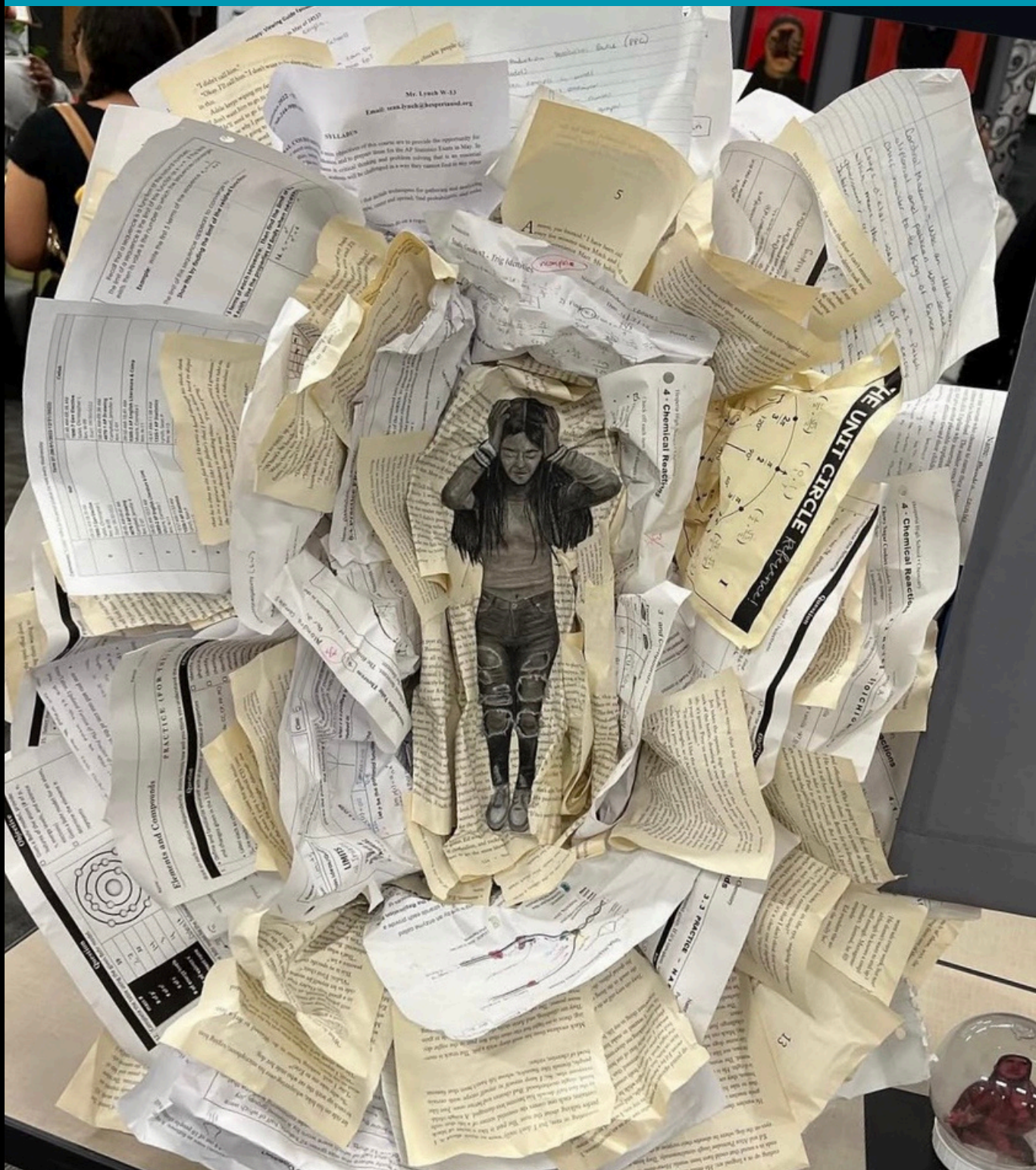




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All submissions are reviewed by editorial board members, scholars, together with teachers and community members. We invite submissions from scholar-activists, educators, organizers, and students in the form of scholarly research, archival histories, action research pedagogies, testimonios, photo essays, and art.

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ISSUE THEME

Teaching Ethnic Studies in the Heart of Colonial Resistance: Practical and Theoretical Reflections on Pedagogies of Ethnic Studies for White-dominant Classrooms, Communities, and Schools

LEAD EDITORS

Michael Domínguez and Suneal Kolluri

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Introduction: Ethnic Studies in Hostile Terrain

Michael Domínguez, University of New Mexico
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Over the past decade, we have seen an explosion of interest in Ethnic Studies for K-12 schools. Among other things, wildly successful Ethnic Studies pilot programs in major metro areas, the work of the *Ethnics Studies Now!* and other grassroots community organizations, policy efforts to increase multicultural and multiracial competency, normalization of culturally-relevant pedagogies and curricula in schools, along with tragedy-induced regional and national reckonings with issues of racial justice, have provided traction for advocates' calls for "Ethnic studies for all." As a result of this rapidly expanding interest, the early programs in a few cities and districts have given way to a proliferation of pilot efforts, courses, school programs, district requirements, and, of course, California's state-wide ethnic studies graduation mandate, AB 101, which passed in 2021.

All of this is exciting. But it should also raise questions. For as a result of this enthusiasm and the policy measures that have followed it, Ethnic Studies is being scaled up like never before. A field of study that was closely held by deeply committed content area experts, is now a mandate for major school districts nationwide, and much of the nation's most populous state. This expansion of Ethnic Studies means that whether by grassroots action or policy decree, the field is coming into contact with community contexts and demographics—specifically, predominantly white students and educators—that are vastly different than the BIPoC and hyper-diverse community settings in which the discipline grew from, and has thrived in, for the last half century.

Today, Ethnic Studies finds itself in new terrain. A discipline that grew from the Third World Liberation Front's late-1960s efforts to ensure there was BIPoC representation *for* BIPoC students (Okiihiro, 2016), is now being deployed well beyond these communities, and into classrooms, districts, communities, and even full states, that are predominantly white demographically or dominated by whiteness culturally and politically. Moreover, it is being constructed in new ways, not as an opportunity for BIPoC epistemic space and community inquiry but imagined as a panacea for resolving racial divides and white cultural misunderstandings. As our title suggests, the new affective landscape(s) Ethnic Studies finds itself venturing into are those at the very heart of coloniality; the places most resistant to liberatory change. And with that said, we would argue that at present, the movement for Ethnic Studies is largely without a clear map of how to navigate this new terrain.

Resolving the looming challenges (and threats) of this endeavor requires a new cartographic effort than the one that presently exists around K-12 Ethnic Studies. We need new maps. We need new paths to be carved out. We need guidance on how to tackle the (affectively) treacherous terrain we will encounter. Starting to engage in that cartographic process is our aim here, and specifically, we want to encourage a conversation on how we might begin to map out answers to this core question: *What does the work of ethnic studies pedagogy look like in white-dominant spaces?*

In what follows, we hope to raise some key issues that extending and scaling Ethnic Studies into white-dominant classrooms and communities involves, before turning the metaphoric microphone over to our authors, and their reflections, insights, and considerations, for what the project of Ethnic Studies in the heart of colonial resistance can, does, and might, look like moving forward.

The K-12 Ethnic Studies Knowledge Base

The overwhelming majority of evidence related to teaching Ethnic Studies—around classroom outcomes, pedagogical models, approaches, and best-practices—is firmly focused on the experience of doing the work of Ethnic Studies in communities of color, hyper-diverse urban areas, and settings with clear cultural histories.

By and large, the findings of these analyses are resoundingly positive regarding the capacity of Ethnic studies courses to improve students' educational experiences. Participation in Ethnic Studies has long been associated with improved academic outcomes such as test scores, GPA and attendance (e.g. Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2017). One study comparing similar students in San Francisco Unified School District who were assigned or not assigned an Ethnic Studies course found wide gaps in academic outcomes - a 21-percentage-point increase in attendance and a 1.4-point increase in GPA (Dee & Penner, 2017). Ethnic Studies courses can also encourage civic engagement and social activism towards more just and thriving communities (Adjapong & Emdin, 2015; de los Ríos, 2017; Hall & Martin, 2013; Sacramento, Curammeng, & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2023; Thangaraj, 2020; Valdez, 2020). Cammarota (2016), for example, documented a youth participatory action project in Tucson where students organized resistance to the cancellation of Ethnic Studies in Arizona schools. Ethnic Studies students experience academic and democratic benefits to their participation in these courses.

These studies all paint a compelling picture of Ethnic Studies as a policy intervention. But a close look at the contexts of these studies—Tucson, the California Bay Area, Los Angeles, to name the most prominent and repeated settings—shows work that has taken place successfully and with great effect in demographically pluralistic settings. Naming that should not undercut the findings or potential of K-12 Ethnic Studies, but it should make us pause when we start to think about generalizability. For even as we are poised to scale ethnic studies up to more and more classrooms, *there is a clear gap in scholarly guidance around what it means, and what it looks like, to teach ethnic studies successfully in white-dominant spaces.*

It should come as no surprise to anyone that racial, ethnic, and cultural identity develop differently across demographics (e.g., Tatum, 2017). Our sociopolitical context means that key aspects of the lived experiences of white and BIPOC youth are vastly different from one another's, as are the pressures and tensions that come into play as individuals' personal and collective racial, ethnic, and cultural identities develop. And both change further when we layer over varying intersectional dynamics and community contexts— such as class, immigration status, parent education levels, and other identity markers like gender and sexual diversity. Coming to understand these differing formative pressures, experiences, and complexities is arguably a central element of any effective Ethnic Studies curriculum. But it should come as no surprise—nor, we think, be terribly controversial—to note that how we do this work should, and must, vary because of these differing formative dynamics and contexts.

In short, teaching and designing ethnic studies curriculum for a classroom of white students is *necessarily* different from teaching Ethnic Studies in a classroom of BIPoC students. And the challenge of learning *to teach* Ethnic Studies is different for white educators in white-dominant spaces than it has been for BIPoC educators with established experiences in the discipline (Domínguez & Kolluri, 2026). These realities are not a call to water things down, or change what Ethnic Studies is—far from it—but a reminder of the imperative for differentiation, and changing the invitations to learning that our pedagogy offers, so that the same goals and learning objectives can be accomplished in ways that are coherent to the formative experiences of the demographics of the students in front of us, and the points of theoretical departure that will resonate with them.

The Universal Potential of an Ethnic Studies Education

Despite the abundance of challenges associated with translating Ethnic Studies in white-dominant contexts, Ethnic Studies concepts might be essential to expanding the capacity of white people to support movements for racial justice. Developing a critical consciousness of race is an essential component of a healthy development of white identity (Helms, 1990). Even well-meaning white people are complicit in the perpetuation of racial inequality simply by participating in the social systems that maintain it (Applebaum, 2010). White students who grow into white adults without having examined these systems will be ill-prepared to undo them. As Du Bois has noted, there exists “Soul of White Folk,” a collective sense of identity that works to maintain existing systems of racial hegemony. Du Bois (1997 [1920]), asks, “Back beyond the world and swept by these wild, white faces of the awful dead, why will this Soul of White Folk, – this modern Prometheus, – hang bound by his own binding, tethered by a fable of the past?” (p. 1).

Untethering white students from the fables of whiteness will necessitate pedagogies designed to do so. Scholars of whiteness and critical pedagogy have long asserted the importance of centering race for white students in schools. Applebaum (2013) argues that White students need to develop a critical lens regarding complicity and responsibility in processes of racial oppression. Matias and Mackey (2016) write that such work might begin in teacher education programs. Kincheloe and Steinberg (2000) add that critical pedagogies can help white students better understand white anger and white privilege. In theory, Ethnic Studies, grounded in interrogations of identity, power, and racial injustice, can provide a platform for white students to develop critical capacities on issues of race. But it also means a fundamental transformation of how we think about Ethnic Studies, because for generations, Ethnic Studies was, as we noted earlier, a “for us, by us” discipline meant to serve BIPoC students and communities, with little regard for white audiences. To be direct, it was not for white folks, so pedagogies sensitive to their developmental needs were not of much concern. That works fine when Ethnic Studies is an elective or students’ chosen major, but mandates and the “Ethnic Studies for all” push force Ethnic Studies to serve more broadly, and thus become, something else (Domínguez, 2026). We think a more substantial and honest conversation about what all this means existentially for the discipline of Ethnic Studies is needed in the literature, but for our purposes here, it is clear that the current expansion of K-12 Ethnic Studies into white-dominant contexts and classrooms requires a new epistemic project.

This kind of project is a departure both from the ways racial justice efforts with white folks have often been approached as uncomfortable but gentle “courageous conversations” (e.g. such as the white-centric analyses and guidance in the work of Robin DiAngelo, Tim Wise, Peggy McIntosh, and Glenn Singleton), and from the BIPoC-centric focus Ethnic Studies has traditionally taken,

worrying little about how it is received, welcomed, or understood by white audiences. Essentially, Ethnic Studies is rich with the tools and material with which to actively confront the fables of whiteness, and to close the *ontological distances* that exist between white folks' experiences, and those of racialized and historically marginalized Others (Domínguez, 2020). But in order to succeed in this endeavor, practitioners will need to give strategic thought to how we might align these constituent concepts and pieces of Ethnic Studies praxis in new ways, to present new invitations that open the door for self-interrogation, without alienating or further radicalizing our new prospective audiences of white students (Hayes, 2017). We think this is an exciting challenge, but also a task that requires intentionality, training, development, and not a dismissive shrug and reliance on strategies and approaches that were built for very different demographics of students, coming from very different epistemic places. In short, there is universal potential for the impact and efficacy of Ethnic Studies, so long as we do not arrogantly assume that scaling it up to white-dominant spaces requires no alterations or grappling with the epistemic realities that come with doing so.

Different Invitations and a Lack of Definition

With all this in mind, the lack of definition around Ethnic Studies is not particularly helpful in addressing these multiple tasks. At the university level, Ethnic Studies has long been a dynamic, evolving transdisciplinary field, in which there is a loose, but clear, consensus by those in the field on what the content and goals of the discipline are (CSU CES, 2020). While this consensus captured and reflected the dynamism of community relationships to knowledge, and the field's rejection of strict colonial disciplinarity in scholarship, that same nebulousness presents challenges to K-12 practitioners who are either new to the field, or carry conceptions of Ethnic Studies lacking nuance into their work (Domínguez, 2026). The consequence of such incomplete or inaccurate understandings of Ethnic Studies, based not on the core tenets of the field, but upon the idiosyncratic dispositions, skillsets, ideologies, relationships, and biases of individual educators, are enactments of "Ethnic Studies" that can vary wildly (and problematically) from classroom to classroom. To extend and reiterate this point, let us call attention to a few of the common ways Ethnic Studies has been realized in K-12 classrooms, and what the consequences of these iterations in white-dominant "Ethnic Studies" spaces can be.

First and perhaps most obviously, are the ways Ethnic Studies is reductively simplified as BIPOC history, or celebrations of "heroes and holidays." This was probably always to be expected, given the historically-justified but discursively generic name of the field (As some critics like to point out, don't we all have an ethnicity?), the way policymakers and administrators have a-historicized the discipline, and equated it with general multiculturalism and cultural relevance, and the fact that many teachers assigned Ethnic Studies courses have had little guidance or training before being tasked with courses. In classrooms, this shakes out in all kinds of problematic ways, including shallow and uncritical examinations of content about BIPOC history and literature, pathologically framed studies of the BIPOC experience as a series of tragedies that reifies BIPOC Other-ness, or conversely, celebratory multicultural approaches that continues to center white narratives and eschew any critical engagement with racial identity. However these shallow versions of Ethnic Studies-as-multiculturalism shake out, at their root, they are pedagogies of resentment; attitudes that regardless of content, epistemically, white, middle-class values and ways of being, thinking, and speaking, are, and should be, the ultimate goal of schooling. To be generative in white-dominant spaces we will need to push educators past these empty iterations of Ethnic Studies, by

providing guidance, training, and resources that offer roadmaps for how to do robust Ethnic Studies work in a variety of different contexts.

Next, particularly in K-12 settings, Ethnic Studies is often realized as a form of community self-study and cultural interrogation, composed of explorations of BIPOC students' community histories, elder knowledge, and counternarratives otherwise excluded from the mainstream curriculum, and wrapped up with YPAR projects and efforts to develop sociopolitical agency. Such manifestations build from some of the earliest and most successful K-12 Ethnic Studies programs (Acosta, 2014; Cammarota, 2016; Cammarota & Romero, 2009), but in translation and replication, nuance is often lost. When community and YPAR become *the* focus, it is easy for the conceptual grounding, and firm, clear, rigorous academic goals around understanding racial identity and power, to fall by the wayside. When this happens, the door springs open for the apolitical; in that the tools and language of intellectual critique can be ignored in favor of a focus on student "engagement," whatever that may be. YPAR is surely a feature of Ethnic Studies, but only in so much as it offers an opportunity for the application of critical agency, resistance, and lived practice in seeking liberation. In short, in Ethnic Studies, community engagement is never disconnected from theory and the critique of power and race. Disentangling these leaves something hollow that becomes all the more dangerous in settings with an active desire to bury the critical analysis under bootstraps narratives and empty notions of agency. If we are to make Ethnic Studies effective white-dominant settings (and others), it cannot be rendered as simply community engagement, and must be linked to robust academic concepts, goals, and learning objectives that legitimize the inquiry and critical analysis expected.

Finally, we have often seen Ethnic Studies enacted as a form of cultural catharsis for educators who were themselves marginalized by schooling. While we feel for (and resonate with) these experiences of cultural dissonance with schooling, and desire by educators for students to hold new perspectives on race, ethnicity, and culture that will ameliorate their past and presently observed concerns, we are reminded that this project of Ethnic Studies is not about us, but about students' critical inquiry *into* those topics. Curriculum that is directive in its conclusions, rather than inquiry based, is no less limiting to students, even if its contents are about BIPOC peoples (Domínguez & Kolluri, 2026). And we worry about how the outdated, near-nationalistic veins of Ethnic Studies—think of Chicano Aztlán narratives, and some constructions of Africana studies—might pop up in classrooms in exclusionary ways (Perez-Torres, 1997). If Ethnic Studies is just catharsis for the historically marginalized, what does it mean for a white classroom, and white students, who understand themselves as unquestionably part of the U.S. body politic? Does that version of Ethnic Studies help us do better, or simply play into critics' claims of divisiveness?

In one of the oft neglected sections of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2009) notes that educators go astray in the classroom when they, "forget that their fundamental objective is to fight alongside the people for the recovery of the people's stolen human-ity, not to win the people over to their side. Such a phrase does not belong in the vocabulary of revolutionary leaders, but in that of the oppressor" (p. 93). Ethnic Studies educators tend to be a group that often appeal to Freire, and considering that, we find this deep-cut reflection to be a critical reminder for these same educators. It is a heavy claim, this suggestion that the desire to "win people over" is the language of the oppressor. But it is an essential one. Education, including Ethnic Studies education, must not be about *our* needs as educators, nor our desires for obvious injustices in communities to be seen and acknowledged in the ways that we see or acknowledge them, regardless of how urgently

and deeply we feel those desires. Rather, our task is to engage with the needs of students, on their terms, and through invitations that work for them, to cultivate the skills and opportunities to confront and understand the realities, complexities, and histories of these issues, and make sense of them in their own ways. That does not mean permitting ignorance or misinformation to reign, but it does mean finding peace with a classroom praxis in which a student might learn about the dynamics of a counternarrative history, and still reject or contest the liberatory outcome we would hope for. For sure, it is and will be a challenging balance for Ethnic Studies educators, especially those in white-dominant spaces, to come to terms understanding their goal as challenging students, without expecting or forcing them to replicate the perspectives and beliefs we would like them to hold.

A Hostile Political Climate

Looming over all these realities is the specter of the current political climate, and the ways in which the current presidential administration has empowered, both through formal channels and tacitly through encouraging outrage, the silencing of conversations related to race, diversity, and social inequity. As we think about how to teach Ethnic Studies in white-dominant spaces, educators now have to consider how to have robust conversations about race, identity, and power in a nation-state in which the Federal Department of Education offers an online mechanism for surveillance and reporting on 'woke' educators and 'DEI' curriculum, the historical record of BIPoC contributions and experiences is being excised from the Smithsonian Institution museums and our National Parks for being "too negative," and a whitewashed, propagandistic curriculum (the 1776 Project) is being pushed onto states and school districts under the coercive threat of a loss of federal funding. While these dynamics speak to the need for Ethnic Studies, they also necessarily increase the tensions and pressure on anything that may be perceived as 'DEI,' 'Critical Race Theory' or anything else that seems 'woke.' And reactionary critics have already made plain their view that Ethnic Studies fits this bill too (Stephens, 2021; Butcher & Gonzalez, 2024). At best, Ethnic Studies teachers operate "on the margins" of their institutions (Young & Kolluri, 2025, p. 1477), and at worst, they are under direct attack from leaders of their communities.

Moreover, whiteness is not only found in demographically majority white spaces. As noted earlier, whiteness, and white people, are different. Even in some settings and amongst some constituencies that are not demographically white, white-cultural dominance and adherence to white ideological dominance—something decolonial scholar Homi Bhabha (2012) describes as *mimicry*—remains very much the norm. Voting patterns among Latino men in the 2024 Presidential election, the Asian-led *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* case that struck down affirmative action, and the ways patriarchy and trans/homophobia have led some BIPoC demographics into common cause with white-supremacists, all speak to the reach of whiteness beyond demographically white people. The ideologies of whiteness are pervasive, and students and communities of color can carry deeply entrenched neo-colonial attitudes and ideologies of whiteness into classrooms. This means that even in classrooms with "diverse" student populations, an expansion of Ethnic Studies means a broader engagement with students who will not necessarily be eagerly interested in, and may in fact be resistant to, the content now on offer. Such conditions demand different pedagogies and praxis than what has worked in classrooms where Ethnic Studies was an elective choice by willing, excited participants.

As Ethnic Studies scales up beyond its strongholds of multiracial urban centers and BIPOC communities, pressure from students, parents, colleagues, administrators, and community observers/provocateurs openly or subversively hostile to Ethnic Studies will be felt far more intensely by those educators attempting to lead critical conversations around race, coloniality, and Eurocentrism in white dominant spaces, where Ethnic Studies is seen not as a welcome change, but an aberration and attack on closely held ideologies and identities. Support for these educators cannot just be political cheerleading. Some of the ways Ethnic Studies has been justified and defended for BIPOC students recently, as indignation at monolithic and overly patriotic educational malpractice, and an insistence that BIPOC voices, narratives, and histories should unquestionably matter too, will not fly in white-dominant spaces. We do not say that to be contrarian, but to be realistic about the traction we can expect to find with principled stances about resisting nationalist indoctrination. In communities where the racial status quo is comfortable and safe, such arguments have become positioned as radical and unreasonable by a political moment in which overt racism is normalized. There was a time for nuance, and that time was before 2016. Now, we need to be ready with grounded, strategic, and dare we say, market-based arguments defending practitioners and the work of Ethnic Studies, building on the lessons learned from how attacks on bilingual education in the late 1990s was defeated not through principled arguments for multilingualism, but appeals to affluent parents' hopes for their own children (Escamilla et al., 2003). If we are really committed to Ethnic Studies *for all*, we will need to appreciate the unique challenges posed in different contexts, the realities of where some students and communities are starting from, and the differentiation and varied pedagogical invitations they call for. Demographic consideration and purposeful, deliberate, and patient strategy, is vital.

Seeking Difference with Fidelity

In sum, there is tension between the *idea* of Ethnic Studies for all, across all demographics and contexts, and the *reality* of doing that work. As it is scaled up into contexts where whiteness dominates (either demographically, or ideologically), the work and pedagogy of ethnic studies must look different than what our existing scholarship has detailed. Starting points, core questions, messaging around conceptual understandings (and misunderstandings), framings of relationships to power, approaches to identity work, dynamics of community engagement and communication, navigation of resistance, and the work of pedagogy and curriculum construction will and must be different if Ethnic Studies is to realize its many promises and potentials for students across demographic and community contexts.

None of that is to say that we believe Ethnic Studies should compromise itself; far from it. There is always a risk in scaling an intervention up that the intervention is itself changed and watered down by the new contexts and challenges it meets. Given Ethnic Studies' history, we hope no such mutations, either in substance or in the public imagination, occur. But preventing Ethnic Studies from being modified by its expansion will require attention to its core mission, and how praxis and pedagogy must shift to retain fidelity, while offering different invitations. Essentially, rather than ways in which Ethnic Studies is being 'adapted' or 'modified' to fit resistant contexts, we are particularly interested, both in this issue and hopefully seeing in the field in the future, in work engaged in, and pursuing, robust and authentic versions of critical ethnic studies in white-dominant spaces—even if that means documenting struggle or failure to implement ethnic studies and remain true to the discipline. With that said, let us turn to the contents of this issue, and the new cartographic efforts those articles offer.

Cartographic Starting Points

Through the articles in this issue, our hope is to provide some cartographic starting points for what a map of Ethnic Studies pedagogies and praxis in white-dominant spaces might look like. The contributions to this volume, then, come in three rough groupings we hope readers will find useful.

Throughout the first group of articles, *Creating Ethnic Studies Ecosystems*, *Curtailing the Slow Violence of White Supremacy in School Districts*, *Developing White Racial Consciousness*, *Losing the Thread*, and *Imagining Ethnic Studies in Rural Spaces*, you will find rich reflections on what the contextual challenges that teaching Ethnic Studies in white-dominant spaces entails. These articles challenge us to think beyond individual curricular choices, and individual pedagogies, to consider broader ecologies, both positive and negative. As our first article details, it is a holistic ecology that makes a successful Ethnic Studies program possible, but as the other articles in this group explore, the pitfalls and subversions that can undermine the promising work of Ethnic Studies are plentiful, varied, and contextual, and ways around these roadblocks require intention, commitment, and imagination.

The second group of articles, *The American Dream or the American Nightmare*, *Tenemos que luchar por lo que es justo y necesario/ "We were doing what was necessary,"* and *Reconceptualizing In Lak'ech: CERF v. State of California*, all provide us with historical (more and less distant) insights on the way whiteness and white supremacy operate to resist liberatory projects of Ethnic Studies. If we are to imagine "Ethnic Studies for all" it is critical that we learn our lessons from history, and build generative and productive strategies for progress that respects, as some of our authors note, the need to do "what [is] necessary," even if that means deliberative, patient progress, and not the immediate liberatory change we may desire.

Finally, our last collection of articles, *"Our Fates Are Linked": Coteaching Ethnic Studies as an Act of Love and Resistance*, *Translating Abya Yala*, *Decolonizing the Master's Tool: From Traditional Rubrics to the Competency Wheel*, and *Centering Queer and Trans Ethnic Studies Pedagogical Strategy*, all offer specific classroom case studies and exploration of praxis for navigating white-dominant spaces. As we have noted earlier, the unique challenges facing Ethnic Studies educators in white-dominant spaces are plentiful, and navigating them will require road maps and guidance, and new tools and approaches, that fill the gap in knowledge on how to do the work of K-12 Ethnic Studies in these contextually different spaces. These articles all add to this literature, detailing classroom and community arrangements, assessment practices, and epistemic orientations needed to allow Ethnic Studies to thrive in white-dominant settings.

Final Thoughts

K-12 Ethnic Studies sits at a pivotal moment. Scaled up and deployed widely, but under attack from reactionary political pressures, and newly abandoned by moderate allies (Marquez Rosales & Thornton, 2025), what "Ethnic Studies for all" will come to mean in the K-12 space, for students as well as for the discipline, is very much up in the air (Domínguez, 2026). As we gather the voices in this issue, and look forward towards the future of Ethnic Studies in white-dominant classroom

and community spaces, we remain hopeful that the enthusiasm behind Ethnic Studies will be paired with awareness of contextual challenges, and new maps for doing this work in different contexts will begin to emerge, and more voices will share out around their work in white-dominant spaces to keep us honest in understanding what this work entails. We hope the scholarship in this issue is a start to a new vein of intellectual cartography in and around K-12 Ethnic Studies, that will keep us moving towards the real social and relational promises embedded in the slogan of Ethnic Studies for all.

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Creating Ethnic Studies Ecosystems for Student, Teacher, and Community Well-Being: Lessons for Supporting Emerging Ethnic Studies Teachers

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Abstract

Through an analysis of the most compelling texts, models, and frameworks of Ethnic Studies practice, this article provides an overview of the shared tenets of Transformative Ethnic Studies through the lenses of curriculum, pedagogy, and culture. As the necessity for teacher training in Ethnic Studies increases, we organize an approach to these efforts that centers teacher commitments aligned with the core Ethnic Studies frameworks. We consider the challenges in implementing this approach through our efforts in two distinct contexts: the largest school district in Oregon (Portland Public Schools) and the first and only teacher residency program in the state of California to center Ethnic Studies. We resist the tendency to center whiteness and white comfort as is often deemed necessary in developing alternative approaches to reimagining our learning spaces. Instead, we build a framework to create Ethnic Studies Ecosystems that center and support the collective well-being and upliftment of students, families, and communities of Color.

Introduction

Ethnic Studies is essential to supporting all students with the ability to collectively understand the world they live in, the history that led us here, and their own role in creating a just and caring society that supports the holistic well-being of all (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). When we imagine the role of schools in the greater societal project of justice and care for all, we envision an Ethnic Studies Ecosystem in which every aspect of schools and schooling work in collaboration for the well-being of everyone: students, families, communities, teachers, counselors, social workers, administrators, and the entire support staff. This is the Ethnic Studies project.

In the midst of the contemporary political conflicts surrounding the teaching of racial history in the United States, we find it imperative to center holistic Ethnic Studies Ecosystems in the building of policies and practices for fulfilling emerging Ethnic Studies requirements. We recognize that

there is intense resistance to Ethnic Studies (Jones, 2025; Zaske, 2025), and that the furor behind that resistance has led many districts to scale back their vision of what is possible in Ethnic Studies (Buller, 2025; Marquez Rosales & Thornton, 2025) and even to redefine Ethnic Studies in ways that placate conservatives and minimize the backlash against the larger Ethnic Studies project. This is most clearly reflected in the narrow-minded restrictions placed on the California Ethnic Studies model curriculum created for the high school graduation requirement in California (Buller, 2025; Jones, 2025; Marquez Rosales & Thornton, 2025). How do we avoid the pitfalls that have plagued efforts to address issues of inequity in U.S. schooling for generations, whereby the commitment to justice is performative at best and too easily and often sacrificed for the comfort of those invested in dominant narratives? We center the insights of Ethnic Studies approaches that have proven not only to support the academic success of students, but that have supported their well-being across ethnic, racial, gender, and class lines as they imagine and work toward the upliftment of their communities.

This project is led by two Ethnic Studies practitioners who have engaged in K-20 Ethnic Studies teaching as well as the training of teachers and teacher candidates in communities across the Western United States. We understand and have witnessed the most profound challenges involved in this training. We have seen district administrators and school leaders buckle to pressure from conservatives and abandon efforts to build Ethnic Studies curriculum and opportunities for training Ethnic Studies teachers because they lacked the racial literacy and commitment to push back against those who deny both our racial history and its role in shaping contemporary manifestations of white supremacy, institutional racism, and school-based oppression.

Furthermore, we have witnessed other projects developing Ethnic Studies curriculum and training Ethnic Studies teachers that have depoliticized these efforts and centered conservative responses to Ethnic Studies (even without any direct resistance to their efforts), resulting in incomplete and inadequate racial realities and histories in their curriculum along with the abandonment of the goals of Ethnic Studies (Buller, 2025).

Finally, we have also monitored the inadequate responses of state governing bodies to the inclusion of Ethnic Studies as high school and college requirements. Most recently, despite the powerful testimony made in the 2022 hearing on the current Ethnic Studies teacher workforce led by California state assemblymember Jose Medina, in which it was made apparent that credentialed social studies teachers do not have the expertise to teach required Ethnic Studies courses, the credentialing body of the state of California maintains that both credentialed single subject social studies teachers and multiple subjects teachers are qualified to teach Ethnic Studies (Smith, 2025). We know that many teachers are and will continue to teach Ethnic Studies K-12 courses or subjects without any Ethnic Studies coursework or training.

Given these experiences over years and across contexts, we have been analyzing these realities and our experiences with successful efforts to develop K-12 Ethnic Studies projects to create a roadmap for Ethnic Studies teacher training that centers the principles and goals of Ethnic Studies with implications both for classrooms serving communities of Color and those that are whitespaces (while acknowledging that the centering of whiteness defines most aspects of schooling in this country). Our intention, as the subsequent sections make clear, is to support those committed to the training of teachers in Transformative Ethnic Studies practices and ways of being toward the

collective upliftment of students, families, and communities of Color. We do so by first mapping out the insights from essential Ethnic Studies Frameworks and subsequently offering lessons from our own work training Ethnic Studies teachers, highlighting the challenges that emerge in institutional spaces and a framework that centers embodying Ethnic Studies values in ways that support teacher, student, and community well-being.

Lessons from Ethnic Studies Frameworks

In order to understand the unique demands of Ethnic Studies in the process of mapping pathways toward effective teacher training in Ethnic Studies, it is helpful to learn from existing frameworks that have been used in or applied to the development of Ethnic Studies K-12 curricula. We reviewed, unpacked and connected four of the most well-developed, frequently cited and applied (in curriculum development) efforts to organize and map out the core elements and best practices of Ethnic Studies (each from a collective of Ethnic Studies scholars and practitioners): the Critically Compassionate Intellectualism Model for Transformative Education in *Raza Studies: The Public Option for Intellectual Revolution* (Cammarota & Romero, 2014); *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* (Cuauhtin et al., 2019); *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools* (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020); and the *Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Coalition* (Liberated Ethnic Studies, 2020). Each of these frameworks represents years of expertise and implementation and has its unique features. Collectively, they also have significant overlap and, in many cases, authors in each project were involved in, connected to, or inspired by the others. To help us understand the insights from this body of work, we read through these texts in their entirety and identified the key ideas in each framework (both in sections where this was explicitly written and through the themes that emerge in the full body of the works). While the frameworks did not always make these distinctions, we found it helpful to organize them in terms of the guidance they provide related to Ethnic Studies curricular development, pedagogical practices, and the process of building classroom culture through an Ethnic Studies ethos.

The four frameworks are explicit that Ethnic Studies curriculum is distinct from conventional approaches to U.S. history and that it must:

- 1) Analyze indigeneity and center indigenous knowledge and knowledge production in pre-colonial and contemporary contexts;
- 2) Confront and challenge white supremacy, colonialism, genocide, and racism;
- 3) Engage in intersectional analysis that also addresses interlocking forms of oppression including (but not limited to) capitalism, homophobia, ableism, transphobia, patriarchy, xenophobia, compulsory heterogenderism, islamophobia anti-blackness and anti-indigeneity;
- 4) Center the historical and contemporary transformational resistance of communities of Color against white supremacy, imperialism/colonialism and racism, as well as other forms of oppression in the pursuit of justice; and
- 5) Emphasize the cultural and knowledge production of communities of Color, as well as the joy and beauty within these communities; along with the dynamic, diverse and expansive nature of each of these communities and their cultural and knowledge production.

It is important to note that pedagogy is as essential to Ethnic Studies as the content that is covered, and in fact, Ethnic Studies practitioners often assert that, in places where curriculum is restricted

by district leadership, pedagogy has been the primary tool for moving toward classrooms that pursue Ethnic Studies objectives. The four frameworks do not always emphasize pedagogy in and of itself as it is often integrated into discussions of curriculum, but they demonstrate that Ethnic Studies pedagogy requires:

- 1) student-, family-, and community-centered learning and knowledge creation;
- 2) justice- and change-oriented approaches through problem-posing, critical consciousness-raising, and responding to student, family, and community needs; and
- 3) culturally sustaining, revitalizing, regenerating, and extending approaches that also explore and confront the role of positionality in classrooms and support the development of affirming, holistic identities that center the well-being of the members of the learning community.

Finally, there is a third aspect of Ethnic Studies practice that is actually the heart of this transformative approach to learning. It is also the most challenging to explain and center in the training of Ethnic Studies teachers. Ethnic Studies practitioners often describe the heart or spirit that is required of Ethnic Studies teachers. They explain that Ethnic Studies is who they are, as they emphasize the love they have for BIPOC students, as well as the families and communities they serve. When Ethnic Studies is strongest, what is most striking is the culture that is nurtured in the classroom, which is the product of ways of being among Ethnic Studies teachers that are built around specific values. Creating Ethnic Studies classroom cultures involves teachers and students embodying values such as:

- 1) Framing learning as the pursuit of justice, freedom, and liberation;
- 2) Building solidarity across communities and identities as essential in all learning;
- 3) Centering and valuing students, families, and communities for their wisdom;
- 4) Grounding knowledge production in accountability to families and communities; and
- 5) Fostering *cariño* by embodying love and nurturing self-love, building *confianza*, and shared visions of wellness. [Note: We use the specific examples of *cariño* (deep, holistic care) and *confianza* (trust built on relational accountability) to bring these values to life in ways that are vivid while acknowledging that there are parallel values across BIPOC communities.]

An essential aspect of Ethnic Studies teaching and learning is that it demands a commitment to these values in pursuit of the liberation of BIPOC communities. As we reviewed the frameworks and our own practices, we recognized the importance of explicitly naming the commitments required of Ethnic Studies teachers as a way of imagining the most engaged means of supporting the training of Ethnic Studies teachers. As understood in the frameworks and our own teaching and training of teachers, *Ethnic Studies teachers must be willing to commit to:*

- 1) **Developing racial literacy and critical consciousness** as a lifelong process of growth;
- 2) **Racial justice** in terms of:
 - a. content (through transdisciplinary works); and
 - b. culturally sustaining, revitalizing, regenerating and extending pedagogy that center students in active, praxis-based learning opportunities (e.g., Youth Participatory Action Research built on Ethnic Studies theory and existing research) (Paris & Alim, 2017; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015);

- 3) **Centering both the realities of racial oppression and the dynamic assets and strengths of communities of Color** (historically and contemporarily), including the ways of being (ontologies) and the intellectual production and knowledge systems (epistemologies) of communities of Color;
- 4) **Analyzing the intersectional nature of oppression** and the pursuit of liberation that addresses (but is not limited to) multiple forms of racism (including anti-blackness and anti-indigeneity), patriarchy, capitalism, islamophobia, homophobia, compulsory heterogenderism, xenophobia, and ableism, as well as the contributions and strengths of those who have been impacted by these forms of oppression;
- 5) **The development of critical hope** (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Freire, 1998; Kaba, 2021) and specific skills to confront racial inequity and oppression and benefit communities of Color in the pursuit of liberation: including school- and community-based actions, initiatives, and policies;
- 6) **Centering and nurturing the wellness, beauty, and joy of students and communities of Color** as they define these constructs intergenerationally (building on concepts such as autonomy, fugitivity, self-determination, and sovereignty) (Givens, 2021; Love, 2019; Simpson, 2017);
- 7) **Developing students' holistic, dynamic, intersectional identities** that integrate and nurture strong intellectual (not necessarily academic) identities as defined with students, families, and communities;
- 8) **Building healthy intergenerational relationships** between and among students, teachers, families, and communities within a framework of relational accountability, solidarity, and accompliceship across communities.

We have used these commitments with the teachers and teacher candidates we support, not as a set of unchanging requirements, but as an example of what it means to dedicate themselves to Ethnic Studies and to the upliftment of BIPOC communities. We create space for them to make and embody their own commitments in ways that reflect their identities and communities, and those of their students. Teachers and teacher candidates have found these guideposts helpful because they often affirm and put into words values that they have learned and lived, but which have neither been acknowledged nor centered for their power as classroom practices. This reflects the fundamental conflict between Ethnic Studies ways of being and the ways in which mainstream approaches to “schooling” center standards, methods, performance measures and a host of other normalized practices grounded in individualism and whiteness that are harmful to the well-being and success of students.

The process of reviewing the literature helped us put these experiences in context of the larger body of research in Ethnic Studies and the insights of Ethnic Studies scholars who base much of the literature in their own training of Ethnic Studies teachers. We turn now to an analysis of the insights gained through our distinct experiences in the training of Ethnic Studies teachers through this framework.

Teaching Teachers Ethnic Studies (Portland, Oregon) – Robert Unzueta

In this section I share my experience building Ethnic Studies at a district level as an Ethnic Studies scholar/practitioner in an administrative role. I highlight how, even with good intentions, funding support, and a desire to develop new approaches to Ethnic Studies, these efforts can fall short if

we do not confront our own investment in whiteness. Ethnic Studies praxis is, by nature, in contention with institutional ways of being and requires change, both in our approaches and in ourselves.

Ethnic Studies became a high school graduation requirement across three states where I have worked: Oregon (House Bill 2845 in 2017), Washington (Senate Bill 5023 in 2018), and California (Assembly Bill 101 in 2021). Each state's implementation has varied and each reflects a lack of clarity about the discipline and how to enact the legislation in districts and schools. As the Ethnic Studies requirement unfolded in these states, I was concerned with ensuring that Ethnic Studies would be taught with integrity and wondered who would teach Ethnic Studies, particularly in a state with such a low percentage of teachers of Color (over 85% of the teachers in Oregon were white when I worked there in 2021–22, and that number has shifted only slightly since). I lived in Oregon during the early days of their Ethnic Studies requirement, working as an assistant professor of Teacher Education and Educational Leadership at Lewis & Clark College. As someone with extensive Ethnic Studies teaching experience in the community college system, I wanted to support the development of curricula to fulfill the requirement. My original intention was to offer a dual enrollment class at a credit recovery high school through a local community college as an adjunct, in hopes of helping students who had been deemed disposable (Unzueta, 2020) earn both high school and college credit. The goal was to build the foundations of a pathway program for students being pushed out of the K-12 pipeline into college, given that research has demonstrated that disenfranchised students who engage in high school Ethnic Studies have greater school success (Cammarota & Romero, 2009).

My concern about implementation soon shifted as I was hired in one of Oregon's largest school districts to attempt the following: (a) help develop an Ethnic Studies curriculum for the entire district; (b) provide training to current teachers on Ethnic Studies teaching; (c) develop a dual enrollment Ethnic Studies partnership with the local community college system; and (d) create the first-ever student oversight mechanism whereby paid student interns would review Ethnic Studies curriculum. The district had experienced a highly contentious divide and disconnect between educators, administrators, community members, and student leaders with regard to the development and implementation of Ethnic Studies. The push for Ethnic Studies came from students of Color who were experiencing severe racial discrimination in the district. The district's teaching force, 91% of which remained white, had a track record of failing its students of Color, but over 100 courses on the books from middle to high school had recently been deemed appropriate for Ethnic Studies. My hiring was the third attempt to establish a cohesive vision of what K-12 Ethnic Studies could be in collaboration with educators, students, and higher education and community partners.

My first task was to develop partnerships and relationships with all of the educators within the district who had been involved in the multiple attempts to develop Ethnic Studies. My approach was informed by my previous work building a transfer cohort model through grant funding from the Lumina Foundation & Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors Racial Justice & Equity Grant (in 2018), and my most recent role as faculty liaison between the college and the Center for Equity and Inclusion (in 2020). I began by sharing an announcement in the district newsletter detailing who I was and what I had been brought to the district to do. I also emailed and called individual teachers who were known advocates for Ethnic Studies. I was able to connect with over 20 educators and administrators from multiple schools, grade bands, and with a wide range of Ethnic

Studies experience. I learned about the work they had done within the district for Ethnic Studies, the ways that they believed the district had sabotaged previous efforts to get Ethnic Studies off the ground, and the uneven implementation and teaching of Ethnic Studies. Throughout this process, it was clear that I was being evaluated to determine if I had the appropriate experience as a student, researcher, practitioner, and lineage to lead the district's Ethnic Studies work.

Based on the insights I gained from these conversations, I constructed professional development and partnerships that would support educators and students who were interested in creating three key approaches to developing Ethnic Studies that emerged from the literature and my own experience in the field. First, I knew we had to center the tenets of Ethnic Studies as an academic discipline (Taylor, 2010). Second, I knew we needed to co-construct Ethnic Studies curricula in a collaborative method to disrupt traditional top-down approaches to curriculum development (Freire, 2005). Third, I knew that our Ethnic Studies work should establish pathways for students who traditionally had been excluded from a college track by bringing college-level courses to the high schools and providing them dual credit for both high school and college (Aleman & Bernal, 2017). We had to create ways for our educators to align their Ethnic Studies courses with the student learning outcomes of the community college to create a new, aligned standard of what Ethnic Studies needed to be. Through targeted training and collaborative curriculum development in a series of paid workshops, educators who completed the training were able to offer dual enrollment classes at their high schools, creating greater college access to students of Color (most dual enrollment courses do not focus on these students, but the new Ethnic Studies requirement meant that every student in the district would be engaged in these dual enrollment opportunities).

The teacher training was broken into six sessions followed by 60 working hours in the summer to develop lesson plans aligned with the scope and sequence that was created by the district. Our sessions were organized into key themes that aligned with the district's scope and sequence and also with Ethnic Studies frameworks as described above. We started with a focus on identity through community and relationship building, as well as exploring teacher positionality within the power structure of schooling. Next, we explored the context of education as a force that created and maintained inequality and the role of Ethnic Studies in challenging these systems and processes. Then, we aligned the district's scope and sequence with the community college Ethnic Studies learning outcomes and the key tenets of Ethnic Studies. In addition, we centered the importance of our accountability to our students and their families and communities as a unique approach to assessing our efforts. Finally, we considered the division of labor within the group and how we could build Ethnic Studies collectively.

We started with 15 educators from different grade bands and schools, who served distinct student bodies, including credit recovery schools, online school for students who were "falling behind," schools that served a majority of students of Color, and high-performing schools (recognizing that these last two categories do not have to be but are often seen as distinct). Educators came to our training with various levels of experience in Ethnic Studies and radically different understandings of what Ethnic Studies is. To be granted community college equivalency, they each had the support of their administration and agreed to complete the training and summer work hours. Yet only four teachers completed the training and summer work. In hindsight, it is clear that this attrition and the failure of the program as conceived was due to larger political forces that led to a shift in organizational priorities and reflected deeply embedded forms of racism in district practices.

Ethnic Studies had been established in the district as an elective prior to becoming a graduate requirement in the school district. There had been no oversight of what constituted an Ethnic Studies course. Furthermore, few teachers or district leaders had any Ethnic Studies training. Everyone had their own definitions of what Ethnic Studies was or was not, which allowed for very different approaches to course content, pedagogy, and classroom culture that were rarely aligned with the tenets of the discipline. This created an atmosphere of personal ownership and attachment to courses as “Ethnic Studies” even though they were simply not Ethnic Studies. Teachers’ professional identities had become interwoven with teaching an Ethnic Studies course that was not grounded in the discipline or the research in the field (Cuauhtin et al., 2019). This led to disputes over who was really doing Ethnic Studies work and who was not.

The sense of ownership and territorialism that developed around implementing Ethnic Studies in the district thwarted the opportunity for educators to co-construct curriculum, build a pathway with the local community college, and systemically create an approach to Ethnic Studies at a district level that was transformative. I spent much of my time addressing in-fighting between educators as they tore down each other’s lesson plans in an effort to maintain their ability to teach Ethnic Studies as they had, rather than learning together how to build Ethnic Studies aligned with its core tenets. They resisted learning and adopting the core values of Ethnic Studies: being critically self-reflective, iterative, and employing praxis-based approaches centered on the abolition of racism (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Related, many resisted aligning their curriculum with the community college standards, again reflecting their unwillingness to change their courses and grow in their Ethnic Studies approaches. This also reinforced the ways in which their schools reproduced inequality, as they resisted the opportunity to support students of Color toward community college entrance through a challenging and engaging curriculum that gave them college credit and the skill development to thrive in college.

There was a larger issue underlying the internal conflicts that had emerged in our training. Ethnic Studies is little understood, and teachers believed they had the expertise to teach Ethnic Studies, even with no training in the discipline. This led to conflicts as teachers pushed back against the training and each other because they sought to ensure that they could continue to teach as they had. They did not believe that they needed training or professional development in Ethnic Studies and they sought to continue to work in silos, valuing their individualistic approach to teaching over a collective process of Ethnic Studies curriculum-building that could benefit all students. In so many ways, these educators were committed to maintaining the centrality of whiteness, unwilling to disrupt white comfort, and unable to adapt the Ethnic Studies principles in their own approach to developing Ethnic Studies.

From these experiences, I learned two valuable lessons for the work of training Ethnic Studies teachers. First, for the district to implement transformative Ethnic Studies across the curriculum, they needed to address the harms built into schooling that teachers had experienced, working towards a space of healing/trust. It is one thing to claim alignment with Ethnic Studies and another to create the working environment and conditions in which it can be implemented, transforming not just our relationship with students but also our relationships with each other. For educators, new and seasoned alike, it is critical that we examine how we contribute to upholding the toxic environments and cultures we aim to dismantle, particularly in our relationships with peers, administrators, and other stakeholders. Engaging in Ethnic Studies work is contentious by nature,

and often that conflict is not only external but comes from within, through the ways we perpetuate and uphold whiteness.

Training Teacher Leaders, Future Teachers and Social Workers in Ethnic Studies (East San José, California) – Marcos Pizarro

Over the years, I have provided many different forms of support for teachers who sought to grow in their Ethnic Studies practices, from individual consults to professional development for teachers across an entire county over multiple years. In July of 2022, for the first time and with a collective of colleagues, we were able to design and implement a teacher training in Ethnic Studies practice that fully aligned with the principles of transformative Ethnic Studies.

In conceptualizing our approach, we followed the framing in this article, culling through the four Ethnic Studies frameworks to create a guide that reflected the common themes, constructs, and approaches across each, in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy, and culture-building (as described above, we understand that culture-building involves centering ethics, principles, commitments, and collective accountability/support that foster a caring learning community). In doing so, we modeled and shared examples of Ethnic Studies practice and provided space and time for reflection, application, and addressing pressing needs. Some of the key components in this training were:

- Conocimiento – Centering the teachers as we built community by sharing our and their stories, journeys, challenges, wisdom, expertise, and power.
- Agreements leading to Commitments – Building a shared vision of how we would embody Ethnic Studies practice through how we worked together and committing to ourselves and each other to work actively toward this collective vision.
- Defining Ethnic Studies in complex terms – Centering epistemologies, complicating history, challenging traditional disciplines, acknowledging the holistic nature of Ethnic Studies knowledge production and community building, and highlighting spirit and joy in our approaches.
- Creating a Working Ethnic Studies Framework for the project – Given the context-specific nature of Ethnic Studies, we worked together to create an evolving framework for the participating schools that built on existing models of Ethnic Studies development and brought them together in ways that honored the students, families, and communities in the district.
- Building and curating a Freedom Dreaming Space – Engaging in a process of deep collaboration that centered collective wellness (particularly for BIPOC students, families, teachers, and communities) and supported the pursuit of our shared vision through individual units, classroom practices, and principles that were then evaluated and assessed through the emerging Ethnic Studies Framework.

The approach that we took over the 2022–2023 school year helped the teachers begin to not only deeply understand Ethnic Studies, but to see its embodiment through each aspect of the training. As this article has made clear, Ethnic Studies demands accountability to students, families, communities, and histories that holds its practitioners to standards that are much higher than that of a district office, school board, or state standards. What was most profound about this experience was that the teachers going through the process recognized that the foundation for

their work would be in the area of culture-building. Unlike typical professional development spaces that center content and pedagogy, through our time together and the ways in which we embodied Ethnic Studies values and curated a culture that centered well-being, they began to understand that, above all else, the values we modeled in our work were at the heart of the practices that they would have to invoke in their classrooms. So, in building our collective Ethnic Studies working framework for this project, we focused on carefully envisioning and implementing a transformative culture: ethics, principles, commitments, and accountability. In doing so, the teachers then began to build units that would start their academic year and model a foundation of Ethnic Studies ways of being, all of which required the centering of students and their families as knowledge producers and emphasized supporting the holistic well-being of their students.

