

Why a Journal on Ethnic Studies Pedagogies?

Michael Dominguez, San Diego State University
Brian Lozenski, Macalester College
Miguel Zavala, California State University, Los Angeles
Marie Nubia Feliciano, California State University, Fullerton

While ethnic studies may seem new to K-12 classrooms and policy conversations, as a field, ethnic studies is anything but new. With its roots in the theorizing of early anti-colonial intellectuals and community leaders, this distinct field we call ethnic studies grew from the community protests led by the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF)—a collective of Native, Latinx/Chicanx, Black, and Asian-American student and community organizers—at San Francisco State University (SFSU, then San Francisco State College) and UC Berkeley in the late 1960's. First on the list of demands these early activists pushed for was:

That a school of Ethnic Studies for the ethnic groups involved in the Third World be set up with the students in each particular ethnic organization having the authority and control of...the curriculum in a specific area of study.

Exploring the full nuance and history of the TWLF's multiple demands and struggles is beyond our scope here, but what is unquestionably the case is that when the dust settled, these early activists had forced the creation of a new, transdisciplinary academic field; one that would ensure marginalized voices, experiences, and perspectives were clearly and distinctly heard in the academy, and had clear homes on campus. At both SFSU and UC Berkeley, Colleges of Ethnic Studies were established, with the four departments—Black Studies, Chicana/o/x/Latinx Studies (then Mexican American Studies), Asian American Studies, and Native American Studies—in place and in position to recruit faculty, serve students, develop curriculum, and chart new paths forwards for communities of color.

In the 50-plus years since the TWLF's victories, ethnic studies colleges and departments began to spring up in universities across the country as students and community members carried the TWLF's demands forward. They argued for the importance of their place in educational settings, and the value of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian-American, and other marginalized communities' epistemologies and ontologies. This was not just a revolution of representation and inclusion, but of re-thinking and transforming in fundamental ways what it meant to examine, explore, understand, and create knowledge.

But while ethnic studies was able to establish a strong foothold at the university level, and the discipline has been clear, evolving, and productive in higher education since its inception, K-12 schools were slower to respond. Rather, communities, activists, and ethnic studies alumni would spend over 50 years negotiating space, pressing forward with strong ideas that would be twisted and watered down by multiple decades of neoliberal policy-making and the standardization of a Eurocentric curriculum. Thus, working from the margins and centering the perspectives of working-

class communities of color in the school curriculum, we would see the implementation of ethnic studies programs rise (prominent among these being the Mexican American Studies program in Tucson Unified), be attacked, and fall, and organizing efforts hunker in for the long haul, pushing on political leaders to center community ways of knowing in the K-12 classroom. While exciting, we know that California's passage of AB 101 in 2021, mandating ethnic studies as a graduation requirement for all students, nor the many district, city, and school policies that do the same nationwide, are not final successes, but small steps forward in a longer struggle.

As we look to the launch of this journal, it is valuable to consider this genealogy and history of where ethnic studies comes from. The themes we are exploring here in *Ethnic Studies Pedagogies* is not a new trend or fad, nor is it a re-badging and re-branding of the diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts that have been done over and over in schools. We are excited to see a field with 50 years of history and inter-disciplinary roots finally emerge as a topic of study and attention in K-12 contexts, and to create a grassroots journal as a space that furthers knowledge of, and exists in service to, ethnic studies in K-12 contexts.

Another Kind of Truth-Telling, Another Kind of Hxstory

The movement for ethnic studies has been iterative since its inception. Ethnic studies exists as both a critique of the colonial contexts in which it stands, and as a space to imagine, strategize, and enact new ways of being. This duality places complex demands on ethnic studies practitioners, theorists, and students. We are positioned to respond to the material realities of communities who have experienced economic, political, and intellectual dispossession. Ethnic studies spaces must help to provide historical context, analyses, and what philosopher Charles Mills (1994) calls, "revisionist ontologies," to understand our current realities. We might think of these revisionist ontologies as ways of knowing based on the subjectivities of those who have borne the brunt of colonialism. How have Indigenous communities conceptualized land and humans as one in the same? How have the enslaved understood education as a literal embodiment of freedom? How have displacement and dispossession shaped the ontologies and epistemologies of marginalized peoples in the United States? How have perceptions of ethnicity, language, and migration come together to racialize communities of color? These are the stakes of ethnic studies frameworks. They provide an alternate set of questions, presuppositions, and thus, *realities* through which to navigate our current moment.

