

Ethnic Studies Educators as Enemies of the State and the Fugitive Space of Classrooms

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Schooling is not an innocent project. Schools in their traditional sense are not sanctuary spaces for People of Color and never have been. However, for us, Ethnic Studies is a project that has sought to disrupt the white supremacist foundations of schooling in the United States. Ethnic Studies is the only academic discipline to be conceptualized for People of Color and by People of Color. Even though Ethnic Studies has been institutionalized, its intent to be critical remains—to encourage acts of subversion that challenge traditional notions of schooling. As Ethnic Studies educators we are explicit in our delineation between “schooling” and “education.” For us, “schooling” is the state-sanctioned conventions of order and compliance that result in the intentional dehumanization and marginalization of students of color. Because schooling is rooted in a logic of white domination, “education” is understood as the process that allows people who are experiencing dehumanization to ask questions of their condition while working with others to change it. Education in this sense becomes an act of abolition and self-determination. It is a nonpartisan political act that is by definition linked to the claim to our humanity. In a system that would rather incarcerate certain populations before educating them, the work of the critical Ethnic Studies educator to disrupt the status quo is abundantly clear.

In framing our teaching as subversive, we as Ethnic Studies educators are often positioned as “enemies of the state” and our classrooms instantaneously become “fugitive spaces” in the literal and figurative sense, highlighting as many dangers as there are possibilities for education. Noted by scholars Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, fugitive

space stems from the shared notion that oppressed peoples have always made a commitment to build spaces for our liberation beyond the rules and regulations thrust upon us by mainstream white society. Because we continue to struggle with various oppressions (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, ageism, audism, ableism, trans/homophobia, etc.), we are informed by scholars like Michael Dumas and do not make the bourgeois claim that “We’ve made it.” Instead, we are not yet free; Dumas reminds us that to live in recognition of this reality also challenges us to make a collective decision to run as the initial act of resistance. It is “fugitive” because the decision to run is an intentional one, challenging us to find others along the way who are also willing to build capacity to create and protect our ability to educate. Instead of distancing ourselves from the realities of the current political moment, fugitivity demands that we run into the contradictions head-on, with a commitment to build something new.

Conditionally we also become “enemies of the state” in an abject refusal to teach history and culture on the terms and conditions of the colonizer. In making “a way out of no way,” we as Ethnic Studies educators often find ourselves in trouble with systems not for nefarious reasons but due to a commitment to education over traditional, mainstream, white, Eurocentric, colonial “schooling.” Given these realities, we are clear that it is never about “if” they come, but “when” they come. As Ethnic Studies educators, it is our duty and responsibility to be prepared when they do.

Lessons That Brought Us to Our Work

As forever students in Ethnic Studies, one lesson we consider particularly instructive comes from Filipino

American Studies curriculum, particularly lessons regarding the Philippine-American War of 1899–1902. Lessons on the conflict provide an example of intersectional Ethnic Studies, highlighting the inherent multiraciality of U.S. history and the potential of cross-racial solidarity. The war is an oft-observed historical moment that defined U.S. coloniality through the unlawful ceding of a newly declared sovereign Philippines to the United States by Spain as a condition of the Treaty of Paris in December 1898. In this particular conflict, U.S. soldiers were sent to the Pacific to fight Philippine nationalists, or *insurrectos*. While few are aware of this history, even fewer know that the U.S. military in the Philippines included Black Buffalo Soldiers. These Buffalo Soldiers ranged from active participants in the colonization of the Philippines as a strategy to demonstrate patriotism and belonging in the United States to conscientious objectors. The latter group of resisters included David Fagen, who legendarily defected from the U.S. Army and fought against American imperialism alongside Filipinos. Despite their efforts, a more weaponized U.S. military would force a Philippine surrender.