In this project, through our approach, we emphasized the construction of a healthy Ethnic Studies Ecosystem. In developing the ecosystem that we imagined for this collective, the goal was that it would be nurturing and support everyone's growth and development, building an understanding of the diseased aspects of our school communities and our own individual, community, and historical experiences, and establishing supports to foster the holistic well-being of our collective and of the students, families, and communities we would be working with. The ecosystem metaphor is useful on multiple levels, particularly in the recognition that the basics are required first and foremost to allow us to thrive: the air, water, soil, and sunlight must be healthy. Fire is also critical as we have to burn and let go of so many aspects of schooling that are unhealthy and harmful to students and teachers alike, including: Eurocentric curriculum; teacher-centered pedagogy; and carceral approaches to "discipline." Identifying these harmful realities—many of which have been normalized and accepted in our schools—calling them out, and burning them and their damaging impacts, allowed us to focus on building alternatives. The culture that we create in our classrooms, the air that our classroom communities breathe, must be healthy for us to work toward a space of thriving. The curriculum is the heart of what we engage in with our students—the soil—and it also must be rich with culturally sustaining content to nurture student engagement and wellness so that they can thrive (Paris & Alim, 2017). This is supported by the water we provide our students, the pedagogy, as we find ways to quench their thirst for both knowledge and healthy, holistic identities in this climate that is designed to support their well-being.

Additionally, sunlight is also essential and we understand it as the shared purpose, care, and joy that we foster and center in our classrooms. And, of course, when we nurture health in an ecosystem we understand interdependence and recognize that every part of the ecosystem, every single person in our classrooms, have to be healthy or supported on a path toward wellness in order for the ecosystem to function as it should: our collective wellness is dependent on the wellness of each of us, and requires that we feed and support each other uniquely, as we may each require different forms and amounts of sustenance to thrive. This is reflected in our sense of collective accountability to each individual, never sacrificing any member of our community (as is often done in schools through multiple forms of "discipline"). We recognize that the dandelions and "weeds" in our ecosystem need to be understood and honored for their essential role in the well-being of all of us. Through this approach, we are able to nurture mutual resistance, resilience, regeneration, adaptation, shared vulnerability and interdependence.

This framing helped us understand that the future of Ethnic Studies training for teachers and teacher candidates will require that we move far beyond typical approaches and create ecosystems that are grounded in the values and principles of transformative Ethnic Studies that

foster a commitment to racial and intersectional justice, and the holistic well-being of BIPOC communities, while holding ourselves accountable, above all else, to these communities, families, and students.

In the 2023–24 school year we were able to take this approach to another level and witness the implications of the Healthy Ethnic Studies Ecosystem model for teacher support and development. Working across two K-8 and one high school district with teacher candidates, teachers, and social workers and centering the holistic embodiment of Ethnic Studies in all facets of the vocation, we understood the necessity of an ecosystem that centered wellness. The students represented a variety of different interconnected seedlings striving to grow and be healthy, and the teachers—particularly their care for students and the culture they built—were the air that enveloped the students and upon which their health depended. This culture was built on a care and love for students and centered the strength and power of students and their families and communities through art, activities, and projects that continually uplifted students as essential to our communities and our future collective well-being (leaning on tools such as Yosso's [2005] Community Cultural Wealth Model and Paris and Alim's [2017] Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies). The deficit-centered toxins that hung in the atmosphere and negatively impacted the well-being of so many students in East San José had been eliminated in these classrooms. The air became healthy.

Their teachings were the water that fed the students and supported their growth. Our community engaged in teaching approaches that were truly student-centered, moving from direct instruction to having, for example, elementary school students engage in Freedom Dreaming activities that allowed them to both imagine their communities as they want them to be and to begin to move toward those dreams. The teachers were constantly watering their students, who had become increasingly thirsty, to center both wonder and possibility.

The healthy and affirming curriculum was the soil that enveloped their learning and intellectual well-being. This challenge demanded constant re-imagining of the curriculum as teachers would have students critique the textbooks, comparing deficit-laden approaches to communities of Color to alternative materials that retold their histories in affirming ways. Often, the students themselves would create the curriculum: building a framework for the year that centered wisdom that was essential in their families (a Sabiduria Wall), or learning about the Ohlone people on whose land they were learning and creating innovative approaches to Land Acknowledgement that included letter writing to politicians supporting Land Back movements. These teachers learned to identify unhealthy curriculum (which could be difficult given how pervasive it is in our schools) and became increasingly adept at developing alternatives that were affirming to students and their communities as they nurtured advanced critical thinking skills. The soil was always being replenished for wellness.

The teachers became adept at moving from a school and district focus on testing and compliance toward a continual emphasis on joy, celebration, and wonder. They themselves glowed in the excitement of ensuring that their classrooms were joyous spaces from the moment that students walked in every day through the time they returned home. Students were excited to be learning in such affirming ways. Despite a perpetual fog that hung over their schools, the sun was shining in Ethnic Studies classrooms.

It was the larger school/district climate that our teachers and students experienced that we struggled with most. We could not ensure the safety of the school climate in which they were building these ecosystems, and in fact in many cases we had to support our teachers in dealing with its toxicity. We understood this climate as the larger school culture and the corresponding beliefs that shape practices across a school setting and district. So, for example, many of our teachers felt the weight of deficit approaches to students, families, and communities in the schools in which they worked as experienced through discipline, low expectations, and negative views of families. We saw this vividly at an assembly at one school site, where a carceral approach to compliance dominated what was intended to be a showcase of an arts program. The teachers and social workers constantly shared stories about the challenges they faced and the lack of support they experienced from administrators and district leaders who did not understand the necessity of embodying an Ethnic Studies ethos for their own practices related to supporting students, families, and communities and their well-being.

The struggle our teachers and social workers experienced is that their classrooms were not autonomous ecosystems, but existed within the larger school climate, which was often defined by significant toxicity that teachers did not have the capacity to address. While they sought to make their classrooms spaces in which they could inoculate their students from the harms they might encounter, they needed grade level colleagues, school staff, and in particular, school leaders to be part of the Ethnic Studies development process so that the culture we were creating was something that was pervasive across the school site. So, while the air in their classrooms had become healthy, teachers and students both had to find ways to protect themselves from the toxicity in the rest of the building. This is the true challenge of Ethnic Studies, as it always has been: we are engaged in efforts to reimagine and reconceive schooling as we do so within the very sites that have been inflicting harm on students, families, and communities of Color since their inception. The burning of institutionalized and often pervasive toxicity and harm is something that we have to engage in for the health of the entire ecosystem.

One example of this challenge was in the inclusion of school social workers in our community and trainings. Several social workers across one of our districts reached out to request to be included in the project, even though our focus was on teacher and student-teacher training. They made it clear that they wanted to learn and adapt Ethnic Studies approaches to their efforts to support students and families experiencing any number of challenges to their well-being. They faced resistance from their supervisor and from some district leaders, illuminating the fundamental contradiction we were attempting to confront. Certain leaders wanted social workers to focus on the work of disciplining students, and specifically engaging in superficial approaches to monitoring attendance, rather than supporting and challenging teachers at their sites who were unable and often unwilling to create healthy learning communities in their classes. Some of these district leaders did not understand how the work of Ethnic Studies—reimagining schools as sites of care that nurture the holistic well-being of students and families grounded in their strengths—was central to the social worker role in their schools. This reflected the focus on punitive, deficit based, and discipline-centered approaches to engaging students and families. It was vivid in all of our gatherings and small group meetings with the social workers that they and their students were stifled and suffering from toxic school and district climates that provided no support for them to begin to imagine and grow healthy ecosystems for their students, who our social workers saw as beautiful, smart, future leaders, but who others were unable and/or unwilling to support. This toxic climate prevented their and our ability to implement the lessons of Ethnic Studies in their schools

in the ways that our emerging Ethnic Studies framework and our students, families, and communities deserved.

The social workers, in many ways, were the mushrooms in our Ethnic Studies Ecosystem, as they absorbed the toxins in the climate to the greatest extent possible in an effort to prevent those toxins from harming the children. But they were too few and were working without support to sustain themselves and ensure that they could process the harm that they and their students experienced, while sustaining themselves. So we worked collectively to create protective suits for all of us to wear when we had to enter toxic spaces in our schools, since absorbing those harmful beliefs and practices was overwhelming. Until school leaders (who are responsible for the safety and health of the overall school climate) embodied an Ethnic Studies ethos in every aspect of their roles, we needed to deflect harmful practices and arm our students, families, and communities to do the same as they learned to grow and thrive in our classrooms. Those healthy classroom ecosystems allowed us to keep building innovative approaches to resist toxicity so that we constantly reinforced our protective suits with ways to: identify harmful framings we encountered, avoid engaging with toxic beliefs and practices if possible, resist dangerous norms/standards, and, when necessary, confront faculty and leaders who do not support our well-being (in the safest ways possible).

In our vision of where we were heading collectively, our healthy Ethnic Studies Ecosystem benefitted from moving beyond interventions against toxicity toward deep cultivation as we leaned on, learned from, and centered the wisdom of our indigenous communities and their practices of cultural burns. We understood that at times we needed to engage in intentionally burning the invasive undergrowth that works against the overall, long-term health of our ecosystems. If we did not burn and eliminate the harmful beliefs about and practices toward our communities of Color, they would lead to the decay of all that we created and nurtured. Our gatherings became a ceremonial burning, as we acknowledged these harmful realities, imagined ways to eliminate their impacts, designed and built alternatives, and shared the impacts of these approaches on the well-being of our students, families, and communities.



Creating a long-term vision of all that is required of Ethnic Studies is essential to fulfill our necessary mission. This ecosystem metaphor is purposeful, because, as we have experienced, without something like this to ground and direct us, we too easily accept the harmful beliefs and practices that those within these institutions understand as common practice without question.

Conclusion

In describing these processes, we intentionally decentered whiteness for this writing. The toxins we described above can be understood as the centering of whiteness, racist carceral approaches to discipline, and pervasive deficit beliefs and practices related to students, families, and communities of Color. Still, we chose to build an Ethnic Studies Ecosystem that centered the ways of knowing, being, and engaging in collective care in communities of Color. This model was helpful to our entire community, which included white teachers and student teachers, to disrupt the common practices of centering whiteness, even in spaces that are committed to the upliftment of communities of Color. In the Portland and San José examples in this piece, we strived to demonstrate the limits imposed by whiteness, as well as the power of imagining and cultivating other worlds that decenter whiteness in every possible way as we build on the power of communities of Color and of truly transformative Ethnic Studies.

As we look to the future of Ethnic Studies in K-12 schools, we must center the lessons from these processes:

- Recognizing that the embodiment of an Ethnic Studies ethos that defines the culture of our classrooms is essential;
- Building our classroom practices and pedagogies through that culture of embodiment; and
- Creating curriculum that honors Ethnic Studies commitments and our students, families, and communities.

Most importantly, we have to understand that Ethnic Studies is not simply a class or even a subject area or discipline. Ethnic Studies is the embodiment of learning as the pursuit of joy, justice, and liberation for all, and therefore requires that our schools become sites fully dedicated to that vision. As we strive to prepare teachers for this powerful manifestation of the vocation, we have to help school and district leaders analyze, understand, and commit to creating school and district climates that foster healthy ecosystems for our young people, reimagining “discipline,” family and community engagement, and learning itself.

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Curtailing the Slow Violence of White Supremacy in School Districts through Critical Ethnic Studies Praxes, Pedagogies, and Partnerships

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Abstract

Urban school districts are increasingly tasked with advancing anti-racist change while simultaneously reproducing the white supremacist logics embedded within public education systems. While these school districts are often framed as progressive hubs of educational innovation, conflicts over race, curriculum, and equity continue to plague public schools and enable forms of racialized harm that undermine student learning. Amid entangled legacies of coloniality, white dominance, and racialized exclusion, this study documents the everyday forms of domination that subtly weaken rigorous and liberatory learning. More importantly, we simultaneously chronicle strategies for how San Francisco Unified School District middle school teachers resist educational domination through collaborative experiments in critical Ethnic Studies. This paper draws upon the conceptualization of *slow violence* as a framework for reconciling the district's progressive ethos with recent local and state divestments from Ethnic Studies. We partnered with middle school social studies teachers to co-design a 6-week Ethnic Studies curriculum from inception to evaluation. Findings indicated that Ethnic Studies educators thrived when they were provided opportunities to nurture an intimacy with critical theory, translate educational theory into practice, and reimagine healthy relationships with district leaders, which was strengthened through theory-aligned collective study, deep teacher passions, and humanizing relationships between researchers and educators. In politically volatile contexts, teacher agency and research collaboration become essential in sustaining Ethnic Studies.

Keywords: Ethnic studies, middle school, urban schooling, slow violence, teacher collaboration, social design-based research

Introduction

A few weeks after the last school bell of the academic year rang across San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) schoolyards, the newly appointed Superintendent, Dr. Maria Su, convened a meeting with district principals in late June 2025. One agenda item in particular—the continuity of a yearlong mandatory Ethnic Studies curriculum—stirred turmoil within one of the birthplaces of Ethnic Studies, at least at the institutional level. With a polarizing appointment process in her

wake due to an accelerated selection process and community concerns over its lack of transparency (DeBenedetti, 2025), Superintendent Su had a tall order in delivering news about the fate of Ethnic Studies. In that meeting, principals across the district learned that Superintendent Su was considering pausing the implementation of Ethnic Studies for the 2025-2026 academic year while the district assessed the curriculum's content.

Many conservative stakeholders within the district lauded the decision and its politically opportune timing to seize the momentum of the U.S. Department of Education's "Dear Colleague" letter, national anti-DEI attacks, and California's budget cuts to Ethnic Studies, which consequently destabilized Ethnic Studies efforts at the local level (Conyers & Wright Fields, 2026; Trainor, 2025). Critical education scholar Michael W. Apple (2005) conceptualized these coordinated, yet always contested, attacks on "egalitarian norms and values" in education, such as the aforementioned examples, as enactments of "conservative modernization," which is "the successful struggle by the right to form a broad-based alliance" that restructures the way we do education to be more individualized, privatized, depoliticized, and stratified (p. 272). Notably, what often falls outside the frame when we think about the organizing strategies of conservative social movements is the subtle way they seize power. Without the heightened public attention of press conferences, packed school board meetings, or community listening sessions, Superintendent Su and the school district attempted to slowly and quietly sunset one of the nation's most progressive and effective Ethnic Studies programs in favor of re-establishing white colonial norms in the district.

Superintendent Su's question to pause the curriculum came as a shock to many advocates of Ethnic Studies across the district. Many defenders of Ethnic Studies pointed to the curriculum's national acclaim and widespread success, as evidenced by its ability to improve student achievement, attendance, and graduation rates (Bonilla et al., 2021; Dee & Penner, 2017), as a rationale to invest in the program. Progressive stakeholders cautioned that an abrupt interruption would make curricular planning more difficult for teachers and the logistics of course scheduling more challenging for the school year beginning in August. Advocates of Ethnic Studies viewed the proposed pause by district leadership as a swift divestment from Ethnic Studies despite SFUSD's historical eminence as a progressive thought leader in the field. The principal at Thurgood Marshall High School questioned in a public comment at the SFUSD school board meeting if "the push to pause ethnic studies is about a national wave against DEI and truth-telling in schools" and asserted that "SFUSD must resist" (San Francisco Unified School District, 2025). Accepting this call, a coalition of progressive school leaders, parents, and students engaged in a collective effort to plot, plan, and make meaning beyond the district's control. This coalition made the quiet workings of "conservative modernization" loud and, through petitions, rallies, and press conferences, successfully organized for Superintendent Su to reverse her decision to sunset Ethnic Studies in August of 2025.

While the public narrative focused on conservative efforts to undermine Ethnic Studies and the subsequent resistance from progressive educators and families, the impact of these district policies and politics on teachers who must navigate these polarizing politics every day in the classroom with young people is less often discussed. In this context of subtle and gradual attacks on Ethnic Studies, this paper turns our attention to the everyday realities of teachers working to enact, sustain, and honor the liberatory tradition of Ethnic Studies in tense political environments where conservative challenges are raised in progressively imagined spaces. With this in mind, our study is guided by the following research questions: (a) How do middle school teachers in SFUSD

navigate the implementation of Ethnic Studies amid political uncertainty and uneven institutional support?; (b) How do collaborative relationships among teachers support Ethnic Studies implementation across different middle school contexts?; and (c) How do research-practice partnerships shape teachers' experiences of implementing and sustaining Ethnic Studies within politically contested educational environments? By grounding this project in the lived experiences of teachers currently navigating shifting political issues, we illuminate the tensions, possibilities, and resilience that shape Ethnic Studies implementation in SFUSD.

Background

San Francisco is typically framed as a radical city, with progressive-minded thinkers and educators shaping its future. Compared with large urban districts such as New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago, San Francisco often stands out for advancing progressive educational policies related to Ethnic Studies, restorative justice, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and sanctuary protections for immigrant communities, many of which influence educational standards and strategies nationwide. Much of what comes out of the city leads to trends that reshape educational advancement. Shifting the national landscape toward justice-centered education, San Francisco's consequential curricular contributions included the Ethnic Studies movement. As one of the birthplaces of Ethnic Studies, San Francisco is often presumed to embody the field's commitments to identity affirmation, critical consciousness, and social justice (Sleeter, 2011). However, San Francisco's progressive reputation is not neutral; it is discursively constructed. In this gap between ideal and practice, we are interested in the everyday decisions that middle school teachers make to unsettle the contradictions in what Shange (2019) described as San Francisco's "progressive dystopia."

Progressive Schooling and Racialized Contradictions

The city of San Francisco is powerful, but small, only 49 square miles, with a single public school district to serve the city's population, concentrating educational governance and policy decision-making within one system. The San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) serves as a critical site where competing narratives of progress and persistent inequality converge. The district is characterized by its racial, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity, serving a student population that reflects the complexities of the city and nation alike. While SFUSD often celebrates and boasts about its diversity and leadership in advancing equity-oriented policies, these conditions coexist with decades-long disparities in access to resources and educational outcomes for Black, Latinx, multilingual, and low-income students. Despite progressive commitments, SFUSD continues to navigate tensions between symbolic policy leadership and unequal implementation, consistently letting down public school families who rely on its systems.

San Francisco's educational system is structured by coloniality and whiteness. These "epistemes of domination," or knowledge systems that undermine pursuits of freedom (Turner et al., 2023), such as coloniality, whiteness, antiblackness, xenophobia, and so on, pierce into the ecosystem of the classroom to maintain environments that value racial hierarchies, dominant knowledge systems, and enact institutional practices that marginalize people of the global majority (Leonardo, 2009). Apple (2005) clarified the danger of being seduced by these white colonial logics given their unassuming nature that is "often couched in the discourse of 'improving' competitiveness, jobs, standards, and quality in an educational system that is seen as in total crisis" (p. 271). This shows up in curriculum, policy, and resource allocation decisions. Specifically, this includes staffing

shortages, budget cuts, limited support from district leaders, and the dilution of race-conscious curriculum, resulting in uneven implementation of Ethnic Studies. Here, it is important for us to continually acknowledge that attempts to do liberatory work are always operating alongside the very conditions that constrain the work of Ethnic Studies, leading to the persistence of racialized inequities.

In recent years, SFUSD has also experienced significant political and administrative instability, including leadership transitions, shifting policy priorities, major budgetary constraints, and the constant threat of state involvement. These changes have contributed to inconsistencies in program support, delays in staffing key positions, and uneven implementation of district initiatives. For educators, this impact is real in their day-to-day experiences, producing uncertainty around curricular expectations, limited access to resources, and an increased reliance on their individual initiative to sustain justice-oriented teaching. These organizational conditions set the stage for the heightened political tensions surrounding Ethnic Studies and the vulnerability of its continued implementation within the district.

Beginning work grounded in the values of Ethnic Studies in middle school social studies classrooms comes at an even more precarious time. Recent efforts to pause Ethnic Studies in SFUSD must be understood within the context of organizational instability and gradual disinvestment. While the recent attempt to pause Ethnic Studies may have appeared abrupt, it reflects years of accumulating policy shifts, resource constraints, funding reductions, and political backlash that gradually reshaped the conditions under which such a curriculum could be sustained. This includes decades of disrespect to the city's Black residents (Har, 2024), public attacks on the school district's attempted equity audit (Peña, 2021), and a billionaire-funded recall campaign to remove three progressive school board members (Lagos, 2022). These developments are also situated within a wider national landscape of backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, in which Ethnic Studies and race-conscious teaching have become focal points of political controversy (Buller, 2025; Tucker, 2025), and gaining school board seats is a part of the conservative playbook (López & Sampson, 2024). As elsewhere across the nation, these dynamics have taken shape in San Francisco through culture war debates over curriculum, funding, and especially the role of race-conscious teaching in public education.

Rather than an isolated disruption, the vulnerability of Ethnic Studies in SFUSD reveals how progressive policies can be undermined. It is within this context that understanding how teachers navigate, adapt, and collaborate becomes critical to examining the conditions that enable or constrain the implementation of Ethnic Studies in middle school classrooms.

Literature Review

A growing body of scholarship has examined the political dimensions of teaching, particularly within spaces where race, equity, and curriculum are contested. Rather than positioning teaching as neutral, this work highlights how educators engage in political practice through their pedagogical decisions, curricular content, and their focus on relationship- and trust-building with students and communities. While Ethnic Studies and culturally sustaining pedagogies are distinct traditions, both position teachers as key actors in advancing educational approaches that center students' lived experiences and challenge dominant narratives (Paris & Alim, 2017; Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). Research has shown the benefits of Ethnic Studies courses, noting that they

can support student engagement, foster positive relationships with schools, and enhance academic achievement while also providing a deeper understanding of structural inequality (Dee & Penner, 2017). These perspectives bring light to the importance of classroom practices that are deeply entangled with broader social, cultural, and historical conditions, particularly in urban settings.

Existing scholarship has documented how teachers implementing Ethnic Studies and other race-conscious pedagogies must navigate institutional constraints, political and public scrutiny, and shifting expectations around what is considered permissible within schools (Kohli et al., 2017; Sleeter, 2011). Scholars have also highlighted the increasing pressures placed on educators attempting to sustain justice-oriented teaching amid broader backlash against race-conscious education and diversity initiatives (Kohli, 2019; Michael, 2015).

In response to this complexity, research-practice partnerships (RPPs) have emerged as a prominent approach for bridging the gap between research and practice. RPPs are typically defined as long-term collaborations between researchers and practitioners that aim to address problems of practice through sustained inquiry and shared engagement (Coburn et al., 2013). Within the context of Ethnic Studies implementation, collaborative approaches can serve as a buffer, supporting teachers as they navigate political scrutiny, local tensions, and uneven institutional support. Scholars have noted that these partnerships can challenge hierarchical distinctions between researchers and practitioners by positioning teachers as knowledgeable actors within the research process rather than passive recipients of external expertise (Coburn et al., 2013; Gutiérrez et al., 2020).

At the same time, existing research has raised questions about the extent to which research collaborations fully engage with the broader political and institutional conditions shaping justice-oriented educational work. While RPPs often emphasize collaboration and improvement, they may still prioritize solving technical problems within existing systems rather than addressing the structural conditions that constrain race-conscious teaching and the implementation of Ethnic Studies. Existing literature has also tended to focus more heavily on measurable outcomes, such as instructional change or student achievement, than on the relational, political, and ethical dimensions of collaboration itself. This study builds on this scholarship by examining how teachers and researchers collaboratively navigate the implementation of Ethnic Studies in a context marked by political contestation, institutional instability, and broader backlash against race-conscious education.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, we draw on Sociologist Ranita Ray's (2025) concept of "slow violence" to conceptualize the conditions that affect the feasibility of Ethnic Studies in middle school classrooms, including gradual disinvestment in infrastructure, evidenced by coordinator vacancies, reduced funding, and a lack of institutional support. Additionally, organizational and political instability lead to leadership turnover and shifting district priorities, which in turn exacerbate these issues. These conditions accumulate over time in patterned forms of harm, often appearing as routine administrative decisions while simultaneously constraining justice-oriented teaching. Slow violence is sustained by the normalization of seemingly minor or procedural decisions.

Furthermore, we draw on Zeus Leonardo's (2009) theorization of whiteness as a structuring force in education to explain how these conditions operate within SFUSD. White supremacist school logics function by organizing what is recognized as legitimate knowledge, appropriate pedagogy, and acceptable forms of political engagement by teachers within their classrooms. These logics depend on claims of neutrality, on keeping "politics out of the classroom" (Tucker, 2025), and on notions of balance, often positioning race-conscious teaching as controversial or outside the bounds of standard practice. These basic practices thus shape decisions about curriculum adoption and resource allocation, constraining the sustainability of initiatives such as Ethnic Studies.

Building on our discussion of RPPs, we examine how collaborative researcher-teacher relationships can help educators navigate and transform these conditions. Teachers are not passive; they have always done this work, particularly in San Francisco, where teacher-led organizing groups provide opportunities for teachers to organize and effect meaningful change in schools (Ginwright, 2015; Quinn, 2020; Alridge et al., 2023). Researchers must reposition themselves in order to meet the needs of these same educators who believe in the values of Ethnic Studies. However, dominant approaches to RPP position researchers as outside experts tasked with diagnosing problems and prescribing solutions, often negating the ongoing labor and knowledge that educators already bring to this work (Coburn et al., 2013; Gutiérrez et al., 2020). In this study, we instead conceptualize research as operating through co-conspiracy, in which researchers align politically with teachers and participate in the collective labor of sustaining critical pedagogy (Love, 2019; Stovall, 2023).

Co-conspiracy, as we designate it, requires more than collaboration; it demands that researchers lean into the relational, political, and material conditions that shape classroom practice, rather than remain at an observer's distance. This manifests as a commitment to co-designing processes that are responsive to teachers' existing knowledge, hopes, and constraints, while also working to expand what is possible within those conditions. Research becomes a site of collective inquiry and shared responsibility, and less so one of intervention upon teachers, organizing opportunities for educators to study and apply Ethnic Studies in ways that both respond to and push back on the conditions that constrain it. Together, these frameworks help us understand the challenges teachers face in sustaining Ethnic Studies and how collaborative partnerships can support justice-oriented teaching under difficult political and institutional conditions.

Methods

The insights presented in this paper draw upon a larger study of an Ethnic Studies curricular intervention implemented within middle school social studies and elective courses. In that project, we employed critical qualitative and Social Design-Based Experiment (SDBE) methodology to evaluate the curricular intervention, co-design equitable learning environments, and remain attentive to other emergent insights from the social world of the classroom. SDBE is the process of "co-design[s] learning ecologies in which learning is made equitable and consequential for youth from nondominant communities" (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 330). Through this adaptive methodology, we assessed how the middle school curriculum can lay a positive foundation for the secondary Ethnic Studies requirements. Here, we move the role of the research-practice partnership from high-level, cursory engagement with districts to licensing our research to more personally engaging with educators, striving to sit with the curricular, political, and structural tensions our partners are working through in real time.

In our study, we partnered with middle school social studies teachers to co-design a 6-week curriculum, “Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies,” from inception through evaluation. This project was launched twice—once in the Spring of 2025 with five teachers and again in the Spring of 2026 with three teachers who participated in the first iteration of the study. Three teachers identified themselves as women, one as a man, and one as transgender. Two teachers racialized themselves as white, one as Asian, one as Black, and one as Latine. The data analyzed in this paper were collected during both iterations of the curricular design and implementation.

We conducted two rounds of coding to identify emergent patterns related to curriculum, pedagogy, research feasibility, and student learning in the Ethnic Studies curricular intervention. The first round of coding relied on an a priori coding scheme based on the seven youth abolitionist principles (Saldaña, 2009). Subsequently, we conducted a second round of coding using emergent coding schemes that surfaced from our data (Miles et al., 2014). After revising the code definitions from round one and two coding, we performed a third round of thematic coding—applying both the a priori and emergent codes—and collectively deliberated on this final set of data to achieve inter-rater agreement between our team. To ensure validity, our findings and selected transcript excerpts were shared with our community partners and community advisory board to understand how an Ethnic Studies pedagogical standpoint influenced the curriculum, teaching, and student learning during the study.

Learnings from Collectivist Engagements with Critical Ethnic Studies

In times of heightened political uncertainty in the school district, fueled by the logics of coloniality and whiteness, the teachers in our project experimented with new forms of collectivity to persevere amid the political turmoil surrounding attempts to rescind the district's commitments to Ethnic Studies. Hence, we observed that teachers in our study chose to resist an educational structure that encourages isolation and hyper-individualism within the profession (e.g., lesson planning and evaluation meetings). They sought alternative relationships that nurtured their Ethnic Studies praxis and their humanistic need for meaningful connection. In this section, we first discuss how teachers built consequential relationships of care with one another and, subsequently, with other teachers across the district. Then, we explore how the structure of our research-practice partnership created a unique opportunity for teachers to nurture an intimacy with critical theory, translate educational theory into practice, and reimagine healthy relationships with district leaders, which was strengthened through theory-aligned collective study, deep teacher passions, and humanizing relationships between researchers and educators. Taken together, we argue that teachers' study, commitment, and engagement with critical Ethnic Studies pedagogies and praxes ushered in a collectivist orientation that transformed their art of teaching, learning, and student development.

Contexts of Ethnic Studies Implementation

The five educators in this study taught Social Studies, Special Education, and Public Speaking across four middle school sites within and adjacent to SFUSD, each shaped by distinct racial, socioeconomic, and institutional conditions. Three teachers worked at schools in neighboring working-class communities on the southern side of the city, while another taught at a more affluent school site serving students in one of San Francisco's wealthier neighborhoods. A fifth

educator worked within a county-operated educational setting serving students who had experienced significant disruptions within traditional systems.

The teachers also entered the project with varying levels of teaching experience and familiarity with Ethnic Studies. Three participants were first-year teachers navigating both the demands of entering the profession and the implementation of a race-conscious curriculum amid broader district instability. One of whom had formal training in the Mastering Cultural Identity (MCI) model, a school-based program designed to support students' cultural identity development, leadership skills, and engagement with Black historical and contemporary experiences (Parents for Public Schools of San Francisco, 2024), which shaped their approach to identity, power, and student engagement. Another educator had nearly a decade of classroom experience and had formed long-lasting relationships within the district. Teachers entered the project through a combination of institutional relationships and trusted networks. One educator had previously worked with a co-researcher through a local university's partnership and was recruited because of their demonstrated commitment to critical and culturally responsive teaching. Other participants joined through district-level relationships and word-of-mouth recruitment among colleagues. In one case, a teacher invited a coworker from their school site to participate alongside them.

These uneven pathways into the project, after significant challenges of finding qualified teachers willing to teach an ethnic studies curriculum in an eighth-grade classroom, reflected the broader instability surrounding Ethnic Studies implementation and fear within the district. Some educators become deeply engaged in the collaborative process, regularly participating in curriculum development conversations, cross-site reflection, and collective problem-solving. Others struggle to sustain participation amid burnout, competing institutional demands, and uncertainty surrounding their positions within schools. One teacher, already questioning whether they would remain in teaching after their first year, gradually disengaged from the project as the year progressed. Another educator attended meetings inconsistently while traversing a co-teaching arrangement that researchers had not initially been aware of, complicating communication and curriculum implementation. During the following year, teachers also dealt with city-wide labor tensions, including a week-long strike that further disrupted continuity and trust.

Teacher Disposition toward Critical Consciousness

Teachers in this study approach Ethnic Studies with a deeply political and moral commitment, viewing it as central to addressing injustice and shaping students' understanding of the world around them. This orientation is reflected in how educators both understand their role and describe their motivations for teaching, often grounded in their work in broader commitments to social change and collective responsibility. As one teacher explained, "the best way that I could see to fix [problems in the world] them was to become a teacher," while another described their role as helping students "examine politics and their beliefs." These perspectives, rife with moral and political purpose, position teaching not as a neutral act, but as a powerful engagement with social and political purposes.

For many educators, Ethnic Studies is viewed not as an elective or new graduation requirement, but as a necessary component of students' learning. Teachers describe the work as "not optional . . . necessary if we're going to get free," and emphasized its urgency given "the climate of the world right now." In this framing, Ethnic Studies becomes a critical space through which students can

develop the tools to understand and respond to systems of inequality. Teachers also articulated a sustained attentiveness to how knowledge, power, and identity operate within the classroom. This was evident in their efforts to question dominant narratives, foreground multiple perspectives, and critically examine whose stories are centered in the curriculum (Kolluri and Edwards, 2023), especially given how closely related the creation of Ethnic Studies is to the students in this city. As one educator noted, a central aim of their teaching is to remain aware of their positionality as a white teacher working with students of color and to actively consider how that shapes classroom dynamics.

Collaboration also extended into public and professional learning spaces beyond individual school sites. During this project, teachers and researchers co-facilitated a workshop at a local conference on justice-oriented teaching and learning for educators across the region. The session invited educators to collectively reflect on the conditions shaping Ethnic Studies implementation, including where they experienced support, constraints, political risk, and possibilities within their own school contexts. Teachers led conversations about adapting the curriculum, fostering students' connection to identity and history, and navigating the practical realities of race-conscious teaching in politically contested environments. These exchanges created opportunities for educators across different schools and districts to collectively problem-solve and affirm one another's work during a period of broader, statewide uncertainty surrounding Ethnic Studies. This work also extended beyond professional collaboration to include deeper engagement with students' families and communities. Assignments such as oral histories created opportunities for students to connect classroom learning to lived experience and foster relationships across generations.

Cultivate Critical Consciousness in Classroom Practice

Teachers enact this orientation through intentional pedagogical practices that center identity, have conversations about how to disrupt dominant narratives, and create space for critical engagement. One key dimension of this work involves explicitly engaging students in honest conversations about identity, race, and power. Teachers described designing lessons that ask students to define and reflect on concepts such as race, ethnicity, and nationality, often beginning with students' own experiences and understandings, and whether they even recognized these dynamics as existing in their worlds. Teachers also demonstrated a commitment to addressing issues of harm and conflict as they arise in the classroom. Rather than deferring or minimizing these moments of tension, educators described intervening immediately when students used harmful language or reproduced oppressive behavior. As one teacher explained, when a student disrespected someone else's culture, "if you're going to say something problematic, we're going to have a conversation . . . in the moment." These responses reflect a pedagogical stance that treats such moments not as disruptions to instruction or punitive discipline, but as integral opportunities for learning. In addition to these responsive practices, teachers emphasized the importance of building relational and humanizing classroom environments. Several educators described approaching their teaching from "a loving stance," prioritizing trust, care, and emotional safety as foundational to students' ability to engage critically. This included the use of restorative practices and intentional efforts to create spaces where students felt seen and valued.

Simultaneously, teachers' efforts to cultivate critical consciousness were shaped by a range of constraints that complicated their work. Educators described challenges related to student

engagement, pacing, and the limitation of existing curriculum supports, at times characterizing the work as “whack-a-mole” as they attempted to address multiple competing demands in the classroom. These conditions required teachers to continually adjust their approaches, balancing their commitments to critical pedagogy with the practical realities of time, resources, and instructional expectations.

Teachers extend their work beyond individual classrooms through cross-collaboration, shared problem-solving, and community engagement, challenging the usual isolation of teaching in these areas. Several educators described limited opportunities at their school sites to engage in sustained dialogue about curriculum or pedagogy, and even shared moments that ran counter to or were at odds with Ethnic Studies values. In response, teachers sought collective reflection among themselves, emphasizing the importance of being able to “talk to people” about how lessons unfolded, how students responded to and engaged with the material, and how to navigate implementation challenges. Through cross-site collaboration, educators shared strategies, compared student engagement data, and worked together to adapt the curriculum in ways responsive to their distinct classroom contexts. With the looming risk of attacks by organized groups in the city, the lateral mentorship and support that teachers engaged in became an important space for refugee support and skill-building as they collectively navigated the district’s hostile political climate.

To better understand these broader issues unfolding in practice, we now turn to the story of one educator navigating the tensions, possibilities, and contradictions of Ethnic Studies implementation.

Wrinkles in Liberatory Learning: Striving for Alignment Between Purpose, Pedagogy, & District Policy

As the clouds swelled with rain over the San Francisco skyline, Natalie, a first-year teacher, used her prep period to ready a lesson on student protest movements from the “Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies” curriculum, which reminded students that they, too, were part of a broader continuum of freedom seekers. In contrast to the conservative storms silently brewing and subtly chipping away at progressive gains in the district (Apple, 2005), Natalie created a classroom space that reminded her students that better worlds were possible (Wallace et al., 2026). As a teacher of a well-celebrated race-conscious curriculum in the district, the very classroom space was adorned with liberatory quotes, portraits of artists, intellectuals, and movement leaders (e.g., Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman), and student work that grapples with difficult questions of the relationship between race, education, and power. Despite the district’s local politics, Natalie remained steadfast in her purpose to nurture and design her classroom as a cradle of critical learning that valued positive affirmation, critical thinking, and embodied learning.

Unlike another content-knowledge-building day or another reflexive journaling session, the “Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies” curriculum would require students to build their muscle for speaking truth to power by rehearsing the political act of protest. In honoring the Ethnic Studies imperative to “systematically examine and dismantle institutional racism” (Hu-DeHart, 2004, p. 874), the FDES research team and teachers intentionally built this lesson plan to help students think critically about “who decides what we learn in schools,” with particular attention to their own local politics of education (FDES Curriculum, 2025). Students ended their previous class session

by watching the mini-documentary film, *The Legacy of the Third World Liberation Front Student Strike at SF State*. For a few seconds, the screen hovered over a black and white visual of a San Francisco State Black Student Union member carrying a protest sign that read “teachers and students shut it down together. Parents support community.” After watching the film, one student journaled how they felt inspired by the idea of teachers and students working together. Kate noted in an exit interview that she was intrigued by her students’ initial observation that the “protest didn’t work on the first day.” However, that curiosity turned into admiration when she realized her students recognized the endurance required by movement work, and that it didn’t stop the protesters from getting “back to it.” Little did they know that the very next day, they would have an opportunity to step into the movement’s tradition themselves.

Chairs scraped against the tile, and desks creaked under Natalie’s hands as she moved furniture from the center of the classroom to the periphery to clear space for an embodied learning experience. We were witnessing Natalie transform her classroom into a “hush harbor” of learning that “nurtures a collective vision of what might be possible” (Hartman, 2022). Students were tasked with creating protest signs as if they were part of the protests themselves. Each group shared with the class why they chose the message/symbolism. At the conclusion of the activity, students reflected on the following questions collectively: “What is one thing young people today can learn from students in the 1960s and 70s? What is the role of youth in shaping social and political change? How can students use their voices to advocate for what they believe in, just as the Third World Liberation Front students did?” In many ways, this lesson was yet another enactment of a “pedagogical ritual of purpose,” which are the “soul-stirring acts of knowledge synthesis that cultivate love, dignity, truth, wisdom, and criticality through the facilitation of rigorous learning” (Wallace et al., 2026). Rather than teaching to the test or to the whims of a particular political moment, teaching in alignment with her purpose and the collective support of the Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies team would prove instrumental in navigating broader district policies and norms.

As a member of the “Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies” research collective, Natalie drew on her experience as a student in the movement at San Francisco State University and honored the rich tradition of Ethnic Studies student activism in her classroom teaching. Natalie often radiantly reminisced about how her Ethnic Studies professors intentionally built learning environments in which she and her peers were valued as co-creators in the learning process. As a first-year teacher, she productively struggled to balance the liberatory foundations of her Ethnic Studies tradition with the district culture, becoming a “warm demander” of high academic expectations, orderly conduct, and human-centered personal investment (Delpit, 2013). This prompted her to take a few pedagogical risks in the classroom, which occasionally invited the district’s curiosity. We noticed, at times, that Natalie used the academic freedom established by the Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies research project, through a research-practice partnership with the school district, to wrinkle the landscape of liberatory learning and push the bounds of what race-conscious education looks and feels like within her district through Ethnic Studies.

As discussed previously, San Francisco is well-known and respected as a progressive hub. As an MCI teacher, Natalie was given a curriculum to advance students, particularly Black students, with their sense of positive identity, leadership skills, and agency. Her engagement with the Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies project allowed her to build upon the aims of that curriculum and add additional content related to critical theories, histories, and practices of race, ethnicity, nationality,

capitalism, and power. The embodied and liberatory pedagogical innovation that Natalie nurtured through the Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies project in her classroom was, in many ways, aligned with the district's vision for a progressive education. However, at times, Natalie shared that there was "a bit of a challenge [with] the communication between my school, MCI, and the project." Even though Natalie knew the district approved and was "in partnership with the project," there was still this "added layer of checking in that I almost needed to do to put out the [Ethnic Studies] curriculum, because it had to also be run by them, just to make sure." The district supported the aims of this project at every turn during implementation; however, navigating the boundaries among the aims, content, and political orientations of the MCI and FDES curricular projects. With deep reflection, Natalie shared that she didn't want to do "anything wrong" and "wanted to make sure that . . . it was . . . everybody was comfortable with it" when designing and implementing the FDES curriculum. After all, the district leaders with whom Natalie worked closely had been very supportive of her growth as an educator, and she wanted to maintain good relationships with them while also developing a new curriculum.

Recognizing this as an opportunity for mutual understanding, the FDES team and Natalie decided to share a draft of a research paper on Natalie's pedagogical practice with a trusted district leader for feedback (Wallace et al., 2026). To our advantage, we were not engaging with a hostile district or particular personnel at that moment. Thus, the aim of this feedback session was to preemptively show the district the advances being made in the lesson plans, highlight the impact this orientation to Ethnic Studies had on student learning, and socialize the theoretical frameworks that underpinned this particular paper and the broader curricular design. What started as a routine consensus check evolved into much more. Natalie was overwhelmed with joy at the feedback she received, not just on the curriculum, but also on her care, rigor, and humanizing approach to the craft of teaching. This moment warmed the hearts of the FDES curriculum team because it served as a timely reminder that the time that our teachers spent reading Stuart Hall, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Toni Morrison during our FDES curriculum retreat proved to be useful beyond the scope of curricular design, but also aided them in better clarifying and defending their Ethnic Studies pedagogical standpoints to the district. Overall, this experience taught us that pairing the ability to speak the language of the district with the academic craft of explaining social customs through educational, Black Studies, and Ethnic Studies theory helped the district better understand Natalie's pedagogical decisions in the classroom and position it as in alignment with the District's aims to offer Ethnic Studies, however, with an added critical lens.

Discussion and Implications

The findings from this study illustrate how teachers navigate the implementation of Ethnic Studies within conditions shaped by disinvestment, organizational instability, and ongoing political tension at the local level. Across the three areas examined (teacher disposition, classroom practice, and collaboration across sites), educators consistently demonstrated a commitment to sustaining critical, justice-oriented teaching despite limited structural support. Rather than functioning as passive recipients of these policy shifts, teachers actively interpreted and adapted their work in response to the demands of their local contexts. These patterns highlight the importance of understanding Ethnic Studies implementation not simply as a matter of curriculum delivery, but as an ongoing negotiation within broader institutional and political conditions that most first-year teachers lack the context for.

These findings suggest that the challenges facing Ethnic Studies are not the result of isolated disruptions, but of the slow violence of cumulative effects from incremental decisions that shape the conditions under which this kind of teaching occurs. Teachers' descriptions of inconsistent curriculum, limited time, and uneven institutional support reflect how harm can be deeply entwined with organizational processes that pass as neutral or merely procedural (Young and Kolluri, 2025). However, the need to continuously adapt lessons, address emergent issues, and compensate for resource gaps placed additional burdens on educators, requiring ongoing labor that often goes unrecognized and uncelebrated. In this way, slow violence operates not only through policy shifts but through the everyday conditions that structure teachers' work.

Further, understanding the workings of white supremacist logics helps to explain how such conditions become normalized within educational systems. Teachers' accounts of navigating institutional uncertainty and concerns about what is appropriate to teach reveal how colonial norms of neutrality and depoliticization continue to shape classroom practice and attempt to subordinate the soul of Ethnic Studies praxis (Domínguez, 2026). These logics organize the boundaries of what is considered legitimate knowledge and acceptable pedagogy, often positioning Ethnic Studies as risky. Thus, teachers are required to engage in ongoing negotiation, making strategic decisions about how to introduce and sustain critical content within constrained environments.

Importantly, the findings also point to the limitations of understanding teacher practice in isolation. In addition to strengthening teachers' disposition towards Ethnic Studies (Domínguez and Kolluri, 2026), teachers' efforts to sustain Ethnic Studies were not solely individual acts of resistance but emerged through cross-site collaboration, shared curriculum, collective reflection, and ongoing dialogue about how to navigate political and practical tensions. Whether through research practice partnerships or informal networks, collaboration emerged as a critical mechanism for educators to share responsive approaches to their teaching. These dynamics suggest that sustaining justice-oriented education requires not only individual commitment but also structures that support collective inquiry and shared responsibility.

These findings carry several implications for research, policy, and practical application. For researchers, the findings suggest the need to move beyond models of collaboration that treat classrooms as sites for applying generalized equity without deep engagement with Ethnic Studies as a distinct intellectual and political tradition. This includes designing collaborative research that is responsive to teachers' priorities, attentive to power dynamics and commitments within partnerships, and grounded in the historical, political, and pedagogical foundations of Ethnic Studies itself. For districts and policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of providing sustained structural support for Ethnic Studies, including stable funding, coherent curriculum resources, and clear institutional commitments and leadership support that extend beyond symbolic endorsement and protect those who enact it. Without such support, the burden of sustaining justice-oriented education is disproportionately placed on individual educators.

Conclusion

As state and local attacks on Ethnic Studies continue, this study highlights the critical role teachers play in sustaining justice-oriented education despite growing political pressure and institutional instability. For the educators in this study, this work is not supplemental; it is "how [they] fix

problems in society” and a necessary part of broader struggles for freedom. Even amid instability, disinvestment, and political pressure that often becomes personal, teachers continue to adapt curricula, facilitate difficult conversations about race and power, create opportunities for student activism and reflection, and build collaborative spaces where students can critically engage with history, identity, and inequality.

Sustaining this work cannot rely solely on individual commitment or personal sacrifice. The future of justice-oriented education depends not only on whether Ethnic Studies remains in place, but also on whether the conditions exist for it to be meaningfully enacted and sustained for future generations.

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Developing White Racial Consciousness: Ethnic Studies Pedagogies and the Transformative Learning of White Students

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Abstract

In the context of increasing restrictions on teaching about race and racism in schools, this study explores the impact of a high school social justice program grounded in Ethnic Studies pedagogies on white students' learning and development. Through focus groups with white alumni, this research examines how students made meaning of lessons on systemic racism, whiteness, and racial identity. Findings show that participants experienced these classrooms as transformative spaces that fostered critical consciousness, empathy, and a deeper understanding of social inequities. Students reported feeling more confident participating in academic spaces, more comfortable engaging in difficult conversations, and more invested in their learning across subjects. Emotional responses such as discomfort and guilt were reframed as necessary components of growth, supported through structured dialogue and community-centered learning. Beyond high school, participants described sustained engagement in civic and social justice efforts, as well as career pathways informed by their education. These findings highlight the power of Ethnic Studies pedagogies in predominantly white spaces to cultivate critically engaged, socially responsible students, as well as underscore the importance of educators intentionally creating inclusive, reflective, and justice-oriented classroom environments.

Keywords: Social justice education, racial justice education, Critical White Studies, Ethnic Studies, critical consciousness of race, anti-racist consciousness

Introduction

Color blindness has become a powerful weapon against progress for people of color, but as a denial mindset, it doesn't do white people any favors, either. A person who avoids the realities of racism doesn't build the crucial muscles for navigating cross-cultural tensions or recovering with grace from missteps.

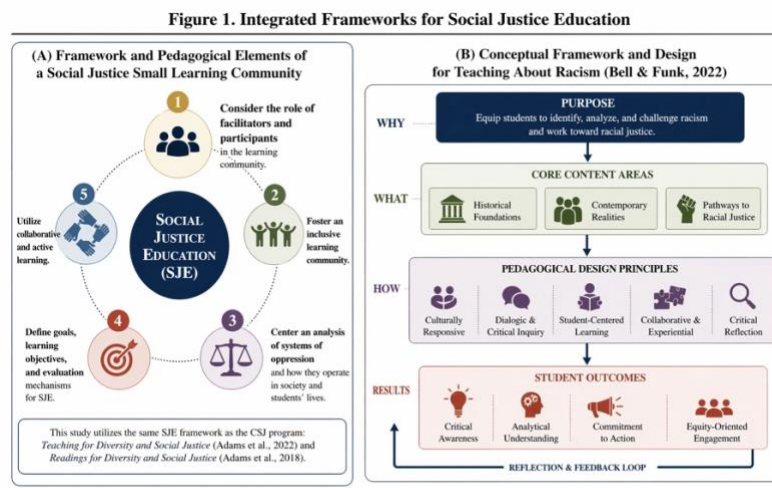
– Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us*, 2021, p. 230

Debates about what can and cannot be taught in public schools are nothing new. Throughout the 20th century, everything from evolution, religious influences and prayer, and periodic book bans have permeated public education policy. Since the 2016 election, there has been an increase in disagreements over the overall purpose of schooling and whether to include topics around race

and racism, and other Ethnic Studies approaches, in the classroom (Aronson & Ashlee, 2018; Butcher & Canaparo, 2024; Gonzalez & Butcher, 2021; Kim, 2021; Tetelbaum, 2022; Welton & Lent, 2023; Wolfe-Rocca & Nold, 2022). Civic education and critical discussions about systemic inequalities, like racism, are being discouraged, and even outlawed, through local and state policies across the country.

While a substantial body of research documents the benefits of Ethnic Studies and racial justice education¹ for students of color (Byrd, 2016; Farag, 2021; Rich & Cargile, 2004; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020), far less scholarship has examined how Ethnic Studies pedagogies operate in white-dominant spaces or how white² students experience and make meaning of such learning. This piece intervenes in that gap by showcasing the reflections of white alumni from a high school social justice interdisciplinary program that incorporated themes from Ethnic Studies, particularly critical consciousness of racial identity of self and others. It examines how they recalled learning about systemic racism and racialized identity and whether they contributed this education to their beliefs and attitudes about people of different racial identities. It also surveyed whether alumni continued social justice-related practices and civic and social engagement after graduating.

While social justice education is often situated as a broader framework, the learning experiences collaborators³ were exposed to align closely with Ethnic Studies pedagogical commitments to (a) situating contemporary racial inequalities within historical contexts, (b) examining whiteness and white privilege as systems of power, (c) using counter-narratives to disrupt dominant historical accounts, (d) nurturing students' critical thinking skills, and (e) fostering a community learning environment (Dominguez et al., 2023; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020).



Note. (A) Adapted from Adams et al. (2022, 2018). (B) Adapted from Bell & Funk (2022).

¹ Racial justice education is defined as, “an introductory overview and understanding of racism with the aim of cultivating a racially just society. . . focusing on helping participants develop a historical and conceptual understanding of racism and helping participants take action toward racial justice in their personal and institutional lives” (Bell & Funk, 2022, p. 158).

² The term “white” is lowercase in alignment with The Associated press (AP) stylebook based on several factors, including the risk of subtly legitimizing white supremacist beliefs (Daniszewski, 2020).

³ Volunteer participants in this study were referred to as “collaborators” and not “participants” to acknowledge their essential contributions to my study and not for it.

