

Reflections on the Political Attacks against Chicana and Ethnic Studies

[STEVIE RUIZ](#) AND [LONG BUI](#)¹

Fifty years ago, the longest student led strike in U.S. history took place, forever changing the color of the ivory tower in higher education. In 1968, the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) at San Francisco State College fought with school administrators, taking over and occupying their offices for months to challenge what they saw as the Eurocentric bias in higher education (Acuña 2011). The result of this hard-won fight was the first College of Ethnic Studies with a social justice-oriented curriculum that emphasized the struggles and experiences of oppressed people of color.

While academic disciplines from anthropology to sociology were founded by white male academics, ethnic studies remains the first to be founded exclusively on student voices and activism with emphasis on historically underrepresented communities and “collective knowledge” about race, colonialism, indigenous displacement, women’s exploitation, homophobia, and immigrant exclusion. These are issues that are still alive with us in the present day. Despite the end of formal segregation in education under the case *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the appeal of ethnic studies continues to ring across the halls of academia as sign that there is intellectual and social segregation at work, and why there needs to be a greater push for an inclusive learning environment that reflects the changing demographics of the country and the population of college students. The University of California predominantly serves middle-class whites and Asians, reflecting entrenched hierarchies, while the California State University system serves overwhelmingly brown and black working-class

¹ Stevie Ruiz is assistant professor in Chicana and Chicano Studies at the California State University, Northridge. Long T. Bui is assistant professor in Global & International Studies at University of California, Irvine.

students. At California State University, Northridge (CSUN), half the student population is Hispanic/Latino but they make up only a fifth of the faculty, which remains overwhelmingly white (more than double the percentage of white students).²

In this context of inequality, ethnic studies practitioners face cutbacks as well as blowbacks by administrators unwilling to both teach race and confront institutional racism. Despite powerful calls for a more democratic learning system and greater emphasis on diversity on college campuses today, ethnic studies programs in existence endure constant political pressure and budget cuts by university administrators. This despite a growing spread of popular subdisciplines like Asian American Studies, Chicano/a Studies, African American Studies, and Indigenous Studies. Here, a focus on recent events affecting Chicana and Chicano Studies at California State University, Northridge—the largest department of its kind in the country—brings attention to the close relationship between the tenuousness of ethnic studies and the precarity of U.S. higher education.

In 2017, Chancellor Timothy White of the California State University system issued executive orders 1100R and 1110 (hereafter referred to as EO 1100R and EO 1110) as efforts to streamline general education code. Under the banner of student success to allegedly increase graduation rates, Chancellor White issued these two mandates which would have severe consequences for cultural studies departments such as Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and Queer Studies (Watanabe 2018). After weeks of walkouts, boycott and divestment led by CSUN students against its administration and the Chancellor's Office, in October of 2017 CSUN's faculty senate voted in favor that the students not comply with EO 1100R and EO 1110 because of their detrimental impact upon their education. The Department of Chicana/o Studies responded swiftly and forcibly, inspired by the groundwork of student organizers (all of this happened during a time when California's Governor Brown rejected the mandatory implementation of ethnic studies in K-12 curriculum).

The controversy at CSUN resonates with previous activities in Arizona years past. Most recently, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Arizona's 2010 Ethnic Studies Law SB-1070 violated the constitutional rights of Mexican-American students. In Arizona, conservative legislators claimed Tucson School District's Ethnic Studies curriculum

promoted ethnic chauvinism, ruining the image of the founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. Attacks made against Mexican-American Studies in Arizona are connected to the colorblind policies promoted by CSU Chancellor Timothy White. Comparable in their impact, each policy is intent on diluting the mission and integrity of Chicana/o Studies. Content management by decreasing demand of Chicana/o Studies courses means Chicana/o students have less access to information that relates to their racialized experiences. When high school students are denied access to this content, it makes it easier to further deny them once they reach college age because they have not been exposed to ethnic studies material. Most students that take classes in Chicana/o Studies at CSUN express their disappointment in being denied a critical education early on and now even in college. Such life affirming responses that students share in Chicana/o Studies classrooms speaks to the mission we hold dear as a department.

