

Imagining Ethnic Studies in Rural Spaces

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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 (Camarrota & 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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