

Practitioner's Essay

Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Introduction: Ethnic Studies as “General Education” after AB 1460

Trung P.Q. Nguyen, Ryan Buyco, May Lin,
Simmy Makhijani, Saugher Nojan, and Wendi Yamashita

ABSTRACT

This practitioner's essay engages with the structural obstacles and pedagogical approaches toward teaching the “Introduction” Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies courses in the aftermath of AB 1460. Despite now introducing all CSU students to the tenets of Ethnic Studies courses as part of their general education, the introductory Ethnic Studies classroom has become a space where the decades-long outcomes of defunded education, the dismantling of public good, the sharpening of right-wing politics, and the neoliberalization of the university as transactionary rather than liberatory have come to surface. Against being framed as “useless” or otherwise a “waste of time” (like many other general education courses), the authors, who have experienced these conditions in the Ethnic Studies classroom as the first cohort of Ethnic Studies educators after AB 1460, analyze and critically reflect upon the structural conditions that create what we call the “neoliberalized student” – the forms of foreclosed futures, accelerated crisis in the cost of living, inhumane expansion of student debt, and the saturation of market logic within the realms of everyday life that in turn systematically devalue Ethnic Studies, critical thought, freedom dreaming, and the struggle for liberation through education at the student

level. In response, we identify where these ideas have emerged, situate them within their historical contexts, and how to challenge them. Our hope is to outline new ways to reframe the introductory Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies class as not just about the reproduction of content, but also as a set of strategies to undo these specific structures of neoliberalism that coalesce upon both the student and educator in our particular historical juncture. In doing so, we hope to revitalize those exhausted by the struggle we encounter teaching Introductory Ethnic Studies and imagine new paths of collective liberation through the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

With the passage of Assembly Bill 1460 (AB 1460), California State University (CSU) institutionalized an Ethnic Studies course (Area F) requirement for all undergraduate general education throughout its twenty-three-campus system. Ethnic Studies/Asian American Studies will now reach over one hundred thousand students a year, with increased tenure track positions in a long under-resourced and under-invested field. At the same time, the classroom has become a site around which questions of “diversity work,” the institutionalization of radical knowledge, and the stakes of “general education” have fomented—questions especially urgent in the context of right-wing attacks on higher education.

This practitioner’s essay focuses on the introductory-level class: critical reflections from junior scholars in the CSU system who have been on the frontlines of the “Ethnic Studies” requirement on their campuses. The “Introduction” course is a staple across universities, a crucial moment to spark interest and undo punitive relationships to education students have accumulated throughout their schooling. However, the “Introduction” course is saddled with underexamined challenges because many of its educators are pre-tenure, lecturers, or otherwise vulnerable. In this essay, we highlight these challenges and their impact on Asian American Studies/Ethnic Studies pedagogy.

AB 1460 comes at a moment of heightened austerity, neoliberalism, and disinvestment intertwined closely with systemic racism. CSU students are on the frontlines bearing the brunt of these conditions—close to eighty percent of CSU students are students of color, and nearly a third are first-generation college students. A marked increase in students of color at CSU has been accompanied with a decline in public spending on this state system: accounting for inflation, the

state of California spends forty-one percent less today on a CSU student than it did in 1995. The California Faculty Association's report argues that this signifies "the long, gradual abandonment of the state's commitment to fund the CSU and the other public higher education segments" (CFA, 2017).

Such gradual abandonment has historical roots in the California Master Plan of Higher Education of 1960. While the system intended to create greater access to college education by offering three tiers of entry, in practice it perpetuated racialized class oppression by constructing barriers to the upward matriculation of working-class and students of color from the junior college level. In other words, CSU has long been designed to manage a protracted neoliberal crisis against race radical social transformation. These crises are exacerbated in the present with a national, right-wing backlash, best exemplified by attacks against Critical Race Theory (often conflated with Ethnic Studies) that resulted in over 250 measures that outlawed race-related education across the country.¹

Reflecting on these conditions, we the coauthors write as a collective, making references to overarching themes and specifying particular campuses when necessary. While we represent many CSU campuses, our experiences are not prescriptive of all institutions. Rather, we hope to offer a glimpse into the possibilities and tensions of a post-AB 1460 world based on our lived experiences.

We begin with the structural conditions that shape our students and ourselves: what austere conditions form CSU students and their educators? How do these conditions create neoliberalized students, and what challenges does this bring to the Ethnic Studies / Asian American Studies classroom?

We then highlight the pedagogical form of these questions by engaging with the introductory classroom itself. How do we facilitate critical consciousness despite these conditions? How are we still constrained despite our work? What support do we need to have the greatest impact?

