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Practitioner's Essay

The Academic-Activist Matrix: Mobilizing Ethnic Studies to Confront the Neoliberal University

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the institutional challenges and opportunities of implementing Asian American Studies (AAS) and Ethnic Studies (ES) college curriculum in the University of California and beyond. These personal observations are built on my involvement in the national, community, and student-led movement for Ethnic Studies in the state and across the nation. While scholars and educational practitioners have already documented the difficult history of implementing these programs—building them into full-fledged departments with faculty lines with a strong number of majors—there is still room to consider other pertinent social issues.

Connecting scholar-activism in the UC system with AAS-mobilizing efforts in CSU and in elite private liberal arts schools, I discuss the following issues related to the implementation of ES as a state requirement: (1) academic senate faculty participation in governance, (2) engaging student activism and apathetic faculty, (3) forging inter-institutional collaboration across school systems, (4) fighting for faculty unions and political associations, (5) reducing over-professionalization of the field, and (6) challenging administrative surveillance and infringement on academic freedom. As a central theme, I speak to the “academic-activist matrix” to engage differently educational activism within the academic-military-industrial complex, considering the endless possibilities for re-creating the university that we collectively desire and want.

INTRODUCTION

On August 17, 2020, California passed two bills requiring all students in high schools and the California State University (CSU) to take a class in Ethnic Studies (ES) as a graduation requirement. The legislative victories of Assembly Bill 101 (AB 101) and Assembly Bill 1460 (AB 1460), which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, did little to diminish simmering controversies over ES as the field continues to ignite debates on the role of higher education, diversity, free speech, and academic governance.

This practitioner essay discusses the challenges of implementing ES, as well as Asian American Studies (AAS), by focusing on my intellectual and activist background within post-secondary education institutions in California and other states. It focuses on the controversies related to graduation requirements and institutionalization of programs while reflecting on the state of the field and steps for capacity building.

As someone with a B.A. in Asian American Studies and Master's degree and Doctorate in Ethnic Studies, I witnessed many political attacks on these fields over the years that serve only to obscure the signal importance of these intellectual field of study, one forever linked to community activism born out of late-1960s demands for Third World Liberation (Okiihiro, 2016). The movement's objective of bringing a reflexive focus on race, identity, and power runs up against two forces: the inherent conservatism of the neoliberal university, and broader political assaults on diversity programs, progressive student-activists, and anti-racist educators (Phelan, 2019). Their symbolic conjunction occurs through communicative affinities, insofar as the corporatized logics of higher education—often antagonistic to “social justice warriors”—align unintentionally with subcultures that are racist, authoritarian, and sexist. This troubling intersection provides a starting point for discussing the overlap between institutional politics and political activism.

Building on personal/critical observations from my long-time involvement in faculty and/or student-led movements in California, while adding remarks from my time working in private selective liberal arts colleges (SLACs) in the East Coast, I discuss here an array of issues related to what I call the “academic-activist matrix,” the circle of power/knowledge in which activist responses are simultaneously emboldened and circumscribed by the politics of higher education. This matrix provides a portal for insight into the endemic problems of contemporary higher education and society.

In this essay, I highlight other controversies that erupted during the fight for ES in a moment of racial reckoning. Over year after the murder of George Floyd and protests erupted nationwide for justice, Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bills 101 and 1460 into law, requiring all students in high school and CSU campuses respectively to take a class in ES and/or its cognate fields: Native American Studies, African American Studies, Asian American Studies, and Chicano/a/Latinx Studies. These new laws made the Golden State the first state in the country to install ES as a requirement for graduation.

While California's ES law arrived on the fiftieth anniversary of the first ES programs being founded in the country (at San Francisco State University and University of California, Berkeley), it did not come without hiccups. The CSU system codified AB 1460 into law only after months of student demonstrations and lobbying at the state capitol. Although the policy did not directly affect the University of California (UC) system, UC had to reckon with the greater statewide push for ES. Efforts to align the new state high school and CSU requirements with UC's admission/transfer qualifications stirred up troubles.