Courses on the nonwhite experience are rarely offered as a mandatory or even elective part of the General Education curriculum, while ethnic studies professors are often censored for speaking directly to the issues of the times. Brown and Black students are ghettoized and maligned, despite the use of their bodies for boosting school statistics. What happened in Arizona is happening all over, and racist and nativist voices claim that youth of color fighting racism are the race-baiters, effectively shutting down any form of critique. When Chicana/o and African American students at UC San Diego in 2010-2011 fought hard to make reforms after witnessing intense racism on the campus, they were labelled “uncivil” rabble-rousers by faculty and administrators but not the fraternity members who had sparked protest by having “Compton Cookout” blackface parties.

In the end, the cascade of student voices will not stop. In 2015, student protests rolled across forty campuses, including top tier private schools like Wesleyan University and Pomona College, demanding more ethnic studies courses to the chagrin of university heads (*New York Times* 2015). These were the precursors to later student protests demanding removal of offensive names, statues, and monuments of racist leaders of yesteryear. In these institutions of privatized higher learning, where there is an open curriculum and encouragement of non-traditional learning, students still fight for more anti-racist seminars and hiring of faculty of color. In all these places, students have been met with open resistance or passive indifference by administrators and

faculty who might not see the value of such programs. In an age of neo-Nazi revivalism and white nationalism, it is not an understatement to say that when students simply demand classes about race and racism that help teach them about their attacked identities or how to confront white supremacy, resistance to this effort makes opponents complicit enablers in the violent terrorist organizations and xenophobic ideologies currently besieging this country and other territories. Despite the liberal pretense of college as a pure place of learning, where highly educated professors are mostly liberal and open-minded, ethnic studies remains the most maligned discipline, as it poses a real political threat to those (half-hearted) advocating for mere diversity and numbers rather than widespread change and perhaps revolution.

At CSUN, Chicana/o Studies stood in solidarity against EO 1100R and EO 1110 policies that eroded the health and survival of Ethnic Studies departments on campus and contribute to the under-education of students of color. Chicana/o Studies intentionally built coalitions with departments that include Communication Studies, History, Deaf Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, Central American Studies, Asian American Studies, Africana Studies, American Indian Studies, and Queer Studies because we felt strongly that racial justice requires that Chicax students and faculty understand race and racialization between communities. Built upon the intersections between race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation, faculty like Gabriel Gutiérrez, Martha D. Escobar, Marta López-Garza, Rosa RiVera Furumoto, Vilma Villela, and ourselves embrace models of Chicana/o Studies that align itself with other communities of color, queer communities, and those seeking gender equality because we see our struggles in relationship to one another. When in solidarity, students and faculty built a stronger sense of community on campus with one another that allowed them to network in ways that undermined false antagonisms that are perpetuated by those who seek to divide coalition among historically disenfranchised communities. Built by a history of coalition between students of color, the Chicana/o Studies department has historically placed the experiences of Chicax communities in conversation with indigenous peoples, African diasporic communities, and Asian American experiences. In this way, Chicana/o Studies is a stomping ground for comparative and relational work that seeks to embrace a comparative model of ethnic studies.

Detractors think ethnic studies displaces the contributions of Western civilization and, by default, replaces white people. This is not true, but it is in fact a call for a better, more accurate and truly global education. In his book *Third World Studies: Theorizing Liberation*, Gary Okihiro traces the birth of ethnic studies to the decolonizing movements of the mid-twentieth century, and discusses its cooptation or dissipation by institutional forces, even though ethnic studies strike at the core of humanistic learning:

To clear the deck, Third World studies is not identity politics, multiculturalism, or intellectual affirmative action. Third World studies is not a gift of white liberals to benighted colored folk to right past wrongs; Third World studies is not a minor note in a grand symphony of U.S. history... Third World studies is about society and the human condition broadly; Third World studies is about the United States in its entirety and its place in the world (Okihiro 1).