In my research, particular attention was paid to the experiences of white students because the conservative narrative being pushed is that learning about racial concepts, like white supremacy, is inappropriate and puts white students in a position to receive hateful messaging in schools (Farag, 2021; Gonzalez & Butcher, 2021; Rufo, 2021; Wolfe-Rocco & Nold, 2022). Rather than centering white students as victims or beneficiaries, my analysis—grounded in Critical White Studies (CWS)—focuses on how this learning experience supported students' development of critical consciousness of racial identity, empathy, solidarity, and democratic participation.

Literature Review

There is a realm of research, specifically in Critical White Studies (CWS), which addresses the process of white racial consciousness in adults (Delgado & Stefanic, 1997; DiAngelo, 2018). However, the experiences of white students learning about white racial consciousness in high school is very limited. CWS conceptualizes whiteness as both a racial identity and a structural location of privilege that must be critically examined to disrupt racism (Aveling, 2004; Delgado & Stefanic, 1997). Because white students are rarely asked to analyze their racial position, this study responds to a critical gap by examining how they come to understand whiteness as a socially constructed racial identity rather than a neutral norm.

The available research suggests that white students may experience a level of moral culpability or even shame when exploring their own ignorance and misunderstandings of racism, and a level of discomfort can occur when they acknowledge their own racist assumptions and socialization (Aveling, 2004; Bandy et al., 2021; Heinze, 2008; Rich & Cargile, 2004; Tatum, 1994). The inevitable emotional reactions of learning about racism are what is being weaponized by policy makers without the contextual understanding that a “transformative understanding of what it means to be white today rarely occurs in those classroom communities where such risks are not run” (Rich & Cargile, 2004, p. 352). Courses that utilize Ethnic Studies pedagogies foster substantial instructional support and learning environments that promote critical consciousness and student engagement, while bans and restrictions constrain opportunities for these educational outcomes to occur.

Introducing white students to this content is beneficial as it encourages them to critically assess dominant white historical perspectives and aids in building constructive partnerships and relationships with other students of different racialized identities. Farag (2021) argues that rather than “producing feelings of shame and guilt about their racialized identity, a thorough understanding of systemic racism can actually lead to a better understanding of their identity and a sense of allyship” (p. 22). It is important to convey to students that this awareness is not intended to evoke permanent feelings of guilt or shame but rather to facilitate discussions about how one can responsibly address white privilege upon acknowledgement. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of utilizing the power inherent in that privilege to actively promote social justice and equality.

Many white students grow up in a cultural context that prioritizes individualism, which can make it challenging for them to grasp that their personal experiences are significantly influenced by and interconnected with the lived experiences of others. Ledesma and Calderón (2015) highlight that “we must teach Whites to understand themselves through the history of the other, in much the

same way many communities of color understand themselves in relationship to Whites” (p. 209). When these students start to recognize the historical origins of white supremacy and the ways it has been challenged, they may experience a profound identity crisis. Research shows that many white individuals resist acknowledging racism due to the belief that being labeled “racist” is a moral endpoint (DiAngelo, 2018; Rich & Cargile, 2004). CWS challenges this binary by reframing racism as systemic rather than individual, creating space for reflection, accountability and growth.

CWS emphasizes the development of an explicitly anti-racist consciousness that includes rejecting whiteness as a position of unearned power. Scholars emphasized that feelings of discomfort—such as guilt, shame, or uncomfortableness—are a natural and necessary part of the learning process for white students when engaging in topics related to race, racism, and racial justice (Delgado & Stefanic, 1997; Farag, 2021; Heinze, 2008; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). This emotional engagement encourages students to confront uncomfortable truths about racism and history. Exposure to diverse perspectives helps white students develop deeper emotional and empathetic awareness, leading to significant growth in their understanding of racial justice. This is particularly important for white students because in the absence of sustained interaction with peers of different racial identities or lived experiences, they are less likely to engage in meaningful reflections on race, racial identity, and racial privilege while in school.

The demographics of my collaborators intentionally include white students specifically to address the gap in research and offer insight into this perspective and experience learning about racial identity through Ethnic Studies pedagogies. Collaborators reflections attest that their education encourages critical thinking and reflection on one’s own identity, privilege, and position within social structures, while at the same time, learning and hearing lived experiences outside of their own. They contribute their educational experience with helping them break down their own conscious and unconscious stereotypes and biases. This deeper awareness of both their own racial identity and the racialized experiences of others promoted a sense of coalition building, allyship, and solidarity that stayed with them well after high school. As educators, isn’t that all we could hope for? To foster a lasting analytic lens through which they move through their worlds?

Methodology

My research focused on the experiences of students who participated in a high school social justice program, The Social Justice Institute (SJI)⁴ for at least two years. Alumni from SJI served as collaborators for my study which explored their experiences learning about systemic racism through a social justice curriculum, how that experienced influenced their own and others’ racialized identities, and if they continued their social action engagement after leaving the program. Collaborators graduated high school between 2012 and 2019, so they were reflecting back on this experience, which for some was over ten years ago. Nonetheless, they were able to vividly recall experiences and articulate the impact SJI had on their personal development, outlook on life, and civic engagement after high school.

The interdisciplinary SJI program incorporates thematic social justice courses in English Language Arts as well as Social Studies. It also includes a social action engagement elective course, which

⁴ Pseudonyms were utilized for the social justice program, public high school, and town to adhere to anonymity.

serves as an introduction to understanding current issues of social diversity and social justice in The United States. The course provides a theoretical framework, based on the social justice pedagogy outlined in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (Adams, M. et al., 2022). This includes the chapter “Racism” which offers an overview of key as well as a design for teaching about racism (Bell & Funk, 2022). Students are provided the accompanying text *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, that include an introduction to the conceptual framework of social justice as well as chapters on a wide range of social oppressions from a social justice standpoint (Adams, et al., 2018). Teachers in SJI use the pedagogy and strategies from the *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (2022) text and incorporate readings that are timely and made relevant to students through active discussions, reflection activities, connections to current events. In all three courses in the program, there is an emphasis on empowerment and allyship, and a true belief that “teaching about racism needs to shift from an exploration of the experiences of victims and victimizers to that of empowered people of color and their white allies, creating the possibility of working together as partners in the establishment of a more just society” (Tatum, 1994, p.474). This is reflected in the culminating projects at the end of each unit, in which students work together to create an action plan addressing the specific form of oppression they just learned about and present to the community.

Students form very close relationships with each other as well as teachers, and there is a true community fostered throughout the program. These relationships continued even after high school, which is how I was able to acquire volunteers to collaborate on my research. It is important to note that students elect to be in this small learning community, with the support of parents and/or caretakers. Therefore, parental pushback on topics like race, or progressive policies, was not an issue.

Three focus groups of three to four SJI alumni of different racial identities were conducted. This piece focuses on the reflections and interactions of collaborators who identified as white, or white-passing.

Table 1

<i>Focus Group Identifiers</i>		
Participant Pseudonym	Self-identified Ethno-racialized identity (presented in the order stated)	Self-identified “white Passing” (if more than one race)
Colton	Italian, Argentinian Jewish	yes
Edith	white	n/a
Jessie	white	n/a
Jordan	white, Black	yes
Mary	white	n/a
Shelby	white	yes
Silas	Black	n/a
	white	n/a

The focus group conversations revolved around their reflections on learning about systemic racism and the development of their critical consciousness of racial identity of self and others. Overall, a profound reflective feeling of nostalgia and gratitude was observed during collaborators' reflections on their experiences in SJI and overall motivation to contribute to social justice in their current lives.

Learning about Systemic Racism and Whiteness through Ethnic Studies Pedagogies

Focus group collaborators described their high school experience in SJI as transformative, often using metaphors such as “doors being opened” and “finally making sense of the world. They recalled the SJI classrooms as pivotal spaces where they began to understand themselves, others, and their place in society. Importantly, collaborators emphasized that the impact extended beyond their academics in the small learning community. They described feeling more empowered to participate in their other classes, more confident in their interactions with teachers, and a deeper sense of academic investment. Many spoke with nostalgia and gratitude, emphasizing that SJI laid the “foundation” for lifelong reflection, learning, and civic engagement. Jessie profoundly stated:

That experience of learning and just being in an environment where it's okay to talk about things that may be more difficult in an unsafe space. It really was good, like quite a privilege to be able to do that . . . to hold on to those teachings and actually have that come into my way of life in so many ways, especially socially.

Overall, their reflections suggested that learning about social and racial justice functioned as more than a high school course—it became a lens through which they continued to interpret the world and deepen their perspectives on the lived experiences of other people.

The Journey into and through Racial Critical Consciousness

Collaborators described how exposure to racial justice education and Ethnic Studies pedagogies—particularly historical inquiry, structural analysis, and critical dialogue—shaped their *conscientização*, or critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). They learned to situate individual experiences within broader systems of racial power and to understand racial identity as socially constructed and historically produced. Rather than viewing racism as isolated acts, collaborators came to see its systemic nature and the role of whiteness in maintaining racial hierarchies. This understanding enabled them to see the interconnectedness of individual experiences with wider societal issues, which is a core aspect of critical consciousness (Deimer et al., 2017; Freire, 1970).

For people who identify as white, cultivating an awareness of their racial identity involves understanding the implications of being white in a society that prioritizes whiteness, and recognizing the limitations of adhering to a colorblind ideology. In white-dominant spaces, teachers must be deliberate in “bring[ing] critical race discourse into the classroom . . . specifically on whiteness and its role in perpetuating a racial system of privilege” (Chaisson, 2004, p. 346). Shelby recalled this prolific realization and remembered thinking, “I’m not lucky, I’m privileged. This was something I was born into that I did not have to work for. I did not earn what other people should also have.” In the context of CWS, critical consciousness for white people involves developing an awareness of the ways in which whiteness functions as a social and political identity that grants privilege and power (Delgado & Stefanic, 1997).

All collaborators identified SJI as the first space where whiteness was framed as something worthy of critical analysis. They reflected on developing a deeper understanding of their own white privilege, and expressed a newfound understanding of systemic issues like racism grounded in their high school social justice education. Jordan described his education, specifically on microaggressions, as the “dot connector” that helped him reinterpret earlier racialized experiences with friends. Similarly, Colton recounted a conversation with his lifelong best friend, who is Black, where, despite being in Colton’s company, had been subjected to racial profiling and discrimination. He explained, “I was so angry that that had happened to him. And quickly I was like, ‘Oh, shit! I get it now.’” Through their education, collaborators began to recognize their prior complicity and unawareness, marking a shift toward what CWS describes as rejecting whiteness as a position of unearned power (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). Through SJI, these collaborators did not further perpetuate racial oppression by avoiding discourse on racial justice. Instead, they were engaging and learning about social justice daily, acknowledging their privilege, admitting past experiences where they had been unconsciously biased or unaware, and wanted to take steps to move forward in a social justice way.

Feelings of Guilt or Shame are not Roadblocks

When asked if they ever felt guilt or shame around learning about white supremacy or white privilege, collaborators did not view these emotions as barriers to developing their critical consciousness. Instead, they described them as necessary steps toward awareness and growth, consistent with CWS scholarship (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; DiAngelo, 2018). Silas admitted that when he learned about white privilege it did initially make him feel bad and guilty. But he explained that it actually helped him develop empathy and an awareness of what marginalized people experienced. He explained:

I just felt bad. I wish that all people with any background had those same privileges. . . . I didn’t really think as much about it and those kind of world problems before SJI. And I feel like SJI made me take more into consideration other peoples’ experiences and get to know a lot of people better.

These perspectives and historical understanding were something that he would not have been able to be aware of through his own personal lived experience. Similarly, Shelby confessed:

I just felt horror, I felt guilt. I felt shameful. I looked around, and honestly, I felt like a fraud for having made it so far in life, and just didn’t understand what the people around me were going through . . . looking around and there was a whole world I knew nothing about going on right in front of me.

The discomfort associated with these feelings can lead to personal growth and a deeper understanding of social justice. These emotional responses were not paralyzing but transformative. CWS suggests that engaging with feelings of guilt or shame can ultimately motivate individuals to become more active in advocating for equity and justice. Collaborators emphasized the importance of moving from discomfort toward responsibility and action. Edith explained:

I remember just being like, okay, I know I'm a white woman. So, I'm gonna take a seat and just listen. And I feel like that was such a huge learning thing for me too, to just be like I'm gonna let other people speak. Like, I don't need to always be the one upfront.

She realized that even the act of just listening to other perspectives and voices, without interjecting, held power. Shelby went on to say:

So having to kind of check myself on, well, yes, I do have white privilege. It's hard initially, when you learn it. But I think to come back the next day and be like, okay, obviously, I'm not a slave owner. Obviously, I'm not saying the n-word like, I am trying my best. But *how* do I try my best? Respectfully, in a way that's actually helpful.

She recognized the sometimes-difficult process of developing a critical consciousness around being white. It's hard. It's tough. But it's necessary to acknowledge the pain and suffering that white privilege has caused so many people in order to work towards dismantling it. Colton also acknowledged the importance of becoming unstuck in the uncomfortableness and moving towards action:

It's like, yeah, that may be uncomfortable in the moment, but you know what? How do you choose to grow from it? Versus how do you choose to make it too much about feeling that shame and pushing it onto somebody else? It's like you've got a choice when you have those uncomfortable moments.

During these lessons on white privilege, he realized that his privilege didn't have to be a marker of shame, but instead could be utilized as a tool to learn, understand, and advocate. Again, CWS says that this awareness is a critical first step in understanding one's position within society structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; DiAngelo, 2018; Kendall, 2013). When asked if anyone felt like they would have learned about their white racial identity outside of SJI, all of them said that they didn't think so. They actually expressed feelings of gratitude and nostalgia for going through that difficult process and contributed it to their continued personal growth which had significant influences on their lives after school, and even today.

Continuing the Journey Post-High School

After high school, collaborators remained actively engaged in social justice through forms of civic and social actions, ranging from voting to organizing Black Lives Matter (BLM) marches. For them, an understanding of racial identity not only heightened their awareness of systemic injustices but also instilled the understanding that all actions promoting social justice are valuable, no matter their scale. They participated in diverse activities, including voting, community organizing, advocacy, and volunteer work. Their actions reflected a strong understanding of social injustices and a commitment to combating these issues.

Furthermore, their education in social justice principles had a considerable influence on their career paths and choices, guiding them toward roles where they could continue to advocate for equity and inclusion. Collaborators credited their high school education for their success in the following careers: social worker, non-profit sector, middle school teacher, music business manager, human resources, content consultant for major television networks, legislative assistant and

canvasser, and communications director for large community center. They explained how their high school experience inspired some of their career paths, prepared them to be in diverse settings, and taught them to listen and acknowledge perspectives and lived experiences other than their own. Overall, the education these alumni received played a crucial role in shaping their ongoing dedication to social justice, empowering them to act as informed and active citizens within their communities.

Forging the Path: Implications for Practice

This study emerges at a critical historical moment, as anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies, curricular censorship, and book bans continue to proliferate the United States. These efforts have intensified amid political rhetoric that promises to eliminate what is broadly, and often inaccurately, labeled “CRT” and “DEI” from classrooms, framing Ethnic Studies pedagogies as “left-wing indoctrination” that creates hostile learning environments, particularly for white students. Such rhetoric deliberately conflates CRT—a specific legal and academic framework—with broader pedagogical practices that engage students in learning about race, identity, equity, and systemic inequality. This misrepresentation not only distorts public understanding but also places educators under heightened scrutiny, discouraging them from addressing historical and contemporary realities that are essential to students’ civic and social development. My findings demonstrate that Ethnic Studies and social justice-oriented pedagogies support students in making sense of the world, developing a critical consciousness, and engaging meaningfully with their communities outside of school. When done correctly, it encourages an examination of how whiteness is constructed and maintained, often leading to challenging conversations about race, identity, and accountability. CWS emphasizes that discomfort can arise when individuals confront their own biases, privileges, and the realities of racial injustices. This discomfort is seen as a crucial part of the learning process, pushing individuals to critically reflect on their beliefs and societal structures. Grappling with these reactions is essential to understanding how racial hierarchies are reproduced and maintained. The findings of this study reinforce that when educators create structured, reflective spaces for students to engage these tensions, discomfort does not carry harm, but rather it can become part of transformational learning.

The testimonies of participants underscore the profound and lasting impact of learning about racial identity and developing a critical consciousness. As Edith described, “SJI really helped me to keep an open mind throughout my entire life and really integrate the learnings that are important for basic morals and basic human rights and basically everything.” Such statements affirm that utilizing Ethnic Studies pedagogies extends far beyond academic content; it shapes how students understand themselves, others, and their responsibilities as members of a democratic society. Don’t we want an educated, engaged, and civically minded population that cares about the well-being of others and the way our government functions? Don’t we want systemic change towards equity and equality? Utilizing Ethnic Studies pedagogies does not ask students to remain mired in oppression; it equips them to analyze and challenge it.

Why Teaching whiteness Matters

In the classroom, especially predominantly white classrooms, discussions of race often center exclusively on the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, while leaving systems of whiteness unnamed and unexamined. Focusing solely on the outcomes of oppression without

addressing its structural causes suppresses solution-oriented learning. As Tom Marshall's (1998) "Sand" lyrics metaphorically capture:

If you can heal the symptoms, but not affect the cause,
It's quite a bit like trying to heal the gunshot wound with gauze.

Teaching whiteness—its construction, maintenance, and normalization—is essential to understanding how racial inequality persists. When whiteness remains invisible, responsibility is implicitly shifted onto marginalized communities rather than the systems that produce marginalization. The onus must be placed on the oppressor, not the oppressed because “unless the students are trained in awareness of the forces that inform their subjective, their ability to recognize these relations is inhibited” (Chaisson, 2024, p. 346). Solutions stem from discovering and irradicating the root causes of issues in order to prevent them from happening to begin with. Addressing whiteness allows students to move beyond individual prejudice and toward systemic analysis, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of racial injustice and pathways towards change.

A Note for white Educators

White teachers may be apprehensive to include these topics out of fear of causing emotional distress or even their own discomfort with racial identity. In the context of educating white students, it is crucial to impart the understanding that racism often manifests not through overt hostility by through “blindness on the part of well-intended whites” (Heinze, 2008, p. 8). Silence, in this sense, is not neutral. It is complicit.

White teachers must commit to sustained critical reflection on their own positionality, privilege, and fragility. This work cannot be superficial or optional. While such efforts can support white students in critically examining privilege and developing racial literacy, they must also be undertaken with a deep awareness of the presence and experiences of BIPOC students. White teachers must ensure classroom discourse does not place undue emotional labor on BIPOC students or reinscribe marginalization. This dual responsibility requires intentional pedagogical choices that avoid reproducing harm, decenter whiteness, and create classroom spaces that are affirming, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all students.

Professional development in Ethnic Studies and social justice should be intensive, ongoing, and rooted in both theory and praxis. Being an educator comes with the responsibility to constantly critically reflect on our own biases and actions in order to treat all students fairly with respect, empathy, and to view all of our students as capable. Safeguarding white comfort preproduces white supremacy in classrooms by prioritizing ease over equity. Consistent and continuous critical reflection can help white educators hold themselves accountable for their actions and decisions, encouraging a commitment to high standards and ethical practices in their teaching.

Conclusion

Public education has become a battleground where competing visions of democracy collide. While framed as efforts to depoliticize schools, policies aimed at restricting Ethnic Studies instead place education at the center of political conflict. Opponents often characterize Ethnic Studies as

divisive or unnecessary; however, findings from this study demonstrate that Ethnic Studies pedagogies provide white students with conceptual tools to critically examine racial identity, systemic inequities, and their relationship to broader structures of power.

Collaborators described learning experiences rooted in inquiry, historical analysis, reflection, and dialogue that encouraged accountability without relying on guilt or shame. These pedagogies and learning environment fostered critical thinking rather than ideological conformity and helped students understand that recognizing systemic racism is not equivalent to accepting individual blame. Instead, Ethnic Studies pedagogies emphasize structural analysis, historical continuity, and collective responsibility, creating opportunities for growth, solidarity, and democratic engagement.

This study further suggests that resistance to Ethnic Studies often functions to preserve dominant narratives that leave whiteness unexamined. When Ethnic Studies pedagogies are removed from classrooms, particularly in predominantly white communities, students are less likely to engage critically with race, racial identity, and racial power. Such omissions limit students' intellectual and civic development while reinforcing the inequities public education claims to address.

As these collaborators demonstrate, students are capable of and eager to engage with challenging conversations about racial identity and systemic injustice when given the opportunity to do so safely in school settings. As bell hooks (1994) aptly stated:

The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy. . . . Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions. (p. 12)

They want to understand the world honestly, situate themselves within it, and imagine ways to contribute to a more just society. Ethnic Studies pedagogies make this possible by equipping all students, including white students, with the tools to critically examine power, challenge injustice, and participate meaningfully in democratic life.

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Losing the Thread: The Storying of Ethnic Studies in a white-Dominant District

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Abstract

California's AB 101 Ethnic Studies (ES) graduation requirement surfaces complex tensions in white-dominated schools. Over two years, I accompanied a group of teachers—all white, and new to ES—as they launched a new ninth-grade ES course in a white-dominant, class-stratified, politically liberal district in coastal California. Pursuing a methodology of *storying* (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014) in a context full of contradictions, I engaged in ongoing dialogue with teachers about the inevitable, necessary tensions surfaced by institutionalizing ES in state schools. In this essay, I focus on an early storying episode in which teachers began articulating their personal stakes in advancing ES. Drawing on critical theorizations of schooling and Whiteness, I trace the ways that teachers' preoccupations with particular professional and pedagogical conflicts seemed to narrow horizons for imagining and enacting ES—losing sight of the connection between ES classroom pedagogies and the liberatory futures the teachers desired to help grow. I close with reflections on possibilities for storying with teachers toward more expansive, community-grounded visions and practices of ES.

Is it ES? I still don't know. It's ES because we say it is.

– Rachel⁵, teacher leading district's ES design team, following school board approval of their new ES course in May 2024

Rachel's brief statement speaks volumes. It confirms the fears of many Ethnic Studies (ES) educators and scholars who warned of the distorting pressures of ES institutionalization, especially in white-dominant spaces (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2022). In this case: a group of enthusiastic white teachers, backed by a supportive all-white school board, launching a new ES course in a white-dominant, class-stratified, politically liberal community in coastal California. Across the region, districts have faced lawsuits, received public records requests, fired ES teachers, and canceled ES consultant contracts. In this context, Rachel's uncertainty reflects her teaching team's ambivalence about their positionality, professional commitments, and pedagogical preparation to enact ES. Yet, Rachel's words also evoke still-emerging *possibilities* of California's AB 101 conjuncture⁶, in which local policies, hiring decisions, and curricular choices swirl in the fray of

⁵ All district, school, and teacher names are pseudonyms.

⁶ Passed by the state legislature in 2021, California's Assembly Bill 101 requires all public high schools to offer at least one ES course by the 2025–2026 school year. By 2029–2030, all public high school students must have completed one semester-long ES course to graduate.

local, state, and national debates, before settling deeper into the grooves of dominant schooling ideologies and practices.

Rachel's words reflect predictable contradictions of expanding ES education—a movement-rooted discipline “from below”—*within* state schooling institutions that (re)produce a “top-down” representation of the oppressive status quo (Wright, 2025). While never fully contained, ES is getting “schooled.” What can be learned from studying this still-unfolding process in white-dominant contexts? How might these insights inform ongoing struggles to grow ES education and abolish dehumanizing schooling (Love & Stovall, 2021)?⁷

This essay emerges from a case study of ES institutionalization in a white-dominant district. Over two years, I accompanied a group of high school teachers working to design and launch their district's new ES class. I strove to enact a methodology of *storying* (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014): dialogical meaning making to deepen relationship, critical knowledge, and ongoing praxis. Across school and beyond-school spaces, we storied the commitments, concerns, and contradictions that shaped their intentions and actions. Here, I focus on an early storying episode highlighting how teachers' preoccupations with conflict seemed to overshadow their personal stakes in advancing liberatory ES.⁸

Teacher Praxis and Community Struggle

Teachers labor in contentious times, with ascendant authoritarianism, increasing right-wing influence over state institutions, and targeting of educators – on top of increasing surveillance, control, and devaluing of teachers' labor in the neoliberal era. Teachers committed to advancing critical education face political, professional, pedagogical, and emotional conflict as they resist (and internalize) dominant ideologies and practices of schooling (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Buenavista et al., 2019; Pham & Ho, 2025). Critical approaches to *teacher praxis* have long linked teachers' capacity to navigate these conflicts, and deepen their pedagogical commitments, with community knowledges and struggles (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Freire, 2005; Lee & Pham, 2022). Along the way, spaces for critical dialogue can help educators sharpen their analysis and story their commitments to this lifelong work (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017; Souto-Manning, 2011).⁹

⁷ As infrastructure for anti-relational technologies of racial capitalism and settler colonialism, dominant schooling ideologies and practices often disconnect teachers and students from themselves, each other, community struggles, and potential solidarities (Gilmore, 2022; Grande, 2015; Grosfoguel, 2012; Melamed, 2015). For Black and Brown children, in particular, schools can be dehumanizing enclosures in a prison regime (Love, 2019; Rodríguez, 2010; Shange, 2019; Sojoyner, 2013). However, schools are *also* places where humanizing pedagogies and critical praxis can and do exist (Cammarota & Romero, 2014; Givens, 2021; hooks, 1994b), and where educators with a range of experiences, commitments, and capacities work within / against deeply entrenched constraints (Kinloch et al., 2021).

⁸ In future writing, I address the experiences and perspectives of students in the district's new ES courses.

⁹ Spaces to analyze the dehumanizing conditions of dominant schooling can support healing and ongoing praxis (Pour-Khorshid, 2018; Teacher of Color Collective & Souto-Manning, 2022). However, research is mixed on the value of white caucus spaces and affinity groups (Pollock & Matschiner, 2024; Varghese et al., 2019). Indeed, teachers and scholars have cautioned against white teachers working in isolation, but instead joining collective struggles as co-conspirators and accomplices (Gallagher-Geurtsen, 2024; Love, 2019).

Seen through this lens of praxis, ES teachers are not born, but made (Beckham & Concordia, 2019). For decades, ES movements have cultivated teacher subjectivities grounded in community struggles rather than state schooling (Wing, 1976), nurturing counter-hegemonic modes of reading the world (Freire, 1970) and re-imagining critical, humanizing curricula and pedagogies (Cuauhtin et al., 2019). However, as a predictable contradiction of ES institutionalization in California and beyond, educators who are assigned (or even volunteer) to teach new ES courses may not yet have cultivated political commitments and pedagogical frameworks to advance critical ES—or navigate the conflict it entails.

Conflict, Whiteness, and Niceness

Ethnic Studies' central conflict is with the state project of Eurocentric, racist, settler colonial schooling that (re)produces and sustains oppressive systems (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). In this way, multi-generational movements for ES include enduring struggles against *Whiteness*, a material and discursive system rooted in European colonization, and the enslavement and exploitation of Africans and Indigenous peoples in the Americas and around the globe (Du Bois, 1920; Wynter, 1995). As system-justifying discourse, all people can mobilize and reproduce Whiteness, especially when embedded in grooves of institutional policies and practices. And yet, because Whiteness protects white supremacy's material and psychological wages, people rendered white are more likely to invest in it, materially and affectively (Harris, 1995; Leonardo & Gamez-Djokic, 2019; Lipsitz, 1998; Roediger, 1999). These investments produce an inverted epistemology of *non-knowing* (Mills, 2007), an organized forgetting (Mueller, 2018; Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008).

Whiteness functions to avoid, suppress, and manage conflict that challenges domination—narrowing possibilities for critical education in schools (Leonardo, 2009) and sustaining schooling's role in (re)producing racialized hierarchies (Ewing, 2025). One way Whiteness evades conflict—while hiding dispossession, hoarding, and other harms—is through *niceness* (Castagno, 2014; Joffe-Walt, 2020; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Niceness prioritizes optimistic politics of incremental reform (Lashaw, 2008) within the bounds of the liberal state (Goldberg, 2002), promoting individualistic solutions to inequality that crowd out systemic critiques (Pascoe, 2023). Niceness also fosters unrealistic expectations of “safe” classrooms (Arao & Clemens, 2013) and elides “contradictions in individuals' actions and statements” (Yoon, 2012, p. 590). In contrast, ES offers a praxis of shared struggle that challenges niceness, Whiteness, and the institutionally (re)produced domination they conceal and sustain. In this way, the “schooling” of ES is a conflict between revolutionary desires and institutional niceness.¹⁰ And yet, “the ties between education, niceness, and whiteness are so interwoven that they can be difficult to identify, locate, and pull apart” (Castagno, 2014, p. 10). Studying how teachers story *conflict* is one way to tease apart these strands, and nurture possibilities for reflexive praxis to confront these “interwoven” challenges.

The Storying of Ethnic Studies

Emerging research underscores the *complexity* of enacting ES across various school contexts (Nguyen & Borrero, 2024; Ochoa & Ochoa, 2022; Pham & Ho, 2025; Vue et al., 2024). Tensions include: balancing pedagogical commitments to critical inquiry with ES commitments to

¹⁰ This conflict is mirrored in the struggle between liberatory ES and so-called “constructive” ES.

counternarratives (Kolluri & Edwards, 2023), affective dimensions of ES teacher praxis (Domínguez, 2021), and uneven ES experience among new ES teachers (Castro-Gill, 2025; Sacramento, 2019). Researchers have addressed the constraints of Whiteness in ES teacher and curriculum development (Chapman et al., 2020; Siebert, 2022). While the role of white people in opposing ES is well-documented (Chang, 2022; Gómez et al., 2023; Orozco, 2011; Pollock et al., 2022), white scholars have also articulated their personal stakes and pedagogical commitments in supporting liberatory ES (Gallagher-Geurtsen, 2016; Greenberg, 2019). Nonetheless, emerging research shows how *supportive* white educators can mold ES onto neoliberal multicultural frames (Jibrin, forthcoming). To date, few studies have examined experiences of white ES teachers or white students in ES classes, let alone white educators launching new courses in white-dominated schools.¹¹

In this essay, I consider a storying episode near the start of teachers' curriculum design year. The dialogue highlights elements of their personal commitments to advancing ES *and* their concerns about teaching ES in their white-dominated schools. What emerged as they storied the tensions between their commitments and concerns? What—and *who*—seemed to absorb their attention? And what might their preoccupations tell us about schooling, Whiteness, and possibilities for ES teacher praxis?

Methodology

Intentions, Relationships, and Positionality

This project emerged from school, community, and university collaborations to grow relationships—among educators, researchers, and community members—that support the development of critical K-12 ES programs and pedagogies. Through this work, I got to know a group of high school teachers who had volunteered to launch their district's new ninth-grade, semester-long ES class (*See Table A*). Across most district schools, a (slim) majority of students are white and middle-class, while the district's teachers, administration, and board reveal an overwhelmingly white institutional structure.¹² After participating in a district-wide ES working group (2022–2023), the five teachers collaboratively designed the new curriculum (2023–2024), and launched the new class across three high schools (2024–2025). While their ES collaboration was new, the teachers were already connected through a web of personal and professional relationships. Notably, one teacher (Rachel) held a part-time district role as Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA), tasked with keeping the course development on track.

I am a parent and graduate student with roots and relationships in the region that ground my commitments to advancing ES. I am an educator and storyworker¹³, but not a K-12 classroom

¹¹ Notable exceptions include King et al. (2020), Kolluri and Edwards (2023), San Pedro (2018), Sacramento (2019), and Siebert (2021).

¹² According to Ed-Data.org, Mission's student population is 58% white, Fair Oaks is 47.5% white, while Embarcadero is the district's only Title I high school and only school where white students are *not* the largest racial / ethnic group (56% Hispanic or Latino, 35% white, 1.8% Asian, 0.9% Filipino, 0.6% Black, 5.1% Two or more races).

¹³ For 15 years, I worked at the intersection of story and social transformation, producing stories with / about grassroots organizations, facilitating story circles and media production workshops, developing youth media programs, and working as a teaching artist in continuation high schools.

teacher. Like the teachers in this essay, I am not an ES expert. Like them, I am a European-descended settler who is read and rendered as white.¹⁴ I am committed to abolishing systems of domination that have unjustly advantaged me and harmed me (Harney & Moten, 2013). In those efforts, I am answerable to communities of color, Indigenous peoples, poor and working-class people, and other marginalized communities whose freedom dreams are the driving force for ES and collective liberation (hooks, 1994a; Kelley, 2002; Patel, 2016). And, at times in tension, I am accountable to the educators, youth, families, and community members I came to know through this project.

Table 1
ES Design Team Members

Teacher	High School	Years teaching	Courses taught (besides ES)	Race	Gender
Rachel	Fair Oaks	22	Government, Economics	white	woman
Jane	Fair Oaks	6	ELD, Social Studies	white	woman
Lou	Embarcadero	4	History of the Americas	white	man
Virginia	Embarcadero	4	World History	white	woman
Anastacia	Mission	17	Sociology	white	woman

Note: the list includes one teacher (Jane) who joined in the middle of the 2023–2024 year, but was not present for the focus group conversation at the center of this paper’s analysis.

Storying as Praxis

Emerging from my previous experience as a storyworker, I pursued a methodology of *storying*, the dialogical process of (re)constructing meaning about selves, relationships and realities (Archibald, 2008; Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; Maracle, 2007). Storying can both critique and recycle dominant narratives (Souto-Manning, 2014), surfacing contradictory ideological currents *within* groups and individuals (Philip, 2011). While dominant ideologies guide stories in system-compatible directions, critical storying can nurture critical praxis (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017). By holding space for reflexive analysis, according to Stó:lō scholar Lee Maracle (2007), “story becomes a means of

¹⁴ Unlike four of the five teachers, I am a cisgender male, which undoubtedly shaped the process of building trust, particularly given the gendered hierarchies of positional leadership in schools (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010).

intervention preventing humans from re-traversing dangerous and dehumanizing paths” (p. 60). In this sense, storying can be pedagogical (Goodson & Gill, 2014), especially when grounded in autonomy and agency rather than coercion (Maracle, 2007). Models of teacher solidarity co-design (Philip et al., 2022) and teacher culture circles (Souto-Manning, 2010) strive to create spaces and structures where such storying can emerge.

Research Activities and Analysis

After getting to know the teachers through initial interviews, Rachel invited me to attend the September 2023 curriculum design meeting that is the focus of this essay. As I attended more meetings and local ES events, we began exploring a research project that could document and support their efforts. The summer before they launched the course, I facilitated a story circle about experiences, relationships, and commitments that grounded teachers for the year ahead. During the course’s first year (2024–2025), I attended *in-school* professional learning community (PLC) meetings and facilitated monthly *beyond-school* dialogue circles. I observed back-to-school nights, school board meetings, field trips (as a chaperone), and over 30 hours of classroom instruction. In final interviews (Summer 2025), we reflected on key learnings and lingering concerns from the course’s first year.¹⁵

Across contexts, I approached research as collective storying in which I was engaged and implicated. I observed, listened, took notes, asked questions, and reflected back teachers’ previous comments and intentions. I strove to co-create critical dialogue that honored teachers’ mix of experiences, desires, and vulnerabilities (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017). Given my analysis of ES institutionalization, I affirmed their misgivings about their roles in launching the course, and encouraged them to learn from ES experts, community knowledge holders, and local organizations.

In developing this analysis, I looked for topics that absorbed teachers’ attention and elicited strong emotions—where they seemed to “get stuck.” I noted patterns and divergences across time and space (Wortham & Reyes, 2015), between and *within* individual educators (Philip, 2011), while recognizing deeply entrenched structures that shaped teachers’ storying (Holland & Lave, 2001). In the process, I collected storying episodes for deeper analysis. Here I focus on an early episode that introduces dynamics which preoccupied teachers over the ensuing two years. As I unravel these strands, I reflect on ways that teachers’ storying of conflict created boundaries for imagining and enacting ES.¹⁶

Part I: “Another world is possible”

“If someone feels ready to share, you could start.” We are sitting in a cluster of student desks in Virginia’s classroom on a warm September afternoon. The month before, teachers had begun a yearlong collaboration to design the new curriculum and secure school board approval. Today,

¹⁵ In some cases, we read my classroom observation notes and discussed our interpretations of noteworthy moments.

¹⁶ My reading of teachers’ words, while emerging from deep attention and reflection, is not the only or most accurate reading (see Lensmire, 2024). I am storying their storying, grounded as rigorously as possible in the evidence I have gathered and generated. Most importantly, I continue to engage with teachers, community members, collaborators, and mentors about these ideas and their implications.

during their biweekly ES design team meeting, I am facilitating a 45-minute dialogue about teachers' "personal stakes in advancing ES."

In previous conversations and interviews, teachers had expressed concerns about the statewide mandate, the district's plans for implementation, and their own role in the process (*see Appendix A*). As one teacher, who felt "passionately invested" in teaching "authentic" ES, feared: "It won't actually be ethnic studies. It'll just be whatever is easiest." They stressed the limitations of a single, standalone course, insisting ES should "continue into other classes and spiral down into lower years." They predicted *requiring* the course would spark pushback from students and families. They were concerned that their own positionalities and preparation—an all-white teaching team, none of whom had experience with ES or community activism—would further constrain possibilities. Multiple teachers vowed they would only teach the course until a more qualified teacher—in their view, a teacher of color with ES experience—took it over.¹⁷

Aware of their misgivings, I am curious to hear about the commitments that led them to volunteer. After the group reflects in writing, I invite them to share aloud. **Lou**, an early career teacher without tenure, begins:

The first thing I wrote down was my personal stake and interest in Ethnic Studies is liberation, celebration and resistance, and revolution. And then I kind of started thinking back to why [I started] teaching initially [...] the injustice that we see, the inequality that we see is not an accident, but is a result of, like, people's decisions. And they're ingrained at this point, super deeply, the effects of them are ingrained. But I think in my endeavor to have a meaningful career, I think undoing those decisions, if those decisions were made, they can be undone. We just have to do the work. [...] "Another world is possible" [referencing poster on the wall] I love that poster, Virginia. [...] I want to do that work, of making that other world a reality.

Virginia, also an early career educator, picks up the thread, weaving it through her love for the community:

...I have a really deep sense of belonging to here and like the natural world and all of the community, but I want that to not just be white people in this community. Because I know that a lot of that comes from privilege [...] I just think about people I really love who have been victims of one-on-one racial violence, as well as institutionalized racial violence, like, especially with getting pulled over and stuff. I've just been in the car and have seen so much bullshit. And, you know, the cops now are people that I know and grew up with. So I think about that kind of key moment that this course might offer people. And not to [be] like "Oh, this is going to be *the* thing," but it's maybe part of a larger pattern.

Anastacia, a veteran educator who had been *Virginia's* teacher a decade earlier, affirms Virginia's insights and roots her own stake in her working-class background:

¹⁷ Notably, some teachers also saw themselves as strategic messengers who could help preempt local conflict, because of trusting relationships with skeptical families, colleagues, and administrators. As one explained: "I'm probably a fairly palatable person to put in front of parents."

I've always been somebody who can view unfairness or injustice very rapidly and readily. But you know, coming from the background I did, I always felt very powerless in the face of it. I want students to be given tools to be able to see the structures that they live in. [...] I want to help them see that they're not alone. [...] And that if something seems very, very hard for you, there's a reason why. Right? [...] the real analysis of structural inequity, and how it works all the way down.

However, the themes and tone begin to shift a couple minutes later, when **Rachel**, the teacher on special assignment (TOSA) guiding the course design process, joins the conversation:

...just bringing it to a really micro school level. To me, a big part of why I want us to be teaching Ethnic Studies is because I think it will help the students to get along. [...] I think that's also something that most of you all would agree with. But the path to get there involves bringing in curriculum that will challenge them [...] So how are we going to square that? If part of it is we want them to be able to coexist in comfortable ways in brave spaces, and move through the rest of their days. How do we do that with a curriculum that we know is going to be painful or difficult sometimes, but also [...] hopeful and exciting and present? Like, that's my question: How do we do that? I don't know how to do that. [laughs]

Strand 1: Liberation and Getting Along

In their opening comments, the first three teachers' began storying their stakes in ES with language that echoed liberatory visions of ES. Lou enthusiastically linked the group's vocation as teachers ("meaningful career") to a broader movement in which they are participants. Virginia's witnessing her friends' encounters with police ("racialized violence") drove her commitment to transform racist beliefs, practices, and institutions in the community where she experiences deep (and "privileged") belonging. For Anastacia, feeling "powerless" to change conditions that limited her own life as a young person fueled her desire to act in solidarity with marginalized students ("see that they're not alone") and nurture their radical analysis of oppressive structures ("how it works all the way down"). Together, they begin to articulate ES as an educational method that links classroom practice to broader struggles to transform schooling and society.

However, hailing her colleagues back to the "micro school level," Rachel foregrounded preoccupations with classroom conflict.¹⁸ She believed ES could *reduce* conflict (by helping students "get along") but worried it would *increase* conflict (by focusing on "painful" curriculum¹⁹). This dynamic demanded a pedagogical approach she did not yet possess and could not yet imagine ("How do we do that?"). In separate conversations, Rachel admitted she was not an "Ethnic Studies warrior," and worried her lack of experience with "racial activism" would be "where I'm gonna let the thing down." Her words reflected an awareness—conveyed in similar ways by other teachers—that advancing "authentic" ES education required risking conflict. It meant not getting along.

Throughout the curriculum design year (2023–2024), teachers regularly discussed national, state, and local battles over education—often returning to the risks of their involvement in launching ES.

¹⁸ Given her district role guiding the course development, Rachel's personal concerns were likely intertwined with institutional concerns about avoiding public scrutiny and opposition.

¹⁹ Of course, the question becomes: painful for whom, and in what ways?

This was especially true of two early-career teachers who did not have tenure at the start of the year. At a January 2024 gathering, they expressed feeling “afraid of retaliation” and “out on a limb,” concerned the district might not “back them up.” These fears shaped group conversations about the boundary between what teachers could—and could *not*—teach in the course, as seen in their notes from that January gathering:

“We can teach about revolution, we can’t teach how to do revolution”

“Teach w/ agenda” ⇒ vulnerable to lawsuits

“Serve students first, not angry parents w/ pitchfork”

In the above storying episode, Lou listed “revolution” among his personal stakes in ES. Just four months later, teachers are storying the political, professional, pedagogical boundaries of this vision: drawing a line between “teach *about*” and “teach *how to do*.”²⁰ In their study of an ES curriculum design process, Kolluri and Edwards (2023) highlighted similar tensions for ES teachers around promoting counternarratives *and* critical thinking, with one teacher stating: “we can’t just be spouting ideology” (p. 59). And yet, in the current study, the teachers’ meeting notes reveal an *accurate* assumption that teaching “authentic ES” includes a political commitment to advance subaltern struggle, which renders teachers and schools vulnerable to “angry parents w/ pitchforks,” “lawsuits,” and institutional repercussions. ES movements (and critical educators across disciplines) have long resisted these attempts to intimidate teachers into narrowing their horizons for pedagogical practice.

Teachers labored diligently to develop an “authentic” course: researching ES curricula and pedagogical frameworks, visiting schools and educators with ES experience, and designing lessons grounded in their students’ lives and communities.²¹ And yet, preoccupied with the above concerns, teachers continued storying the goal of “getting along.” At a May 2024 board hearing to approve the new course, teachers emphasized “building cultural competency—the ability to interact, work, and develop meaningful relationships with people of different backgrounds”—a goal affirmed by multiple board members as they voted, unanimously, to approve. In November 2024, during teachers’ first semester teaching the new course, one suggested “the point” was to: “encourage students to have respectful dialogue with each other, while also teaching somewhat hard to negotiate stuff.” By Fall 2025, the start of the course’s *second* year, a new teacher on the team tried to summarize the course’s goal: “we just want [students] to be good, responsible, respectful, thoughtful, empathetic, members of a diverse community.” A colleague joked in response: “Are you a jerk? No? Okay, cool, we’re good.” The sardonic humor shows how grooves of institutionalized niceness guided teachers away from the transformative desires where they began. Indeed, the first part of the storying episode previews a trajectory through which *desires to get along* can crowd out teachers’ *desires for shared struggle*, especially in the face of classroom and community conflict (Pascoe, 2023). The second part of the episode surfaces deeper ambivalences about who ES is “for,” who it benefits, and who might be harmed.

²⁰ Notably, teachers’ words index multiple possible meanings. For instance, “we can’t teach how to do revolution” could mean such teaching would be: proscribed by the state and targeted by opponents, thus posing risks for district and teachers; not aligned with teachers’ professional identities and ethical commitments; or unwelcome in their classrooms and school communities.

²¹ In conversations about this manuscript, Jane observed that “it seems like we are all using [authentic] as a signifier for ‘that good thing over there’” – underscoring the complexity teachers faced in storying and enacting ES.

Part II: “I want everyone to be a part of it.”

“How do we do that? I don’t know how to do that.” Rachel’s uneasy laugh hung in the air. After a pause, the first three teachers began responding to Rachel’s concerns, modifying their initial stories along the way:

Lou: . . . I don’t want this course to be like, “Okay, we’re just talking about all this horrible stuff,” right? So that’s, I think, why I wrote down celebration and resistance. [*Rachel: Solidarity*] Solidarity . . . and comradeship and, you know, like “*tu lucha es mi lucha, baby.*” We’re in this, like, *together*. And there have been countless examples of success and moments to celebrate, right? . . .

Anastacia: . . . Part of it is teaching students to recognize the channels through which power flows. And for all students, I think that can be very empowering, because it removes the veil, right? And allows them, well, agency, no matter what part of the power flow you are from—that is a kind of knowledge which is inherently enriching, I think, no pun intended.

Virginia: What all of this makes me think about is: how do we make all students understand that this course is for them, you know? Though it’s called Ethnic Studies, which, you know, has all of those CRT connotations, that parents and community members are ready to throw hands about . . . [*Anastacia: yeah*]

Rachel: . . . it’s not that many of them . . .

Virginia: . . . No, but those types of temperaments, they grow, and they’re insidious, and they kind of snake through these little channels. Where then you have a student like [colleague’s] student who’s ready to scream in their teacher’s face during class, you know, they feel so *victimized* [*dramatic voice*] by something that they don’t agree with. But you know, [I’m] wondering how in these goals of liberation and justice and community, like how can we frame this class is for you? Whoever you are, wherever you come from, whatever perspective you have, this is for you.

Ian: Why does that matter so much to you?

Virginia: I want everyone to be a part of it. And I don’t want to already have that kind of, “Oh, well, that kid over there is racist, and his parents come from this place, and that girl over there is a transphobe, so we have no space for her here.” I think about that term, brave space, instead of safe space. . . . [I] want to protect my students whose identities might be, like, pulled into question by those students, but I don’t think that we can necessarily have these larger goals—and not to say that there’s not structured boundaries. You know, it’s not okay to be hateful, and there’s a time and a place to put those. But I don’t want to “other” people. But I also don’t want to give people who are othering themselves a big ole bullhorn to be like [*whining sound*].

A couple comments later, **Anastacia** returns to this pedagogical knot, with more direct language:

. . . it's important to give students the emotional literacy to be able to navigate conversations that are hard, especially when they're about race. But so many conversations about race in our society already center white discomfort. And I think there's a real challenge there to not have that happen [...] But again, like you're saying, it's not like you want the class to only be about non-white experience, because it's a system that everybody lives in, right? Like, we all have a place in looking at systemic issues. And so then the issue becomes: how do you set it up so that the discussions and the learning empower the white kids, too? Because they should. It is empowering. I found it empowering . . .

Strand 2: Including, Othering, Empowering

Responding to Rachel's concerns about the contentious enactment of required ES, Lou and Anastacia begin storying the benefits of "ES for all." However, Virginia foregrounds a core challenge: "How do we make all students understand that this course is for them?"—a question that seems driven, in part, by fears of interpersonal conflict. Her tone shifts dramatically as she invokes family pushback and imagines a confrontation with a student screaming in her face. She seems to be *pre-occupying*—that is, imagining and experiencing—the *feeling* of that future interaction.

This moment crystallized a central concern for Virginia and her colleagues: "*Those students.*" She worries they might cause harm to their peers, and also worries about "othering" them for perceived racism or transphobia. She begins to define a boundary; she will not give airtime to a student who is being so blatantly offensive that they are "othering themselves." And yet, her focus seems drawn to the student being "othered" (for their harmful words or actions), rather than students experiencing the harm.

While Virginia and Rachel²² both spoke about creating *brave space* (Arao & Clemens, 2013), they seemed to envision an unreachable goal: safety and comfort for *all*, in a classroom and society that are often profoundly *unsafe* and *uncomfortable* for racialized and marginalized students (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Indeed, to counter this dynamic, ES centers the well-being of marginalized students and nurtures critical knowledges that emerge from subaltern standpoints. Teachers recognized the impossibility of avoiding harm entirely.²³ However, their desires for safety and comfort—perhaps motivated by *their own* desires to be included²⁴—seemed to overshadow their systemic analysis of oppression and their vision of intersectional ES pedagogy.

²² In Part I, Rachel expressed a goal of supporting students to "coexist in comfortable ways in brave spaces."

²³ Teachers knew the course would resolve the real challenges of nurturing respectful classroom and school cultures. As Rachel reminded the group in December 2024: "I know we've also felt some pressure that like, 'Okay, once we have this class, then there'll be no more fights, and everything will be perfect' [...] and that's not realistic or fair."

²⁴ Multiple teachers storied themselves into the vision of ES. Lou wanted students to feel: "we're in this, like, together." Anastacia believed developing structural analysis should be "empowering" for white students—like it was for her. Virginia's comment, "I want everyone to be a part of it," implicitly includes herself. Earlier in the conversation, Rachel worried that ES "forces [students] to confront their own selves, but also asks them to put themselves on the table a little bit, and like, stick their necks out"—visceral language that hints at her own anxieties. These comments suggest a shared awareness that "we" (white teachers) could be "them" (white students). For the teachers, "othering" those students may have felt like othering themselves.

Indeed, as they grappled with tensions of enacting required ES in their school contexts, some teachers storied the benefits of “ES for all” in ways that seemed at odds with their own understandings of how ES challenges dominant power. In the first part of the episode, Anastacia focused on nurturing *marginalized* students’ capacity to analyze and confront oppressive structures. But after Rachel’s comments, Anastacia suggested analyzing power is “enriching” and “empowering” for *everyone*: “no matter what part of the power flow you are from.” This is out of step with research about the role of schooling in (re)producing social hierarchies (Anyon, 1980; Lewis & Diamond, 2015), and at odds with her own working-class identity. Perhaps Anastacia recognized this, adding “no pun intended” to diffuse the irony.

Notably, Anastacia is the first to explicitly name the challenge of developing white students’ critical racial literacy without “center[ing] white discomfort.” Her insistence on the transformative potential of systemic analysis—to “remove the veil”—emerges from her own working-class upbringing (“I found it empowering”). Her insights evoke San Pedro’s (2018) *culturally disruptive pedagogy*, a subaltern-centering praxis that “creates ruptures in schooling and social systems that counter the normalizing of Whiteness” (p. 1221)—ruptures that are valuable for all students.²⁵ In this *intersectional* pedagogical and epistemological vision, long championed by activists and scholars (Combahee River Collective, 1977/2017; Sleeter, 2011), confronting the role of schooling in (re)producing systems of domination, while centering the thriving and agency of multiply marginalized students, families, and communities, is indeed “ES for all” (Reyes McGovern & Buenavista, 2016).²⁶

Teachers seemed to implicitly endorse this vision, often centering students of color and multiply marginalized students as the intended and most likely beneficiaries of ES. They cited the well-known Stanford study showing SFUSD’s ES courses boosted school outcomes for all students, especially Latino boys (Bonilla et al., 2021; Dee & Penner, 2017).²⁷ And yet, for multiple reasons, teachers often focused on the beliefs and behaviors of white, conservative students and families. As one teacher lamented, “those kids, the white kids, get way too much attention [...] They take up the most space” – reflecting an enduring, pervasive challenge for critical education. Meanwhile,

²⁵ Anastacia consistently endorsed the idea that her ES class should be uncomfortable for dominantly positioned students, but that such discomfort was necessary for developing an “empowering” analysis of structural injustice.