In the following, I parse through different working sites by engaging three overarching themes:

1. Engaging student-faculty activism, while forging inter-institutional collaboration across different school systems and class/group/academic hierarchies;
2. Bolstering faculty participation in university governance, while challenging administrative surveillance and political infringement on academic freedom; and
3. Fighting for faculty unions, while fighting against apathy and over-professionalization of the field.

Engaging in these organizing axes reveals an academic-activist matrix, which I argue draws attention to the Ivory Tower as a place where oppressive social forces not only collide, but where there is equally great potential for social transformation. Such critique draws on ES, but also critical university studies and social movement studies.

ENGAGING STUDENT/FACULTY ACTIVISM WHILE FORGING INTER-INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION ACROSS DIFFERENT SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Timothy Fong, Professor of Ethnic Studies, reminds us that ES was formed to concomitantly better academic power structures and societal norms. It bears an explicit mandate and commitment to

support marginalized communities, insisting on political engagement and experience (Fong, 2008). Fong says ES offers a positive model of direct confrontation and scientific inquiry anchored in protective agendas for diverse perspectives.

As one major strand of ES, AAS is the perfect rejoinder to racist slurs by administrators like the chancellor of Purdue University Northwest, who mocked the “Asian” accent at a graduation ceremony. An open letter from angered faculty across the country demanded a program in AAS to address such institutionalized racism (“Asian Americans Demand Accountability from Purdue University,” 2023). Case studies and research show how the success of AAS is often contingent on the political context, the economy, and the neo-liberal direction that universities are taking (e.g., de-emphasizing the arts and humanities) and how Asian Americans are treated within local, regional, and national contexts (Chang, 1999; Lee, 2009; Park, 2022). With a field that has grown over half a century, ES-trained teachers can be found across a variety of fields like sociology, gender and sexuality studies, international studies, political science, English, and anthropology. Given this spread, we can ask then where ES and AAS are going when policies like AB 1460 require taking classes containing ETHN or cognate prefixes, and when so many ES faculty come from adjacent fields.

Many hiring lines for ES professors dried up in the post-2008 recession, only returning after the national liberal guilt trip that came with a spike in anti-Asian hate crimes, the fight for Indigenous land and water rights, Latinx mobilizing for detained immigrants, and the renewed fight for Black Lives Matter (BLM) in 2020. ES programs are already marginalized in the academic world and often the first programs to be cut during budgetary crises; when students and faculty try to bring ES into their universities, they encounter stonewalling and blockages by administrators. It is remarkable then that ES expanded during a time of pandemic-induced economic contraction.¹

I want to now juxtapose organizing for ES in California with ES-related activism in other states so we can think of AB 1460 as not just limited to the West Coast, but the start of a bigger movement for mainstreaming ES. If past endeavors to pass AB 1460 in a “minority-majority” state like California seemed difficult, other parts of the country face uphill battles. Success in California was possible because it has the most ES programs and scholars in the country. How would ES be feasible in places where the field is starting to gain a foothold?

I turn now to the fight for ES/AAS in places like New York and Connecticut to make this point clear.

After students rallied to establish AAS at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, I was hired as a visiting professor to teach Asian American Studies classes. The job was overshadowed with controversy over who was responsible for my hire: the students or the faculty (“Letter from the American Studies Department Regarding Asian American Studies at Wesleyan,” 2017). To build up a viable AAS course cluster, Wesleyan student Alton Wang and other students self-taught the first AAS courses at the school, and fought openly with the president and administrators over programming. Wang eventually became a community organizer and policy advisor advocating for the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community. The academic-activist matrix is toxic for student-activists like Wang, but productive in other ways in terms of preparing students for civic engagement and organizing at multiple levels—from the college level to the national level of politics. Entering the academic-activist matrix is a double-edged sword.

After my temporary stint at Wesleyan (we can think further about the adjunctification of many ES scholars), I moved into a tenure-track faculty position at Vassar College—another East Coast selective liberal arts college—where students had also been pushing for a AAS program for some time. After seeing students’ demoralization following meetings with administrators that went nowhere, I pressed them to “stop asking, start demanding” and the volume of protests increased to the point of finally getting the president’s attention. My exit from the school to go work at another job left a vacuum of politically active Asian American professors, so the Asian Student Alliance kept in contact with me to continue our conversation after my departure.

