

ETHNIC STUDIES AS ANTI-SEGREGATION WORK:  
LESSONS FROM STOCKTON

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*In 2021, California became the first U.S. state to require that public high schools teach ethnic studies. Given polarized politics over what that mandate might mean, this Essay reflects on the role of ethnic studies curriculum in one place, through the voices of three people. The place is Stockton—the most diverse city in America and home to more than twenty years of grassroots investment in ethnic studies courses. Oral histories from three generations of the leaders who built that local curriculum—each of whom was shaped by their own ethnic studies education—offer a personal window into what the work has been about. Set in a city, like many others, with a long history of neighborhood and school segregation, these Stockton stories provide a chance to reflect on the curriculum’s legal history as a court-ordered remedy for de jure and de facto school segregation. Ethnic studies could not integrate Stockton’s schools but it could, and did, finally integrate the content of their lessons to reflect the people in the room.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Dillon Delvo grew up in Stockton, California, in what scholars call a tri-generational family. His father was sixty-three when Delvo was born and decades older than Delvo's mother. As a young boy, Delvo was embarrassed of their age difference, mortified to think that his dad was "a horny old man." Behind his father's back, Delvo tried to pass him off as his grandfather. But Delvo's views began to change after he left for college in San Francisco. He took his first Asian American studies course, majored in ethnic studies, and completed a thesis on Filipino history in California. The reason tri-generational families were common among Filipino Americans, he learned, was not rooted in a preference for younger women. That pattern reflected the fact that Delvo's father and other Filipino men were legally and practically barred from marrying during their prime years. Filipinos like Delvo's father were recruited to labor in California agriculture at ratios of about fourteen men to every one woman.<sup>1</sup> Those men were then subject to strict anti-miscegenation laws until 1948, which prohibited them from marrying anyone classified as white—a bar that, under California race law at the time, included the Mexican American women who lived in Filipinos' segregated neighborhoods. Strict immigration quotas barred Filipino men from returning to the Philippines to marry and moving back to California.<sup>2</sup> They were also subject to prohibitions on land ownership under so-called Alien Land Laws until 1942, which made the community reliant on cash wages without the ability to build wealth to support a family.<sup>3</sup>

College research and courses taught Delvo another aspect of his father's generation: They were not passive victims. They were leaders in shaping a more ethical California. They had been organizers in the California farmworker movement of the 1960s, one of the most legendary civil and economic rights battles in U.S. history.<sup>4</sup> Delvo learned that the downtown blocks that he grew up calling "Skid Row" used to be a hub for some of this organizing and the home of the largest Filipino community outside of the Philippines. The area's older nickname had been "Little Manila." Filipinos owned businesses there, pooled their funds to secure dignified burials for their dead, and eventually opened a community center to support civic ties and cultural practices.

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1. These facts, like many about Stockton's Filipino community, were assembled in a masterful urban history by Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, whose academic research and activism for historical preservation have partnered with and been an inspiration for Delvo and many of the ethnic studies leaders mentioned in this Essay. See Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, *Little Manila Is in the Heart: The Making of the Filipina/o American Community in Stockton, California* 152 (2013).

2. *Id.* at 86, 155–58; Gabriel J. Chin & Anna Ratner, *The End of California's Anti-Asian Alien Land Law: A Case Study in Reparations and Transitional Justice*, 29 *Asian Am. L.J.* 17, 18 (2022).

3. Mabalon, *supra* note 1, at 169, 235.

4. *Id.* at 254–63.

None of these facts were discussed during Delvo’s childhood or in the Filipino community in Stockton. His network had “melting pot, not salad bowl people,” Delvo says.<sup>5</sup> Look ahead, Delvo was taught. In Stockton public schools, where local and California history started and ended with the Gold Rush, Delvo didn’t learn any of this history either. But he got the education he needed just in the nick of time. Before his father died, Delvo had learned his truer family story: His father had to wait until his 50s before he could fall in love, marry, and become a parent; and he had spent his youth organizing for Filipino farmworkers’ labor rights alongside the visionary leader Larry Itliong.<sup>6</sup> That context, Delvo said, “allowed me to say thank you to my father before he died.”<sup>7</sup> As Delvo spoke, he paused and swallowed, noticing how that description failed to live up to what he meant to convey. “It was so much deeper than words can express.”<sup>8</sup>

Ethnic studies had given Delvo a truer history of his state and his city, which in turn transformed how he understood his own family. That kind of curriculum is ascendant in America.<sup>9</sup> So too, ethnic studies is under assault in America.<sup>10</sup> In this moment of polarized politics, this Essay reflects on the role of that curriculum in one place, for three people. The place is Stockton—the most diverse city in America and home to a grassroots, DIY

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5. Interview with Dillon Delvo, Exec. Dir., Little Manila Rising, in Stockton, Ca. (Mar. 27, 2018) (on file with the *Columbia Law Review*).

6. Mabalon, *supra* note 1, at 258–65; Gayle Romasanta, Why It Is Important to Know the Story of Filipino-American Larry Itliong, *Smithsonian Mag.* (July 24, 2019), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/why-it-is-important-know-story-filipino-american-larry-itliong-180972696/> [<https://perma.cc/8Y9A-RA2B>].

7. Interview with Dillon Delvo, *supra* note 5.

8. *Id.*

9. See Natalie Escobar, How 50 Years of Latino Studies Shaped History Education, *Atlantic* (Sept. 7, 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/09/how-50-years-of-latino-studies-shaped-history-education/569623/> (on file with the *Columbia Law Review*); Dana Goldstein, Push for Ethnic Studies in Schools Faces a Dilemma: Whose Stories to Tell, *N.Y. Times* (Aug. 15, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/15/us/california-ethnic-studies.html> (on file with the *Columbia Law Review*); Sophie Quinton, Good Teachers Embrace Their Students’ Cultural Backgrounds, *Atlantic* (Nov. 11, 2013), <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/11/good-teachers-embrace-their-students-cultural-backgrounds/281337/> (on file with the *Columbia Law Review*).