Critical Ethnic Studies curriculum requires emphasizing how the Philippine-American War helps us to discuss the foundations of American schooling while historicizing the intended role of teachers. The Philippine-American War led to U.S. control of the Philippines and the establishment of a public schooling system. Concretized through state-sanctioned violence, schooling was considered a central tool in the colonization of the Philippines, or what Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales and co-author Edward Curameng refer to as “an innovative maneuver in how war is waged.” The first American teachers in the Philippines were U.S. soldiers, and then in 1901 the U.S. government began to recruit and deploy teachers to the Philippines via the USS Thomas. These teachers and those who were subsequently recruited to teach in the Philippines were known as the “Thomasites” and referred to as an “army of instruction.” In total, there were approximately 1,000 Thomasites. Under the Thomasites project, teachers were federal employees charged with the development of a public education system that instituted English as the primary language of instruction in the Philippines. Although clearly a tool for colonization, even dom-

inant narratives of the Thomasites obscure the fact that they were essentially a military intervention in the Philippines meant to erase the vestiges of Spanish colonization and replace it with an American version of a similar process. Continuing the theme of fugitive space, noted scholar of African American history Carter G. Woodson was a Thomasite. Upon observing the detrimental effects of colonization, he rejected U.S. imperialism and began his quest to create education for self-determination once he returned to the United States, highlighted in his seminal text *The Miseducation of the Negro*.

During his time in the Philippines, he observed how fellow Thomasites used and designed textbooks with lessons that were culturally damaging to young people in the Philippines. Below are two examples—in each iteration, students are indoctrinated into learning symbols of American patriotism.



Figure 1: Kirk, M. (1899). *The Baldwin Primer* (p. 14). New York: American Book Company. Retrieved from archive.org/details/baldwinprimer00scrigoog.

In figure 1, students are introduced to the flag; the red, white, and blue; and the American eagle—objects that have no relevance to Filipinos absent



Rita. O Mother, we are playing market.
 Mother. What can you buy in your market?
 Rita. I can buy flags, kites, and fans.
 Mother. Can you buy a flag for Baby?
 Rita. Yes, I can buy two flags for one centavo. Pedro is selling flags.
 Mother. Take this centavo and buy two flags.
 Rita. Is one flag for me, Mother?
 Mother. Yes, one for you and one for Baby.
 Rita. Thank you, Mother.

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Figure 2: Fee, M. H., Purcell, M. A., Fillmore, P. H., & Ritchie, J. W. (1907). *The First Year Book* (p. 44). New York: World Book Company. Retrieved from archive.org/details/firstyearbook00ritegoog.

colonialism. Figure 2 is a lesson considered to be more “culturally sensitive,” as it includes Philippine references: images of a Filipino family and mention of the “centavo,” Philippine currency. The family is “playing market” where the goal is to purchase a flag. From our perspective, figure 2 is actually more problematic in that it also introduces young people to consumerism or the idea that buying a flag is in and of itself an act of patriotism. Ultimately, both perpetuate a narrative that is focused on constructing notions of U.S. patriotism.

These lessons serve as a site to study the intersection of racism, militarism, and American imperialism; or rather, an intersectional, critical Ethnic Studies. For example, while the Philippine-American War is a unit typically included in Filipino American Studies curriculum, the role of Black American soldiers in the Philippines during this time creates the potential of comparative and intersectional analysis of racialized imperialism among Asians and Blacks in the United States and in diaspora. Moreover, the subsequent arrival of the Thomasites demonstrates how a critical Ethnic Studies necessarily draws on

lessons of sociohistorical events to understand contemporary phenomena. In particular, and in context of the original intent of the American schooling system, teachers have always been positioned as “agents of the state.” And such intent remains emphasized in teacher education.

Agents vs. Enemies of the State

As agents of the state, teachers are responsible for carrying out the agenda of the state in local contexts. Their lessons are designed to promote abstract liberal ideas—equality for all, universalism, and a bootstraps work ethic—all of which are not realistic in a society characterized by racial and socioeconomic stratification. In doing so, teachers often emphasize the individual’s role in determining their life chances and de-emphasize the direct role of the state in shaping one’s living conditions and decision-making processes or the state’s numerous attempts to destroy one’s agency. Akin to teachers in Native American boarding schools, teachers in classrooms today often use violence and coercion to suppress dissent. This is why we see students with some of the most critical perspectives become subjected to punitive disciplinary school policies.