In 1938, an article in the the *Negro History Bulletin* (Dagbovie, 2004) titled, "The Right to Know the Truth Denied", stated:

Education is always a problem. Many of the things which we study today are detrimental to us; but we have to accept such education because it is imposed upon us, and we cannot help ourselves. Things taught in schools in various parts of the world are not true, but authorities want the people to believe that such things are true. Those in power try thereby to use education as means to reach other ends. (p. 8)

Ethnic studies spaces inherently deal with this question regarding the nature of truth, and invite educators to reflect on what engaging with such questions mean in terms of praxis. For this reason, ethnic studies and spaces of critical educational exchange have long been deemed dangerous to

those who want to perpetuate the status quo of colonial education. *Ethnic Studies Pedagogies* emerges from this tradition; reflecting a perspective that beyond conceptual understandings of how truth is constructed, there are pedagogical practices that encourage students to grapple with the nature of truth, history, and reality. These pedagogies often integrate the arts, embodiment, direct action, and collective inquiry. Understanding the pedagogical practices that support ethnic studies inquiry is as important as the content that ethnic studies attempts to convey. And importantly, when these practices are shared, they spread.

From black educators teaching in segregated Jim Crow era schools across the U.S., to Mexican-American communities resisting English-only education, to tribal elders maintaining cultural traditions, languages, and narratives even as their communities were ravaged by the impacts of the boarding schools, the opportunity to share lessons, archive learning, and disseminate deeper understandings of the practice of sustaining community were critical to early anti-colonial educators. In our current moment of entrenched epistemic ignorance (Lees, Tropp Laman, & Calderón, 2021) (i.e., the denial of the right to know the truth), this new journal is as vital to ethnic studies practitioners today as those publications were during those eras of more overt and codified discrimination and segregation. With all this in mind, *Ethnic Studies Pedagogies* seeks to illuminate and disseminate pedagogies of truth-telling and world-building based on the knowledge systems that have existed outside of formal colonial education institutions.

The Future of Ethnic Studies

As ethnic studies expands into more classrooms, we are experiencing and witnessing an ethnic studies futurity in the present. This present moment has led to the creation of learning spaces in high schools where students of color see themselves for the first time in the curriculum; where students engage in YPAR (Youth Participatory Action Research) as they explore problems and issues in their communities with the tools of ethnic studies; where middle schoolers use art as a vehicle for identifying aspects of their own community cultural wealth; where high school youth create picture books on historical issues and use these to teach elementary children about these omitted histories; where students write schooling biographies and read them to each other in ways that allow them to name injustice; and where healing trauma begins as students learn about their rich ancestral legacies. These and other examples of practice can help us imagine the future of ethnic studies in and outside schools, and transform how we view schooling, where education takes place, and how learning happens, at a critical social moment.

As we look forward to 2023, our students require different skills than those classrooms have traditionally offered. The United States nation-state we have inherited is a colonial, capitalist construct, but also a multiracial, multicultural, multireligious, and multilingual society, full of creativity and innovation. Yet for decades, the education system has done little to center and value this emerging future. The present resurgence of white supremacy is a reminder both of this failure, and that we are still engaged in a struggle to determine who we *are* and what kind of collective society we want to form. Our students are facing an epistemic conundrum as the reality of a pluralistic future lives in real tension with nationalistic, Eurocentric forces trying to circumvent this creative, generative inevitability. An ethnic studies education for the future will need to center life experiences as sources of truth, critically examine ideas, assumptions, and discourse, and encourage learning experiences that help our students engage with their world from an informed and empowered position.