10. Melinda D. Anderson, The Ongoing Battle Over Ethnic Studies, *Atlantic* (Mar. 7, 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/03/the-ongoing-battle-over-ethnic-studies/472422/> (on file with the *Columbia Law Review*); John Fensterwald, Civics Proponents Urge Common Ground in Battles Over Ethnic Studies, *EdSource* (Sept. 28, 2021), <https://edsources.org/2021/civics-proponents-urge-middle-ground-in-battles-over-ethnic-studies/661561> [<https://perma.cc/7F9A-3FHP>]; see also, e.g., Editorial, California’s Ethnic Studies Mandate, *Wall St. J.* (Mar. 16, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/californias-ethnic-studies-mandate-11615935133> (on file with the *Columbia Law Review*) (opposing California’s ethnic studies curriculum and describing it as “invert[ing] traditional American ideas of individual merit, opportunity and success”); Bret Stephens, Opinion, California’s Ethnic Studies Follies, *N.Y. Times* (Mar. 9, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/09/opinion/californias-ethnic-studies.html> (on file with the *Columbia Law Review*) (opposing ethnic studies as “a curriculum that magnifies differences, encourages tribal loyalties and advances ideological groupthink”).

ethnic studies movement dating back to the 2000s.<sup>11</sup> Stockton can be a reference point for other school districts and states, including California, which in 2021 became the first U.S. state to require that public high schools teach ethnic studies.<sup>12</sup> Three generations of leaders of ethnic studies curriculum in Stockton—each of whom was shaped personally by their own ethnic studies education—offer a window into what the work has been about.

Our purpose is more modest than to take up the academic or political debate about the merits of the curriculum, or even the choice about whether to standardize it statewide.<sup>13</sup> We simply intend to sit with the more personal vantage points of three people (each a teacher or a student) in one city as a way of regrounding those debates. What follows is a brief racial history of the city of Stockton (in Part I) and a look at the origin and legal context of the city's ethnic studies curriculum (in Part II). Three personal narratives (in Part III) help chronicle the development of the curriculum and bring its impacts to life. In the Conclusion, in light of the ongoing history of segregation and inequality in Stockton, we reflect back on the use of ethnic studies as a court-ordered remedy for *de jure* and *de facto* school segregation.

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11. Gaby Galvin, *America's Most Diverse City Is Still Scarred by Its Past*, U.S. News & World Rep. (Jan. 22, 2020), <https://www.usnews.com/news/cities/articles/2020-01-22/stockton-california-americas-most-diverse-city-is-still-scarred-by-its-past> [<https://perma.cc/9F4F-GQFW>].

12. Mackenzie Mays, *California Students Will Have to Take Ethnic Studies to Get a Diploma*, Politico (Oct. 14, 2021), <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/10/14/california-students-ethnic-studies-diploma-515972> [<https://perma.cc/EC9L-7EK7>].

13. For valuable law review articles evaluating the controversies over K–12 ethnic studies (most of which focus on the political battles in Arizona), see generally Steven W. Bender, *Silencing Culture and Culturing Silence: A Comparative Experience of Centrifugal Forces in the Ethnic Studies Curriculum*, 33 U. Mich. J.L. Reform 329 (2000) (personal reflection on silence and race in undergraduate ethnic studies classes); Richard Delgado, *Precious Knowledge: State Bans on Ethnic Studies, Book Traffickers (Librotráfico), and a New Type of Race Trial*, 91 N.C. L. Rev. 1513 (2013) (framing the legal battles over ethnic studies, including in Arizona, as “the right to learn one’s own history and culture”); Nicholas B. Lundholm, *Cutting Class: Why Arizona’s Ethnic Studies Ban Won’t Ban Ethnic Studies*, 53 Ariz. L. Rev. 1041 (2011) (presenting a close analysis of the history of Arizona’s H.B. 2281 and the ethnic studies curriculum it targeted); Ronald L. Mize, *The Contemporary Assault on Ethnic Studies*, 47 J. Marshall L. Rev. 1189 (2014) (providing a critical analysis of why “ethnic studies knowledge [is] deemed dangerous”); Margaret E. Montoya, *Silence and Silencing: Their Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces in Legal Communication, Pedagogy and Discourse*, 33 U. Mich. J.L. Reform 263 (2000) (drawing from humanities and cultural analysis of silence and silencing to analyze and critique law school pedagogy); Lupe S. Salinas, *Arizona’s Desire to Eliminate Ethnic Studies Programs: A Time to Take the “Pill” and to Engage Latino Students in Critical Education About Their History*, 14 Harv. Latino L. Rev. 301 (2011) (describing the history of and backlash against the Mexican American Studies Program in the Tucson Unified School District). Salinas’s piece makes the additional valuable point that “high school students . . . are also mature enough to learn of the injustices that our country perpetrated . . . . Only then can we live up to the true meaning of the First Amendment by allowing those with knowledge to share it and those who lack it to receive that wisdom.” *Id.* at 323.

Ethnic studies, these voices convey, is part of how Stockton is healing from more than 150 years of racial segregation in housing and education. In a city (like so many others) where race determined housing and housing determined educational opportunity, Stockton has needed to rescue its students' self-confidence, educational ambition, sense of possibility, and trust in one another. In public high schools that are majority non-white (which is also common<sup>14</sup>), that work has meant diversifying the authors, leaders, and historical facts that youth meet during their school years. What segregation long degraded—the sense of self and possibility—ethnic studies has tried to rebuild. Ethnic studies could not integrate Stockton's schools but it could, and did, finally integrate the content of their lessons to reflect the people in the room.

### I. LEARNING FROM STOCKTON

Stockton, California has been ranked the most diverse big city in America.<sup>15</sup> To earn that status, the city beat even famously international cities like Los Angeles and New York. Its people are a portal into domestic and global history. The city is about 45% Latino, 21% Asian, 18% white, 11% Black, 1% Native American, and 0.5% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, with about 18% of the population crossing categories to identify as multiracial.<sup>16</sup> One in four of its residents were born abroad.<sup>17</sup> Stockton's community was diverse hundreds of years before the arrival of Europeans: The first residents of this area, the Yokuts, lived at the geographic center of a wider temperate and fertile valley that provided for distinct Native American and Indigenous communities who spoke dozens of languages and dialects.<sup>18</sup> Today, the residents of Stockton are descendants or refugees of the California Genocide and Spanish colonization, the Gold Rush, rural poverty in nineteenth century China and Japan, American war

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14. For one of many windows into rising racial diversity overall in American public schools, but the ongoing racial segregation within any given school, see Katherine Schaeffer, U.S. Public School Students Often Go to Schools Where at Least Half of Their Peers Are the Same Race or Ethnicity, Pew Rsch. Ctr. (Dec. 15, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/12/15/u-s-public-school-students-often-go-to-schools-where-at-least-half-of-their-peers-are-the-same-race-or-ethnicity/> [<https://perma.cc/M7XB-BT58>].

