

Practitioner's Essay

“Flattening” Asian American Studies in Secondary Education: Strategies and Recommendations for Conceptualizing the Field in Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, political pressure to address systemic racism, police brutality, and racialized violence in California has resulted in the passage of laws and policies that mandate public schools, colleges, and universities to require Ethnic Studies courses. Amidst this expansion, an array of policies and practices are emerging within and across systems that reflect what is believed to be core knowledge in Ethnic Studies and subfields like Asian American Studies. This article distills observations from one site among these different systems—secondary schools—and describes a “flattening,” or watering down, of Asian American Studies in emerging curricula and instructional practices. It discusses four forms of flattening—subsuming, reducing, decontextualizing, and omitting—and offers recommendations for responding to these tendencies.

INTRODUCTION

With increasing frequency, we, the authors, have been enlisted to provide feedback on drafts of course and unit plans, learning activities, curricular materials, and projects and other assessments across an array of professional learning workshops with current and soon-to-be high school Ethnic Studies teachers. These exercises, arranged by county

offices of education, school districts, and various networks of teacher educators in California, typically focus on how well teachers are aligning curriculum and pedagogy with the political origins of Ethnic Studies. In each case, the teachers ground into emerging pedagogical frameworks, most principally the state's recently adopted "model curriculum," a much-debated resource to guide the state's new graduation requirement (see California Department of Education, 2022).

In these settings, nearly all teachers struggle to provide a robust approach to teaching Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) experiences. Sentiments we commonly hear include: "I don't really know how to cover them because there are so many different groups. I don't like the idea of leaving anyone out. But there just isn't time." Another observation is efforts to shoehorn the Asian American experience into curricular treatments borrowed from units about other ethnic groups. In these situations, which happens routinely, we are faced with the task of noting that, for instance, the struggle for Black liberation is not the same as forms of resistance Asian Americans have practiced. And in most of these places, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders are almost always ignored entirely, including in school communities where these groups are present in sizable numbers. Together, these and other trends represent what we call a "flattening" of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies. Patterns such as these, factors that contribute to them, and implications for these fields are the focus of this article.

Significant contributors to the flattening are emerging frameworks and models that focus largely on broad goals and outcomes with little guidance on accessing resources to achieve these objectives. While these approaches represent tremendous progress and generally reflect the social and political origins of Ethnic Studies, they are almost always met by teachers and school leaders who have had limited opportunities to think critically about and discern among different groups' social location in the United States. Instead, simply put, groups get lumped together. This tendency, of course, is something that Asian Americanists are particularly attuned to, critical of, and grapple with regularly because of the history of the politics of panethnicity that gave rise to and undergird the field (Nakanishi and Yamano, 2014; Ng, Pak, and Hernandez, 2016; Yu and Nguyen, 2018.).

Though elements of Ethnic Studies have been in public schools for decades, most notably as critical forms of multicultural education (see Banks, 1993), its widespread implementation is more recent. Over the past twenty years, efforts to offer or require Ethnic Studies have

taken place in schools and districts around the nation. In the early 2000s, legislation to develop curriculum standards in Ethnic Studies emerged alongside the movement for standards and accountability (California Legislative Assembly, 2002). More recently, educational leaders and elected officials in California have responded to political pressure to address systemic racism and racialized violence through policies to require Ethnic Studies courses for high school diplomas and associates and undergraduate degrees. In general, school districts in the state have responded to these initiatives and mandates by designing and implementing Ethnic Studies in three ways: as a standalone course, as an integrated course, and as a framework for curriculum and pedagogy change across grade levels and subject matter areas. Scholars in Ethnic Studies, Asian American Studies, and related fields have been increasingly tasked with supporting counties, districts, schools, and individual teachers as they seek to address policy mandates and innovate with limited expertise and resources.

Over the past decade, against this backdrop, we the authors have collaborated on local, regional, and statewide projects involving the design, implementation, and evaluation of Ethnic Studies by drawing from our respective backgrounds at the intersection of PK-12 schooling, Ethnic Studies, and public policy. James Fabionar holds a Ph.D. in educational policy and is a former high school history-social science and Ethnic Studies teacher. He has held faculty positions in Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies and is presently a faculty member in a school of education where he teaches courses on secondary teaching methods, social foundations of teaching and learning, and critical perspectives on research methods, school reform, and educational policy. Jesse Mills holds a Ph.D. in Ethnic Studies and is a former Ethnic Studies department chair. His research focuses on Black liberation, immigration and refugee studies, and comparative Ethnic Studies.