²⁶ An intersectional praxis of collective liberation holds that freedom for the most marginalized would “necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective, 1977/2017, p. 23). As a BSU-TWLF flier read: “The struggle of Third World people to control their own lives, their education, their communities is in the interest of all working people since the racism they are fighting is used to oppress us all” (Strike Support Committee, 1969).

²⁷ Teachers cited the study in their May 2024 board presentation, implying that it demonstrated academic benefits of ES coursework for all students. In actuality, the study found ES was most beneficial for students who *complied* with their assignment to the ES course (the experimental condition). However, the authors found no impact on students who would have enrolled even without any encouragement (who the authors call “always takers”), and the authors predicted *less* impact for students who opted out of the course (“never takers”). This is relevant in California’s statewide mandate, since both groups of students—“always takers” and “never takers” alike—are required to take ES, and their inclusion can mediate the aggregate benefits of ES coursework (both through their individual outcomes, and the way their participation might impact their peers’ outcomes). As the study’s authors cautioned: “Mandating the wide-scale availability of ES through policy without thoughtful curricular development and teacher training may not reproduce the educational gains we document here” (Bonilla et al., 2021, p. 9).

some students of color faded into the background, left the room, or simply didn't show up. Exhausted at the end of the course's first year, some teachers faced the sobering reality that students of color and students experiencing disabilities were over-represented in the small group of students who they "had to fail," causing them to grapple with their own roles in the (re)production of racism / ableism through schooling (Annamma, 2018; Buenavista et al., 2019; Ewing, 2025). In end-of-year interviews, teachers reflected on emotional harms students of color might endure by simply showing up to class, as well as academic harms they might experience for refusing to participate (Castro-Gill, 2025). Multiple teachers expressed regret, with one asking themselves: "How can I be a teacher *for* students of color?" They were *post*-occupied with the experiences of the students they had intended to center and benefit.

For educators committed to transforming school and society, it can be tremendously painful to sit with the ways we—embedded in institutional infrastructures and practices—have failed, again, to interrupt schooling's role in (re)producing systems of domination. In these moments, the entrenched grooves of schooling can feel hopelessly deep. And yet, traditions of subaltern struggle and community-grounded teacher praxis offer spaces, practices, and "infrastructures of feeling" (Gilmore, 2022) for holding the heaviness of these contradictions and failures, metabolizing them as nourishment for the long-haul work of justice and liberation (Baker, 1972; Horton, 1998).

Preoccupations and Possibilities

The story isn't over [...] because the [AB 101] mandate is still new, and what districts do with it is different.

– Rachel, near end of the course's inaugural year, in May 2025

This brief essay offers a snapshot of teachers' storying at the *beginning* of a two-year project.²⁸ In the above episode, teachers initially express commitments that align with Ethnic Studies' challenge to dominant institutions and the limits of incremental reform. And yet, as they grappled with dilemmas of teaching required ES in white-dominated schools, overlapping grooves of schooling / Whiteness / niceness channeled their preoccupations toward particular conflicts and seemed to narrow their visions for what ES—and they themselves—could become.

Within their context, teachers' preoccupations were justified. They were right to question their preparation, fear backlash, foresee classroom tensions. The generative paradox of ES institutionalization is that ES resists institutionalization by design (la paperson, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2016). It comes into conflict with the purposes and practices of schooling. It pries open assumptions, challenges practices, and questions outcomes. It calls out the unacceptable status quo, which lands as acrimony for some and liberatory struggle for others. Conflict is part of its pedagogy. As I write, ES opponents are promoting a "constructive Ethnic Studies" curriculum—*Many stories, one nation*—that claims to "teach an American story that includes all of us" (FAIR For All, 2026). This "nicer" story may appeal to teachers, and especially white teachers, facing contradictions and conflicts of enacting ES in white-dominant spaces.

²⁸ In discussing this article, Virginia described feeling "struck at how much I've matured as a woman and an educator since those early days," including personal shifts that reduced "fears of retaliation and confrontations."

Ironically, *because* of their commitment to advance ES in the face of potential opposition and litigation, district leaders and teachers in this study operated with an urgency that outweighed teachers' misgivings about the process, pace, and their own preparation. Teachers were quick to admit the significant amount they did not yet know about ES. However, as they storied preoccupations with conflict, they began to forget important things they *did* know: their desires to transform society in solidarity with subaltern communities. In the span of minutes, personal stakes in radical transformation were crowded out by institutionally mediated stakes in getting along. In the span of a school year, the complex work of cultivating solidarity was reduced to the common denominator of niceness: "Are you a jerk?" Intentions to center students of color were sidelined by attention to white students (for their potential to cause harm and be harmed). Teachers genuinely desired to cultivate care and connection among 14-year-olds in service of critical learning and solidarity, and encountered the enduring constraints of schooling and the specific challenges of enacting ES in white-dominant districts.

This essay—and Anastacia's insights, in particular—underscores the need to clarify a political / pedagogical framework of shared interest among white people in an *intersectional* praxis of Ethnic Studies. As this essay also affirms, this praxis must live *beyond* schools—embedded in community knowledges, dreams, and struggles (de los Ríos & Ochoa, 2012; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Promising models exist in communities—including white-dominant districts—that have: developed ES Advisory Councils (DJUSD, n.d.; Gallagher-Geurtsen, 2016); invested in teacher collaboration guided by ES expertise, youth visions, and community knowledge (Beckham & Concordia, 2019; Dorsey, 2023; Green et al., 2020); and cultivated partnerships across school, community, and university (Jackson, 2023). Institutional resources and movement networks are urgently needed to prepare, support, and sustain critical ES educators—especially educators of color—with disciplinary expertise *and* community relationships (Lee & Pham, 2022; Vue et al., 2024). Due to enduring structural barriers, efforts to rapidly expand the ES workforce are unlikely to meet AB 101's implementation timeline (Penner & Ma, 2023). Given this dynamic, current teachers will play a pivotal role in institutionalizing ES. As I explore in forthcoming work, grounding teacher praxis in community knowledges and "infrastructures of feeling" (Gilmore, 2020)—not infrastructures of schooling—can help educators navigate the enduring conflicts of teaching in schools without losing the thread of our shared stakes in Ethnic Studies' struggle for collective liberation.

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Appendix A. District Boundaries

Before the teaching team began their work on the new curriculum, district leaders had already made key decisions about the format, development, and staffing of the new ES class. It would be one semester, ninth grade, standalone (vs. integrated, e.g., US History Ethnic Studies), and taught “tight” across all three high schools (i.e., the same curriculum). Citing budget constraints, the district chose to assign the course to current social studies teachers rather than hire teachers with ES experience. Importantly, while the district and county initially worked with an expert ES consultant, they later decided the course would be developed “in-house” by teachers (compensated with limited state funds). While district leaders considered holding community forums about the new class, these plans never materialized. The decisions to minimize engagement with ES experts and community members seem to have been motivated by fears about pushback from right-wing organizations that had attempted to intimidate districts and teachers across the region with lawsuits, public records act requests, and direct targeting of teachers and consultants. According to one teacher: “the more lawsuits, the less money we can spend on kids.”

Imagining Ethnic Studies in Rural Spaces

Aaron Romero, University of New Mexico

Introduction: A History of Conquest

The idea of an equal education system presumes a social, economic and political reality that has never existed in these United States.

– Dr. Jeffrey Duncan Andrade

At the heart of my existence as a Nuevo Mexicano educator is the desire to greatly alter the system of education in New Mexico, so that I may give back to those whom I serve: the students and families of the rural community in which I work. New Mexico is a place with a long and complex history of settlement, invasion, and assertion of dominance by invading forces. Coronado arrived in 1540, and set into motion subsequent Spanish *entradas* into this most northern province of what was then New Spain. Oñate arrived with settlers in 1598 and established the colony of Nuevo Mexico. 250 years later, Stephen Watts Kearny invaded Nuevo Mexico and claimed the land in the name of the United States during the Mexican-American War. With the 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, a new era of U.S domination emerged, marked not only by military conquest but by political, cultural, and ideological assimilation. That the struggle for New Mexico statehood took 60 years reflects the unwillingness of the American people to fully accept a culturally and racially mixed population of “Others” (Said, 2003). Our people were perceived as incapable of belonging within an imagined Anglo American national identity.

During this same historical period, another project of domination was unfolding elsewhere in the United States. In Pennsylvania, Richard Henry Pratt was conducting what would become one of the nation’s most influential experiments in forced assimilation. Direct military violence toward Indigenous communities had become increasingly costly and politically difficult to justify. Pratt’s alternative was conquest through education, and schooling emerged as a more socially acceptable mechanism of empire. The logic of institutions such as the Carlisle Indian Industrial School rested on the belief that Indigenous cultures could be erased through education (Reyhner & Eder, 2017). The goal was not merely instruction, but assimilation. Cultural, linguistic and spiritual identities were targeted through an educational system designed to replace Indigenous ways of being with dominant American ideals. The successes of Pratt at Carlisle Indian School ushered in a new era of cultural dominance. Gone were the days of physical violence, replaced instead by ideological violence.

Across the West, especially in New Mexico, military conquest was gradually replaced by Pratt’s new machinery of educational conquest. The dominance once asserted through armed occupation gave way to a system of schooling based on Anglo-European norms, English language acquisition and cultural conformity. Indian boarding schools, such as Albuquerque Indian School and Santa Fe Indian School, became sites where Indigenous students were prepared not for self-determination but for subordination within the American social order (Adams, 2020). Curriculum, language, and

systems of schooling worked together to establish what Tuhiwai Smith (2012) described as the *positional superiority of Western knowledge*, reinforcing a hidden curriculum of whiteness embedded in everyday school life (Leonardo, 2004).

Education as a Site of Contestation

I provide this short history lesson because since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the American education system has become one the most powerful instruments through which colonial domination continues to operate to this day. The violence is no longer overtly physical. Rather, it manifests through the privileging of certain forms of knowledge, language, identity, and belonging over others. Students whose cultures, histories, and ways of knowing exist outside dominant norms continue to be pushed to the margins of schooling. This is especially true in rural education spaces where, despite considerable and growing BIPoC demographics, whiteness functions not as an explicitly named ideology but as a normalized and unquestioned standard against which all else is measured—an intractable cultural inertia bound to the “place” of the rural setting. This normalizing of expectations on Anglo-European ideals makes rural spaces deeply complicated. Political conservatism, historical isolation, normalized whiteness, demographic power hierarchies, and institutional inertia frequently shape educational practice. white cultural norms are normalized, viewed as neutral. Where urban, and even suburban, areas are seen as multicultural and diverse, the *place* of rural spaces are *assumed* to be white, normalizing and permitting whiteness to dominate, even when demographics and educational need would dictate otherwise. As a result, whiteness operates in rural spaces ideologically through curriculum, institutional norms, political expectations, and assumptions about what knowledge carries value. The discourses of tradition and legacy (codes themselves for whiteness) permeate rural spaces, and mask the demographic and cultural changes that are actually taking place in these schools and communities. As a result, these realities incite a profound tension for educators committed to creating more equitable and culturally sustaining forms of schooling.

In the context of New Mexico specifically, rural schools include many students, especially Indigenous and Latinx youth, who continue to live under systems of ideological dominance (Dominguez, 2025) both in and out of school. These systems of dominance obscure their histories, identities, their ways of knowing and the cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) that they bring into the classroom. These are spaces where educational revolutions that have begun to impact urban schooling—including Ethnic Studies courses and curricula—could have an enormous impact, both for white rural students, and for the many rural BIPoC students who live under the shadow of white ideological dominance. In the remainder of this essay, I want to explore the ways in which whiteness continues to shape rural schooling in New Mexico (and elsewhere) and consider what Ethnic Studies pedagogy might look like in the white dominated spaces of rural schools. I argue that equity minded educators that are committed to this work often experience deep frustration after learning theories of liberation, equity, and decolonization, and struggle to find meaningful opportunities to put them into practice within the space and place of the rural, where tradition and inertia resist transformation in unique ways. Ethnic Studies could represent an opportunity to contest these exclusionary practices and empower students who have been marginalized by the education system, but understanding the rural as a unique place and setting is a critical first step.

Querencia: Writing from a Contested Place

The tensions of power, identity and belonging that have shaped New Mexico for centuries continue to shape the realities of rural schooling today. To understand why Ethnic Studies is particularly necessary in rural education spaces, it is important to understand the role that place plays in shaping identity, belonging and educational experience.

I grew up as a Nuevo Mexicano in the rural spaces of the Hondo Valley near Ruidoso, New Mexico where my family maintained a small ranch on the eastern edge of the Capitan Mountain Range. The concept of *querencia* (Romero, 2014) describes the enduring relationship that individuals maintain with the places from which they come and the ways in which those places continue to shape their identities, even if they are uprooted and move from that space. At the center of my efforts to become the best educator that I can be is my own *querencia*, one rooted in a *genizaro* background and shaped by histories, landscapes and tensions of rural southern New Mexico.

Querencia offers an important lens for understanding rural schools and the students who attend them. Rural communities are deeply shaped by place. Family histories, local economies, cultural traditions, a sense of nostalgia, and longstanding community relationships profoundly influence how students understand themselves and their futures. In many rural communities, identity is inseparable from the land, labor, kinship and history. Indigenous and Latinx students arrive at school carrying these experiences with them, yet schools often fail to recognize the depth of knowledge and identity rooted in the places these students call home. This disconnect matters.

The place from which I write is one that has been contested for centuries. Indigenous peoples, Spanish settlers, Mexican immigrants and American expansionists have all laid claim to this land, leaving behind histories of resistance, violence, adaptation, forced assimilation and survival. These layered histories and contested spaces continue to shape rural New Mexico today. Many of the students from these contested spaces move through school with limited opportunities to critically examine the historical forces that shaped the communities in which they live. Instead, the curriculum regularly privileges dominant national narratives while marginalizing local histories, the experiences of Indigenous people and other communities that have long existed outside of the dominant Anglo-European norms.

This reflects the reality of rural schooling in New Mexico. Although many rural communities in New Mexico are culturally and racially diverse, schooling often remains shaped by ideological whiteness. Curriculum, behavioral expectations, and definitions of academic success continue to privilege dominant Anglo-European middle-class norms. This is even the case in schools where white students are not the demographic majority. In these spaces, whiteness often operates invisibly, experienced not as an ideology, but as somehow existing in a neutral sense. Students are expected to adapt to these dominant educational expectations while the cultural wealth and experiences they bring remain underrecognized and as possessing no value. Essentially, nostalgia for an imagined Anglo, frontier rural identity is embraced, yet the *querencia* of BIPOC rural students, their cultural knowledges and deep histories, are denied institutional recognition. This is precisely why Ethnic Studies could matter in rural education. The conditions present in many rural schools create an urgent need for learning experiences rooted in identity, place, community, power, and student voice. Ethnic Studies provides opportunities for students to critically examine

how history has shaped their lived realities while also recognizing the cultural wealth embedded within their communities, lands, and places.

For students whose families and histories have often been pushed to the margins of schooling or silenced entirely, Ethnic Studies could offer something many traditional courses do not, recognition. Students deserve to see themselves reflected within the curriculum, especially those whose histories and lived experiences have been silenced or reconstructed through a colonial settler perspective. The diversity found within rural New Mexico is vast, with unique histories of land, migration, labor, resistance, and belonging, all tied to specific places and identities. Yet this nuance is often erased in the expectation of demographic whiteness, and institutional dominance that Anglo communities (even if demographic minorities) hold in these settings. In short, BIPoC students from these backgrounds deserve the opportunity to critically engage with the systems of oppression that shape their communities, histories, and educational experiences. Implemented in contextually targeted ways, Ethnic Studies has the potential not only to make student voices heard and strengthened, but to also construct belonging, and to lead rural students to the realization that there are spaces within schooling for their histories, identities, and ways of knowing. First, though, we need to confront and understand what is unique about the rural context, for simply translating the models of Ethnic Studies that have succeeded in urban spaces to these places, and their traditions, nostalgias, and cultural inertia, will not work.

Coloniality, Whiteness and the Structure of Rural Schooling

Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2010) explains that the concept of coloniality:

... refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. ... It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience.

This understanding of coloniality is critical for understanding schooling in rural spaces. Coloniality is not simply historical; it continues to shape how schools define success, whose knowledge is centered, and what forms of language, behavior, and identity are legitimized within educational institutions. In many rural schools, these systems have become so normalized that they are often viewed as neutral or simply “the way that the school works.” Without the other nearby districts and communities to push on this assumption, the neutrality itself can function as a form of domination. Yet, as Freire (2020) reminded us, education is never neutral, and, in ways that are perhaps more intensive than other settings, rural schools come to reproduce dominant social orders. Immersed in tradition, nostalgia, and neutrality, rural schooling is, as Shujaa (1994) critiqued; schooling and education are distinct concepts. Schooling is designed to reproduce existing social structures while education reflects the transmission of knowledge and culture within communities. In rural New Mexico, and other rural settings, this is certainly the case. Whiteness frequently operates in ways that are subtle yet deeply influential. Even in schools where white students are not the demographic majority, whiteness remains the organizing force behind curriculum, definitions of rigor, disciplinary expectations, and assumptions about what students should know, and the paths that they must take to become successful. For Indigenous, Latinx and students from blue-collar communities, these expectations can create alienation. The consequences of this are significant.

These conditions explain why rural schools are especially susceptible to whiteness. Rural communities often value continuity, tradition, and familiarity as understandable responses to histories of geographic isolation, economic instability, and protection of traditional ways in which communities have existed for long periods of time. Schools become vehicles which are expected to preserve and maintain established norms. These conditions create institutional inertia. Longstanding or traditional practices remain in place not because they are effective but because they feel familiar and safe. It is in this context in which whiteness becomes difficult to identify because it is experienced as normal. Many BIPOC students in these settings possess rich forms of knowledge rooted in land, kinship community, language, and survival. Yet because of the inertia built into rural schools, they find no outlet for this knowledge. Schools frequently ask these students—on the basis of community nostalgia, identity, and belonging—to move further toward dominant Anglo cultural norms while distancing themselves from the identities and forms of knowledge, the *querencia*, they already possess. When looking this closely at the public school system, one cannot help but wonder how much progress has been made for Indigenous and Latinx students since the days of Richard Pratt's social experiment of forced assimilation at Carlisle Indian School in the late 19th century.

The Intellectual Cul de Sac

This process of cultural inertia, institutional nostalgia, and the normalization of whiteness presents further challenges for educators seeking to imagine something different. In many ways, the tension often feels like having driven into a metaphoric cul de sac.

A cul de sac is not really a dead end. There can be movement, but it is often constrained and limited. There is an entrance, but limited pathways forward. My experiences as an educator and administrator in rural spaces have often felt this way. Despite language and tools that might allow me to recognize coloniality, whiteness, and inequity in schools, in the setting of my own school building, I have struggled to find spaces where my learning and professional development as an equity-minded educator can be meaningfully moved into practice. The hegemony of the structures embedded within rural spaces are incredibly entrenched. Entering the cul de sac may have been simple enough, but once inside, a series of looming institutional constraints block any obvious way through. Such dynamics encourage one to simply leave, to depart the way one came, leaving the place, its inertia, and nostalgia intact. But doing so leaves things for students and communities unchanged. With this in mind, in the next section, I want to review the constraints and specters of institutional inertia that face anyone seeking liberatory change, including Ethnic Studies, in rural settings.

Constraints and Institutional Inertia

Constraints and Institutional Inertia are the greatest tensions which place me into the proverbial cul de sac which I have referenced several times now. The more that I learn about equity, decoloniality, and critical education leadership, the more clear the inequitable systems of schooling appear. There are many constraints which prevent actual progress being made.

Resistance is embedded within the everyday routines, assumptions and institutional habits that shape schooling itself. Here is a look at some of the most glaring institutional constraints which

have placed me in the cul de sac and prevent real progress from being made. I highlight these constraints because I believe they represent barriers to more meaningful learning experiences. I highlight these barriers because they represent spaces in which we can make subtle adjustments to the ways in which we deliver curriculum. If these relatively simple adjustments cannot be made, convincing others of the importance of Ethnic Studies will likely prove to be far more difficult.

Institutional Constraint No. 1: Traditionalist Educators and the Reproduction of Schooling

One of the most significant barriers to more equitable and culturally sustaining forms of schooling lies in the persistence of traditional instructional beliefs. Many educators continue to understand teaching primarily as content delivery where the role of the teacher is to transmit knowledge and the responsibility of the students is to absorb it. Paulo Freire (2000) critiqued this model as the *banking model of education*, where students are treated as passive recipients rather than active participants in knowledge construction. While many teacher preparation programs increasingly emphasize culturally responsive and student centered practices, the realities of schooling often reinforce more traditional approaches centered on compliance, lecture, and standardization.

I recognize this because I once operated in much the same way early in my career. I believed that strong teaching meant tight control, efficient content coverage, and orderly classrooms rife with structure. Students sat in rows of desks and took notes while I lectured. I assumed that instructional rigor was related to the amount of material that I covered rather than how deeply engaged students were with learning. Over time, though, I came to realize how exclusionary these practices were. This became especially true when I had the entire class engage with the same grade-level text. I quickly came to realize how those who could not read at grade level were prevented from accessing the curriculum. This was quantified in more students who could not access the article than those who could. With this exercise I reproduced the normalized expectation based on white, middle-class expectations and so many of my students found themselves excluded. This was no fault of their own.

As an administrator, I continue to encounter these same tensions when I step into classrooms. Educators continue to interpret low scores through deficit-oriented explanations centered on students and families rather than systems and instructional practices. Statements such as “*I taught it, they just didn’t learn it*” or “*Education is just not valued in that family*” reveal how quickly responsibility for inequitable outcomes can shift away from institutions and onto students. Rather than approaching these moments through blame, I have attempted to create spaces for reflection and critical conversations with staff. We have explored difficult conversations such as: What responsibility do adults carry when students are unsuccessful? How might instructional practices create barriers to learning? What shifts in adult practices could lead to improved learning opportunities and experiences for students? These are deeply uncomfortable conversations but they must take place.

Institutional Constraint No. 2: Poor Assignment Design as Institutionalized Inequity

Institutional resistance also appears in less obvious ways, particularly through assignment design and grading practices. As part of the ongoing efforts to improve instructional quality, we began closely examining gradebooks across classrooms. What we found was striking. The quality, rigor and purpose of assignments varied dramatically. In some cases students received grades for

activities such as coloring sheets, word searches or extra credit tied to bringing classroom supplies such as boxes of tissue. In other classrooms, assignment expectations were far more rigorous and were aligned to grade-level, state standards. The inconsistencies raise important questions about equity.

If grades are intended to communicate students' learning, then poorly designed assignments distort what students actually know and are able to do. More importantly, inequitable instructional design disproportionately impacts students who already face barriers within schools. Students most in need of meaningful learning opportunities are often the ones least served by low expectations or poorly designed tasks. Again, the activity of analyzing anonymous gradebooks provided an opportunity to hold meaningful conversations surrounding assignment design, grading practices, and equitable learning experiences. The conversations were wildly uncomfortable but served a very meaningful purpose.

Institutional Constraint No. 3: Resistance to Equitable Grading Policy and Missing Work

Even modest attempts to make schools more equitable frequently encounter resistance. One example of this involved conversations surrounding a district grading policy. Our district requires that students who make an attempt on an assignment receive no lower than a 50 percent. From my perspective, this policy represents an effort to create a greater opportunity for grade recovery and success. This is particularly for those who may already be struggling academically or are navigating significant barriers outside of school. Resistance to this policy has been significant among some of the instructional staff at my school.

On the surface, these disagreements appear to center on grading. More deeply, these tensions seem to reflect differing beliefs about merit, fairness, and deservingness. For some educators, assigning low or failing grades reflects accountability. For others, myself included, grading should solely exist as a representation of what students have learned and understand rather than function as a punitive measure for incomplete compliance. I challenged staff to fill missing assignment scores with the score received on a summative assessment since summative assessments are considered to be the strongest artifact of student understanding. As Tyrone C. Howard (2024) argued, equity requires meeting students where they are at while creating pathways toward where they need to be. This is a defining principle of my philosophy on school leadership, but this too encounters much resistance.

Institutional Constraint No. 4: Political Risk and Administrative Hesitations

Perhaps the most difficult barrier to the development and implementation of Ethnic Studies in rural spaces is the broader political climate in which schools operate. While I believe that district leadership would likely grant me space to propose an Ethnic Studies course, I remain realistic about how such a proposal might be received. In many rural contexts, conversations surrounding diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), race and power have become politically charged. Ethnic Studies is often framed not as an educational opportunity but as ideological or divisive. This reality creates understandable institutional caution.

School leaders frequently operate within highly visible political environments where community opposition can escalate quickly. I have witnessed board meetings stretch for hours around

contentious local decisions which are unrelated to curriculum. The intensity of those moments offers insight into how communities respond when longstanding norms feel threatened. In this climate, proposing Ethnic Studies in rural New Mexico would likely invite organized and vocal resistance from both upper administration and the community alike. Community concerns would likely emerge around patriotism, perceived political agendas, and anxieties about conversations surrounding race and identity. These realities cannot be ignored. They shape the practical limits of what educators and administrators often feel empowered to pursue.

At times, this reality is incredibly discouraging. Many school leaders understandably seek calm waters, particularly when it comes to politically polarized environments. Meaningful disruption carries risk and Ethnic Studies in white dominant, rural spaces represents precisely the kind of work likely to provoke discomfort. In my experience, upper administration becomes reluctant to provide support for new initiatives that they perceive to be prickly or uncomfortable. Discomfort alone should not and cannot determine new educational priorities.

The resistance surrounding Ethnic Studies does not diminish the need for the work. If anything, it further illuminates the enduring power of the hegemonic structures that shape schooling. The same conditions that make Ethnic Studies difficult to implement are often the very conditions that make it necessary. In this sense, the cul de sac remains an apt metaphor. The barriers are real. The routes outward are not always obvious. Awareness creates responsibility. Once inequitable systems become visible, remaining stationary becomes increasingly difficult.

What Ethnic Studies Could Like in White Dominant Rural Spaces

If Ethnic Studies is to be meaningful in white dominant rural spaces, it cannot simply replicate popular models such as those found in California's urban contexts. Ethnic Studies must be developed by taking into consideration the unique historical, ideological, and social conditions which shape rural communities. Ethnic Studies pedagogy in these spaces and contexts must respond accordingly to the realities of each individual community so that it may best serve the needs of students in that setting. The needs of students in rural, eastern New Mexico are very different from the needs of students in rural northwest New Mexico on the Navajo Reservation, and those are vastly different from the needs of students in the rural Midwest, or the rural South and Southeast. Regardless of setting, Ethnic Studies must contest longstanding traditions of who holds political power, and attitudes of cultural inertia. Students must be given opportunities to analyze systems which reproduce oppression, but which are often viewed as neutral. Students must be tasked with coming to understand the systems which Ethnic Studies seeks to interrupt.

Students coming from Indigenous communities and backgrounds find that their communities are shaped by histories of domination, conquest and survival. These students frequently encounter curriculum (even in Ethnic Studies contexts) centered on dominant national narratives which force their local histories to the point in which they are nearly invisible. These students are rarely afforded learning experiences which provide them the opportunity to critically examine their own identity, Indigenous sovereignty, the boarding schools, agricultural labor or the histories which shape the very communities in which they live.

With this in mind, Ethnic Studies pedagogy in rural New Mexico must be place based. Students should be encouraged to critically examine their histories, any tensions between cultures and

power structures which shape the communities from which they come. In the context of New Mexico the spaces explored would likely be questions about land, land acquisition, labor, migration, identity, language, colonization, sovereignty and belonging. These are great points of entry which would help students to identify the way their current, present day realities have been shaped. Querencia is a vital component which can be identified through an analysis of these questions. Rural communities in New Mexico and elsewhere are deeply shaped by relationships to land and place, so the pedagogy of Ethnic Studies must also be rooted in place. Students must learn how systems of power have influenced those places over time.

These learning experiences are not intended to solely benefit Indigenous or Latinx students. All students should be invited to hold critical conversations surrounding their histories and relationships to place and land, whose histories are centered, whose knowledge is legitimized, and why some narratives have had the effect of marginalizing while others are seen as neutral. In white dominant rural spaces this type of work is often avoided in order to avoid the levels of discomfort which are attached to these conversations, especially for white students. But the discomfort of the conversations are where the learning occurs. Discomfort is a part of the learning process. Students should be encouraged to ask difficult questions. Why are some histories invisible? Who benefits when certain stories are privileged over others? How do schools shape our understanding of belonging and success? These questions do not seek to assign blame but to create candid conversations about race and belonging. Again, even in schools where Anglo European students do not represent a demographic majority, whiteness continues to shape educational experiences. Curriculum is one of the most dominant sources of cultural reproduction. The average learning opportunities in these spaces are centered on the mythology surrounding American Exceptionalism. Especially in rural settings, these learning experiences often celebrate that of the conquering frontier Americans, while portraying communities outside of that ancestry as somehow standing in the way of progress and backward. Progress in rural schools means disrupting the frontier nostalgia curriculum is built upon, but whose harms are immediately present in local histories of place and land.

In rural settings, where tradition is valorized and cultural inertia holds sway, Ethnic Studies could create opportunities for students not only to see themselves reflected in the curriculum but to recognize themselves as knowledge holders who are capable of critically understanding and reshaping the worlds they inhabit. For students in rural communities whose histories have long existed at the margins of schooling, this work could be transformative. Too often schools fail to recognize the “funds of knowledge” that students already possess (Moll et al., 1992), especially forms of knowledge rooted in labor, caregiving, multilingualism, land, migration and survival. Rural educators, existing in contexts of normalized whiteness, tradition, and cultural inertia often fail to identify these forms of knowledge because it is perceived that they do not have an application in the context of traditional learning systems. When educators do not value the ways of knowing that their students already possess, this only serves to create another barrier for all students. Many marginalized students come from backgrounds of shared or communal learning. When an educator shows a student that their prior learning has no application in schools, all students suffer. Instead, if the curriculum and pedagogy allowed students to explore stories of migration and labor, examined local histories of schooling, and critically investigated how power within their own educational experiences was connected to land and place (Camarota & Romero, 2014), Ethnic Studies could actively affirm these ways of knowing rather than requiring students to distance themselves from their sources of knowledge in the pursuit of academic legitimacy.

Ultimately, Ethnic Studies pedagogy in white dominant rural spaces must be community responsive. It cannot be imported wholesale from urban contexts nor reduced to celebrations of diversity detached from local realities. It must emerge from the histories, tensions, inequities, and aspirations shaping rural communities themselves. Educators facilitating curricula such as this must remain steadfast in their commitment to these principles. They must be willing to engage in those uncomfortable conversations surrounding race and power relations in a specific context. Only then can Ethnic Studies begin disrupting the structures that have long limited whose knowledge matters, whose histories are centered, and whose future schools are made possible in these spaces.

Conclusion

I believe that educational equity cannot simply mean improving existing systems while leaving their underlying assumptions untouched. This change will require a willingness to critically examine whose knowledge is centered, whose histories are legitimized, and whose identities are affirmed within schools. This is particularly important in rural educational spaces where longstanding traditions—normalizing whiteness, cultural nostalgia, and institutional continuity, among others—shape school in ways that are rarely named, yet are deeply consequential.

Throughout this essay I have argued that rural schools, particularly white dominant rural spaces, are shaped by enduring structures of coloniality that continue to privilege dominant ways of knowing while marginalizing others. Earlier, I described how military conquest in New Mexico gave way to educational conquest. The legacy of that conquest persists today through intellectual and epistemic systems that determine whose histories matter, whose language carries legitimacy, and whose identities are expected to adapt in order to belong. In many schools whiteness operates not as explicit ideology but as common sense, shaping curriculum, rigor, discipline, and assumptions regarding educational success. This reality helps explain why Ethnic Studies matters in rural education spaces. Ethnic Studies offers opportunities to interrupt the reproduction of systems that too often ask students, particularly BIPoC students and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, to distance themselves from their histories, communities, and ways of knowing in pursuit of academic legitimacy. Ethnic Studies in white dominant rural spaces cannot simply be transplanted from elsewhere. It must be place-based, community responsive, and attentive to the histories, tensions, and realities which shape rural life.

The systemic conditions shaping rural schools—institutional caution, normalized whiteness, political polarization, and adherence to and nostalgia for longstanding traditions—cannot be ignored. These realities help explain why meaningful disruption often proves difficult, especially when these are seen as neutral values. Too often, educational systems interpret neutrality as virtue while overlooking the ways schools actively produce inequity. Education is never neutral. Schools either reinforce existing structures of power or create opportunities for students to critically understand and reshape the conditions influencing their lives. Recognizing these barriers should not be confused with accepting inevitability. The persistence of coloniality within schooling only further underscores the importance of educational approaches willing to critically question inherited assumptions and imagine more equitable futures.

For me, this commitment ultimately returns to *querencia*. The place from which I come, rural southern New Mexico, continues to shape how I understand education, responsibility, and belonging. *Querencia* reminds me that place matters, that histories matter, and that community carries forms of knowledge schools too often fail to recognize. It reminds me that the opportunities I have been afforded through education carry an obligation. This obligation is not to simply critique or lament inequitable systems, but to participate in the difficult work of imagining something better for the students and communities I serve. This commitment to disruption is not rooted in certainty that transformation will come easily. It emerges from the refusal to accept that the inequities shaping rural schooling are inevitable. Possibility exists in the willingness of the educators, students, families, and communities to question what has long been treated as normal. It is up to us to imagine schooling where belonging, dignity, and community knowledge are not peripheral but central. Ethnic Studies holds promise in white dominant rural spaces because it asks us to believe that another educational future remains a possibility. Even in those spaces where change has too often felt difficult to imagine.

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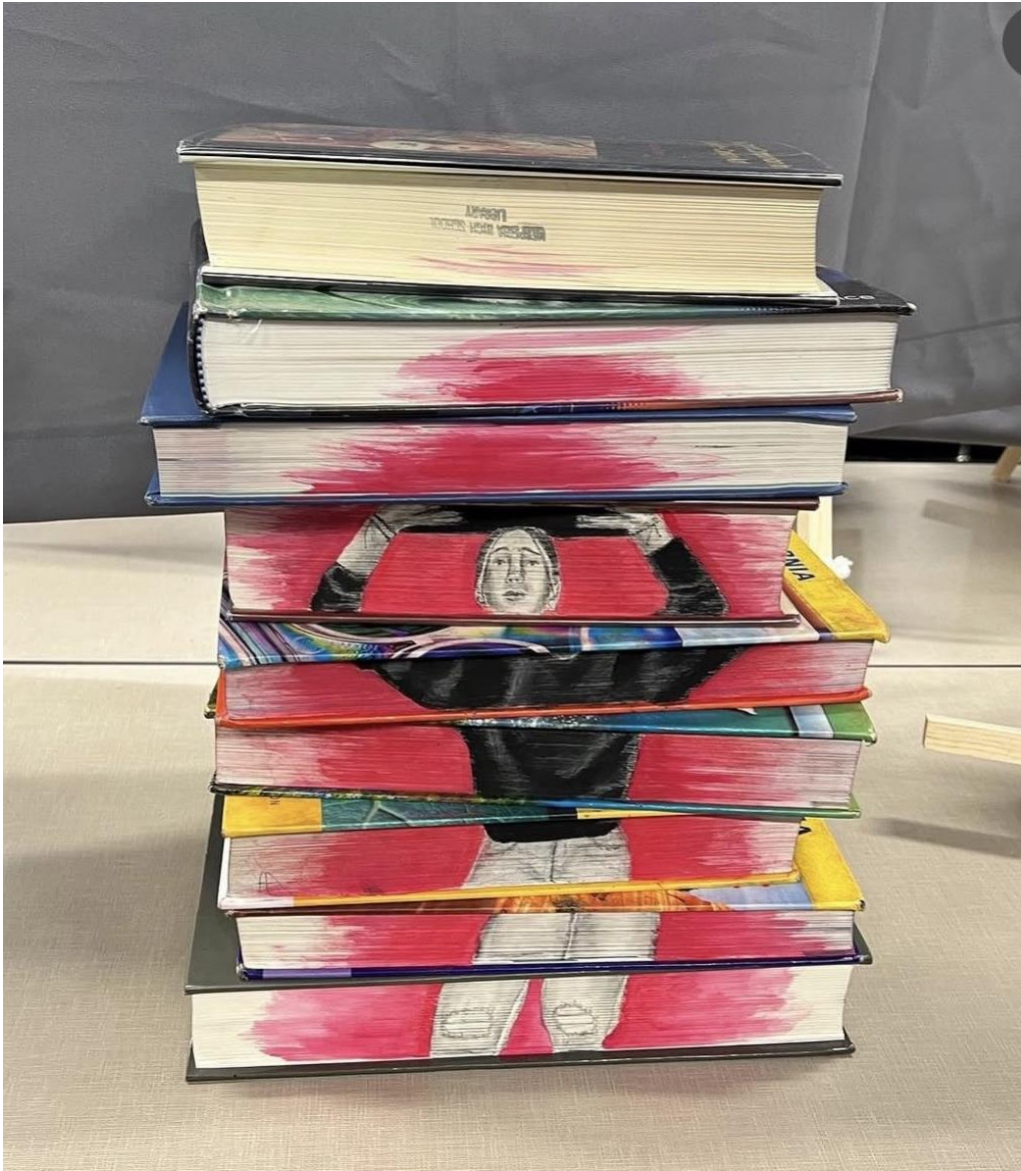
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Lost Between the Pages

Alondra Corrales

Description: This piece portrays the weight of navigating educational spaces where marginalized histories and identities are often overlooked. Crushed beneath the weight of the books represents the challenge of carrying an education that does not always reflect our own stories. This emphasizes the need for education that allows every student to see themselves in what they learn.

The American Dream or the American Nightmare: Hmong Studies at PWIs

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Abstract

How does an American Dream turn into an American Nightmare? The American Dream that education is a vehicle for everyone to gain upward social mobility and an opportunity to produce well-rounded citizens has not always been inclusive. Americans who dream of a more inclusive world envision an education system that includes Ethnic Studies curricula, the teaching of race, power, and inequality. This more inclusive American Dream quickly turned into a nightmare where Americans must confront racism and systemic oppression. Similarly, Hmong Studies programs at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) are part of this Ethnic Studies legacy of student activism, inheriting the tensions of achieving the American Dream and living the American Nightmare. This autoethnographic and self-reflexive paper draws on the reflections of three professors of Hmong Studies at PWIs to explore the political context that shaped their journey, pedagogical approaches, and development of courses and programs. This paper (a) advances critical pedagogies of Ethnic Studies by engaging with educator-scholars working at PWIs, and (b) offers examples that illuminate both the joys and struggles of teaching in white-dominant spaces.

Keywords: Hmong Studies, , Ethnic Studies, Pedagogy, PWI

Young people go to college to get an education, advance in their careers, and achieve the American Dream, but wait, why are they required to learn about race? For many, education is a vehicle to achieving the American Dream—the idea that hard work and grit can lead to a thriving career, homeownership, and upward social mobility. In particular, a liberal arts education is part of becoming well-rounded citizens who can represent and protect American freedom, liberty, and justice.

Ethnic Studies and learning about race, power, and marginalized histories became part of public education and the American Dream during the civil rights era. Seeing Ethnic Studies as a civil right, students at San Francisco State College held the longest student strike in 1968, leading to the creation of the first Ethnic Studies programs (Umemoto, 1989). The continued activism from students and the community responding to institutional racism has led to the national upscaling of Ethnic Studies programs. This growth has enraged critics to accuse public education of promoting anti-American and divisive curricula. Ethnic Studies requirements at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) name race as part of the content, but those courses continue to be advertised as cultural appreciation and learning about differences. This political machination has shaped how the

increased demands for Ethnic Studies requirements are implemented amid recent disinvestments in diversity, equity, and inclusion by the U.S. Department of Education.

This autoethnographic and self-reflexive paper draws on the reflections of three interdisciplinary professors of HMoob²⁹ Studies at PWIs as an entry point for examining the political context that shaped their journeys, their pedagogical approaches, and the development of HMoob Studies courses and programs. Specifically, this paper explores: What are the joys (dreams) and challenges (nightmares) of teaching HMoob-related curricula at a PWI? How do we decenter the colonial, white gaze in HMoob Studies? This paper discusses the struggles of teaching and sustaining such courses/programs. Bringing HMoob Studies into critical Ethnic Studies, we offer reflections for developing curriculum and pedagogy at PWIs from a critical HMoob Studies perspective.

Achieving Our American Dream

The United States of America is depicted as a land of opportunity, where any dream can become a reality despite one's upbringing and socioeconomic status. This American Dream operates as a vehicle for hope against the institutional, structural, and societal inequalities and inequities that exist in the United States. This idea of the American Dream is “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement . . . regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Adams, 1931, pp. 214–215).

This idea constructs the United States as a land of opportunity that assumes “everyone” includes all Americans, without interrogating who is part of the “everyone.” In reality, the American Dream and its promise of success and upward mobility is a façade because the concept of “everyone” has only applied to white, cisgender people—what Lipsitz calls America’s historical investment in whiteness (2006). Scholars have argued that as a nation, America was built at the expense of exploitation and violence against slaves (Coates, 2016; Morgan, 1975), Indigenous peoples (Blackhawk, 2006; Reséndez, 2017; Tuck, 2018), im/migrants (Jung, 2006; Ngai, 2004), women (Glenn, 2002; Luibhéid, 2002), and queer people (Bronski, 2012; Puar, 2018). Schools have played a role in erasing Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) knowledge, constructing racially minoritized students as intellectually inferior, and reinforcing the exclusion of women and queer people (Ewing, 2025; Grande, 2018; Grosfoguel, 2013; Oakes et al., 2018; Wilder, 2014). Despite a history of exclusionary policies and practices, schools continue to be seen as a vehicle to achieve the American Dream. The paradox of this exclusion is that it gave birth to the dream of Ethnic Studies, which demanded curricular and institutional inclusion.

For Americans who desire a more inclusive nation, their American Dream might start with the Third World Liberation Front, which challenged Eurocentric U.S. curriculum and gave birth to the Ethnic Studies Movement. Ethnic Studies *is* an American Dream that centers on the history, experience, knowledge, and resilience of BIPOC communities in the United States. Additionally, Ethnic Studies calls for an examination of power dynamics that shape and reproduce inequities through race, class, gender and colonialism at the structural, institutional, cultural, and societal level. Through understanding these power structures and impacts, students and communities can transform our

²⁹ We recognize there are many spellings for the group commonly written in English as “Hmong” or “Mong.” We utilize different spellings of this group name to represent various dialects, linguistic expression, and pronunciation such as Mong, Moob, Hmoob, HMoob, MHoob, etc. (Mouavangsou, 2024).

society to be more equitable. The dream for Ethnic Studies led to the requirement of Ethnic Studies in K-12 schools in states such as California, Minnesota, Connecticut, Illinois, Oregon, and Washington, *and* across many educational levels such as community colleges and state colleges in California. These are evidence of the Ethnic Studies American Dream becoming a reality.

Intertwined within are dreams for Hmong Studies. In recent decades, student and community activism for Ethnic Studies, especially Hmong/HMoob-specific curricula in states with high concentrations of HMoob population (i.e., California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin), has led to the establishment of Hmong Studies programs. These efforts are reflected by networks of HMoob community-based charter schools, growing numbers of HMoob bilingual and heritage language schools and programs, expanding offerings of study in higher education, and organized policy change efforts to develop teacher preparation programs and graduation requirements across multiple states. Thus, HMoob Studies is a product of Ethnic Studies. We, the Hmong Studies professors, are the dreamers of this American Dream.

As dreamers, we each envisioned a place for HMoob Studies. In the following section, we share how our American Dreams—one that lives out Ethnic Studies dreams as part of the American Dream—led us to where we are now as tenure-track faculty in Hmong Studies programs. Kaozong began with the absence of HMoob Studies which served as her catalyst to hope and dream for HMoob Studies. Similarly, the silencing of HMoob in history and the accusation that HMoob had no history propelled Chong to pursue her PhD in History and become a tenure-track faculty of Hmong Studies. For Choua, her desire to learn and become a HMoob Studies expert is to counter the racist stereotypes about HMoob people. Our dreams were born from our experiences with erasure and how in these moments of despair, we dared to include Ethnic Studies as part of our American Dreams. As a result, we changed the definition of who is an American and created a more inclusive version of the American Dream.

Kaozong's Dream(ing) of Hmong Studies

As a Moob American, child of refugees, and a recipient of our U.S. public school system in California, I can remember going to school and wishing that there were Hmong Studies courses at my high school and universities. When I was a graduate student at the University of California, Davis, I had an opportunity to teach a course of my choosing and I chose to teach a Hmong American Experience course—the first that was officially offered through the Asian American Studies Department and where students could earn a letter grade. To me, this course legitimized Hmong history and experiences within the university—it was the first time that Hmong experience, knowledge, and history was at the forefront of students' learning. This course, while focusing on Hmong American experiences, was validating for Hmong students and for non-Hmong students alike, providing a window to understand Hmong history and experiences through a Hmong lens that builds a community solidarity across shared experiences and differences.

I could not have imagined that many years down the road, I would become an Assistant Professor of Critical Hmong Studies (CHS) at the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire, teaching the very classes I wished I had taken. Coming into this position was truly an honor and privilege because I knew about the legacy of students, staff, faculty, and the respective Eau Claire community at large who advocated and fought for Hmong Studies to be on this campus. These efforts led to the hiring of the

first CHS tenure-track professor in 2017—and where I (who was a graduate student then), saw that dreams can become a reality: An American dream to have a tenure track faculty and a program specific to Hmong Studies in higher education.

Becoming Hmong Studies as Chong's Dream

When I was younger, someone told me that Hmong people had no history because our history was not documented. This contradicted what I knew about my family and people. My parents told me that we came to the U.S. as refugees because of the Vietnam War conflict in Southeast Asia. How can my family, and Hmong people, not have any history when I was the evidence of U.S. military failure in Southeast Asia? I was furthermore confused when there was no mention of Hmong when we got to the Vietnam War unit in my AP U.S. history class. I remember thinking to myself, how could this be? AP U.S. history was supposed to be the most advanced class and even there, Hmong was absent.

I carried these questions with me into college where I also found no answers. The absence of Hmong continued in the Asian American Studies and Southeast Asian Studies courses I took. In the end, the fight for curriculum inclusion came from the labor and love of myself and other Hmong students. I joined the Hmong student organization at the University of California, Los Angeles and we decided that advocating for Hmong Studies was a priority. Instead of culture shows, we wrote grants to host conferences that highlighted Hmong scholars and their work. I developed my first Hmong Studies course syllabus and reader with two other Hmong peers to show there was enough scholarship to be included in courses.

All these experiences propelled me to pursue a PhD in History. I specifically chose History because of the comment that Hmong people had no history because it was not in any books. I wanted the authority of the PhD to be able to say that Hmong people do have history and I'm writing it. I currently hold one of a handful of Hmong Studies faculty positions in the U.S.—evidence that Hmong Studies dreams do come true.

Becoming HMoob Experts as Choua's American Dream

“Do Hmong people eat cats and dogs?” asked an audience member. I remember holding onto that mic in the middle of the high school auditorium stage, feeling stunned by the words. I swore silently at the atrocities that anyone would accuse HMoob people of such things. “No,” I answered rather quickly, trying to move on from this topic as fast as possible. *People are just ignorant because they have never been taught this*, I reasoned with myself. *Not everyone knows that HMoob people are refugees from Southeast Asia, and they can be less judgmental if they had an opportunity to learn about us*. What I did not know as a young high schooler is that the majority of people were not actually interested in seeing HMoob people as part of the American Dream.

Non-HMoob people have always come to HMoob public events expecting HMoob people to perform, teach, and open the doors of our culture to them. However, these individuals have assumed little to no responsibility for learning about HMoob people or taking accountability for their racist fascination. HMoob people are expected to just give free labor and free history lessons, and to offer emotional compassion because non-HMoob people are finally “interested” in us. I used to think that

I should be grateful to have an opportunity to hold the microphone and share the little that I know about HMoob people with the public. It became clear after a few runs on the public stage that the audience was only interested in using me as a quick, cheap, watered-down cultural window.

Experiences like these have led me to dream about having the chance to be the learner of my history rather than the teacher. I wanted space to learn about my history and culture without having to be the one to teach others about my people when I don't even know about us. I studied really hard to prove that I have enough evidence, so that I can be a researcher and a doctor. I wanted to show that I am a legitimate source of knowledge production, that I have spoken with enough people, and I have observed enough examples. I can run numbers and data to illustrate a "truth" worthy of telling the world about. After all of this, the doctoral degree and everything, I have finally proven that I can be a professor. I have enough content and authority to call myself an expert who can teach this topic. I have achieved my American Dream, one where HMoob people are finally included.

I remember feeling excitement and anxiety as I stood in front of class on the first day of teaching a Hmong Studies class. I had carefully designed the course syllabus, reviewed my notes, and prepared my mind to create the best classroom environment that I could. The dream had finally arrived. I was going to be able to hold space for people to critically learn and reflect on their relationship to HMoob people. All students, especially HMoob American undergraduates, were excited that we were finally spending longer than one lecture on HMoob people. Each semester, I have students share about how proud they are to be in community and to create community on campus through the class. Several students testified on student evaluations that they felt seen, affirmed, and "the only class they are excited to come to." I am proud to be creating and holding space for marginalized students on PWI campuses to be themselves. I still hold onto these joys as much as possible.

American Nightmares Haunt Us All

Our American Dream to dismantle systemic oppression and decolonize our classrooms quickly turns into an American Nightmare that challenges the façade of inclusivity and a post-racial society. America has not become more inclusive and continues to cling onto its historical past of racism, colonialism, and cisheteropatriarchal sexism. The upscaling of Ethnic Studies across the nation means Americans have to contend with its oppressive past. Tintiangco-Cubales and her colleagues (2019) wrote that strong Ethnic Studies teachers and programs help "students critique structures of racism and its personal and social impact, as well as challenge oppressive conditions" (p. 21). Moreover, Ethnic Studies pedagogy of anticolonial education, developing sociopolitical consciousness, and enacting institutional changes must reflect the needs of the community. Predominantly white communities, like all others, need Ethnic Studies to know about their particular history, culture, relationships, and futures related to colonial conquest, racial violence, and systemic oppression (Greenberg; 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2010; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). The particularity of predominantly white communities might mean that the community may not be ready to name race and talk about racism directly.

With the growing interest in teaching and learning HMoob histories, experiences, and alternative forms of knowledge production, HMoob Studies programs at PWIs are quickly swept into the nation's machinations to superficially embrace cultural appreciation and celebrate diversity (Hoffman, 1996; May & Sleeter, 2010; Meyer & Rhoades, 2006). Students enter HMoob Studies classrooms expecting

to develop “HMoob cultural appreciation,” but they find themselves facing the uncomfortable reality that the U.S. is a racialized empire. In this “discovery,” students, specifically white students, often question, minimize, and undermine Ethnic Studies theories and research as opinions of extreme, leftist political agendas. PWI communities do not have the tools to support Ethnic Studies educators or their students to truly engage in transformative changes. As Hmong Studies professors at PWIs, this task proves challenging because we are racialized and tokenized. Our academic freedom, professorial authority, and scholarly expertise are often minimized and ignored. We also must balance how we teach about whiteness with enough compassion for white students and prevent further racial violence towards students of color. This balancing act is how the three of us arrived at the American Nightmare.

