

Introduction

At a Seattle School Board meeting, students, teachers, and parents held signs reading “Teach Us Real History,” “Decolonize Seattle Public Schools,” and “Ethnic Studies Is the Truth.” In Portland, Oregon, students yelled, “Fists up, everyone!” and cheered as the Portland Public School Board passed a resolution in support of Ethnic Studies. Students descended on the California State Capitol in Sacramento to testify about how Ethnic Studies taught them about their histories and cultures and encouraged them to perform well in schools. In Providence, Rhode Island, student activists rallied for Ethnic Studies outside the Providence School Department, with one speaker proclaiming, “I deserve an education that makes me feel powerful.” In Texas, as the State Board of Education was considering the adoption of Ethnic Studies, student and community activists rallied with signs reading “We Are MAS [Mexican American Studies] Students, Hear Us Roar!”

On the heels of the banning of Ethnic Studies in Arizona in 2011 and atop a wave of California school districts making Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement, a movement has been unleashed in the United States. It is a powerful movement for K–12 Ethnic Studies that has sprung from students, teachers, and community activists seeking to transform curriculum and teaching into tools for social justice in public schools.

The Tucson Unified School District in Arizona is a touchpoint for K–12 Ethnic Studies. Although not the first to offer high school Ethnic Studies classes, Tucson Unified was the first to do so at a districtwide level with its Mexican American Studies program. Tucson’s Ethnic Studies program had a

powerful impact on students that was documented by several studies: In Tucson’s schools, Mexican American Studies reversed the low-achievement/high-push out levels and general intellectual stagnation for Latinx/Chicanx students typically produced by the Eurocentric, standards-based curriculum and test-driven teaching of the past three decades.

In short, Latinx/Chicanx students who had seemed apathetic came alive through Ethnic Studies classes.

Teachers across the nation who had been teaching Ethnic Studies in their own classrooms already knew of its positive effects. Many teachers knew their textbooks fell far short of including Ethnic Studies knowledge. Many teachers viewed their purpose as not simply to raise students’ test scores but rather to equip students with the knowledge and experiences they would be able to use to improve conditions in their communities and their lives. These teachers knew from their own teaching that when students of color see their experiences, realities, histories, and intellectual frameworks represented in the classroom, they wake up and dive in.

In response to the progressive politics of the Ethnic Studies program, right-wing conservatives in Arizona viciously attacked the program and eventually banned Ethnic Studies in Arizona’s K–12 schools through state law HB 2281 in 2010. This law essentially outlawed Ethnic Studies for several years. The uproar it caused had a tremendous effect around the country, however, inadvertently launching what has become a national movement.

In a short period of time, the Ethnic Studies movement has spread like wildfire. Numerous school districts across California now require Ethnic Studies,



and the state of California is in the beginning stages of developing model Ethnic Studies and Native American curricula. Oregon has a statewide requirement to develop and offer Ethnic Studies K–12, and in Kansas there are efforts to introduce statewide legislation. Indiana high schools will soon be required to offer Ethnic and Racial Studies as an elective course. States with large Indigenous populations—like Montana, Washington, and Alaska—have standards for including Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum. Seattle is in the process of implementing Ethnic Studies across the district; students in Providence, Rhode Island, have successfully lobbied for an Ethnic Studies pilot; and Albuquerque, New Mexico, is launching Ethnic Studies courses in all of its high schools. There are also individual Ethnic Studies courses popping up in individual schools around the country.

An Ethnic Studies Framework

The growing movement to bring Ethnic Studies into K–12 schools raises many important questions for teachers. What does Ethnic Studies mean and how should it be taught? Does Ethnic Studies mean teaching separate units about the cultures and histories of different ethnic groups? Does it have to be a separate class? Can one Ethnic Studies curriculum be developed, packaged, sold, and taught everywhere? Can anyone teach Ethnic Studies? If not, what kind of training and knowledge do Ethnic Studies teachers need? Is Ethnic Studies just for social studies or is it a way of envisioning and teaching the entire curriculum? Is Ethnic Studies the same as multicultural education or something else entirely? These are the kinds of questions we address in the pages of *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*.

