



The University of Texas at Austin
Texas Education Review
College of Education

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Published online: July 2019

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ALEX J. ARMONDA

The University of Texas at Austin

To cite this article: Armonda, A.J. (2019). Advancing an (im)possible alternative: Ethnic studies in neoliberal times. *Texas Education Review*, 7(2), 30-44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/2283>

Advancing an (Im)possible Alternative: Ethnic Studies in Neoliberal Times

ALEX J. ARMONDA
The University of Texas at Austin

The establishment of what is now known as Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University in the late 1960's represented a decisive victory for grassroots movements led by young scholars and students, who drew their political and theoretical inspiration from the anti-hegemonic and anti-colonial upheavals that animated the revolutionary spirit of the era (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). The Ethnic Studies movement constituted a broad effort to challenge the constricted disciplinary perspectives that have historically defined the Western academy. The appearance of a multitude of subaltern standpoints from which new knowledges, histories, and political futurities were being generated threw into question the boundaries and procedures that had worked to contain, discipline, and legitimize the Western sciences. While Ethnic Studies has since then been used as an umbrella term to cover a number of specific areas of inquiry (e.g. Black studies, Chicana studies, American Indian studies, Asian American studies), Sleeter (2011) has nevertheless identified within the contemporary Ethnic Studies five common themes or tenets, which I summarize as follows: 1. The critical consideration of the positionality of the subject from which knowledge is constructed or leveraged; 2. The close examination of the dynamics of U.S. colonialism and neocolonial formations; 3. A critical attendance to the ideological and historical constructions of race, including the institutionalization of race and the struggles of people of color for liberation; 4. An investigation of the meaning and function of collective and of communal identity and; 5. The study of one's communal artifacts, whether artistic or intellectual, whether historic or contemporary. Taking these tenets as a point of departure, this conceptual paper aims to extend and clarify the radical political potential of Ethnic Studies in the context of neoliberal capitalism, and the crucial role that Ethnic Studies can play in realizing critical pedagogy's promise of emancipatory social transformation in the present.

As noted, we must frame the push for Ethnic Studies as but one important expression of a broader effort to challenge the coloniality of the academy and academic knowledge as such. This is a project that aims to disrupt the ontologies, epistemologies, and dominant ideologies that are positioned in schools as neutral, objective, ahistorical, or atheoretical (see Apple, 2004), doing so by way of what Paulo Freire (1970, 1993) called praxis, a term which designates both critical reflection and strategic intervention into our material conditions of existence. In this way, Ethnic Studies has been strongly linked to transformative forms of community engagement (Lopez & Romero, 2017), which draw specifically upon the variety of cultural wealth and social capital of historically marginalized communities (Yosso, 2005). The central question addressed here, however, concerns the specific ways in which these alternative forms of social investment have to be made sense of in the global context of neoliberal capitalism, which has been described as a properly biopolitical regime that consistently finds new ways of incorporating and neutralizing the immaterial productions of marginalized communities and subjectivities (see Hardt & Negri, 2004).

In direct challenge to the recuperative tendencies of neoliberal capital, this essay aims to raise the question of Ethnic Studies as a crucial site of generative conflict, of theoretical irreconciliation – a site of a productive disruption, of a potential rejection of the neoliberal order of things and the opening of new social and political horizons. I see this following two distinct yet interrelated paths of exploration, through what I call its 'external' and 'internal' valences of contestation and negotiation. In the first section of this review, I will trace the contentious relationship between the Ethnic Studies movement and the challenges advanced by neoliberal multicultural ideology and the agents of neoliberal educational reform, which will culminate in an extended discussion of the passage of

Arizona House Bill 2281. I then offer a brief meditation on some of the contemporary efforts to legitimize Ethnic Studies in the wake of the bill's passage, asking whether or not it is possible to square the transformative objectives of Ethnic Studies with the instrumentalized models of assessment and measurement that characterize the neoliberal agenda for reform in public education.

However, I want to make it clear in advance that by situating Ethnic Studies in relation to the neoliberal problematic, I do not mean to say that all of the forces working against Ethnic Studies programs are strictly neoliberal ones; this analytic is useful, but it is neither comprehensive, nor is it final. And insofar as readers may know of the ultimate fate of HB 2281 (which a federal judge ruled unconstitutional in 2017), I believe it would be naïve to consider this analysis as a kind of post mortem. If anything, the recent actions taken by the Trump administration have done well to remind us that the juridical sphere hardly constitutes a neutral space wherein which justice is secured or delivered. The logics of exclusion seen at work in HB 2281 are still very much with us today. We need only look as far as the recent 'Muslim Ban,' the declaration of a state of emergency at the U.S. – Mexico border, the systematic denial of due process for refugees, the unconscionable separation of families, and the renewed ethos of militaristic intervention to see the extent to which the identification and violation of the Other remains essential for consolidating and sustaining dominant fantasies of 'security' and 'protection.'