Our American Nightmares detail our experiences of practicing and living the ethos and values of Ethnic Studies. While we embraced our position and responsibilities of teaching to the needs of our community, we also engaged in the Ethnic Studies struggle to implement institutional changes. In this section, we each share a story about the specificity of our nightmares. Kaozong reflects on the contradictions of inclusivity at PWIs, critiquing how such institutions tokenize their faculty, mark them as the racialized Other, and sideline Ethnic Studies programs to the periphery. Expanding on how institutions perpetuate racism, Chong’s student evaluations and tenure dossier demonstrate that PWIs are quick to utilize anonymity to seclude racist students and racism as isolated events. Even when perpetrators can be identified, such as in Choua’s case, PWIs still insist on protecting whiteness. In navigating these American nightmares, our testimonios point to the struggles to implement Ethnic Studies at PWIs and the consequences we each faced personally. Ethnic Studies pedagogy cannot exclusively stay in the classroom, and we argue that part of eradicating the American Nightmare means we are burdened to teach our colleagues, university, and campus community how to be in community with the faculty they hired.

Façade of Inclusivity: The One and Only (Kaozong)

When I developed and taught a specialized course on Hmong American Experience in 2015 as a graduate student, I thought my biggest challenge was finding materials to teach the course. I was not concerned about who my students were, but what if there were not enough “resources” out there to teach this course. At that time, there were no professors in my university who specialized in Hmong Studies, nor was there anyone who had ever taught such a course before (there still isn’t). All the readings, assignments, and overall course design were done by me. However, what I have come to realize many years later, as a first-year faculty and the one who leads the Critical Hmong Studies (CHS) certificate Program is that my concern early on was only a small taste of the institutional nightmare.

I recalled when I interviewed for this position, I was asked by the search committee what my vision was for the CHS program. I had told them that I wanted to create another tenure-track line for this program because one person cannot sustain it. There needs to be more than one. While I did get the position, I quickly recognized that my vision for the sustenance of the program was far-fetched. My university was content with having one person fulfill the position; after all, my position and this program were created as a result of racist incidents on campus. My position and this program came after students publicly confronted the university for their lack of accountability, and thus,

maintaining this program is a way to continue that harmony and façade of inclusivity . . . but for how long?

The existence of The One allows the university to maintain the status quo, to continue to operate in harmony with whiteness while saving face publicly. The One is the perfect representation of the deferred project of inclusion, a project we know is not about justice or equity. . . . To be the One is behaving, obeying the rules of whiteness, maintaining the status quo, and above all, being grateful. (García-Peña, 2022, p. 18)

Within the first few weeks into the fall semester, I would come to understand what *the one* means. I had many encounters with faculty and staff, and although I did not know who they were, they knew who I was. I also received invitations and was sought out to partake in Hmong specific events that were university-wide related but also community events. It became apparent to me that as *the one*, I had become very visible compared to many of my first-year faculty colleagues. The hypervisibility of my presence and the anonymity of these encounters speaks to the cloak of inclusivity and representation. My position is symbolic of the university's continued commitment to inclusivity and a reminder that they have moved on since those racist incidents from the past . . . but have they really?

Being *the one*, and also *the only* is not something to be grateful for. Rather, *the one and only* foreshadows unsustainability with little room for program development and growth. I was operating in survival mode—to survive the first semester of teaching, to acclimate to this new university, climate, and community—miles and miles away from the community where I came from. I was intentional in collaborating with the Hmong Student Association on campus and to create events that would garner more interest in CHS. All of these were rewarding and worthwhile, but it was challenging to be one person. I grappled with the demands of a high teaching load, in addition to contributing to research and service—but most importantly the hopes and dreams of those who saw me in this position.

I recognized that the CHS program will continue to be marginal at my university, despite the continued large enrollment of students in CHS courses each semester. I also recognized this marginalization at my department's awards banquet, where CHS student recipients were awarded at the very end instead of with the other programs' student recipients—almost like a stepchild of the family. However, what continues to ground me is what has sustained my people for centuries, which is our community. Unlike the whiteness of institutions where it demands for One, I leaned into my network of Hmong sister scholars, who like me are navigating these spaces as professors in predominately white institutions. Together, Dr. Chong Moua and Dr. Choua Xiong are a support system for me to reflect and strategize—all while we were still dreaming of more CHS pipelines across many universities. But the truth is, these positions can be created, but can they be sustained? Having one individual hold down the fort as the one and only is not doable—burn out is real—but also the bandwidth to expand and create becomes thinner and as faculty, we get pulled in many directions. After all, we, too, are only human. Professionally, we may be “okay” but personally, our mental health, our well-being are not okay. Eventually, these will collide and impact how we teach, our ability to imagine and grow, and most importantly, the sustainability of us, as faculty within these predominantly white spaces.

The Anonymity of Racism and of Institutional Response (Chong)

The only real reason it was the most helpful because we all shared the same feeling of confusion, the notes weren't very helpful and can be taken out of context so it was up to us students to interpret it the best we could. The teacher is nice but when it comes to a class like this where note taking is the most important aspect it feels almost pointless when its sometimes so hard to understand what I am writing down when I forget the context later down the line. Thank you and fuck off.

– Anonymous student evaluation, Fall 2023

“Thank you and fuck off” was how a student ended their anonymous class evaluation for my Introduction to Hmong American Studies class in fall 2023. The rest of the evaluation was the student complaining how they felt confused by the class materials and lectures and how notetaking was “pointless” because “sometimes” it was “so hard to understand what I’m writing down.” All of this was coded language for racism. They were upset that they had to learn about a different group of people’s history, coming from a different part of the world, with names that they were not familiar with. They were upset that they had to take notes about things they did not know and clearly were not willing to learn. Saying the class content is hard to understand is the equivalent of saying a non-white person’s English is hard to understand.

That was my first semester in my first tenure-track job as assistant professor of Hmong Studies and history at a PWI. I was, however, not new to teaching nor to teaching at a PWI. In fact, I had been teaching a version of that class since I was a graduate student at a nearby PWI. I was used to anonymous student evaluations and aware that young-presenting women of color in the classroom received unfair comments. I certainly have received my fair share of critical feedback from students about the amount of reading assigned, the clarity of guidelines about assignments, the clarity of class expectations—and I accept these as part of the job of being an educator.

When I read this evaluation, however, I was shocked, not only by the unmistakable vehemence of the curse words the student used but also because their comments about the class and my teaching were coded language for racist microaggression. This evaluation was the first time I had ever had a student cuss at me—not a single student prior to this had used such violent words in an evaluation. The fact that this happened in a Hmong Studies class and the fact that I am a woman faculty of color who is young presenting are not coincidences. What made this evaluation more insidious was the veiled misogyny, evidenced by the student’s comment of “the teacher is nice but,” and the fact that it was anonymous.

These violent words stayed with me long after I read them. I deliberately included this evaluation in my first tenure and promotion renewal file. I wanted to make sure I documented this so that the institution knows what happened—that it doesn’t get lost and dismissed in the graveyard of anonymous student evaluations. The response from my PWI institution, in many ways, mirrored the anonymity of the student’s racist comments. In their letters of support for my renewal, institutional stakeholders at different levels expressed outrage discursively but passed around the responsibility of support. My tenure department framed that incident under the overarching umbrella of me going through the challenges of being a new faculty. The department did acknowledge there was a lack of support and intended to take steps to improve mentoring. At the college level, that committee urged

the department to provide appropriate support for a faculty member at the beginning of their academic career. The dean agreed with the previous suggestions and noted that it was the practice of the college for a mentor to be assigned from the department and the college. Last, the provost's review also urged the department to ensure that I have a strong mentor in place.

The nightmare of teaching Hmong Studies at a PWI for me is the anonymity of the racism I experienced and the anonymity of the response from the institution. Despite passing my first renewal with unanimous votes, there has been little communication and progress in terms of providing me more support at the department and college level. The university is undergoing changes and challenges (like many others in the current context of disinvestment in higher education and attacks on DEI) and perhaps addressing the racist experience of one faculty member is not a priority. Part of the nightmare is also the punting of who should respond and provide support for faculty like me. Until this week, I had not talked to anyone about this incident since turning in my renewal dossier. A colleague, who had read my renewal file and was disheartened about the racist student evaluation, asked if someone had talked to me about it recently. My answer was no. I had forgotten about the evaluation until that conversation. Now, it will linger until I can forget it again.

Nightmare as Pedagogy (Choua)

In 2022, a white male undergraduate accused me: "My example [of interpersonal racism] is going to be Dr. Choua P. Xiong. . . . You have taken what is supposed to be an informative subject diving into the Asian American culture and have corrupted it with your prejudice bigot views." He wrote this as his answer to an exam question about the different levels of racism for an online, asynchronous class on Asian American Studies. This moment was one of my worst nightmares as an instructor of color who explicitly teaches about race at a PWI. Learning about race and racialization is central in all my introductory courses. I believe that students need to understand racism before they can appreciate "culture" and ethnic diversity.

Unfortunately, my dreams of finally teaching students about the specificity of HMoob people through a critical race and Ethnic Studies lens meant that I have to also navigate these nightmares. This student was interested in this course because he wanted to learn about "Asian American culture," but he was not expecting the course to focus heavily on race. He was not ready to face the fact that the entire category of "Asian American" is a racial category and the notion of "culture" is actually about how an entire group of people has been racialized. I knew students were going to resist, but I was not prepared for such direct hostility. Perhaps this type of accusation was possible because it was online and the exam answers were private—only between the student and me, the professor. Students are usually not as confrontational in-person, but this platform enables students to feel emboldened to be hostile. What was most disappointing was not this student's racism, but the lack of support from the institution. Surely, this type of hostility cannot be one that I take up alone as an instructor hired to teach Ethnic Studies for this university.

My colleagues, department chair, and dean were upset that I was encountering racism on our "nice, progressive campus." "This is unlike our students," they promised. "Let's schedule a meeting with this student." During our meeting, they let this student dismiss my expertise and reduced the racial harm that he committed to "ad hominem" behaviors. No one actually addressed how these are repeated acts of racism, nor did they offer any physical protection for me on campus. Originally, they

wanted me to invite this student in for an in-person meeting. I declined because I did not feel safe to let this racist student know how I look in-person. He already knows where my office is and could probably find me. This student had expressed publicly on the discussion boards that the increase of anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic “was just a joke,” and Vincent Chin’s death was not due to anti-Asian hate or racial targeting. I was afraid of this student tracking me in person, and I started changing my routes to school, where I parked, and how often I am in the office. The administrators told me to call campus police if I see anything strange, but they failed to recognize that campus police often questioned if I am even a professor. This university hired me to teach this subject, but yet, the people who are supposed to support and protect my safety suddenly turned me into a nuisance. Administrators started marking me as a problem and troublemaker because they did not have adequate solutions for racist institutional practices.

I am reminded that my existence as an Ethnic Studies professor may be a nightmare for me, but I am also a nightmare for PWIs. They want to celebrate their gestures to include me, but they also have to deal with me when I ask for my humanity and dignity. I realized that this is part of practicing Ethnic Studies pedagogy that challenges students, colleagues, and institutions to confront racism, especially when they do not want to. This student wanted to learn about “Asian American culture,” and we have learned about culture. Except, the culture that we are learning about is the culture of racism. While this student did not hesitate to enact their overt racism, a large majority of students were very engaged in learning about culture not as a profound group difference, but as a collective history, past, and present structured by race. Because I am a young, female, and Asian American professor, my Ethnic Studies pedagogy at PWI will always be confrontational, questioned, and undermined. My existence has become a nightmare for PWI as Ethnic Studies programs scale up, and I have become the prime example of interpersonal racism against white fragility.

Conclusion: Ethnic Studies for the People, By the People

Our Hmong Studies dreams build upon the legacy of the student protests for Ethnic Studies in 1968. We are the intended outcomes of Ethnic Studies being the only academic field of study to come from student and community demand. Our stories and experiences, taken together, show how we as individuals have embodied the dream of Ethnic Studies. Our nightmares, however, reveal that the institution has not lived up to the dreams and demands put forth in the 1968 student strike. The main demands of BIPOC students in 1968 were to: (a) establish a School of Ethnic Studies, including a Department of Black Studies; (b) increase admissions for minority students; and (c) hire and retain faculty of color to teach these subjects (Whitson, n.d.). Their vision was forward-looking, going beyond curricular inclusion to focus on structural and institutional change that would ensure the success of Ethnic Studies as full and vibrant academic programs.

Instead of transformative institutional investment, many Ethnic Studies programs at PWIs exist on the margins in curriculum as well as physical spaces on university and college campuses. Our individual accounts of how the dream of Ethnic Studies manifested as nightmares for us reflect this. Kaozong being isolated and the “only one,” Chong’s experience of anonymous racist microaggression through evaluations, and Choua’s hostile racist encounter with a student and then administrators reveal the gap between the dream of Ethnic Studies and the lived reality of faculty of color who teach it.

Almost 60 years later, in the wake of anti-DEI legislation at the federal and state level, the climate for Ethnic Studies is eerily a mirror of the past. Despite this, we, like the students in 1968, remain steadfast in our belief in the transformative power of education and Ethnic Studies to give people the knowledge and tools to enrich their lives and be empowered and good citizens in community with one another (see, e.g., Vang, 2025; Vue, 2021; Xiong, 2023; Xiong et al., 2019). The goal is the same, to continue to work to build Ethnic Studies programs centered on care and reciprocity—an Ethnic Studies that recognizes us and that we recognize in return (see, e.g., Vang, 2018; Vue, 2023; Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021; Xiong & Mouavangsou, 2023; Xiong-Lor, & Xiong, 2026). One that represents the lives and experiences of people we know and love (see, e.g., Lee, 2024; Lo, 2017; Moua, 2023; K. Vang, 2023; T. Vang, 2023; Yang, 2023; Yang & Cushing-Leubner, 2025). We are not anonymous. We have not lived anonymous lives. Our American Dream is an Ethnic Studies that isn't anonymous.

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Tenemos que luchar por lo que es justo y necesario/ “We were doing what was necessary”: La Escuelita and Enacting Chicana/o Studies in Whiteness, 1969-70

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Abstract

In 1969, a group of Mexican American students and faculty from the University of Washington and community members in Granger, Washington created a collaborative educational center, La Escuelita (The Little School). La Escuelita was built by and for the community in an old Catholic church with the University of Washington providing incidental support. The “Little School” was an attempt to create a Chicana/o Studies educational space that centered the local Mexican American community in the Yakima Valley in a predominant White space. Nowhere were La Escuelita’s goals more represented than in their Calmecac education summer program in 1970. This reflective article returns to the roots and history of Ethnic Studies origins to learn from those who embodied Ethnic Studies whilst surrounded by Whiteness. Our article records and reflects upon a conversation with two Chicana/o scholars, Dr. Antonia I. Castañeda and Dr. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, who, in 1969–70, co-facilitated the birth of La Escuelita and the Calmecac educational program in Granger, Washington. Although nominal archival history exists and La Escuelita’s institutional memory dwindles, delving into the legacies and lessons of La Escuelita today, a moment of political and social turmoil, Latina/os, immigrant-based knowledge networks, and Ethnic Studies scholars can lean on our predecessors who confronted and overcame challenges predictive of today’s hostile environment.

Keywords: Chicana/o Studies, Community Embedded Ethnic Studies, educación, El Movimiento, Pacific Northwest, Whiteness

Introduction

In *Three Decades of Engendering History: Selected Works of Antonia I. Castañeda*, Chicana historian Antonia I. Castañeda and artist Tomás Ybarra-Frausto discussed the migration of Mexican American peoples and ideas in “Que Se Pudieran Defender (So You Could Defend Yourself)” (Castañeda & Heidenrich, 2014). A key focus of their discussion was their work in Granger,

Washington in 1969–70 focused on creating a Mexican American cultural center, La Escuelita (The Little School). The work was an outgrowth of the Chicana/o Studies Movement of the era focused on Mexican American cultural empowerment (Moreno, 2022). La Escuelita resulted in an educational program inspired by documented educational programs of Indigenous pre-colonization Mexico; especially the concept of Aztec educational tradition of the Calmecac (school of nobles). In the summer of 1970, a group of students from the University of Washington (UW) and Yakima Valley community members created a six-week Chicana/o focused summer enrichment program—Calmecac—that was designed to be a Chicana/o centered space in a White-dominated political environment.

The creation of La Escuelita and the Calmecac program came at a time of intense political resistance in the Yakima Valley to farmworker unionization and Mexican American political mobilization (U.S. Congress, 1969). The site was so intertwined with the local Chicana/o Movement and farmworker unionization efforts that United Farm Workers (UFW) members made an appearance at La Escuelita's opening (Castaneda, 2023; Palmer, 2026). UW Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) members contacted human rights activist Dolores Huerta, who coordinated the UFW visit and Mexican American civil rights leader Cesar Chavez's speech at the inauguration of La Escuelita (Guzmán, 2026a; O'English, 2025, p. 52).³⁰

From 1970 to 1974, Granger, Washington alone would be the site of two major Mexican American legal cases, both focused on educational rights. *Guillermo V. Castaneda v. Granger Public Schools* (1973) and *Guillermo Nicacio v. A. Ludlow Kramer* (1974). Both cases documented widespread discrimination against Mexican Americans in teacher hiring practices and school board voting practices. *Castaneda v. Granger* would even be cited in a U.S Supreme Court Case regarding desegregation practices in schools in *Washington v. Seattle School District No. 1* (1982). Guillermo V. Castaneda was a student from the University of Washington who worked at La Escuelita, found the old chapel location, and designed the interior of the center (Castaneda, 2023).

The Granger public schools showed disdain, making deliberate choices that worked against La Escuelita and showed an overall neglect of Mexican American Studies. For instance, the same year of the Calmecac program the Granger School Board refused a request by Granger community members to form Mexican American history and cultural classes in the local high school. Community members specifically requested a lecture series named Quetzalcoatl (Human Rights Commission, 1970). The White-only Granger School Board denied the request. Despite pushback

³⁰ While writing this paper, the most recent revelations about Cesar Chavez's abhorrent misconduct came to light. Given this information with long standing historical critiques of Chavez, the authors debated whether to include UFW's visit to La Escuelita. Cesar Chavez's historical lionization, at the expense of other important figures in the farmworker's movement, has meant that it is difficult to excise Chavez from our historical reflection without losing key moments altogether. In this case, Chavez's speech at La Escuelita's inauguration is among the few substantial narratives told about La Escuelita. Wanting to tell a larger history of La Escuelita, we have chosen to include the appearance of the UFW in 1969 to highlight the invisibilized labor of organizing that took place by farmworker movement organizers like Dolores Huerta and UW students. This paper highlights the many other narratives, beautiful labor, and community resilience that took place. Since its inception, La Escuelita was understood as an important and necessary community space, symbolizing the fight for civil rights for the Yakima Valley community and beyond. The UFW's appearance at La Escuelita did not legitimize the school's importance; rather, it signals the conversations the UFW wanted to be a part of.

from the Granger School Board, La Escuelita and Calmecac were a resounding success (Calmecac final evaluation, 1970). This is particularly noteworthy since it was one of the first of its kind in Washington State if not the Pacific Northwest (Weinreich, 1970). La Escuelita and the Calmecac program both served as a physical and symbolic manifestation of Chicana/o Studies that stood in stark contrast to the educational system that did not reflect the surrounding Mexican American culture.

Despite the importance of La Escuelita there has been little written about its history, how it emerged at a moment of White hostility, and its historical legacy on recent battles for Ethnic Studies (Garcia, 2025, p. 30). Currently, there is more written about its demise than its larger impact on the Mexican American community in the Yakima Valley (Miller, 1991, pp. 82–84). This article will focus on the years from 1969–1970 when the Calmecac program was developed at La Escuelita in Granger, Washington. It coincides with the work of Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Antonia Castañeda, Guillermo V. Castaneda, among others who were foundational to La Escuelita and Calmecac in Granger. Our article is composed of two parts. The first part is a brief history of La Escuelita from its inception in 1969 to the completion of the Calmecac program in 1970. Reflections via an interview with Guillermo V. Castaneda (a co-founder of La Escuelita) are central to this section (Castaneda, 2023, 2026; Guzmán, 2026a). The second part focuses on the legacy of La Escuelita with an interview with Antonia I. Castañeda and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in 2024. With the historical analysis and modern reflection of La Escuelita and the Calmecac participants it is our hope that this article will serve as guidance for creating Ethnic Studies spaces in Whiteness and times of political backlash.

Part I: A Brief History of La Escuelita and the Calmecac Program (1969–70)

In 1969 a group of mostly Mexican American students and faculty from the University of Washington developed a plan to create a Mexican American cultural center in the Yakima Valley. The efforts were primarily led by the UW chapter of El Movimiento Educacional Chicanos de Atzlán (The student movement of Chicanos of Aztlán) (Castaneda, 2026). The center was called La Escuelita (The Little School) and it was designed to serve as a counter to the educational system in Washington State that refused to teach Mexican American children about their ancestry and historical roots. The imagined reality of La Escuelita was very much based in the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement—El Movimiento—at the time focused on self-autonomy and cultural affirmation. In the proposal for La Escuelita, one of the co-founders Tomás Ybarra-Frausto stated, that the “Little School” was:

a plan by the Chicano people to create the environment necessary for the self-development—intellectual and spiritual—of the little bronze Chicano children. This requires a total emersion[sic] in Chicano ambience where the children will learn their language, their games, their folklore, their arts and crafts, so that they can realize a positive self-image and become strong enough to exist within the dominant culture. Chicanitos must be taught that it is not wrong to speak Spanish, that it is not bad to have brown skin and dark eyes. They will learn regular school subjects in an unstructured environment by discovery and self-analysis. (La Escuelita proposal, 1969)

The Yakima Valley was chosen as the site for this cultural center since it was home to the largest Mexican American community in the state at the time (Human Rights Commission, 1969). Granger

was specifically chosen as the site given its central location in the Yakima Valley and the efforts of UW student Guillermo Castaneda who was voted by UW's MEChA to find the site for La Escuelita and was responsible for designing the interior of the Little School (Castaneda, 2026; Cultural Center Plans, n.d.; La Escuelita, n.d.). Castaneda was able to secure a one-year lease for an abandoned Catholic church chapel that was directly across the street from the Granger elementary schools.

The La Escuelita rollout plan was a three-phase process set to begin in the Spring 1969 and be fully operational by the summer of 1970. As envisioned in the initial proposal La Escuelita was designed to be a "cultural center for the learning about Mexican culture" the programs from 1969 to 1970 focused primarily on cultural classes from visiting academics and local community members (Laddroun, 1969). The final goal was that eventually leadership and operations of La Escuelita would be entirely from the Mid-Valley community as operations were solidified. A critical component of La Escuelita was its dedication to basing its learning frameworks in the community. "Viejitos from our communities will be our teachers and our textbooks" (La Escuelita, n.d.). The advisory board responsible for organizing the program involved 12 UW students (the majority of whom were from the Yakima Valley and Mexican American) and 12 community members. This once again modeled the concept of Mexican American self-determination that was the driving force behind the establishment of the Little School. Given the idea of La Escuelita to be a place where people will build and maintain their language, culture, crafts, traditions, and way of life, no other program embodied the goal and mission of the school more than the Calmecac program in the summer of 1970.

In the summer of 1970 with funding from the University of Washington and a grant from the Washington State Arts Commission, a six-week summer program, Calmecac, was launched at La Escuelita. According to UW organizers and participants, the primary goal of the program was:

To develop a sense of identity and working relationship among emerging Chicano leaders in the community, on one hand, and students and College officials, on the other; to train these present and potential leaders so that they can participate in decision-making and work in Migrant and Mexican-American communities. (Calmecac final report, 1970, p. 8)

The idea for the Calmecac summer program was inspired by educational programs from Indigenous communities in Latin America. The educational experience and expertise of the Aztecs inspired the work in Granger. Descriptions of the Calmecac from the Aztec communities from descriptions in *Suma Indiana* (1943) and *La Literatura de Los Aztecas* (1964). Given that a formal Chicana/o Studies program did not exist yet at the University of Washington, in many ways the Calmecac was a manifestation of Chicana/o Studies in the community.

By all accounts, Calmecac symbolized the potential and power of community embedded Chicano/a Studies even in a White-dominated space. The six-week program was modeled on one of the founding documents of modern Chicana/o Studies, the 1969 *El Plan de Santa Barbara* centering the goal of "tying the campus to the Barrio" (Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education, 1969). Additionally, it also served to fulfill a main purpose of La Escuelita of studying the "barrio gestalt" of the Yakima Valley (La Escuelita proposal, 1969). The six-week program was brief but very involved. It included community enrichment programs that incorporated performances from groups such as Teatro del Piojo, classes led by local Mexican American community members,

creating a community-led museum of local Mexican American artifacts from the Yakima Valley, and holding a critical space for UW students and local community members to discuss Mexican American history and political concerns in the Yakima Valley ("UW Sets Chicano Program," 1970; "Chicanos learn of heritage from elders through Calmecac," 1970; "Chicano Calmecac pamphlet," 1970; "El Teatro del Piojo entertains while also teaching," 1970). Throughout the genesis of La Escuelita and the Calmecac program, Indigenous communities from around the Yakima Valley played an essential role in supporting their Chicano neighbors (Castaneda, 2026). Indigenous communities were advocates for the Mexican cultural courses that the all-White school board refused to allow into the classroom, and when La Escuelita was envisioned and programming executed, Indigenous peoples were consistently in attendance (Guzmán, 2026a, in press). La Escuelita flourished with the support and engagement of the Yakima Valley's Indigenous community. Thus, the Calmecac became a "school without walls" which "was a practicum or laboratory of ideas during discussions but became an agent for institutional change immediately afterwards" (Calmecac final report, 1970, pp. 12–15).

Despite the brief tenure of La Escuelita and the Calmecac program in 1970, the impact of those involved from the University of Washington and local Mexican American community members was transformative. Maria Elena Villaeuva, a local participant from Granger, remarked on the meaning both had on the community and Mexican American children:

It looks like it's the last week of the six-week program [Calmecac], but for us, for me, for our children, it's only the beginning. Now that the Escuelita is no longer a dream, we have a long way to go. Our children were denied the privilege of being able to learn their culture, history, and most important their mother tongue. The Escuelita made it possible for that dream to become a reality, and thus, we cannot afford to give it up. (Calmecac final report, 1970, p. 33)

For UW students who were from the Yakima Valley, the impact was just as transformative, as noted by Epifano Elizando who commented:

Calmecac was the most important thing to ever happen to all the Chicano people of Granger and all around. I just wish that the program Calmecac or a similar one would be started in other places. I as a participant really got the feeling of what being a real Chicano is and I'm sure that everybody else did too. (Calmecac final report, 1970, p. 32)

Elizando would return to UW and be part of the theatre group (Teatro del Piojo) where he would graduate with a degree in Drama and eventually have a distinguished career in public health in the U.S. Military (Elizando image description, n.d.). Despite some reviews of the lack of funding of the program, almost all the participants argued that they wished the program lasted longer. No comments or reviews denied the impact and participation of the local Mexican American community and UW students (Calmecac final report, 1970). By all accounts, the conclusion of Calmecac embodied all goals of the purpose of La Escuelita and the potential of Chicano/a Studies and Ethnic Studies embedded in community practices and knowledge systems. However, the legacy and ideas did not stop with the closing of La Escuelita but instead disbursed. Tomás Frausto spoke about the temporary museum La Escuelita housed, acknowledging:

And though these were some of the ideas that we brought together in this little museum when Escuelita disbanded, all these things were given back to the people that had loaned them, because they were just loans. And so again, things dispersed. The people dispersed, the elements of the museum dispersed, and the doors were closed, and that was the end of that experience. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Although La Escuelita was not initially meant to be a space of political organizing and meetings, from the beginning it was associated with El Movimiento and the farmworkers movement. In 1969, with the official opening of La Escuelita, one of the UFW co-founders Cesar Chavez made an appearance at the school ("Board reverses," 1969; Castaneda, 2023).³¹ Although invited by UW MEChA chapter members, a key reason why the UFW made an appearance at La Escuelita was largely because the Granger School Board originally refused a request to allow them to use a school gymnasium for the visit ("Granger board denies," n.d.; Guzmán, 2026a; Wherry, 1972). The denial of the request would be used as evidence in a court case against the Granger School Board of hiring discrimination against Mexican Americans in 1973. Additionally, La Escuelita coincided with calls to bring Mexican American cultural programs and classes into the Granger public schools. All represented White backlash to the Chicana/o Educational Movement in the Yakima Valley and any form of Ethnic Studies.

Local Mexican American students proposed a Mexican American cultural and history program Quetzalcoatl, that mirrored what would happen in the Calmecac program at La Escuelita. The Quetzalcoatl proposal was driven by the students and community advocates with the goal of holding public lectures at the public schools on Mexican American history specifically in the U.S. and building a World Problems course in the Granger High School. The school board denied the request (*Castaneda v. Granger Pub. Schools*, 1973). The school board argued their denial was based on protest by Mexican American history in the classes and other complaints they received. However, following the denial of the request for the Quetzalcoatl program Mexican American community members launched a petition for a formal Mexican American History and Culture Class during the 1970–71 academic year. The petition was submitted to the school board and showed widespread support for Mexican American history and cultural courses not just in high school but also in middle and elementary grades (*Castaneda v. Granger Pub. Schools*, 1973). Court documents from *Castaneda v. Granger Public Schools* indicated this was part of a widespread discrimination policy against any Mexican American inclusion in the education system that would reflect the closure of La Escuelita by 1972.

By 1972, the Catholic Church refused to renew the lease for the chapel that housed La Escuelita (Garza, n.d.). Records from participants and complaints sent to the Washington State Human Rights Commission, assumed links between La Escuelita, the Brown Berets, and the United Farm Workers Union. Those assumed relationships were principal reasons for the ending of the lease (Miller, 1991). Reflecting back on the legacy of La Escuelita, Guillermo Castaneda stated:

For a few years, La Escuelita was a "Base" for many Hispano-Chicano groups. For example, college students explained facts on how to become enrolled in college, and other groups taught the Mexican and Chicano cultures. But in time, the students completed their studies and went to jobs in other parts of the state. Nonetheless, this Mexican-American culture

³¹ See Footnote 1

center project, for whatever its historical and ground-breaking worth, was a testimony of cultural activity in the Yakima Valley . . . (Castaneda, 2026)

Affirming the reflection of Castaneda, La Escuelita and the Calmecac would not just be a base for Chicana/o group activism but the enactment and dissemination of community embedded Chicana/o Studies with a legacy very much well into 2026. This epicenter of Chicana/o ideas, education, and community activism would very much be echoed and confirmed with the interview of Antonia Castañeda and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in 2024.

Part II: Discussion of Interview Context

Our conversation with Antonia I. Castañeda and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto took place in the fall of 2024 over Zoom. Going into the conversation our aim was to understand, from their personal perspectives, what led to the genesis of La Escuelita, its daily workings, and what some of its founders hoped and understood its legacy to be. From the onset of our conversation, Antonia asked us how we heard about La Escuelita. As Mexican Americans, Gonzalo, born and raised in the Yakima Valley and Karla having lived much of her life in the Midwestern United States, we shared that there was little recorded history of La Escuelita. Gonzalo, an educational historian, had stumbled upon footnotes about La Escuelita by happenstance while writing his master's thesis, "Who Shall Educate the Mexican and Native Children': The Decline of La Escuelita and the Center for the Study of Migrant and Indian Education in the Yakima Valley, WA 1968-74" (Guzmán, 2010). Over the years, Tomás has donated many of his personal notes, and clippings about La Escuelita to the Washington State University archives. Although these resources have helped transport us back to La Escuelita, these alone cannot tell the complete history.

As the interview continued, it became evident that La Escuelita's framework and legacy were not simply exciting to us as Ethnic Studies scholars but incredibly relevant and important to understand and learn from as the sociopolitical climate of the United States in 2026 undervalues public education and further isolates marginalized peoples and students.³² Today educational funding opportunities dwindle and crackdowns on unionizing fill the news. There is a growing emergence of Whiteness across the country (Banks, 2025). Antonia and Tomás shared that although over fifty years have passed since the genesis of La Escuelita, the U.S. educational system continues to perpetuate many of the shortcomings La Escuelita aimed to remediate for marginalized students and families.

Antonia and Tomás urged us to find a way to bring to light La Escuelita's existence and significance. The following section is a personal reflection of our conversation with Antonia and Tomás including transcriptions from our interview. García's reflections comes first, and is broken down into three primary categories, a reflection on the genesis of La Escuelita, what Ethnic Studies advocates can draw upon in understanding La Escuelitas "curriculum," and the beauty transitory educación can provide. García's reflection is followed by Guzmán's conceptualization of the interview with Antonia and Tomás. García and Guzmán close out this piece with a joint reflection.

³² Of note, when the interview with Castañeda and Ybarra-Frausto was conducted and throughout the production of this paper, García and Guzmán resided in Minnesota. Minnesota is one of the first U.S. states to institute a statewide Ethnic Studies requirement for high school graduation.

García's Reflection and Analysis

The Genesis of La Escuelita: Educación as Framework

In 1970, Granger's school district had no teachers of Mexican descent even though the district predominantly served a Mexican student population. Antonia shared:

The contemporary [educational] institutions did not serve us, they certainly did not serve us well. We lived with the reality of segregation. [...] There was no institutional effort to understand the reality of the Mexican, Mexican American community, that was living in the midst and sending their children to school. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Noting the inaction and inattention of the school board in supporting the needs of Mexican American children the community backed by UW graduate students took charge. Tomás noted:

There's a big distinction between education and educación. This was one of the genesis of La Escuelita, the people felt that when you went to the regular Anglo schools, you were instructed, but you were not educated. And the difference between instruction and educación is that educación is to involve you with the norms and structures and language and ideas and history of your own culture. Una persona bien educada, a well educated person is one who is part of that continuum of history, of stories, of all those things that make up who you are as a Mexican American. But in the Anglo community you're just instructed in terms of the curriculum, just in terms of subjects, not in terms of the deeper meaning of what to be una persona bien educada was. So one of the genesis [...] was this notion that we wanted to capture what educación meant from the community standpoint—so that is what they felt was important for their children to receive, and they were not receiving that in the Anglo school. We decided, well, maybe we should have another part, another way, of dealing with education so that it would include educación. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

"Education" in a U.S. English context is directly associated with schooling. Images of a classroom with four walls come to mind, a room full of desks, a teacher at the front of the room. "Educación" in Spanish, on the other hand, speaks to spaces of learning or knowledge (conocimiento). When embodying educación a learner is welcomed to a space of conocimiento a growth of knowledge of heart and mind, they are encouraged to show up as holistic individuals. I was particularly drawn to a reflection from a participant of La Escuelita who stated it was a "school without walls" (Calmecac final report, 1970, p. 15). This metaphor embodies what educación is—a space without constraints.

As Tomás underscored, being well-educated does not simply signify going through the motions of schooling and receiving a degree, it means being a well-rounded individual. The families in the Yakima Valley recognized the mis-education the public school was providing their children yet understood and continually advocated for the public schools and La Escuelita to co-exist (Castañeda, 2008). La Escuelita employed community artifacts and the viejitos (old folks) as their textbooks centering community and culture throughout all their programming. What the Mexican American community wanted was a supplementary space of educación, not to dismantle the public school, but the school board took a defensive stance. At the same time that the all-White school

board refused to allow the Quetzalcoatl lecture series, the public schools purposefully altered their afterschool bus pick-up schedules, adding significant transportation challenges for the Chicano parents who wanted to grant their children the opportunity to engage in La Escuelita programming (Castaneda deposition, 1973).

Despite the tactical challenges the school board threw at La Escuelita, the Mexican American community stayed steady in their advocacy of educating their children both through what the public school offered and the culture-based programming La Escuelita facilitated. They believed both spaces should—and had the right to—exist. Through La Escuelita, the Mexican American community of the Yakima Valley set out to meet its own needs, needs that centered community and culture but also valued what the public school had to offer even when they believed critical aspects of their education were not always met by the public school. La Escuelita became a space of cultural significance not only for the Mexican American community but also for the Yakima Valley reservation. The Indigenous communities in Granger recognized the significance and importance of La Escuelita and in solidarity were strong advocates of its programming.

Today as Ethnic Studies is scrutinized around the nation, there is a miss understanding that dates to movement schools across the nation, a miss understanding La Escuelita also confronted. Those who have been touched by Ethnic Studies, and educación (knowledge spaces centered in culture and community) are advocating inclusion, not attempting to topple public schooling. They are advocating for more holistic approaches to learning.

Curriculum Building Amongst Growing Whiteness

La Escuelita uniquely reframes what building and institutionalizing an Ethnic Studies curriculum means in the 21st century. The first of its kind in Washington State, La Escuelita did not have an educational philosophy to guide its programming. Rather than turning to Western states like California, which were building Ethnic Studies programs, La Escuelita turned to its roots, México. Tomás's archives detail specific Indigenous texts and teaching that grounded La Escuelita's programming and leadership organization.

Having been in the classroom and in the room during professional development days for Ethnic Studies teachers in 2025 in Minnesota, one of the first states to instate an Ethnic Studies requirement for high school, I witnessed the interpersonal and institutional challenges that come with standardizing Ethnic Studies (Wurzer & Stockton, 2025). I ponder the hidden potentials that exist if we build Ethnic Studies curriculums not as reiterations of Ethnic Studies programs across the country but through a return to primary sources - ancestral knowledge frameworks. Instead of setting benchmarks guided by curriculum, what if Ethnic Studies benchmarks were made by the community as done so at La Escuelita:

Ybarra and the students are working very hard for these last few days, but for us the participants and parents, it is only the beginning. We have a long ways to go. The dream of the Escuelita would be opened and that we be involved in the programs we've had these last few days, are no longer a dream but a reality. We the parents are willing to work to achieve these goals to give our children the opportunity which was denied by your educational system. The Escuelita needs to be improved in so many ways, but for now, just being able to continue the work we started, it is one more step towards being self-reliant

not just with money, but with ideas and dedication, to see this through. (Calmecac final evaluation, 1970, p. 45)

Embodied Transitory Nature

The Mexican, Mexican American community of Washington, specifically Yakima Valley was isolated and segregated evident in the court cases highlighted earlier in this paper (Human Rights Commission, 1969). “There were not only no institutions [that served us well] there were no doctors or lawyers or professionals in our midst” (García & Guzmán, 2024). During our conversation, Antonia reflected on her own educational experience in Washington, highlighting the migrant reality of the Latino, Mexican population, they were predominantly *mano de obra* (physical laborers). “We worked in the fields” (García & Guzmán, 2024). The communities migrated with the seasons, the *temporadas de trabajo* typically being from March to September. The seasonal reality, migrating to where there was work, coupled with the working-class mindset was a strength of La Escuelita rather than a deficit and speaks directly to the power of La Escuelita opening its doors for only a short period of time.

Always centering the community and continually on the move, the Mexican American community of La Escuelita holds an unmatched transitory strength. The community museum La Escuelita housed was temporary in nature since its birth, they always planned to return the donated items of the “exhibit” back to the families, and just that happened. No physical traces of the museum exist, other than possible recollections that participants might share with loved ones and the memories that Antonia and Tomás recounted during our interview. We found a possible photo in the archive labeled “cupboard.” Although the museum’s framework made it more difficult to trace into today’s records, it was ahead of its time. Today, we observe some museums shifting to more equitable practices of archival collection and retention, enacting temporary loans of items or returning stolen artifacts.

Throughout our interview, Tomás and Antonia lamented the closure of La Escuelita, sharing that it was the end of an era. They shared that nothing like La Escuelita has ever surfaced again in Washington State. However, I argue that the embodied transitory nature of a migrant working class coupled with the practice of returning knowledge sources to the community was far stronger and far more telling than the logistical means that coincided with the Yakima Valley Archdiocese failing to renew the building lease and the closing of La Escuelita.

We often see closure, both physical and metaphorical, as a sign of failure. We aim to make sure our spaces of Ethnic Studies withstand the test of time. We hold a false image that institutionalizing Ethnic Studies means it’ll withstand the test of time. But perhaps, like our migratory ancestors, the transitory and temporary nature of existing in a certain space and time is the seed that paves the future. Let us understand Tomás’s words, “And so again, things dispersed. The people dispersed” as a space of potential, of reseeded sorts, a creation of new futures. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Guzmán’s Reflection and Analysis

As a historian who is interested in the Latina/o/x educational experiences in the Northwest, La Escuelita has always appeared in my life in some form or another, for most of my scholarly and

teaching career. However, interviewing Tomás and Antonia in 2024 illuminated something that the historical documents and archival evidence miss: the living impact of their educational work. Even in my own master's thesis, the work on La Escuelita was more of an institutional history than a social history of the impact of Chicana/o Studies and the spread of its educational philosophy (Guzmán, 2010). In other words, my original take on La Escuelita and its educational work was not an Ethnic Studies framework.

Not only that it speaks to doing educational empowerment work in this case Chicana/o Studies when models were just being created. And the only models present were ones that doubled down on Whiteness. For instance, the national call for Chicana/o Studies in the now canonical and famous *El Plan de Santa Bárbara* (1969) was less than a year old, when La Escuelita was planned and implemented. Here Antonia speaks to this lack of models, but the work continued:

But for me, Gonzalo, there were no models. We were trying to break models. Those models that existed oppressed us, and maybe I didn't have the language at the time to talk about oppression or exploitation or United learning. So no there, at least for me, there were no models. . . . And so, we created what we could from what we knew and from what the community and the students knew, and so we drew upon those historical, cultural, political, intellectual experiences and knowledges. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

The reflection by Antonia also illuminates an important aspect of Ethnic Studies, knowledge creation. Antonia's discussion focused on the creation of a new curriculum, new ways of teaching, and new ways of education because that was what was necessary for Mexican American empowerment. She clearly marks this as a community need and necessity for Mexican Americans in the Yakima Valley:

We thought about it as what, yes, what needed to be done, what we wanted to do, and, and, and I think at least from my perspective, working with the community, at least I didn't necessarily think about it in those terms. These, this was this. These were the people from which we came. These were our parents. These were our uncles and aunts. These were our co-workers, especially, they were our co-workers and we worked in the fields. We sweated and sang and suffered together in the fields, and we knew that the experience of people, we knew that the people not only had experience, lived experience, but they had they had intellectual frames and they had analysis and they understood. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Antonia speaks to a larger educational embodiment of culture, the community, and schooling that stands in stark contrast to the experience of Mexican Americans in the 1970s and the very ways public schooling has been formulated in the U.S. That is to say that for Antonia despite La Escuelita being surrounded by Whiteness, it served as a counterpoint to it as well.

Ultimately, Antonia speaks to a larger concept of public education that is much more aligned with the Latin American educational philosophy of *educación* (García, 2025). In other words, schooling was not just designed to assimilate and prepare for a certain station in life; it was part of a larger cultural educational upbringing that was about learning to be part of a good life and in good relationships with culture. Antonia spoke to this strongly towards the end of the conversation:

The idea behind that, or the intent, was that a culture nurtures us. It is not only what we eat, not only nutritious, but it nurtures us beyond just nutrition food, it nurtures our spirit, it nurtures our being. It nurtures our understanding of who we are and what we and that all of that has immense value back to the issue of affirmation. . . . And it was an effort to draw to help the community know their own value, because there was nothing else in the society that communicated their value and their knowledge and their importance, certainly back to neither the schools nor the church nor other institutions, the political institutions or the cultural institutions of the United States, and while we're struggling in at the University of Washington and in Granger and in the community in Washington state. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

The concept of “culture nurtures us” was not just a theme of Antonia when discussing La Escuelita but was also reaffirmed and illuminated by Tomás as part of his discussion. Tomás named the educational philosophy of La Escuelita and the goals of their work in the Yakima Valley. It was very much grounded in community embedded Ethnic Studies. Tomás identified specific community education programs as guides for their work:

All those ideas came because some of those ideas, we thought, were the same thing. We had a Native American community the same, you know, and they were having some of the same problems in terms of language and their history being told. So, the larger ideas behind the intellectual ideas that we, you know, we didn't necessarily take those ideas and transfer them to the Yakima Valley. But they were the seeding. They seeded us intellectually about what some of the some of those notions, how could we use some of those notions about community education programs in Latin America and in Mexico specifically to the Yakima Valley? (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Although Tomás credited influences on the work of La Escuelita of educational philosophers of the time like Paulo Freire, he specifically named the community members in the Yakima Valley, especially Granger, as being the educational philosophical tradition of their work in Granger:

I want to emphasize the knowledge base that we were drawing from, was both the intellectual knowledge base of our studies and books at the university, but more importantly, the lived experience of the community that was the center for whatever we decided we were going to do that it was the people themselves had different kinds of very, very broad, different kinds of knowledge that they had gained, you know, and so, how could these things make a holistic person? (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Tomás' reflection echoed that of Antonia, of culture as a site of learning and nurturing. But more importantly, it was local culture, community, and knowledge systems that were vital to that healing in the work in the Yakima Valley. This assessment was critical since Tomás was not a local to the Yakima Valley, and despite him also being a Mexican American well-versed in Chicana/o history and culture, was still a guest in the Yakima Valley community.

In many ways, Tomás' discussion of his work with Antonia and the La Escuelita project invoked his own educational theory of *rasquachismo*. Tomás himself defined *rasquachismo* as “a perspective of the oppressed, a view from *los de abajo*” in working-class Chicano communities that uses elements of “hybridization, juxtaposition and integration” as a means of empowerment and

resistance (Ybarra-Frausto, 2019, p. 86). Although said term has been used principally in art, it is very apparent that elements were present in the educational work in La Escuelita. In fact, this seems to be the foundation of the educational work in Granger, with Tomás stating:

tenemos que luchar por lo que es justo y necesario. We have to struggle. For what is just and necessary. And so we began thinking, well, what is necessary for this community, and how can we build topics and ideas to share with that community for that thing that you know what is, what is the most significant thing that is needed? (García & Guzmán, 2024)

This became a defining force and foundation of the work of Tomás, Antonia, and Guillermo, who all built on what had already been present in the community:

A lot of it was countering what was going on with migrant education, because they were not really doing what we felt they should be doing. . . . But at Granger, they lived together. I mean, the community, the teachers were the elders, and they lived there, and so we had the advantage of intergenerational transfer of knowledge. And we wanted this to be at the core we valued, you know, the knowledge that the elders and the community had. And so we wanted to find ways so they could pass it. There were no books that did this. You know, there were no elementary or high school or whatever, they did this. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

When reflecting on the conversation with Tomás, what is apparent is not just that the early forms of his theory of raasquachismo were present, but they were very much critical to their dispersal after the end of La Escuelita and the Calmecac program in 1970.

Both Tomás and Antonia both named the disbanding of the core La Escuelita crew as being central to the ending of the program. Although they do not name the active resistance by the Catholic Church, Granger School Board, and mostly White grower class, by the end of 1970 both had left the Valley. However, although at first glance it does read as an end to an important educational intervention, Tomás named a key aspect of the work at La Escuelita that lives on and spread, as reflected in the community-led museum they created that modeled their educational philosophy:

One exhibit that I remember that we did was when we put frijoles, you know, on a table and a molcajete and so on. So, it was showing that this was the basis for the culture, that what you ate was your culture, you ate tamales, you ate the tortillas you ate. You were eating your culture. . . . And though these were some of the ideas that we brought together in this little museum when Escuelita disbanded, all these things were given back to the people that had loaned them, because they were just loans. And so again, things dispersed. The people dispersed, the elements of the museum dispersed, and the doors were closed, and that was the end of that experience. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Thus, the notion that you “ate your culture” and museum artifacts came from the community and were given back to them illuminates a key aspect of the Chicana/o Studies and Ethnic Studies work in action.

I end by pushing back on the idea of 1970 being the end of the La Escuelita project. The work very much influenced the Chicana/o Movement in Seattle with the development of the UW Chicano

Studies program and the creation of El Centro De La Raza (Johnson, 2022; Moreno, 2022). Both Antonia and Tomás took their invaluable experiences in the Yakima Valley and knowledge in their work in Texas (Castañeda & Heidenreich, 2014; Guzmán, 2022). Guillermo V. Castaneda launched a successful lawsuit against the Granger School District in 1973 directly leading to a statewide lawsuit that challenged school board voting in 1974 (Ante la Comision, 1973; *Castaneda v. Granger Public Schools*, 1973; *Nicacio v. Kramer*, 1974). The 2024 interview served as a reminder that although the legacy of La Escuelita in 1970 may have been brief, their impact very much outlived the Whiteness regime that was a factor in its closing after 1970.

Conclusion

In October 2005, a group of Latina/o students from the Yakima Valley—Paul Arambul, Jr., Gonzalo Guzmán, and Lily Lopez—conducted a lecture circuit on Pacific Northwest Latino history in ninth-grade social studies classrooms. This had been motivated by their experiences taking Northwest Latino History at UW. The UW undergraduates directly outreached at high schools in Wapato, Toppenish, and Granger of the Yakima Valley (Joyce, 2005). When reviewing the interview with Tomás and Antonia, Gonzalo was immediately reminded of his experiences as a UW undergraduate. This includes co-founding what was then the Latino Student Union and co-organizing/launching a Latino Leadership Conference in the Yakima Valley in 2006. That is to say that the words of Antonia and Tomás were a “back to the future” moment where he saw firsthand that works such as La Escuelita and the Calmecac were always part of the living tradition of Mexican American history in the Yakima Valley. For instance, no one in Granger in 1970 could have imagined that the Mexican American lecture series “Quetzalcoatl”—which had been proposed to and rejected by the Granger School Board—would be completed in 2005 (Human Rights Commission, 1970). And this is one of the central conclusions from the story of La Escuelita and the Calmecac education program: *esperanza/hope*.

The words of Antonia, Guillermo, and Tomás all spoke to hope with evidence regardless of the time frame. Their work spoke to a time when the education of Mexican Americans in the Valley was defined by cultural neglect. It was bound in a form of Whiteness that promoted schools to assimilate Mexican Americans into a Yakima Valley that did not recognize Mexican American culture as nourishing and central to their American identity (Gamboa, 1973; Human Rights Commission, 1969). Here, both Antonia and Tomás spoke to what Chicana/o Studies, La Escuelita, and the Calmecac program meant to them and the community in a time of Whiteness as ascendent and actively against their educational work in the Yakima Valley:

And we have a there was a very interesting saying in the cultural sphere, and that was, la cultura cures, and that the what it cures is that that wound that was open, that wound that we still suffer from, that wound of being dispossessed of our lands, the wound of not being acknowledged as wholly human, the wound that we had with segregation, the wound that we had when we were not part of a process of being recognized as Americans in the fullest sense of the word. So, culture cured a lot of those things because it was, it affirmed. You know, no matter if you're if you're dispossessed, or whatever, when you hear a story, a story gives you hope. And I think one of the important things is that all our efforts, in whatever area they were, was to build hope for a better future, a better society, a new way of looking at the world. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Tomás added to Antonia's assessment by acknowledging the legacy and the hope for changing things in the modern era: "So I think hope, we build hope. And La Escuelita was another part of that Esperanza, which is still a very important word, because we're still, in many ways, hoping that things will change. And now, you know, particularly now at this moment in our history" (García & Guzmán, 2024).

In a time where public schooling is continually falling short in meeting the needs of our students across the nation, particularly students of color, La Escuelita is a vibrant reminder of hope. It is easy to have faith in what is to come, faith in the conocimiento and educación of our future generations when the history and the legacy of La Escuelita is revealed. As we thank them, Antonia, Guillermo, and Tomás all shared discontent and lamination that La Escuelita did not last longer, as it was so incredibly influential for them and their career paths but also for all the Mexican Americans in the Yakima Valley and other marginalized folks that supported La Escuelita in solidarity. La Escuelita has been far from closed and forgotten. Embodying a "school without walls" the community and teachings did not fizzle out rather they dispersed around the nation and beyond.