Despite these structural conditions and pedagogical constraints, we end with the radical potential of this decades-long struggle within CSU. We point towards concrete ways to invigorate rather than dampen its promise. As public higher education is systematically dismantled nation-wide, we hope that the work done within CSU ignites many generative struggles for Ethnic Studies elsewhere and beyond.

STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS

CSU Students at the Frontlines of Neoliberalism

In November 2016, students from multiple CSU campuses demonstrated at a Board of Trustees meeting against proposed tuition increases that would make an already unaffordable college degree even more untenable. Students noted that their everyday lives were characterized by an excruciating grind to pay fees and stay enrolled while taking on thousands of dollars of debt. Many shared how they worked nearly forty hours a week in non-work study, food service, or retail jobs; cared for family; and otherwise juggled multiple obligations on top of academics. The tuition increases exacerbated skyrocketing costs of living that would further stretch thin the working student's already threadbare state of existence. As spelled out on their picket signs and banners, CSU students proclaimed that "We Are the Walking Debt" (Xia, 2016).

This scene offers a glimpse into the conditions of austerity under which a CSU student must learn and their educators must teach. At California's "primary undergraduate teaching institution" that is ostensibly an "affordable option," tuition has increased multiple times—doubling the cost of attendance from a decade ago and comprising an ever surging proportion of students' daily living expenses (Trustees, 2023).² Students are struggling through the *lived experience* of neoliberalism's transformation of the university (Higgins, 2023).³ Indeed, as Jason Read writes, "the cut in funding to state universities and the rise of tuition have as their effects not only the shifting of the funding of education from a public good to a private good, but a transformation of how education is lived and experienced . . . thus, the liminal moment of the university, that made the subject position of the college student anomalous . . . is being eradicated" (Read, 2009).

The "liminal moment" of the university is such that it was historically a site of social rebellion and radical experimentation in living in common, intellectual exchange, unmooring the sedimented practices of social order, and the redistribution of resources between the university and community—tenets that student activists fighting for Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies saw as transformative. And yet, the intensified dismantling of public education and the commons in the aftermath of Reagan translates into students' conscription into increasingly exploitative forms of tip-, gig-, and otherwise underpaid work in the present, further yoking their lives to the chains of mounting

student debt in the future (Adamson, 2009; McClanahan, 2011; Meister, 2009; Moten and Harney, 2010).

The Complicity of CSU

Understandably, then, many students seek out CSU as a relatively affordable way to move themselves and their families “from the factory floor to the front office.” CSU leverages this aspiration to secure enrollments and tuition dollars/debts by emphasizing its role in individual economic uplift: reifying economic discourses of “job readiness,” “market demand,” and “market uncertainty” to justify slashing interdisciplinary programs focused on social critique, tuition raises, and the massification of classrooms (Sherner, 2021). Majors are advertised by CSU as direct pipelines into job security and the middle class. For example, CSU proudly unveiled an online tool wherein users could compare the salaries of different majors at five CSU schools (Carr, 2022). California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) President Jane Conoley asserted that “this app . . . clearly demonstrates the financial advantage a CSU education provides as well as the economic expectations for the future.” This is merely one example of CSU’s complicity in intensifying and obfuscating conditions of precarity while embracing the idea that the university’s primary function is no longer social transformation, but rather monetary and debt transaction.

At the very same time, the crisis cycle of capitalism and CSU as one of its arms have foreclosed possibilities of social transformation through debt, the dismantling of social welfare programs, thwarting of organized labor, real estate speculation, the proliferation of the renter’s economy, and intensified precarity—all of which is hidden when CSU proclaims itself as an engine of social uplift rather than its gatekeeper, and something which Asian American Studies seeks to make visible.

Convergence in the Classroom

Amidst such conditions, general education requirements—including Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies—can be variously perceived by overburdened CSU students as a “waste of time” and a “distraction” from their ultimate goal of social uplift, especially on campuses that are only now building up Ethnic Studies programs and departments supported by AB 1460. To be clear, we are not chastising already overburdened students for their strategies to escape conditions of precarity. Rather, here, we situate their disinvested affects and our common classroom frustrations within the larger neoliberalization of

CSU, public education, and social life as a whole to highlight structural failure—and pressure points to undo it.

We see how these contexts manifest in our Asian American Studies classrooms. Given the excruciating grind of survival and omnipresent messages of education as monetary uplift, students often enter our classes too exhausted to learn, or resistant to the material. Aside from the usual conservative and liberal reactions to critical analysis that accompanies every Ethnic Studies class, some of us have been told that our General Education classes should be “less work” than other ones, and studying “diversity” is “useless.” Others report that we get treated differently as educators of color: expectations of grade inflation, extensions in perpetuity, and antagonism to accountability are not uncommon, with the outcomes of learning loss during the quarantine made more manifest.