In this article, we build from our observations instances of flattening to bring attention to the array of ways state laws, mainstream educational governance, and the structures of secondary schools lead to courses that are Ethnic Studies or Asian American Studies “in name only.” Our overarching goal is to contribute a sketch of the broader terrain of translating Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies into public schools. Central to achieving this, we argue, is identifying and giving context to the structural-epistemic forces in and around secondary schools that are shaping Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies. We approach this argument and goal across three sections:

1. First, we expand on the notion of flattening by discussing the four interrelated forms we routinely witness in classrooms—omitting, subsuming, reducing, and decontextualizing—contemporary school governance, curriculum, and pedagogy. In particular, we examine how the push to legitimize Ethnic Studies has led to the need to “discipline” the field in ways that subscribe to a canonical view of knowledge and, therefore, project a vision of the field that is far more settled, fixed, and consistent from institution to institution than we believe it is.
2. Next, we outline a framework for conceptualizing Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies that critiques this disciplinary-canonical model. We present a view of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies focused on “formations” of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies that emphasize legitimacy, not as a subscription to forms of fixed knowledge from the top, but rather a deep analytic commitment to understanding perspectives and experiences from below.
3. We end with recommendations to illustrate how this framework can orient newcomers to the field to a critical consciousness of the epistemic structures of education and how this awareness is an imperative mindset to disrupting oppressive social relations, within and among racialized groups, vis-a-vis schooling.

THE FLATTENING OF ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

The widespread implementation of Ethnic Studies in California is a unique case study in the challenges and possibilities associated with coordinating curriculum and instruction within and across institutions and systems. Accompanying each new requirement are efforts to define the field and articulate credit valuation among the state’s community colleges, teaching universities, and research universities. These dynamics are reflected in the establishment of Ethnic Studies in the state’s community colleges. Until recently, few community colleges had programs and departments in Ethnic Studies. In addition to hiring faculty for developing coursework for these new academic units, leaders have been engaged in establishing guidelines for transfer requirements to the twenty-three California State University campuses and nine University of California campuses. Understandably, in part because of the political nature of Ethnic Studies and the diversity of views and practices in the field, efforts to coordinate across systems

are often contentious. At times, we have observed similar dynamics in the scores of conference sessions, webinars, workshops, and other professional learning events that are held across the state.

The process of interpreting Ethnic Studies in schools magnifies the rigidity in how schools work and illustrates decades of school reform literature that notes changing the ways schools work requires imagining them in new ways. An important dimension of why Ethnic Studies is challenging to interpret into schools is because they were designed precisely to do what Ethnic Studies stands against. A key component of this is a history of treating knowledge through a disciplinary lens in ways that, to paraphrase Freire (2020), perpetuates the banking system. That is, knowledge is quantified and valued for the sake of motivating students to reinforce what the dominant (colonial) culture deems important. Through this process, knowledge gets regurgitated and commodified, and social hierarchy becomes normalized and harder to detect and resist.

Forms of Flattening in Asian American Studies

In our projects, we regularly observe patterns of concern in the way Asian American Studies is reflected in the design and implementation of Ethnic Studies in secondary schools. In particular, we take note of four interrelated patterns. The first is subsuming AAPI in more prevalent political situations and frameworks. This is reflected in, for example, the conflation of Asian American notions of liberation within a binary that centers Black political thought for instances of anti-Asian racism. In emerging Ethnic Studies frameworks, varying experiences of racial oppression are often not differentiated, and liberation is framed to only make sense in the context of anti-Black racialization.

The second pattern is reducing or lumping widely varying AAPI groups into one racial category. If there is an inclusion of Asian Americans as a “model minority” in an Ethnic Studies course, this can elide, for instance, the sovereignty orientation of Pacific Islanders, the colonial incorporation of Filipinos, or the military devastation of homelands prior to the resettlement of refugees.

The third pattern is decontextualizing, or removing the social, cultural, historical, and political particularities of AAPI groups that do not fit into a streamlined racial construct. In the manner in which curriculum and instruction are configured, these context nuances rarely fit into brief and coherent lesson segments.

The fourth pattern is omitting professional, serious scholarly work. A dearth of studies and knowledge from AAPI standpoints perpetuates a constant struggle around representation and inclusion in a critical Ethnic Studies framework. We call the combined effect of these patterns a “flattening” of the field.