Castañeda and Frausto's work in Granger serve as a guide for Ethnic Studies work that does not have a long term or permanency in mind. La Escuelita probes us to question what is possible when we meet a community's needs and do the work of Ethnic Studies even when there is no clear future in mind. In other words, we are asked to focus our attention to Ethnic Studies work that will only temporarily displace Whiteness or work where political defeat is the expected outcome (Marquez, 2023). When entrenched in schooling, La Escuelita has a powerful message given the hyper focus on curriculum, the institutionalization of abolition work and decolonization work. In other words:

The now is possible because of the then and you all will make the next eras possible because of the work that you're doing. So yes, certainly hope, I had it then, and I have it now. You give me hope. And the other folks, other young people like you across the United States. But to the word hope, I would add action precisely because, especially now, we as Latinas, Latinos, Chicanas, Chicanos are especially under assault again. There is an effort to, there will be an effort to pass repressive legislation, and so it is especially important that we know our histories, so that we can build, not only build upon them, but use them to resist and to act. (García & Guzmán, 2004)

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Reconceptualizing In Lak'ech: *CERF v. State of California* and the Appropriation of Spiritual Learning

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Abstract

The past and present imposition of organized religion as an institutionalization of spiritual practices—or an extinguishing thereof—has served as a mechanism of colonialism, racialization, white supremacy, and, ultimately, control. This paper engages LatCrit as a lens to situate *CERF v. State of California* as an attempt to maintain and uphold white supremacy within schools. CERF's characterization of In Lak'ech as part of a formal religious doctrine was a misrepresentation of how spiritual knowledges are practiced, conceptualized, and shared. We offer a reconceptualization of spirituality that centers the experiences, desires, sensemaking, and empowerment of Indigenous and Latiné people themselves. We highlight what spiritual practices look like in white-dominant spaces by first critiquing how “religion” and “spiritual practices” have become enmeshed as a discursive and political tool by white power-majority institutions.

Keywords: Ethnic Studies; Mexican American Studies; LatCrit; Spirituality; Curriculum

In Lak'ech

Tú eres mi otro yo.
You are my other me.
Si te hago daño a ti,
If I do harm to you,
Me hago daño a mi mismo.
I do harm to myself.
Si te amo y respeto,
If I love and respect you,
Me amo y respeto yo.
I love and respect myself.

In 2021, the Californians for Equal Rights Foundation (CERF) filed a lawsuit against the State of California concerning the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, the state's standardized Ethnic Studies curriculum required for high school completion (*CERF v. State of California*, 2021). In their argument, CERF claimed that the In Lak'ech chant—a philosophical poem with roots in an amalgam

of Mesoamerican ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identities—included in the curriculum invoked a religious practice that violated articles of the state constitution concerning state-sponsored religious activity and the aiding of religious “sects” (Article I, § 4; Article XVI, § 5). Ultimately, the State of California removed In Lak’ech from its Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (Bell et al., 2022). Thus, a power-majority institution imposed its own rigid definition of “religion”—an inherently white, colonial institution—onto the spiritual practices of people historically racialized and colonized.

In this paper, we engage Latina/é/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) as a lens to situate *CERF v. State of California* as an attempt to maintain and uphold white supremacy within schools. CERF’s characterization of In Lak’ech as part of a formal religious doctrine was a misrepresentation of how spiritual knowledges are practiced, conceptualized, and shared. The past and present imposition of religion as an institutionalization of spiritual practices—or an extinguishing thereof—has served as a mechanism of colonialism, racialization, white supremacy, and, ultimately, control (Nye, 2019). Using LatCrit as an analytical tool, we offer a reconceptualization of spirituality that centers the experiences, desires, sensemaking, and empowerment of Indigenous and Latiné people themselves (Ruiz & Mills, 1997)—thus decentering whiteness. We highlight what spiritual practices look like in white-dominant spaces by first critiquing how “religion” and “spiritual practices” have become enmeshed as a discursive and political tool by white power-majority institutions. Without such critical examination, the spiritual practices included in Ethnic Studies curricula risk appropriation through a neo-colonial gaze.

Tracing Ethnic Studies through Courts and Culture

Ethnic Studies first emerged in the 1960s as a framework to decenter whiteness from school curricula by foregrounding the knowledge, history, and experiences of marginalized ethnic and racial groups living in the United States (Sleeter, 2011; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Research has noted the academic and social benefits white students and students of color have experienced from taking Ethnic Studies courses (Sleeter, 2011). In addition, Sleeter and Zavala (2020) and Cabrera (2013) highlighted the sense of empowerment and advocacy students of color experience after taking Ethnic Studies courses.

The standard approach to incorporating Ethnic Studies has been through elective courses meant to supplement the traditional white- and Western-centric curriculum. However, states such as California and Colorado, which have relatively prominent Latiné, AAPI, Black, and/or Indigenous populations, have made Ethnic Studies a required component of the standard public-school curriculum. In California, Ethnic Studies has even been enshrined as a component of state high school graduation requirements. The state and federal resistance California experienced during and after the mandated Ethnic Studies graduation requirement went into effect (see Santa Ana Unified School District and Temecula School Board lawsuits) not only reflects the historical struggles Ethnic Studies has experienced to enter and stay in school districts, but it is a representation of the immense racism and xenophobia that is emblematic within U.S. society. For example, Bell and colleagues (2022) discussed a legal challenge concerning a violation of religious freedom that resulted in California retracting In Lak’ech, a Mayan phrase, from its list of Ethnic Studies requirements in the classroom. Battles of resistance in the courtroom have not only altered California’s Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, but at the state government level, questions as to

where the curriculum stands in terms of the state's priorities have resulted in the de facto defunding of Ethnic Studies courses across school districts (Blume, 2025).

In Lak'ech is a poem (or chant) first introduced in Luis Valdez's (2013) larger poem "Pensamiento Serpentino," which evokes tenets of Mayan philosophy on what it means to be a human being (Valdez & Martinez Paredes, 2012). The phrase itself is meant to nurture interconnectedness between one another, promoting empathy and integrity as prominent features in the human experience (Sosa-Provencio et al., 2021; Villanueva, 2013). In Lak'ech is most commonly referenced in the Mexican American Studies (MAS) curriculum, a subfield to Ethnic Studies, where students are introduced to the knowledge and experiences of Mexican Americans who have and continue to reside in the U.S. Practicing In Lak'ech in schools can take on several forms. Teachers often display the In Lak'ech poem on their classroom wall for students to see. Teachers can also instruct all students to recite the poem, either in unison or as a call-and-response, at the start of every class session (Owens, 2018). Essentially, In Lak'ech is a classroom ritual, wherein each line of the chant serves as a signpost to set the intention for learning and to situate and connect students to themselves and others in the class.

Challenging Curriculum, Legislating Whiteness

The teaching of In Lak'ech, and MAS at large, saw national attention in 2010 when the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) officially ended the Mexican American Studies Department within the district. With the passage of Arizona House Bill (HB) 2281, the state's public schools were prohibited from offering Ethnic Studies courses, like MAS. According to a mostly conservative legislature, Ethnic Studies courses "either promote the overthrow of the United States government or promote resentment toward a race or class of people," including courses that, "are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group [and] advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals" (HB 2281). Here, the language of the bill and its eventual law, the Academic Freedom in Schools Act (2010), not only positions advocacy for "ethnic solidarity" as a threat to students' individuality; it also appears to position "ethnic solidarity" as a threat to white power majority.

Arizona's removal of the MAS curriculum offered to students was overruled in 2015 when a federal court judge overturned the Academic Freedom in Schools Act. The ruling stated that TUSD had violated students' First and Fourteenth Amendment rights by banning MAS and Ethnic Studies broadly (*Arce v. Douglas*, 2015). Arizona's 2010 ban of Ethnic Studies curricula, however, has served as the precursor to the mass censorship taking place throughout U.S. schools in the early 2020s. For example, Gómez and colleagues (2023) discussed how the recent battle on Critical Race Theory (CRT) in schools stems from Arizona's 2010 attempt to ban Ethnic Studies curriculum. Anti-CRT legislation aims to ban curriculum that discusses racism as it exists within U.S. systems and structures. Although similarities do exist, Gómez and colleagues explained how anti-CRT legislation incorporated lessons learned from Arizona's attempt to ban curriculum and has then proceeded accordingly by using "evasive language" to circumvent any potential inclination of targeting a specific ethnic or racial group, as such race-specific targeting proved to be why the ban on MAS was overturned in Arizona.

Although it was overturned within five years, Arizona's ban on MAS—and, indirectly, In Lak'ech—rested on evident and enduring political and racist motivations. For example, in 2021, a 501(c)3

organization called the Californians for Equal Rights Foundation (CERF) emerged to enact its stated mission, “to safeguard and build awareness on the causes of equal rights and merit through policy monitoring, voter education, legal advocacy, rigorous research, alliance building and media outreach” (CERF, 2026b). While CERF alleges that the organization is non-partisan, its website at the time of this publication in 2026 leverages contemporary mainstream “culture war” rhetoric commonly associated with conservative right-wing politics related to issues of equity. For instance, CERF’s home page asserts, “The woke culture is destroying America and its future generations! We need all hands-on deck to stop the attacks on our cultural values and our kids. All Americans must ACT NOW!” (CERF, 2026a). CERF’s website also directly delineates its anti-equity stance. One graphic on its home page, titled, “Our Values | Their Propaganda,” goes so far as to pit “Equality & Merit”—a value against “Equity, Identity Politics, & Lowering Standards”—propaganda (CERF, 2026a).

Considering the clear mission, values, and commitments of CERF, it is no surprise that the organization filed a lawsuit against the State of California related to a curricular program intended to promote equity for marginalized students: the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (California Department of Education, 2021). The Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum includes sample lessons, materials, and implementation guidance for K-12 teachers. In Chapter 5 of the Model Curriculum, a subsection, titled, “Affirmations, Chants, and Energizers,” prominently features the In Lak’ech poem among other call-and-response chants and affirmations (2021, pp. 414–415). In Lak’ech is just one of many concepts and expressions rooted in activist and solidarity-focused movements, but it stands apart from the others in the “Affirmation, Chants, and Energizers” section in that it is the only one specifically relating to themes of empathy, compassion, interdependence, and love (California Department of Education, 2021, p. 416). The inclusion of In Lak’ech became the spearhead of CERF’s lawsuit against the State of California. CERF alleged that the practice of chanting, displaying, and referencing In Lak’ech was religious, and specifically teaching Aztec theology. As such, because it was prominently featured among the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum’s implementation guide and resources, CERF argued that the entire curriculum violated articles of the state constitution concerning state-sponsored religious activity and the aiding of religious ‘sects’ (Article I, § 4; Article XVI, § 5). California chose to settle the lawsuit by removing In Lak’ech from California’s Ethnic Studies mandate. In their arguments, CERF cited religious dogma, as opposed to anti-government sentiments, as the main reason for why the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum should not be present in California schools.

In the following sections, we outline how LatCrit provides the theoretical framework for our argument and analysis of *CERF v. State of California*. Then, using LatCrit, we compare the case studies from Arizona and, primarily, California. We explain how law and litigation have been used to attack a curriculum that centers the knowledge and lived experiences of minority groups (and how the de-centering of the Eurocentric curriculum is regarded as threatening). Moreover, our analysis reveals how the legal and philosophical concept of the Separation of Church and State has been leveraged inconsistently in the U.S. to target the practices and learning for minoritized racial and ethnic community groups specifically—especially when they are constructed as “threats” to the white, Western, Christian, and monolingual English power majority.

Theoretical Framework

Latina/é/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) emerged as a theoretical framework to expand on Critical Race Theory's (CRT) commitments and techniques to interrogate how racism is embedded in laws, policies, and institutions (Valdés, 1997). Latina/o legal scholars identified several shortcomings within CRT concerning its lack of focus and established framework for centering and understanding Latina/o experiences (Valdés, 1998). To address these shortcomings, LatCrit not only continues with CRT's emphasis on exploring the role race plays in law and society, but it centers the experiences, identities, and interests of Latina/o communities, specifically within legal discourse and social policy. LatCrit specifically identifies four functions behind its theoretical purpose: (a) advancing the production of knowledge by creating a culture of understanding of Latinas/os and the law; (b) inciting transformation by creating social change for Latinas/os; (c) expanding and connecting struggles by recognizing theories that acknowledge the intersectionality present in the Latina/o experience; and (d) cultivating community and coalition among those who share the same goals of LatCrit (Valdés, 1998, pp. 1093–1094).

Since its emergence in 1995, LatCrit has served as a theoretical framework in many fields of practice. LatCrit has especially gained popularity within the field of education. LatCrit's focus on education continues with a line of inquiry that started with CRT. In education, CRT has been applied as a way to explore and highlight how race and racism influence the way schools operate to create conditions that negatively impact the learning experiences of students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Villenas et al., 1999). Under a LatCrit theoretical framework, this line of research narrows the focus by exploring and identifying how Latinas/os are directly impacted by racism in schools. While CRT does provide a lens to understand how social and political structures work to the advantage and disadvantage of certain groups of people, it also provides an avenue for people of color to rise above a grim and seemingly hopeless reality. The impact social and political structures have on people of color, especially Latinas/os, is an approach that LatCrit specifically adopts from CRT. In particular, LatCrit embraces the:

subjectivity, particularity, multiplicity and intersectionality; the acceptance of legal scholarship's inevitable implication of power politics; the emphasis on praxis, social justice, reconstruction and transformation; the navigation of sameness and difference to build self-empowered communities; and the recognition of self-critique's continuing importance to intellectual integrity. (Valdés, 1997, p. 57)

This approach not only continues with the goals of CRT, but it also offers an opportunity for "researchers to better articulate the experiences of Latina/o specifically, by addressing issues often overlooked by CRT such as immigration status, language, ethnicity, culture, identity, and phenotype" (Huber, 2009, p. 643).

We apply LatCrit when interrogating the argument in *CERF v. State of California* that frames In Lak'ech as a religious practice. In the process, *CERF v. State of California* completely ignored the spiritual components of In Lak'ech. Spirituality, as seen in In Lak'ech, represents the embodiment of lived experiences as historically experienced by Latinas/os in the Americas. We discuss how religion has not only been historically employed to advance the political objectives of a mostly white dominant group—in the process subjugating Latinas/os in the Americas—but we also make the argument for why religion and spirituality operate separate from one another. We conclude

by emphasizing a participant-observer role that students who do not share the spiritual and lived experiences of Latiné students can adopt when learning about and participating in the observance of In Lak'ech in Ethnic Studies classroom.

In Lak'ech as Spiritual Practice/Spiritual Practice as Learning

In this section, we interrogate the past characterization of In Lak'ech as a “religious” practice. We argue that In Lak'ech could be reconceptualized as spiritual in nature, which is deeply distinct from religion, and crucial to learning for racially and ethnically marginalized students. Religion, as an institutional practice, has historical ties to white European Protestant Christian traditions which, in part, have served as the foundation of Western systems and structures that historically subjugated and stripped indigenous groups of their cultural ways of being (Lofton, 2012; Nongbri, 2013). As part of the colonial project, moreover, religion served to construct the indigenous people of the Americas as the “other” in relation to Europeans and justify the imposition of European religious values and practices that were meant to “save” indigenous people from their “savage” ways of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, 2014). Religion served its purpose to usher in indigenous people into an age of “modernity” during colonial times. In contemporary U.S. society, religion has also served as a vessel for groups in power to effectively maintain control over a subjugated group.

In Lak'ech is described as a “chant or mini poem” that invokes an ancient Mayan philosophy on how to love and respect oneself and others (Owens, 2018). Mayan philosophies predate contact between European settlers and people of the Americas. While accurate interpretations of Mayan, and Mesoamerican teachings and philosophies at large, were lost due to colonization, scholars have noted the common “fundamental metaphysical themes regarding the nature of reality, human beings, and the interrelationships between human and nonhuman realms” (Maffie, 2009, p. 10). In part, Mayan philosophies ventured into the realm of situating a person’s role and place in relation to the world around them. Whether it was by emphasizing the connection that exists between oneself and others (e.g., In Lak'ech) or the connection between oneself and the cosmos as a single life force (Cobo, 1990), Mesoamerican cultures were conscious of how everyday actions could have significant impact both on people and the world around them. Mutuality and reciprocity are key to these precolonial philosophies. For example, Toltec knowledge arises from the reciprocity of honoring spiritual masters who taught on Earth and trained apprentices to spread their wisdom and guidance to others to maintain a way of living (Ruiz, 1997). Colonization framed both Mesoamerican practices and the people of Mesoamerica as subhuman, thus establishing the rationale for why religion was needed to save or civilize those who followed a way of seeing the world like it is reflected in In Lak'ech. In Lak'ech lays in contrast to the European Protestant Christian values that colonial powers aimed to implement. As such, In Lak'ech invokes a sentiment more spiritual than religious given the way In Lak'ech offers a lens of existing in the world, devoid of the necessity or obligation to follow a specific religious institution—a trait common in the construct of religion.

Tippett (2010) states that the spirit, and the presence of a spiritual reality, may be something that is naturally prevalent in humans. A religious doctrine is thus not needed for: (a) one to be truthful with themselves; (b) to perceive the world around them with positivity; or (c) have the motivation to put forth one’s best effort, ultimately to work towards personal fulfillment and success (Ruiz, 1997). Spirituality is often recognized as a positive trait to have and is often glorified when exhibited in individual successes. For example, Slater (2005) mentions how, “we refer to a person

as having spirit, we describe a person's behavior as spiritual and uplifting, a person may be in high or low spirits [. . .] athletes give spirited performance beyond their everyday capabilities, and we take things from others in the right or wrong spirit" (p. 60). Spirituality can thus be that defining feature that gives purpose or meaning to one's life (Huebner, 1999; Palmer, 1980). In Lak'ech applied spiritual elements in the way it serves as guide or code of conduct for how one should see themselves and the world around them. *Tu eres mi otro you; you are my other me* captures the relationship between oneself and others. *Si te hago daño a ti; if I do harm to myself; me hago daño a mí mismo; I do harm to myself* captures the reciprocity that exists in people's actions and how the manifestation of either positive or negative actions can come back to impact the one who wishes goodwill or ill on others. Lastly, *si te amo y respeto; if I love and respect you; me amo y respeto yo; I love and respect myself* emphasizes the interconnectedness that exists between oneself and others and how extending love to those around you can serve as an act of self-love. Thus, embracing one's own, and others', humanity.

While the common association attached to the word "spiritual" does conjure up, "religious dogma, [and] a set of beliefs and practices [that] one might have" (Lantieri, 2010, p. 7), it is important to note that the term "spirituality" can never be a "neutral" idea and that, "discourses exist beyond the level of a particular society, culture, or political context" (Nye, 2019, p. 14). To frame spirituality as a religious practice imposes a white standard approach to defining people's diverse ways of being and of existing in the world. Spirituality as religion contrasts the goals of colonialism which defined Mesoamerican practices and ways of being as inherently barbaric and violent. As was the process that came with labeling Mesoamericans as "savages" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, 2014), nothing produced by the Toltecs, Mexico, or Mayans was seen as civilized under the gaze of the colonial project. The distinction was thus drawn between what religion is and what practices or perspectives laid counter to the goals of religion. Distinguishing spirituality from religion served European settlers in their efforts to colonize Mesoamericans' minds, hearts, and spirits, for sakes of exploitation and the institutionalization of whiteness in the Americas. The lens CERF adopted in *CERF v. State of California* largely ignores the historical construction of spirituality and religion. Albeit intentional, labeling spirituality as religion served a larger purpose of giving leverage to CERF's mission to do away with any content or curriculum that interfered with the teaching of the mostly Eurocentric curriculum found in all U.S. public schools. Under the pretext of labeling spirituality as religion, given the separation of church and state that is fully exercised in public institutions such as schools, immediately scrutinized In Lak'ech, thus detaching it from its intended purpose.

CERF v. State of California proceeded under the argument that In Lak'ech is a "religious practice" and thus, California's mandated Ethnic Studies curriculum violated the state's constitution with the aiding and promotion of a specific "religious sect." Incorrectly framing In Lak'ech as a religious practice not only ignored the historical role European religions served to replace Mesoamerican practices like In Lak'ech, but it points out the contradiction in terms of which established creeds should be followed and promoted within schools. Including In Lak'ech in the teaching of Ethnic Studies in California was seen as an attempt to replace the largely white Christian values that are sprinkled throughout the traditional public-school curriculum. CERF's decision to challenge In Lak'ech's inclusion in California's Ethnic Studies curriculum echoes fears presented in the Great Replacement theory by white nationalists who see the incorporation and inclusion of diverse practices in U.S. society as an attempt to replace traditional white values which have historically been pushed by white institutions (Feola, 2021). Conservative forces have actively taken measures

to ensure the preservation and interests of whiteness within U.S. society. For example, Donald Trump passed Executive Order 14291 in 2025 which set out to safeguard and expand religious liberties, including eradicating any anti-Christian bias from public institutions (Exec. Order No. 14291, 2025). It is interesting to note how four years after In Lak'ech was removed from California's Ethnic Studies curriculum citing concerns over the state sponsoring a certain religion, Donald Trump in his capacity as President of the United States, sponsored Christianity within all U.S. schools. Framing In Lak'ech under the construct of religion was an imperative move that utilized courts as a mechanism of power to maintain white supremacy within California public schools. It also establishes precedence for how the white power majority will boldly ignore the law to protect Christianity all while subjecting Mesoamerican spiritual practices like In Lak'ech to the full interpretation of the law despite the absence of any religious association.

Within the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, In Lak'ech is situated as a routine, multilingual affirmation which serves as a guiding framework for seeing and situating yourself in relation to others. Empathy, compassion, and interdependence are central messages of the poem, affirming the interconnectedness of human experience (Sosa-Provencio et al., 2021; Villanueva, 2013). Such themes—especially interdependence—might seem in contention with the hegemonic values and norms of Western societies, which tend to emphasize independence, conformity and compliance within hierarchical power structures, rugged individualism, and capitalistic venture. As such, the themes and affirmations presented by In Lak'ech “threaten” the power majority’s status quo and hegemony by foregrounding interdependence and connection—rather than independence and individualism. In Lak'ech not only “threatens” some of the hegemonic political, cultural, and social values of the U.S. power majority. Crucially, in *CERF v. State of California*, the spiritual elements of In Lak'ech were emphasized by the plaintiffs, albeit under the construction of In Lak'ech as “religious” in nature.

Si Te Hago Daño a Ti, Me Hago Daño a Mi Mismo: Participant Observers in Ethnic Studies Classrooms

In this section, we make recommendations for multi-ethnic and multi-lingual participation in Ethnic Studies programs. Considering the increased interest among white communities in Ethnic Studies curricula and learning experiences, there has recently been an increased demand and motivation for passing legislation to incorporate Ethnic Studies curricula and content in K-12 public schools (for example, see Committee of 100, 2023). With over 50% of California’s high school students identifying as Latina/é/o, the need for Ethnic Studies curriculum becomes more evident given the overwhelming racially marginalized populations California public schools aim to educate. At the same time, it is equally important that the white population of students in California meaningfully engage with past and present settler/colonial histories of violence—alongside content and concepts which elevate the voices, knowledges, joy, and contributions of racially marginalized groups in the U.S.

Of course, how one articulates and conceptualizes their own racial and ethnic identity does depend on a variety of factors, including those at the crossroads of gender and socioeconomic status. Nonetheless, research on Ethnic Studies shows that students whose history and experiences are not highlighted in Ethnic Studies curriculum (i.e., white students) still benefit academically and socially from their exposure to a broadened perspective. As such, Ethnic Studies becomes crucial in educating a U.S. population that is both tolerant and accepting of diverse cultural practices and

ways of being. While In Lak'ech is officially not included in California's required Ethnic Studies high school curriculum, the question does emerge: how would one participate in In Lak'ech if their racial and/or ethnic identity does not match the identity of those who In Lak'ech attends to directly? With Ethnic Studies being offered at an exponentially larger rate in schools across the U.S., exploring this question is crucial to prevent potentially co-opting In Lak'ech and having its original purpose being lost in translation—as was done by CERF.

In Lak'ech is a clear example of *Spirituality in Learning* that embodies the knowledge and experiences of many Indigenous peoples across the Americas. Students and teachers whose history, background, and lived experiences do not match those of Latinas/és/os can take a specifically adapted role when participating in In Lak'ech. This role should be one of a *participant-observer* (Johnson et al., 2006). Often defined in the field of ethnography, a participant-observer requires an ethnographer to be actively present as they immerse themselves in the practices that take place within a particular social context. The ethnographer may at times be more of an observer since “ethnic and cultural differences would allow the ethnographer to maintain only an amateur standing in the culture at best” (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 112). While observation may be the initial entry point for mostly white students to take part in In Lak'ech, their role may take on that of a participant after critically interrogating their positioning in relation to those in the classroom space. Given the history of colonization which did away with many of the Mesoamerican traditions that are highlighted in Ethnic Studies classrooms, it is essential to safeguard these sacred practices to avoid the improper use of Mesoamerican knowledge for personal gain or power (Ruiz, 1997).

For those participant-observers who choose to embrace the spiritual knowledge and way of being enveloped within In Lak'ech, they may do so by first interrogating their status, power, and autonomy to maintain culturally defined roles within an Ethnic Studies classroom. White students must first recognize their own privilege if they are to gain full cultural understanding of In Lak'ech. Knowing how communities practice and have preserved In Lak'ech despite attacks from a white power majority is vital towards psychologically undoing whiteness which has contributed to the labeling of Mesoamerican practices as lesser to European values and traditions. Recognizing the significance of In Lak'ech can contribute to undoing the construction of Mesoamericans as savages, effectively re-humanizing a group of people that have largely been constructed under the gaze of the colonial project. After white students undergo the process of recognizing their own privilege, their participation can grow to the point where they can authentically participate in In Lak'ech. While the spiritual element of In Lak'ech does reflect a way of life grounded in Mayan knowledge, experience, and practices, participant-observers can engage with the promise of In Lak'ech by focusing on the ethics and principles enveloped within the poem itself.

Three core principles can be identified within In Lak'ech: (a) emphasizing oneness in the human experience; (b) self-reflection; and (c) living by a moral code. *Oneness* is captured in the eloquent flow of words in how In Lak'ech shifts between “tu” (you) and “yo” (I), thus establishing that connection between oneself and others. This message of oneness can further achieve the goal of Ethnic Studies where the deconstruction of Mesoamericans as “others” can lead white students towards a more unified and collective front, realizing the interconnection that exists in human experience (Sosa-Provencio et al., 2021; Villanueva, 2013). Recognizing how participant-observers can see themselves reflected in the experiences of Latinas/os/és can also build a sense of collective responsibility in addressing past and present injustices severely impacting indigenous

communities. *Oneness* leads into *self-reflection* emphasizing how one's actions not only impact others but oneself as well. Participant-observers can build on examining their status and power by recognizing the influence their actions can have, as possible co-conspirators (see Love, 2020) in building a more just world. Through self-reflection, participant-observers can be advocates for those multiply marginalized within society, echoing oneness as is reflected in the initial lines of In Lak'ech. Lastly, In Lak'ech can serve as a *moral code* for how one can promote love, empathy, and respect for others. Participant-observers can reflect this key principle of In Lak'ech in their decision to listen carefully to those whose experiences are not reflected in the dominant narrative within U.S. schools and society while also setting out to treat people with dignity in their daily interactions.

The idea of the participant-observer creates the conditions for white students to not co-opt spaces largely meant for students of color. Defining roles within a space is essential when considering how whiteness can shape spaces to attend to the comfort of white bodies, allowing them to move easily within a space, all while making non-white bodies feel out of place (Ahmed, 2021). As participant-observers, white students within an Ethnic Studies classroom can exist without interfering with the purpose of Ethnic Studies in creating a counterspace for the teaching and honoring of knowledge and culture not prioritized within the traditional school curriculum. Being a participant-observer allows the opportunity for one to envelop themselves directly into a community. Not only do participant-observers get the opportunity to study and learn from a culture firsthand, but they also come to embody the practices which comes from active participation in the community. As participant-observers, the knowledge, traditions, and practices learned in an Ethnic Studies classroom will follow white students even if they are extracted from that community. Thus, white students adopting a participant-observer role can address the concern that comes with whiteness as property and how it has historically operated as a means of taking resources from, as opposed to being in unison with, communities of color (Harris, 1993).

Conclusion

Ethnic Studies has been targeted by conservative, right-wing power majority legislatures, communities, and organizations. These entities have desperately pointed to isolated components of Ethnic Studies curriculum, or they leverage vague or color-evasive legal discourse (see Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Gotanda, 1991) to alter or ban Ethnic Studies curricula entirely. At the same time, the increased interest convergence and demand demonstrated by some white-dominant communities seems paradoxical: If there are many white people in power who are motivated to take up Ethnic Studies in their public school communities, how can other white power majority entities justify their attacks on Ethnic Studies with claims that it threatens American culture, "values," and politics in the classroom? In effect, Ethnic Studies—along with other educational initiatives associated with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion—is being subjected to whiteness both in its destruction and its proliferation (through the interest convergence of white stakeholders). For this reason, we take up the idea of the participant-observer as a potential starting point for mediating the tendencies of white stakeholders (e.g., white students) to center themselves in a program where they are not inherently at the center. In so doing, we hope to contribute to the larger dialogue shaping the future of Ethnic Studies and the *Spirituality in Learning* for racially marginalized students, especially Latiné students.

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Everything I Got

Alondra Corrales

Description: This artwork captures the courage and vulnerability of sharing lived experiences in spaces where those voices have not always been heard. The pages flowing from the girl's mouth symbolize pouring out stories, memories, and histories carried within. It reflects how ethnic studies creates opportunities for every voice to be heard and valued.

“Our Fates Are Linked”: Coteaching Ethnic Studies as an Act of Love and Resistance in Low-Income Rural California

Katie Gordon
Mabel Aguilar³³

Abstract

This practitioner research examines the co-creation of a Latinx Ethnic Studies unit in a rural, majority-white low-income high school as an act of loving resistance. Developed by a White teacher and a Salvadoran-American educator in response to the 2025 deportation of Venezuelan migrants to El Salvador’s CECOT³⁴ prison, our collaboration uses Chicana/Latina feminist *testimonios* and *pláticas*. Framed by abolitionist teaching, revolutionary love, and viral justice, we refused to yield to the historic and dominant whitewashing of curriculum in our majority-white high school, instead adapting the classroom to center BIPOC scholarship. Our co-planning—a healing solidarity forged through shared activism—produced a unit that traces cyclical violence from U.S. imperialism to carceral institutions. Analysis reveals a pivotal divergence: for Chicano/a/x students, the unit fostered affirmation and a language to express anger through indicting systems of oppression; for White students, it initiated a fragile reckoning with complicity. We argue this collaborative and community-responsive praxis is essential for cultivating anti-racist consciousness in white-dominated spaces, demonstrating how deep solidarity among teachers and their students can transform rural classrooms into sites of critical consciousness and co-conspiratorial action.³⁵

Keywords: Ethnic Studies, Rural Education, Revolutionary Love, Co-conspiratorship

Background

Ethnic Studies holds tremendous promise as a tool for cultivating antiracist identities in majority-white classrooms (De los Ríos et al., 2015; Gillespie et al., 2024; Pinedo et al., 2025; Sleeter & Zavala, 2021). Ethnic Studies is grounded in the experiences and scholarship of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Therefore, when implementing it in our low-income, rural, majority-white

³³ Due to the sensitive nature of the work described, the authors have chosen to publish under pseudonyms.

³⁴ *Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo*, stylized as (CECOT).

³⁵ All names and place names have been anonymized to protect their identities. All names are pseudonyms or have been omitted.

classrooms, rather than asking the discipline to adapt to them, we need to ask white students to confront their own internalized white supremacy and fragility.

During the 2024–25 school year, Ms. Grant piloted the first Ethnic Studies elective in her rural, majority-white hometown in rural California. The course drew heavily on resources and texts, from *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*, edited by Cuauhtin et al. (2019), and *Indigenous Children's Survivance in Public Schools*, authored by Leilani Sabzalian (2019), with intentional emphasis placed on local history and knowledges. This paper does not provide a comprehensive account of that course. Instead, it offers a snapshot of a collaborative process between Ms. Grant and Ms. Aguilar, a leader in rural California's bilingual education community. We examine how drawing from our communities can enhance the quality of Ethnic Studies in majority-white classrooms while maintaining fidelity to the discipline's core principles—this approach effectively expands its application into rural, low-income white-dominated spaces.

Our collaboration was forged in shared struggle. We first connected in fall 2021 when Ms. Aguilar was assistant principal at Magnolia Elementary, a two-way Spanish-English dual immersion program our own children attended. That spring, Ms. Aguilar was placed on administrative leave. The stated reason given—that Aguilar was too focused on equity—came after a conservative Latina parent complained about her work to center BIPOC voices in curriculum and celebrations.

In response, Magnolia parents, including Ms. Grant, mobilized, advocating relentlessly for the reinstatement of Ms. Aguilar, a dynamic Latina leader known for prioritizing the unmet needs of students of color. We formed a grassroots community-based committee *Guardianas Para La Comunidad* (GPLC). This period of advocacy forged powerful solidarity among Latinx, Chicanx, multiracial, and allied white families. We provided mutual aid through childcare, meals, and financial resources; opened our homes as spaces for collective grief over the loss of our school's only BIPOC administrator; and crafted strategies to push the district to repair trust and implement policies that prioritize our most vulnerable children. Together, we launched a petition, wrote editorials, sent countless emails, acquired legal counsel for Ms. Aguilar, and attended and demonstrated with music, joy, and signage outside of school board meetings. Ultimately, rather than return to the district in a different capacity, Aguilar accepted a lead teacher position at a small elementary school in a neighboring district. There, she helped guide the school's transition to a dual immersion model and continues to serve as a classroom teacher.

GPLC continued advocating for equity and inclusion into the 2022 school year, expanding our reach by attending district Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) meetings. This strategic move was pivotal, allowing us to build solidarity with BIPOC parents and students across other school sites who shared our experiences of being marginalized. Catalyzed by this shared energy, and meeting several times a month, we formed the group *Parents for Anti-Racist Schools* (PARS) to (a) elevate diverse lived experiences and (b) create material and educational conditions for BIPOC students, educators, and families to thrive. At our initial community visioning session we identified six overlapping areas of focus and goals.

Table 1
Parents for Anti-Racist Schools Areas of Focus and Goals

Parents for Anti-Racist Schools Areas of Focus and Goals	
Areas of Focus	Goals
Identity & Curriculum	Ethnic Studies is flourishing for all students through school partnerships and articulated TK-12 programs, ensuring every child can answer: "Who am I? What community am I living in?"
Representation & Leadership	The district staff (classified, certificated, and leadership) proportionally represent the student population. BIPOC educators and administrators are commonplace.
Equity in Access & Discipline	There is flexible placement into advanced programs with proportional BIPOC representation. Discipline is equitable, proportional, and emphasizes positive practices over punitive, criminal justice-inspired models.
Family & Community Power	BIPOC families are legitimate partners in planning, professional development, hiring, and accountability. PTAs are diverse and welcoming, and community groups co-create accountability tools like surveys.
Belonging & Holistic View	All children are viewed holistically, belong unconditionally, and are treated with inherent dignity. A real connection exists across the school community where everyone knows each other's stories.
System Accountability & Support	There is a foundational, "no opt-out" understanding of where bias and racism live in the system. All staff are trained and held accountable to center marginalized voices. A well-articulated support system ensures high retention of BIPOC staff, and equity-minded cooperating teachers support new hires.

Since its founding, this coalition has become a vital hub where BIPOC families and educators gather to share meals, exchange stories, and organize advocacy. Our collective presence has strengthened our impact. We continue to attend school board meetings, and have successfully consulted on and advocated for the district's adoption of board policy to address persistent discrimination and disproportionate punishment of students of color. We created cooperative learning spaces for anti-racist educators, such as a spring 2025 working group that studied Liz Kleinrock's (2021) book, *Start Here, Start Now*, to address discrimination in our classrooms. We also provided key recommendations for implementing the Ethnic Studies curriculum mandated by California Assembly Bill 101 (2021).

With the passage of AB 101, when an opportunity arose for Ms. Grant to receive Ethnic Studies training, she embraced it. As an educator who actively integrates both bioethics and Ethnic Studies across her high school preps, she saw this as a crucial chance to deepen her understanding of her identity as a white educator and mother in an interracial Chicanx and white family. Upon finishing the training, she felt prepared to continue her Ethnic Studies teaching journey; however, after being confronted by the persistent gap in literature on Ethnic Studies praxis in low-income and rural white-dominated educational spaces, she has since began studying Ethnic Studies in a more formal capacity as part of an MA program.

To build capacity for teaching in rural, low-income, and white-dominant communities, we offer our collaboration as a narrative of resistance during these times when federal policies are working to strip constitutional rights of our most vulnerable communities. Our hope is that other educators implementing Ethnic Studies in white-dominant K-12 settings can connect, study texts presented in our literature review, draw inspiration from our collaborative unit, and work together in finding ways

to critically engage current events in our classrooms for the benefit of all students. This work is vital to help students see how white supremacy operates and to develop the anti-racist identities white people need to engage in meaningful solidarity—particularly with Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities who have suffered the most historically and have been amongst the first harmed by policies of our current administration.

Context: Troubling Socio-political Times

No one is coming to save us; we must protect each other. What we witnessed in the spring of 2025—the Trump Administration's blatant disregard for due process and deportation of Venezuelan nationals to CECOT, a maximum-security prison in El Salvador—was a horrific warning bell. Watching these events unfold, we knew we could not remain silent in our classrooms. Together, we pivoted our planned curriculum to build a unit directly responding to this moment. The targeting of Venezuelans as alleged “Tren de Aragua” members foreshadowed a revival of the Monroe Doctrine and a push for forced regime change which has facilitated the continued exploitation of Latin America. Specifically, this moment foreshadowed the ramping up of ICE deportations and detention camps—such as “Alligator Island” and the Dilley facility in Texas—used to hold vulnerable immigrant community members.

The imagination of those who hold power within our settler-colonial government and institutions are nearsighted and limited. This was evident in Elon Musk reposting this tweet:

If White men become a minority, we will be slaughtered. Remember, if non-Whites openly hate White men while White men hold collective majority, then they will be 1000x times more hostile and cruel when they are a majority over Whites. White solidarity is the only way to survive. (Jerr, 2026)

Given these ideological conditions, Ethnic Studies is an urgent and most necessary intervention vitally needed in rural educational settings. Ethnic Studies provides all students including white ones with practice in understanding how power moves within our society to regulate and exploit the most vulnerable among us. This pedagogical intervention is critical given that Musk, amongst others, have amplified fears of anti-white violence tied to demographic projections, a narrative that Ethnic Studies helps students critically unpack. In doing so rural, low-income, white students are provided with the opportunity to see their interests as more closely aligned with urban BIPOC communities than with Billionaire technocrats and switch from a zero-sum racial worldview toward a class-conscious, multiracial solidarity that challenges white supremacy and its elite beneficiaries.

Figure 1. Tweet by Elon Musk.



Reflecting on our coteaching experiences, our central question, then, is this: How do we, as teachers, engage white students in cross-racial solidarity work that moves beyond the paradigms of whiteness and is instead motivated by the internalized knowledge that none of us are safe until all of us are safe?

Literature Review

Building on the work of Bettina Love (2019), Valerie Kaur (2021), and Ruha Benjamin (2022, 2024)—three contemporary BIPOC feminist authors—our framework seeks to disrupt white supremacy as the prevailing norm and power structure that world otherwise likely go unnamed and unchallenged within our rural and low-income communities. While not working explicitly within Ethnic Studies, these thinkers provide essential entry points for educators who recognize the profound injustices of our era, but whose preparation programs failed to equip them with the frameworks and histories required for meaningful intercultural solidarity work. We selected them for five primary reasons: (a) As critical feminist BIPOC scholars, they offer perspectives often absent in rural and white-majority educational settings, providing a necessary corrective to dominant narratives; (b) Each theorist writes in direct response to the post-2016 political landscape—marked by heightened xenophobia, emboldened white supremacy, and targeted violence against BIPOC, immigrant, and LGBTQ+ communities—offering not just analysis, but narratives of resilience and tangible hope; (c) Each author centers the foundational role of anti-Blackness and chattel slavery in building U.S. generational wealth and structures of harm, while acknowledging the ongoing legacy of settler colonialism on stolen Indigenous lands and peoples; (d) Their texts are rich with case studies of struggle, resistance, and joy from Black, Indigenous, Chicanx/Latinx, and Asian and Pacific Islander communities, with the potential to serve as direct launching pads for K-12 curriculum integration; and (e) Each rigorously examines the machinery of white supremacy and provides a lexicon for anti-racist identity formation, crucially distinguishing between performative allyship and co-conspiratorial action. The following section details how each theorist contributes to a cohesive framework for teaching Ethnic Studies as an act of restorative resistance.

For educators implementing Ethnic Studies, Bettina Love’s (2019) framework of *abolitionist teaching* is a vital and transformative starting point. Love presented it not as a simple set of lessons, but as a fundamental reorientation for practice. Love began with an unflinching mandate to “acknowledge and accept America and its policies as anti-Black, racist, discriminatory, and unjust and to be in solidarity with dark folx and poor folx in their fight for their humanity and fight to move beyond survival” (p. 12). This requires understanding that historical systems like enslavement evolved into the carceral state and what Love termed the *educational survival complex*—such a system manages, rather than educates, minoritized students.

Therefore, abolitionist teaching is more than a method; it is a commitment built on “the radical imagination of collective memories of resistance, trauma, survival, love, joy, and cultural modes of expression and practice” (p. 100). It is, in her words, “a way of life, a way of seeing the world, and a way of taking action against injustice. It seeks to resist, agitate, and tear down the educational survival complex . . . while simultaneously freedom dreaming” toward a new future for schools (p. 89).

For educators practicing in rural contexts, we have translated this into imperatives derived from Love's text. First, internal work: educators, particularly white educators, must learn "how to question Whiteness and White supremacy, how to check and deal with their White emotions of guilt and anger, and how these impact their classrooms" (p. 75). Second, pedagogical action: classrooms must use methods that "call out and teach students how racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and inequality are structural, not people behaving poorly" (p. 55).

Abolitionist teaching and Ethnic Studies share core DNA: both are rooted in a critical understanding of history, center the joy and resistance of BIPOC communities, and are committed to a liberated future. Love's framework provides the essential why and the necessary stance—ensuring the work is grounded in solidarity and systemic analysis, not superficial representation. By starting with this foundation, educators build the lens necessary to implement Ethnic Studies with fidelity and purpose, regardless of their classroom context. If Love's abolitionist teaching provides the why and the stance, Valerie Kaur's (2020) framework offers a method for navigating the relational labors of this work.

Kaur (2021) provided a framework for practicing what she terms *revolutionary love* which she defines as "the choice to labor for *others*, for our *opponents*, and for *ourselves* in order to transform the world around us . . . an orientation to life that is personal and political, sustained by joy . . . revolutionary love can only be practiced in community" (p. 310). Within the struggle for liberation, *revolutionary love*'s utility extends beyond the classroom. The discipline of Ethnic Studies emphasizes fostering healing relationships between the classroom and larger community. Revolutionary love builds our relational capacity for providing the care needed to support educators who are producing relevant Ethnic Studies content within hostile environments.

Figure 1. Kaur's Revisionary Love Compass.



Kaur's maps (see Figure #2 Revisionary Love Compass) offer examples of revolutionary love in practice through a "compass," where "the inner ring of the compass (*wonder, rage, breathe*) contains internal actions. The middle ring (*grieve, listen, push*) contains interpersonal actions. Last, the outer ring (*fight, reimagine, transition*) is made up of social actions. All three levels of transformation . . . are engaged in the labor of revolutionary love" (Kaur, 2020, pp. 309–310). Together, this compass provides a roadmap to navigate personal and interpersonal trauma toward collective healing. The concepts of interdependence and solidarity are challenging for students who have internalized white supremacy and hyper-individualism. *Revolutionary love* directly counters these by offering entrypoints to build humanizing relationships between individuals where "others" once existed, chipping away at the white supremacist worldview. While Kaur mapped the interpersonal journey, Ruha Benjamin scaled the work, showing how these personal and relational actions can create viral systemic change. In the books, *Viral Justice* (2022) and *Imagination: A Manifesto* (2024), Ruha Benjamin offered complementary frameworks that explore the intersections of race, technology, and narrative. Benjamin questions how narratives about human nature are normalized to justify harm against BIPOC and poor communities. In *Viral Justice*, she argued that our society is structured by a eugenic logic, dividing people into "winners" and "losers," with institutions "designed for the fittest to flourish and the vulnerable to die off" (p. 108). As a defense, she advocated for "viral justice"—the idea that small, individual actions can "have exponential effects... tipping scales toward justice; affirming life, fostering well-being, and invigorating society" (p. 20).

Benjamin framed viral justice as "a process of internal and external reorientation toward a system where no one is disposable" (2022, p. 181). She broke down the steps, comparing it to tending a plot of land: (a) discover your plot; (b) identify the harmful ways of thinking and doing things you inherited in your plot; and (c) start taking small but significant steps to change patterns (Benjamin, 2022, pp. 279–280). Benjamin noted that this work must "take many different forms, drawing on our varied skills, interests, and dispositions" (2022, p. 284).

In *Imagination: A Manifesto*, Benjamin (2024) extended this call, challenging us to collectively "fight the inevitability" of technological and eugenic narratives (p. 102), narratives currently being pushed on us by techbro billionaires. She warned that without radical reimagination, we cede the future to elites whose vision is grounded in a eugenic worldview where "there is no telling what suffering they will justify as the road to long-term bliss" (p. 21). Against this, we must populate our imaginations with "images and stories of our shared humanity . . . our interconnectedness . . . our solidarity as people—a poetic of welcome, and not walls" (p. 119). For educators, this is a direct charge. Especially for those of us who possess relative agency over the classroom cultures we foster and stories we seed in our students' imaginations. As Benjamin asserted, "it matters whose imaginations get to materialize our shared future" (p. 119).

Teaching CECOT and the Cycle of Violence

As part of the Latinx unit in Ms. Grant's pilot Ethnic Studies course, Ms. Aguilar had agreed to visit Grant's class and share her family's story of migration to the U.S. during the Salvadoran Civil War in the 1980s. As we sat down to design the mini-unit, our hearts sank. Social media reels showed shackled, terrified men being unloaded from a plane and violently processed into CECOT, one of El Salvador's mega-prisons. We looked at each other and recognized a crucial pivot: centering this current moment would transform the unit, offering students the experience and background knowledge needed to move beyond passive learning toward active solidarity.

With the urgency of the current political moment and accountability to our communities in mind, we developed three guiding goals for our collaboration. First, to deepen our own practice through Latina/Chicana feminist methodologies, specifically *testimonios* and *pláticas*; second, to equip our rural students with counter-narratives that challenge dominant discourse about migration and Latinx identity; and third, to provide students with the analytical tools to name and resist the harm enacted on Latinx communities through unjust deportation policies and performative state violence.

Centering Testimonios and *Pláticas*

Latina feminist methodologies—*pláticas* and *testimonios*—fundamentally shaped our co-planning process and classroom structure, ensuring the work moved beyond representation toward the transformation of harmful systems. *Pláticas*, as defined by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016), are rooted in pre-colonial Indigenous traditions of relational dialogue. More than casual conversation, *pláticas* create mutual spaces of storytelling and meaning-making that rely on reciprocity and vulnerability, challenging institutional isolation by fostering collective, and humanizing understanding.

Saavedra (2011) extended this relational work through *testimonios*, and described them as a Latin American genre where personal stories of struggle raise collective awareness about systemic injustice. A first-generation immigrant, Saavedra credited *testimonios* as her scholarly gateway, connecting to literature that centered “the struggles, testimonios, and . . . the beauty of straddling multiple worlds” (p. 261). In the classroom, she argued, *testimonios* allow students to author their own narratives, connect to historical movements, and “imagine new possible futures” (p. 265).

With 20 percent of the class identifying as “Mexican,” “Mexican American,” and/or “Chicano/a/x,” we integrated and relied upon *pláticas* and *testimonios* as interdependent practices. This allowed us to honor both culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), creating a vital relational foundation for our second goal: the intentional curation of transformative counter-narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) for all students.

Using Counter-Narratives

According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), counter-narratives expose racism and oppose majoritarian stories told about People of Color. The pedagogical power of our mini-unit relied on intentionally curated counter-narratives scaffolded by foundational knowledge from the prior semester. In the fall, students engaged with a unit on Indigenous representation and settler colonialism, analyzing the Indian Removal Act, forced displacement, Indigenous forms of self-representation in response to modern day settler-colonialism, and an introduction to Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing. This provided a crucial lens: the understanding that the U.S. is built on land theft, Indigenous erasure, and genocide, which has resulted in cyclical patterns of violence against BIPOC and low-income communities. When we pivoted to the spring unit on El Salvador and CECOT, students were primed to see historical, ideological, and epistemological patterns.

We used documentary clips, news reels, and Aguilar’s *testimonio* not as neutral information, but as direct counter-narratives to the administration’s criminalizing rhetoric. Analyzing media news

episodes like *Rare Look Inside El Salvador's Mega Prison* (NBC News, 2024) and *What Records Show About Migrants Sent to Mega-Prison* (60 minutes, 2025) equipped students to deconstruct the state's narrative and identify the "racialization of illegality" (Menjívar, 2021).

This analytical work is the bedrock of solidarity. As Kaur (2021) noted, "solidarity is only possible when we are brave enough to reckon with the past" (p. 148). Love (2019) added that "studying whiteness, white rage, and violence is a fundamental step to moving from ally to co-conspirator" (p. 144). In our classroom, we validated students' feelings of discomfort, both white and students of color, while gently reminding them that grappling with oppression is necessary. As Love argued, BIPOC people must contend with this reality, as they are forced for "their entire lives [to deal] with the oppression" of institutionalized racism (p. 148). This layered approach—connecting historical settler-colonial patterns to contemporary immigration policy—provided the vital background for students to move beyond shock or paralysis toward a critical analysis essential for solidarity and anti-racist identity formation.

Developing Language to Name and Address Intersections of Harm

Understanding the cycle of violence was not enough. We wanted our students, especially our white students in their rural community, to feel the historical threads connecting them to the headlines and to see themselves not as passive witnesses, but as agents with a stake in the struggle—equipped to name, interrogate, and resist the state violence we are seeing unfolding in real time. To do this, we had to map a more complete cycle of violence, tracing a direct line from U.S. policy in Latin America to the spectacle of cruelty featured in our news reels.

We began by explicitly connecting histories of colonization, showing students how anti-Indigenous and anti-Black policies in El Salvador mirrored the settler-colonial foundations within the U.S. that we studied in fall. We then traced how the civil war in El Salvador was a proxy war waged between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., resulting in the diaspora to Los Angeles, including Aguilar's family. Here we traced a crucial parallel for our rural, majority-white students: we compared and drew distinctions between the systemic poverty and lack of opportunity in their community to the systemic racism and economic exclusion faced by immigrants in Los Angeles. This was a deliberate pedagogical move to build empathy through a shared, yet distinct, experience of structural failure and the school-to-prison-pipeline.

As students learned how these conditions fostered the rise of MS-13, we analyzed the U.S. policy of mass deportation, which had exported the gang crisis back to a destabilized El Salvador. Students then examined President Bukele's response: the importation of the U.S. prison-industrial complex in the form of the CECOT mega-prison. We framed this using Benjamin's (2024) analysis of the prison as a "eugenic institution . . . snatching up and discarding those society deems human detritus" (p. 59), a logic most students recognized from the poverty and carceral proximity in their own rural zip codes. This full-circle analysis became the critical tool. Students could now see the deportation of Venezuelans to CECOT not as an isolated act, but as the latest node in a carceral network born from enslavement and permitted by the Fourteenth Amendment.

