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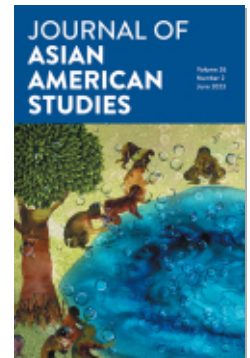
## Ethnic Studies as Social Movement: Resistance in the Face of Public Reaction

Giselle Cunanan, Artnelson Concordia, Taunya Jaco

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# ETHNIC STUDIES AS SOCIAL MOVEMENT

*Resistance in the Face of Public Reaction*

*Giselle Cunanan, Artnelson Concordia, and Taunya Jaco*

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**Abstract.** The article addresses the struggle to institutionalize K–12 ethnic studies, ethnic studies’ co-optation by the California Department of Education, and the shape of a conservative right-wing backlash. We situate the collective grassroots efforts of the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium as a national movement. We show how practitioners struggle to transform schools in the face of hegemonic power and argue that ethnic studies must always speak truth to power and cannot be reduced to multiculturalism. We hope that this knowledge supports efforts across the United States as we share what is at stake for ethnic studies.

## INTRODUCTION

Resistance to ethnic studies is nothing new. In today’s multicultural moment of diversity and inclusion, analyzing backlash against ethnic studies in K–12 education can reveal details about transfigurations of power and illuminate the rhetorical context within which ethnic studies finds itself in battle. The language of social and racial justice movements that accompanied the development of ethnic studies is being used to oppose it, powered by white supremacist logics.<sup>1</sup> Through a form of public reactionary conservatism, the terminology of inclusivity has been mobilized to exclude the people whose challenges gave

that language power and is being utilized to defeat the curriculum that taught people the power and value of such terms.

As history makes clear, ethnic studies always included an analysis of power and was a political project from its inception. In 1968, student organizations at then San Francisco State College, alongside community members and faculty, led the longest student strike in US history, demanding a relevant education, increased recruiting and admission of students of color, and a more diverse faculty to teach courses that centered the knowledge, histories, and experiences of people identifying with the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF).<sup>2</sup> Over the last fifty years, ethnic studies expanded beyond higher education and eventually institutionalized at the K–12 level in California, though it was met with some hostility and struggle.<sup>3</sup>

In September 2016, the California Governor Jerry Brown signed Assembly Bill (AB) 2016 into law, which required the state to develop and make available a model curriculum of ethnic studies for school districts to adopt.<sup>4</sup> In November 2018, California's Instructional Quality Commission (IQC) recommended that ethnic studies experts be a part of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Advisory Committee (ESMC-AC). The experts chosen had reputable credentials and training, community credibility, university and K–12 experience, and relevant professional work qualifying them as vetted specialists with comprehensive and experiential knowledge in ethnic studies. In addition, the CDE contracted through the Sacramento County Office of Education three Ethnic Studies curriculum writers. These three curriculum writers appointed to the IQC worked in collaboration with the ESMC-AC.<sup>5</sup> The curriculum writers initiated a draft of the model curriculum based on the feedback received from the ESMC-AC. In February, March, and April 2018, the ESMC-AC met for three two-day sessions to draft the curriculum. The first draft of the model curriculum was posted on the California Department of Education (CDE) website for public comment from June 15, 2018 to August 15, 2018.

The CDE received over fifty-seven thousand public comments over a two-month period. Many comments were in support of the proposed model curriculum. There was, however, an array of public comments, news briefs, and letters to the editor, mostly published online, that strongly objected to the curriculum. They exerted pressure on the CDE to halt the approval of the model curriculum, further delaying the establishment of ethnic studies in public schools. Because of the public alarm, the CDE eventually abandoned the established process and timetable. In doing so, the CDE disregarded the ESMC-AC's expert work and academic opinion and terminated the contracts of the three writers of the document. In March 2021, the State Board of Education went ahead and approved a third and final draft of an Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum that

diluted important lesson plans essential to ethnic studies' critique of power. At the time that we write this article, the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum is available via the CDE's website, but it is not the version that the experts wanted. Every member of the ESMC-AC and all three curriculum writers requested that their names be removed from the final draft and publicly declared that the CDE compromised their work.<sup>6</sup>

