

Introduction: Ethnic Studies in Hostile Terrain

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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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