Rethinking Ethnic Studies is organized around a holistic Ethnic Studies Framework that was initially proposed by co-editor and high school Ethnic Studies teacher R. Tolteka Cuauhtin. The framework connects directly with a review by co-editor Christine Sleeter on themes that run across the literature in African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American Studies. Principles within this framework have been articulated by co-editor Miguel Zavala’s conceptualization of a rehumanizing and decolonizing pedagogy for Ethnic Studies, as well as co-editor Wayne Au’s ongoing work in

anti-racist teaching and education for social justice.

The framework is based on four basic premises:

1. All human beings have holistic, ancestral, precolonial roots upon our planet.
2. For many students of color, colonization, enslavement, and forced diaspora attempted to eliminate and replace their ancestral legacies with a Eurocentric, colonial model of themselves.
3. This Eurocentric, colonial model has been normalized for all students, translating to a superficial historical literacy and decontextualized relationship to history today and negatively impacting academic identity for students of color in particular.
4. In order for colonized students to initiate a process of regeneration, revitalization, restoration, and decolonization, they must honestly study this historical process as an act of empowerment and social justice.

Language and Ethnic Studies

We also need to address how language is used in this volume. Our language very often fails us. This book is written in English—a linguistic vestige of settler colonialism and white supremacy in the United States. It is the language of the “victors,” and it was used to carry out attempted cultural genocide. Our use of English carries this legacy with it. We recognize that when we use English to communicate, we are fundamentally bound by the politics of racism, patriarchy, sexism, capitalism, and colonization buried within the English language. Indeed, even when communicating in Spanish (which three of us also do), we are also using a Eurocentric language of colonization. Because Ethnic Studies is so strongly centered on anti-racism, cultural revitalization, and decolonization, it has always (and rightfully) struggled with the inherent contradiction of our use of the language of the colonization: Fundamentally we are trying to use what historically has been a tool for domination as a tool for resistance and liberation.

The word “ethnic” in Ethnic Studies symbolizes this contradiction perfectly. Although we currently use “ethnic” to refer to culture or a cultural group,



the origin of the term is imbued with politics and power: Originally it meant “heathen” or “pagan”—both terms used to refer to non-Christian groups. More specifically, “ethnic” comes through the Latin and Greek *ethnikos* (heathen) to *ethnos* (nation), connoting a non-Christian (and, we might argue, non-Western) “other.” The politics of this should not be lost on us considering that “ethnic” is most often used to refer to non-white groups.

That said, Ethnic Studies is both about the critique of unequal power and the reclamation of power by marginalized and oppressed communities. In this way, the term “Ethnic Studies” itself is an example of one such reclamation. We’ve taken the word “ethnic” back, flipped the old meaning on its head, and are using it to build a movement that focuses on anti-racist and decolonizing curriculum and teaching. A term of oppression has been transformed into a term of potential liberation.

The chapters in *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* embody the overall struggle between Ethnic Studies and the English language in two ways. The first has to do with terminology. The English language categories for talking about race, culture, and gender are rigid, constrictive, and built on legacies of racism, patriarchy, sexism, and white supremacy. They are too inflexible to really describe our realities, especially if we want to name ourselves in ways that move beyond gender binaries and challenge the politics of race. In response to the confines of English, Ethnic Studies has pushed on the spellings and pronunciations of many commonly used racial and cultural categories and the gendered nature of the English language.

For instance, here in the pages of *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*, you will find a range of terms being used to identify the Indigenous and colonized peoples of the Americas (even the Italian roots of the term “America” communicate the political legacies of naming; Abya Yala, Turtle Island, and Ixachilan are three Indigenous names for the continent). While no *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* authors use the term “Hispanic” (which problematically means “of Spanish origin”), authors use “Latinx” or “Latin@” or “Latina/o” for peoples commonly referred to as Latin American. We see the limits in this terminology as well, given that the root of all these terms is “Latin”—thus based in a language of colonization, since Latinxs can actu-

ally be of any precolonial continental ancestry, which the term obscures. For these reasons, several authors also use “Chicana/o” or “Chicanx” or “Xicanx” to challenge gender binaries and to move closer to more Indigenous words, spellings, and identities.