Uselessness is the clarion call for neoliberal student subjectification. Perhaps with the exception of campuses offering Ethnic Studies courses for more than five decades, such as San Francisco State University (SFSU) and California State University, Northridge (CSUN), many students enter our AB 1460 introductory classrooms thinking that “Asian American Studies is *useless*” to their major, or this course is just “*prolonging* the amount of time it takes . . . to graduate”—by implication, noting that the Ethnic Studies class is just “not important *enough*.” These comments sting and speak to the small and everyday violences of teaching Introduction as a requirement. On a structural level, these comments reveal how the AB 1460 student understands their educational experience through a lens of neoliberal individual efficiency where every class must outweigh the financial cost and burden of higher education. In other words, the *uselessness* of Ethnic Studies is that it cannot make the AB 1460 student (potentially) *more* money and therefore is seen as an impediment. Many of us within Ethnic Studies know this comment, where the valuation of a class is equated with its potential monetary outcome.⁴

Implications for Faculty Labor

Despite AB 1460’s solidification of Ethnic Studies into the CSU student experience, the impulse to make Ethnic Studies useful to a variety of majors and to the university—or, translating it into the logic of the market—remains. As a major or proposed path of intentional study, Asian American Studies is coerced to perform the logic of the market as a strategy to stay protected in CSU. As untenured faculty,

we are plagued with the mandate to continually justify our existence, to legitimize our place as essential to college education (by appealing to the university and the neoliberalized student) that we need to fill our classrooms. We reconstruct our classes to demonstrate the value of Ethnic Studies to civil engineering, computer science, and STEM—which is rarely something that other fields do (that is, reconstruct their classes to appeal to Ethnic Studies and the necessity of social transformation). For our departments’ survival and to procure tenure, we must make sure classes are filled and that students are sufficiently satisfied in teaching evaluations. We must continually remind students to take social critique seriously because our futures are in their hands, and, at bare minimum, it is worth spending the effort to pass.

This is only one way that, despite our shared entrapment, faculty are expected to—and often do—fill in to compensate for massive systemic failure. After all, this labor of legitimizing Ethnic Studies takes place within an already overwhelming workload. CSU faculty teach three to four classes a semester (amounting to approximately 120-150 students), or at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, three courses every quarter. For example, Ryan Buyco teaches a large introductory course with 130 students and one regular class of thirty students, all without the help of teaching assistants.⁵ Similarly, May Lin has taught an introductory class of 150 students, with one undergraduate teaching assistant who could only work seventy hours over fifteen weeks. Our strategies to legitimize Ethnic Studies are accompanied with our efforts of radical care (e.g., flexible deadlines, multiple chances to revise, following up with students who disappear in the miasma of exploitation)—but also multiplying time and labor. In designing our classes, caring for an increasing number of students, and embodying Ethnic Studies’ transformative pedagogies as much as we are humanly able, we are concurrently sacrificing our own health.

Broader Labor Conditions

These conditions of privatization and state disinvestment targeting students also cast a dark cloud on the labor conditions that we enter into as new tenure track faculty in Ethnic Studies. Hyper-exploited part-time adjunct instructors and junior, untenured faculty provide a significant bulk of the CSU teaching labor: tenure density at CSU declined by 7.9 percentage points between 2002-20, resulting in an increased ratio of students to tenure track faculty.⁶ Adjunct lecturers often teach ten or more courses a year, commute to multiple campuses,

and make poverty wages. Faculty are also ensnared in the soaring costs of living—and markedly underpaid within these contexts (Smith, 2023). It is far from uncommon to take on additional side jobs—that faculty already have little time for—to make rent.

Even at a teaching intensive university, our publication record makes or breaks our tenure prospects, minimizing the significant teaching and caring labor that we engage in, or brought us to this position. Many of us are community-engaged, community-rooted scholars and educators who conduct research as part of a broader praxis in Ethnic Studies, viewing the academy as in service of community liberation. This type of research is not always valued as much as research hidden behind fifty-dollar paywalls within retention, tenure, and promotion processes. Although faculty are leading efforts at change in places like CSULB, CSUN and San José State University (SJSU), significant push-back persists.

We also have significant service obligations, aggravated in large part because of the long-term disinvestment at CSU and, for some, our entry into departments that have long been purposely starved of tenure track faculty hires. Many of us willingly take on the additional labor of supporting students in their organizations, clubs, and independent research projects. Again, many of us come from communities that have not been represented in faculty, and we find students excited to work with us regardless of their major/minor. For example, at CSULB, faculty mentor students from all across campus for directed readings. As second-year tenure track faculty, Lin, Wendi Yamashita, and Simmy Makhijani serve on multiple committees, including time-consuming ones such as search committees—either because there are so few Asian American Studies tenure track faculty or due to unavailability/stretched capacity of senior faculty. To sum it up: we are asked and expected to do it *all* as we strive to live out the tenets of Ethnic Studies praxis we hold dear and to justify our very existence—even as we have been abandoned structurally.

PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES OF ETHNIC STUDIES IN OUR AB 1460 CLASSROOMS

Our work as Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies educators therefore extends far above teaching content. We embrace how Ethnic Studies, at its core, has always challenged education beyond economic valuations central to capitalism. In other words, what we identify in our classrooms at this particular historical juncture and

what we attempt to undo is the disciplining of our students into the *neoliberalized student*—one who understands university education in economically-inflected, transactional, and market-reifying ways. The work of Ethnic Studies, as we understand it, is a step towards undoing this onslaught across multiple vectors of our social order. Our work and teaching conditions show how Ethnic Studies remains precarious, not just on a national stage or in Florida, but in our very classrooms, in places that appear to value Ethnic Studies.

Yet, we continue to see the possibilities of education as radical spaces of transformation. As a reminder, interlaced within these moments of fatigue we have experienced, there are as many moments of exuberance—of educational transformation before our eyes, glimmers of new collective worlds improvised *ex nihilo*, hope, loud or quiet, and stark reminders of why this work is necessary. The Ethnic Studies classroom is a place where we aspire to walk our talk. It is where we brainstorm and build upon the solutions that are already here. It is where we practice and experiment. With this in mind, we would like to share select examples of our pedagogical practices that best exemplify the productive tensions we grapple with while responding to the challenges of the post-AB 1460 classroom.

San José State University

Trung P.Q. Nguyen defamiliarizes the everyday (a key step in consciousness-raising) using place-based activities. Early semester, he arranges a visit to San José Japantown, one of four remaining Japantowns in the United States and an intergenerational community with multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and activist roots. Though only one mile north of the SJSU campus, most students in his class, even those from San José, have never been to it.

After reading about the exclusionary laws shaping Japantown, students meet there, receive a short list of sites to take group selfies in front of, roam the area freely, and note what feels different. Debriefing together, students observe how Japantown feels “calm,” “vibrant,” with “many generations walking around.” Discussing how their lives would be different if they lived here, they share “I would want to explore and walk more,” “I’d be more connected to history,” and, perhaps most critically, “I wouldn’t have to commute to school.”

At the end of this discussion, Nguyen introduces tension. He takes his students to a luxury apartment complex built over the remains of Heinlerville (the exclusion-era Chinese enclave preceding

Japantown) and asks them to research the rent for a one-bedroom. Costing \$3,084 to \$3,620 per month, he asks students who they think can live there. They note only the rich, the privileged, and tech professionals can afford it, not them or their families. They observe how this is a new form of exclusion repeating presently, since the low-income, working class, and marginalized communities who once called this place home could not afford to live there now.

Students link this point to their personal experience with the cost-of-living crisis in San José. Students commute hours from the Central Valley, live with family and roommates in cramped spaces, or work minimum wage and gig economy jobs to attend SJSU—conditions where academics are deprioritized. Nguyen closes on an optimistic note, asking students to share their ideal communities without the limitations of cost. Many say it looks like San José Japantown: a place close to campus, embedded in Asian American history, and rooted in an intergenerational community.

After this activity, students note how it inspired them to think about their communities differently and how everyday experiences are connected to histories of exclusion and material exploitation. This activity therefore defamiliarizes everyday sights (a nearby neighborhood or an apartment building) as a way to build the critical consciousness exercised in Asian American Studies/Ethnic Studies.

Nguyen's SJSU colleague, Saugher Nojan, builds a learning community in her introductory Asian American Studies courses prior to the start of the semester when she sends students an initial survey to understand their prior knowledge, interest in the subject, and aspirations for the course. Encouraging student reflection about their shared goals and aspirations for their learning establishes a shared vision for the class. Nojan also leads an activity called "community brainstorms" that rely on students to establish their own cultural community wealth in the classroom space. While drawing upon their prior knowledges, life experiences, and disciplinary backgrounds, community brainstorms help students connect with peers to establish themselves as producers of knowledge while also drawing upon their community cultural wealth outside of the classroom, and creating new sources of capital within the classroom.

These community brainstorms enable students from diverse backgrounds and skill sets to connect their cultural resources and academic skill sets to Ethnic Studies course material in a way that empowers them. Another benefit is the engagement it facilitates among

peers. One of the difficulties of the pandemic was to create opportunities for sustained community and engagement among peers in a Zoom classroom, leaving students often alienated and deprived of critical discussion. Fostering these opportunities are important to distinguish in-person learning from Zoom, and to establish the importance of student-led activities and horizontal relationships (among peers) that occur in person to establish a sense of belonging.