15. Katelyn Newman, America's Most Racially Diverse Big Cities, U.S. News & World Rep. (Jan. 22, 2020), <https://www.usnews.com/news/cities/slideshows/the-10-most-racially-diverse-big-cities-in-the-the-us?slide=11> (on file with the *Columbia Law Review*) (calculating estimates based on cities with more than 300,000 residents, using 2018 Census data).

16. QuickFacts: Stockton City, California, U.S. Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/stocktoncitycalifornia/INC110220> [<https://perma.cc/PE94-R4G8>] (last visited Feb. 1, 2023) (conveying 2017 to 2021 Census data).

17. Id.

18. Chris Clarke, Untold History: The Survival of California's Indians, KCET (Sept. 26, 2016), <https://www.kcet.org/shows/tending-the-wild/untold-history-the-survival-of-californias-indians> [<https://perma.cc/KW6G-VW4D>].

and occupation in the Philippines, the Dust Bowl, the Great Migration of African Americans fleeing the American South, the Vietnam War, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and generations of war, economic colonialism, and interdependence with Mexico.<sup>19</sup> This is a city built by strivers and survivors.

Stockton's diversity makes it a magnificent laboratory for the wider American experiment—to unite a global people under a single democracy. But within the city, Stockton has not always been integrated or equitable. In 2012, public health researchers discovered a grim fact that captured drastic internal inequality: Life expectancy in a high-income neighborhood called Lincoln Village was twenty-one years longer than that in the neighborhoods of downtown and South Stockton.<sup>20</sup> The two sections of the city are as little as seven miles apart. This difference tracks other metrics of wealth and well-being. An in-depth analysis of Stockton's Health Development Index (a composite of educational, income, and life expectancy data) found that the score for the more affluent North Stockton was nearly twice as high as the score for South Stockton.<sup>21</sup> The high school graduation rate in the school district serving the southern neighborhoods has improved in recent years, but it remains fourteen percentage points lower than that of the northern neighborhoods.<sup>22</sup> The 2020 Census revealed some neighborhoods in Stockton (nearly all on the South Side) with poverty rates above 50%, while the higher-income neighborhood of Brookside had a poverty rate of less than 1%.<sup>23</sup> South

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19. Michelle Wilde Anderson, *The Fight to Save the Town: Reimagining Discarded America* 38–44 (2022) [hereinafter Anderson, *Fight to Save the Town*]; see also Maya Abood, *San Joaquin Valley Fair Housing and Equity Assessment* 30–33 (2014), <https://www.frbsf.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/SJV-Fair-Housing-and-Equity-Assessment.pdf> [https://perma.cc/U75F-68B7].

20. Health Pol'y Inst., Joint Ctr. for Pol. & Econ. Stud., *Place Matters for Health in the San Joaquin Valley: Ensuring Opportunities for Good Health for All* 17 (2012), <https://www.nationalcollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/PLACE-MATTERS-for-Health-in-San-Joaquin-Valley.pdf> [https://perma.cc/NRF2-NGNJ]; Joe Goldeen, *Two Neighborhoods, Years Apart*, *Recordnet.com* (Feb. 29, 2012), [https://www.recordnet.com/article/20120301/A\\_NEWS/203010317](https://www.recordnet.com/article/20120301/A_NEWS/203010317) [https://perma.cc/Y9G6-X4LX].

21. *Measure of America, A Portrait of California 2014–2015: Stockton Metro Area Close-Up* 3, [http://www.measureofamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Portrait\\_of\\_CA-Stockton.pdf](http://www.measureofamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Portrait_of_CA-Stockton.pdf) [https://perma.cc/PY84-BYRC] (last visited Feb. 1, 2023) (reporting a Human Development Index score of 4.62 for Stockton City North versus a score of 2.86 for Stockton City South).

22. *Compare Cohort Graduates, Lincoln Unified, Ed-Data*, <http://www.ed-data.org/district/San-Joaquin/Lincoln-Unified> [https://perma.cc/N45Y-NKQF] (last visited Feb. 1, 2023) (reporting a 2020–2021 high school graduation rate of 94% for Lincoln Unified School District), with *Cohort Graduates, Stockton Unified, Ed-Data*, [http://www.ed-data.org/district/San-Joaquin/Stockton-Unified/ps\\_NTY0Njg%5E](http://www.ed-data.org/district/San-Joaquin/Stockton-Unified/ps_NTY0Njg%5E) [https://perma.cc/DJ3D-MT3C] (last visited Feb. 1, 2023) (reporting a 2020–2021 high school graduation rate of 79.4% for Stockton Unified School District).

23. See Aaron Leathley, *Where Are the Most—And Least—Impoverished Areas in Stockton? This Map Will Show You*, *The Record* (May 13, 2022), <https://www.recordnet.com/story/business/economy/2022/05/13/survey-shows-which-stockton-areas-most-and->

Stockton included seven of the ten unhealthiest neighborhoods across all cities and rural areas in San Joaquin County.<sup>24</sup> A comprehensive demographic analysis found that the city's most disadvantaged neighborhoods (all of which are in central or South Stockton) are more than 93.8% persons of color (including Latinos), compared with 69.3% countywide.<sup>25</sup> Nearly one-third of the households in those neighborhoods spend over 50% of their income on rent.<sup>26</sup>

A child growing up in Stockton would not need those kinds of data points to learn about neighborhood inequality. Prosperity and poverty are obvious on the visible surface of the city and in its social "common sense." The best northern neighborhoods have tree-lined sidewalks, decorative lakes, and scenic canals; the poorest central and southern ones have potholed streets and scrappy young street trees planted by nonprofits. Casual discourse refers to the "good" schools in and around Lincoln Village and Brookside, and the "bad" ones downtown and on the South Side. Decade after decade, children learned that north side neighborhoods were seen as the safe ones, and that police acted like "keeping it that way" meant keeping people of color out. "The unsaid thing, when you're growing up in South Stockton," said Dillon Delvo, "is that you're in this community because your family is not good as the more affluent families. There was always a sense of shame and unworthiness—a feeling like you don't have a right to thrive."<sup>27</sup> It is a sentiment that one hears again and again from people who grew up on the poor and non-white side of Stockton's color line.<sup>28</sup>