Within ethnic studies, we are able to grapple with the notions of race, identity, power, belonging, community, and nation. We can critically interrogate where and how we define a collective notion of identity that is inclusive and broad enough so that all are seen, but none are foreclosed upon. Ethnic studies equip us in the now with forms of study that contextualize insider and outsider group differences, our intertwining histories, and collective struggles. It provides a roadmap that, although not straightforward, accounts for pauses, side trips, crossroads, and the creation of new paths of self and collective discovery. Ethnic studies insists on intersectional thinking and an acknowledgement of our subjectivities. It is decolonial, it is antiracist, and it is a study of hope and possibility, not, as some would argue, victimization, identity-silos, and grievance. Knowing about oneself permits a perspective to receive others and their experiences with humility and care as we learn, grow, create, and innovate together. Ethnic studies looks like us, both collectively and individually.

The future of ethnic studies will bridge classroom and community learning. The future of ethnic studies will rethink recognized fields of knowledge and pedagogical processes. The future of ethnic studies will transform and disrupt disciplinary boundaries. The future of ethnic studies will be attuned to hope; to the relational, the spiritual, and prophetic possibilities. The future of ethnic studies will invite youth and families to be co-creators of knowledge, teachers to facilitate empowerment and healing, and scholarship to speak with humility and solidarity. The future of ethnic studies is now; etched in the prefigurative world-building and liberatory love that guides the varied, contextual, and creative projects it engenders. *Ethnic Studies Pedagogies* aims to honor, nurture, and further that future by archiving, sharing, and celebrating the creative and exciting research, praxis, and visions that are happening in classrooms as we write.

Humanizing The Publishing Experience by Honoring Our Epistemic Diversity

In practice, we are operating with a humanizing publishing and editorial experience. For many of us, if not all, publication and editorial reviews of our work have been scaring and damaging. Traditional reviews follow a predictable, linear process. Scholars work incessantly on their research, write about it, and then submit for publication (in mostly corporate run journals). Not diminishing the value of these publication outlets, because many of us have published pieces that are contributing to growing fields of knowledge in the study of race, power, and pedagogies, we often find that editors are distant and unknown. Reviews tend to be punitive, with feedback (if any) leading to a decision: “accept with revisions, revise and resubmit, and reject and submit elsewhere.” We hear from other scholars of color the ways journals privilege ways of knowing over others, how they become a sort of guessing game, and at worst police what counts as knowledge.

Our approach, therefore, is to proceed with a critical publishing pedagogy (Buenavista, 2022) and Chicana feminist approaches that encourage collaborative writing and nurturing editing processes (Saldaña & Aléman, 2019). Our approach is holistic, encompassing strategies and relationships that support emerging and minoritized scholars, and those on the margins of scholarly writing and publishing including K-12 educators, artists, organizers and youth, so that their writing, perspectives, and community ways of knowing are supported and published. Two aspects of a critical publishing pedagogy are that feedback operates at the pedagogical level, and that editors build community with and alongside contributing authors.

Feedback as pedagogy proceeds by providing technical and explained feedback on writing. It proceeds with seeing pieces as developmental and guided by others. For instance, a lead editor on a specific issue may bring authors together to discuss their writing and share ideas. Other examples include establishing a mentorship relation to authors, where editors (and other authors) work closely with contributors at various stages of their writing. While this approach is time intensive and not without challenges, we believe prioritizing the relational aspects of writing will lead to purposeful and meaningful experiences that provide transformative opportunities for not just contributing authors, but also editors. We, therefore, seek to model the notion of working alongside authors, of nurturing their development (and ours), and to guide them in ways that model the values of ethnic studies.

Critical in understanding the field of ethnic studies is understanding that epistemic diversity—a rich appreciation for knowledge expressed, explored, and demonstrated in a variety of forms and formats—is at its core. Our educational institutions, from Pre-K up through graduate schools, are built upon Eurocentric, colonial models that have traditionally valued only one form of demonstrating knowledge. As professionals and academics, this is nowhere truer than in the ways scholarly and professional journals—now widely controlled and published by an “educational industrial complex” of academic corporations—insist on standard formulae for how knowledge must be presented, and whose standards it must meet to “count” as contributions to our understanding of the world. Ethnic studies, as a field, rejects such constraints, and so do we.