In the second section of this paper, I argue for a dialectical description of Ethnic Studies, emphasizing its ability to stage productive confrontations between traditions in Marxist philosophy, decolonial theory, and critical race theory – the tensions of which are key to reframing our understanding of consciousness raising and the formation of radical subjectivities in the present. The central question that emerges throughout the course of this review concerns the status and enduring vitality of the political imaginary, of our ability to engage in the envisioning of radical alternatives despite the atrophy such capacities have suffered under the neoliberal regime. I have aimed to distill the theoretical contours that have characterized some of the major inquiries into the topic, while attempting to maintain the contradictions that underscore them – the very antagonisms that may yet initiate key points of departure for the generation of novel kinds of emancipatory praxis moving forward.

External Contestations: Ethnic Studies and Neoliberal Reform

The Birth of Neoliberal Multiculturalism

In order to understand the fundamental changes that neoliberalism – here understood as both a resurgent laissez-faire economic doctrine as well as a social philosophy rooted in Western principles of individualism – would inaugurate within the sphere of multicultural discourse, we have to first grasp the political situation in which it realized its initial intervention. To that end, Kymlicka's (2013) discussion on the multicultural policies of the 1960's contextualizes the birth of the Ethnic Studies movement within the larger political dynamics of 'citizenation' that were then being negotiated between state actors and grassroots organizers and activists. And, of course, while the decade marked a number of watershed moments for the legitimation of ethnic identity politics within and across the democracies of the West, we must also recognize the degree to which such state-sanctioned 'politics of multiculturalism' nevertheless served to curb the more genuinely revolutionary impulses inherent to the various movements in question. In other words, these official discourses of multiculturalism, and the political victories so often attributed to them, were indeed always-already symptomatic of a convergence of dominant and oppositional interests, as Bell (1980) masterfully elucidated in his seminal reading of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Yet, while Western states secured for themselves throughout this time a tenuous equilibrium between the politics of nationalism and citizenship on the one hand and the politics of identity and social liberalism on the other, the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980's initially met this multicultural reality with deep hostility. As Kymlicka (2013) noted,

Indeed, the first wave of neoliberals in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia were uniformly critical of multiculturalism, which they viewed as a prime example of unjustified intervention in the market in response to "special interests" caused by the capture of state power by ethnic entrepreneurs and their rent-seeking allies in the bureaucracy. (p. 107)

We thus identify the parameters of the ideological space that would provide the foundations necessary for a series of strategic interventions aimed at delegitimizing the Ethnic Studies movement. This appears to develop along a three-pronged axis of attack. The first is grounded in neoliberalism's anti-Keynesian impulse, for which government-sanctioned initiatives aimed at redressing systemic inequities appear precisely as the kind of interventional policy deemed by neoliberal proponents to be anathema to their market-driven, supply-side solutions (Harvey, 2005). The second deals with the correlative shifts that neoliberalism inaugurates at the locus of the individual subject, whose essential rearticulation as a 'market actor' frees it from the fetters of social solidarity, providing a space wherein which a disciplinary ethic of self-conduct can blossom in accordance with the actuarial language of investments and returns which, at the same time, moralizes the consequences of individual (rather than collective) choice (Besley and Peters, 2007; Brown, 2003; Foucault, 2008).

The third and perhaps most problematic dimension deals with the way in which neoliberalism eventually came to appropriate for itself the productive energies of the multicultural movements that preceded it. This is what Kymlicka (2013) has called neoliberal multiculturalism, which describes the process by which neoliberal actors came to see 'the field of ethnic relations' as an asset to be leveraged in the construction of an increasingly deterritorialized global marketplace, the viability of which necessitated the incorporation of ethnic identities, markers, and artifacts as an antecedent upon which the valorization and accumulation of new capital could be generated (pp. 109-110). As Mitchell (2003) argued, the older political brand of state-sanctioned multiculturalism – while being from its very inception linked to the hegemonic maintenance of capital as an ideology – still provided opportunities for even the most ephemeral moments of harmonious alignment between groups with divergent class-based or ethnically-based interests. Yet, within the neoliberal moment,

This particular form of multiculturalism is thus increasingly perceived by contemporary neoliberal politicians as either irrelevant or negative as a political philosophy, and is now being undermined in educational systems... [where] it is rapidly being replaced with a meaner, harder logic of competition on a global scale, and of a strategic, outward-looking cosmopolitanism. (p. 392)

