

# Ethnic Studies Today: Battles and Possibilities

**Ramona Bell**

**Nancy Perez**

**Marisol O. Ruiz\***

California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt

---

When California's Governor Gavin Newsom signed AB 1460 into law on August 17, 2020, we cheered.<sup>1</sup> As educators of color who teach in the California State University (CSU) system and as ethnic studies educators, we celebrated the fact that the discipline of ethnic studies was being recognized for the value it brings to all students' lives. AB 1460 requires CSU students to take one 3-credit unit of any qualifying ethnic studies courses. Almost a year later on October 8, 2021, Governor Newsom signed Assembly Bill 101 making California the first state that requires students to take Ethnic Studies to earn a high school diploma. The approved AB 101 legislation requires that by 2025 all high school students take one semester course in Ethnic Studies. Despite these victories—mandated Ethnic Studies in the CSU and in California high schools—the battle continues as the implementation of Ethnic Studies remains contentious. Nonetheless, we are still hopeful in the transformative possibilities of Ethnic Studies in California.

From the demand for inclusion in the 1960s academy to the current fight from exclusion, Ethnic Studies continues to have its detractors. Just as we were reveling in the joyous occasion of the passage of AB 1460, another battle in education was on the horizon: a backlash against Critical Race Theory (CRT). One month after Governor Newsom signed AB 1460, former President Agent Orange (also known as Donald Trump) launched a misinformed

attack on CRT (Cineas 2020). This attack against CRT is an attack on all curriculum that share anti-racist goals such as Ethnic Studies. We have witnessed fascist, right-wing supporters speak out at local schools regarding the teaching of Project 1619 and all subjects regarding race, ethnicity, and sexuality. There were even those who wanted to remove “slavery” from school textbooks and replace it with terms such as “Black immigration” and “involuntary relocation.” These are also the same folks using the term “illegal aliens” in reference to immigrants particularly from Central and South America. The acrimonious battles of how culture, history, and identity are taught was heightened under Agent Orange. After his administration ended, his minions continued the attack. We not only witnessed the attack, but we were on the frontlines in the implementation of Ethnic Studies at our university. Even though AB 1460 had become law, we still had to fight those who opposed it. Much like the backlash against the 1954 Brown versus Board of Education decision, some folks within the CSU and on our campus tried to devise ways to block Ethnic Studies from becoming a requirement.

## **Implementation of AB1460 at Cal Poly Humboldt**

Discussions on how the new Ethnic Studies requirement should be implemented at Cal Poly Humboldt was met with hostility. Meetings were held where faculty from various departments believed they could teach Ethnic Studies with fidelity. Faculty from various departments did not stop to think that Ethnic Studies is a field of study that requires the same depth of knowledge and expertise as any other discipline. Ethnic Studies (which is housed in the Critical Race, Gender & Sexuality Studies and Native

---

\* Authorship is in alphabetical order, authors worked on this article with equal amounts of labor

1 AB 1460 Bill Text: [https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201920200AB1460](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB1460)

American Studies Departments at Cal Poly Humboldt) had to stand up and defend their field. There were several points of contention during the implementation process of AB 1460. One was the lack of communication and transparency on behalf of the ASCSU (Academic Senate of the CSU) and the CSU (Chancellor's Office) when it came to discussing, vetting, and approving the core competencies (student learning outcomes) of AB 1460 with Ethnic Studies faculty, collectively represented by the CSUCES (CSU Council on Ethnic Studies). This collaboration was required by the law (AB 1460 Education Code 89032c), yet the Chancellor's Office did not facilitate this process. Instead, they tried to rush the approval of the core competencies one month after the law was passed without any intentional collaboration and input from the CSUCES, and gave false and misleading accounts of shared governance. It was crucial for the representatives of the CSUCES (organized as Native American, Latina/o, African American, and Asian American caucuses) to develop core competencies together, as they are the experts of the field and should be the ones to determine what criteria and learning objectives should be met under this requirement. This sparked a collective resistance by Ethnic Studies faculty represented by the CSUCES to halt this rushed timeline. Together, they organized weekly meetings on Zoom to carefully discuss, debate, and approve core competencies that reflected epistemologies and methodologies of Ethnic Studies and central concepts and themes of each group. Over 100 Ethnic Studies faculty from across the CSU regularly attended these meetings in the span of a month which led to the drafting and approval of a final draft in October 2020. This final draft went beyond simply outlining student learning outcomes; it also strategically included criteria that respects the expertise of Ethnic Studies faculty and protects the autonomy of Ethnic Studies departments on each campus. This meant establishing parameters that emphasized CSU Ethnic Studies graduation requirement courses must be courses that already exist in Ethnic Studies departments (e.g. Native American Studies, Latina/o Studies, African American Studies, Asian American Studies); or be courses that are "proposed, designed and implemented by faculty with expertise in Ethnic Studies (and related disciplines) and be an Ethnic Studies department/unit approved cross-listed course" housed and offered within Ethnic Studies departments (CSUCES).

