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Editors' Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

By Raj Chetty and Beverly Greene

As co-editors, we welcome you to the inaugural volume and issue of the *Journal of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies*. It is the official journal of the Institute for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies of St. John's University. Our goal is to examine through a diverse range of perspectives and formats, the parameters and expressions of social power dynamics as they are expressed and organized around ethnoracial identities. Content will include examinations of the wide range of expressions and outcomes, across generations, that result in the presence of a historically hierarchical social order rooted in presumptions of the racial inferiority of people of color, and the supremacy of their white counterparts.

We recognize the complexity of social identity and the locations of both power and disadvantage in the subjective realities and lived lives of those who comprise the groups that are a focus of our attention. Given the reality of a wide range of diversities within these groups, we both seek and encourage material that utilizes intersectional rather than single identity paradigms. Our inquiries include intersections of gender identity, sexual orientation, social class, differently abled and other social identities that can transform and inform the lived experience of ethnoracial identity.

We affirm the importance of the disciplinary, trans-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, and anti-disciplinary intellectual formations that could be collected—even if imperfectly—under the umbrella designation the journal's title indicates. The journal also affirms the social movements that are the *sina qua non* of these intellectual formations and fields of study. We recognize that there is no singular history, no singular narrative that can encompass now-established fields such as Ethnic Studies, Africana Studies, Black or African American Studies, Asian American Studies, Native American or Indigenous Studies, Latinx or Chicanx Studies. While the histories of these fields share some commonalities—in particular, student movements of the late 1960s at universities across the country—their formation and relationship to each other at times revealed solidarities and at other times betrayed fractures not easily containable by rhetorical appeals to “unity” or “solidarity.”¹

In other words, to borrow a phrase from Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's landmark essay, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” these different institutional histories, in addition to the social movements that have undergirded (and sometimes broken from) them, are “incommensurable.” For Tuck and Yang, however, this incommensurability is productive: “We argue that the opportunities for solidarity lie in what is incommensurable rather than what is common across these efforts.”² Similarly, in their introduction to *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader*, the Critical

¹ For a brilliant analysis of the limits to universities' incorporation of these programs of study, see Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism,” *boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (1984): 19-70.

² Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 28. http://resolver.scholarsportal.info/resolve/19298692/v01i0001/nfp_dinam.xml.

Ethnic Studies Editorial Collective ask, “What if this alleged totality of epochal violence cannot be so easily generalized into coherence nor *schematically and coterminously* apprehended?”³ What the remainder of their introduction offers, along with the essays collected in that reader, is a sustained engagement with the *problem* of solidarity, not a facile invocation of the term that functions alongside “late-capitalist mantras such as ‘diversity and excellence’ and ‘global citizens.’”⁴

This is precisely the importance of the intellectual work across and within these fields: the critical labors in study groups and classrooms and courses, in conjunction with the labors “out in the street,” in direct and indirect actions, via grassroots mobilizing. In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D. G. Kelley writes against the tendency see these two modes of engagement—intellectual and activist—as oppositional. He describes both the “well-meaning students who want to be activists but exhibit anxiety about doing intellectual work” and “at the other extreme...students [who] argue that the problems facing ‘real people’ today can be solved by merely bridging the gap between our superior knowledge and people outside the ivy walls who simply do not have access to that knowledge.”⁵

We launch the *Journal of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies* in the spirit of recognizing the generative relationship and mutual entanglement between social movements/activism and insurgent intellectual work in academic spaces. For this reason, our journal “Aims & Scope” explicitly states that “while [it] will include more conventional contributions by academically trained scholars, [it] will also publish articles, interviews, narrative essays, and empirical research by experts in K-12 education, medicine and healthcare, organized mental health, public policy, religion and spirituality, and technology. It will also publish work by artists and creative writers, public intellectuals, and social activists.” In an effort to counter efforts to ban books from public and school libraries content will also include reviews of newly published books that constitute perspectives relevant to the scope of the journal as well as reviews of banned books. Those reviews will include discussions about what makes those books dangerous, to whom, and why, as well as why it is dangerous to ban their access and inclusion in the discourse.

