

Ethnic Studies Past and Present: Towards Shaping the Future

Otis L. Scott

Ethnic Studies as a curriculum at predominantly white colleges and universities remains a relatively new phenomenon in academe. The recent history of these formations can be traced back to the several social change movements of the 1960s. These changes, spearheaded by the civil rights movement and the black student protests in the South in early 1960s, provided the impetus for the social change spillover which many college and university campuses were to experience in earnest beginning with the mid-1960s.¹

What is phenomenal is that these programs have managed to persist as academic formations in college and university environments. The environments by some accounts have become even more hostile than the epoch of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period of rather rapid development and implementation for ethnic studies programs. The presence of ethnic studies programs, courses and faculty is in large measure a testimony to the resolve by a cadre of teacher-scholars and students to persist within a learning environment where the institutional acceptance and support levels range from indifference to overt hostility.

This paper has one major purpose. I wish to focus attention on the future of ethnic studies on predominantly white colleges and universities and what that future may look like. In making this examination—out of necessity—some attention will be placed on the origins and the present status of ethnic studies. Both provide the essential historical context which informs the future of ethnic studies. Both examinations assist in framing the issues and factors which allow us to view the shape of the future. And both establish the agenda of needs and tasks which must be attended if that future is to be one which is appreciably more sustaining than either the past or the present.

To assert that the national waters through which ethnic studies programs have navigated over the last twenty years have been turgid is only to speak to the obvious. To assert that ethnic studies programs at traditionally white colleges and universities have had a mixed record of intellectual achievement and community and university acceptance is again to speak to the record of ethnic studies programs. Because of a myriad of challenges, running the gamut from being ill-conceived and

hastily contrived to being vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a changing market economy, ethnic studies faculty and administrators have been confronted with a range of interdicting variables which threaten the viability, if not the existence, of programs. The challenges faced by ethnic studies scholars have undoubtedly not been of the same kind or degree faced by other scholars in academe as they have attempted to embark on new academic, intellectual, and program development pursuits.

It is this point, that is, the environment within which ethnic studies programs function, which essentially constitutes the continuing challenge to program development and persistence. And by this, I am suggesting that early on ethnic studies programs have had to contend with an academic and intellectual environment which in the main was non-nurturing, reluctantly supportive, and ever wary. It was an environment wherein “mainstream academics” were very critical of the claims by black and brown students, faculty, and community members for a university curriculum that reflected the life experiences and issues significantly attendant to the lives and realities of people of color in the United States and the diaspora. The claims by ethnic studies advocates tended to offend the sensibilities of most “mainstreamers” in an academic community that had long prided itself on having a strangle hold on the university curriculum and the allocation and use of university resources. Who were these “people” now demanding that the university curriculum be broadened? Who were these people now demanding that ethnic faculty, staff, and students become an integral and programmatic part of the post-secondary experience?

Significantly, the ethnic studies thrust during these early years represented a challenge to the gridlock of Euro-American hegemony on the curriculum and the dispensation of resources. And in the main, the continuing presence of ethnic studies programs and especially those programs that have managed to attract and produce top notch scholars and scholarship still remain threats to the monopolization of ideas, knowledge, and information so long harbored by the Euro-American academic community.

And while the pitch, tenor and cadence of the tension between ethnic studies programs and the host campus have somewhat diminished and slowed when compared to yesteryear, the long standing struggle over ideas and perspectives still underlies the tension. It is well that this point is kept in mind; the war is one between prevailing notions of “truth” and their critique. This writer is mindful that in some instances ethnic folk believe they have garnered the “acceptance” of their mainstream colleagues. Some believe also that their perceived and believed acceptance conveys “legitimacy.” Both are confusions with tolerance. Underneath the thin veneer of tolerance the primordial questions still lurk: “Who are these people?” “What is this ethnic studies thing?”