We detail the difficult and laborious process of creating a model curriculum with the CDE. Specifically, we draw on an Asian Americanist lens to argue that ethnic studies is not merely about identity and representation, as aligned with the multiculturalist agenda, but instead posit that ethnic studies must attend to the violent conditions that underwrite subjectivity in the first place. We draw on Kandice Chuh's critique of Asian American studies alongside the arguments of Lisa Lowe and Yéñ Lê Espiritu, objecting to the flattening of Asian American studies, Latinx studies, African American studies, Native and Indigenous studies, and ethnic studies writ large into a studies on identity politics. Thus, our analysis of the model curriculum process and its public reception finds us nestled within the fields of Asian American studies, critical ethnic studies, and American studies, always considering the ways in which white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism constitute our historical and material predicament with ethnic studies. The neoliberal programs of the state, Zionist influences, diversity agendas, and critics of ethnic studies who have little to no actual practice in the pedagogy of Ethnic Studies speak to our multicultural moment—the conditions that we examine here.

## VILIFYING ETHNIC STUDIES

Public comments received by the CDE show how people debated the materials of ethnic studies and how the CDE determined its contents to be illegitimate and thereby invalidated the experts appointed to the ESMC-AC. After the CDE disbanded the original Model Curriculum Advisory Committee, the CDE continued to revise the curriculum without disclosing a complete list of consultants hired to revise the draft. The CDE invited consultation from WestEd—a nonprofit, nonpartisan, education research agency—along with the Jewish Community Relations Council and other individuals and groups. The CDE was succumbing to the political pressures of the organized assemblages and public media.

The public comments received by the CDE shape a backlash against ethnic studies that described the curriculum as biased and discriminatory and claimed

that it is “divisive” and “promotes hate.” Some organizations and individuals regarded the first draft of the model curriculum anti-Semitic because the draft included a glossary definition of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS)—a Palestinian-led movement that promotes economic sanctions against Israel—and used it as an example of a justice-oriented social movement in a lesson plan. This reactionary backlash framed ethnic studies as teaching only about BDS while removing BDS from its accompanying examples in the lesson plan. The public comments from pro-Israel members considered much of the draft reprehensible, claiming that ethnic studies has no right to issue criticism of Israel-Palestine relations. As evidenced by the collection of public comments received by the CDE in addition to letters to the editor and news reports, this logic shows how the public views the model curriculum as a key site of “racial, national, and imperial fashioning.”<sup>7</sup> According to the comments in question, the curriculum was not supposed to include teachings about BDS and Palestine. They misrepresented the focus on Palestine and BDS as anti-Semitism and used such charges to direct attention away from the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

The organized protest against ethnic studies by a vocal segment of the Jewish community demonstrates how the Israeli state and US are involved in conjoined and similar practices of imperial sovereignty. The legions of Israeli American and Jewish groups reflect the stronghold and influence that Zionist organizers have in the state of California. Many individuals submitted public comments expressing their own personal experiences with anti-Semitic hate. Commenters shaped their grievances with civil rights language such as “rights,” “injustice,” and “discrimination” to condemn the model curriculum. One commenter, for example, argued that “the proposed curriculum poses a material threat to the safety and civil rights of Jewish and Israeli-American students.” Another comment shared this position and viewed that “this curriculum includes anti-Semitic tropes, one-sided BDS bias, and demonization of Israel.” These comments are some examples of the ways that the public misunderstands the purpose of ethnic studies and its work to critique power.<sup>8</sup>