At Cal Poly Humboldt, Ethnic Studies faculty organized an Ethnic Studies Council with faculty from our two departments to create a campus wide policy to meet the requirements of the law for implementation. The council also partnered with the GEAR and ICC Committees, the Academic Senate, as well as in conversation with Department Chairs. The council worked diligently to review and adapt the criteria from the CSUCES Core Competencies to our campus. Students and faculty of color faced a lot of increased racial hostility from some faculty and administrators during this time, who deemed the Ethnic Studies requirement (and Ethnic Studies departments and faculty overall) as "unnecessary," "expensive," "intrusive," "disruptive," and "misleading." This racial hostility also came in the form of public attacks posted in Zoom chats during virtual Academic Senate meetings. These were primarily directed at students who were advocating for racial justice and Ethnic Studies faculty and allies who they implied were working surreptitiously rather than in concert with university policies to implement the Ethnic Studies requirement. This pushback was expected and not new to Ethnic Studies departments and faculty, who have historically fought for over 50 years to be recognized as a multidisciplinary field and area of study. The pushback at Cal Poly Humboldt revolved around (1) a lack of understanding that Ethnic Studies is a discipline with disciplinary experts; (2) a perceived idea that somehow Ethnic Studies departments will be unfair to other departments that will want to propose courses that meet the AB 1460 requirement; (3) a paternalism suggesting courses proposed outside Ethnic Studies should be approved automatically and be given cross listing designation and a course number from Ethnic Studies departments without the involvement and approval of Ethnic Studies departments; and (4) a suggestion that somehow utilizing this law to support Ethnic Studies growth is "back door" support and preferential treatment of Ethnic Studies departments, not understanding the colonial structures of academia and their continued denial of Ethnic Studies as a legitimate field of knowledge production and teaching. These arguments in opposition to the AB 1460 requirement and its implementation were a pattern observed across CSU campuses. Meeting regularly to report on campus-specific developments around AB 1460 implementation, the CSUCES shared and discussed strategies that worked and organized effectively to

get the support from students, faculty, and community. The Ethnic Studies Council at Cal Poly Humboldt put together an Ethnic Studies Implementation Policy for our campus approved by the Academic Senate in Spring 2021.<sup>2</sup> The CSUCES Core Competencies were crucial in that it protected the requirement from being managed outside of Ethnic Studies Departments and by non-Ethnic Studies faculty through its criteria stipulating an Ethnic Studies course prefix and for AB 1460 (implemented as an Area F General Education requirement) to be housed in our two Ethnic Studies departments (CRGS and NAS) on campus. Furthermore, we added steps to encourage transparency about qualifications and intent in proposing

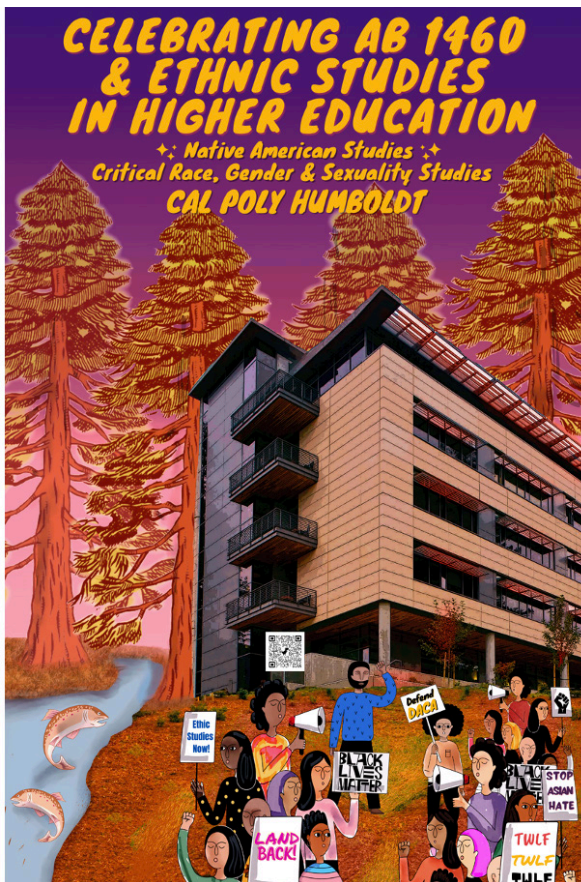


Figure 1: Poster celebrating AB 1460 at Cal Poly Humboldt

2 Cal Poly Humboldt Ethnic Studies Implementation Policy: [https://academicprograms.humboldt.edu/sites/default/files/proposing\\_area\\_f\\_course.pdf](https://academicprograms.humboldt.edu/sites/default/files/proposing_area_f_course.pdf)

AB 1460/Area F courses, requiring that proposing faculty meet with Ethnic Studies Department Chairs first to discuss proposed courses before submitting to Curriculog if approved. In the end, CRGS and NAS were able to build and design the implementation of Ethnic Studies. However, challenges remain with ongoing systemic racism and paternalism that continues to undermine Ethnic Studies and its potential for critique and social transformation.

