

INTRODUCTION



The teaching of ethnic studies in elementary, middle, and high schools across the United States is, to say the least, a very contentious issue. Ethnic studies can be defined as an area of academic study that focuses on the critical examination of the cultures, perspectives, and histories of minoritized people of color in the US. Ethnic studies raises questions about topics of race, privilege, and power in US society, which can be uncomfortable for some people (well, white people, to be honest). Therefore, there are those who do not want their children to engage with such material in school. For example, the state of Florida has become a hotbed for debate regarding issues of race and anything resembling critical race theory¹ in K-12 schools (i.e., elementary through high school). Florida’s “Stop W.O.K.E.” law bans the discussion of critical race theory in K-12 schools, specifically. Thus far, Florida is one of eighteen states that has passed some type of policy and/or law restricting academic lessons addressing the issues of race and racism in US schools (Pendharkar 2023). While teaching about the topic of race has been attacked in some states, ethnic studies has made huge strides across the country in the past few years. In fact, an increasing number of school districts are now requiring students to complete an ethnic studies class in some form, such as in literature, history, or the arts, in order to graduate from high school.

Traditionally, ethnic studies courses at the university level have focused on the four historically oppressed groups in the US—Blacks, Latinos, Indigenous Peoples, and Asians/Pacific Islanders. American Jews are often excluded from the field of ethnic studies, and their presence sparks heated debate in academic circles on university campuses. Many scholars in the field do not believe that Jews belong in ethnic studies in any capacity. As David Baddiel (2021) stated, “For a long time, antisemitism has been downgraded as not a real or proper racism by progressives” (98). Therefore, there

are those who theorize that ethnic studies has had, and continues to have, a Jewish problem (Freedman 2012).

This fight over Jewish inclusion has now trickled down to the K-12 level due to many school districts implementing ethnic studies course material that has been modeled closely after university ethnic studies courses. Ultimately, the issue of Jewish inclusion in K-12 ethnic studies classes came to a head during the creation of the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC) in 2017. The ESMC was drafted by an Advisory Committee comprised of ethnic studies scholars and educators (i.e., the Curriculum Frameworks and Instructional Resources Division) in the California Department of Education (CDE). There was a great deal of conflict over the initial draft of the ESMC for various reasons, such as a lack of acknowledgement of particular ethnic groups (e.g., Sikhs), accusations of the exclusion of Jews and anti-Jewish hatred (i.e., antisemitism²), as well as the promotion of course materials that focus on the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS)³ movement against the state of Israel (Agrawal 2021). The conflict over ethnic studies curriculum in California led to the creation of the ethnic studies organization called the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium (LESMCC), as well as the Coalition for Liberated Ethnic Studies (CLES), both of which are determined to keep American Jews out of K-12 ethnic studies curricular content.

This is where I conflict with my colleagues in the discipline of ethnic studies. I have been an advocate for the inclusion of American Jews in the study of ethnic studies, diversity, and multiculturalism since I was in my doctoral studies program over a decade ago. I have explained my journey of personal and academic Jewish self-exploration in a previous text (see Rubin 2021), so I will not say much more about that in this space. What I will say is that, as a university educator and researcher on issues of race and education, I find great purpose in confronting and educating those who attack others based upon race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and national origin. Yet, as I contend that American Jews warrant inclusion in ethnic studies due to the continued overlooking of antisemitism in the field (Rubin 2024), I am met with both resistance and refutation by my fellow scholars and educators (Rubin 2018).

It was not until I left the K-12 classroom as an English/Language Arts (ELA) teacher and began a position at a Jewish nonprofit in the fall of 2022 that I learned about the fight over Jewish inclusion in K-12 ethnic studies class content in the state of California. By that time, a modified version of the ESMC had already been approved and made available throughout the state.⁴ When I began researching about the struggle for Jewish inclusion in the original iteration of the ESMC, I finally began to understand what was written between the lines regarding the place of Jews in the field of

ethnic studies (as well as the areas of diversity and multiculturalism), both in the United States and around the world. I explain, in the following pages, the beliefs, assumptions, and excuses that underlie the “no Jews allowed” sentiment in K-12 ethnic studies—many of which are narrow-minded, uninformed, stereotypical, conspiracy-based, and arguably anti-semitic. I assert that the exclusion of Jews is a foundational tenet in many ethnic studies curriculum programs that have become popular recently in the US, such as “Liberated” ethnic studies (LES). While a position of Jewish exclusion has not been stated explicitly in the field of ethnic studies (at least in academic literature), it is deeply ingrained at both the K-12 and university levels.