Assuming that faculty in ES/AAS are all activists or naturally sympathetic to activism would be presumptuous. Per Asian American cultural studies scholar Kandice Chuh, the field’s fetishism of community activism does not always speak to the professionalization of Asian American academics. Many of the well-educated professional immigrants that came post-1965 do not understand the histories of oppression and racist laws passed in the United States. Chuh (2022, 339) says, “Activism functions in that sense as a justificatory explanation that can obscure contradiction and the unavoidable complicity that accompanies academic work.”

As cultural critic and scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen observes, the field of ES strayed far from its “radical” roots in the 1960s. Today, ES

and AAS are embedded in elite institutions, their success linked to forms of (Asian) upward mobility (Nguyen, 2020). The rollout of ES policies like AB 1460 across California's public universities had a ripple effect and might be the trigger to bring ES to elite private schools like the University of Southern California (USC) after it got rid of its diversity requirement in 2015. Diversity requirements are too broad to encompass ES, Nguyen (2020, n.p.) argues, since the latter contends with "the particular American confluence of race, violence, class, labor exploitation, and so on, which is what an Ethnic Studies requirement would do." Diversity requirements celebrate cultures broadly, but ES addresses head-on racist exploitation and power imbalances, even within the institution (Martichenko, 2021). The question then becomes how faculty teach these things while fighting their own institutions for academic freedom.

BOLSTERING ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE WHILE CHALLENGING ADMINISTRATIVE INFRINGEMENT ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Ethnic Studies offers a vital hub of activity that broaches the assumed divide between academia and community, between education and activism. Academic freedom remains key to keeping these channels of communication open. On many UC campuses, cross-cultural centers have been prime sites of social justice work, maintaining institutional support and allyship for ES departments (Bui, 2015). However, this relationship is troubled by recent attempts by administrators to revamp cross-cultural centers into DEI and diversity training institutes.

The devaluing of anti-racism can be most discerned in the 2023 U.S. Supreme Court case decision that gutted affirmative action by giving a neoliberal argument that race-conscious admission policies deprive individuals of equal protection under the law. Affirmative Action ended despite overwhelming support for it from Asian Americans and national AAPI organizations.² Critics of affirmative action base their argument on the "model minority" stereotype and large numbers of Asian-descent students in the UC (over half on some campuses), leveraging these as reasons that both affirmation action and ES/AAS are not needed. Another abiding fear is that AAS courses will politicize students, turning Asian American youth into activists (Ong, De La Cruz-Viesca, and Nakanishi, 2008).

There are sizeable Asian American populations at many elite universities, yet there remains a lack of AAS programs in places "east of

California.”³ It is necessary then to build ES across the entire country in order to achieve justice on a massive scale. As sociologist of gender and race Victoria Reyes (2022) writes, interdisciplines like Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies remain vital since they offer a platform for articulating (and materializing) the concerns of society’s most oppressed. Since these fields employ the most minoritized scholars, retaining them stands as a form of “academic justice.”

Opponents of ES have warped this notion of justice. An open letter written by CSU professors against AB 1460 argued that Jewish Studies was left out, even though it was never historically a foundational part of the Ethnic Studies field; Jews are studied relationally with the four main groups of Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Chicanx/Latine (“CSU Faculty against AB 1460,” 2020). During the fight for AB 1460, the issue of Palestine also came up, and ES activists were labelled antisemitic. Such accusations were leveled at the first dean of CSU Los Angeles’s (Cal State LA’s) College of Ethnic Studies.

To make their false claim that ES was inherently exclusionary, opponents listed the omission of LGBTQ+ and Gender/Women’s Studies (GWS) in the curriculum proposal. This empty rhetorical attack reflects a poor comprehension of the intersectional approach of the field, and women’s studies departments like the one at CSU Fullerton castigated opponents, emphasizing the mention of GWS was made with spurious intent (“The CSUF Women and Gender Studies Department’s Statement on AB1460,” n.d.). Sucheng Chan (2005, 25), one of the founders of AAS, contends that

... unlike more established disciplines, where such power struggles occur primarily within the disciplines themselves, in the case of Ethnic Studies many persons outside of our field, including all kinds of individuals who know virtually nothing about it, act as if they have a right to determine whether any particular study in Ethnic Studies is “legitimate.”