In both public comment and in closed-door meetings, strong opposition was immediately raised against California State Assembly members, the State Board of Education, and Governor Gavin Newsom. The reaction reflected two general trends. Some of the opposition was voiced by those who believe that the field of ethnic studies runs counter to traditional Western liberal ideals that espouse the supremacy of the so-called free market along with the values, norms, and epistemologies associated with Western civilization. Other opposition that misrepresents criticism of Israel as anti-Semitism came from the Zionist community. The critiques of the model curriculum came from people who are not experts in the field. However, the CDE responded to these comments while dismissing the

expert advice and recommendations of the ESMC-AC and curriculum writers. As Palestine continues to confront the violence of Israeli colonization, ethnic studies faces an ethical imperative and commitment to address the occupation of Palestine and violent displacement of Palestinians in education.

## MULTICULTURAL ABSORPTION

The public comments briefly discussed here demonstrate both an investment in and protection of the traditional Western canon taught in schools and a form of reactionary conservatism that views ethnic studies as a threat to the Western episteme. K–12 schools claim an ethic of multiculturalism, but, in reality, continue to promote Western cultural study.<sup>9</sup> Ethnic studies challenges these biases.

The institutionalization of ethnic studies presents an ideological challenge and a paradox. Ethnic studies is prone to collapsing into a multiculturalist framework, decontextualized and depoliticized from its decolonizing agenda. Within the K–12 public school context, ethnic studies, along with health education, is the most scrutinized and opposed subject area. Given the long history of the US state alignment with cisheteropatriarchy and white supremacy, it should come as no surprise that efforts to teach about reproductive rights, gender equality, and racial, social, and environmental justice evoke such strong reactions from the champions of the status quo.

We observe the state's management and disciplining of ethnic studies. Portraying the model curriculum as failing to emphasize those very attributes misrepresents ethnic studies as an extremist, one-sided, and fabricated form of study. The rhetorical and discursive strategies briefly described here offer insight into the ways that the language of multiculturalism and diversity now serves neoliberal logics and undermines the founding intent of ethnic studies. The comments convey how white supremacy is reified through multicultural education and the limits of ethnic studies' institutional potential. Thus, we write this article with a sense of urgency to raise awareness of the encapsulating ways that multiculturalism works to preserve white supremacy, as Vijay Prashad neatly charts.<sup>10</sup>

While the public views ethnic studies as a field of study representing a diversity of histories and cultures in the terrain of multiculturalism, scholar Lisa Lowe reminds us that ethnic studies is not merely a reproduction of literary, historical, or sociological studies to celebrate "ethnic culture." Instead, ethnic studies theorizes in a critical dialectical manner the form, function, and order of

social categories that groups also use and, in turn, help produce.<sup>11</sup> Lowe's analysis is particularly useful because of her attention to multiculturalism. She points out that multiculturalism is a stage or dominant formation in the state's attempt to "recuperate conflict and difference through inclusion."<sup>12</sup> The CDE's attempt to make ethnic studies a multiculturalist study devoid of political pronouncements signifies an important post-civil rights era moment. Having ethnic studies as a part of the state's curriculum creates a vulnerability for ethnic studies to be controlled, policed, and managed by the state.

## WE STILL NEED ETHNIC STUDIES

While any attempt to institutionalize a radical project such as ethnic studies within institutions like our school districts will be fraught, the endeavor remains worthy of our most concerted effort. Though too many of our experiences as racialized people of color within K-12 public schooling have been dehumanizing, and while our critical knowledge of the history and purpose of education as a tool of discrimination, assimilation, and sorting reminds us of this, nevertheless, the vast majority of the children and youth of our communities are compelled to attend and will continue to be students in these spaces for the foreseeable future. Because of that reality, it is incumbent upon critical ethnic studies practitioners, scholars, and the larger social justice community, to continue to engage in the work to transform the system, to continue to democratize the institution of public schooling, and to make it truly accountable to communities of color, which compose the overwhelming majority of its student body in California.