California State University, Sacramento

In Wendi Yamashita's classroom at California State University, Sacramento, assignments that are collaborative and creative are employed to disrupt traditional assessments. For their final, her students are put into groups where they spend the semester researching, designing, and producing a zine on a topic pertinent to the Sacramento Asian American community. The zine requires the following components: 1) the history of Asian American Studies and its significance; 2) a Sacramento-based photo collage and reflection where students profile a community business, organization, or place; 3) an interview with one member of the local Asian American community; 4) a current event; and 5) two original pieces of artwork. Each group learns a variety of skills: oral history, ethnography, archival, and community-based research. Every week, readings are structured to provide examples of these methods and how to delve into their own original research.

The zines are beautiful summations of their understanding of Asian American Studies and the Sacramento Asian American community. While there are many challenges to this project, students are proud of their work. One student wrote, "As I look back on the creation of the zine, I feel proud of the work that my group and I have accomplished. From the captivating poem capturing the essence of the Asian American childhood experience to the insightful interview with [name removed], the zine offers a diverse range of perspectives on a complex and multifaceted topic." Some enjoy the group work, saying they are "grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with such a dedicated and talented group of individuals." As the instructor, it is rewarding to see students connect with one another in the classroom in ways that a traditional research paper does not allow for. In fact, connection is an important part of this assignment: connection to the material, to the local Asian American community, and to each other.

However, to create this connection is labor intensive for untenured faculty who must also meet the demands of the university.

Despite the emphasis on teaching for tenure, we often find ourselves stretched thin by service obligations. As faculty of color, we are culturally taxed: mentoring and advising students of color, serving on search committees, developing diverse programming for the university, and more. By the time we get to the classroom, we are exhausted. Despite the conditions of the university, we can develop innovative classes, but the longevity of such work is precarious and at our expense.

Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo

As mentioned previously, in the post-AB 1460 context at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, Ryan Buyco and other faculty in the Ethnic Studies Department teach Area F courses to 130 students without a teaching assistant. For Buyco, teaching “Introduction to Asian American Studies” in a large lecture-style class makes it difficult to carry out Ethnic Studies pedagogies such as project-based learning, checking in with students on a regular basis, as well as other creative activities. Due to this, Buyco relies on standardized evaluation methods such as multiple-choice quizzes, midterms, and final exams in his teaching. While the use of standardized evaluation methods is not ideal, Buyco adapts them in ways that decenter the traditional classroom to support student-centered learning. For example, as a class activity, Buyco allows students to write possible midterm and final exam questions that they submit in groups on Canvas.⁷ Buyco incorporates many of these questions on his exams—which he edits—and gives students extra credit for this labor. This is important because it allows students to have a say in what they will be tested on and allows them to review course materials.

Furthermore, due to the large number of students, it is impossible for Buyco to answer every question during class—either because there are too many or students feel shy about speaking in front of their peers. In this way, Buyco regularly has students submit questions at the end of his lectures on Canvas, which are graded as complete/incomplete assignments. At the beginning of his next class, Buyco chooses three questions to answer in front of the whole class, projecting these questions on his slides, and asks students to read their own questions. This allows even the shyest students to participate and promotes a class culture where everyone can feel seen, even in such a large class. This activity also gives Buyco the opportunity to address common questions and fill in gaps since everyone comes to his classroom with different levels of familiarity with the field. This activity, while simple, has been

an important part of his pedagogy as it supports a class culture that feels more like a community and not an impersonal large lecture-style class that students have become accustomed to.

California State University, Long Beach

May Lin develops community agreements with students so that they can feel empowered to be brave and vulnerable. She devotes significant time to icebreakers, somatic/healing activities, and community builders to cultivate authentic relationships and mutual caring. For example, after the 2023 Monterey Park mass shootings, she facilitated healing circles where students could voice how they felt and support each other. Students noted that their pain had rarely been acknowledged, and this practice helped disrupt the false, imposed “normalcy” with which they were expected to accept ongoing crises and trauma.

Another practice Lin utilizes involves self-assessments where students create goals for participation and growth in other areas while providing reflections and feedback on class changes or support needed to meet those goals. Lin provides tailored encouragement (as much as possible with a large number of students) to support students in their goals. Furthermore, after weekly student-led presentations (where groups, guided by Lin, develop creative/interactive activities for fellow students to engage with the material), non-presenting students provide verbal affirmations.