In other words, neoliberal ideology, particularly as it is expressed through education and schooling, issues a cosmopolitan imperative: we are disciplined to become cosmopolitan actors, nodal points through which networks of material and immaterial exchange are to proliferate and multiply in the space of the global economy. Undercutting, at the level of subjectivity itself, the deeply anti-capitalist tendencies of the Ethnic Studies movement, multiculturalism is here reduced to another strategic reflex in the composition of the entrepreneurial self. The moment where the signifiers for 'cultural competency' appear as a bullet point on the corporate resume suggests, at the same time, the extirpation of any remaining currency 'multiculturalism' may have held for those concerned with political contestation and collective struggle.

But this is in no way to suggest that neoliberalism's mobilization of the multicultural impulse is accompanied by a veritable waning of institutional forms of racialized prejudice and violence. Indeed, Melamed's (2006) examination points us toward the opposite conclusion: that despite the in-

sistence on the part of neoliberal actors to detach race and the legacies of state-sponsored racial discrimination from the discourses of cultural politics, the ideological mystifications that constitute neoliberal multiculturalism and the ‘post-racial’ imaginary not only allow for the exploitation of communities of color to continue unabated, they further provide neoliberal actors with the symbolic purchase necessary for their profit-driven interventions in the social field to be heralded as benevolently humanitarian and philanthropic (Buras, 2011; Lipman, 2015). In shifting the conversation back to the recent controversies surrounding the high school Ethnic Studies program in Tucson, Arizona, what we must throw into relief, above all else, is neoliberalism’s recourse to the pernicious ideology of racial colorblindness.

Arizona HB 2281 and the Neoliberal Racial Imaginary

The discursive shifts outlined above are critical to understanding the ideological dynamics that drove the passage of Arizona House Bill 2281 (HB 2281) in 2010, which has been described as a legislative effort engineered to target and effectively eliminate the thriving Mexican American Studies (MAS) program housed within the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). The controversy surrounding the bill’s passage – as well as the now famous display of public resistance by TUSD students – made rounds on a variety of local and national media outlets. At the time, Sleeter (2011) designated TUSD’s MAS program as the only “fully fledged” high school Ethnic Studies program in existence within the United States. Romero (2010) has gone even further in detailing how the program began as a grassroots initiative for the improvement of educational outcomes for Chicax students in TUSD in the late 1990’s, and how its roots extend back to a series of walkouts led by student activists in the late 1960’s, whose demands included the establishment of a Chicano Studies program as part of a more comprehensive effort to begin redressing the devastatingly inequitable effects of TUSD’s school funding policies. In this way, the struggle to build TUSD’s MAS program cannot be separated from the local legacies of Chicax activists and their relentless pursuit of educational justice.

While the MAS program survived a variety of legal attacks by the state in years prior, the successful passage of HB 2281 meant that classes in Arizona public schools were subsequently forbidden to:

- 1.) Promote the overthrow of the US government.
 - 2.) Promote resentment toward a race or class of people.
 - 3.) Be designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group.
 - 4.) Advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals
- (Arizona Revised Statutes, p. 1, lines 12-16)

Critical responses to the bill have characterized it as ‘neoliberalism by law’ (Serna, 2013), and it is precisely this line of critique we are pressed to trace here. To begin, we must contextualize the language of HB 2281 in relation to neoliberal multiculturalism and the logic of its colorblind ideology, which refers to the contemporary structuring of a racism ‘without race,’ a discourse of race that has, in the post-Civil Rights era, become ‘naturalized’ through the abstract language of laissez-faire liberalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). As Gillborn (2014) noted, the erroneous, yet entirely necessary, notion assumed by its legislative architects – one that is perhaps best captured in the second clause of the bill – mistakes the program’s emphasis on the deconstruction of institutionalized whiteness and white supremacy as an attack on “white people” (p. 32). Under these pretenses, the bill inscribes into law a vision of colorblindness which secures the very worldview that neoliberalism informally imposes elsewhere (see Melamed, 2006) – not only in its drive to separate the cultural from the racial, but in its explicit degradation of the politics of ethnic solidarity via the fetishization of the ‘pupil as individual.’ The nominal claim to post-racial harmony thus renders any explicit invocation of institu-

tionalized racism (or perhaps even race itself) – not even to mention collective struggle – seditious, and, in a way, anachronistic. Tom Horne, serving as Arizona’s Superintendent of Public Instruction at the time of the bill’s passage, claimed that he – presumably along with the other architects of HB 2281 – was following in the most progressively humanistic way the lesson of Martin Luther King when he reiterated his faith in the principle that “we are individuals... not exemplars of the race we’re born into” (Horne, quoted in Moore, 2010).