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least-impovertised/9722077002/ [https://perma.cc/5M67-SSGZ] (noting that "the percentage of poor residents was as high as 52% in parts of Stockton in 2020" while "fewer than 1% of residents were poor" in other areas); see also U.S. Census Bureau Profile, Census Tract 31.17 San Joaquin County, American Community Survey 5-Year Data (2021), [https://data.census.gov/geo/maps?geo=United+States&t=Income+and+Poverty+Poverty&g=0500000US06077\\$1400000&tid=ACSST5Y2020.S1701&cid=S1701\\_C03\\_001E&vintage=2020&layer=VT\\_2020\\_140\\_00\\_PY\\_D1&mode=thematic&loc=37.9662,-121.3135,z10.3436](https://data.census.gov/geo/maps?geo=United+States&t=Income+and+Poverty+Poverty&g=0500000US06077$1400000&tid=ACSST5Y2020.S1701&cid=S1701_C03_001E&vintage=2020&layer=VT_2020_140_00_PY_D1&mode=thematic&loc=37.9662,-121.3135,z10.3436) (on file with the *Columbia Law Review*) (highlighting low levels of poverty in Brookside compared to the rest of San Joaquin County).

24. See Ad Lucem Consulting, San Joaquin County 2019 Priority Neighborhood Profiles 1–22 (2019), [https://www.healthiersanjoaquin.org/pdfs/2019/2019\\_SJC\\_CHNA\\_Priority\\_Neighborhoods\\_Handout\\_5-10-19.pdf](https://www.healthiersanjoaquin.org/pdfs/2019/2019_SJC_CHNA_Priority_Neighborhoods_Handout_5-10-19.pdf) [https://perma.cc/Z8EL-AHJA] (including data for Priority Neighborhoods 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, all of which are in South Stockton).

25. See UCLA Luskin Ctr. for Innovation, Stockton Rising: A Baseline and Progress Report on Early Implementation of the Transformative Climate Communities Program Grant 23, 66 (2022), <https://innovation.luskin.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Stockton-Rising-Baseline-and-Progress-Report.pdf> [https://perma.cc/3D3M-GRBS] (showing table of demographic statistics).

26. *Id.* at 78 tbl.A7.6.1.

27. Interview with Dillon Delvo, *supra* note 5.

28. Former city councilmember Jesús Andrade characterized what it was like to grow up in South Stockton in the 1980s and 1990s: "You see fights, needles, blighted lots, dogs everywhere . . . You go to the north side and you see lush lawns, grocery stores. You have an inferiority complex and don't even know that. You think it's our fault we can't keep nice things." Anderson, *Fight to Save the Town*, *supra* note 19, at 31.

Because racial segregation tracked the wealth gap, it endangered the self-confidence required for children of color to believe they could succeed in school and beyond. Legal scholar Richard Delgado predicted as much when he wrote:

A minority child from a low-income background could easily conclude that something is wrong with her people and that the whites who enjoy a better standard of living are superior—more intelligent, more energetic, and with a better culture and habits than hers. If we are poor, such a child may reason, it must be our fault.<sup>29</sup>

Without education about the city's history of segregation and disinvestment, more prosperous residents, city staff, or public officials may also treat the poor neighborhoods of color as lost causes of their own making. African American community worker Andre Belion captured that concern in a 2018 interview when he observed that white Stocktonians seemed to think less of the people who lived on the south side, as if "that's just the way they live."<sup>30</sup> It was not just non-white youth, his remark conveyed, who needed to understand why Stockton looked the way it did.

The differences between wealthy and poor neighborhoods were not determined by talent, work ethic, or culture. They were set in motion by the basic facts of the city's history. Northern subdivisions like Lincoln Village were developed for all-white occupancy using racially restrictive covenants, which favored white applicants for mortgage lending and investment on 1930s Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) redlined maps.<sup>31</sup> Ever since, Northern subdivisions have been protected from "locally undesirable land uses" that depress neighbors' quality of life and property values even as they benefit the city as whole. Highway route planning favored northwestern neighborhoods' access, but spared those areas the harms of demolition and fragmentation borne by downtown and southern neighborhoods.<sup>32</sup> South Stockton was reinforced as the non-white, high-poverty side of town. State and local public housing authorities placed all of the city's large-scale public housing developments in South Stockton and surrounding neighborhoods, making them some of the poorest and most racially segregated neighborhoods in the state. Segregationist policing ticketed or endangered non-white motorists when they entered northern neighborhoods, a pattern that Stockton residents

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29. Delgado, *supra* note 13, at 1538.

30. Interview with Andre Belion, Case Manager, Fathers & Families of San Joaquin, in Stockton, Ca. (Mar. 28, 2018) (on file with the *Columbia Law Review*).

31. Lange Luntao, A City With No Center, *Placeholder Mag.* (Sept. 3, 2014), <https://www.placeholdermag.com/culture/2014/09/03/a-city-with-no-center.html> [<https://perma.cc/DJ28-ZR2F>].