The journal emerges in a highly polarized ideological and political context. The inaugural volume of the *Journal of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies* is comprised of two issues, “The Backlash to Non-dominant Cultural Narratives” (issue 1) and “The Resistance to the Backlash” (issue 2). Content includes invited papers focused on responses to contemporary distortions of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and critiques of those distortions, as well as analyses of the underlying motivations for creating these distortions. We understand those distortions to be motivated by attempts to undermine legitimate discussions of critical race and ethnic studies. Such discussions disrupt the

³ Critical Ethnic Studies Collective (Nada Elia, David Hernández, Jodi Kim, Shana L. Redmond, Dylan Rodríguez, Saria Echavez See), “Introduction: A Sightline,” *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016), 2. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822374367-001>.

⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁵ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 8.

dominant cultural narratives' omission of examinations of interlocking and systemic forms of oppression that are connected to ethnoracial identity and their sequelae. Efforts to silence these discussions are also designed to eradicate efforts to expand dominant cultural narratives beyond the confines of white supremacist patriarchal cis-heteronormative ideology.

This first issue, “The Backlash against Non Dominant Cultural Narratives,” represents the fruit of discussions that seek to address willful contemporary distortions and critiques of distortions of racial and ethnic studies. Our focus is organized around providing the reader with content that addresses the question of what CRT is and what it is not, and what purpose is served by distorting its content and purpose, as well as analyzing who benefits and who does not when analyses are posed as though CRT were synonymous with race and ethnic studies, as a stand-in phrase deemed to describe all writing and study about race, racism, and anti-racism. In their introduction to [“Keywords Now: Critical Race Theory,”](#) Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler note this is but “the latest skirmish in a decades-long culture war” by a “right-wing indignation industry in the United States” that cannot offer “even the most rudimentary definition of what they are targeting, let alone trace the history of the particular ideas that have traveled under that name.”⁶

This is a key point in Robert Smith and Aja Martinez’s collaboratively written article for this issue: the bad faith engagements with CRT taken up by those loudly proclaiming its sinfulness and proscribing its existence. As part of their investigation of right-wing evangelical opposition to CRT, Smith and Martinez analyze social media posts by perhaps the most prominent anti-CRT pseudointellectual crusader, Christopher Rufo. In them, Rufo states that the point is to turn CRT into a catch-all “brand category” that has been “decodified” for the general public such that he and others can “recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural connections that are unpopular with Americans.” In other words, if CRT’s opponents can’t give “even the most rudimentary definition” of CRT, that seems to be the very point.

In their respective contributions to this issue, Berta Hernández-Truyol, Rodney Coates, and Laura Brown all ask a fundamental question: what is motivating this fear of CRT (in Brown’s case, the specific fear of Anne Frank’s diary that motivates its banning)? On the one hand, we recognize that this fear is manufactured by the “right-wing indignation industry” Burgett and and Hendler point to. On the other, however, there is also a real fear of displacement, not from material sufficiency but from ideological, material, and cultural centrality. In other words, the fear is both an invention—who, really, is *afraid* of being woke? (to inflect the title of Hernández-Truyol’s essay)—and real. On this, the thirtieth anniversary of Cheryl Harris’s brilliant history of the process by which whiteness became codified legally as property⁷, we more fully understand that those who benefit from the racial hierarchy really will experience a loss of power as property rights

⁶ Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, Introduction to *Keywords Now: Critical Race Theory* (New York: NYU Press, 2021). <https://keywords.nyupress.org/critical-race-theory/essay/introduction/>.

⁷ Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness As Property,” *Harvard Law Review*, 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787>.

threaten to disassociate from whiteness, and as movements for reparative racial justice and just wealth distribution, among other progressive issues, gain traction among young people.⁸ Hence the strategic commitment by “right-wing indignation industry” to mobilize against antiracist projects in K-12 education and, as Coates compellingly traces in his essay, undergraduate education in universities. This discussion takes the lead in engaging in the deconstruction of those efforts used to deploy them.