Dotts (2015), recognizing Arizona’s particular historical legacy of cultural and curricular imperialism, has argued that what HB 2281’s proponents fail to recognize is the way in which their own white privilege functions in relation to their investment in the mythos of a democratic, pluralistic, and meritocratic America. Whereas this may certainly be the case, such arguments may do well to ascribe to subjective ignorance or error the objective logic of violation coordinated within the symbolic space of neoliberalism itself (see Žižek, 2008a). In other words, the bill represents the moral failure of individuals inasmuch as it does an achievement – the crystallization in juridical terms of a more nebulous ideological agenda running more or less according to plan. In this way, Clark and Reed (2010) have described how

HB 2281 is predicated on neoliberal colorblind racial ideology. That ideological orientation is rooted in logic that undermines the work of Racialized Communities Studies by denying colonization and racial oppression, white privilege, and, importantly, the past and present of racialized communities’ grassroots efforts to name and hold accountable the agents and institutions of settler colonization, racial oppression, and white supremacy. (p. 44)

Following this, we will maintain that HB 2281 represented but a variation of the colonialist discourse inscribed into the very heart of the U.S. national project itself, which has historically worked to secure and legitimize material accumulation on the exploitation and exclusion of Indigenous, African-American, and Latinx communities (Kunnie, 2010). But to understand the dynamics of exclusion as they play out here requires us to recognize the particular antagonisms inherent to the neoliberal racial imaginary and its tendency toward the symbolic and material reterritorialization of space. Thus, while HB 2281 represents a logic of exclusion which proceeds along epistemological lines – the exclusion of the knowledge of the Other – we may locate its corollary in Arizona’s controversial Senate Bill 1070, whose granting of broad power to law enforcement included an ability to ‘determine’ immigration status during routine traffic stops, as representing the sovereign’s pursuit to violate the body of the Other (Martinez, 2012). Bolstering this idea is the fact that previous legislative attempts to dismantle TUSD’s MAS program came packaged in a number of proposed homeland security bills, suggesting that the very possibility of a transformative educational experience for children of color is not only reducible to an attack on “white people” as such, but reveals the extent to which whiteness itself becomes coextensive with the sovereignty and safety of the state in the dominant racial imaginary (Romero and Arce, 2009).

Yet, if we are to consider the logic of these juridical interventions in relation to the ‘post-racial’ procedures of neoliberalism and neoliberal ideology, a series of contradictions appear that may indeed hold serious theoretical value. Here, Wanberg’s (2013) perspicacious analysis has established one important point of departure: that HB 2281 lays bare the way in which race in the neoliberal imaginary must simultaneously appear as excessive, as a threat which serves as the grounds for a legitimate reactionary response, and nonexistent, as that which must continually reaffirm its claim to colorblindness as a means “to destabilize the very intelligibility of racism” itself (p. 31). In other words, it paradoxically requires the very thing it rejects, clueing us in to the fetishistic logic of disavowal that, in turn, constitutes the parameters of its ideological space (Žižek, 2008b).

This dialectic is reiterated in a slightly different way by Cacho (2010), who has argued that the affective and symbolic circulation of fear in the debate around HB 2281 works precisely because it lacks a fixed, stable referent; that this discursive economy, characterized by a constant vacillation

between presence and absence, illustrates the way in which dominant anxieties gain strength as they shift rather effortlessly between the locus of the racial Other, the Marxist revolutionary, the undocumented migrant, and so forth. Furthermore, one of the chief conservative criticisms of TUSD's MAS program is that it advocates 'feeling over fact' (Cacho, p. 30). This gesture sees affect as symbolically sutured to the advancement of subversive political agendas, which are then situated over and against the neutral, objective, affectless operations that characterize 'real' learning; in Cacho's words, "indifference (as an emotional response unrecognized as such) becomes the sole criterion for fact" (p. 30). In this way, the mobilization and investment of affect, much akin to the mobilization of racial significations, must again function in a manner that is, paradoxically, both nonexistent and excessive. I will add that such investigations represent merely the first step in our task of mapping the deep contours of neoliberalism's racialized imaginary, by way of striking at the heart of the constitutive disavowals which inform and sustain its ideological and symbolic economies.