Altogether, students have shared that this caring environment helps them cultivate confidence. One student stated: “I appreciated this encouragement very much. This semester I spoke in the whole group discussion on numerous occasions. I truly believe that I had great improvement in this and it is because of how passionate I felt about these issues. . . I felt like I was learning about something that mattered to me. My ancestors, my past, my stories. I’ve never taken a class like this one and I am going to truly miss it.”

California State University, Northridge & San Francisco State University

Students are rarely asked what kind of world they want to live in or invited to imagine radical alternatives to the status quo. Guided by an abolitionist feminist praxis of care and aspirations for building *beloved community*, Simmy Makhijani aspires to make her classrooms relational. Beyond co-crafting group agreements, utilizing cultural energizers, “head-heart-hands” check-outs, pair shares, etc., she introduces “buddy crews” designed with the purpose of fostering a culture

of mutual support within and beyond the classroom. Students spend time getting to know each other in small formations and are asked to craft innovative ways to have each other's backs. When a crew clicks, students leave the semester transformed, best summarized by one CSUN student: "I feel as though I may never take a class where I feel so closely connected to a professor as well as fellow classmates." But just as often, there are students that are slow to reach out to each other, noting the demands of their schedules and struggles with material precarity as primary obstacles in building meaningful relationality.

Buddy crews also co-build critical analysis around course topics while simultaneously putting their learning into practice. For example, after reviewing how worldviews shape economies, students consider how a culture of toxic individualism dovetails with neoliberal capitalism. And through the support of embodied practices, they contemplate things such as how the dominant culture seeds a fiction of being "self-made" when in fact nothing in the world has been built alone.⁸ From there, they reflect on the quality of their connections with others while learning ways in which connected people have always helped each other, whether through practical support (such as friends pitching in to help with rent), or by communities forging solidarity relationships across struggle, or by the building of mutual support networks (such as food/clothing shares).

At its best, this relational (and trauma-informed) pedagogy fosters bonds between students that extend far beyond the classroom. For instance, at SFSU, Makhijani witnessed students coming together and strategizing ways to address housing insecurity amongst themselves and in turn create the "Students Against Displacement" group after being introduced to housing rights organizers in class. These same students went on to live together and become active community organizers. But even in this best-case example, those same students were unable to get meaningful structural support from the university to curb the number of students living in their cars while enrolled. Whether at CSUN or SFSU, Makhijani notes the trust built in the relational Ethnic Studies classroom might allow students to overcome their isolation and confide with each other, as well as the professor, about their material and/or mental health struggles. But often, when they start to mobilize towards solutions, they find the university fails to provide adequate support and in some cases even creates obstacles for their peer-led efforts.⁹ This ongoing condition suspends the relational classroom in a perpetual state of experiment over realization.

Despite the structural limitations and challenges that we have discussed throughout this essay, we, as a collective of faculty members in the CSU, demonstrate our continued commitment to the project of Ethnic Studies by bringing a relevant education to our students through our pedagogical approaches. As we have already noted, we currently work in an imperfect system and are all too aware of the limitations that have accompanied the passing of AB 1460. While we acknowledge the pedagogical opportunities of the massified classroom, these select examples show the reality of our current roles in shortening the distance between the ideals from which AB 1460 was passed and its implementation on the ground. Indeed, as teachers, activists, and scholars in Asian American Studies/Ethnic Studies, we continue to bring students to consider the historical conditions that brought us to the present as we imagine future, brighter possible worlds together.

CONCLUSION

Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies allow students to transform themselves, their communities, and society. The promise of AB 1460 offers potential to extend these possibilities to the largely working class, first-generation, or otherwise marginalized student population at CSU.

Yet, as we have highlighted, our work and our student learning outcomes are constrained by the austere conditions that attend the systematic dismantling of higher education as a public good. While AB 1460 has provided a necessary foundation towards a transformative education, our preliminary, first step recommendations to challenge neoliberalization and amplify the transformative potential of Ethnic Studies/Asian American Studies take aim at structural changes rather than argue for the internalization of these crises of the institution, by individual educators or students. Our first step recommendations are as follows:

1. **Increased Labor Support:** The transformative impact of the Ethnic Studies/Asian American Studies classroom is eroded by the neoliberally-induced massification of the classroom. We have challenged these exploitative conditions through the labor-intensive work of creating community and non-traditional, engaging projects. To sustain this, we call for increased labor support through a combination of smaller classrooms, more teachers and teaching assistants, and for involvement in organized labor struggle.