Flattening of this nature happens across the broader field of Ethnic Studies as well as within subfields, and Asian American Studies in particular reflects this effect. As many scholars have pointed out, the lumping of different groups under the category of Asian American and Pacific Islander often hides from view stark differences in histories, sociopolitical situations, and struggles for liberation and self-determination. Furthermore, Asian American Studies often struggles to have institutional space and validation in comparison to fields such as Black Studies. We consistently observe dynamics such as these being mimicked in secondary schooling.

Structural-Epistemic Flattening Influences

The process of requiring Ethnic Studies in secondary schools involves boiling down a complex field—one that varies *considerably* in structures, approaches, topics, and theoretical orientations (among other dimensions)—into forms of knowledge that are often fixed, uniform, and easily understood by educators who more often than not have limited background in the field. The conditions shaping how Ethnic Studies takes shape in secondary schools are very different than in institutions of higher education. In broad terms, learning in colleges and universities center on knowledge production in ever-evolving fields while educational experiences in public schooling are framed by standardized curriculum and knowledge consumption. While it is no revelation that knowledge and learning are often conceptualized differently in high schools and colleges/universities, we have observed that distilling how these differences are structurally originated and maintained is helpful to both scholars and public school educators in orienting one another to the work of interpreting the field into classrooms and schools. We locate the flattening of the field in four interrelated structural-epistemic sites in secondary schooling:

1. The traditional treatment of disciplinary knowledge in secondary schools. Within the factory model, courses of study are constructed for linearity, efficiency, and “proof” of learning and reflect ongoing territorial tensions between disciplinary scholars and educationists (Apple, 2018; Au, 2012; Lagemann, 1997). Traditionally, fields of study

are conceptualized across multiple courses to provide an introduction and a foundation for specialization in higher education. A hallmark of disciplinary knowledge is the way thinkers, topics, principles, and methods in a given field are canonized. In the context of Ethnic Studies, while numerous schools and school districts are adopting Ethnic Studies as a broader framework to be infused into all grade levels and subject matter areas, the majority of projects being implemented are courses. Unlike disciplines such as history, social science, natural sciences, and the humanities, Ethnic Studies courses are a “one shot deal” in the sense that the entirety of what a student is meant to learn on the topic is intended to happen in a single course.

2. Contemporary educational policies that still focus largely on standards and accountability. This movement emerged in the 1990s against the backdrop of deindustrialization and globalization. Corporate sector leaders were increasingly invited into policy discussions about education as a way to position the nation for global market competition (National Commission on Educational Excellence in Education, 1983; Stein, 2004). A discourse of accountability, which focused on narrowly defined and rigidly evaluated performance measures among other marketized approaches to schooling, focused on competition and treating parents and students as consumers. This includes policies and initiatives involving charter schools, vouchers for private schools, and schools-within-the-school. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) symbolizes this time period. NCLB enjoyed widespread political support as folks on the political right were in favor of getting schools “back to basics,” and those on the left appreciated that a condition of the policy included data on racial and ethnic group student performance being tracked and expected to improve. Educational governance transformed rapidly in response to these policies. Matters that had for decades been the terrain of local decision-makers were now decided from afar in statehouses and the federal government and facilitated by members of a rapidly growing consultant and bureaucrat class in the field (Kantor, 1991; Thomas and Brady, 2005).

This period has had a significant impact on “what counts” as knowledge. Curriculum standards and frameworks, pacing guides, and assessments all became externally produced for alignment to state policies as opposed to a component of teachers’ professional duties (West and Peterson, 2003). Scholars of secondary history-social science content and pedagogy note that increasingly teachers became curriculum interpreters instead of producers of their curriculum. The

lingering effects of the standards and accountability movement also contribute significantly to the flattening. In California, the idea of state-wide policies on Ethnic Studies goes back to the late 1990s and early 2000s. Local school districts, primarily in large, urban metropolitan areas, began offering or requiring Ethnic Studies and scholarship on it in public schooling began to grow (Sleeter and Zavala, 2020).

3. The teaching profession has shifted dramatically as a result of these changes in educational governance. In teacher preparation programs, significant emphasis is placed on subject matter competence as determined by fulfilling undergraduate prerequisites and achieving score thresholds on standardized tests. The pipeline is notorious for discouraging students of color from becoming teachers (CARE-ED, 2019). Once accepted into teacher preparation programs, heavy focus is on traditional subjects. Ethnic Studies, much like in secondary schools, does not fit neatly into existing program configurations because of its interdisciplinarity. To become a teacher in today's schools means to focus solely on knowledge that is from outside of local contexts. The role and significance of place, in particular *local* places, is often nowhere in the official curriculum. Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies stand in strong contrast to the state-sanctioned materials because of their emphasis on being community responsive. Thus, teachers often have had limited to no experience doing this effectively because of the overwhelming focus on experiences and concepts in nationalized (and globalized) curricula. What they are exposed to in preparation programs is a conceptualization of community from a white middle class gaze: a container for cultural "others," often emphasizing cultural deficits instead of a place of knowledge and wisdom with the potential to be equal partners in supporting young people's intellectual development and well-being. In contrast, Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies often view the community through the lens of relationship-driven scholarship and advocacy, as reflected in mutual respect and long-term commitment.