We know these questions are there because curriculum committees

raise them about our courses. We know the uncertainty about the legitimacy of our scholarship persists because tenure and promotion committees raise questions about the legitimacy of our scholarship and teaching. We know that ethnic studies still is not generally embraced as a “serious academic discipline” because of the rascality of our faculty who use budget and curriculum committees as forums to savage ethnic studies proposals and requests. Furthermore, the dearth of our physical presence in colleges and universities across the nation and the significance of our declining numbers over the recent past speaks to the commitment by the Euro-American academic community to continue to close its ranks to ethnic faculty.²

Given the foregoing sketch of the milieu within which ethnic studies programs have tended to exist and still exist, one can in summary fashion assert that over the last 15 to 20 years ethnic studies has been shaped by a growth dialectic which can be represented as follows:

1966-1970

Activity	Growth and Development	Survival
----------	------------------------	----------

1971-Present

Activity	Stasis	Decline	Survival
----------	--------	---------	----------

Given that there has not been a genuine commitment on the part of most institutions to properly building and adequately supporting ethnic studies, programs have always operated from a survival/defense mode. Ethnic studies folk—faculty and students in particular—have directed most of their interest, energy, and time toward fending off attempts, and in many instances not so veiled ones, to diminish ethnic studies presence and influence.

I, for one, expect that this is the academic climate within which programs will operate into the foreseeable future and beyond.

I advance this line of thought regarding the future academic setting for ethnic studies because I understand two essential points as they bear on comprehending the academic environment within which ethnic studies exists on campuses in the U.S. First, colleges and universities represent the most conservative institutional formations in this society. American colleges and universities tend to be most resistant to “upstart” ideas and formulations which challenge long settled “truths” and status quo formations. Part and parcel of the conservative nature of these institutions is the fundamental, Eurocentric, and at times, unabashed racist, sexist and elitist nature of these institutions. It is against the pervasive Eurocentrism and particularly its perverse manifestations in representing the social histories of people of color that much of ethnic studies scholarship is directed. The ever present ethnic studies critique tends to be a critique of Western and Euro-American cosmologies. And as is usually the case, the veracity of the critique, more often than not, insulates it from conservative rebuttals. Consequently, upon close inspection, the pedestal upon which Eurocentric perspectives have long

rested is no longer sturdy.

Secondly, the delivery of education (or miseducation for that matter) is a function of political power. The acquisition of power and the ability to win concessions from competitors in public arenas, especially policy making arenas, is a necessity on college and university campuses. Ethnic studies clientele continue to work within settings where power has long been entrenched for the purposes of sustaining traditional status quo academic formations, ideas and values.

To wit, ethnic studies folk must be able to amass power bases, for example, from students, colleagues, community members, and from professional associations. This must be done if we are to be sufficient to the tasks of navigating ethnic studies programs through the maelstroms of academia. The use of power as the manifestation of the conservative personality of post-secondary institutions will continue to shape what we try to do and how successful we are at what we try to do. One of our important roles in ethnic studies into the next century will be to try to check the use of power residing in academe which threatens the life blood of our programs and therefore our ability to serve our on-campus and off-campus constituencies and interests.

I believe that the tension of give and take between the traditional repositories of power in the academy, i.e., central administrations, curriculum, budget, personnel committees, and ethnic studies program will continue through the last quintile of this century. Additionally, implementing an ethnic studies agenda will be fraught with considerable resistance, given the “excellence” movement in higher education. This is movement which has the thinly veiled objective of returning colleges and universities to their historical places as bastions for the elite and privileged in this society.³ This movement portends an exacerbation of the historical tension already mentioned.

Given the foregoing, there is a prediction I will offer regarding the future of ethnic studies as such programs are currently conceptualized, designed, and in place. Perhaps the prediction is reckless. Nevertheless, I will posit that ethnic studies disciplinarians will attend to the political tasks necessary to ensuring the continued presence of course offerings, budget, and resource allocations. I also believe that they will undertake other actions essential to maintaining the research and teaching objectives of ethnic studies programs.

I will further posit that ethnic studies practitioners—no strangers to ethnic group social history and the lessons of vigilance and readiness taught by those histories—will neither wittingly nor due to a lapse of attention betray the investment made by countless numbers of students, community allies, faculty and others in creating ethnic studies programs. This writer is of the mind that the continued presence of ethnic studies programs speaks more to the commitment by ethnic studies folk to maintaining presence than it does to some transformation in the consciousness and personality of Euro-American dominated academics.

I choose not to underestimate the element of commitment. I have on occasion questioned the level of commitment of my colleagues. If, however, my assumptions concerning this capacity to persevere are incorrect, then we will become casualties of our clumsy assistance at our own birthing.

This outline of issues casts a dark pall over the present and immediate future of ethnic studies. It is nothing new. It is the nature of things given the cultural context of American society. The litany of issues framing the challenges to ethnic studies need not be summarized. The struggles for “acceptability,” “legitimacy,” “recognition,” “authenticity,” and “institutionalization” will continue.