In addition, ethnic studies continues to demonstrate a significant impact in students' lives not only in terms of academic achievement, but also in holistic student wellness.<sup>13</sup> In a study that examines the effective support for historically disenfranchised students through ethnic studies coursework, researchers saw growth in several metrics used to assess student "achievement."<sup>14</sup> For students who were enrolled in an ethnic studies course, they found that attendance improved by 21 percent. The average student GPA increased by 1.4 points, with math and science seeing the largest growth. Additionally, pushout rates among these youth significantly declined. Not only does ethnic studies improve student academic success, but it also improves students' self-esteem and self-determination, mental wellness, civic and community engagement, and commitment to cultural perpetuity.

As mentioned earlier, when Assembly Bill 2016 was signed into law to require the CDE to develop, adopt, and make available an ethnic studies model

curriculum, a collection of the state's leading scholars and practitioners assembled to create a resource that could be used by school districts throughout the state in their development of their respective ethnic studies offerings. The collective produced a draft that, while not perfect, was a strong first-of-its-kind step toward creating a resource for classroom teachers that may not have a background in ethnic studies. The document was a tool aligned with the origins, purpose, emerging impactful practice, and pedagogy of ethnic studies in secondary public schools.

Among others, there are two particular and significant developments in the movement to develop ethnic studies within K–12 public schools that need highlighting. First, the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium (LESMCC) was developed “to promote the advancement and implementation of well-designed Ethnic Studies courses and programs for the purpose of advancing students’ academic achievement, educational equity, community activist scholarship, and community leadership skills.”<sup>15</sup> Second, the Coalition for Liberated Ethnic Studies (CLES) was developed to “lift up principles, policies, practices, and pedagogies that center—the knowledge, narratives, experiences, and wellness of—Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPoC) communities so that liberation of all peoples and relations are realized.”<sup>16</sup> While these two formations are related and work in concert with a number of important organizations supporting the development of ethnic studies curriculum and pedagogy, it is important to highlight the focus areas of each of the formations because they emphasize different material efforts essential to the movements for ethnic studies. The LESMCC directly supports teachers and districts in the development of ethnic studies content and pedagogy in fidelity with the origin and purpose of the discipline, whereas the CLES focuses on the activism and organizing necessary to support, sustain, and grow the movement for authentic ethnic studies, broadly.

We distinctly fight for a radical, authentic, political, and liberatory ethnic studies so that ethnic studies works outside the multiculturalist logics of the state. The model curriculum available via the CDE website bears the name ethnic studies yet it is not the version that organizers, writers, and experts approved. As a nationwide social movement for ethnic studies grows, it is imperative to develop an ethnic studies curriculum that is antiracist, decolonial, and both culturally responsive and responsive to communities. We reiterate that “it is not enough to adopt an Ethnic Studies curriculum without attending to pedagogy.”<sup>17</sup> Our writing is one method of our praxis. It is our way of putting radical Asian American studies pedagogy into practice, calling truth to power, and calling upon communities to work in solidarity with us.