These interlopers claim legitimacy over ES scholars, the latter deemed as too close to their identities, subjects of study, and communities to ever be “objective” scientists.

At UCs, faculty are forced to focus on producing research, which might explain the lack of strong relationships between scholar-activists in the UC and CSU/Community Colleges as well as the lack of a strong movement for an ES requirement in the system. Yet, the

issues surrounding CSU and AB 1460 affect UC faculty in terms of protecting academic freedom and diversity writ large. These issues were most evident at CSU Northridge (CSUN), the only CSU campus with a mandatory ES graduation course before the passing of AB 1460. But CSU Chancellor Timothy White's unilateral plan to rid this campus requirement, and later dilute AB 1460 by expanding the graduation requirement to include "social justice" courses, set off a mass movement to make the ES graduation requirement both a systemwide rule and a state law. Administrators' watered-down sense of social justice contradicted *specific* demands for social justice by ES activists. Those who opposed AB 1460 overlooked how ES was not merely teaching about the "Other," but offered a means for uplifting entire communities. But who can be entrusted to do this type of work presents a dilemma.

Too often, those most burdened are working-class first-generation faculty and women of color such as the author of AB 1460, Dr. Shirley Weber. As a child of a farmer who never attended high school, she overcame many barriers to become California's Secretary of State and an Africana Studies professor at San Diego State University. After Arizona passed a law in 2010 banning ES classes in high school, I worked with Weber and other activist-scholars to create an ES consortium uniting junior college and CSU schools throughout San Diego. We had difficulty getting full-time commitment or interest at first from UC faculty, including nearby UCSD. According to Martha Escobar (2022), Professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies at CSU Northridge, "Sometimes there is a lack of trust among colleagues and fellow activists. We may not agree on the same things, even if we all agree on the same goals. Class is [a] major reason, since many see ES as a job, and not a way of life, a form of solidarity work." ES bridges the political imaginaries of the past with today's progressive impulses for inter-group and cross-institutional solidarity.

This solidarity played out in the passage of AB 1460 with separate Asian American Studies, African American Studies, Native American Studies, and Chicano Studies departments in the CSU banding together to fight for the bill across a massive twenty-three-campus system.⁴ This foreboded what is happening with the UC, as the proposed new subject matter requirement in ES for high school admission (and junior college transfers) to UC brought together disparate and diverse faculty across ten campuses. The CSU success with AB 1460 was a catalyst for UC to begin pondering a systemwide graduation

option, but UC activists had to overcome and contend with their campuses being uniquely semi-autonomous entities.

Working through the activist-academic matrix proved somewhat easier in CSU than the UC given the powerful presence of faculty unions in the former. The faculty at UCs are more privileged in terms of material resources, but are also encumbered by their lack of collective bargaining power among the faculty, which mounts incredible impediments in the battle for ES.

The UC systemwide Academic Senate committee, BOARS (Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools), had commissioned a committee comprised of scholars with subject matter expertise in ES to align new high school state requirements with UC admission criteria in core subject areas called “A-G” (History, Social Sciences, English, etc.). Despite BOARS’s approval in 2021 of a new “H” requirement for ES, subsequent meetings to institute it stalled. BOARS approved, and then later ignored, the recommendations of those same knowledge experts, allowing the public to comment on the committee’s proposal. Foes launched invectives against the proposal due to the perceived inclusion of Palestine and charges of anti-Semitism against the ES experts.

No one sitting on BOARS was an ES expert or knew much about the field. Despite overwhelming support by Academic Senates across the UC system and nineteen thousand signatures from faculty around the country in a statement of support, this new UC criteria found itself stuck in red tape (UC Ethnic Studies Faculty Council, 2023). The ability of certain administrative personas and their political allies to thwart activist efforts infringe upon academic freedom. Professors (especially tenured) are given much latitude to speak on issues and do research, but this privileged freedom is circumscribed by institutional gatekeepers. If those faculty speak out too strongly on any matter, they are accused of “not doing proper academic work.”