In the face of the gale of these challenges there is work to which we teacher/scholars can and must attend. There remains much work if we are to build an intellectual and academic enterprise which we can use and which can be used by the folk we research, and write about, and teach, and learn from to build more humane human institutional formations.⁴

The tasks before us are those necessary to strengthening our ability to persist and grow within our respective academic environments. These tasks must be attended to if ethnic studies scholarship and teaching are to be even more relevant. Relevance here conveys compliance with the sense of social responsibility which appropriately undergirds ethnic studies study, teaching, and research. My point here is that there is much building to do if our enterprise is to be a more useful tool for folk to better interpret and understand their environments. This utilitarian feature of the discipline is an imperative. Our scholarship must assist folk of color with developing correct responses to the several predations so common to their environments.

The tasks before us have been elsewhere articulated and explicated. This writer is only restating old ideas. Yet, old good ideas need be restated. They have pragmatic value; they are focussing. I see the tasks as: further institutionalizing ethnic studies courses and programs at colleges and universities and seeking better clarity of the concept “ethnic studies.”

A major objective by advocates of Asian American, black, Chicano, and Native American studies programs during the late 1960s was to broaden the university curriculum to include courses reflecting the totality of the colored ethnic experience. And as uneven as the implementation of this objective has been over the intervening years, the centrality of this objective to the programmatic mission of ethnic studies remains constant.

As argued above, this is a responsibility which cannot be taken casually or approached with arrogant indifference. Those of us at institutions whose primary mission is teaching must attend to the demands of course development and course revision as these bear on course offerings which are engaging, timely, and purposeful. In order

that the fruits of course development labors be harvested, we must attend to what I will refer to as the politics of program maintenance.

A bane of many of our faculty is committee work. Often times, it seems that the more institutionalized some of us become, by virtue of tenure and promotions, we tend to shirk those responsibilities pertinent to maintaining our programs. Having served on many committees and chairing a few, I know first hand the oft-time thankless drudgery which accompanies these tours of duty. I also know that given the ethnic studies socio-political experience at colleges and universities, it is necessary to have ethnic studies representation on those academic assemblies having power to significantly impact what we do. Institutionalizing ethnic studies in part means ensuring ethnic studies' presence on those strategic university committees concerned with budget, curriculum and personnel issues. More ethnic studies disciplinarians must be brought to the point of commitment where they understand that just as is air to fire—our presence in the “pits,” *viz.*, committees, is essential to our survival and progress. Inasmuch as ethnic studies has and maintains presence within these vital processes, program agendas can be presented, advanced and defended. To do less tacks in harm's way.

Attending to the politics of program maintenance also means that more attention needs to be given to strengthening the presence of ethnic studies courses in post-secondary general education or liberal education programs. Indeed, on this point, a program objective over the next three to five years of organizations like the National Association for Ethnic Studies may be to encourage and assist college and university programs in making ethnic studies a mandated part of a student's general/liberal education program. In light of the current demographic transformation of California's social fabric and given the demographics of a planet that is largely non-European, there seems to be no plausible reason for not requiring students to take a minimum number of hours in course work intended to inform them of the “real world.”

Currently, faculty in the Ethnic Studies Center at CSU, Sacramento, this writer's home institution, are preparing such a proposal to the University community. And while the structural changes recommended to the extant General Education (GE) program will be minimal, the impact on the content and philosophy undergirding the program will be significant. And therein we expect that stoney will be the road trod towards revising the GE program at CSU, Sacramento. The eventual adoption of the proposal will in a small way institutionalize an important part of the Ethnic Studies program and go a long way toward bringing the University's general education program into the real world. As noted earlier, an ethnic studies requirement should be adopted as a short range objective by ethnic studies programs in post and secondary institutions in this state. NAES may consider a program for developing strategies/tactics which can assist ethnic studies programs in California and elsewhere with institutionalizing an ethnic studies general education

requirement.

The other assignment we must attend to concerns shaping or better focusing the concept we call ethnic studies. I am mindful that this is (or can be) sensitive ground to tread. I am mindful that a lot of ideological and philosophical dust has been raised—more so nearly a generation ago than now—over this subject. I am aware of the cases and countervailing cases for better defining ethnic studies—its methods, scope, and areas of inquiry. I am mindful also of the oppositional schools of thought which argue that ethnic studies is a discipline vs. those believing ethnic studies is actually an area of study.