2. **Strengthened Student Support:** Because of the understanding environment of our classrooms, students share with us the dire conditions of their everyday lives that impact their success. These dire conditions have been exacerbated with the largest transfer of wealth in U.S. history, skills gaps, and social isolation that have attended the quarantine period. To address this, we call for strengthened support for mental health, academic skills, and direct services (especially for first-generation, immigrant, undocumented, poor, working-class, and Black students, Indigenous students, and students of color).
3. **Cost of Living Adjustment:** CSU students and educators must learn, work, eat, shelter, and survive in some of the most expensive places in the world. If our students' constant quandary is the choice between eating a meal or attending a class, neither student nor educator can succeed. We call for stability through a long-needed cost of living adjustment for all students and educators (especially pre-tenure, contingent, and adjunct).
4. **Access to Regular Funds:** For our work to be transformative, we must move and leverage our resources to support pedagogical and community projects. These annual funds must be enough to support capacity building, faculty programs, student programs, and community collaborations in any given year. We call for a regular, annual, and self-managed fund that will allow us to pursue these social transformation projects both in and out of the classroom.

As we collectively continue working towards a more just society through the abolition of racial capitalism and the structures that support it, we see these recommendations not as the panacea to the conditions we have outlined, but as necessary first step, short-term measures to address immediate needs. We know funding these futures are possible given that the budget is only constrained when discussing faculty, staff, and student needs, yet unlimited when discussing administrative salaries, allowances, and stipends (Ford, 2023). Through AB 1460, we can build a critical, radical, and socially engaged populace. But our work is constrained by structural exploitation. This is a task especially urgent in a context where right-wing authoritarianism preys upon the alienated and hyperexploited. With these stakes, we hope that what we have highlighted herein serves as a beacon for others struggling to implement Ethnic Studies/Asian American Studies as public education in California and beyond.

NOTES

1. Some notable ones include Executive Order 13950—Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping; and Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (WOKE) Act in Florida.
2. Increases of nearly eighteen percent are being proposed on the near horizon- outpacing wage increases and inflation.
3. For a lucid history contextualizing the CSU and the CA Master Plan of Higher Education within the Cold War context, how the Master Plan reproduced class and racist hierarchies rather than dismantled them, and how student organizers critiqued the Master Plan at the time of its implementation, see: Higgins, Andrew Stone, *Higher Education for All: Racial Inequality, Cold War Liberalism, and the California Master Plan*.
4. It's important to note that campuses offering Ethnic Studies courses for several decades (such as CSUN and SFSU) have a valued reputation for benefits that have been mirrored in research studies by San Francisco State University and the Stanford Graduate School of Education (2014). These studies attest to improved student attendance and increased academic performance due to student enrollment in Ethnic Studies courses compared to academic outcomes of students not enrolled in Ethnic Studies courses. Students report being more invested in all their classes overall after seeing the experiences of their community histories reflected back in their education. Makhijani reports having this experience teaching both at CSUN and SFSU (where introductory Ethnic Studies courses generally fill up quickly). Though Makhijani does note there are still contradictions and challenges initiating AB 1460 supported courses on these campuses, namely those of uneven teaching of Ethnic Studies under the pressures of assimilating it into neoliberal "logics" as this article outlines.
5. The large introductory course counts as two courses.
6. From 34.1 to 39.4 a decade later.
7. This activity is an adaptation from a similar assignment that Dr. Lydia Heberling uses in her "Introduction to American Indian Studies" class. Heberling is Ryan Buyco's colleague in the Ethnic Studies Department at Cal Poly.
8. Embodied practices include things such as body scans paired with guided visualizations or movement activities.
9. Makhijani was a full-time lecturer in the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University for six years prior to joining the Asian American Studies faculty (on the tenure track) at California State University, Northridge in Fall 2021. She draws on her experience teaching pre- and post-AB 1460 Ethnic Studies introductory courses at both CSUs.