I feel that it is important to state here, at the beginning of the text, that I am an ardent supporter of the discipline of ethnic studies. I currently teach ethnic studies to future ethnic studies educators at a university in the US and have taught similar courses in diversity and multiculturalism since 2015. In my previous twenty-two-year career as a middle and high school ELA teacher, I fought for inclusion of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) voices and experiences. For example, I created and taught a social-justice oriented Latino/Latina Literature class at a high school in Las Cruces, New Mexico back in the late 1990s, long before I even knew what the fields of ethnic studies or Latinx studies truly entailed. I support ethnic studies scholars Christine Sleeter and Miguel Zavala (2020) in their declaration that “ethnic studies seeks to reexamine experiences, challenge problematic Eurocentric narratives, and build community solidarity across difference ... it attempts to unpack, challenge, and eradicate racism as it takes place in our schools and in the broader society” (4). I see the value and benefit of taking ethnic studies courses in school, whether it be at the K-12 or university levels. Yet, simply introducing the topic of Jewish inclusion in K-12 ethnic studies classes can have serious consequences. As I will explain in the following pages, as a result of entertaining the notion of Jewish inclusion in ethnic studies for an academic journal, I was accused by my peers of attacking the field of ethnic studies as well as demeaning, devaluing, and misrepresenting the entire academic discipline. It is quite evident to me that simply mentioning Jews and ethnic studies in the same breath has, and will continue to, pit me against those I wish to support, collaborate, and advance with together.

This book is intended to serve scholars in the areas of ethnic studies, Jewish studies, multicultural education, higher education, and teacher education. It is also written for practicing education professionals, such as school administrators, district leaders, and current K-12 ethnic studies educators. The text is aimed at university students studying to be educators in ethnic studies, multicultural education, and education administration. It

is also intended for those who are not professionals in the field of education but are interested in the topics of K-12 education, ethnic studies, antisemitism, and issues of race/ethnicity in the US. It is my hope that this text can open some doors, even just a crack, to begin a critical dialogue. The fact of the matter is that “we have a right to our opinions, but there will be no personal or intellectual growth for us if we are not willing to think critically about them” (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017: 33). That being said, I believe that being open to listening and questioning, even to ideas one does not appreciate, can lead to positive social change.

In this book, I assert, without hesitation, that there is an anti-Jewish bias in the discipline of ethnic studies at the university level, and it is important to note that this was a major concern well before Hamas’ attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, and the subsequent Israel-Hamas War. Additionally, due to new school district requirements across the US, persisting anti-Jewish biases and assumptions have now begun to poison the well of ethnic studies at the K-12 level. The needs and perspectives of American Jews are unnecessarily disregarded in our schools today, and the LES program in California is emblematic of the widespread absence of Jews and antisemitism in ethnic studies course curricula. As Rosenblum (2007) asserted, “Every oppression is different, and every oppressed group deserves our time and commitment to learning what their specific experience is like, and how we can best support their struggle for liberation” (7), yet, for some reason(s), this is just not true for the Jewish people.

Recent studies have shown that antisemitic incidents in the US reached (yet another) all-time high in 2023, which was the second year in a row of record-breaking antisemitic activity (ADL 2024). This includes 8,873 incidents of assault, harassment, and vandalism, which is the highest number of antisemitic incidents on record since the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) began tracking in 1979 (ADL 2024).⁵ For Jewish people, there are relationships “between perceived discrimination and poorer quality of life, including mental health symptoms, poor self-esteem, and life dissatisfaction” (Kaufman et al. 2020). Therefore, I believe that it is essential that American Jews be included in ethnic studies curriculum content so that antisemitism can be extinguished in its infancy, when people are still young and impressionable. I provide, for those who are willing to listen, a voice for Jewish Americans—who are overlooked, ignored, and disregarded in most, if not all, racial/ethnic discussions in K-12 and university classrooms. This perpetuation of anti-Jewishness, intended or not, is not just harmful to Jews, but rather, every person of color fighting a similar battle against white supremacy and domination. Unless addressed in our schools, antisemitism will continue to grow, spread, and infect a new generation of American youth. This is preventable, but the simple truth is that Jews cannot do it alone.