FORMATIONS OF ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

The pressure to "discipline" Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies is coming in part from how the field is being defined to new teachers. Over the past ten years, tremendous effort has been made to define Ethnic Studies. This undertaking has largely been by scholars who straddle the fields of Ethnic Studies and education (Buenavista, 2016; Cuauhtin et al., 2019; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). Significant

contributions have been made to articulate a pedagogy of Ethnic Studies that extends the political and social action of the originators of the field and envisions revolutionary shifts in the praxis of public education. Impressively, these ideas frame the current discourse and manifest distinctly in policies and practices throughout California and across the nation. Picking up on these projects, we believe it is important to communicate a vision of the field that defines “the work” of Ethnic Studies beyond pedagogy to include a fuller scope of what Ethnic Studies and Asian American scholars do.

What does an introduction to the field look like that best navigates these structural-epistemic influences that contribute to the flattening of the field? How do we sidestep the trap of disciplinary thinking and the epistemological assumptions that undergird organizing knowledge in this manner? An educational institution, be it a university academic department, a school, a classroom, a scholar’s body of work, or more, is a social construction tasked with instruction and learning. Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies institutions moreover are overtly racial formations, housings for the explicit formulation of race theory, knowledge, and practice. While at their inception, the fields of Black Studies, Chicano/a Studies, Native American Studies, and Asian American Studies represented the extension of cultural nationalist social movement strategies to higher education. Their continued evolutions did not always consistently balance the organizational and community moorings. Moreover, as race theorizing has strengthened in its complexities of intersectionality (multi-level interwovenness-internal to systemic), and anti-racist movement innovations have been appropriated in evermore institutional contexts, Ethnic Studies has continued to navigate the fraught in-between spaces. Instead of looking solely at what Ethnic Studies is and is supposed to do, we should also look at how Ethnic Studies / Asian American Studies have formed in ways that vary based on local conditions such as type of institution, demographic landscape, location, and politics. Consistent in the different places where Ethnic Studies takes shape are interrelated “formations” of Ethnic Studies / Asian American Studies: horizontal and vertical, analytic, institutional, developmental, and engaged. We offer these forms of Ethnic Studies as a framework for guiding teachers to consider the work of Ethnic Studies *in their local context*.

To illustrate these formations, we draw on examples of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies in San Diego, California, the region where our local projects take place. According to the Asian

Pacific Thematic Historic District Master Plan (1987), Asian American and Pacific Islander communities have an extensive and rich local area history. A Chinese fishing community grew in the 1870s, Filipino students arrived by 1903 to study at what would become San Diego State University (SDSU), a Japanese community formed in 1907, and Hawaiian business owners also thrived in downtown San Diego in the 1910s and '20s. Mass incarceration of Japanese during World War II, waves of immigration from Asian countries post-1965, Southeast Asian refugee resettlement in the 1970s and '80s, and military service through the present day have been among the major drivers of San Diego's AAPI population history, community dynamics, and social justice activism. Within this community context, Asian American Studies has also developed in the major universities and community colleges in the area.

Vertical and Horizontal Ethnic Studies

Ethnic Studies consists of the four original fields of African American Studies, Native American Studies, Chicano Studies, and Asian American Studies, as well as the more directly relational field of Comparative Ethnic Studies. We think of the ethnic-specific fields as "vertical" in alignment, with each taking the interdisciplinary study of those groups within the racial category as their scope. For example, the field of Asian American Studies, while decentered and complex, approaches the study of race, racism, and liberation from the many perspectives of groups categorized as "Asian Americans." The field of Chicano Studies, which has evolved into a range of conceptions critical of gender and geography, includes the history, culture, social formations, politics, art, philosophy, knowledge, contemporary issues, social movements, and more, of Chicana/o or Latinx people. Native Americans and African Americans make up the core foci of the other two Ethnic Studies fields. Like Chicano Studies, each of these fields has evolved naming practices that reflect population and political shifts since the 1960s.