From recent calls in South Africa to make the curriculum less Euro-centric to implementation of Black Studies in Ireland, ethnic studies constitutes a part of an international movement to decolonize a Western educational model that has still locked out historically disadvantaged groups. Canadian ethnic studies, for example, has become a leader in the field to tackle some of the most pressing issues about post-colonial and settler colonial contexts. Among them include indigenous sovereignty movements over land, color blind racism (amid claims of post-racialism), and Black Lives Matter. Yet, such “unorthodox” education does not only mean picking up chants from the *United Farm Workers Movement* (Sí Se Puede or “yes we can”), but also learning some real difficult facts about America, such as the fact that a million Mexicans in the U.S. were deported in the 1930s due to the racial fallout of the Great Depression, and the fact that the U.S. has been central to initiating migration from Mexico, for example, through the federal Bracero Program that lasted from 1942-1964 and the North American Free Trade Agreement signed in 1994. Ethnic studies bring such matters into the foreground, re-envisioning traditional disciplines like literature, history, and even science, while showing students a pathway into academia beyond regular vocational careers.

The proven success of such programs cannot be denied in increasing test scores and graduation rates and motivating low-income students to love learning in an education system that ignores or even silences them. Enlightenment may be a hallmark of a liberal arts education, but empowerment is the basis of ethnic studies and Chicana studies. To suggest that black, brown, and red people have the same right to self-determination as white people is as radical—or even more so—now as it was back during the foundation of ethnic studies during the 1960s. This links intimately to the mission of Chicana/o Studies at CSUN to “provide students with an awareness of the social, political, economic, historical and cultural realities in our society...in order to offer a Chicana/o critique and perspective within the traditional disciplines...and to provide a multicultural and enriching experience to all students in the university.”³

Despite all its challenges, the movement to establish ethnic studies endures. Oregon became the first state in the country to implement an ethnic studies curriculum for K-12, while California passed a law requiring it as an optional elective. These state-instituted efforts should be celebrated, because they give a voice to those traditionally silenced. Actor Danny Glover, a staunch supporter of ethnic studies, and former activist in the Black Student Union at San Francisco State in the 60’s says ethnic studies is not about dividing people but that it is “committed to creating a larger sense of democratic possibility in which everybody’s voice, culture, and history was honored and valued equally.” He goes on to say that “in attempting to do that we kept running into these institutionally constructed divides—that privilege some realities and marginalized others” (ibid).

One of the biggest criticisms is the lack of utility of a degree in ethnic studies for postgraduates in a tight job market and a time of skyrocketing student debt and tuition—things that disproportionately affect working-class students of color. But Glover and others believe ethnic studies allows for a revolutionary educational model that allows greater access for formerly colonized communities to education, because of its founding mission to teach them to understand their social position in an unequal segregated world, how their actual histories of success (i.e. the Haitian Revolution) have been erased, and how to address the structural inequality that impedes their life progress. In its 50th anniversary, the

Chicana/o Studies Department at CSUN remains committed to providing access to low income historically marginalized communities. In this way, the faculty envision their research and teaching in practices to allow for equitable access for local communities who otherwise would not have the affordability, mentorship, or opportunities to obtain an undergraduate degree in higher education.

One cannot *be* something if one does not know who one is or where they came from. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, just 16% of professors at post-secondary institutions are historically underrepresented minorities, while close to 90% of full-time professorships are white (and male), even though white people are less than 70% of the population (National Center for Education Statistics). At CSUN, the argument is that students should be funneled into STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). Yet, the false divide and assumed wedge between ethnic studies and STEM is one that fails to address how STEM fields are (de)racialized and how ethnic studies is the bogeyman to blame for the failures of STEM fields to both attract black/brown students and help them achieve in the first place in contrast to ethnic studies' long-time successes in helping students integrate/coordinate familial struggles with academic ones. The lack of mentorship and role models in STEM fields are a serious problem that undermines the professional pipeline and student retention, but ethnic studies is not the problem or the impediment. It is the solution. It is often the first window where students see themselves in the lesson plan as the main subjects rather than the objects of study by others; the first time they see a world where they fit in and where they can do something and be heard.

In an era of social crisis where white supremacy and nativism are on the rise, it seems we have turned back the clock to half a century ago when racism was more direct and overt and less coded. We need ethnic studies, and especially Chicana and Chicano Studies, which emerged from that time, more than ever to teach us why race still matters today and how we might unravel its grip on society. It will teach us how race is not just a black and white issue, how students and youth are the true teachers, and how community activism is the basis of true education. On the 50th anniversary of the field (and Chicana and Chicano Studies at CSUN), a time where activists are still asking and fighting the same things they have always faced--we ask everyone to reflect on where we have been, where we are stuck, and where we should all be heading.

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