Chapter Outline

In this text, I take an academic (i.e., research-based), theoretical, and introspective look at the field of ethnic studies and where I believe American Jews fit into the academic discipline. In order to accomplish this, I focus on several different areas of ethnic studies, Jewish studies, multiculturalism, critical, and educational pedagogy. I lay out the argument for Jewish inclusion in ethnic studies classes at the elementary, middle, and high school levels and show, by rhetorical analysis, the personal and professional consequences of broaching the subject of Jewish inclusion in the field of ethnic studies today. As such, I cite a good amount of personal communication in this text; the sole reason being that most assertions regarding Jewish Americans in ethnic studies are communicated via channels that are considered to be less formal than published academic literature (e.g., via email, interviews). Ultimately, I explain why advocating for Jewish inclusion in K-12 ethnic studies is a risk worth taking in order to fight antisemitism and build continued collaboration and cooperation with all BIPOC communities.

In the first chapter of this book, I define the academic discipline known as ethnic studies, provide a brief history of ethnic studies courses at the university level (and how the current K-12 classes are modeled after them), and the ethnic studies debate that occurred in California and continues in cities across the US. I discuss the creation of the LESMCC, explain its impact on ethnic studies classes in K-12 schools, and why this is cause for great concern for the study of antisemitism and the safety of American Jews.

The second chapter introduces the ideas of positionality and reflexivity in research and explains why I believe it is important to “lay all of my cards on the table” and discuss my personal background, Jewish identification, and family history in this book. In addition, I address my general disconnect with the State of Israel and how this affects my perspective on Jewish inclusion in K-12 ethnic studies course content. I explain how I am an American Jew with no real personal ties to Israel; therefore, my focus on Jewish inclusion in ethnic studies is based solely on my understanding of American Jewry, antisemitism, racism, and discrimination, and not as a reflexive defense against the accusations of the perceived negative actions of the State of Israel. Since a major assertion for a lack of Jewish inclusion in ethnic studies classes is the existence of Israel and Israeli treatment of Palestinians in Gaza (in addition to the issue of Zionism⁶ and accusations of colonialism⁷), I will attempt to separate the lived realities of American Jews from those of Israeli Jews and how exclusion of one group due to the supposed acts of another is simply unacceptable.

Chapter 3 explains the potential arguments against Jewish inclusion in K-12 ethnic studies classes and why I believe that American Jews have a

place in its class content. I also address antisemitism in schools today and how the inclusion of American Jews in ethnic studies classes can only help reduce anti-Jewish hatred in the US. For example, I argue that addressing the American Jewish experience in the classroom does not mean that other oppressed groups are not important and do not have their own specific needs, that all racial/ethnic groups are fighting the same battle against white supremacy in this country, and while often seen as a successful “model minority,” American Jews still fall victim to increasing prejudice and discrimination in both the US and around the world.

In the fourth chapter, I explain the five major reasons why I believe that Jews are not included in K-12 ethnic studies class content, as demonstrated by groups like the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium (LESMCC). The reasons for Jewish exclusion are as follows: 1) Jews were not included in the original 1968 ethnic studies model curriculum at San Francisco State College (now University); 2) American Jews are only considered to be white; 3) Jews are equated with Zionism, and Zionism is seen as evil by most ethnic studies scholars; 4) the belief that Jews simply do not need the support and representation in academic curriculum like Black, Indigenous, People of Color do; and 5) the notion of anti-normalization⁸ at the university level. In reality, since many of the K-12 ethnic studies classes that have been created across the US are advised by university ethnic studies faculty, such as those in the LESMCC and the Coalition of Liberated Ethnic Studies (CLES), this stance of anti-normalization has now been adopted by K-12 schools. I also highlight an additional possible reason why Jews are not included in most middle and secondary ethnic studies classes—continuing, unchecked, anti-Jewish hatred (i.e., antisemitism). Additionally, I discuss the importance of pushing for a Jewish presence in K-12 ethnic studies classes no matter how resistant some ethnic studies scholars may be at the present time.