When we analyzed the Trump administration's concurrent efforts to end birthright citizenship, white students began to confront the direct threats to their own notions of liberty and due process. This

unit culminated in the understanding that, as Benjamin (2022) wrote, “solidarity . . . is born out of the recognition that our fates are linked” (p. 158). Anti-immigrant and anti-Black policies that seem to target “others” are part of the same “frayed social fabric” (p. 50) as divestments from social goods—education, healthcare, economic stability, and more—in all communities, including their own. The goal was achieved not through abstraction, but by tracing a concrete historical chain that linked their reality to the violent induction of Venezuelan nationals into CECOT, making palpable the truth that no one is safe until all are safe.

Reflections: On Co-conspiratorship, Community, and the Limits of Our Classrooms

For us, creating this unit was in itself an act of revolutionary love and resistance—a way to find strength and community as we processed the first 100 days of the Trump 2.0 administration. With nearly 25 years of combined experience working primarily in rural education, our collaboration was rooted in a shared commitment to abolitionist teaching and a lifetime of bridging Latinx/Chicanx and white communities. As Kaur (2021) wrote, “the act of naming the violence and grieving loss in community is how the [pain] turns into a wound that can heal” (p. 33). Our planning sessions were medicinal work. Cooking in Aguilar’s kitchen together, she shared the story of her Fernando Llorc tattoo, a bright blue bird she got to honor the legacy of Archbishop Óscar Romero. We wove our personal histories and channeled our rage into making curriculum. This process transformed the unit from a pedagogical exercise into an act of loving resistance rooted in our shared refusal to accept official racist narratives of criminality directed at our immigrant communities.

When it came time for Ms. Aguilar to visit, the students in class were already accustomed to engaging in a circle practice, rooted in restorative justice practices based on Indigenous traditions. This structure fostered a culture of deep listening and in time, vulnerability. Kaur described such listening as “an act of surrender” that requires us “to feel safe enough to stay curious” (2021, p. 143). Circle practice made this safety tangible, which was crucial for *plática*. Instead of presenting to rows of desks, we joined in a circle. This deliberate choice, and our scaffolded frontloading, helped counter the limited exposure many white and Chicanx students had to Latinas in academic leadership. We intentionally introduced Aguilar as a professional, referenced her degrees, and ended with students shaking her hand as they would for a distinguished visiting scholar at a university—a small ritual to reshape their imagination of expertise.

The results of this careful cultivation were profound, though uneven. Reflecting afterward, we noted that students were eager to hear stories of Aguilar’s lived experiences as a first generation Salvadoran and they were enthusiastic about learning about and in discussing ways to end cycles of violence within both the U.S. criminal justice and immigration systems. For our Chicanx students, the unit was transformative. They demonstrated deep emotional and intellectual investment, using their unit projects and *testimonios* to explore identity, express pride, and articulate anger at systemic injustice. They were, as Kaur (2021) suggested, beginning to “grieve with [each other] through stories and ritual,” building the solidarity that “shows us the kind of world we want to live in” (p. 44).

For white students, outcomes were more varied. Many demonstrated growing empathy and began to question dominant narratives. However, the unit also revealed the limits of our time, scope, and setting. Some students defaulted to individualized explanations of gang violence, not fully internalizing the structural analysis—circling back to notions of poor personal choices while glossing

over institutional racism, diasporic displacement, and systemic abandonment that had shaped those choices. More critically, we did not reach our hoped-for destination of collective action or the “reimagine” phase of Benjamin’s and Kaur’s frameworks. The semester ended as we were solidifying analytical tools, not deploying them in ways that directly benefit impacted communities, for example participating in collective action such as advocating for the release and return of individuals deported to CECOT.

Still, the learning did not end. In conversations since, students have shared how the unit gave them a critical lens to understand the escalation of ICE raids we witnessed over the summer and into the present day. They shared a growing confidence in engaging in critical conversations surrounding racism, immigration, and politics. They now have historical and political vocabulary to name the harm and systems of oppression they are witnessing happen in this country. As Aguilar reflected, the process deepened her own understanding of her family’s journey and in a way, aided in her healing. For our students, it was a vital intervention—planting seeds of critical consciousness—the essential first step toward a solidarity rooted not in salvation, but in the shared understanding that our fates are linked. For Gordon it served in furthering a conviction that despite her individual anxieties and fears, curriculum rooted in Ethnic Studies pedagogies is vital, necessary, and non-negotiable to her praxis as a rural white educator.

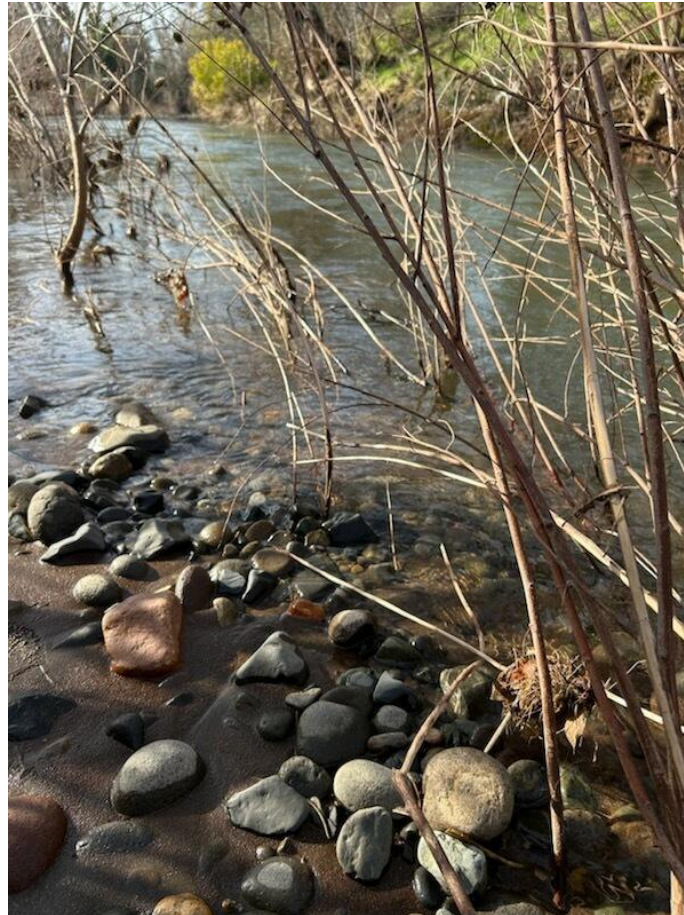
Where We Are at and Moving Forward

Before starting the process of formalizing our work into this paper, we met on the land at Oak Grove, a community park stewarded by a local Indigenous leadership. The bombing of Caracas, the kidnapping of Maduro by our government, and the murder of Renee Good by ICE agents in Minneapolis, had left us feeling all kinds of depleted. We had just spent the previous Wednesday together in Aguilar’s elementary classroom, where Grant had co-taught a lesson on the carbon cycle and ocean acidification with Aguilar’s students. We were at lunch when the news of Good’s murder broke. Up until that point it had been a day of joyful reciprocity, a reminder that our collaboration enriches both our practices and our students’ lives. There was a protest downtown that we could have joined, but instead we answered an invitation put out to the community by an honored local tribal leader and Traditional Ecological Knowledges (TEK) Practitioner: to tend the land and in so doing, to tend to our hearts. That day at Oak Grove—receiving instructions, following Indigenous leadership, and offering our hands in labor—provided some much needed grounding and a lesson on what it can mean to disrupt patterns of historic settler-colonialism here at home in the hopes of one day being good guests on Indigenous lands.

As people far removed from our own ancestral Indigenous land management practices—consider Ms. Aguilar’s much more recent connections—coming to Oak Grove and being of service is a tangible way we can physically participate in solidarity with and honor the leadership of Indigenous community members. As invited guests on Indigenous land and receiving instructions from a TEK practitioner, we participated in the gathering and processing of willow shoots. Reaching into the banks of the Bonita Arroyo for willow roots, the shock of January’s icy water was a welcome distraction from the political trauma of the week. These roots would later be used in cultural revitalization workshops for those looking to learn how to make traditional baby rattles. Washing sandy debris from young root shoots, we felt the land working on us. This act of reciprocal care—

providing for each other and working together with the human and non-human at Oak Grove is a tangible act of working to become good guests on Indigenous land.

Figure 1. Willow Shoots at the Bonita Arroyo



This unit was our initial “plot of land” to tend. We entered it as an act of love and refusal, a way to process grief and channel rage. As Kaur (2021) wrote, this labor is itself the point: “when we labor in love, labor is not only a means but an end in itself” (p. 241). For us, the labor was medicinal. For Aguilar, the experience was rekindling. The moment when Grant’s high school students, one by one, locked eyes, shook her hand, and thanked her because her *testimonio* was a powerful moment of peace and connection she carried with her back into the classroom this year. It reaffirmed the power of creating spaces where vulnerability is met not with othering, but with gratitude and shared humanity.

That resolve has taken root in Aguilar’s classroom. Inspired by our collaboration, she and her student teacher designed a six-week unit for her majority Latinx students on migration, diverting from the district curriculum to meet their students’ realities. They began with animal migrations to build a bridge to human movement. The shift in student understanding by the unit’s end was profound. For many their initial narratives of criminality and fear gave way to new definitions centered on safety,

family, and shared struggle. Students concluded by writing letters to the Governor, empowered by the belief that their voices mattered. This is the shift we seek: from internalized shame to narratives of embodied agency and belonging.

These parallel classrooms—high school and elementary, majority white and majority Latinx—represent the viral justice Benjamin (2022) envisioned, where small, intentional actions in our “plots” create exponential effects. As Love (2019) insisted, they are acts of “freedom dreaming” (p. 101) that start with a critique of the world as it is. We did not reach the end of that dream in our high school unit; we ran out of time to move from analysis to collective action. The “reimagine” phase remains a work in progress as it is not ours to hold alone. Yet, as Benjamin argued, “we can’t only critique the world as it is, we have to build the world as it should be” (p. 11). Our students are now building that vocabulary. They have told us the unit gave them the critical lens to name the escalation of ICE raids they witnessed over the summer, a first step toward the solidarity Kaur described as knowing how to “stand up and fight for each other” (2021, p. 63).

So, we return to our central question: How do we, as teachers, engage low-income white students in cross-racial solidarity work that moves beyond the paradigms of whiteness and is instead motivated by the internalized knowledge that none of us are safe until all of us are safe? We do it by tracing, with unflinching honesty, the historical chains that link their community’s struggles and white supremacy to the violence of CECOT. We do it through reciprocal practice—teaching in each other’s classrooms, from the carbon cycle to the civil wars—understanding that this work is a long-term cultivation, not a single harvest. For now, one practice of being a good guest that we can cultivate is to accept further invitations. Both Ms. Grant and Ms. Aguilar have been invited to bring both their students back in the spring to learn TEK practices for harvesting seeds of vulnerable native flower species and removing invasive European thistles, and perhaps see in practice what traditional burning feels and looks like within fire-adapted ecosystems.

The imagination, Benjamin reminded us, “is a field of struggle” (2024, p. 8) and our collaborations are acts of soil enrichment from which we grow seed for shared liberation. The work of Parents for Anti-Racist Schools, the unit flourishing in an elementary class, the high school students who can now name the violence they see—these are the seeds sown. They may not yet have mobilized as a movement, but they are gaining practice in telling a different story. And as Kaur affirms, “social change is only possible when communities are able to mobilize and tell stories that reclaim our imagination” (2021, p. 196). Our labor continues, one plot of land, one classroom, one story at a time, fighting for the day when justice becomes irresistible (Benjamin, 2022).

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Translating Abya Yala in a Native American Studies Classroom

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Abstract

This article reflects on the challenges and possibilities of “translating Abya Yala” within a Global North Native American Studies university classroom. Abya Yala, a term used by the Guna people to name the American continent, resists colonial mappings and asserts an Indigenous hemispheric frame that predates and unsettles the categories of “Latin America.” Drawing on classroom experience, this reflection examines how whiteness surfaces through demands for easy comprehension, resistance to discomfort, and pressure to find solutions to the issues discussed in the class. It also outlines pedagogical strategies that unsettle these dynamics. Ultimately, the article argues that the work of translating Abya Yala is not to render Indigenous concepts legible to whiteness, but to disrupt the expectation of legibility itself, creating conditions in which students must reconfigure their own positions within ongoing colonial systems.

Keywords: Abya Yala, whiteness, Native American Studies

Introduction

Abya Yala, a term used by the Guna people to name the Americas, was popularized by Bolivian Aymara leader Takir Mamani and is now commonly used by Indigenous movements, organizations, and scholars to refer to “Latin America.” Abya Yala is home to an estimated 42 million Indigenous people and nearly 1,000 Indigenous nations, languages, and knowledge systems. Yet in my experience, the presence of Indigenous peoples beyond the U.S./Mexico border is widely unacknowledged or poorly understood. I often see these gaps in my undergraduate Native American Studies classrooms, for example when students are surprised to learn that “Native American” also refers to Indigenous peoples outside the United States. I treat this confusion as a teaching opportunity to reveal how U.S. imperial narratives conflate “America” with the United States, erasing other Americas and the Indigenous peoples who inhabit them.

While Ethnic Studies and Native American Studies are largely grounded in a U.S. context, limiting Indigenous study to these borders reproduces the very colonial logics the field seeks to dismantle. Without a hemispheric frame, Indigenous peoples outside the United States are rendered peripheral, and U.S. imperial narratives remain unquestioned even within ostensibly critical curricula. In my course, I ask students not only to learn about Indigenous peoples across Abya Yala, but to recognize how colonial systems sever and obscure relations among deeply connected struggles. Moreover, teaching Abya Yala in white-dominant spaces, where whiteness functions not

only as racial identity but as the cultural lens, raises additional challenges. Teaching about Abya Yala therefore requires confronting how settler-colonial geography, language hierarchies, and disciplinary boundaries shape what counts as knowledge.

By “translating Abya Yala,” I do not refer only to linguistic translation, but also to a broader pedagogical and epistemic process. By translation I mean: the movement of Indigenous concepts across languages; the attempt to render Indigenous epistemologies legible within academic frameworks structured by whiteness; and the reorientation of students’ own relationships to land, knowledge, and the hemispheric histories that connect them to Indigenous struggles across Abya Yala.

Because many Indigenous epistemologies center nonhumans as relatives, translating Abya Yala also requires unsettling the human-centered assumptions in dominant academic knowledge. Teaching Abya Yala in a Global North Native American Studies classroom is not simply about including hemispheric content in the syllabus. It requires confronting the colonial demand that Indigenous knowledges and struggles become easily legible, consumable, and solvable within white-dominant academic frameworks. I argue that a pedagogy of discomfort and witnessing helps students resist the desire for quick resolution and move toward relationality. Across the course, students are asked to move away from colonial habits of separation: self from land, knowledge from responsibility, the United States from the rest of the hemisphere, and humans from nonhumans, and ultimately toward a relational understanding of accountability.

Native American Studies Beyond Colonial Borders

As a starting point, I situate my pedagogy within the field of Native American Studies and the personal experiences that inform my positionality. I came to the U.S. as a mixed-heritage person from the Global South to complete my undergraduate degree in a university on the East Coast, where I struggled to find professors and courses that mirrored my own experiences. Being a person “ni de aquí ni de allá,” [from neither here nor there], has granted me the benefit of being at ease in spaces that traverse binaries and borders. As a graduate student, I found an intellectual home in Native American Studies, where the field’s theories and methodologies enabled me to make sense of, and articulate my lived experiences in Ngulu Mapu (Mapuche territory in so-called southern Chile) and across the hemisphere.

Native American Studies emerged from Indigenous struggles for self-determination in the late 1960s and early 1970s and remains grounded in Native sovereignty, community accountability, and the refusal of extractive knowledge. Yet when the field is confined to U.S. borders, it can reproduce the colonial geographies it seeks to challenge. A hemispheric Native American Studies frame responds to this limitation by foregrounding Indigenous relations, struggles, and knowledges systems across Abya Yala.

As we think about Ethnic Studies expansion in 2026, we should be attentive to how the dispossession of Indigenous peoples in Abya Yala, through corporate plunder and racial capitalism, continues to drive migration northward, making visible the fact that a significant and often overlooked portion of immigrants arriving in the United States are themselves Indigenous to the Americas. In 2007 there were an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 Indigenous people from Oaxaca living in California, a figure that has likely grown substantially since then (Kresge, 2007). This reality

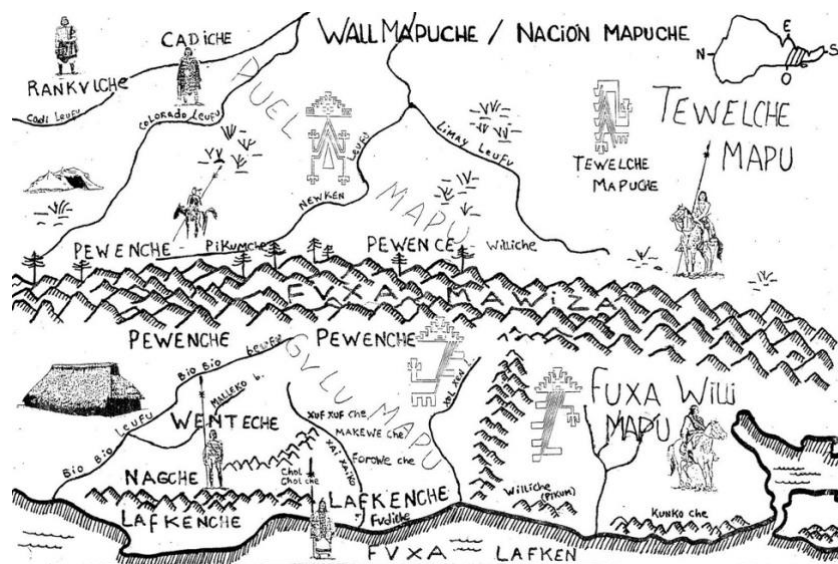
demands an Ethnic Studies framework capable of understanding Indigeneity not as contained within the borders of the United States, but as hemispheric, multilingual, transborder, and shaped by the ongoing violence of settler colonialism and empire.

Indigenous Peoples of the Americas

It is from this disciplinary grounding that I designed “Indigenous Peoples of the Americas,” a course focused on the histories, cultures, political struggles, and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples across Abya Yala. The course is organized around Indigenous-authored and community-grounded materials such as testimonies, films, and media. When possible, I provide optional Spanish-language texts alongside English-language materials. The assignments, which students have the option to submit in Spanish, include positionality-based reflections, collective discussion, and open-ended creative assignments.

Students often enter the course assuming that “Native American” refers only to Indigenous peoples within the United States. I treat this confusion as a starting point for examining how language, geography, and power uphold imperial borders and colonial ways of seeing. The first module, “Reorientation,” asks students to examine how their understandings of land have been shaped by dominant ideologies. We begin with Indigenous maps and spatial practices, including a Mapuche map oriented with the east at the top, Hopi artistic renderings of land, Australian Aboriginal songlines, and Hawaiian hula as embodied cartography. These examples help students understand that maps are not neutral or objective representations. They express relationships to land, water, movement, memory, and nonhumans. Here we begin to learn that land is not a passive surface on which human activity unfolds, but as an active relation. This is an important early disruption of the human-centered frameworks many students bring into the classroom.

Figure 1. Wall Mapuche/ Mapuche Nation.



Note. From *j...Escucha, winka...!*, by Pablo Mariman Quemenado. Copyright 2006 by LOM ediciones.

We then discuss Indigenous place names, including Abya Yala and Turtle Island, and the histories, stories, and ecological knowledge they carry. Using NativeLand.ca, students identify Indigenous territories to which they are connected and reflect on their own positionality. They often notice that territorial boundaries overlap, which opens discussion about the difference between settler borders and Indigenous relations to place. Whereas settler borders are designed to confine, control, and exclude, Indigenous borders may also function as zones of relation, gathering, and contact.

From there, the course turns to contemporary struggles against extraction, dispossession, state violence, and forced migration. I frame these struggles as attacks on webs of relation among humans and nonhumans. This is important because extractive capitalism depends on translating land and water into property and commodities, while many Indigenous communities defend territory as a living relation. Each unit is anchored by an Indigenous concept or principle relevant to the region of study. For example, during our week on the Andes and the Cochabamba Water War, we discuss the Quechua value of *ayni*, often translated as reciprocity, as a counterpoint to neoliberal extractivism.

The course also examines how U.S. foreign policy and corporate power have contributed to political instability, economic displacement, and environmental devastation throughout the Global South. Students learn that many migrants racialized in the United States as “Latino” or “Hispanic” are Indigenous peoples carrying languages, knowledges, and histories that dominant migration discourse often erases. In this way, the course frames Indigenous migration as central to a hemispheric understanding of colonialism, empire, and survival.

As the imperial boomerang of the United States returns to its point of origin—in the form of ICE raids and control tactics developed in counterinsurgency efforts in places like El Salvador and Guatemala--U.S. citizens are confronted with the same strategies of persecution, criminalization, and dispossession long mobilized against Indigenous peoples in Abya Yala. This is precisely why there is an urgent need to learn from the histories and living movements of those who have been on the front lines against imperial power in the Global South the longest. It is in this context that I teach about Abya Yala and anticolonial movements of the Global South as part of my Native American Studies curriculum.

Engaging Discomfort

While the course often receives positive feedback at the end of the semester, the beginning is always tense. Whiteness surfaces in both explicit and subtle ways, from critiques that the material is “too one-sided,” to refusals to engage with assigned media because reading subtitles is “too difficult.” But the most common way it surfaces is through students pointing out their discomfort because the subject matter is “too negative.” A student shared:

Almost all the information I learn gives me a feeling of sadness, powerlessness, overwhelm, and feelings of immense guilt since I am a white person who's ancestors have harmed native people and have participated in stealing their land. I feel it's important to note also that I have a great respect for Indigenous scholars who have the emotional fortitude to engage with this material regularly. With everything going on in the world "it all" just seems

all so paralyzingly sad. I knew from week two when we discussed Columbus and his raping/kidnapping/human trafficking that I was in for a rough ride.

It is not unusual for students to express paralyzing guilt, sadness, hopelessness, and exhaustion at learning some of the material. Inherent in these responses is a fear of reprisal and of being implicated in systems that oppress others. At the start of the semester, I name these reactions as part of the learning process and encourage students to unpack these feelings in our discussions and weekly reflections. When we discuss particularly challenging topics such as the murder of Indigenous land defenders, I provide tactile materials such as beads, clay, or art supplies to help them process in embodied and creative ways. I also invite a mental health counselor to guide them through various grounding exercises and provide them resources for accessing mental wellness services on campus. Most Ethnic Studies educators do not have additional training as mental health counselors, and our graduate programs do not prepare us to deal with students' affective responses to the material we teach. Over the years I have started incorporating mental health resources into my curriculum to support students in engaging difficult emotions.

After the initial emotional responses, students shift into an urgent desire to find solutions, to translate what they are learning into familiar actions. Sitting with the weight of colonialism and ongoing dispossession is deeply uncomfortable and moving to action can feel like relief. Tema Okun's (1999) work on white supremacy culture identifies urgency to act as one of its defining characteristics, a cultural norm that prioritizes speed and immediate results over the slower, more relational work of deep change.

Tuck and Yang's (2012) call this kind of desire a "settler move to innocence" (p. 9). "Settler moves to innocence" are gestures, including the urgent search for solutions, through which those who benefit from settler structures seek to relieve themselves of the weight of complicity without actually surrendering the material benefits of colonialism. From this perspective, the question of "what can I do?" can be about the student's own need to feel less implicated.

The question of "what can I do?" reflects another feature of white supremacy culture: the tendency to understand problems as individual rather than systemic, and therefore to imagine individual action as the primary site of transformation (Okun, 1999). This stems from a Cartesian logic of separation. In the course, we challenge this separation by foregrounding Indigenous understandings of land defense as spiritual, relational, and collective. For example, through the work of Elicura Chihuailaf who affirms that Mapuche land defense is about kinship, tenderness, and obligation. He teaches us that the struggle for land is bound to "the universe, nature, mother earth. We consider ourselves another part of her. What grateful son or daughter wouldn't rise up when their mother is overwhelmed?" (author's fieldnotes, 2015).

In "A Pedagogy of Discomfort," Megan Boler (1999) argued that perception is affective and political. What students see, refuse to see, or cannot yet see is shaped by emotional investments, fear, habit, and the dominant culture of the historical moment. Her concept of "inscribed habits of (in)attention" names how ignorance is a learned way of attending to the world. Drawing from Minnie Bruce Pratt, she explains that what we have learned not to see is shaped by fear, and that learning to see differently requires a willingness to live with new fears. This is what she calls learning to inhabit a "morally ambiguous self" (p. 182). Rather than leaving students in guilt,

innocence, or detached critique, a pedagogy of discomfort asks them to bear witness to others, and critically examine the relations and conditions that have made their ways of seeing possible.

By asking students to build a tolerance for complexity and ambiguity rather than move too quickly toward resolution, discomfort can become a productive site of inquiry. During the second week of class, we read Gloria Anzaldúa's poem, "To Live in the Borderlands Means You," as an introduction to ambiguity. Her work on borderlands is useful because it helps students understand the feeling of inhabiting a non-binary space. Rather than resolving these binaries, contradictions, and tensions, Anzaldúa's work guides students to understand ambiguity as something they can learn to inhabit.

A goal of the course is to interrupt the expectation that learning comes from easily translated and simplified information, or that it should provide a resolution. This pedagogy reframes learning as an ongoing, collective, and relational process. Through coming to terms with ambiguity, the students' questions change; instead of asking "What can I do?" they begin asking, "What relationships can I build? What relationships am I already part of?"

Whiteness, Empire, and the Limits of Translation

To teach Abya Yala in a U.S. classroom, students should consider not only what they are learning, but from *where* they are learning. Whiteness appears through discomfort, but also as a structure that shapes access to knowledge, mobility and legitimacy. In this context, translation is mediated by students' proximity to empire and by academic frameworks that often require Indigenous and Global South knowledges to become legible through dominant categories.

Proximity to Empire

In the course, we analyze whiteness through Rupa Marya's "pillars of colonialism" framework, which understands colonialism as sustained through capitalism and interlocking forms of supremacy, including white supremacy, human supremacy, and patriarchy. This framework helps students understand whiteness not simply as an individual identity or skin color, but as a colonial structure that organizes access to legitimacy, resources, and power.

Barton's concept of "proximity to whiteness" is useful for naming how some non-Black people of color may gain conditional access to power through education, class status, anti-Blackness, or other forms of alignment with white supremacy. I extend this logic through what I call "proximity to empire." If proximity to whiteness describes uneven access to racialized power within white supremacist structures, proximity to empire describes uneven access to global power through one's location within an imperial nation. U.S.-based students, including students of color who experience racism within the United States, may still occupy a structurally advantaged position in relation to communities in the Global South. This does not diminish racial oppression within U.S. borders, instead, it asks students to understand that one can be marginalized within one structure while also benefiting from another. Naming "proximity to empire" allows students to examine how citizenship, mobility, infrastructure, institutional access, and economic security are shaped by histories of extraction that extend far beyond U.S. borders.

Resisting Intellectual Imperialism

Whiteness also operates epistemically by shaping whose knowledge students are taught to trust, what evidence is considered legitimate, and which histories appear objective. For this reason, part of the work is to help students identify the inherited assumptions that make empire, capitalism, racial hierarchy, and human supremacy appear natural. For myself, whiteness also shows up in the pressure to make Indigenous and Global South knowledges legible through dominant academic, colonial, or English-language categories. Allowing Spanish-language submissions and assigning optional Spanish-language materials is one small attempt to unsettle English-language authority in the classroom, though it does not eliminate the deeper problem of translating Indigenous knowledges through colonial languages. As a white-passing, mixed-ancestry, U.S.-college-educated, cisgender woman I have to regularly slow down to reflect on how my positionality informs what I assign, whose voices I center, and how students are invited to participate.

One challenge in anticolonial teaching is the uncritical use of familiar theoretical frameworks simply because they are legible within the academy. In her critique of imperial research practices, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) reminded us that knowledge production has long been implicated in colonial domination, especially when Indigenous peoples are studied, classified, translated, and interpreted through external frameworks not accountable to their own communities. Concepts such as Indigeneity, sovereignty, citizenship, and settler colonialism do not always translate neatly across the vastly diverse communities of Abya Yala. In regions where Indigenous peoples constitute a large portion of the population, such as the Andes, the binary of settler and Indigenous may be insufficient for understanding how colonial power operates. These dynamics are mediated through specific histories, racial formations, state structures, class relations, and community practices.

The imposition of external frameworks is a form of intellectual imperialism that privileges Global North knowledges as universal while treating others as case studies or supplementary knowledge. This dynamic is not confined to Eurocentric or conservative disciplines. Even those of us committed to liberatory, critical, and anticolonial pedagogies can unknowingly reproduce these hierarchies when we default to northern theories as the primary lens through which southern realities are interpreted. In an effort to translate, the lens of whiteness/empire can distort, reduce, or make invisible.

The most generative frameworks for understanding colonialism and resistance emerge from those who have lived its consequences most intimately. For this reason, Ethnic Studies can do more than just include Global South perspectives as content. We can create curricula grounded in frameworks and pedagogies from communities whose histories and struggles the course engages. I acknowledge, though, that this is not a perfect practice and can slip into appropriation if these frameworks are treated as transferable rather than situated knowledges accountable to specific communities and lands. To interrupt that tendency, the course makes relational accountability part of its pedagogy. This is where bearing witness becomes central to the course. Rather than moving quickly toward repair or resolution, we focus on the slow and intentional practice of accountability that begins with collective witnessing.

Bearing Witness

Another way whiteness shows up is in students' demands to learn more about the "cool things" Indigenous peoples have done throughout history instead of contemporary issues. Some students enroll in the class expecting to explore ancient civilizations, artistic traditions, and pre-invasion achievements, and are frustrated to discover that we spend significant time on contemporary movements and critiques of settler colonialism and imperialism. In these moments, students ask why the course focuses so much on "bad things," echoing a broader critique of Ethnic Studies from predominantly white spaces. These complaints reflect the discomfort that emerges when we are asked to recognize our relationship to systems that we have been taught to see as distant or unrelated to us (Boler, 1999). When I shared these complaints with a colleague in Native American Studies, she responded plainly about the entitlement inherent in such a position: "they don't get to learn all the good things about us without learning all the bad things that were done to us."

It is important here to acknowledge that the barrage of digital information we are exposed to each day can intensify this desire for simple and immediately gratifying forms of knowledge. Students are already processing a constant flood of global opinions and crises that can exceed their social processing capacity and leave them with limited bandwidth for slower, more difficult, relational forms of learning. In a class like this one, where students are being asked to think historically, structurally, and personally at the same time, this overload can make them more likely to reject complexity and seek relief in content that feels simpler, affirming, or comfortable.

However, when students ask to learn about the "cool things," without learning about ongoing dispossession, they are asking for Indigenous life to be translated into something pleasurable and consumable within dominant frameworks of knowledge. In this sense, translation is a form of extraction for the benefit of the spectator. Spectating is a form of selective consumption, which can be a kind of extraction in itself, allowing students to take what they want, without examining their own positionality or relationships.

Witnessing, by contrast, requires a shift in how students understand themselves in relation to others. Generally speaking, witnessing is a significant practice with distinct cultural expressions throughout the world. In "A Pedagogy of Witnessing," Louie et al. (2025) drew from their Dakelh and Métis positionalities to describe it as the practice of listening followed by the responsibility to relay what they have heard to another audience. Through witnessing we affirm that the event and the people involved are important. Stellat'en First Nation Knowledge Keeper, Terry Lynn Luggi, elaborated:

As witnesses, we listen attentively with our minds and our hearts, as affirmation of what we are seeing and hearing as being significant. It is not necessarily incorporated or held only as a way of learning or knowledge but as a way of being, permeating within us [...] People are honored when you witness their life event [...] the stories are compelled to be affirmed, respectfully validated, and held as a responsibility, by every witness there thereafter [...] The power of the truth does not rest in a single person. The power of the truth rests in all of us. (Louie et al., 2025, p. 9)

Luggi's words resonate with other intellectual traditions that understand witnessing as a collective and lived responsibility. In this course, witnessing extends beyond the human, as students are also asked to witness the experience of rivers, forests, mountains, and other nonhumans. Witnessing changes the listener because it does not allow them to remain detached from what has been heard. Boler (1999) explained that "spectating versus witnessing provides a useful tool for learning how positionality shifts and slips in complex, unpredictable, and precarious ways" (p. 187). She described witnessing as the process of "learning to see" whereby "one is challenged to disrupt the oversimplifications of "popular history" (p. 185). This disruption is key to Ethnic Studies because popular history often makes colonial violence appear accidental, finished, or disconnected from the present. Witnessing asks students to move beyond the isolated "I" and toward a collective sense of implication and responsibility. As Boler suggested, collective witnessing requires students to recognize that their emotional responses are not purely individual, but are shaped by histories, institutions, and systems of power.

To be clear, I do want students to learn about the "cool things." I do not want to reproduce what Eve Tuck (2009) called "damage-centered" narratives of Indigenous injury and victimhood. After all, Ethnic Studies is not a study of misery; it is a study of power, survival, refusal, creativity, relationality, and world-making despite colonial and imperial violence. The issue arises when we are asked to teach about the "cool things" detached from the conditions that have attempted to destroy them.

With a foundational understanding of the issues facing Indigenous peoples in Abya Yala, I introduce Land Back victories and Buen Vivir declarations (declarations for "good living"), such as the Sarayaku declaration of Kawsak Sacha. These declarations emerge from Indigenous peoples' ongoing defense of land, water, territory, language, and nonhuman relations. Students are asked to witness not only harm, but also the intellectual and political worlds that Indigenous communities continue to build. Witnessing asks students to remain attentive to the harms of colonialism while also recognizing Indigenous presence, continuance, and futurity.

From Discomfort to Accountable Practice

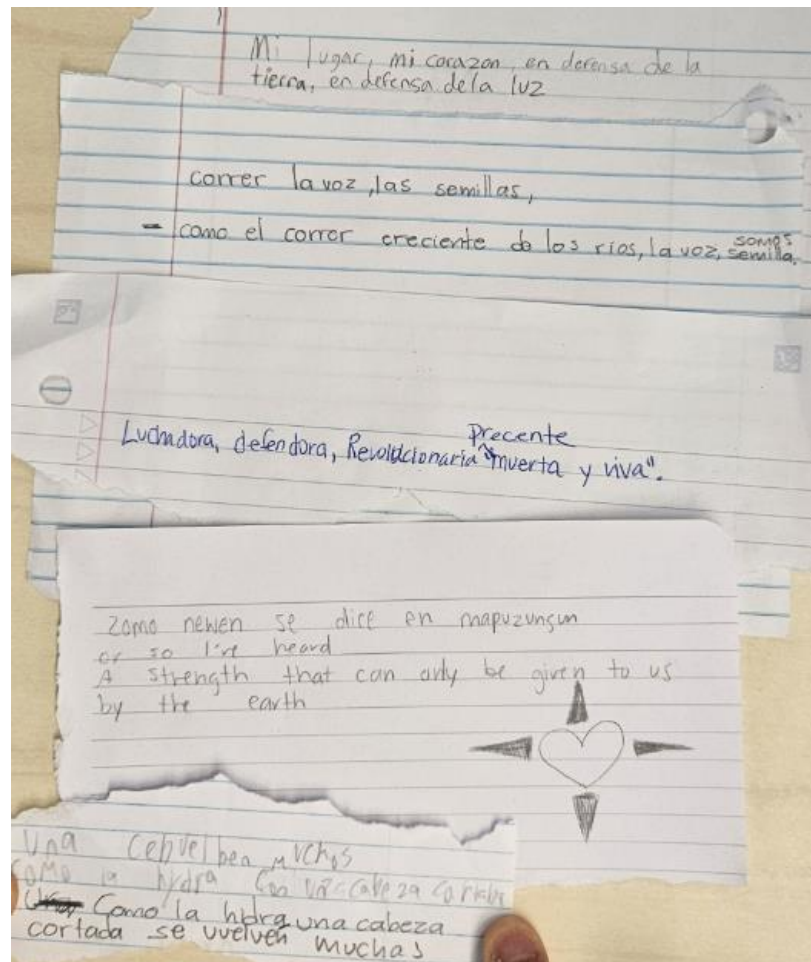
A pedagogy of discomfort ask students to examine the grief, guilt, anger, confusion, defensiveness, contradiction, or uncertainty that arise when their ways of seeing are challenged. Standard academic writing assignments do not provide space for students to process complex emotions, asking them to move too quickly toward crafting a polished argument. While I incorporate weekly written assignments, I also include creative assignments throughout the semester to allow students to slow down, giving them a medium for processing their emotions collectively.

Poetry Collages for Collective Witnessing

In this assignment, students engage witnessing as a collective practice. During the first half of the semester, we learn about corporate exploitation in Central America and the murder of Lenca land defender, Berta Cáceres. Students watch *Berta Didn't Die, She Multiplied*, a short documentary that presents her life, struggle, and ongoing presence through the testimonios of her family and community. Students work in small groups, with each person writing one line of poetry on a scrap of paper, in response to what they witnessed and with reverence for her memory. These lines are then brought together into a collective poetry collage. The collective form of the poem reinforces

that witnessing is not an individual and passive act of observation, it is shared and built through many voices holding fragments of grief, resistance, and remembrance together. Witnessing is an antidote to the colonial logic that “fragments people categorically,” allowing us to find in each other “possible companions in resistance” (Lugones 2003, p. 11). After each group shares their poems, we raise our voices together: “Que viva Berta!”

Figure 2. Poetry Collage.



Note. A poem by a group of students in the Spring 2024 class.

Zine-Making for Engaging Discomfort

For their midterms, I invite a local artist and activist, Chica Masa, to lead a zine-making workshop. She opens the workshop by explaining the significance of zines: they allow for communities to produce, preserve, and circulate their own knowledge, making them powerful tools for political education, collective memory, and social transformation. The zine-making process is flexible and open-ended. The students are asked to pick any topic we covered in class, and elaborate on it through visual art, poetry, or personal narrative. The guest artist provides the tools for zine-making and gives them feedback or suggestions for the visual aspects of their zine. At the end of the class

we circulate the zines and discuss them, building relationships among students while creating space for reflection, dialogue, and collective meaning-making. Working with zines allows them to organize fragmented or partial ideas and emotions into collages and visual imagery, giving students a medium for staying with what they do not yet know how to resolve.

Figure 3. Zine Workshop.



Note. Students in the Spring 2025 class show off their mini zines.

Accountable Practice Final Project

Their final “accountable practice” project asks them to bring what they have witnessed into conversation with their own fields of study. Students create public scholarship they can share beyond the classroom, such as lesson plans, policy briefs, creative projects, research proposals, or community resources, grounded in respect, accuracy, and accountability. For example, a film student developed a documentary proposal rooted in community storytelling practices; a botany student created an infographic on the resurgence of chinampas, a traditional Nahua agricultural method. The emphasis of this assignment, like the rest of the class, is not to achieve a resolution, but to recognize how we are situated within relations to land and to Indigenous struggles across the hemisphere. Across these assignments, I began to notice a shift in how students framed their responses. While at the beginning they often centered on guilt, overwhelm, or the desire to know what action they could take to feel less implicated, later assignments turned towards

understanding their relationality and how their future work might be accountable to Indigenous struggles beyond the classroom. At the end of the semester a student shared:

As a tribal member who has spent much of my life immersed in the stories of my people and the long, painful history of colonization in North America. I thought I had learned all there was to know about Indigenous struggle. But this class opened my eyes to something I didn't expect [...] I asked myself, how could I not have known? I work in a space filled with books on history, on Indigenous identity, on the world. I handle materials every day that cover colonization and environmental issues. And still, these current stories of Indigenous resistance and environmental defense were not reaching me.

This realization is humbling. It shows me how even those of us most connected to Indigenous histories can be isolated from the global picture. It's also a reminder of how colonial systems don't just erase people they erase connections between people.

I am grateful to this class for helping me rebuild those connections. For expanding my understanding of sovereignty, sacred land, and resistance. For introducing me to the courage of Indigenous people protecting the forest and asserting their rights against extractive industries. And for reminding me that this is not just a North American story it is a global one.

I want to share more, and bring this knowledge into my work, into my home, and into the way I think about what it means to be Native in a world where Indigenous peoples everywhere are still fighting to protect what is most sacred.

This student's reflection emphasizes that translating Abya Yala is not only about expanding hemispheric knowledge, but a practice of rebuilding relations that colonial systems have severed.

Conclusion

For our final class module on hemispheric unity, we turn to Pando, fungi, and Emil Keme's "For Abiyala to Live, the Americas Must Die: Toward a Transhemispheric Indigeneity" to consider how relational understandings of land, kinship, and liberation exceed human/nonhuman binaries and colonial borders. Pando, a vast clonal aspen organism connected through an underground root system, and fungi, with their mycelial networks of relation and exchange, help students think beyond individualist and nation-state frameworks. Alongside these materials, we consider what it might mean to position ourselves in relation to Indigenous movements through texts such as the *Ally Bill of Responsibilities* (Gehl, 2012), "Critical Reimagining of the White Settler Relationship to Land" (Maxwell, 2020), and Nikki Sanchez's "Decolonization Is for Everyone" (2019).

This returns to the question that grounds this article: what does it mean to "translate Abya Yala" in a white-dominant classroom? Translation, as I have come to understand it, is not about making Indigenous knowledge easily consumable, fully knowable, or available for mastery. It is an open-ended and discomfiting practice that unsettles the colonial expectation that Indigenous worlds should become legible within white-dominant spaces. Through bearing witness, students are asked to examine the discomfort of confronting imperial violence, the limits of translation, uneven positionalities, and the impossibility of fully knowing across imperial difference. An anticolonial

pedagogy should insist on the limits of comprehension. Some meanings cannot, or should not, be made fully available through translation.

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Decolonizing the Master's Tool: From Traditional Rubrics to the Competency Wheel

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Abstract

Despite its ubiquitousness in Ethnic Studies classrooms, the rubric, as an artifact of colonial assessment logics, has received little attention from critical pedagogy scholars and educators, including those within the adjacent domains of liberatory and/or competency-based education. Responding to an absence in scholarship amplified by the traditional rubric's silent, steady advancement as an overlooked weapon in the colonial arsenal, this paper builds on preexisting critical pedagogies and praxes to propose the Competency Wheel as an alternative to the traditional rubric. Emerging from the author's teaching experience, the recent corpus of scholarship on equity in assessment and co-created rubrics authored by practitioners writing outside of Western paradigms, the Competency Wheel is a template for a co-created structured assessment that attends to transparency and student agency in assessment practices while giving equal attention to the tenants of Ethnic Studies. An effort to decolonize assessment, the Competency Wheel contests the "temporal colonization" of the traditional rubric. Visibly nonlinear, the Competency Wheel captures the recursive nature of an inquiry cycle and is visually and epistemologically akin to the Four Manifestations, or Movements, of Tezcatlipoca.

Key Words: Ethnic Studies, Critical Pedagogy, Assessment, Education

Introduction

Within the field of ethnic studies praxis and curriculum, assessment tools and practices seem to have escaped the recent push towards pedagogical decolonization unscathed and unchanged. This is despite many scholars and educators calling for action and spotlighting alternative methods for assessing student learning in culturally sustaining classrooms. Absent from their disruption to assessment methodologies, however, is critique of the rubric. The rubric has carried on without equal consideration for the assessment tool's structural and practical participation in the very systems and epistemes from which Ethnic Studies aspires to divest. Essentially, despite its ubiquitousness in Ethnic Studies classrooms, the rubric has received little critical attention from Ethnic Studies practitioners, critical pedagogy scholars and educators in general, including those within the adjacent domains of liberatory and/or competency-based education.

Recent scholarship provide catalysts for critically interrogating and reimagining the rubric that, in many of its common and current iterations, normalizes the "various hegemonic forces" and

“problematic ways of being [that] have become so ubiquitous and embedded in who we are and how we do things that they have become invisible” (Bheda quoted in Henning et al., 2022, p. 22). Frequently created by educators in isolation or in small groups with other educators, rubrics do little to thwart Western settler colonialism’s rugged individualism. Rubrics, according to Bheda, serve to prime learners “to be individual contributors” rather than intentional members of a community (Henning et al., 2022, p. 27). Further, rubrics tend to privilege a predetermined set of skills and/or standards that trickle down to students from a top comprised of people who may or may not share in their lived experiences but who most certainly work within places, spaces, systems, and structures still haunted by specters of coloniality. Even the finer details of rubrics—from word choice to formatting—reify inequities, their esoteric vocabulary, linear presentations, and monochromatic color and font themes creating rather than mitigating inaccessibility.

Responding to an absence in scholarship amplified by the traditional rubric’s silent, steady advance, this article builds on preexisting critical pedagogies and praxes to propose the Competency Wheel as an alternative to the traditional rubric. Emerging from my teaching experience and the recent corpus of scholarship on equity in assessment and co-created rubrics authored by practitioners writing outside of Western paradigms, the Competency Wheel is a template for a co-created rubric that promotes transparency and student agency in assessment practices while giving equal attention to the tenants of Ethnic Studies. An effort to decolonize assessment, the Competency Wheel addresses the linearity of the traditional rubric and what Murrah-Mandril (2020) called “temporal colonization.” Visibly nonlinear, the Competency Wheel captures the recursive nature of an inquiry cycle and is visually and epistemologically akin to the Four Manifestations, or Movements, of Tezcatlipoca. My critique and alternative assessment tool seek to upend a common practice in and beyond Ethnic Studies classrooms that is overlooked as a weapon in the colonial arsenal and normalization of whiteness. For, without alternatives to the traditional rubric, we must, as Pewewardy et al. (2022) insisted, ask ourselves, “Are we doing something different? Or are we perpetuating the same way of ‘doing school’ that has always been in place, rooted in settler-colonial logics that not only has not worked for our people but has caused and continues to cause harm?” (p. 34).

Decolonizing Assessment

What it means, however, to decolonize and liberate facets or the whole of the education system must, according to Shirley (2022), “be accompanied by an examination of settler colonialism characterized by White supremacy, racism, land dispossession, and cultural genocide” (Garcia et al., 2022, p. 9). As a part of modernity, imperialism, and colonialism’s violent pursuit of white supremacy, bodies, particularly bodies of color, underwent an ontological reordering that altered the meaning of the human (Winnubst, 2020; Wynter, 2003). One’s proximity to whiteness became the yardstick for determining one’s humanness, and a construct of the able-bodied white person became the norm (Carter, 2007) that would go on to become the norm references in standardized assessments.

Both ontological *and* epistemological, modernity, imperialism, and colonialism sought to systematically and often violently eradicate Indigenous ways of knowing through a form of cultural genocide driven by white supremacy and racism known as epistemicide. According to Tuhiwai-Smith (2021), imperialism and colonialism’s epistemicide of Indigenous and global south knowledge resulted in the commodification and creation of “systems for organizing, classifying and

storing” knowledge (p. 69). Consequently, and purposefully, hierarchies and taxonomies formed that championed Western knowledge as “legitimate” and “universal knowledge” and devalued Indigenous knowledge as an object to be collected, mined, appropriated, but illegitimate on its own (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021, p. 72). Schools, including the K-12 and post-secondary institutions of today, were not only informed by the hierarchical structuring of being and knowledge that privileged Eurocentric bodies and epistemologies but reproduced them as well. We see this still in concepts like the canon, and, as we shall see below, in assessment’s taken-for-granted practices such as the rubric.

Efforts to decolonize education, therefore, must start from the premise that the very notions of norms and knowledge that show up in assessment practices are, themselves, colonized. That is, what counts as knowledge, who qualifies as the knowledge keepers and creators, and how metrics are manipulated and function are, like the systems and practices they reify, determined by a hegemony rooted in Eurocentrism. Recent scholarship considers where and how these logics of coloniality might be hiding in assessment practices (Dooley, 2022; Thorius, 2021). Dooley, for example, examines instances of “performances of slow violence” in standardized assessment (2022, p. 63). Slow violences are sneaky, sub-surface, incremental inflictions whose quiet cumulative presence “set up systems of exclusion and inequity” that “circulate through countless colonizing assessment practices” (Dooley, 2022, pp. 66–67). Dooley’s critique of standardized testing’s reliance on “arbitrary norms” (p. 65) echoes Hobbs and Robinson, who describe these norms as derived from the dominant group (Henning et al., 2022, p. 147). Here, as with the colonization of bodies and knowledge, the dominant group reflects the hierarchy created by white imperialists and colonists to maintain epistemic, temporal, and corporal dominance over those apart from the “superior civilization” (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021, p. 73). Bedfellows, assessment and colonization thus work in tandem to reify white supremacy through the same exclusionary process of othering Tuhiwai-Smith locates in Western knowledge’s violent rise to universal knowledge.

To Dooley’s instances of coloniality’s performances of slow violences in assessments, I insist we must add the concept of time. Hardly benign, its terms defined, normalized, and weaponized by the same colonial projects hijacking bodies and knowledge for personal gain, time was retooled to serve the dominant group. According to Murrah-Mandril (2020), time has been constructed to facilitate “capitalist production and exchange” and “used as a weapon of colonization to exclude people of color from participating in the nation’s past, present, and future” (p. 2). Murrah-Mandril is especially critical of linear time and the metric framing traditional rubrics. An empty construct of temporal colonization rather than relational and discursive, linear time, argues Murrah-Mandril, fails to reflect “the specific places, people, and histories” of colonized peoples and in turn attempts to erase them (p. 6). Of course, how we understand time significantly shapes teaching and learning. From the duration of the typical school day designed to closely parallel the workday to the exact amount of classroom-based instructional minutes school district officials have determined are needed if students are to pass state-mandated standardized tests, the hands of time are far-reaching in education, including through assessment.

In their critique of standardized assessment’s normative bias for Western, white ways of knowing and being, Hobbs and Robinson propose “culturally relevant assessment” as an alternative to assessment practices that enact the aforementioned slow violences (Henning et al., 2022, p. 146). Culturally relevant assessment would, on their view, assess students using methods and procedures that are transparent, fair, relevant, and reflect the student’s individual and communal

learning goals. Instead of enacting colonized performances of slow violences, culturally relevant assessment assignment types center students as experts in their education and work in concert with them to dismantle assignment types rooted in and replicating white ontological and epistemic superiority. Culturally relevant assessment assignment types would constitute high use value and center inclusive content to achieve more equitable academic outcomes for all students. In sum, Hobbs and Robinson emphasize equity in *assignment types* used to assess student learning, leaving the tools used to evaluate these assessments outside their purview.

However, we can no longer ignore the tools, especially when perhaps the most common among them is riddled with colonial performances of slow violences. For all the moves to decolonize education, make culturally relevant assessment, and ensure equity in ethnic studies classrooms, we continue to reach for traditional rubrics, a tool I argue subverts our worthy aims. I join Bheda (2022) in a call to action that necessitates a renewed attention to these tools. Bheda wrote:

As Audre Lorde (1984/2007) put it, it is impossible to dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. In fact, in her work, she makes a couple of statements that readily serve as a great analogy for assessment: "What does it mean when the tools of a racist-patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the narrowest parameters of change are possible. (Henning et al., 2022, pp. 110–111)

This means that if our assessment practice in and of itself is framed by and built with parameters that make privilege, bias, and oppression invisible, we will be unable to achieve our goal of equity and social justice. Consequently, our assessment actions will only reify the very systems we are trying to transform, because our impact will be subverted by the inequity of our approach. Unless we overhaul our assessment tools as critical pedagogies overhaul curriculum, they remain cut from the same cloth; they are quite literally the master's tools. My project picks up where other attempts at decolonizing assessment leave off by tinkering with the tool itself.