The Problem of Success

At the very least, such dialectical lines of pursuit strike one as essential to the praxis of Ethnic Studies in particular, which, in the wake of HB 2281, has found itself caught in a double-bind in relation to the question of its legitimacy as a veritable branch of academic study. In light of the attacks from those on the political right, some scholars and advocates of TUSD's MAS program have maintained that it is possible to square the objectives of Ethnic Studies with both the Common Core standards as well as the more traditional metrics of measuring student achievement (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; De los Rios, Lopez, & Morrel, 2015; Romero, 2010). However, scholars such as Cacho (2010) have argued that these efforts to establish legitimacy would set the terms for a 'victory in defeat' (p. 34), signaling, as it were, a more basic submission to the institutional mechanisms that constitute a major part of the Ethnic Studies' object of critique.

The idea of using quantitative procedures to measure of the outcomes of students participating in Ethnic Studies courses is by no means new. Studies as far back as the early 1970s have sought 'experimental' answers to questions related to the shifts that enrollment in such classes may have in relation to participants' attitudes on a variety of factors – from opinions on ethnic minority groups to the favorability of their orientation toward school itself (Funkland, Peterson, & Trent, 1973). Interestingly, this early study notes that the Ethnic Studies program under consideration was developed with the intention of 'improving race relations' between students, and one of the authors' key findings was that the course was indeed "successful in attaining its major objective of improving student attitude toward school" (p. 167). The focal point of this quantitative inquiry – offered during the nascent years of the Ethnic Studies movement, no less – makes perhaps even more sense when considering Kymlicka's (2013) analysis of the dynamics of liberal-multiculturalism prior to the Reagan era and the rise of neoliberal educational policy.

Today, scholars arguing in favor of Ethnic Studies similarly point to the positive effects it has on participants' educational outcomes. For example, Cabrera et al. (2014) suggested that the politicization of Tucson's MAS program has obfuscated the statistics that demonstrate student success. In pointing first toward the fact that even the more comprehensive literature reviews on the topic of Ethnic Studies (particularly Sleeter, 2011) draw mostly from qualitative analyses with small sample sizes, they have sought to redress these gaps by providing a quantitative analysis examining student achievement of those participating in TUSD's MAS program. Indeed, the results of their study showed that MAS students saw a positive difference in their likelihood to graduate high school, as well as a significant increase in the likelihood of passing the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) test for students that failed it on their first attempt. Furthermore, MAS students with low 9th and 10th grade GPAs later outperformed their peers on the AIMS test, defying the prevail-

ing trends in quantitative research that correlates higher GPA in 9th and 10th grades with higher achievement on standardized exams taken in students' junior or senior years.

Many among us will find these results striking. On the one hand, MAS proponents should perhaps feel justified in invoking the statistical jargon that is so often leveraged in the decision making processes of neoliberal policy-makers and relevant third-party players, including non-profit organizations like Teach for America and private industry giants such as Pearson – the very same decision making processes that have in turn rendered content areas outside of the core of reading, science, and mathematics increasingly subject to elimination (see Au, 2017). While statistically supported outcomes may bolster the validity of Ethnic Studies programs in the eyes of post-NCLB state actors more averse to the 'ideologically laden' procedures of qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2011), they may nevertheless signal a more fundamental acquiescence to the objectifying technologies and tendencies of neoliberalism's agenda for educational reform, whose very "will to truth" (Foucault, 2010) constitutes the essential terrain upon which Ethnic Studies' advocates seek to stage their critical and anti-colonial interventions. A decisive answer to this dilemma is, of course, unlikely – but that does not necessarily imply that it cannot be productive. Indeed, future analyses should explore the degree to which this double-bind can open our thinking to new valences of the neoliberal-multicultural problematic, and help to lay bare the hidden traps, ideological complicities, and political implications that appear by consequence of our desire to leverage the discourse of the dominant educational regime against itself.

Ethnic Studies and the Pedagogical Dialectics of Revolutionary Futurity

A Space for Critical (Ir)reconciliation

This section will bring to light relevant theoretical and qualitative literature that deals specifically with the question of the pedagogical character of Ethnic Studies, broadly considered. As I suggested at the outset of this review, Ethnic Studies scholars and advocates have been nearly unanimous in acknowledging the profound influence of Brazilian educator and critical theorist Paulo Freire (1970, 1993). Among his many contributions to the field, we frequently find cited the notion of praxis (Cammarota, 2016; Halagao, 2010; Tintiangco-Cubales, et al., 2014); an emphasis on student agency, participation, and self-determination (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008); and the development of critical consciousness through student engagement in genuine moments of dialogue (Jocson, 2008; Marrun, 2018).