With the targeted and systematic assault on K-12, public, and higher education in mind, we have included in this inaugural issue the transcript of a November 8, 2022 panel organized by St. John’s University’s Institute for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, featuring K-12 educators, administrators, activists, board members, and scholars. In a conversation facilitated by Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, the panelists—Diana Lemon, Richard Haynes, Dina Klein, Asya Johnson, and Lonice Eversley—share how the implementation of cultural responsive and sustaining education as a framework in New York K-12 education increases racial literacy in an effort to reorient public education towards addressing racial erasure and inequitable K-12 classrooms and curricula. As Sealey-Ruiz describes in her introductory remarks for the panel, it is “a pedagogy that speaks back to injustice and equity, and the erasure of experiences, and histories of people of color, the majority of children in our public schools.” The panelists present their on-the-ground efforts—on school boards, in classrooms, in administration, in teacher training workshops—and the pushback they’ve had to confront.

In an effort to confront one form of attack on a “recodified” CRT—namely, banned books—we include in this special issue Laura Brown’s review essay of Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Brown underscores the threat to white supremacy that this book represents. Generically blending review and personal essay, Brown’s piece is a fitting close to JCRES’s inaugural issue. Her piece and the inaugural issue are in keeping with the journal’s commitment to offering a space for intellectual work ex-centric to a too-often hermetic Ivory Tower. This special issue brings together scholars from across disciplines (Sociology, Education, Literacy Studies, Theology and Religious Studies, Political Science, Psychology, Legal Studies), writing genres (scholarly essay, panel transcript, review essay), and institutions (universities and K-12 schools). It does so by offering a timely response to current attacks on CRT. However, more than merely ceding the intellectual argument to such bad faith racism,⁹ this first issue will be complemented and extended by JCRES’s second one, focused on resistance.

As such, we feel compelled in this inaugural issue to address the rise in Islamophobia and antisemitism, anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian violence. What is happening today in Gaza cannot be addressed without considering indigeneity, settler colonialism, apartheid, racism, white supremacy, and resistance to the same. These concepts and practices are at the intellectual and

⁸ See, for example, “The Year of the Youth,” StudentNation, *The Nation* (December 22, 2023). <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/youth-movements-best-journalism-2023/>.

⁹ See Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995.

activist core of the fields of study that constellate around critical race and ethnic studies. Activist-scholars in these fields have compelled us to reimagine relationships to land and resources, to remember histories of enslavement, colonialism, displacement, and genocide. This work is required so that we can recognize in today's racial hierarchies, control of movement, and inequitable distribution of material and cultural resources, the afterlives of those oppressive historical practices.

What's more, just as in the distortions of CRT there is an attempt by U.S.-style racism to shield white supremacy and its beneficiaries from confronting injustice, so in U.S.-style imperialism there is an effort to shield (most of) us from the violence against Palestinians in Gaza (and in the West Bank). The goal is, at best, to allow us to avoid any sense of complicity with this violence, and, at worst, to justify it. It seems that our own entanglements in historical and contemporary projects of occupation, displacement, and racial violence, here in the United States/North America (Turtle Island), go some way to explaining our collective reluctance to oppose it elsewhere.

Nonetheless, we also know that U.S. imperial violence and support for colonialism are not irrelevant to us because the conflicts take place elsewhere. These tactics and the discursive justification that undergirds them rebound back to the U.S. We have seen this most tragically in the recent shootings in Burlington, Vermont of three young Palestinian men, Hisham Awartani, Kinnan Abdalhamid and Tahseen Ahmed; and, just weeks earlier, outside Chicago, the fatal stabbing of a 6-year-old Palestinian-American child, Wadea Al-Fayoume. We have seen this as a cloud of exponential threats gathers against Jewish citizens and their places of worship, forcing the cancellation of services at Jewish temples and synagogues.

We leave you with words from We Stand Together, who describe themselves as “a grassroots Jewish-Arab movement fighting for peace, equality and social justice in Israel/Palestine”:

The lives of Israelis and Palestinians are not a zero-sum game, and empathy is not a finite resource. Having empathy for the Israeli victims of sexual and gender-based violence from Hamas' attack is crucial—just as crucial as having empathy for the immense suffering currently being faced by Palestinian victims of Israel's attacks.

We must end the cycles of war and violence, and shift the paradigm of constant suffering in this land. This requires the ability to empathize with one another's pain, and to fight against the infliction of pain and suffering on anyone.¹⁰

¹⁰ Standing.Together.English, “Sexual and Gender-Based violence in the October 7th Hamas attacks,” *Instagram*, December 6, 2023. Accessed December 27, 2023. https://www.instagram.com/p/C0grWbwNqYu/?img_index=7.