Continuing their responsibilities as agents of the state, teachers are expected to oversimplify complex histories. One example is the reductionist history of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Teachers across the United States—both liberal and conservative—rely on superficial depictions of Dr. King to shape lessons on the Civil Rights/Black Freedom Movement and fictional narratives of American racial progress. From MLK Day to Black History Month, we commemorate him as a great American leader and construct a lie about his investment in the U.S. political project. Included in this fallacy is the complete removal of his rejection of the U.S. political project of citizenship and patriotism to a radical imaginary that shifted his attention to the racialized aspects of poverty and a stance against U.S. militarism in Vietnam. If teachers only operate as agents of the state, they are expected to teach Dr. King only as an exemplary citizen of the state.

Keeping in mind the perpetual expectation for teachers to operate as agents of the state, we invite readers to entertain the idea of how Ethnic Studies



Table 1. The Multiple Possibilities of Teachers

Agents of the State	Enemies of the State
Carry out the agenda of the state	Use education to subvert state agendas
Promote political liberalism	Critique abstract liberalism
Maintain the status quo	Challenge status quo
Suppress dissent	Organize or facilitate dissent

educators can fugitively position ourselves as “enemies of the state” due to our desire to create education that is transformative in nature. As enemies of the state, teachers of critical Ethnic Studies are in a position where we have made the conscious decision to engage in a practice that centers decolonizing practices while subverting white supremacist agendas. This process includes but is not limited to critiquing structural inequities that challenge dominant discourses that maintain hegemony and the status quo with the purpose of organizing for critical dissent and self-determination as a means to eliminate oppressive systems over time.

Taking in the previous discussion on Dr. King, we propose how a critical Ethnic Studies educator might reframe lessons on his significance to the Black Freedom Movement. For the entirety of his participation in the Black Freedom struggle, Dr. King was legally deemed an enemy of the state. For more than a decade, he was subjected to government surveillance, first under the FBI’s Racial Matters Program and then under the domestic counterintelligence program COINTELPRO. While understanding this history provides a deeper understanding of Dr. King, there is more. The surveillance of Dr. King increased significantly after he delivered his “Beyond Vietnam” speech on April 4, 1967, an anti-war speech in which he outlined what he called the triplets of war: racism, militarism, and materialism—or in today’s context, neoliberalism. In this sense, we are aligned with Arshad I. Ali and co-author Tracy L. Buenavista’s argument in the anthology *Education at War: The Fight for Students of Color in America’s Public Schools*, in which they state that Dr. King promoted what we can consider a critical Ethnic Studies perspective, one that outlines the need for us to understand white

supremacy from an internationalist and intersectional perspective.

When one decides to go into teaching, a critical educator will always negotiate the tensions of meeting state standards and recognizing when such standards are not only problematic but harmful to young people. As critical Ethnic Studies educators, we must constantly revisit whether our practice upholds or subverts white supremacist state agendas. Unfortunately, to position oneself as a critical educator is a decision met with material consequences, as is demonstrated by the surveillance and eventual assassination of Dr. King, a year to the date after his “Beyond Vietnam” speech. In the same vein, enemies of the state are often targeted for forced or (en)forced disappearance.

Forced disappearance as defined by the United Nations is:

[When] persons are arrested, detained, or abducted against their will or otherwise deprived of their liberty by officials of different branches or levels of Government, or by organized groups or private individuals acting on behalf of, or with the support, direct or indirect, consent or acquiescence of the Government, followed by a refusal to disclose the fate or whereabouts of the persons concerned or a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of their liberty, which places such persons outside the protection of the law.

In short, disappearance is “enforced,” one is deprived of their liberty, one’s deprivation is state-sanctioned, and the state absolves itself from any responsibility of the disappearance and of the disappeared.