Given that Ethnic Studies locates its theoretical foundation in the tradition of critical pedagogy, we are first pressed to identify the ways in which this project engages and extends the rich legacy of dialectical thought. Beginning with its deployments in the political writings of Karl Marx, the purpose of dialectical thinking was to demystify the ideological configurations that obfuscate and justify the exploitation and alienation of those exposed to the violence of capital. Thus, the point of departure for dialectical analysis, inherited by Freire in his explication of critical pedagogy, becomes the moment of our encounter with the constitutive antagonisms that exist within a given socio-economic or symbolic formation (Darder, 2016; McLaren, 2015). The phenomenological effect of dialectical analysis is precisely what Freire (1970, 1993) called conscientization – the apprehension, on the part of the oppressed, of a reality that is capable of being transformed through reflective action (p. 85) – a concept which Ethnic Studies as well as various asset-based pedagogies have adopted in their explicit endorsement of the politically oriented consciousness raising of historically marginalized student groups.

At the same time, we would be remiss in failing to register how critical pedagogy has itself come under scrutiny for a variety of reasons over the years. Critical race theorists in particular have

indicted critical pedagogy (and Marxism generally) for privileging the analytic of class over that of race (Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 1998). We would also do well to consider the poststructural criticism of critical pedagogy's overreliance on rationality, which feminist scholars in particular identified as overly masculine and therefore politically and epistemologically limited (Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1998). This being said, my purpose at this time is not so much to sketch a prospectus of reconciliation as much as it is to point out how the theorization of praxis in the field of Ethnic Studies may be already gesturing toward a productive engagement with these tensions described as such. De los Rios, Lopez, and Morrel (2015) suggested as much when they acknowledged that, while critical pedagogy offers us much in the way of mobilizing collective action, it nevertheless "lacks an explicit attention to race and racial relations that is at the heart of Ethnic Studies" (p. 86). Therefore, in recentering an analytic of race grounded in the traditions of African-American intellectual thought (e.g. Woodson, 1990; Du Bois, 1903), as well as historical perspectives in decolonial theory (e.g. Fanon, 2005), the heterodox critical pedagogy of Ethnic Studies better positions itself as a means of intervention within the neocolonial procedures endemic to neoliberalism and neoliberal educational reform – an intervention which the analytic of class alone would fail to provide.

Cammarota (2016) made a similar gesture in this reconciliatory spirit when he described how the Social Justice Educational Project of Tucson (of which the aforementioned MAS program is one part) leverages the Du Boisian notion of second sight as a key element in the critical transformation of student consciousness. Here, second sight refers to the particular subjective position that provides people of color with a unique vantage point to examine the contradictions and oppressions inherent to so-called 'democratic' and 'egalitarian' society – a concept Cammarota has extended in his analysis of Ethnic Studies by accounting for the dimension of youth as an important axis of social marginality (p. 234). Much like the working class subject of Marxism that understands, by the very nature of its position within the schema of production, the inner truth of capital through its repeated exposure to its essential moment of violence (Lukács, 1967; De Lissovoy, 2010), the concept of second sight describes the perspectival dynamic necessary for students to encounter the truth of their position within the structure of white supremacy itself. The school is thus recast as the primary site wherein students are to confront a dominant racialized logic that both coordinates and legitimizes asymmetrical distributions of corporeal, symbolic, and affective violation.

Some scholars are even more explicit in connecting the epistemologically disruptive commitments of Ethnic Studies to the legacy of dialectical thought, grounded as they both are in their necessarily confrontational relationship to non-dialectical, common-sense, or ideologically reified forms of understanding (Jameson, 2009). As Serna (2013) noted, it is imperative that Ethnic Studies borrow liberally from both Indigenous and Western foundation in generating new and creative forms of resistance in the face of neoliberalism's regime of terror and generalized precarity (De Lissovoy, 2017). Here, Serna (2013) has described the example of the Xicano Paradigm (p. 49) developed within Tucson's MAS program. As the product of a collaborative effort between MAS teachers and Chicano elders, its methodology draws upon pre-Columbian knowledges, critical race theory, and Freirean pedagogy, with the purpose of outlining four stages that students must move through in order to realize an academic identity grounded in transformative agency and communal solidarity.

