

Editors' Introduction

On Our Genesis and Future

JOHN D. MÁRQUEZ AND JUNAID RANA

This journal is one result of the inaugural critical ethnic studies conference held in Riverside, California, in 2011. This conference was groundbreaking on numerous levels. It was attended by more than fifteen hundred academics, activists, artists, and students, many of whom are well recognized as critical voices in their respective fields. The 2011 Riverside conference was followed by the equally successful 2013 Chicago conference, which officially inaugurated the Critical Ethnic Studies Association (CESA). With the momentum building of these two conferences and their specific outcomes, a number of intellectual and activist debates have also emerged from the many conversations that have happened both inside and outside these spaces.

These developments did not come without disputation. The conference and the formation of CESA elicited a number of critical debates that were generally framed around the question of: What exactly is critical about critical ethnic studies, and what makes members of the Critical Ethnic Studies Association more critical than the ethnic studies community writ large? The assumption embedded in the notion of “critical” is that this is somehow different from the history and specific genealogy of ethnic studies as many have come to understand that field and as broadly configured. In other words, for many of us working to build this new intellectual field, the formation of CESA proposed a different way of doing something that many others felt was already established and institutionalized and, moreover, that they had spent much time and energy securing and defending within the academy. With so much at stake in sustaining ethnic studies, why was CESA proposing a shift in strategy or vision? In this light, the turn in critical ethnic studies can be and often has been interpreted as unmindful, if not obstructive, of the professional/institutional work that so many have committed their careers and, some would say, their lives to fostering.

Some of these tensions are irresolvable. CESA and this new journal have no party line to share. There is no critical manifesto to distribute. We do not purport to be the critical few among masses of uncritical thinkers and actors. In fact, all of the founding members of CESA are no longer even members of the CESA working group. CESA, from the outset, was designed to be as inclusive and as egalitarian as possible. Our organizational design is structured so as to avoid hierarchal power, cycling members and new voices in and out as routine. Our goal has been to practice a process of inclusivity and collectivity as much as possible, against the hegemonic influence of professionalism and among those who have volunteered their time, energy, and resources to explore new terrains, facilitate different kinds of conversations, and, perhaps, build something new. CESA is and always has been an independent and grassroots effort. Those who have contributed to the association have done so outside their professional and personal commitments or responsibilities—and sometimes to their specific (namely, professional but also economic) disadvantage. As with the development of any new paradigm or organizing strategy, the work has not been without risks or critique. The work of starting an organization that seeks to undo knowledge and institutional frameworks while remaining committed to notions of access and transformation is more fraught than it sounds.

With many different opinions and subjectivities at play within the critical ethnic studies turn, the one unifying condition or factor behind this general organizing effort is, for the lack of a better term, “anxiety.” The *Critical Ethnic Studies* journal, CESA, and its conferences are all acknowledgments that people are feeling unnerved about the current moment or conjuncture; worried that our activist commitments have been misguided or defanged; worried about a growing divide between researchers of color and the researched of color; worried that our scholarly work is becoming increasingly illegible to those who it is intended to aid; worried that our scholarship is helping to refine rather than resist oppression; worried about challenges to academic freedom and the privatization and corporatization of the university; worried that we have become too far removed from the protest movements central to the formation of ethnic studies; worried that we are spending much of our time as instructors and facilitators for the elite; worried that we have become pawns within a neoliberal game of appropriation, institutional multiculturalism, and an assortment of industrial complexes—the prison, academic, and nonprofit.

The critical ethnic studies movement, if it can be called that, is then a mere attempted rupture—an attempt to break from the appropriating logics

that underlie the rhetorics of reconciliation or reform—and a renewed commitment to fomenting resistance to oppression and envisioning alternatives to the current world order. While we seek to challenge, if not undo, the academic industrial complex in its current configuration, we are also mindful of how we are configured within it, of the boundaries and the limitations that many of us must still consider to work within the specific confines of the corporate and neoliberal university. Our activist/organizer friends and peers consistently remind us of this limitation, just as we remind them of the dangers of appropriation that can limit their work and efforts as well. Collectively, we all seek a voice and a role beyond those conditions of containment. This journal was and is imagined as a space to help us work this out.

In the buildup to and for this journal, a major point of contention for us has been the questions of whether we really need to produce an academic journal in order to generate the kinds of conversations that we are all interested in having. If CESA represents a critique of tradition and of the academic industrial complex, and has voiced a concern about a growing disconnect between scholars, activists, and oppressed peoples, then why has it chosen to produce a rather traditional academic publication that will not, as is the case for most academic journals, be easily disseminated across the body politic? This was a major source of tension at the second critical ethnic studies conference in Chicago in 2013. The journal enterprise was inherited by many of the incoming members of the CESA working group, including the two of us as founding coeditors. As we took on the project and work, we knew that important discussions needed to take place about readership and access.

