

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Teacher Praxis and Community Struggle

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

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

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

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

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

Conflict, Whiteness, and Niceness

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

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

The Storying of Ethnic Studies

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

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

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

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

Methodology

Intentions, Relationships, and Positionality

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1
ES Design Team Members

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

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

Storying as Praxis

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

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

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

Research Activities and Analysis

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

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

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

Part I: “Another world is possible”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strand 1: Liberation and Getting Along

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Teach w/ agenda” ⇒ vulnerable to lawsuits

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ian: Why does that matter so much to you?

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

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

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

Strand 2: Including, Othering, Empowering

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Preoccupations and Possibilities

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Appendix A. District Boundaries

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