32. *Id.*; see also National Parks Service, Civil Rights in America: Racial Discrimination in Housing 24, 39 (2021), [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalhistoriclandmarks/upload/Civil\\_Rights\\_Housing\\_NHL\\_Theme\\_Study\\_revisedfinal.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalhistoriclandmarks/upload/Civil_Rights_Housing_NHL_Theme_Study_revisedfinal.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/PAJ9-JZBG>].

experience to this day.<sup>33</sup> South Stockton was also skipped over for all types of investments—from mortgage lending for homeowners to public spending on street trees, from subsidies for grocery stores to spending on parks.<sup>34</sup> A San Joaquin County grand jury investigation in 2014 found that Stockton’s City Hall had never served South Stockton “in any sustained and meaningful way.”<sup>35</sup>

North and South Stockton have another giant difference that both explained and reinforced segregation. They are in separate school districts.<sup>36</sup> The Stockton Unified School District covers all historic parts of the city and is nearly 96% non-white.<sup>37</sup> The Lincoln Unified School District was formed as a new school district as part of a political bargain with developers to minimize their taxes, maximize land values, and avoid school integration. Then and now, educational quality has tracked property values; and in a mutually reinforcing cycle, property values have reflected the stronger educational opportunity available to northern homeowners. As school-based segregation broke down within the Stockton Unified School District after *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, white families fled across the school district border into Lincoln Unified to avoid integration efforts in Stockton schools.<sup>38</sup> The Lincoln Unified School District has become much more diverse since the 1990s as families of color have been displaced to Stockton by rising Bay Area real estate prices, and exploitative subprime lending across the city hurt these newer northside households.<sup>39</sup> Yet there nonetheless remains a stubborn gap in access to financial resources between the two districts.<sup>40</sup> The median household income of

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33. Anderson, *Fight to Save the Town*, supra note 19, at 41; see also Michael Friedrich, *A Police Department’s Difficult Assignment: Atonement*, Bloomberg (Oct. 23, 2019), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-23/what-police-community-reconciliation-can-look-like> [https://perma.cc/27YJ-Y43A].

34. Anderson, *Fight to Save the Town*, supra note 19, at 40–41, 48–49.

35. San Joaquin Cnty. Grand Jury, *South Stockton Quality of Life: As the South Side Goes, So Goes Stockton 7* (2015), <http://standaffordablehousing.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Grand-Jury-Report-on-South-Stockton-5-13-15.pdf?44cce4> [https://perma.cc/Y48W-DMQ8].

36. School Districts: San Joaquin County Geographic Information Systems, San Joaquin Cty. (Mar. 1, 2022), [https://sjmap.org/mapdocs/FrontCounter\\_School\\_Districts.pdf](https://sjmap.org/mapdocs/FrontCounter_School_Districts.pdf) [https://perma.cc/FME5-D9NN].

37. Cal. Dep’t of Educ., *Enrollment Multi-Year Summary by Ethnicity, Stockton Unified Report* (39-68676), <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrEthYears.aspx?cde=3968676&aggllevel=district&year=2021-22> [https://perma.cc/6PDE-HB49] (last visited Jan. 31, 2023).

38. Professor Julia Mendoza’s forthcoming ethnographic history of Stockton’s education system, from the desegregation movement to the modern effort to remove police from schools, will bring this history to life in the most personal terms. See Julia Mendoza, *The Miseducation of the Barrio: The School to Prison Pipeline in Stockton, California* (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author (Anderson)).

39. Ameer Chew & Chione Lucina Muñoz Flegal, *Facing History, Uprooting Inequality: A Path to Housing Justice in California* 34 (2020), [https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/pl\\_report\\_calif-housing\\_101420a.pdf](https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/pl_report_calif-housing_101420a.pdf) [https://perma.cc/H2K2-AJ5T].

40. See id.

families living within Lincoln Unified is more than \$20,000 higher than it is for families living within Stockton Unified.<sup>41</sup>

While the thousands of young people growing up in South Stockton saw the impact of these policy decisions in their neighborhoods, the broader root causes of these disparities were absent from school and civic conversations until recently. Seeking to mitigate the sense of shame and internalized racism that was passing from parents to children, a generation of Stockton college graduates (including Delvo) began to build a grassroots educational after-school program. They set out to give the youth of color in the Stockton Unified School District, many of whom were experiencing poverty, a sense of their history. Pride in the interracial origins of the region's agricultural and industrial productivity enhanced how students understood their families, neighbors, and neighborhoods. Spurred to action by generations of activists who came before, students then led local campaigns to seek district funding and approvals for one of California's earliest public school ethnic studies programs.

## II. ETHNIC STUDIES IN STOCKTON AND CALIFORNIA

California's ethnic studies mandate (enacted in 2021) will go into effect between 2029 and 2030.<sup>42</sup> In giving an overview of one early implementation of this curriculum in Central California, this Part explores how these programs might begin to counteract some of the negative consequences of historic educational segregation, redlining, and disinvestment from school systems serving Black and Brown students.<sup>43</sup> Proponents of the state's new ethnic studies requirement note that in districts like San Francisco Unified (which has offered ethnic studies courses for decades), these classes have had a positive impact on student attendance, graduation rates, and college enrollment—particularly among students of color.<sup>44</sup> After this requirement was signed into law,

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41. Stockton Schs. Initiative, Community Report 7 (2018), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GBzWBLkanR3vtjrjzvpw2IS-BcqnuMY/view> [<https://perma.cc/WX2W-X7JQ>].

42. John Fensterwald, California Becomes First State to Require Ethnic Studies in High School, EdSource (Oct. 8, 2021), <https://edsources.org/2021/california-becomes-first-state-to-require-ethnic-studies-in-high-school/662219> [<https://perma.cc/E2AC-LHJM>] [hereinafter Fensterwald, California Becomes].

43. See *id.*; see also Iris Kim, California Plans to Make Ethnic Studies a Requirement for Public-School Students. Here's the History Behind the Idea, Time (Sept. 15, 2020), <https://time.com/5888853/ethnic-studies-california/> [<https://perma.cc/J8HS-TQ67>] (providing a history of the curriculum and the politics of adoption in California).

44. See, e.g., Thomas S. Dee & Emily K. Penner, The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: Evidence From an Ethnic Studies Curriculum, 54 *Am. Educ. Rsch. J.* 127, 158–60 (2017) (finding large, causal effects on attendance, grade point average, and credits earned when at-risk students in the San Francisco Unified School District took courses rooted in ethnic studies or other “culturally relevant pedagogy”); see also Christine E. Sleeter, The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies: A Research Review 20 (2011), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED521869.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/7Y9J-EUBG>] (conducting a literature review of social science assessing the outcomes of ethnic studies

California Secretary of State Dr. Shirley Weber (herself an emerita professor of Africana Studies at San Diego State University) said, “[A]t a time when some states are retreating from an accurate discussion of our history . . . California continues to lead in its teaching of ethnic studies,” which has the capacity to help students “build character,” “learn how people from their own or different backgrounds face challenges, overcome them,” and “contribute[] to American society.”<sup>45</sup> The state will invest at least \$50 million to support K–12 districts, county offices of education, and charter schools to develop and implement this curriculum over the next several years.<sup>46</sup>

While the state’s commitment to ethnic studies in the K–12 system is new, educators, students, and community leaders have worked for decades to introduce liberatory, inclusive history into California’s public schools. In cities like Stockton, San Francisco, Long Beach, and Los Angeles, teachers have long worked to build ethnic studies programs that seek to combat racism and promote social justice—often without formal support from local policymakers.<sup>47</sup> Inspired by the wide-ranging college student protests at San Francisco State University and UC Berkeley in the late 1960s (which led to the establishment of the first courses in African American, Chicano, Asian American, and Native American studies at state universities),<sup>48</sup> these grassroots, community-driven initiatives offer an example of what it could look like to use ethnic studies programs to build an inclusive system that provides a high-quality education to all students.