What comes into view is a vision of Ethnic Studies as a radical space of epistemological and ontological ambiguity, disjunction, and potential (but entirely provisional) moments of clarity and synthesis. This is, perhaps, why some have found value in the terms *sitio* and *lengua* (Marrun, 2018) to describe the transformational dynamic at stake in the Ethnic Studies project. *Sitio* refers to the site itself, the space of negotiation where students are encouraged to identify and negotiate dialectically the contradictions that develop between their lived experience 'at home' and the way in which they are positioned within white academic institutions of learning, while *lengua* describes the hybrid-

ized medium of discourse from which the subversion of the dominant must proceed – what Freire would call the naming of the world. Yet, in a way that is responsive to the criticisms of critical pedagogy as being over-reliant on a Eurocentric rationality, what emerges here is a kind of rigorous educational experience that embraces the productive dimensions of affect – including those of humor (Chapman and Olguin, 2016) and spirituality – whose very revivification and rearticulation signal new modes of resistance to the deterritorializing mechanics of settler colonialism, to capital’s unquenchable thirst for material and symbolic accumulation (Simpson, 2014).

In considering all of this, we move toward a dialectical understanding of Ethnic Studies in its own right – as a space, language, and pedagogical orientation that draws tenor and force from the very institutional, structural, and theoretical antagonisms that, in fact, prevent it from achieving its own ‘sanctioned’ form. Considered as such, Ethnic Studies does indeed present us with the promise of a reconciliation or synthesis, but it is one that must never arrive, one that must continue to fall short of its goal of integrating or resolving the multitude of perspectives and impulses that animate it. This, we could say, is essential to sustaining the generative space of conflict necessary for imagining emancipatory possibilities beyond the ideological horizon of the present.

Toward a Decolonial Imaginary

The engagement of *sitio* and *lengua*, together with the challenge that the question of hybridity and liminality (Anzaldúa, 2012) bring to Western modes of understanding predicated on taxonomy, boundary, and disjunction, becomes the essential moment in the theorization of a decolonial imaginary (De los Rios, 2013). A lucid example of this is the Transformative Pedagogy Project developed at University of California Santa Barbara, which aims to connect the very act of knowing to the disruption of the ontological and epistemological forms of violence that prevail within and among colonial institutions (Fujino et al., 2018). The task for the students and educators in such programs is not, of course, to eliminate the colonizer as a material embodiment (the empirical designation of a class of people), but to intervene directly upon the bodies of knowledge that provide for them the hierarchical and value-laden schemas that allow for differentiated ‘human kinds’ to emerge as both intelligible and natural in the first instance (Brown, 2013). It must be reiterated that the *sitio* is not a ‘safe space,’ but a site of deep epistemological contestation – where the centering of marginalized voices and experiences serves as the crucial first step in the larger project of collective struggle and transformation, to devise through praxis what the authors have called “a theoretical description of decolonial practice in the face of an unlivable collective destiny” (Fujino et al., 2018, p. 71).

In following the path traced by these scholars and theorists, the standard descriptions of Ethnic Studies as simply a site of cultural reclamation (or, for those on the political right, of cultural separatism) seem to miss the mark. More specifically, when considering these contemporary projects of cultural reclamation, we must pay keen attention to the ways in which multiplicitous knowledges are continually negotiated to figure new and oppositional political significations. Just as Fujino et al. (2018) pointed out how Moses can become a signifier of resistance for enslaved African-Americans in the Antebellum South, or the Virgen de Guadalupe a symbolic proxy for colonized peoples of Mexico to connect with an effaced religious history (pp. 75-76), so too have the writings of Hegel and Marx served as points of departure for decolonial theorist Aime Césaire’s (1972, 2000) dialectical reading of Western civilization as history’s true bastion of barbarity and despotism. Such instances of symbolic appropriation and inversion contain the kernel of potentiality for new and positive deployments in the field of knowledge, signaling the outlines of hitherto unperceivable epistemological, ontological, and axiological parameters of political praxis that, in turn, animate unorthodox exercises of the social imaginary.

In this way, the decolonial imaginary is indicative of a kind of retroactivity that, counter to any notion of a ‘pure return’ to a pre-capitalist past, poses to us the question of a revolutionary futurity; looking forward, it asks us to ponder the commitments and fate of the multitude, the human collective understood as a set of irreducible singularities that produce and struggle in common (Hardt & Negri, 2004). As culturally endemic ways of knowing and being are resecured, reestablished, and reclaimed within whitestream spaces (the school, the archive, the state, and so on), they undergo novel forms of elaboration as they are articulated over and against the discursive, ideological, and material logics of violation that characterize institutional bodies of practice. Here, Paris and Alim (2014) have invoked as much in their criticism of asset pedagogies that focus solely on the ways in which cultural differences have been enacted, rather than attending to how they are and will be enacted in a situation of cultural recombination and flow that has, in our postmodern moment, radically altered the relationship between the individual, the communal, the national, and the global, as well as the consistency and integrity of these spatialized hierarchies in and of themselves.