None of this is to say that ethnic studies, or this journal, is not interested in rigorous research, reflection, empirical inquiry, or knowledge creation. Rather, we understand that all of these things might all occur without it being translated into a very particular type of writing format, with the proper subheadings, structure, and codified norms. The idea that this type of formulaic, often-sterile writing is the only way to produce and share knowledge is absurd. Traditional, formal inquiry and research papers have their place in sharing community voices, informing praxis, and guiding future research, but so too do unrealized, creative formats that spark us to think in new, unforeseen ways. We are interested in seeing and uplifting both traditional research inquiry, but also unexpected and creative pieces that push the boundaries of what scholarship might be.

We look to innovators and creators like Gloria Anzaldúa, who never did get that PhD, but whose genre-bending work is widely celebrated today, or, thinking hypothetically, of a teacher eager to share the multimedia creations their students have put together through their own multimedia reflection, as archetypes of the epistemic diversity this journal is interested in. Ethnic studies has always been interested in centering, cultivating, and celebrating the creative ways of knowing and thinking—the decolonizing methodologies—that communities participate in. We look forward to publishing work that bends and challenges genres, and marries the creative with the scholarly with the grassroots, and, when necessary, working with contributors to determine how to share non-traditional formats that make meaningful contributions to the field and knowledge, and ultimately transform peoples’ lives and the social institutions they are a part of.

A Note on the Foundations of This Journal

The creation of *Ethnic Studies Pedagogies* preceded the first convening of the editorial collective, which took place in July of 2022. Prior to that gathering, several editorial board members had crossed paths in other spaces, such as at the American Educational Research Association, and

through community-activist spaces like the Free Minds Free People conferences and the Xicanx Institute on Teaching and Organizing (XITO). While many in our Editorial Collective come from scholar-activist spaces, we have sought to bridge relations with teachers and community educators/organizers, who have also joined the editorial board. The initial invitation to an emerging editorial board was framed as follows:

This journal is envisioned as a relatively autonomous space not owned by a university or corporate publisher but rather a space where scholars, educators, teachers, teacher educators, and organizers--who converge on anti-racist, decolonial, and rehumanizing praxes--come together to study, theorize, reflect upon, and contribute to an emerging archive of their work and local projects, and that links up to larger movements and scholarship.

Following this initial invitation, we had a set of meetings convening a national representation, from places like Pennsylvania, Minnesota, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, and the four major subfields of ethnic studies. Gaining momentum, an editorial collective was formed. The initial meetings focused on the vision for the journal and defining collaborative and humanizing editing processes that subvert the traditional, patriarchal and corporate model, experienced as punitive and imbued with knowledge policing, by emerging scholars of color. As we look forward, the journal, and our editorial board, will continue to challenge ourselves to stay true to our initial vision, while seeking to grow, develop, and cultivate the most humanizing, rigorous, decolonial, and productive space of pedagogical reflection and discussion on K-12 ethnic studies possible.

For more information about *Ethnic Studies Pedagogies*, please visit www.EthnicStudiesPedagogies.org.

References

- Buenavista, T. L. (2022). Editorship as publishing pedagogy. [Unpublished manuscript].
- Dagbovie, P. G. (2004). Making Black history practical and popular: Carter G. Woodson, the Proto Black Studies Movement, and the struggle for Black liberation. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 28(2).
- Lees, A., Tropp Laman, T., & Calderón, D. (2021). "Why didn't I know this?": Land education as an antidote to settler colonialism in early childhood teacher education. *Theory Into Practice*, 60(3), 279-290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2021.1911482>
- Saldaña, L. P., and Alemán, S. (2019). Chicana/Latina studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social: An Anzaldúan approach to Chicana feminist editorial praxis. In *Mundo Zurdo 5: Selected works from the 2018 Meeting of the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa*. Aunt Lute Books.
- The Right to Know the Truth Denied. (1938). *Negro History Bulletin*, 1(9), 8-8.