Stockton’s efforts to build that kind of program began in 2009, when a handful of educators (largely coordinated through the organization Little Manila Rising) launched a series of volunteer-led after-school programs with the intention of someday formalizing this curriculum during the school day. Dillon Delvo, Alma Riego, Aldrich Sabac, and Brian Batugo—all Stockton-raised teachers who had been trained at California State University and University of California campuses—built the Little Manila After School Program, specifically focused on introducing students at Edison High School in South Stockton to local Filipina/o history.<sup>49</sup>

In 2016, a related, broader project emerged when a dozen teachers came together to teach an after-school class. Rather than call the class

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curriculum and finding considerable evidence of positive academic and social impacts for students of varied ages).

45. Fensterwald, *California Becomes*, supra note 42 (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting Shirley Weber, Cal. Sec’y of State).

46. *Id.*

47. Sherry Posnick-Goodwin, *Ethnic Studies Trailblazers*, Cal. Tchrs. Ass’n (Dec. 14, 2021), <https://www.cta.org/educator/posts/ethnic-studies-trailblazers> [<https://perma.cc/3LXF-XMF8>].

48. *Id.*

49. *Why We Advocate for More Than Local Filipino American History*, Little Manila Rising, <https://littlemanila.org/more-than-history> [<https://perma.cc/Z7NF-Y8E6>] (last visited Feb. 25, 2023).

“U.S. History,” they called it “us History,” reflecting coursework they had studied in Black Feminist Theory, Chicana Studies, LGBT+ studies, and local history.<sup>50</sup> In 2017, these teachers and their students pushed the Stockton Unified School District to approve the first course description for a pilot ethnic studies class, which several of the us History educators then taught.<sup>51</sup> In 2019, the school board for Stockton Unified passed a resolution strengthening and expanding the existing ethnic studies program, establishing dedicated staffing to develop a district-wide curriculum, and providing resources for teachers to collaborate to improve the program.<sup>52</sup> These courses are now offered at all Stockton Unified high schools. According to a 2020 study administered by the program, “92 percent [of students who took the courses] had developed an increased appreciation for other cultures, 90 percent enjoyed the course, and 85 percent would recommend it to other students.”<sup>53</sup>

Stockton’s multiethnic coalition of teachers had succeeded in launching some of the first ethnic studies courses in any public schools in the California interior, a region of roughly seven million people.<sup>54</sup> They had to overcome political opposition, interethnic competition, and the resource scarcity inherent in a district that serves a student population that is more than 80% low income.<sup>55</sup>

### III. THE EXPERIENCE OF ETHNIC STUDIES IN STOCKTON

Some of the best spokespeople for Stockton’s ethnic studies curriculum are its builders and its beneficiaries. In their own lives and educations, they experienced the limitations of standard history curricula and saw the community-building potential of more inclusive stories. Their observations have useful implications for managing changing student demographics—a particularly relevant insight for California and other

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50. This group of teachers included one of this Essay’s authors, Lange Luntao. For a fuller history of this effort, see generally Susan Brenna, *Recovering From Historical Amnesia*, *Teach for Am. Mag.* (Jan. 30, 2018), <https://www.teachforamerica.org/one-day/magazine/recovering-from-historical-amnesia> [<https://perma.cc/7RM3-599X>].

51. Stockton Unified School District Governing Board Meeting Agenda 3074 (Apr. 11, 2017), <https://www.stocktonusd.net/cms/lib/CA01902791/Centricity/domain/159/agendas/2016-2017/2017-04-11%20Regular%20Board%20Meeting.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/R8DH-6PQD>].

52. Stockton Unified School District Governing Board Meeting Minutes (Dec. 17, 2019), <http://go.boarddocs.com/ca/susd/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=BJQRFL6DCCE7> [<https://perma.cc/G4D4-BEFN>].

53. Posnick-Goodwin, *supra* note 47.

54. California’s Central Valley Finds Itself on the Political Map, PBS Newshour (Nov. 1, 2010), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/californias-central-valley-finds-itself-on-the-political-map> [<https://perma.cc/3V76-SHQ6>].

55. Free and Reduced-Price Meals, Stockton Unified, Ed-Data, <http://www.ed-data.org/district/San-Joaquin/Stockton-Unified> [<https://perma.cc/5BTD-3899>] (last visited Feb. 1, 2023).

states with a minority-white student body in their public schools.<sup>56</sup> What follows are lightly edited oral histories from three graduates of Stockton public schools: one “elder” leader, one current teacher, and one college student.

A. *Dillon Delvo: Program Founder*<sup>57</sup>

*Delvo, whose story opened this Essay, is a father, educator, youth minister, nonprofit founder, and a second-generation Filipino American who was born and raised in South Stockton. After graduating from Edison High School, Delvo attended San Francisco State University, where Asian American studies helped him make sense of his own family’s migration history. After graduation, an elementary school friend (the late Dr. Dawn Bohulano Mabalon) alerted him to the impending destruction of some of the last buildings in Stockton’s historic Little Manila. He and Mabalon established Little Manila Rising, which has developed neighborhood and youth programs in martial arts, dance, health outreach, urban forestry, and historical/cultural preservation. Delvo continues to lead the organization as Executive Director and has been among the city’s leading advocates for adoption of ethnic studies in Stockton schools.*

I never learned Filipina/o history while I was in Stockton. I only learned it when I went to San Francisco State. The very first class I ever took in college was called “The Psyche and Behavior of Filipinos.” And I was like, “I’ll get an easy A! What’s in the final—how to wrap lumpia?” [*Delvo laughs.*]

But once I took that class, it proved how wrong I was and how little I knew. It reshaped me as a student. It gave context to my own existence, meaning that I had a direct relation to the first generation of Filipinos in America. I remember vividly how that first class started: The professor walked in, and he was dressed as a homeless person. I didn’t know that he was the professor—he sat with the students, and we were just waiting for the professor to show up. Finally, this guy that was dressed as a homeless person stood up and said, “Where is the professor?” And then he slowly started undressing while giving a monologue, and by the end he was in full Barong Tagalog [Filipino formal attire]. His point was to talk about Filipino American identity and how we were invisible. My mind was blown!