I witnessed this charge during my time as a postdoctoral fellow in AAS at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. I was among many protesting the un-hiring of Steven Salaita by the university’s Board of Trustees who tried to diminish his work, both academic and activist, as not appropriate for a faculty member. He was then denied his new job in American Indian Studies after tweeting about Israel’s bombing of Gaza and being accused of anti-Semitism. The American Indian Studies Department lost faculty and university support after this incident.

Implementing ES programs and/or graduation requirements poses unique problems for the neoliberal public university, which values diversity but falls short of embracing anti-racism or radical politics. Institutional challenges to AB 1460 were always political and even racist—for example, in preventing students of color and Native students from learning about their communities and histories (Ruiz and Bui, 2021). The bill’s passage brought on debates about anti-racist education in the largest school system in the nation, especially at this juncture when conservative states are curtailing programs in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), which would help students learn more about this country’s horrible past.

Inspired by the work of Professor Yvonne Kwan at San José State University on minoritized Southeast Asian American youth, I consider ES-inspired activism as a means for young people to build resilience and cope with microaggressions in higher education and in society. Academic activism, specifically the kind espoused in ES/AAS, is pivotal to the construction of political identity and complex educational subjecthood (Kwan, 2020). The fields’ teaching enables them to navigate the academic-activism matrix better. Unlike students, the subjectivities of academics are fully embedded within professionalized environs and school bureaucracy.

FIGHTING FOR FACULTY UNIONS WHILE REDUCING APATHY, OVER-PROFESSIONALIZATION, AND BUREAUCRATIZATION OF THE FIELD

Troubles persist even when the university allows ES to enter its gates, something observed during the creation of the second College of Ethnic Studies at Cal State LA in 2020—half a century after the first one was established. The university’s choice for interim dean was a civil rights organizer, Steward Kwoh, over academics like Dr. Melina Abdullah, professor of Pan African Studies and co-founder of Black Lives Matter Los Angeles. She called this top-down pick “a doubling down on anti-Black, Islamophobic, patriarchy” (Guzman-Lopez, 2020).

Supporters of Abdullah argued that the professor’s denial of deanship was due to her being a long-time critic of the university and leading a campaign to shut down an alt-right thinker who spoke at the university. Aside from Black faculty and student groups, other supporters of Abdullah included the powerful California Faculty Association (CFA), a social justice-oriented labor union representing twenty-nine thousand CSU faculty members. They set up a petition to

“contest the entrenched manifestations of academic neoliberalism and anti-Blackness so prevalent at CSULA” (Zupkus, 2020).

“If you want an Ethnic Studies graduation requirement at the UC, I’m not sure it will happen without the students and faculty unions,” said Dr. Stevie Ruiz (2022), a CSUN professor of Chicano and Latino Studies and one of the main proponents of AB 1460. My friend and comrade was skeptical that UC would ever have an ES graduation requirement due to its more elitist non-unionized faculty and historical lag (UC got most of its ES programs decades after CSU did). Yet, the CSU victory inspired the pursuit of such objectives at UC. While there is a growing movement for an ES graduation requirement in California’s junior colleges, the aim for a new ES admissions/transfer requirement in the UC has stalled.

Despite the incredible work of the associations, we still need faculty unions at universities to mitigate academic isolation, provincialism, and indifference. One of the biggest differences between the fight for ES at CSU as opposed to UC stems from strong faculty unions like the CFA. UC holds no collective bargaining unit, though campuses are free from legislative intervention unlike CSU.

While there exist no unionized UC faculty except at UC Santa Cruz, there are faculty associations, and I sat on the executive board for the Irvine campus. These associative groups are tasked with dealing with matters that exist outside normal academic senate issues such as labor grievances, administrating bullying, and protecting academic freedom.⁵ I call these associations “political unions” as they serve a major purpose, acting as an academic liaison with national organizations like the United Auto Workers (UAW). The boards of each campus association all demanded BOARS support the task force responsible for streamlining ES within the UC admissions standards. Their efforts continue after three long years.