As people whose community members have been direct victims of (en)forced disappearance by both the Philippine and U.S. government, we do not use this example lightly. We apply the concept of (en)forced disappearance to understand the dire situation for critical educators of color, particularly those who engage in critical Ethnic Studies pedagogies. In other words, we need to be prepared to grapple with the question "How can we understand the lack of critical teachers of color as (en)forced disappear-

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ance?" From our perspective, we live in recognition of the fact that teachers of color have literally been disappeared. In the Philippines, the government has implicit and explicit directives to harm Indigenous schools they deem rebellious. In 2014 in Ayotzinapa, Mexico, 43 teacher education students were disappeared for opposition to state government. To this day the families of the disappeared are still trying to hold the government responsible for their murders.

Domestically, critical teachers of color with critical pedagogies are metaphorically disappeared: They experience state-supported marginalization, silencing, and/or pushout from schools. Critical Ethnic Studies educators are often deprived of their liberty through state-sanctioned practices that forcibly remove them from their classrooms. Subject to fabricated narratives surrounding the idea that Ethnic Studies is reflective of "a communist agenda intended to overthrow the government" or is "teaching students

to hate America," Ethnic Studies educators are criminalized before any facts are presented or reviewed. A *prima facie* example of the material effects of (en)forced disappearance is the dismantling of Mexican American Studies in Tucson, Arizona, resulting in the loss of employment for many veteran teachers.

(En)forced disappearance is a pressing issue in higher education in addition to K-12. The "Professor Watchlist" is affecting many Ethnic Studies faculty and/or critical pedagogues. A student-initiated surveillance project, the Professor Watchlist seeks to "expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom." Faculty including but not limited to Ethnic Studies scholars Melina Abdullah, Rodolfo Acuña, David Palumbo-Liu, and education and critical race scholars Subini Annamma and Cheryl Matias have been targeted for their critical education perspectives.

Behind the watchlist is Turning Point, a conservative student organization with chapters across the United States. Many members of the organization are externally funded to attend college, enroll in Ethnic Studies classrooms, and display disruptive classroom behavior. Currently, faculty have developed classroom policies that prevent the recording of our lectures, while much of our course material has ended up on conservative blogs and news outlets and opened up faculty and their families to right-wing threats. Such is the context that currently shapes our work. For these reasons, we do not seek to frame the idea of harboring a critical Ethnic Studies perspective as one that comes without direct opposition and threat to our mental, physical, and spiritual health. Instead, our attempts to frame education from a critical perspective are taxing, reifying the idea that teaching from an Ethnic Studies perspective is difficult, and in many cases, hazardous. Nevertheless, these challenges affirm the dangerous relevance of Ethnic Studies, as we work to guide students to understand their material realities instead of engaging a cacophony of abstractions that have nothing to do with their lives.

Always Running: Love and Struggle in Perpetuity

In conclusion, we want to leave you with some ideas regarding how we can work against these literal and



metaphorical attacks on Ethnic Studies educators and how we can move toward developing a PK–20 critical Ethnic Studies. First, we have to contend with the harmful foundations of schooling and begin or continue to collectively envision an education that is explicitly anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist. This requires an education that deconstructs the original intent of schooling, allowing for space to self-determine what learning looks like for ourselves and our students in our classrooms. To do this, we have to uplift our communities' experiences and narratives while enhancing our ability to connect larger projects of U.S. imperialism and capitalism with domestic projects, such as the racialized policing of young people and the divestment of schools. We need to entertain questions like "How can we help students to link global war projects with school pushout, the militarization of schools, and recruitment of young people of color who mostly join due to socioeconomic need?" Once we are able to connect the global with local, we must build what Dr. King referred to as a "Beloved Community," or one in which social, political, and economic equity is possible. In the context of education, a beloved community entails the ability for educators to better engage with our communities to protect ourselves and our students from being disappeared through schooling and work toward an education that is relevant to and humanizing of our communities. In other words, while some might interpret our call to be enemies of the state and foster classrooms as fugitive spaces as problematic, from our standpoint, all we are asking is how can we, as Ethnic Studies educators, understand such assertions as radical love in the context of white supremacy? *

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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