Just that first class alone was transformational for me and made me question what I had learned back at home. It eventually made me so passionate that I actually went back to my U.S. History teacher kind of angry. She was my favorite teacher at Edison High School, Sarah Davenport—one of the best teachers ever. I asked her: “You teach U.S. history—how come none of our history is a part of this? How could we

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56. Public School Enrollment, By Race/Ethnicity, Kids Data, <https://www.kidsdata.org/topic/36/school-enrollment-race/table> [<https://perma.cc/VLG7-SFD6>] (last visited Feb. 1, 2023) (documenting that 21.7% of California’s public school students are white).

57. This section is an oral history told in the voice of Dillon Delvo (described above). Interview with Dillon Delvo, *supra* note 5.

come from our city without learning any of our city's history?" She did that teacher jiu-jitsu thing. [*Delvo laughs.*] Very apologetically, she said, "I never learned about this either. I would love for you to come back to my class and teach one day of my U.S. history class." I agreed, which I immediately regretted, because when I was like eighteen or nineteen years old, I had this huge fear of public speaking.

I wanted to do this because *someone* had to help—how could this not be taught at the high school level, or in Stockton? Because by then I was changing into a different student. Prior to this, I wanted to get an easy A in a Filipino History class, but after the class I began wondering, I should have known the history of my family, right? I should have known this about my neighborhood. I should have known this about my community. Shouldn't you understand this history to be able to function as a person from Stockton or as a person from California or just as a citizen of the United States? That's what was going on for me at a macro level, but at a micro level, it's like I didn't even know who my parents were. I felt so betrayed. I began to understand the effects of colonialism on family relationships and formation. I realized that these interactions that we've had weren't expressions of disagreement with me and my dreams, but the only way that other generations could express love. It changes everything. I became really passionate about that, and so I taught that class every year at Edison. I was terrified, but I was more angry than terrified.

My visits to Ms. Davenport's class turned into a workshop on the importance of ethnic studies. I would basically tell the folks in the class, "When you go to college, take these courses because they're not teaching us this here and it will change your world. These courses help you make sense of why our community is the way it is. It's not our fault." I was trying to expose the unsaid thing, which is that when you're growing up in South Stockton, you're in this community because your family is not as good as the more affluent families. There was always a sense of shame and unworthiness—a feeling like you don't have a right to thrive. It's not talked about, but it's deep down in our psyche. It informs our imposter syndrome. I'm approaching fifty and I'm just starting to understand the depths of the damage done to me.

Looking back on my history education when I was a kid in Stockton, what was missing was a sense of relevance. I'm not related to George Washington. George Washington's story doesn't tell anything about my ancestors and their sacrifices. Not that I shouldn't learn those other things, but I think there's a concerted effort to erase other histories. This makes our country into a very monolithic narrative instead of the incredibly organic tapestry of what America really is. This has a lot to do with the economy, too, especially if you come from an immigrant family. Especially for Filipinos, we're only allowed into this country because there was an economic need in the United States in the 1920s and '30s for field labor in California agriculture. Slavery had ended. Chinese and Japanese immigrants were already excluded. They needed a source for cheap labor.

That's the only reason my father came to this country. Then, of course later on, with the Vietnam War, immigration was only restarted for Filipinos because of the need for nurses. So the narrative of conventional U.S. history is you're only allowed into our country so you can become a cog in this economic engine. That's not a great narrative for our young people! But that is what's taught. We're taught to expect that you go to school so that you can get a job and make good money. If you're a young person with hopes and dreams—no one dreams of growing up just to add to the economy. No kid does that! You grow up wanting to change the world, to make a difference, to help your family and community. Yet none of the curriculum supported that.

Taking ethnic studies courses made me a better student because it gave me context to learn, "How did I even have the opportunity to be in this college class when I'm just one generation removed from my father, who could only become a field worker?" It helped me understand his struggle, which I had known nothing about. It made me realize: Oh, I *do* need to get good grades. There is a legacy that I need to live up to and uplift and to spread. That's why [Dr.] Dawn [Bohulano Mabalon]'s work is so important, because she's basically saying in [her book] *Little Manila Is in the Heart*: "This is a story that was not told to you. It belongs to you. It's a better definition of you and us, and it's beautiful." And that's just square one! The real question, which you've got to answer for the rest of your life, is "*What are you going to do with it?*"

The simple truth is, if you ask any student that is engaged in ethnic studies what the content is about, you learn the history of your own family and this history in context, but it also leads to better understanding of others' histories. Every culture has their own unique experience, but what I've learned is how much more alike we are. There's this narrative that "if we teach ethnic studies it's going to divide us!" For me, ethnic studies taught me about allyship, what that really means and entails.

So, to go back to my timeline, I took that Filipino Studies class, became very passionate, ended up taking a major in Film and a minor in Asian American studies, and graduated from San Francisco State in 1997. I came back to Stockton and became a youth minister at St. George Catholic Church in 1997. Then, around 1999, I connected with Dawn, who was my friend in the seventh grade but we had fallen out of touch. She had just graduated from UCLA and we reconnected at Barrio Fiesta (an annual Filipino festival). She was in this booth and selling these Filipino empowerment t-shirts called Downright Pinoy. At the time, I had started an organization with another friend called PAK—Philippine American Kaibigan. It was a Filipino youth group that taught about Filipino American history. It was a precursor to Little Manila After School Program and we were doing it out of a church. The students in our program happened to be in charge of entertainment for this Barrio Fiesta. And I remember Dawn walking up to me and she had tears in her eyes, and she said, "This is so beautiful! This is what needs to happen in Stockton!" And

she asked me, “Did you know that they’re going to destroy the last remaining buildings of Little Manila?” and I said, “No.” She was about to go back to Stanford to start her dissertation on Stockton’s Filipino American history but she was so upset that no one was doing anything to preserve our community’s history. We talked some more and realized that it was too late to save the original building, but I had a film degree so we agreed that if this was going to happen, at least someone was going to document it—and then we started organizing to protect it long-term. But that’s the main thing: Dawn and I in high school were two completely different people from the ones that reconnected after college. It was because of ethnic studies.