With a publishing contract in hand granted to us by a major and supportive academic publisher, the CESA working group reached a consensus that we preferred for the journal to be as openly accessible as possible and that it matched the broader political and organizing endeavors of CESA as an organization. We remain in dialogue with our publishing partners about new and sustainable methods to make this possible and are excited about the challenge. During the debate about the journal at the Chicago conference of 2013, some academic members of the CESA working group were also concerned about professionalization and the needs of peer review within the confines of the tenure system of the university, measures that would allow for CESA and the *Critical Ethnic Studies* journal to contribute to the growth of critical ethnic studies scholars and scholarship within the academy, a space that we identify as one among many spaces for struggle

and contestation. This, of course, entailed the preservation of some of the very methods and traditions of the academic publishing industry that were being critiqued as politically counterintuitive.

We have faced serious challenges and remain engaged in difficult conversations. Ultimately, we are not a divided camp. CESA members have resolved that we would and could foment resistance and facilitate new conversations on both of these fronts—the activist and the academic. For those of us who have dedicated our work to seeing the journal enterprise through, we have done so via an agreement or understanding that new forms of resistance derive as much from new ideas, from new perspectives on the origins and pervasiveness of oppression, as it does from the willingness and capacity to organize, mobilize, and sustain activist collectives. While it is true that anyone can generate new ideas, it is also true that scholars have a unique set of skills to contribute as idea generators, perspective givers, researchers, writers, teachers, and theorists. Many of us entered and have endured the neoliberal university, as students and as faculty, as a result of trying to learn how to be better activists, as a result of our trying to create or contribute to resistance struggles. We have attempted to build on a legacy of revolutionary thinkers and scholars who have inspired us with their boldness and willingness to journey across borders. We imagined the work we were doing or have done as a component of resistance, not as an obstruction. It bears repeating that we have not come to this position with ease. CESA's academic representatives remain wary of the resources and life conditions that the academic industrial complex affords us. Our aim is to make those resources and privileges more generative of social change than they currently are in the status quo of the academy.

We want to influence the activist realm in a similar way. Just as our vision of the social significance of academic work can be and has been critiqued as romanticized, activist work is equally as susceptible to critique, and especially as it is conducted within the confines of the neoliberal reforms of settler colonial nation-states, or what Athabaskan and critical ethnic studies scholar Dian Million has described as the “therapeutic” maneuvers of settler nations, that is, the capacity of such nations to curb critical dissent not only via violence but also via the belated inclusion of subaltern and Indigenous subjectivities into the power structures and logics of colonial institutions.¹ What is most important to us is an acknowledgment that effective resistance against such forces has commonly derived from the combined and concerted works of activists, artists, and intellectuals, in addition to strong expressions of solidarity across racial, class, ethnic, national, gender,

and sexual borders. We, as the founding coeditors of *Critical Ethnic Studies*, intend for this publication to function as an intellectual conduit and a generative space for these kinds of activist/academic conversations regarding resistance, decolonization, and the possibility of another kind of world to live in, a world that does not repeat the same outcomes of the past five or so centuries.

WHAT DISTINGUISHES *CRITICAL ETHNIC STUDIES* FROM OTHER PUBLICATIONS?

In terms of our principles as a collective, a number of key concepts and organizing principles drew us intellectually together. These ideas shared in our scholarly and activist approaches are imagined as a beginning, tentative, as constructs that set an agenda of thinking and doing. This journal represents our best efforts to consolidate all of the perspectives and positions that have contributed to our project and that we are now asked to coordinate as the journal's founding coeditors. This inaugural issue expands on these concepts and sets forth a range of scholar-activist interventions at the heart of the *Critical Ethnic Studies* endeavor.

The original proponents of *Critical Ethnic Studies* envisioned the journal as a space for insurgent critique, primarily within the field of ethnic studies and, subsequently, within the academy as broadly defined. To this end, the journal proposes to explore the guiding question: How do histories of colonialism and conquest, racial chattel slavery, and white supremacist patriarchies and heteronormativities affect, inspire, and unsettle both scholarship and activism in the present? As the new editorial voice for this collective, we propose five distinct points of departure as our initial response to this question.

The first point of departure is that *Critical Ethnic Studies* aims to unsettle or expand the rubrics of identitarian frameworks for analyzing oppression (for example, Asian American studies, African American studies). To this end, *Critical Ethnic Studies* aims to untether incrementally the field of ethnic studies from the limitations of liberal multicultural institutionalization and belated inclusion within the academy. The journal aspires to unsettle the regulatory schemas through which ethnic studies scholars and scholarship rely on a politics of identity representation that is diluted and domesticated by nation-building and capitalist imperatives. While, over the past several decades, scholarly representatives of distinct subaltern or Indigenous populations have often been invested in protecting and defending

spaces within the academy, and that were the result of activism of the mid-to late twentieth century, *Critical Ethnic Studies* suggests that there are limits to this praxis. This journal thus aims to map out new kinds of space and collectivity that resist the protocols through which neoliberal authorities have managed “difference” within their institutions, blunting a more critical and comprehensive conversation regarding oppression. Given the now perfunctory attention that the neoliberal university gives to interdisciplinarity, we seek to go beyond these imperatives to imagine transdisciplinarity and the possibility of no-disciplinarity. For example, how might the scholar-activist undo the institutional order of the university to deploy insurrectionary knowledge and protest theory that is both methodologically and analytically untethered to specific traditional disciplines and is rather pre-disposed to an always already critique of disciplinarity?