Comparative Ethnic Studies, which we view as "horizontal" in relation to the original fields, centers race as a relational construction, and examines issues that cut across different racial and ethnic groups. For example, rather than starting from the position or experience of one racial group, a comparative study may examine labor exploitation and organizing among Asian American and Chicana/o communities, analyze restrictive immigration policies that impact refugees, asylees,

and immigrants from multiple origins at the U.S.-Mexico border, explore cultural hybridity and expressive traditions among marginalized groups, or many other possible scopes of study (Ngai, 2014; Espiritu et al., 2022; and Lowe, 1996).

In San Diego as elsewhere, the relationship between the horizontal and vertical formations of Ethnic Studies frames both the common patterns of and unique relationships to racial oppression in the U.S. All racialized groups, for instance, are historically pushed farther away from high-value coastal lands through dynamics of gentrification, criminalization, incarceration, and removal. Indigenous people survived Spanish missions since the 1770s, while throughout the 1900s Mexican Americans endured increasing deportation policies and practices. African Americans faced residential segregation and disparate policing, and Asian Americans pursued liberalized immigration opportunities while enduring racist othering. The intellectual and scholarly traditions that have emerged to examine the similarities and differences across, and within, these general patterns have given Ethnic Studies in San Diego its particular contours.

Analytic Ethnic Studies

Many generations of scholars have contributed to and honed the ways of thinking or epistemologies of Ethnic Studies and how those knowledges are situated in differing lived conditions. Ethnic Studies impacts how we think. The analytic dimension of Ethnic Studies entails a critical turn or the growing into a consciousness that is rich, affirming, re-connecting, inspiring, and expanding, all of which directly counters the intent and impact of racial oppression in the U.S. Subaltern studies scholars, indigenous decolonization scholars, critics of “orientalism,” and “racial formation” scholars have been among the key contributors of Asian American and Pacific Islander frameworks of analysis.

When flattened, Asian Americans are considered “model minorities” who are othered as forever foreign, but who are also held up above African Americans, in particular, to invalidate claims of racial injury and social justice. Ethnic Studies developed based upon this may use frameworks of immigrant exclusion, non-discrimination, and civil rights. Centering the analytic lens, however, brings to the fore significant contrasts among the situated or grounded theories of AAPI people. Native Hawaiian indigeneity and sovereignty, for instance, orient knowledge not around inclusion, but around cultural

revitalization within a restored or re-matriated ancestral homeland—connecting Native Hawaiian epistemologies to Native American more than settler frameworks.

Differential inclusion, an analytic concept advanced by critical refugee studies scholar Yêñ Lê Espiritu (2003), plays out very differently in the histories of AAPI groups. The “benevolent colonization” of the Philippines located Filipinos as already internal to the U.S., even if purported racial inferiority helped U.S. political and economic elites drive the “independence” in 1934, which functioned more like deportation. Japanese American citizens, during WWII had their citizenship rights removed without due process and were mass incarcerated from 1942 to 1945. Reparations in the late 1980s did not repair the generational trauma of such direct and total state violence.

Southeast Asian refugees began U.S. resettlement in the 1970s and in many cases did not have the intact family, community, and resource lines more normative in the immigrant success aspect of the model minority construct. In San Diego, as in many other places, Southeast Asian refugees found themselves located in the socio-economic precarity of racially segregated neighborhoods replete with educational, employment, and law enforcement disparities. Refugees can be thought of as being included to the extent that the U.S. military ventures abroad appear to be fundamentally “good,” “just,” and “benevolent,” but then left to struggle with/in inequitable, primarily urban racial formations.

From these different social locations, the analytic lens may take as its central focus the U.S. military, the U.S. economy (e.g., agriculture and home ownership), underlying ideologies of racial inferiority, underlying ideologies of racial *difference* (but as foreign, not necessarily inferior), underlying anti-Blackness, or sovereignty. It would be fair to say that the range of analytic lenses required to not flatten Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies is an important contribution itself to the broader field of Ethnic Studies.

All racial categories are lumped categories where very different ethnic groups are removed from their context and lined up on a ladder of human value for the purpose of managing, in the case of the U.S., a white-dominated sociocultural political economy—or put more simply, colonization. The interpretive lenses and understandings of the many groups positioned as subordinate are not the same, as is also the case with senses of justice and liberation. Historically, socially, culturally, and politically grounding the philosophies of justice, oppression, and liberation is important work for Ethnic Studies teachers.