### High School Implementation

The implementation of Ethnic Studies in high schools has been a battle due to districts failing to commit to the field of Ethnic Studies. Now that AB 101 has been passed, the battle for its implementation is at the center of curriculum decisions.<sup>3</sup> AB 2016 is the California state model curriculum for 9-12 Ethnic Studies. There are at least two divergent perspectives of what will be taught in high school Ethnic Studies. On the one hand, the state model curriculum committee bowed to right-wing political pressure, and as a result produced an Ethnic Studies curriculum that centers a master narrative that has plagued education since its inception in the United States. This master narrative either ignores or marginalizes people of color whose voices, histories, and cultures have made significant contributions to a truly democratic nation. For instance, the state curriculum eliminated critical conversations about Palestine and the creation of Israel. Another example is the state's lack of support in teaching Indigenous knowledge. The lawsuit against In lak'ech and Ashe are such examples. California settled by eliminating Indigenous cultural practices from the model curriculum. The fact that California decided to give into this lawsuit shows the lack of cultural responsiveness they have for African American, Chicanx/Latinx and Native American students who have fought for a robust Ethnic Studies K-21 curriculum.

Nevertheless, there are those who support the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium perspective (Liberated Ethnic Studies 2023). The Liberated Ethnic Studies Model, unlike the state's model

3 AB 101 Bill Text: [https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/bill-NavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=202120220AB101](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/bill-NavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB101)

curriculum, advocates for a curriculum reminiscent of the 1960s student movement who called for the self-determination and liberation of ethnic groups such as African Americans, Arab Americans, Asian Americans, Native American, and Chicanx/Latinx. For example, Dr. Theresa Montaño, states that,

As educators, it is our responsibility to do what others will not, to teach truth. The refusal to acknowledge Palestinian history and human rights by those in government and by the media mirror the actions taken by the California Department of Education when it rejected inclusion of Palestine in the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (Lowenthal Marcus 2022).

Moreover, proponents of authentic Ethnic Studies contend that the state curriculum falls short in teaching the lived experiences of people of color by people of color, thereby marginalizing and devaluing their ontologies and epistemologies. This is coupled with the fact that schools have local control on how they will implement AB 101. The idea of local control is that decision-making will be communal. However, depending on the community's political climate, the curriculum they choose can either support a more liberated curriculum or one that dismisses the founding principles of Ethnic Studies by creating their own version of multicultural education.<sup>4</sup>

After deciding the content of the Ethnic Studies curriculum, another concern will be who will teach it. Some school districts will make sure people who teach Ethnic Studies are qualified by having an undergraduate or MA in Ethnic Studies, while others will allow those with less qualifications, such as just having one or two courses in Ethnic Studies. Some fear that districts will allow their Social Studies teachers to teach Ethnic Studies because it reduces and essentializes the discipline. With the latter, the possibilities of compromising Ethnic Studies and delegitimizing it as a discipline may come into fruition. These varied perspectives—one that values ethnic studies, another that wants to pick and choose what to teach and what to

eliminate, and that does not understand its significance becomes a battleground in each school district.

### **Ethnic Studies Resistance- A Call to Action**

The importance of what we teach in higher education and high school speaks to our role as Ethnic Studies educators in ending the cycle of one-step-forward-two-steps-back in the fight to transform American institutions, specifically education. The discipline of Ethnic studies grew out of the 1960s Civil Rights and student social movements. These movements demanded empowerment and recognition of historically marginalized groups of color. These movements played a central role in radicalizing African Americans, Asian, Chicanx/Latinx, and Native Americans to effect change in a society that deemed them disposable. Part of their agenda was aimed at education. For too long higher education and K-12, in all disciplines, embraced epistemological frameworks drawn from white thinkers, scholars, and educators. In other words, education was just too white. As a result, the lived experiences, the histories, and culture of groups of color was either objectified or non-existent. Students wanted academia to include their voices, histories, and experience. We as Ethnic Studies educators need to embody a pedagogy of resistance to individualism, spirit murdering curriculum, surviving, and allowing others to define our identities and experience in order to reach joy, and the ability to thrive in solidarity with one another (Tijerina Revilla 2021; Love 2019). Therefore, we as Ethnic Studies educators and scholars need to:

1. Fight the backlash against Ethnic Studies. African American Studies scholar Carol Anderson would call this right-wing resistance against Ethnic Studies “white rage.” In *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, Dr. Anderson documents the depths and lengths white people go to in their refusal to follow the constitutional law of desegregation. Whenever African Americans insist on their humanity and rights, white people unleash white rage in their “brutally relentless tactics” by denying Black people their humanity (Anderson 2017).
2. Educators need to use CRT as a framework in building academic curricula, because it will give them the necessary tools needed to transform education that is truly a democratic reality for Chicanx/

<sup>4</sup> Multicultural teaching is centered around surface-level understandings of non-white communities and is essentially a settler-colonial technique of commodified inclusion.