Master's Tool: The Rubric

Existing scholarship documents the well-crafted rubric's potential to clarify teachers' expectations for students, foster student self-assessment, and contribute to inclusive content (Henning et al., 2022; Yan, 2024). These attributes also constitute the challenges faced by Curriculum Based Education (CBE) models (Bingham et al., 2022). That is, CBE models experience, with varying degrees, difficulties reimagining grading practices using modalities that effectively communicate expectations and student progress to those within and without the school community (Bingham et al., 2022). These challenges are certainly the Achille's heel of CBE and reflect my experiences as a teacher in a CBE model. Novel High's attempts to address these challenges have resulted in the development and piloting of various assessment tools, from traditional rubrics to self-reflections to checklists. Despite our best efforts, the relationship between our school competencies, the Indigenous cosmology and pedagogies framing them, and stated course learning objectives remained fragmented. These various assessment tools did not put all three in conversation with each other and relied on top-down design that made no attempt to critically rethink the formatting and use of the rubric. Put another way, our efforts fell short of capturing and thus overhauling the slow violences at work in this enduring relic of colonial education. To decolonize education, we must also indiscriminately address the multitudinous ways epistemologies and ontologies privileging whiteness show up in assessment practices and

“critically examin[e] the *assessment cycle*” (emphasis added, Henning et al., 2022, p. 147). This requires taking a step back to consider not only the efficacy of the boxy, linear rubric ubiquitous in schools but the creation and function of the tool itself.

In an effort to decolonize assessment practices and contend with the master’s tool, Stitt-Bergh et al. (2021) drew from their experiences as Native Hawaiian educators to contextualize assessment in place-based Indigenous epistemologies. That is, in their critique of Anglo-centric assessment practices and education systems disconnected from place, the authors rethink the rubric. They propose replacing learning outcomes disconnected from place and expansive worldviews with outcomes that reconnect students with sacred places and Indigenous worldviews. In practice, their proposal manifests as a linear rubric with a learning outcome that promotes students’ understanding of Wahi Noho Like o Ka Po’e, a Native Hawaiian concept for community engagement. The rubric moves left to right, each level an additional application of Native linguistic practices: Mu’u (Emerging), Liko (Developing), and Kumu (Implementing). Each level is paired with distinguishing criteria that speaks directly to the learning outcome and, therefore, to place and Indigenous worldviews. To the rubric, Stitt-Bergh et al. introduce language and concepts attuned to Native Hawaiian ways of knowing and being in the world, thereby unsettling the settler’s lexicon. Yet, in the linear form of their rubric lies the temporal colonization of assessment that the Competency Wheel’s marriage of co-creation with *circulos* strives to shed.

Creating and Practicing the Competency Wheel

Context

Developed within the context of the high school at which I currently work, the Competency Wheel reflects the educational model and values of this institution. A small alternative public high school in a politically progressive city and state, Novel High School prides itself on a robust offering of interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies courses and a community and curricular focus on racial and gender equity. Our small but mighty community is disproportionately queer in comparison to other high schools in the District and the school-of-choice for many trans, gender nonconforming, and neurodivergent students. We are the educational home and safe space for many queer students of color, despite being a Predominantly White Institution (PWI).

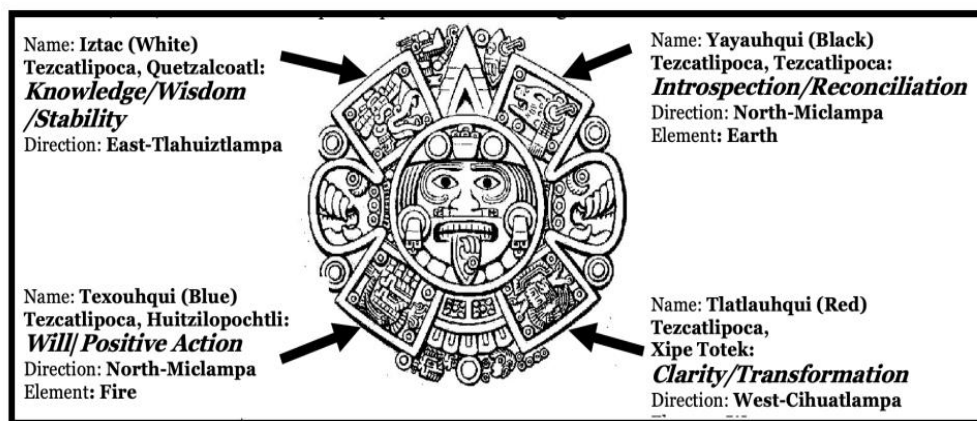
The only nongraded high school in the District, Novel implements a Competency-Based Education (CBE) model that, according to Bingham et al., “is characterized by mastery-based progression; differentiated support based on students’ personalized needs; assessment aligned to measurable, transferable learning objectives; and learning outcomes emphasizing knowledge creation and application, along with developing important skills and dispositions” (2022, p. 676). Pursuant to the CBE model, Novel has developed four school-wide competencies within which content-specific learning objectives influenced by Common Core and Ethnic Studies standards for learning are imbedded. Capturing an inquiry cycle that is also reflective of The Four Movements of Tezcatlipoca, Novel’s four competencies are Embodied Curiosity, Community/Context, Growth/Transformation, Action/Application. A CBE school and regional trailblazer in secondary Ethnic Studies, Novel High School is uniquely equipped to birth and implement the sort of alternative assessment that I propose here.

The Four Movements of Tezcatlipoca as a Cycle of Inquiry

Commonly, rubrics are introduced at the beginning of an assessment cycle but ultimately measure the end product. If, for instance, a unit culminates in a five-paragraph essay, the rubric would speak to the criterion for the essay and not the assessment cycle as a whole. As such, traditional rubrics neither represent nor assess learning as cyclical, recursive and ongoing processes, delineating instead starting, intermediate, and terminal end points that value a very particular product over the personal and communal processes that nurture learning across a space of inquiry. They fail to capture the complexity of the learner and the learning process, employ notions of time, counting, and measuring—slow violence—born from Western ways of knowing and being in the world, and privilege standardized performances of these same epistemologies and ontologies. In contrast to those built from and to maintain the status quo, learning processes that are Indigenous and Indigenized are, according to Craig (Yakima Nation) and Craig (Tulalip Tribes) “much more complex than the ways western schooling has conditioned [them]” (quoted in Pewewardy et al., 2022, p. 29). They are critical of Western schooling’s penchant for standardization that maps learning temporally and with a rigidity that discourages process and reduces it to a regimented series of transactions. Instead, Craig and Craig propose a decolonizing of education that would honor “traditional ways” of learning as a process that “unfolds over time” (2022, p. 29). Along this same vein, the Competency Wheel challenges “temporal colonization” (Murrah-Mandril, 2020) and other colonial performances of slow violences by looking to Chicanx-Indigenous cosmologies and praxis to describe an inquiry process that unfolds over time and non-Western taxonomies to name and organize what the tool aims to capture and communicate.

Recognized by Ethnic Studies educators and scholars (Fernandez et al., 2023; Gonzales, 2021; Villanueva, 2013) as a decolonial pedagogical tool and framework for guiding critical conscious raising, the Four Manifestations, or Movements, of Tezcatlipoca (Figure 1) inspired Novel High School’s description of the inquiry cycle and corresponding competencies. Los Cuatro Tezcatlipoca, the Nahuatl concept Nahui Olin meaning four movements or motions, can be summarized as follows: critical reflection (Tezcatlipoca), gaining perspective (Quetzalcoatl), growing in consciousness (Huitzilopochtli), and renewal and transformation (Xipe Totec) (Villanueva, 2013).

Figure 1: Aztec Sunstone and Four Tezcatlipocas (Gonzales, 2021).



As a teaching and assessment tool in the ethnic studies classroom, Los Cuatro Tezcatlipoca and the Nahui Olin resist a Western construct of learning that adheres to the colonial logics of linear time. For example, the Xicano Institute for Teaching (XITO)'s TIAHUI framework, like Los Cuatro Tezcatlipoca and the Nahui Olin, appears as and moves in interconnected *circulos*, or circles that “embrace collective solidarity, balance, and cycles that overlap and inform each other” (Fernandez et al., 2023, p. 74). This nonlinear, mutually constitutive relationality between and among *circulos* is also true of the Competency Wheel. Students, like Tezcatlipoca, move in and out, back and forth, and between the four manifestations or components of an inquiry cycle and the Nahui Olin.

From Co-Creation to Implementation

Leveraging the Four Movements of Tezcatlipoca, the Competency Wheel honors “the Indigenous, decolonized reality that knowledge is generated, shared, and preserved collectively” (Henning et al., 2022, p. 18). As such, the communal practice of co-creation guided the Competency Wheel's development, revisions, and implementation. Not only, though, does co-creation disrupt the typical top-down formation of the tool thus decentering the proverbial Master. Educators observe that when students participate in the creation of the tool assessing their work, they are more likely to engage in the learning process and take greater pride in their work (Becker, 2016; Chambers & Harkins, 2023; Eppink, 2002; Yan, 2024). Additionally, co-creation improves students' understanding of the teacher's expectations, in the quality of student work, and in student agency, particularly during self- and peer-evaluation (Becker, 2016). Qualities of co-created assessment tools, transparency and student agency are also desired outcomes for the Competency Wheel. For, despite our lofty aspirations to develop school competencies reflective of The Four Movements of Tezcatlipoca, Novel struggled to engage students in a cohesive understanding of and meaningful assessment practices with the competencies.

Each iteration of the Competency Wheel, therefore, was piloted and informed by students, ensuring transparency and entrusting them with the tool's evolution. To do this work, though, we had to start from the beginning and then move from The Four Movements of Tezcatlipoca to Novel High School's competencies. In the early stages of the development of the Competency Wheel, I tried to frontload as much of this history as possible, walking students involved in the co-creation of the assessment tool's earliest iterations through the teacher-led thought process behind the development of the competencies. We looked at the Nahui Olin in Figure 1 and discussed each competency within the context of the corresponding movement: Embodied Curiosity (Quetzalcoatl), Community/Context (Tezcatlipoca), Action/Application (Huitzilopochtli), and Xipe Totec (Growth/Transformation). I distinctly remember the first time having this conversation with students and the audible “Oh!” that arose in my classroom as students heard for the first time explicit mention of the Chicana-Indigenous cosmologies and praxis undergirding our school's competencies. What we like to call an ah-ha moment in education, this reveal of sorts bridged a gap in students' existing understanding of the competencies and one I attribute, in part, to Novel High School being a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in a district cut from the same cloth as the traditional rubric. Shedding a paternalistic approach all-too familiar to systems designed to uphold white supremacy is, as our early misstep shows, an ongoing, imperfect process. By hitting pause on the curricular rollout of the competencies and the assessment tool to revisit the Chicana-Indigenous epistemologies framing them, students began to appreciate the inquiry cycle as student-driven movement through, among, and between its parts and the Competency Wheel as an attempt to assess this movement.

Given the nonlinear nature of the inquiry cycle, the circle made sense to my students, who saw in the Competency Wheel's circulo our competencies and the Four Movements of Tezcatlipoca in motion. They objected, however, to the original language I used to level segments within each competency's wedge. They described the categories I adopted from Native Hawaiian educators Stitt-Bergh et al.—Emerging, Practicing, Implementing—as not kid-friendly. Instead, my students proposed changing the categories to “Starting, Practicing, Doing It!,” a change they claimed increased accessibility and better captured a cycle of inquiry intended to move students from assisted explorations of their passions to autonomous, public-facing expressions of them. Wanting to see themselves instead of a school assignment at the center, students advocated for an additional change to the Competency Wheel that quite literally places them in the center. Open to interpretation and creative license, the innermost circulo invites students to make their identifying mark. Some students simply write their name. Others sketch a caricature of themselves. Occasionally, a student will create a mini montage showcasing hobbies and pets. Around them blooms their cycles of inquiry, their learning goals, all within the context of Novel’s competencies and course learning objectives.

Figure 2. Anchor posters on my classroom wall.



After two school years of co-creating and piloting the Competency Wheel with a small group of juniors and seniors, I launched the assessment tool in a Fall 2025 Freshfolks course, a English/Language Arts class designed for ninth and tenth graders new to Novel High School. As

with the pilot groups, we began at the beginning, starting with Novel High School's competencies and their alignment to the Four Movements. To this launch, I added anchor posters to show rather than just tell alignment (Figure 2) and learning activities aimed at familiarizing our Freshfolks with the school competencies. For example, students engaged in individual and small and whole group activities that, through visuals and prompts, illustrated alignment between the Four Movements and Novel's school competencies (see Appendix 2). Instead of at the end of a learning cycle, students begin interacting with and co-constructing their assessment tools, their Competency Wheels, at the beginning, tapping into their Embodied Curiosities as they relate to their identities, in Quetzalcoatl, to craft goals that personalize for them the course learning objectives (See Appendix 3). They cut out, write in, and glue each wedge to their Competency Wheel, an activity that allows students to view and consider each competency tactically and in isolation, alleviating the visual overwhelm of traditional rubrics that can be challenging for students with visual processing, executive functioning, and specific learning disabilities.

For my timid Freshfolk whose special interest was crows and personal goal to make friends, personalizing the learning objectives, in Quetzalcoatl, involved crafting goals that assessed them on their growth in initiating and collaborating in a range of discussion and knowledge co-creation (Appendix 2, Speaking and Listening 1). As I sat beside them during this activity and first experience with CBE and the Competency Wheel, they quietly voiced to me that they loved crows, wanted to bring them into our nature-based class as a means of completing assignments and connecting with others. Later wedges on the wheel, further into the inquiry cycle, crows remained a persistent theme, if not explicitly in the work they produced and the assessed using their Competency Wheel. They and their personalization of the learning objectives became their yardstick for growth, not their proximity to whiteness. Together, we used their Competency Wheel to assess their progress and engagement in an inquiry process that was uniquely theirs but integral to our learning community and the co-creation of knowledge that took place therein. Their engagement with the Competency Wheel illustrates the general process for all students in the Freshfolks class, although each wheel, each wedge, each personalized learning objective was marked by the nuance of students' individual interests, communities, and identities they brought with them into the learning community.

Given the Competency Wheel's disavowal of linear notions of learning and time, student engagement with the Competency Wheel and teacher data collection happens during formative and summative assessments and occurs at multiple intervals within a given learning cycle. As with the aforementioned student, I co-create and review, with students, their Competency Wheel as they build it during each reflective and goal-setting interval. The intervals take place systematically as we move from one activity to the next and organically as progress in learning goals approaches "Doing It!" and interests shift. Each of these intervals offers moments for assessment and opportunities for both student and teacher to recalibrate, if necessary. For instance, one of my Freshfolk students lost interest in their initial Embodied Curiosity as we moved into Community/Context, into Tezcatlipoca. In community with a friend they made in the class, they discussed their shared Embodied Curiosity, returning to Quetzalcoatl in practice, before co-creating goals and personalizing learning objectives in Tezcatlipoca. In other words, the pair moved backward before going forward, co-creating a goal to assess within Community/Context that was in and of itself evidence of the competency. Together, they wrote a series of silly short stories inspired by a video game they both enjoyed. Their collaboration provided evidence of their ability to draw from a shared community/context (gaming community) to craft creative prose that

deployed rhetorical and literary devices found in the game they played (Appendix 3, Writing 1), and, together, we would assess progress referencing their Competency Wheels. As with their classmate, this student's metric is not their proximity to whiteness and the normative standards derived from the colonial logics underpinning assessment practices designed to uphold whiteness' supremacy. The Competency Wheel invites students to reshape learning objectives through a meaningful process of inquiry that places them at the center whilst never losing sight of their place within a broader learning community engaged in the co-creation of knowledge.

Framed by the Competency Wheel and its co-creation, the discussions I have with students and my assessment of their growth are in direct, *transparent* conversation with Novel High School's competencies. I use the information generated by these conversations and assessments to write monthly status notes reporting on students' progress in my course, make curricular adjustments, conference with students, and ensure that students' Embodied Curiosities and identities are represented in the curriculum. The Competency Wheel and students' engagement with the assessment tool means these notes and subsequent adjustments are, once again, in direct conversation with the competencies and representative of them rather than ideals intended to bolster white supremacy. Experiential, reflective, and reflexive, the Competency Wheel, from start to finish, increases student understanding of and engagement with Novel's school competencies and the inquiry cycle they capture whilst celebrating students' Embodied Curiosities, community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and role as knowledge keepers and creators.

"Are you looking for something different?"

This year, Novel High School's student-run Recruitment Committee designed and mailed postcards to public and private middle schools as well as every household with a rising ninth grader in the district. The catchphrase—"Are you looking for something different?"—hopes to snag those seeking an educational setting that, as the slogan foretells, offers an alternative to the traditional, comprehensive high school model. A CBE school and Alternative Learning Environment, Novel can and does reimagine teaching and learning, our very existence and commitment to Ethnic Studies acts of resistance, particularly in a climate currently hostile towards such endeavors. Nevertheless, we remain a PWI in school system patterned after colonial models of education framed by and charged with upholding a hierarchical production of knowledge that privileges white Eurocentric epistemologies. Co-creating critical consciousness-raising content, centering the linguistic and cultural practices of our students in teaching and learning, striving for liberatory and decolonized education—these are all necessary and important practices at Novel High School and beyond. We ask our students, our extended community, ourselves to do this difficult, crucial work only to meet it with a metric that, until now, has been mostly absent from conversations about decolonizing assessment. Rather than participating in the slow violences perpetuated by the traditional rubric, the Competency Wheel refuses assimilative assessment practices in a critically conscious return to non-Western ways of knowing and being. Such a turn marks a notable break from a tradition, a master's tool, bound to normative notions of whiteness constructed to uphold their ontological and epistemological supremacy and embodied in conceptual, systemic, and tangible iterations of the master's house (Lorde, 1984). Even if the Competency Wheel in its current iteration feels like a far reach for some educators, especially those outside of CBE schools, the reimagined assessment tool reveals a need for further conversation about how to tinker with the tool its itself.

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Centering Queer and Trans Ethnic Studies Pedagogical Strategy: Case Studies on Teaching at PWIs in Liberal and Conservative States

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Abstract

This article situates a queer trans Chicanx educator's experiences across two predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in politically divergent states: Minnesota and Utah. I argue that the work of Ethnic Studies must be guided by queer and trans feminist pedagogical strategies to expand an intersectional analysis as an avenue from which to challenge anti-trans narratives across the U.S., and transphobia within Ethnic Studies. I highlight the ways queer and trans ethnic studies strategies at two PWIs (a) create and reimagine healing learning spaces centered on anti-colonial embodiments and (b) challenge censorship through critical pedagogical activities rupturing silence as a form of relational solidarity. Through reflective case studies examining course objectives, assignments, discussions, and pedagogical reflections, I position an embodied pedagogical strategy in Ethnic Studies courses at PWIs as an aspect of feminist, queer, and trans Ethnic Studies scholars navigating higher education during heightened racism. Ethnic Studies courses must contribute to dismantling heteropatriarchy, prioritizing queer and trans joy, and embracing anti-colonial and abolitionist politics as we engage with White students and colleagues.

Key words: Chicanx educator, queer and trans ethnic studies, Minnesota, Utah

Introduction

As of December 29, 2025, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) was tracking 616 Anti-LGBTQ bills in the U.S. Anti-LGBTQ+ bills range from banning transgender girls and women from sports, to criminalizing drag performances, policing what restrooms people use, and prohibiting gender-affirming care for minors. These are political manifestations of racial homophobia and transphobia with material impacts on queer, trans, and gender expansive folks, especially Black transgender women who face high rates of gender-based hate crimes (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2024). Within this context, Ethnic Studies must be committed to disrupting the silences in the face of eugenic White supremacist attacks on queer and trans communities—attacks also on our students.

As the targeting of Ethnic Studies continues to escalate across the U.S., discussions must interrogate who is subject to surveillance, appropriate responses to attacks, and how to

continuously show up for targeted students that rely on Ethnic Studies for academic and personal prosperity. While Ethnic Studies scholars of color continue to navigate racist political attacks, there is a need to critically examine our engagement of White students and colleagues in anti-racist work, and concurrently, interrogate racial cisgender heteronormativity within the fields of Ethnic Studies. This article situates the experiences of a queer trans Chicanx educator at two predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in politically divergent states: Minnesota and Utah. I highlight the ways queer and trans Ethnic Studies at two PWIs (a) creates and reimagines healing learning spaces centered on anti-colonial embodiments and (b) challenges censorship through critical pedagogical strategies rupturing silence as form of relational solidarity. The work of Ethnic Studies pedagogy must be guided by queer and trans feminist epistemologies to expand a racial gender analysis challenging transphobic narratives across the U.S., which directly impacts the discipline.

In what follows, I trace challenges and triumphs from teaching in (a) a blue democratic state that complicates the narrative of White liberal allyship, and (b) a conservative religious state with anti-trans and anti-DEI bills impacting queer and trans Ethnic Studies. The reflective case studies examine course assignments, discussions, and communication with university administrators to demonstrate queer and trans Ethnic Studies strategies to navigate PWIs and disrupt cis-heteronormativity during the second Trump administration.

An Embodied Queer and Trans Pedagogy

To disrupt cis-heteronormativity in the classroom, I ground critical anti-colonial feminist pedagogical strategies from my own experiences as a first-generation queer trans Chicanx educator to prioritize social justice frameworks that build from student experiences as avenues to understand and address social inequities. This pedagogical strategy is part of a long line of intergenerational femtors who engage in anti-colonial, healing, spirit-restoring work while interrogating their own privileges outwardly as they navigate the contradictions and trenches of academia (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2006; Lopez et al., 2024; Tijerina Revilla et al., 2021). Echoing Chicana feminist and critical race theorist Corina Benavides Lopez's (2016) strategy to teach from the *corazón*/heart, and muxerista scholar Anita Tijerina Revilla's concept of spirit protector and restorer, I position queer and trans Ethnic Studies as healing pedagogical strategies to connect with students and mutually heal from oppressive and alienating U.S. educational experiences.

Since analyses of gender and sexuality are tenets of Chicana/x feminisms, I organically shifted into queer and trans Ethnic Studies, specifically, Chicanx/Latinx critical feminist pedagogical strategies. The shift offered queer, trans, and nonbinary epistemes as "alternative ways of reading, thinking, and sensing through decolonial methods, trans decolonial theories, and exploring different ways of being within gender coloniality" (Salas-SantaCruz, 2023, p. 80). In cycles of unlearning and learning as part of healing, queer and trans Ethnic Studies pedagogical strategies (a) position racialized gendered lived experiences to shape our politics, and (b) support our students' consciousness within a neoliberal university (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Salas-SantaCruz, 2023). Chicana/x/Latina/x feminist, queer, and trans intergenerational knowledges honoring our embodied experiences often defy boundaries with ripple effects to those around us, as trans Chicanx educator Jack Caraves (2020) intimately outlined. A queer and trans Ethnic Studies positionality is shaped by our lived experiences as educators, intergenerational solidarity that blurs

ranks and spans geographies, and healing, all part of a pedagogical strategy to navigate PWIs in higher education during heightened racism and transphobia.

Queer and trans Ethnic Studies is a comparative and relational area of study within the discipline focused on the cultural and political production of gender as part of systems of power. More specifically, it's defined by its attention to the expansive conceptualizations of racialized gender "to understand refusals and resistances to specific modern identity categories" (Salas-Santa Cruz, 2022, pp. 691–692). As a queer trans Chicanx scholar part of a lineage of *joteria* educators in Ethnic Studies, I, too, "see my responsibility as offering students the tools to be critical of gender binaries and sexual dichotomies" (Caraves, 2020, p. 121) as part of a broader critical analysis of oppressive structures. Additionally, my trans experience shapes my pedagogical strategies as a transmasculine educator; as such, it is my responsibility to address transmisogyny in classroom dynamics as part of a queer and trans Ethnic Studies disruption to hetero/homonormativity (Alexander, 2019). The alluded privilege to masculinity as a queer trans person does not negate the institutional gendered harm and violence embedded in academia. As such, to be actively participating in the cycle of learning, unlearning, learning, unlearning, is a task shaped with empathy and care by queer and trans Ethnic Studies educators of color. The strategy is continuous, in which we *unlearn* the harmful ways of relating from racialized cis-heteropatriarchy in order *learn* how our privileges can be employed for solidarity, all of which constitute a cycle of healing: both as part of the process and an outcome of the process.

Unlearning to Learn Is to Heal

There is an emotional discomfort that comes with unlearning, or troubling previously learned oppressive ideas and behaviors. (Alexander, 2019, p. 7)

To heal in Ethnic Studies spaces at PWIs means that we unlearn and trouble racial heteronormativity with students in ways that both care about the emotional processes while refusing to coddle White innocence. This is the care work in queer and trans Ethnic Studies that, while essential to the unlearning of racist heteropatriarchy, is overlooked and expected service from women and femmes. Specifically in academia, women of color are more concentrated in care work than White women, most notably for their labor of delivering "empathy or the formation of an emotional tie with" students (Conrad et al., 2014, p. 12). For Latina/x feminists Mónica Torreiro-Casal and Natalia Deeb-Sossa (2024), to reclaim care is:

an act of social justice, particularly in the work we do in the context of academia. We experience the explicit patriarchal violent environment where care is delegated to ethnic studies departments and their faculty or staff who are often women of color. The result of this alienation of caregivers serves a function to the others who do not carry the burden. (p. 152)

To care for ourselves as educators and for our students is a political act not prioritized in academia, but rather taken for granted. For trans Ethnic Studies scholars, it requires a type of vulnerability and disruption (Caraves, 2020) to White, cis-heteronormative patriarchal systems normalized by the university.

To teach Ethnic Studies with care and persistence at R1 PWIs is to disrupt the competitive characteristics of higher education that value individualism and elitism, both tenets of a “successful” neoliberal college education. As such, to prioritize healing from racist heteronormative timelines means to return to what Black Latinx abolitionist scholar Qui Alexander (2019) posited: “what does it mean to queer one’s teaching? And, what does that queering actually look like in a classroom?” (p. 6). Simply put, as pedagogical strategy it means recognizing the necessity for “increased flexibility and openness” (Pennell, 2022, p. 541) about our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs beyond ableist expectations of productivity from ourselves and students. An embodied queer and trans Ethnic Studies scholar pedagogical strategy shapes the following case study examples for navigating PWIs in a liberal and conservative state.

Minnesota: “My First Teacher Of Color Was In College”

As of fall 2025, the Minnesota public research university demographic where I taught consists of 53.2% White students and about 32.2% BIPOC students (University of Minnesota Institutional Data and Research, 2026). Similarly, White professors make up 63.1%, while 21.5% of faculty are BIPOC (University of Minnesota Institutional Data and Research 2026).³⁶ At the time, I was completing a Feminist Studies PhD in the blue democratic state of Minnesota (MN) and teaching complicated narratives of White liberal allyship through my students’ evasion of racial analysis. I was receiving pedagogical training and mentorship prefaced by racial and class tensions that Chicanas and other BIPOC scholars navigated at the Midwestern university.

As graduate instructor for “Chicana Studies: La Chicana in Contemporary Society,” a required course for the degree, I facilitated the examination of scholarly, activist, and creative work of Chicanas through an interdisciplinary approach. During the unit “Chicanas and Education,” we began discussing why Latinas make up less than 1% of PhDs earned in the U.S. with far fewer in the professorate. We followed the patterns of the school-to-prison pipeline, and most importantly, I asked my students to reflect on their own experiences in the U.S. education systems. An advanced undergraduate Chicana shared her White-centered educational trajectories with the class, stating “my first teacher of color was in college.” I vocalized my disappointment in the racial disparities among educators in MN and asked students to think about why this is the case, as well as how that shapes educational experiences of students of color in our space. I foregrounded the student’s life experiences and realities as a form of knowledge-making and critical consciousness as representative of Chicana/x feminist and muxerista pedagogical strategies of resistance to epistemological erasure (Tijerina Revilla, 2004). In terms of context, we were all living through the first Trump administration so there was a sense of political urgency “to engage in a decolonizing process and address educational [and social] inequities within Chicana/o communities” (Calderón et al., 2012, p. 516) in ways that also empowered students. Other Chicanas participated in the class discussion, and most White students listened attentively as part of their unlearning of racial hierarchies in the class that I rooted in vulnerability and care.

White students were uncomfortable with the realities of their Chicana/x peers with some empathizing and others frustrated they had not been affirmed as an ally. As stated in my end-of-semester student evaluations, one student felt my class was an “echo chamber.” Discussions might

³⁶ 5.2% listed as an unknown racial/ethnic identity and 10.2% with “nonresident” designation that may include BIPOC Identity but due to the way data is gathered, this is up for interpretation.

resemble an echo-chamber for a student who cannot fully comprehend the political, cultural, and spiritual implications of the Chicana feminist onto-epistemologies that allow Chicanas/Latinas to “discuss their personal experiences at the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality while connecting to wider societal issues” (Tijerina Revilla, 2004, p. 91)—such critical discourse is often lacking in alienating and discriminatory PWIs. The student evaluation was a devaluing of queer and trans Chicanx knowledge our class centered, alluding to “epistemic exclusion” that involves the “delegitimization of diverse and nontraditional research methodologies frequently employed by minoritized Scholars” (Dua et al., 2024, p. 1). Would this student have felt the same way if a light-skinned/White cisgender Chicana had taught this class?

While cisgender and queer Chicana feminists have advocated for and created spaces for their voices and scholarship on issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality “as major areas of emphasis in the current struggle for Chicana/o studies and ethnic studies” (Arce & Montaña, 2022, p. 124), transphobia continues to permeate the disciplines. This isn’t an attack on Chicanx and Ethnic Studies more broadly. On the contrary, it is a call to solidarity from a queer trans Chicanx educator who is often the only trans person of color in the room at PWIs. Embodied queer and trans Ethnic Studies pedagogy ruptures the assumptions of which bodies can teach gender and “women’s studies, not only in academia but also in that specific discipline” (Caraves, 2020, p. 119). This disruption is a form of “epistemic disobedience” modeled by trans Ethnic Studies scholars who embody the “de-linking from Eurocentric trans knowledge into decolonial options to understand trans* embodiments and trans* configurations” (Salas-Santa Cruz, 2022, p. 691).

Queer and trans Ethnic Studies pedagogies are embodied strategies rooted in lived experiences, vulnerability, flexibility, and continuous cycles of healing through unlearning and learning processes that are unapologetic in its direct disruption to cis-heteronormativity. One example is to facilitate creative assignments that challenge the individualist curriculum of the university through vulnerable storytelling aimed at mutually healing from harmful U.S. educational experiences. Alternatives to traditional essay formats offer theoretical and methodological creativity, positioning student-centered knowledge as the nexus from which to interrogate racial, class, gender, and immigration status privileges in the U.S. The Chicana student who reflected on their predominantly White K-12 experience had centered her family’s immigration journey using family photographs, poetry, and autoethnography to contribute to our collective final class zine. The pedagogical strategy to facilitate the co-creation of a zine in a Chicanx Studies class at a Midwest PWI created an embodied “form of knowledge production due to its counterhegemonic history and attention to accessibility in regard to creation” (Thomas & Nuñez-Janes, 2025, p. 141), and it also showed students “that they can theorize from their own pain and lived experiences” (Caraves, 2020, p. 118). Culminating with a group-based class zine is an anti-colonial outcome of Chicana/x Studies disrupting traditional academic ways to consider who is a producer of knowledge within metrics of a colonial assimilationist education project: the American education system (Arce & Montaña, 2022; Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017).

A pedagogical strategy that is rooted in an anti-oppressive praxis that transcends Whiteness and coloniality is deeply relational because it “aims to develop new *conocimientos*, or understandings, that allow for strengthening relationships of solidarity across difference” (Cahuas, 2022, p. 1517). Part of developing relationality and new *conocimiento* is sitting with discomforts of not being the center of discussion if students are racially privileged. This is not a pass for White students to remain silent; rather, it means paying attention to solidarity their peers ask for. Student excitement

towards creating a project other than an essay varies, as do the outcomes. The challenge as an educator is the resistance by White students to position a reflective analysis of their own racialized gender experiences that are in conversation to BIPOC students rather than in opposition. The unlearning and learning of colonial education values is part of a queer and trans pedagogy in Ethnic Studies knowledge processes to negating deficit misconceptions of communities we learn from by centering ancestral knowledges (Mendoza Knecht & Mendoza Aviña, 2023). Queer and trans feminist attempts to disrupt binaries across our lives also reflect racialized gendered class dynamics across Chicanx Studies.

So, what do these pedagogical insights from teaching Chicanx Studies at a midwestern PWI tell us about healing? Healing in Ethnic Studies is a strategy of unlearning “hegemonic cultural, social, and political narratives” which is a messy process (Thomas & Nuñez-Janes, 2025, p. 147). Queer, trans, and non-binary Chicanx and Latinx scholars remind us that the harm we internalize and reproduce requires accountability. The socialized ways of being and thinking in academia often “force us to internalize these systems of harm and violence; and at times perpetuate these same ways onto each other” (Orozco et al., 2023, p. 1371). Queer and trans Ethnic Studies pedagogical strategies have an anti-colonial responsibility to position ourselves at the intersection of vectors of power to strategize against cis-heteronormativity and hierarchical oppression, as well as disrupt illusory power afforded by the university. The expansion of gender and sexuality analyses that decenter Whiteness are part of an unapologetic unlearning of racial hierarchies in academia.

Utah: “Why Did You Come To Utah Knowing How Conservative It Is?”

In 2024, Utah passed H.B. 261 Equal Opportunity Initiatives, an anti-DEI legislation prohibiting “an institution of higher education, the public education system, and a governmental employer from taking certain actions and engaging in discriminatory practices” (H.B. 261). Disguised as “protection” for “all” Utahns, this harmful fast-tracked legislation passed with unanimous support from the state’s predominant Republican lawmakers (Tanner, 2024), rolling back decades of institutional advocacy for marginalized students and communities attempting to “hide racist intent, thereby insulating White supremacy in historical narrative, policy discourse, legislation, and institutional practices and procedures” (Gómez Bennett & Cammarota, 2025, p. 1123).

In anticipation of the bill going into effect July 1, 2024, the University of Utah closed the LGBT Resource Center, the Center for Equity and Student Belonging, the Black Cultural Center, and the Women’s Resource Center.³⁷ This regressive legislation is not unique to Utah, but actually part of a national pattern across the U.S. heightened after the 2020 uprisings when legislators reacted to “protests by advancing bills that restricted how gender and race could be discussed in schools” (Ortiz & Ramirez, 2025, p. 175). Shuttering diverse cultural spaces on campus is an attack on QTBIPOC students, faculty and staff, and a green light for others on campus to minimize the experiences of the 27% of BIPOC students enrolled at the public research university I taught at (University Analytics and Institutional Reporting, 2026). Additionally, in response to the targeting of DEI, administrators suggested to faculty in my unit to state in our courses: “per legal advice from administration and for legal purposes, these are my own views, opinions, and scholarly

³⁷ The American Indian Resource Center was renamed the Center for Native Excellence and Tribal Engagement.

interpretations.” This disclaimer was shared during a fall faculty retreat to comply with Republican legislators’ censoring of critical and diverse education across Utah’s academic institutions.

In fall 2024, I taught the undergraduate special topics class, *Feminist Cannabis Studies: Queer/Trans* Activism and Racialized Histories*. The course objectives set out to evaluate our understandings and assumptions around cannabis from interdisciplinary feminist Ethnic Studies frameworks to examine historical and contemporary U.S. cannabis prohibition and legalization movements, among other topics. Storytelling was the main pedagogical strategy to learn about feminist cannabis embodiments and foster creative critical thinking in a state determined to stifle critical connections. As we progressed in the semester, group projects and small group discussions were normalized as a pedagogical strategy for engaging White queer, trans, and gender expansive students being targeted in a conservative state without embedding epistemic harm toward BIPOC students in the class. The microcosm in our class was guided by queer and trans Ethnic Studies training in which discussions on racial and gendered were at the forefront of our analysis about cannabis, while also facilitating students’ understandings of each other’s experiences to collectively “question unequal relations of political” power within an “education system that reproduces inequality” (Arce & Montaña, 2022, pp. 129–130), as was evident in Utah.

In November 2024, I was contacted by two conservative watchdog organizations “curious” about our course leaning objectives and how I “believe the course benefits students.”³⁸ Without my response, they wrote an article restating publicly available information including course description and misgendering me. I wondered: how was my class identified and selected for inquiry? Did someone at the university alert them? Was it the student who wouldn’t take notes, glared at me intensely, and stopped attending class after our discussion on Palestine? A Utah Republican legislator read the article and contacted the university asking why a class titled “Feminist Cannabis Studies” was being taught. This triggered my anxiety, stress, and fear of being attacked by vindictive far-right MAGA supporters in Utah. After this inquiry, the decision was made: I could no longer teach my special topics class. A White cisgender woman in charge of marketing for my unit confidently suggested not to disclose to my students what was going on. I refused.

A queer and trans Ethnic Studies strategy refuses the silence expected from faculty to shield the university from accountability and scandal. This was a learning moment for my students and I on the experiences of queer trans educators of color teaching in conservative states about “controversial” topics. I positioned our course within broader political attacks on gender and Ethnic Studies through a lens of institutional violence. In this case, students witnessed their professor:

being vulnerable, being human, our shared stories created a new dynamic in the classroom. My ability to be vulnerable with my students led them to be empathetic: It made students feel seen in their struggle to be themselves, led them to bond with me as their instructor, and broke down hierarchical structures within the classroom that can limit what students take away from the learning experience. (Caraves, 2020, p. 117)

To be vulnerable about institutional violence with students shifted the dynamic of our class into an unlearning and learning experience. One White student asked me, “why did you come to Utah

³⁸ Email communication November 20, 2024.

knowing how conservative it is?” Her peers were shocked that she asked the question many were thinking. I confidently responded: “Places like Utah need people like me, queer and trans BIPOC educators, even when we’re not completely welcomed. Plus, I needed a job.” We broke down the hierarchical structures through collective discussions where students and I voiced our frustrations and fears, allowing us to outline the racist underpinning of anti-DEI and transphobic bills.

Censorship As “Alternative Wording”

In 2025, Utah passed H.B. 257 Sex-Based Designations for Privacy, Anti-Bullying, and Women’s Opportunities and H.B. 269 Privacy Protections in Sex-designated Areas, both aimed at barring transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people from “accessing privacy spaces and other facilities in public schools and government owned or controlled spaces” (ACLU, 2025) including in student dormitories at public universities and colleges that align with their gender identity (MenLove, 2025). Teaching in a conservative state controlled by the Mormon Church means that my existence as a queer trans person of color is targeted and censored, a racist transphobic strategy aimed at cloaking the narratives that stray from Utah’s White supremacist “historical mythology” (Gómez Bennett & Cammarota, 2025, p. 1131). Queer and trans Ethnic Studies pedagogical strategies for challenging anti-DEI censorship in Utah through critical consciousness-raising activities with White queer and trans students were essential to upholding the social justice values of the discipline.

Per my contract, I was scheduled to give a spring semester research talk titled “Remembering and Reimagining: Disability-Centered Cannabis Education as Feminist Epistemology.” The submitted description outlined how the research presentation delineated the following:

intricacies of feminist cannabis knowledges and cultural perceptions while also challenging sexist, homophobic, and racist cannabis structures by community members, advocacy workers, and cannabis researchers. Rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies and qualitative mixed methods. . . . I position queer cannabis histories of disability-centered care and activism in California to remember and reimagine a cannabis education that is holistic and anti-capitalist.

The marketing staff member had “some concerns about the title and description, particularly as this wording will be used broadly to promote the event to a wide range of audiences.”

Asking if I was “comfortable proposing alternative wording?”³⁹ the staff requested that I change the title and content of my research talk to appease the state’s larger Republican audience. After receiving a vague indirect response to my initial question on what specifically was being flagged, the Dean, a Native woman, sent me the following email:

First, if you want the public to attend, I find the title inaccessible in general. I had to read it several times to understand what the presentation will cover, so I think many members of the community outside of campus will struggle with the meaning. Second, as we saw last semester, some members of our community have very strong reactions to things related to feminist cannabis. If the event is a public event, it will be open to everyone which means

³⁹ Email from February 12, 2025

that we will not be able to control who attends or what they say during the presentation/after the presentation. We can ask the police/public safety to remove folks if their behavior impedes the ability to continue with the event. It seems like a revised title would help avoid this result.⁴⁰

The statement overlooks issues of censorship, institutional racism, and carcerality relevant to Ethnic Studies. Here, the limitation of identity politics is glaring, as shown in this Native person's concern with coddling White conservative people's feelings instead of challenging the second Trump administration's affronts to research integrity and so-called freedom of speech. Second, "some members of our community" are racist, transphobic bigots, and are not the focus audience of the research talk I had intended to give. Third, we can never fully control "who attends or what they say" at any event, especially one by a trans Ethnic Studies scholar conducting research on cannabis in a conservative religious state. Control, as is referenced in the email, is a reach for illusionary power doing the work of the neoliberal university. Last, "police/public safety" representatives almost always escalate a situation, and as a Chicanx abolitionist, the carceral state is part of the critiques I offer in my cannabis research. It would go against my values and even be contradictory to have cops at an event on cannabis.

I was angry at the situation, and through the writing of Audre Lorde, I recognized my anger as "a response to racist attitudes and to the actions and presumptions that arise out of those attitudes" (2020, p. 115). The anger manifested as heightened anxiety, insomnia, and waves of frustration, among other things, that are not new for marginalized academics doing critical work. This was an embodied response composed of physiological and psychological symptoms, or what Black scholars call racial battle fatigue (cited in Tijerina Revilla, 2021). The "detrimental, irreparable spiritual damage" that makes us question our worth, dignity, and value are an attempt to spirit murder, what Muxerista scholars call one of "most dangerous weapons of white supremacy" (Tijerina Revilla, 2021, p. 38). Over the years, I had witnessed the burden of conforming to academia's racialized and gendered hierarchies among women and queer faculty of color, whose bodies, minds, and spirits were consequently breaking down. I tapped into my femtors, who were among my spirit protectors and restorers team aimed at breaking cycles of harm. They constitute a healing ecology offering "strength to reject and survive attempted spirit murder and/or restore our wounded spirits, especially in the face of repeated attacks and woundings both inside and outside of institutions of education" (Tijerina Revilla, 2021, p. 39). After a call with my femtor, the consejos were (a) to pick my battles—"this one isn't your battle" because to be in academia means we are in a marathon not a sprint, (b) go outside for a walk, and (c) tap into the cultural and spiritual medicinal practices I was raised with. I processed and decided to reschedule the talk rather than change it to shield the feelings of conservatives at the university. This was a missed opportunity for the Dean to challenge racialized gender hierarchies and holding accountable the university "for how racist policies perpetuate notions of White superiority and the inferiority of BIPOC" (Gómez Bennett & Cammarota, 2025, p. 1135).

To this day, we (myself and chair of unit) don't know how everything unfolded and have access to only pieces of the general issue. While she did advocate for my class and subsequent discussion on delivering my research talk, she was navigating the ethical issues of Gender and Ethnic Studies units being targeted by the Republican legislature. This example of censorship is an institutional

⁴⁰ Email from February 23, 2025

mechanism of state-sponsored racism and transphobia representing the far Right's nationwide, multiyear campaign attacks on higher education "to limit what students can learn and what faculty can teach" (Batker & Turpin, 2023, p. 4). Teaching queer and trans Ethnic Studies at a Utah PWI trained me to develop pedagogical strategies against student hostility and academic censorship in the face of racist zealots attacking tenets of Ethnic Studies (Arce & Montaña, 2022). The pedagogical strategies employed here were the refusal to remain silent, an intergenerational femtorship spanning geographies as part of Chicana/x and Latina/x feministas/muxeristas healing practices, and an unapologetic conviction to expose institutional harm shaped by conservative politics in the U.S.

Conclusion

The reflective case studies on Minnesota and Utah demonstrate how queer and trans Ethnic Studies pedagogical strategies at PWIs must embed flexibility and unapologetic honesty because it is part of necessary unlearning/learning healing practices. Queer and trans feminist Ethnic Studies exposes and interrupts pervasive coloniality and structural inequities at the university level through a racialized gender lens. The classroom is a space to encourage students to disrupt vectors of power impacting their everyday lives in both liberal and conservative states. While not comprehensive, these case studies demonstrate how the "contemporary American academy is part of an institutional and social backlash against the inroads made by student movements" that gave us gender and Ethnic Studies, or as Roderick Ferguson (2017) described, "inroads that challenged the systems of power that sought to constrain the lives and possibilities of the marginalized" (p. 14). The academy's response to recent student encampments in support of Palestinian survival amid a genocide should continue to shape our pedagogical strategies. From having a student in Utah show up to class incognito because they were under investigation for their involvement in the student encampments to having a senior Chicana Studies scholar in Minnesota advocating to be neutral in how we discuss Palestine and Israel, queer and trans Ethnic Studies must remain unapologetic in the face of oppression—neither neutral nor silent.

An analysis of censorship, healing, and solidarity at PWIs in two politically divergent, states are positioned within a thread of reflections on the ecologies of power and resistance that are, now more than ever, necessary. Ethnic Studies scholars remind us that "teaching is the most political activity in which you could possibly engage" (cited in Ortiz & Ramirez, 2025, p. 186). While exhausting at times, guiding white students' understanding on how communities of color "have been a major force in safeguarding and expanding democracy in the United States" (Arce & Montaña, 2022, p. 130), it's rewarding to witness multiscale connections being made. It is part of the spiritual healing that feminista, muxerista, queer, and trans Ethnic Studies scholars continue to bridge across academic spaces adamant in their attempt to wound us.

As pedagogical strategy in queer and trans Ethnic Studies at PWIs, moreover, in the face of institutional violence, healing was and continues to be embodied by "my presence in the classroom, my body, my voice, and my identity," all of which are the "additional tools in my pedagogical toolbelt as I teach and learn alongside my students" (Caraves, 2020, p. 121). In order to disrupt and heal from the cycles of harm that subtly permeate our spaces, we need to give ourselves permission to "engage the wounds we carry, individually and collectively as queer Latinx/a/o people" (Orozco et al., 2023, p. 1371). Healing doesn't come with a guidebook; rather, it comes with a set of traumas that educators often hide deep in themselves, and consequently, they reveal

them in their teaching, unknowingly causing harm. Queer and trans Ethnic Studies pedagogical strategies offer us avenues to mitigate harm and heal ourselves collectively—a rejection to the elitist individualistic neoliberal academy.

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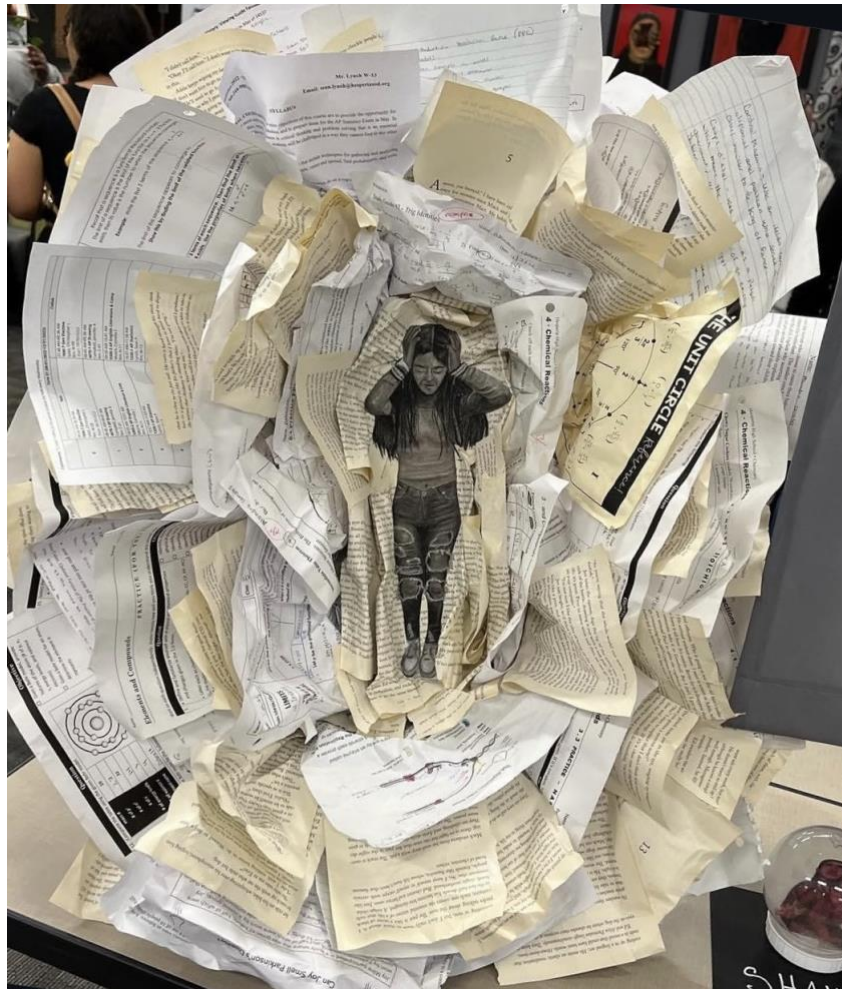
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Cover Art: Buried Beneath the Curriculum

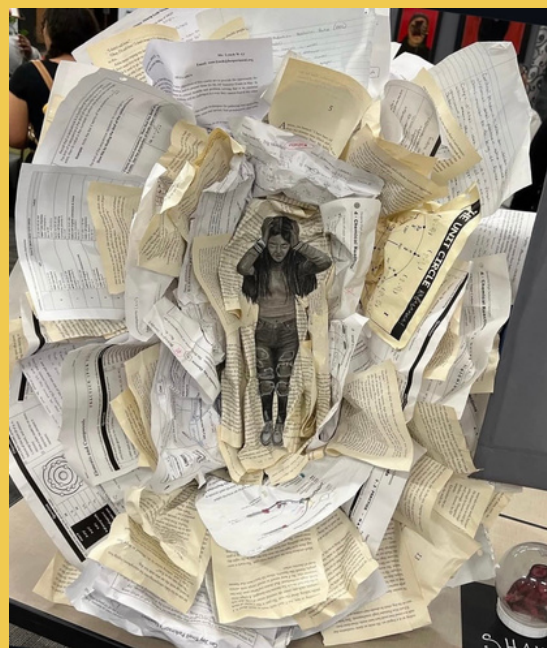
Alondra Corrales

Description: This art piece captures how dominant curriculum can obscure marginalized histories and Identities. It reflects the need for ethnic studies to uncover the voices that have been long overlooked and buried in educational spaces.

About the Author: Alondra Corrales is an undergraduate student at the University of California, Riverside, pursuing a bachelor's degree in education. Born in San Bernardino and raised in Hesperia, California, she is a Mexican American artist whose work explores themes of identity, education, and representation. Through mixed-media compositions utilizing books, educational materials, charcoal, and paint, she reflects on how education can both shape and challenge one's understanding of self. Her artwork encourages conversations about whose stories are taught, whose voices are heard, and the importance of creating educational spaces where every student feels seen, valued, and properly represented.

COVER IMAGE by Alondra Corrales

This art piece captures how dominant curriculum can obscure marginalized histories and identities. It reflects the need for ethnic studies to uncover the voices that have been long overlooked and buried in educational spaces.



ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Ethnic Studies Pedagogies is an open access online journal committed to critical race, decolonial, and ethnic studies movements, bridging public pedagogies with PK-12 contexts. We invite submissions using critical frameworks and methodologies that theorize, investigate, and reflect upon the ecologies of power and resistance both inside and outside the PK-12 classroom.