Developmental Ethnic Studies

A third form of Ethnic Studies is concerned with developmental dimensions of learning. By development, we subscribe to a definition of the term that recognizes common stages of change as a dimension of the human experience. Formal education, it can be argued, is developmental in this regard as learners move through stages in social, intellectual, and political evolution in dialogue with what they learn and how they learn it. Ethnic Studies is different in that it often consciously requires us to consider our and others' identities and how these backgrounds are situated differently in the social world vis-à-vis power, vulnerability, exploitation, life chances, etc. If colonial models of (under)development sever interpersonal relationships, disrupt family and cultural fabrics, inculcate inferiority complexes into marginalized people, devalue embodied and ancestral knowledge and holism, and otherwise stunt the intelligence, talents, and aspirations of racialized people, then Ethnic Studies models of development re-humanize, recontextualize, revitalize, and empower knowledgeable learners who are better prepared to pursue social justice and liberation.

AAPI students in Asian American Studies are, perhaps for the first time, able to find their own personal and familial realities validated, demystified, elaborated, and treated as realities within which they have agency and power. Aspirational developmental outcomes like these, of course, are enhanced to the extent that AAPI knowledge and people are not flattened. Excavating the particularity of AAPI knowledge and perspectives enhances AAPI students' understanding of themselves within the broader identities of Asian American and/or Pacific Islander.

Non-AAPI students benefit from Asian American as well. Non-AAPI students of color learn better strategies for countering anti-Asian violence, working in solidarity with AAPI people for justice and liberation, and gaining more granular perspectives on the comparable and contrasting dynamics of oppression that they themselves experience. White students learn to better counter anti-Asian racism and recognize the varied and sometimes hidden ways that racialization is normalized in U.S. society and institutions.

One example from San Diego is the work of grace shinhae jun (2023), a dance and performance studies scholar whose work with Asian American dance teams illuminates the dynamics of Asian American youth alienation, Black cultural appropriation, and how dancing bodies communicate the complex workings of "racial triangulation"

(Kim, 1999). For Jun, the post-affirmative action increases in Asian American student “diversity,” combined with a finding of self and community through appropriated Black dance forms, must be elevated to the conscious level so that Asian American students can avoid being used to further marginalize Black people and Black cultures.

Engaged Ethnic Studies

A fourth form of Ethnic Studies focuses on engaging in work outside of formal educational spaces or bringing these spaces into racialized communities or sites relevant to understanding and improving the material conditions of communities of color. We observe that the degree to which Ethnic Studies projects do this varies considerably because engagement outside of the institution is often impacted by dynamics inside of the institution.

The engaged aspect of Ethnic Studies has a particular prominence in the field, exemplified in the origin story itself. Abdul Alkalimat (2021) reminds us that four North Carolina A&T State University students—Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr. (Jibreel Khazan), and David Richmond—initiated the sit-ins on February 1, 1960. Sit-in leaders formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) later that year with the support of Ella Baker. James (Jimmy) Garrett brought his experience as a SNCC organizer and community intellectual and leader in Washington D.C. to San Francisco State University in the late 1960s where he and Jerry Varnado formed the first Black Student Union and, eventually, the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), which created the first Ethnic Studies programs (Bates and Meraji, 2019; Joseph, 2003). In other words, students applying their moral, social, cultural, and historical knowledge to the frontlines of the civil rights movement brought their experience, tactics, and willpower back into colleges and universities to transform higher education from an elitist, exclusionary project to a more accessible, liberatory, and democratic sector. The student leaders of U.C. Berkeley’s Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA), formed in 1968, co-created the TWLF and ensured that pan-Asian political empowerment and cross-racial solidarity politics would be fixtures of both the Asian American Studies that they fashioned and the broader field of Ethnic Studies.

Community engagement grounds Ethnic Studies in real-life conditions and directly challenges the *de facto* segregation of marginalized people from the benefits of education. Community engagement locates

the purpose of education not in the drivers of individual academic achievement, but in the relevance of knowledge to human well-being and freedoms. Engagement challenges reductive portraits, including those that are based on or reinforce racial and ethnic stereotypes. The engaged learning experience offers fuller self-representation, collective voice, and more nuanced and substantial disaggregation of categories like “Asian American” and “Pacific Islander.”

San Diego’s Asian Solidarity Collective (ASC) exemplifies engaged Ethnic Studies. Faculty members from San Diego City College, University of California San Diego, and University of San Diego joined community organizers to form a “grassroots movement and power-building organization” with a mission to “activate Asian American social justice consciousness, condemn anti-Blackness, and build Asian solidarity intersectionally with Black, Brown and Indigenous folks, people with disabilities, queer and trans people of color, and all oppressed communities” (Asian Solidarity Collective, 2019). Students at these local colleges and universities join ASC’s national network to learn about and participate in social justice actions, learning sessions, and community building events that deeply impact their education.