Latinx, Asian, Black, and Native students (Delgado et al. 2017). In addition, drawing on the discipline of Ethnic Studies as well works toward empowering not just African American students, but all students with the knowledge and tools to help transform our world for the better. Critical Race Theory is a call to action because it is asking to detect and unveil racism through practice, policy curriculum, instruction, and funding. Once we detect the racist practices and policies, we need to change it.

3. To this point, another step educators can take towards this transformation is employing Culturally Responsive Teaching (another CRT). This can begin by choosing textbooks and other materials that center the lived experiences, history, and culture of African Americans, Chicana/ Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous communities. We use this approach in our own pedagogies. Such an approach is embraced by the authors of *Teaching Black Lives* who write, “From the North to the South, corporate curriculum lies to our students, conceals pain and injustice, masks racism, and demeans our Black students. But it’s not only the curriculum that is traumatizing students” (Watson et al. 2018). It is also who is in front of the classroom and their own miseducation, as well as hostile school climate. As college professors we understand that it is important to cultivate a healthy self-esteem for students of color in K-21 while also teaching students how to be anti-racists.

4. Stop the horizontal hostility. Struggling for resources often divides us, much like the family arguing over late grandma’s estate. Let’s not throw each other under the bus to get the crumbs from the table. Now that Ethnic Studies became law and monies came with the policy, the ugly exchanges and nice/nasty has intensified. Instead, this is the time we come together—in solidarity with all groups of color. We need to build and strengthen each other’s resistance and not destroy one another. Yes, we have differences, but let’s find ways to support each other in all of our unique collective ways of belonging. We need each other.

5. Let’s nurture our spirit, revive our soul, and protect our joy. As Dr. Anita Tijerina Revilla reminds us, we need to be intentional about being Spirit protectors and restorers (Tijerina Revilla 2021). Patricia

Williams coins the term spirit murder when she describes how racism has emotional and spiritual consequences. We have to take care of ourselves in order to teach our students. In other words, our health matters: physically, mentally, and spiritually.

6. Embolden community solidarity. Ethnic Studies educators need to be involved in the community in meaningful ways. This means sincerely asking what our community members need. Now is the time to really connect theory to praxis and act on that! What are the struggles of the people outside of academia? How do they see us? Do they see us as being one of *them*? If not, perhaps it is us that need to adjust. In other words, check yourself first.

## Conclusion

Our liberation is tied to ethnic studies. Education is one arena of struggle that must remain steadfast and unshakable. From the Stop W.O.K.E. Act in Florida to the backlash against critical race theory across the nation, there are battles to be fought. However, there are also beautiful possibilities. Keep in mind, that ethnic studies is more than a discipline with methodologies and theories, ethnic studies is our lives. This is a fight for survival for each other, our families, our children, and our communities.

## References

- Anderson, Carol. 2017. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*. Bloomsbury USA Press.
- Cineas, F. 2020. “Critical Race Theory, and Trump’s War on It, Explained.” *Vox*. Sept. 24, 2020. Retrieved January 28, 2023 ([www.vox.com/2020/9/24/21451220/critical-race-theory-diversity-training-trump](http://www.vox.com/2020/9/24/21451220/critical-race-theory-diversity-training-trump)).
- Delgado, R., Stefancic, J., & Harris, A. 2017. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York University Press.
- Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium. 2023. “LESMC Chapter 1: Introduction to Ethnic Studies.” Retrieved January 28, 2023 (<https://www.liberatedethnicstudies.org/chapter-one-intro-to-ethnic-studies.html>).
- Love, Bettina. 2019. *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*. Beacon Press.

- Lowenthal Marcus, Lori. 2022, May 26. "California's Ethnic Studies Curriculum is Hiding Its Anti-Jewish and Anti-Israel Teachings." *Jewish Journal*. (<https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/opinion/348817/californias-ethnic-studies-curriculum-is-hiding-its-anti-jewish-and-anti-israel-teachings/>).
- Tijerina Revilla, Anita. 2021. "Attempted Spirit Murder: Who Are Your Spirit Protectors and Your Spirit Restorers?" *Educational Foundations* (Ann Arbor, Mich.), 34(1):31–46.
- Watson, Dyan, Hagopian, Jesse, Au, Wayne. 2018. *Teaching for Black Lives*. Rethinking Schools Press.