## NOTES

1. Giselle Dejamco Cunanan, "Ethnic Studies Now: Racial Labor in a Multicultural Moment" (PhD diss., Indiana University Bloomington, 2021).
2. These efforts along with simultaneous national efforts for the culturally relevant curriculum altogether reflected the collective work of grassroots organizations to transform schools. Students organized to demand an education that reflected their histories and struggles in the US. They questioned the Eurocentric bias in the curriculum and the value of their education because they felt that schools did not equip them with the tools to respond to the daily problems in their lives. This was the birth of the scholarly field of ethnic studies. In California, Merritt College was the first community college to offer a Black history course in 1964, as well as an Associate of Arts degree in Afro-American studies; several years later it became the first department in 1967. The foundation of these efforts was initiated by Bobby Seale, a Merritt College student, cofounder of the Black Panther Party and the department's first chair, Melvin Newton, and leading educator Dr. Cecilia Arrington, who taught in the department for over thirty years. The Black Studies program at Merritt College gave expression to the efforts of the Third World Liberation Front. *Merritt College: Home of the Black Panthers, YouTube* (Peralta Colleges, 2014), <https://youtu.be/54wYfiGYMrw>. Other higher education institutions, including University of California, Berkeley, Cornell University, and City College of New York, also had students demanding a third world studies curriculum.
3. Taunya Marie Jaco, "The Criteria For Developing A TK-12 Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum" (PhD diss., San Jose State University, 2021). Jaco notes that in 2010, for example, the Arizona State Legislature enacted House Bill (HB) 2281 which essentially banned ethnic studies from Arizona public schools. The bill particularly targeted Mexican American/Raza studies (MARS) courses offered at high schools. Proponents of HB 2281 stated that the course taught students to hate white people and encouraged students to overthrow the US government. Although the Arizona courts formally determined HB 2281 unconstitutional in 2017, the bill itself set a precedent to criminalize and police ethnic studies courses in high schools. Beginning in 1998, the Tucson Unified School District began offering classes that focused on Mexican American history, literature, and art. In addition, Tucson developed programs for African American studies, pan-Asian studies, and Native American studies. Yet it was not until 2010 that the Arizona State Legislature enacted HB 2281. MARS was singled out as being subject to enforcement of the law because Tucson Unified School District had forty-eight course offerings, making it the largest ethnic studies program nationwide. Please also see the documentary Taunya Jaco, dir., *Fidelity at the Forefront: The Fight for Ethnic Studies* (2021), YouTube Video, <https://youtu.be/BF6sKe9S8T4>.
4. California assembly member Luis Alejo wrote AB 2016.
5. The three curriculum writers appointed to the IQC included Jeanelle Hope, Guillermo Gomez, and Artnelson Concordia, all experts and practitioners of ethnic studies.

6. Elizabeth Arzate, R. Tolteka Cuahtin, Jeanelle Hope, Melissa Moreno, Samia Shoman, Dawniell Black, Angie Fa, Roselinn Lee, Jorge Pacheco Jr., Alphonso Thompson, Lupe Carrasco Cardona, Guillermo Gomez, Stephen Leeper, Jenna Phillips, Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales, Artnelson Concordia, John Gonzalez, Theresa Montañó, Aimee Riechel, Vicky Xiong-Lor. (Sacramento, California, February 3, 2021); The undersigned writers declared, “Ethnic Studies knowledge, framework, pedagogy, and community histories have been compromised due to political and media pressure. Our association with the final document is troubling because it does not reflect the Ethnic Studies curriculum that we believe California students deserve and need.”
7. Keith P. Feldman, *Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade, “Meeting Asian/Arab American Studies: Thinking Race, Empire, and Zionism in the US,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 9, no. 2 (2006): 117–40.
8. Gary Y. Okihiro, *Third World Studies: Theorizing Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.
9. Scholar Lisa Lowe argues that universities claim an ethic of multiculturalism when under pressure for more diversity and representation; we extend her argument to apply it to K–12 public schools operating within the colonial apparatus of the imperial state. Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 41.
10. Vijay Prashad notes, “What had begun as a radical challenge to racism had devolved into the institutional home of multiculturalism. . . . Multiculturalism emerges, in its own clumsy way, to preserve this white supremacy from above.” Prashad, “Ethnic Studies Inside Out,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 9, no. 2 (2006): 157–76, here 161.
11. Lowe, 41.
12. Lowe, 42.
13. Christine E. Sleeter and Miguel Zavala, *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Research* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2020).
14. Thomas S. Dee and Emily K. Penner, “The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance,” *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 1 (2016): 127–66.
15. Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium (LESMCC), accessed 2022, <https://www.liberatedethnicstudies.org>.
16. Coalition for Liberated Ethnic Studies (CLES), accessed 2021, <https://ethnicstudies-coalition.org>.
17. R. Tolteka Cuahtin et al., *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, 2019).