Like what we saw with AB 1460, there is the threat that new ES hires or classes can be absorbed into general DEI work or social justice curricula without risking damage to university norms or business-as-usual. Hijacking and warping the ES-based lexicon of social justice, this DEI-as-ES equivalency revamps the language of community-building and empowerment to fit within the tighter economized confines of U.S. higher education. In short, ES is always under threat of being incorporated into the neoliberal university.

Despite this neoliberal threat, ES offers a window into a multiplicity of power relations, despite the accusation that “real activism”

happens outside the university. Interdisciplinary scholar Rod Ferguson (2012, 15) asserts that ES does not abide by “rules of inclusion and the anatomies of recognition and legitimacy . . . [but it tells us] how we are entrapped, but also how we might achieve provisional forms of freedom and insurgency.” Those provisional forms of activism bump up against the status quo.

At Williams College, student activists forged a campaign that proclaimed, “Williams doesn’t teach me Asian American Studies, but Amherst does.” This mobilization around school status exploits institutional obsession with prestige and reputation, a strategic pivoting that fits within my broad notion of the academic-activist matrix as it channels academia’s institutional culture toward activist aims. Williams later became the first small liberal arts college in New England to establish an AAS program in 2022 (Natter, Pugh, and Goldberg, 2022). The new program fosters intellectual environments in which students develop meaningful connections with their institutions based on trust.

For faculty, trust is hard to come by—whether among themselves or from the government. Some ES departments did not, at first, support the proposed bill—like those at CSU Fullerton. The AAS Department published an open letter opposing AB 1460, giving legitimate fears about state overreach and untrained interlopers in the field, as well as the lack of funding to support this expansion. This example attests to the forms of discord and disconnect that manifest even among practitioners who are all not the same.⁶ Some of my CSU activist friends conveyed to me their deep disappointment with their peers’ letter, but they recognized that social movements involve factions and a spectrum of opinions. There is always more work to be done to unite a diverse coalition. Despite their initial opposition to AB 1460, faculty in Fullerton’s AAS department benefitted from the policy change and received three new hire lines.

Social movements are knotted and complicated, but the arc of justice always points to greater convergence of interests between institutionalists and transformers. Faculty who identify as ES scholar-activists are key to bridging the political and the personal. This consolidation and comingling of various interests are part of the academic-activist matrix.

The UC Ethnic Studies Council (UCESC) worked closely in collaborating with other organizations—the California Community Colleges Ethnic Studies Faculty Council and the CSU Council for

Ethnic Studies—to promote transfer articulation agreements for ES course equivalency in the UC. Besides the stunning success of AB 1460, one motivation for the council was demographics: UC now had a much more diverse student body, with more students of color entering the prestigious institution and busy faculty who can be tasked with contributing mightily to the hegemony of the Professional-Managerial Class (Liu, 2021).

I was asked to be part of the UCESC, but as someone employed in Global Studies and not ES, this important role left me pondering about the faculty in actual ES departments at my campus. I wondered why I was more actively involved with a policy that directly affected them.⁷ The stress of doing more work beyond one's regular job takes a toll, and I began having major health problems that forced me to pull back on my commitments and drop out of the council.⁸ The need to “divest” in such work is just as important, as the ES movement requires the energy of all—not just the same overcommitted people. Would the solution though be to hire more ES people en masse?

Scholars untrained in ES feel excited by the bounty of new tenure-track jobs created after AB 1460, but there remains a need for highly qualified ES instructors who know the field and its history well. As Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo (2023, n.p.), Professor of Comparative Ethnic Studies, writes, “The bottom line is that those of us who teach ethnic studies do not just teach about race—which is why folks who teach about race in other disciplines are not necessarily ethnic studies scholars and why being trained in the discipline matters.”

With the mandate of AB 1460, non-ES programs are trying furiously to hire for ES lines in ways that could diversify and possibly dilute the field by calling them ES courses. In activist meetings, CSUN Professor Theresa Montano kept faithful to the party line that ES tenure-track positions should be first reserved for the ES-trained folks than those found in conventional disciplines. Moreover, she maintained that classes designated as ES should be drawn from *existing* ES programs, rather than simply allowing departments like anthropology, sociology, and English to teach those classes at will. There exist faculty in non-ES fields who could teach an ES class, but there is an underlying fear ES would become another shifting variable in the cog of the academic machine. How then do we transform the machine into a matrix of relations that can speak truth to power? ES presents more than a field of study; it is a powerful vortex and force of revolutionary change within the academic-activist matrix.