Authors in this volume also try to challenge the gendered nature of several terms, including “history.” So you will see the term “herstory” used as a gendered counterpart, or even “hxrstory” (still pronounced *herstory*) as another step beyond the gender binary. Out of respect for the variety of terms and the politics and power of naming, we as editors of *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* have chosen to follow the lead of our contributors in how they’ve named many of these categories. This means that terms may shift from chapter to chapter.

In addition to new terminology, the second way the chapters here embody the struggle between Ethnic Studies and the English language is through the use of more academic and intellectual language. Ethnic Studies rests on the foundational understanding that education has been used for colonization and white supremacy, and as part of these processes, knowledge has either been kept from communities of color or offered up in safer, tamer forms that keep us from struggling for liberation.

So there is a tradition in Ethnic Studies of recognizing that those in power do not want us to know particular hxrstories, theories, politics, cultures, and forms of resistance; do not want us to be “smart”; do not want us to be intellectuals capable of thinking deeply about our existence. In response, Ethnic Studies has developed its own tradition of using academic and intellectual language as a point of resistance—a way to say, in the face of racism and white supremacy, “Yes, we are smart, and we have a right to understand the world in complex ways too.” As such, while *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* is not an academic text, it respects students and teachers enough to recognize that we can learn important and powerful concepts that can help us understand ourselves and the world.

Organization of the Book

Although *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* is not based on all the dimensions in the comprehensive Ethnic Studies Framework (see p. 65 for a more detailed



discussion of the framework), elaborations of central elements are present throughout the volume.

Chapters in Part 1, “Framing Ethnic Studies,” offer holistic conceptualizations of Ethnic Studies that connect curriculum, pedagogy, students, and community. Prior to the chapter that elaborates on the Ethnic Studies Framework that organizes *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*, chapters explain what Ethnic Studies is and is not, the centrality of students’ lives and student activism to Ethnic Studies, why Ethnic Studies matters for everyone, and what it means to teach Ethnic Studies. The four subsequent sections of the book are expressions of the four “macroscales” or “macrothemes” in the Ethnic Studies Framework.

Part 2 develops “Indigeneity and Roots”—the recognition of the sovereignty of the Indigenous nations on whose land teaching is taking place, as well as the identities, ancestral roots, and intergenerational legacies of students in the classroom. Chapters describe various strategies used by teachers from elementary through high school levels to help students explore their family backgrounds, in some cases opening up space to consider painful experiences of family members, such as having fled a war, having been enslaved, or having been forced to forget their ancestral family languages and stories. Chapters illustrate tapping into ancestral knowledge students may have learned at home or community members may hold and be willing to share.

Part 3 delves into “Colonization and Dehumanization”—the historic processes through which peoples of color have been robbed of land, labor, dignity, and autonomy. If students are to heal from the historic traumas of colonization and racism and learn to work for justice, they need to be able to understand oppressive relationships in historical terms. Chapters in this section take on issues such as genocide, segregation, institutional racism, and white supremacy, with some drawing connections to oppressive systems such as capitalism.

Part 4 unmasks “Hegemony and Normalization”—the processes through which oppressive relations have come to be seen as normal or natural. Some chapters in this section critique and move beyond textbooks; others engage students in activities such as simulation and role play that are designed

to prompt students to question “realities” they had previously taken for granted.

Part 5 addresses “Regeneration and Transformation”—the potential of working toward rehumanization and social justice activism. Chapters show multiple processes and concepts teachers have used to help students claim powerful identities of themselves as historically and culturally located people who are intellectually as well as politically capable of making a difference. Through combinations of historical study, community study, role plays, and humanizing experiences in the classroom, young people learn to take on pressing issues in their own communities such as militarization of schooling and police violence.