Institutional Ethnic Studies

A fifth form is associated with legitimizing, creating, and maintaining institutional space for Ethnic Studies. Central to this theme is the question: How have we protected the field in institutional spaces that were not designed to accommodate the knowledge, communities, and relationships involved with Ethnic Studies? We note that it is an ongoing battle to articulate why Ethnic Studies is necessary to those outside of the field, and that people, including Ethnic Studies advocates, often fail to recognize all of this work going on behind the scenes.

In 1969, the institutional formations of Ethnic Studies emerged within universities with the force of years-long student organizing, the direct support from other non-education movements (labor in particular), and the excitement of scholars (including scholars of color) who sought respite from hostile academic disciplines. In the near future, Ethnic Studies will expand across areas of California in institutional contexts that vary in levels of readiness and willingness.

Relative to the field of Ethnic Studies, Asian American Studies proponents continue to struggle for visibility and institutional support. In San Diego, there are few Asian American Studies curriculums. University of California, San Diego (UCSD) hosts a minor in Asian

American and Pacific Islander Studies that started in Fall 2020 (UCSD Guardian, 2020). To put the institutional timeline into perspective, this followed a proposal to create Asian American Studies in 1984 (UCSD Guardian, 2023) and decades of effort, including a 2014 list of demands by the Coalition for Critical Asian American Studies (CCAAS). Southwestern College in Chula Vista offers an associate degree in Asian American Studies. At other San Diego colleges and universities, Asian Americanists offer courses within broader Ethnic Studies programs, area studies programs, or disciplines like history, literature, sociology, and political science. Southern California more broadly has twelve universities that offer an Asian American Studies major (see Association for Asian American Studies, 2023), a graduate program at University of California, Los Angeles, and a graduate emphasis at University of California, Irvine. Pacific Islander Studies are less supported institutionally, most often being located within Asian American Studies contexts. One example of a Pacific Islander-specific course of study is San Francisco State's minor in Critical Pacific Islands and Oceania Studies (see San Francisco State University, 2023).

Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies offer unique frameworks, knowledges, and content that has incomparable impacts on AAPI and non-AAPI students, faculty, and institutions. To prevent the flattening of Asian American Studies within Ethnic Studies, and as we continue to resist the flattening of Ethnic Studies overall, "formations" of Asian American Studies need teachers and school leaders to be proactive, strong, and inventive in their advocacy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES SCHOLARS

For the foreseeable future, the work of Asian Americanists will increasingly involve interaction with scholars and practitioners in education, particularly those in the fields of teacher education, curriculum studies, and educational policy. We believe there is a need for other ways to articulate what Asian American Studies *is* to promote robustly constructed and enacted curriculum. We recommend that the field adopts a language of liminality in how it describes itself and frames teacher practice. Scholars need to frame Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies as being about knowledge and skills for observing, questioning, understanding, and social action based on what is evolving, as opposed to what *is*. To this end, we offer a few recommendations:

1. Critique the epistemology of contemporary educational policy.

Emphasize an awareness of the strengths and limitations of the underlying way of knowing educational policy and the need to navigate its prevalence within and across systems, especially in secondary education. In practice, this involves Asian American Studies scholars directly articulating that Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies are fields that question the limits of the underlying ideology of “universality as authority and legitimacy” of educational policy and practice rooted in standardized knowledge. This way of knowing often perpetuates an epistemic monopoly of high modernity and white heteropatriarchy. The heterogeneity of analytic frameworks within Asian American Studies resonates with the field’s challenge to normative universality.

2. Conceptualize teachers as curriculum thinkers rather than curriculum implementers.

A facet of flattening Asian American Studies is the current situation of teachers around the way schooling is structured. Currently, teachers are often conceptualized in popular imagination and by educational policymakers and leaders as curriculum “implementers” as opposed to curriculum “thinkers.” We encourage a vision of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies that consciously resists this model of teaching and instead encourage subject matter scholars to explicitly call for the empowerment of teachers to design curriculum tailored to the histories (local and beyond), material conditions, and political struggles of the student populations in their school communities as connected to larger global dynamics. In practice, this looks like actively engaging in community-based learning to incorporate local histories, experiences, dynamics, and struggles into classroom materials and activities. AAPI Studies encompasses fields that have been underdeveloped even within the context of Ethnic Studies, thus requiring proactive, teacher-driven spaces to continue evolving.