CONCLUSION

Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies have altered systems and institutions and will continue to do so in the years to come. Though ES research and AAS topics today are read widely, the movement to establish and entrench ES curriculum at all levels of education have been met with punitive measures from school administrators and vitriol from political opponents. Yet, activists and scholars have responded in kind with teach-ins and demonstrations, culminating in AB 1460 as well as AB 101. This dialectic where scholars and students can leverage their outsider-ness to demand internal and institutional changes in the university is what I frame as the academic-activist matrix: where activism is not antagonistic to academia, but works *through* it—at times productively, and other times ambivalently or contradictorily. Fighting for not just representation, but also redistribution of resources, ES pedagogy and praxis are a testament to that dynamic fluid relationship between what we learn in the classroom and what we do “outside” it.

The field of Ethnic Studies has matured into a well-recognized mode of inquiry and community engagement, but attacks on it persist as evident in the UC, CSU, and SLAC efforts to implement ES classes or graduation requirements. These attacks are a warning to all that as we continue to push for more ES classes in the academy, we shoulder the responsibility for those who cannot access or withstand the neoliberal university so easily. As an ES-trained scholar with expertise in AAS, I am using this moment in time to reflect on ongoing efforts for transforming the academy. This goal requires institution-crossing partnerships built on mutual respect, trust, and collaboration within/against/through the neoliberal university. As my examples of struggle obviate, the activist-academic matrix is not a static thing, but a capacious vision for improving equity of access and opportunity—and, more importantly, increasing people power.

NOTES

1. Schools like the University of New Mexico added their first Asian American Studies classes when everything in higher education was being cut or shut down. Schools like San Diego State University hired their first faculty to begin an AAS program. One factor includes an increase in racial consciousness during the toxic Trump era. Another factor is the political ascent of Millennials and Gen Z, diverse cohorts of youth and adults who are more aware of activist agendas in the age of social media.

2. An amicus brief was signed by over one thousand people, including myself, representing a wide swath of scholars who work on Asian Americans in education.
3. California's public colleges are mostly Minority-Serving Institutions (MSI), federal designations that CSU and UC schools almost all possess alongside the status of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI). Despite this diversity, ES and AAS are very much needed in every institution, as they uplift historically disadvantaged racial subgroups while improving campus climate for all.
4. Another reason for ES success there is the fact that Cal State is primarily a teaching student-oriented school with a mostly working-poor Brown/Black student body willing to fight tooth-and-nail for every resource, while UCs are more resource-rich and draw more on middle-class professional Asian/white families, even if a sizable number are first-generation college students of color.
5. Few faculty join these associations due to the fact not many know they exist or the reputation that they are a cabal of "radicalized" professors from the humanities and social sciences.
6. Faculty said they opposed the policy on the grounds it might invite state intrusion, untrained outsiders, and more bureaucratic demands on the curriculum. Eventually, faculty came over to the side of the bill's advocates and the open letter got taken down.
7. Strangely, I was the only representative from the Irvine campus, and I tried to convince faculty I knew in ES programs to join the UCES Council. I did convince one person to be the other point person at my campus after much persuasion and convincing. Despite my training in ES and AAS, I never landed a tenure-trained faculty job in the fields. I am still fighting for ES/AAS but through my home base in the department of Global Studies, which fits me perfectly as an interdisciplinary scholar who cares about Indigenous people and people of color in the world. One main goal of ES is to "infiltrate" other more "conventional" disciplines with our more progressive orientation. It has been said also that my department is a de facto ES department because all the faculty work on racism and are possibly the most diverse on campus.
8. It is understandable that faculty are not involved, as they are busy dealing with childcare, more student care, and rising financial costs. My personal example of forced respite stresses how activism "taxes" those who are heavily involved. Besides leading the faculty association at my school, I am the director of first-generation initiatives, director of a center for racial justice, and sit on numerous DEI advisory boards.

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