The last section, Part 6, looks at the work of “Organizing for and Sustaining Ethnic Studies.” Here, authors from diverse parts of the country—ranging from San Francisco to Providence, from Chicago to Austin, from Sacramento to Portland—reflect upon their efforts alongside students and communities to advocate for and build Ethnic Studies programs. We envision this last section as an extension of the fourth macroscale, Transformational Resistance, and as an opportunity for organizers working for Ethnic Studies to learn from counterparts who have engaged in that work themselves.

Limitations of *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*

We recognize that there is a tension here: Our teaching is often contradictory in that we take part in designing lessons and developing units that are linear and exist within the standardization of public schools, yet we are also interested in being creative, engaging, and responsive, if not also liberating, in our teaching. Our hope is that our vision and orienting frameworks embrace a particular kind of “visionary pragmatism,” in the words of Patricia Hill-Collins, in which we keep our hearts in and our eyes on Ethnic Studies as a movement while also respecting the planning and carrying out of instruction that teachers must do within their specific contexts, institutions, and communities.

We also see contradictions in the pull for Ethnic Studies needing to be defined by and solely grounded in the politics and needs of local communities. As a published collection, *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*



partly contributes to the institutionalization of Ethnic Studies itself, because it becomes a kind of Ethnic Studies textbook. This raises important arguments about whether or not there even should be Ethnic Studies textbooks or Ethnic Studies standards—especially given that peoples’ lives and stories can never be standardized or fully encapsulated in textbooks. In addition, we recognize that blindly committing to local politics does not always work in the interest of justice. For instance, we might argue that white supremacists are also engaged in place-based politics and practices.

Further, we know that Ethnic Studies textbooks and standards *are happening already*, with districts like Los Angeles Unified Schools recently ordering over 23,000 Ethnic Studies textbooks and states like Oregon and Indiana creating Ethnic Studies standards. Our hope is that *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* can play a role in this process by being a book where the voices of those directly involved in the K–12 Ethnic Studies movement are able to shape the movement itself, as opposed to allowing outsiders, textbook companies, politicians, or administrators to take control.

Rethinking Ethnic Studies reflects and attempts to navigate these tensions and contradictions. We hope that the chapters collected here can help facilitate Ethnic Studies theory and practice for teachers both within and outside of our classrooms while also solidifying how we understand Ethnic Studies without succumbing to the oppressive rigidity of standards or formal textbooks.

As teachers, professors, scholar-activists, and community educators, we are also cognizant of the limitations in creating such a volume as *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*. We do not pretend that *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* represents all groups and communities. Even in regard to the macroscales, we would like to include more connections and go in-depth with more groups and communities. We recognize that this work as a whole is not as intersectional as it could be. By “intersectional” we mean a deliberate attempt to reflect upon what bell hooks terms the interlocking nature of race with class, gender, sexuality, and religion, among other axes of difference and power. Given these limitations, in the spirit of Ethnic Studies, we collected the works for *Rethink-*

ing Ethnic Studies with the express intent that readers/practitioners/teachers would use the chapters, resources, and teaching ideas as tools to be adapted, reinterpreted, and remade for use in local contexts and communities.

Even so, we also recognize the potential limits created by our identities as editors and the identities of the authors collected in *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*. Who we are greatly influences the kind of book we have created—e.g., how our own positionalities intersect with institutions to inform and shape this volume and the emergent vision of Ethnic Studies. However, rather than see these identities purely as a problem, we believe that they are also a resource for articulating, envisioning, and dreaming what is possible within and across the movement for Ethnic Studies nationwide.

Finally, we understand that the current movement for Ethnic Studies at this historical moment is neither random nor coincidental. The rise of white supremacy and white nationalism in the United States in recent years, matched by the sharpest economic inequalities this country has witnessed in a century, sends a clear message to communities of color and justice-oriented white people: We are all locked in an increasingly violent struggle over the racial identity of this country, and Ethnic Studies is one concrete and powerful way that teachers, students, schools, and parents can find their own power and take a stand for justice. As such, we hope this volume pushes readers to think more deeply about race, ethnicity, identity construction, and activism. ✱