3. Practice content-context relationality.

Teachers need to be aware that the composition of their classroom, school, and communities are relevant to how courses and lessons in Asian American Studies are framed. For instance, how might the content and learning activities look in schools and classrooms where no Asian American nor Pacific Islander students exist? Will this likely hold the same significance as in classrooms with a sizable AAPI representation? How will the composition of different ethnic groups influence curriculum thinking and instructional practice? The sociopolitical context of the learning environment is relevant to the meaning that is made of the curriculum.

Another dimension to consider is the instructor's background. The teaching field is largely white. It is important for teachers to be aware of issues of representation (and possible misrepresentation). These context realities may present even more pronounced tensions as higher education student demographics change and scholars continue to develop impactful knowledge for AAPI and non-AAPI students.

4. Prioritize critical engagement. The flattening of Asian American Studies curriculum is rooted in a view of knowledge that decontextualizes and distorts and a concept of learning that emphasizes performance, often in the form of memorization or parroting answers to questions or scoring well on standardized tests. An important dimension of resisting the flattening of Asian American Studies is to promote conceptualizations of the field that emphasize forms and purposes of learning beyond what Paulo Freire called the "banking model," or transactional forms of learning that focus largely on regurgitating knowledge held by the teacher, in particular ways of knowing that reflect and maintain colonial relationship. In practice, teaching and learning in Asian American Studies should also be about questioning, engaging in problem posing, exploring solutions, and generating new understandings beyond the sanctioned or operational curriculum. In Asian American Studies, differential inclusion, anti-affirmative action hegemony, and divisive contrasting social constructions are dynamics of racism that complicate simple binaries. Critical engagement with AAPI Studies highlights nuanced and less explicit ways that racial hierarchies operate.

5. Recognize developmental needs. A critical dimension of Asian American Studies is that instructors recognize where learners are in their development. As Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies are increasingly brought into public schools, a challenge that teachers are having to navigate is where students are in their understanding of the past. Some teachers have been observed wanting to teach about racialized experiences in historical eras that students have yet to be exposed to because of the scope and sequencing of the state curriculum. In addition, learners in public schools are at different stages in acquiring language, capacity to formulate critical thinking skills, and in situating their experience in social and political context.

The power of Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies is that culturally and community responsive curriculum and instruction can go a long way in providing authentic contexts to improve in

these areas. However, it also requires recognizing and honoring starting points in ways that do not further exacerbate the tendencies to leave some students behind. Ironically, in some instances, it has been observed that Ethnic Studies courses that do not structure learning in this way can further alienate student populations already not served well by schools. Often driving this view of schooling is the notion that secondary education is about preparing for higher education. This concept of schooling can overemphasize “being on track” and “coverage” (i.e. making it through units of study) at the expense of deep, authentic, and transformative engagement that starts with accepting students “where they are.”

DISCUSSION

We offer these recommendations not as a complete blueprint for the future, but as an extension of a set of observations rooted in ongoing research and service engagements with schools. Few expect that the continued foray of Ethnic Studies into public schools will be smooth and free of resistance. Especially significant is the way it disrupts mainstream views about what schools are, in particular traditional disciplinary treatments of knowledge and views about learning aligned with these ways of knowing. In simple terms: schools were not made for Ethnic Studies. Therefore, it is imperative that scholars working with public school educators integrate an awareness of the structural-epistemic differences between higher education, where Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies first fought for institutional legitimacy, and contextualize our fields in ways that include but transcend the discourse of “standards” and “fidelity” to promote a praxis of creating institutional space for critical pedagogical engagement, critiquing and resisting colonial ways of knowing, and connecting schooling—and the day-to-day lives of young people—to community realities and local-global struggle.

Articulating strategies to circumnavigate the flattening of Asian American Studies reflects our hope for a future in which the fields of Asian American Studies and education are more intentionally linked. This includes greater coordination of programs so that PK-12 educators come into the field with nuanced understandings of the struggles for liberation and self-determination of different groups, and how to develop community-informed and responsive curriculum and instruction. We believe the pathway to this future necessitates scholars in Ethnic Studies, Asian American Studies, and education to collaborate

closely on academic and professional pathways such as undergraduate preparation for teaching; graduate and certificate programs in teacher preparation, educational leadership, and research; and professional learning in schools. Increasing Asian Americanists' input on the programs that comprise the professional pipeline to careers in public schools can help shift the prevailing structural-epistemic paradigm to protect the transformative potential of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies. Without this shift, it is highly likely that the diverse experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander Americans will likely continue to be flattened.

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