And yet it must be stated with force that the kind of decolonial imaginary in question can neither be reduced to misguided notions of postmodern relativism, nor to the liberal brand of ‘cultural pluralism’ so often observed within the field of Social Studies education, which does well to restrict, rather than enable, possibilities for the envisioning of political alternatives (Magill, 2017). What it means to offer, I think, is much closer to what Chandra Mohanty (2003) has called a decolonizing pedagogy – one which commits us to examining difference as historical, relationally articulated, and contingent, while at the same time deeply embedded within and reified through asymmetrical relations of power; a pedagogy which pushes us to recognize how “the contradictions and incommensurability of social interests” (p. 204) creates, in turn, the conditions necessary for nurturing the kinds of oppositional consciousness necessary for more fundamental and enduring kinds of social transformation.

To properly embrace the role that Ethnic Studies might play in the effort to build a *sitio* and *lengua* of a revolutionary futurity may require us to first shed our skepticism of utopianism and utopian thinking. Akom, Cammarota, and Ginwright (2008) have already taken a crucial step by linking the methodologies, pedagogies, and theories of social-justice based action characteristic of Ethnic Studies programs to the notion of Youthtopia, which, they argue, inaugurates fundamentally new ways of understanding the investment and distribution of social and intellectual capital by marginalized youth within imagined communities and third spaces. As sites of praxis, Youthtopias describe immanent fields of social production where heterodox expressions of collective subjectivity and agency take shape (see Hardt & Negri, 2000). I would argue that we are witnessing many examples of this very youth-driven impulse today: in the unflinching activism of the Parkland shooting survivors against America’s deeply corrupt gun lobby, in the recent grassroots driven victory of New York social activist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and in the students behind the case of *Juliana v. U.S.*, who are suing the federal government for its failure to prevent the ecological catastrophes engendered by global climate change.

And so, in direct opposition to the criticisms proffered by lawmakers and pundits accusing Ethnic Studies programs of promulgating seditious identitarian politics (Clark & Reed, 2010; Wanberg, 2013), what we see reflected across this body of literature is a tendential movement toward a much different goal: a formal rupture and sublation of limited conceptualizations of identity, knowledge, and being – and, consequently, a rejection of the narrow political projects that would follow from them. The aim of Ethnic Studies is, rather, to incessantly throw into question the self-contained groundedness of the personal or localized experience, and to move students toward an ontological perspective “wrapped in a garment of mutuality with a wider world” (Fujino et al., p. 76). This means that, for students, the classroom should open a dialogue that connects the tensions that define the immediacy of their subjective experience, the global scenes of political crisis that register

neoliberalism's impoverished vision of a social existence in common, and the obscene undersides of exclusion, exploitation, and renewed colonial conquest that work to secure the reproduction of this reality in turn (see De Lissovoy, 2018).

Conclusion

Those in the critical pedagogical tradition have maintained that is impossible to separate the question of education from the economic and ideological expressions of power and the commensurate expressions of resistance that characterize a given historical intersection. The crises of neoliberal capitalism – the most alarming index of which is the increasing likelihood of global ecological catastrophe – urgently demand from us an ability to bring to bear a properly ecumenical perspective upon even the most localized experience (De Lissovoy, 2010). We would therefore not be misguided in stating that this monumental task requires an altogether different mode of conceptualizing the nature of our relationality as subjects, and to consider deeply the kinds of ethical commitments such rearticulations would imply. What is at stake is the character of what Freire would call our historical vocation – one that must be guided by a commitment to a revolutionary futurity as conceived within and through dialectical thought, a kind of utopian desire invested in a decolonial imaginary that extends well beyond what neoliberalism has attempted to secure before us as its horizon of the given. And where this exercise may have reminded us that Ethnic Studies classrooms are in so many ways limited in their capacity to provide space for students to realize radical alternatives for political life, they may yet remain the best place to begin that difficult project.

Alex J. Armonda, M.A., is a Ph.D. student in the Cultural Studies in Education program at the University of Texas at Austin. A former 8th grade language arts teacher from Chicago, Illinois, Alex currently teaches an undergraduate course on the social foundations of education, and serves as a field supervisor for preservice teachers in the elementary teaching program. He received his Master's in Teaching from Dominican University in 2017 and his B.A. in English from the University of Iowa in 2013. His research aims at extending the critical analysis of neoliberal reform in education, exploring it in relation to the broader questions of capital, biopolitics, and coloniality, while describing the deeper challenges that neoliberal ideology poses to established traditions in critical pedagogical thought. Alex recently presented his work on the dialectics of Paulo Freire at the 2018 American Educational Studies Association conference.

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