The second point of departure is that *Critical Ethnic Studies* does not represent an effort to gather and disseminate facts about oppressed peoples, a praxis that often contributes to oppression. This journal’s goal is to theorize and better understand oppression so as to encourage more effective methods to unsettle and disrupt it. In doing so, the journal sheds not only identitarian but also insular nation-bound criteria and marks how structural development or redevelopment has put racialized subjects positioned at different historical geopolitical locations in relation to each other, as well as how resistance is being created between and across disparate populations.

The third point of departure in *Critical Ethnic Studies* is that by delinking from identitarian and nationalist analytics and by critically acknowledging the space upon which our activist and academic work transpires, the journal seeks to facilitate a productive dialogue with Native/Indigenous studies. It endeavors to unsettle the convention through which discussions of race, civil rights, immigration, labor exploitation, and the discourse of inclusion and exclusion tend to presume settler colonialism as the transparent, taken-for-granted, and therefore uninterrogated ground or terrain.

The fourth point of departure is that *Critical Ethnic Studies* is invested in critical theorizations of race beyond its conventional deployment as a mere descriptive (sociological) category of conflict. More specifically, *Critical Ethnic Studies* looks to create a space for: (a) critical theorizations of race, racism, and white supremacy as foundational elements of modern social formations rather than mere conditions that have been socially constructed so as to justify exclusion or marginalization, and (b) trenchant critiques of how and why race and racism persist, beyond questions about the racialized distribution of rights and resources, and despite rhetorics of

inclusion and therapeutic reform associated with the advent of neoliberalism and the “postcolonial” turn.

The journal's fifth point of departure is to center gender and sexuality studies within critical theorizations of race while proposing that race be more seriously theorized within feminist, queer, and sexuality studies. *Critical Ethnic Studies* is marked as an intersectional project, one that sees categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality not as additive modes of identity, oppression, or discrimination, but rather as constitutive, as robust analytics for critically apprehending and theorizing alternatives to heteropatriarchy.

WHO'S WHO?

We are honored to have been asked to steer this collective as the founding coeditors of *Critical Ethnic Studies*. Our vision for the journal, however, exceeds our work and imagination. None of this would be possible without the sacrifices of the journal's founding leadership and original visionaries. Dylan Rodríguez and Jayna Brown played important roles in writing the original proposal for this journal and securing the University of Minnesota Press as a publishing partner and home for this enterprise. Jayna, moreover, assumed an important and often difficult leadership role as the coordinator of a freshly constituted journal collective. Her grace and skill as a facilitator and organizer were essential in establishing this collective and managing the work of that collective in coordination with the CESA working group. Put simply, we would not have arrived at this moment without Jayna, and we remain indebted to her patience, intellectual vision, poise, and organizing skills. We are also indebted to the time, work, and vision of other members of the original editorial collective and others who have contributed to this process. Kelly Chung and Sylvester Johnson did important logistical work to help launch this publication and in coordination with our publishing partners. As members of the editorial collective, Jodi Kim, Mishuana Goeman, Macarena Gómez-Barris, Shana Griffin, Andrea Smith, Amrah Solomon, Neferti Tadiar, Lee Ann Wang, Alex Weheliye, and K. Wayne Yang also played major roles in helping to shape the journal's structure and purpose. We also thank those who have agreed to serve on the advisory board for the journal.

The design of the inaugural edition was decided upon by the original journal collective and under the leadership of Rodríguez and Brown. We all agreed that this first edition should be an introduction to the key terms and

dialogues that we would invest in *Critical Ethnic Studies*. Each of the original members of the editorial collective, ourselves included, identified a scholar whose work could help to build the intellectual groundwork for the journal. We then solicited keyword essays from those authors, each piece imagined as part of the foundation of this inaugural edition. As editorial collective members, we also directed the review and editorial process for the pieces we solicited. This inaugural edition also includes several essays of a more traditional length and that our editorial collective imagines as excellent examples of the kinds of scholarship that *Critical Ethnic Studies* will help to generate.

We hope that the essays in this inaugural edition will inspire conversation, debate, and disagreement and inform us in our collective struggles as intellectuals, activists, and organizers. We are grateful to the collaborative and collective work that is reflected in the work of CESA, of which this journal is but one manifestation. In these times in which the neoliberal university seeks to stifle debate and control intellectual pursuits, we can turn only to anxiety and disruption as the means of altering our collective future and to maintain the right to dissent against academic and social norms. In this way, our collective process informs our theoretical and intellectual vision and the political stakes of the work. We hope you will join us.

JOHN D. MÁRQUEZ is assistant professor of African American studies and Latino/a studies at Northwestern University and the author of *Black-Brown Solidarity: Racial Politics in the New Gulf South* (2013).

JUNAID RANA is associate professor of Asian American studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with appointments in the Department of Anthropology, the Center for South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, and the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory. He is the author of the book *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (2011).

NOTE

1. Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013).