I am not interested so much in resurrecting the various conceptual arguments for or against ethnic studies as an area or discipline in this paper. I am interested in urging those of us who labor in this vineyard to expend more of our labor on clarifying what we do in order to better communicate what we do to each other, to others, and especially to students.

This is not a call for a flurry of activities aimed at rigidly and for all time defining ethnic studies. Such activity would be purposeless, unnecessary, and virtually impossible to accomplish given the multi- and interdisciplinary nature of our perceptions of the ethnic experience and given that these perceptions essentially guide our teaching and scholarship. It is, however, a call for more attention to better identifying and describing the philosophical, ideological, subject matter, and other bounds of what we do. Again, this activity must not be engaged for the purpose of staking out territorial claims between, for example, Afro American studies and Asian American studies. My concern is that more attention to building and clarifying what we do is essential if we are to more effectively and convincingly articulate those aspects of what we do as teachers-scholars which builds on and contributes new knowledge about the human experience.

And while some of us claim clarity as to the objectives and purposes of what we call ethnic studies, others do not. Moreover, I am not so certain that those of us who talk and write about ethnic studies do so from the vantage point of a commonly agreed body of knowledge framing and driving what many of us refer to as a discipline. There are some reasons for this failing.

One of the difficulties confronting us as we set about clarifying ethnic studies rests with the academic preparation ethnic studies disciplinarians typically receive. Most of us tend to be trained in the more or less rigid canons of “traditional disciplines.” Many of us are “experts” at identifying, categorizing, explicating, and otherwise representing those aspects of “traditional” disciplines which are distinct and unique. Our training prepares us to be guardians at the gates of our respective disciplines. We are taught to be wary against intrusions by suspect “disciplines” and even more suspect of loosely—read, not explicitly defined—bodies of knowledge seemingly unconnected by theory, generaliza-

tions, specificity, methodology, acceptance, and focus.

Unfortunately, our “expertness” does not provide us the disciplinary tools to readily decipher, much less define, a “non-traditional” varied program formation like ethnic studies. Moreover, we are hard pressed to represent what we do to others, especially in academe, who are trained in similar traditions. In addition to these factors, those of us who consider ourselves ethnic studies scholars really issue from a mono-ethnic studies disciplinary component, e.g., Black Studies, Chicano Studies, Native American Studies, or Asian American Studies. And on top of this we tend to bring to bear on each of these areas our “traditional” training as anthropologists, political scientists, historians, and so on. We tend to, at least initially, know little if anything about the other ethnic studies subject areas.

The fact that early on many ethnic studies faculty accepted appointments to programs that were fledgling or floundering, where the top priority was and continues to be survival, has not afforded high quality time needed for introspection and clarification called for here. As a consequence of these and other salient issues and factors, some important work in the area of building the conceptual bases of ethnic studies has largely gone unattended. As a consequence of this inattention we have not raised the kinds of questions necessary to establish the conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and factual foundations to better define, build, strengthen, and communicate what we do.

In this brief exposition I have attempted to identify some of the challenges facing both ethnic studies program formations and faculty as we prepare to turn the corner on this century. Barring a spontaneous transformation of racial/ethnic consciousness in American society, the short term future looks much as does the present. The staying power of both faculty and programs will continue to be tested.

I am not of the mind that ethnic studies will wither and die. I am of the mind that there is much that we can do to vitalize, protect, and advance what we do under the aegis of ethnic studies. This has in fact been a principle concern of this paper. Indeed, as we move toward the twenty-first century our activities and energies should converge on strengthening what we do well. If the past and present of ethnic studies are accurate indicators, our future as an academic formation will in large measure be determined by the amount of work we are willing to expend on shaping that future.

Notes

¹The following sources provide good discussions and analyses of the societal formations prompting the black studies movement which is the indicator for ethnic studies courses and programs on predominantly white colleges and universities: Allan B. Ballard. *The Education of Black Folk*. (New York: Harper and Row, Inc., 1973); Nick A. Ford. *Black Studies: Threat or Challenge?* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1973).

²For a penetrating analysis of the factors contributing to this issue along with some prescriptive measures see: Western College Association Addresses and Proceedings. *The Coming Shortage of Faculty*. (Oakland, California: Western College Association, 1987).

³Charles V. Willie. *Effective Education: A Minority Perspective*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1987). Especially pertinent is Chapter 2.

⁴Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970). Freire's discussion of the true ends of education and the responsibilities of the "critically" educated and the educator in this book represents one of the most eloquent statements on the processes of human and institutional transformation.