In chapter 5, I explain my personal experiences being a Jewish ethnic studies scholar who wrote a journal article that questioned whether American Jews have a place in K-12 LES class content. I describe the academic journal article that was published in a top-tier, international, ethnic studies journal and the personal and professional backlash from the ethnic studies community that resulted from said publication—in the form of an online petition calling for the retraction of the paper, personal and professional attacks on social media, and a complete misrepresentation of my work and the intent behind it. I provide a content and rhetorical analysis of the online petition letter and address pertinent accusations, such as being a right-wing collaborator intent on attacking the discipline of ethnic studies, hiding an undisclosed conflict of interest when writing the article, and equating the fields of ethnic studies with multiculturalism.

I also identify, historicize, and analyze the negative Jewish tropes, stereotypes, and dog whistles that permeate the petition letter.

In chapter 6, I argue for a more inclusive understanding of K-12 ethnic studies, like those articulated by esteemed ethnic studies scholars James A. Banks and Ronald Takaki. I explain how the LESMCC has failed in its understanding of Jews and social justice, and that it deliberately denies American Jews access to increased understanding of its curriculum content. I also introduce the concept of Jewish counterstories and how they have the power to counteract stereotypes and preconceived notions about Jews and the American Jewish experience in the twenty-first century. Therefore, I posit that there must be space created for American Jews in the K-12 ethnic studies classroom in order to address and attack antisemitism in addition to other virulent forms of racism in the United States.

The final chapter of the book summarizes the necessity for American Jewish inclusion in ethnic studies class content at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The chapter explains how, thanks to social media, antisemitism and Jewish stereotypes are finding new ways to grow and fester amongst US youth. This section also discusses why K-12 and university ethnic studies educators must begin the process of critical self-reflection in order to help break the cycle of Jewish hatred and address the needs of US Jews in the field of ethnic studies.

Where to Begin

I believe that it is important to begin this book by taking a step back and briefly discussing the field of ethnic studies and its history in the United States in order to understand why American Jews, for all intents and purposes, are not welcome. To make sense of Jewish positionality, as it stands currently, it is essential to explore the foundational tenets of the discipline at the university level in the 1960s and how this movement directly impacted the K-12 iteration of ethnic studies that is beginning to be rolled out across the US today.

Notes

1. Critical race theory (or CRT) is the study of “transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado and Stefancic 2011: 3), and it emerged out of critical legal studies, a legal movement in the 1970s (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Ladson-Billings 1999). These studies critique the intersection of the law and race, how the law effects groups and individuals in particular social and cultural contexts (Ladson-Billings 1998), and how litigation from the civil rights movement failed to obtain significant racial improvement in society (Liu 2009). Similar to critical legal studies, CRT seeks to eliminate and transform unfair and unjust laws (Bell and Edmonds 1993).
2. For this book, I will use the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (n.d.) definition of antisemitism, which is, quite simply, “prejudice against or hatred of Jews” (para. 1). While there are more detailed definitions of antisemitism out there (e.g., the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance [IHRA] definition), the USHMM definition is suffice for understanding of this text.
3. Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) began in 2005, and it calls for economic boycotts, divestment, and sanctions to be used against Israel to pressure the Israeli government “to end its regime of settler-colonialism, military occupation and apartheid against Palestinians” (Palestine Solidarity Campaign 2023: para. 1).
4. The ESMC focuses on Blacks, Latinos, Indigenous Peoples, and Asians/Pacific Islanders, but additional lesson plans about Jews are located in the “bridge” (i.e., appendix) where Arab Americans, Sikh Americans, and Armenian Americans can also be found (McGough 2021).
5. It is important to note that California had the highest number of reported antisemitic incidents in the country in 2023 (ADL, 2024), which happened to be the first state to require ethnic studies class credit for graduation.
6. According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) (2016), “Zionism is the movement for the self-determination and statehood for the Jewish people in their ancestral homeland, the land of Israel” (para. 1).
7. Colonialism can be defined as “the maintenance of political, social, economic, and cultural domination over people by a foreign power for an extended period ... Colonialism is rule by outsiders but ... does not involve actual incorporation into the dominant people’s nation” (Schaefer 2015: para. 1).
8. Anti-normalization is a policy of not forming any kind of relationship or engaging with Zionists in any way so as not to “normalize” (i.e., accept) their positions.