REFERENCES

- Adamson, Morgan. 2009. "The Financialization of Student Life: Five Propositions on Student Debt." *Polygraph: International Journal of Culture and Politics* 21(1): 107-120.
- California Faculty Association. 2017. "Equity Interrupted: How California is Cheating Its Future." California Faculty Association. https://www.calfac.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/equity_interrupted_1.12.2017.pdf.
- Carr, Janis. 2022. "New CSU online tool reveals potential earning power after graduation." *CSU Long Beach*, 7 September. <https://www.csulb.edu/news/article/new-csu-online-tool-reveals-potential-earning-power-after-graduation>.
- Ford, Matthew. 2023. "Management at California State University Is Living Large While Faculty Struggle." *Jacobin Magazine*, 26 August. <https://jacobin.com/2023/08/california-state-university-union-wages-inequality-administrators-public-education>.
- Higgins, Andrew Stone. 2023. *Higher Education For All: Racial Inequality, Cold War Liberalism, and the California Master Plan*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press.
- McClanahan, Annie. 2011. "The Living Indebted: Student Militancy and the Financialization of Debt." *qui parle* 20(1): 57-77.
- Meister, Bob. 2009. "They Pledged Your Tuition (An Open Letter to UC Students)." Keep California's Promise. https://keepcaliforniaspromise.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/They_Pledged_Your_Tuition.pdf.
- Moten, Fred and Stefano Harney. 2010. "Debt and Study." *e-flux Journal* 14.
- Read, Jason. 2009. "University Experience: Neoliberalism Against the Commons." Pp. 151-154 in *Toward a Global Autonomous University*, ed. Edu-Factory Collective. Williamsburg: Autonomedia.
- Shermer, Elizabeth Tandy. 2021. "What's Really New about the Neoliberal University? The Business of American Education Has Always Been Business." *Labor* 18(4): 62-86.
- Smith, Ashley A. 2023. "CSU faculty salary study shows wide dissatisfaction despite pay being at national averages." *EdSource*, March 23. <https://edsources.org/2023/csu-faculty-salary-study-shows-wide-dissatisfaction-despite-pay-being-at-national-averages/6873261>.
- Trustees of the California State University. 2023. "Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee on Finance." Long Beach: CSU Office of the Chancellor. <https://www.calstate.edu/csu-system/board-of-trustees/past-meetings/2023/Documents/FIN-May-21-24-2023.pdf>.
- Xia, Rosanna. 2016. "As students protest, Cal State trustees seek more state funding to avoid tuition increase." *Los Angeles Times*, 15 November. <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-cal-state-trustees-tuition-20161115-story.html>.

TRUNG PQ NGUYEN (he/him) is Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies at San José State University. His research examines the sensory afterlives of war and the rhetorical circulation of Vietnamese materials under the U.S. empire. He is currently working on a book manuscript, *Loss in Perpetuity: Iterative Vietnam and the Racial Mediation of Permanent War*, which examines how loss in particular gets mobilized for counterinsurgent purposes, like fascism, by the state apparatuses of permanent war, and how Vietnam becomes the ideal object lesson to reinstate this structure of state violence in other episodes of empire's deployment.

RYAN BUYCO (he/him) is Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo. His research focuses on U.S. militarism in the Pacific, especially as it relates to the small island archipelago of Okinawa in Southern Japan. His work has appeared in such publications as the *Critical Ethnic Studies Journal*, the *International Journal of Okinawan Studies*, and *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*.

MAY LIN (she/her) is Assistant Professor of Asian and Asian American Studies at California State University, Long Beach. She is a community-rooted researcher and educator who supports transformative, intersectional, and cross-racial change led by communities of color, including stints as a Research Fellow/consultant for several youth and movement building organizing groups. She has been involved in Long Beach's racial justice organizing ecosystem since 2014, and is currently a board member of Khmer Girls in Action, and Long Beach Forward; and a member of Long Beach People's Budget Coalition. She draws upon previous organizing experience in youth development, grassroots media, graduate student unionizing, and grassroots organizing resisting gentrification.

SIMMY MAKHIJANI (she/her) is Assistant Professor of Asian American Studies at California State University, Northridge. An educator, activist, and scholar, her work focuses on the intersections of art, living histories, youth organizing, cross-racial solidarity and movement building (with emphases in Asian American Activism Studies and South Asian American Studies). While living in the Bay Area, she was a full-time lecturer at San Francisco State University in the College of Ethnic Studies for six years. Prior to that, she co-founded and co-ran United Roots (a green youth arts and media community center in Oakland) for five years. Over the last two decades she has been involved with numerous community organizing efforts including South Asians for Education Justice Collective, Asians 4 Black Lives, Third World Resistance Coalition, Bay Area Solidarity Summer, Alliance of South Asians Taking Action, Narika, Asian Women's Shelter, South Asian Women's Creative Collective-SF, and Art in Action.

SAUGHER NOJAN (she/her) is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Asian American Studies at San José State University in the Department of Sociology & Interdisciplinary Social Sciences. Her research examines how societal inequities are formed and sustained in relation to racial formations, religion, immigration, civic and political participation, and education.

WENDI YAMASHITA (she/her) is Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies at California State University, Sacramento. As a fourth generation (Yonsei) Japanese American, she was and continues to be shaped by her grandparents' experiences of World War II incarceration. She is a member of the Florin Japanese American Citizens League as well as the Manzanar Committee, where she works to educate others about the Japanese American experience. She is the Co-Director of the Manzanar Committee's student programs: Manzanar at Dusk, and Katari: Keeping Japanese American Stories Alive, where she mentors California State University and University of California Nikkei Student Union representatives in a year-long program. Her forthcoming book, *Carceral Entanglements: Gendered Public Memories of Japanese American World War II Incarceration*, is a comparative racial project that examines how Japanese American incarceration is remembered in a post-redress era that both replicate and challenge settler colonialism and the prison industrial complex.