My teacher asking me to teach one class is really the seed that put me on a trajectory to believing that ethnic studies content needs to come into a classroom. When we started Little Manila, Dawn was all about historic preservation—we need to fight the city, we need to make sure these developers don’t take over. My first reaction is always pessimism. I said, “Oh, there’s no way. How the hell are we supposed to fight these millionaires? We just graduated from college! I have to figure out how to pay back my student loans.” Dawn’s thinking, “We’re going to fight the city, we’re going to win.” I was on board, but in the back of my mind I was thinking about how we also needed to be focused on getting this content in the classroom. At that time, we did not have the power to prevent these buildings from coming down, but then the way we could fight back was through informing the youth. If we can’t preserve the buildings physically, we could at least preserve them through the curriculum and the things that we’re teaching our children. We focused on Filipino American history because that was my specialty and that’s what I could teach, but I believed that we needed this to happen for *all* our people.

A few years later, I was elected to the school board and asked, “Shouldn’t we have ethnic studies?” And there wasn’t really a model for how to do this at that time, so we decided to start small and launched an after-school program. Alma [Riego] was graduating from UCLA and she came to help me with this, and so we started going to Filipino clubs that were meeting at lunch. We gave a pitch to students: “Hey, want to come to our after-school program? You won’t get any credit. There may or may not be food for you.” But people came! And they started bringing their friends. We didn’t have anything to offer them except knowledge—what a concept! But I think that’s the power of ethnic studies.

Then eventually Brian [Batugo] and Aldrich [Sabac] came back, and they had actually been trained to be teachers. I turned it over to them, and they took Little Manila After School Program to the next level. The next step was to launch us History, because *of course* this should not just be about Filipino history, but all of our histories. [The founding educators of us History were Aldrich Sabac, Brian Batugo, Gustavo Gonzalez, Dr. Nancy Huante, Dr. Anna NtiAsare Tubbs, Phillip Merlo, Donald Donaire, Nikki Chan, Elaine Barut, CaseyAnn Carbonell, and Lange Luntao.]

As the program grew, our students didn't agree with our timeline. They would ask, "Why are we learning this after school rather than during school?" And my response would be, "We have this five-year timeline to bring ethnic studies to Stockton Unified." [Delvo was no longer on the school board at this time.] And the students would ask, "You mean we can't do this *now*?" So we shifted into thinking about what knowledge we could give them around direct action and organizing, and then they got it! At the school board meeting where the students made their case, the adults didn't have to say one word. I was just sitting in the back at a school board meeting, and I didn't have to say one word. I just watched our students with tears of pride streaming down my face.

B. *Gustavo Gonzalez: Ethnic Studies Teacher*<sup>58</sup>

*Gonzalez is a social studies, history, and ethnic studies teacher at Edison High School, a school of over 2,200 students and the educational heart of South Stockton. The son of immigrants from Jalisco, Mexico, he was raised in Stockton and attended Edison before earning a scholarship to study Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity and pursuing his teaching credential at Stanford. He taught the first Mexican American History classes at Edison and later helped design the ethnic studies curriculum for all of the district's high schools.*

My grandparents were poor ranchers in Mexico, and the future prospects looked the same for my parents. My dad would see when his uncles and people from the village would go *al norte*, go north, and come back with watches and cars, and you know, he wanted that for himself too. So he started migrating to the United States to work seasonally. Eventually he married my mom and they settled down in Stockton.

Why Stockton? Sometimes I wonder that myself. [*Gonzalez laughs.*] Someone from the village had a factory up here, so that chain migration—having a connection here, brought us up here. My parents really emphasized schooling and homework. My mom would take us to the library even though she couldn't really read English books herself. It was little picture books at first. After that, it became a habit every week or two to go to the Chavez Library and read. That helped me do well in school.

I didn't learn the term "ethnic studies" until college. There was nothing like that around [when I was growing up]. I always loved history—I'm a history teacher now. I was one of the only ones in my class who would actually read a textbook and try to pore through the pages. I was always interested in learning about Mexican history. In my U.S. History class, you wouldn't expect to necessarily see that history, but there was hardly anything about Mexico in there. The one time there was, it was about the Mexican war. It was only a page or two, and we're the "bad guys." That's

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58. This section is an oral history told in the voice of Gustavo Gonzalez. Interview with Gustavo Gonzalez, Tchr., Edison High Sch., in Stockton, Cal. (Nov. 21, 2022) (on file with the *Columbia Law Review*).

all they have about us? You know, I remember wanting to hear more, wanting to know more.

In my English classes, the books that they chose were from the typical standard curriculum—*Brave New World*, *Canterbury Tales*, just all very Western content. Looking back on it, I don't remember reading much by authors of color. Even though a lot of my teachers were people of color and tried to build connections between their students and the content, I feel like the curriculum wasn't really rooted in these stories. And I never heard anything about the history of Stockton in my schools.

When I was in high school, I also started to notice inequities in the schools. I did sports at Edison and I would go to Lincoln [High School] or West and Tracy and go to other high schools and think, "Oh, their buildings are a lot nicer than ours." We had peeling orange carpet from the seventies and old textbooks. I started to see that there are some differences in which schools and which areas get money and which don't. I started to pay attention to that a little bit.

I remember when I was in high school there was a report from Johns Hopkins that talked about "dropout factories" in America. This was basically just a list of the worst high schools in America. Edison was on there, and I think Stagg and Franklin, so all the big public high schools around here. It basically said, "These schools failed their students." And I remember thinking: That's not my experience! I have some pretty good teachers. I like my experience at Edison. Even though maybe other schools have more money, they're a little nicer. I started to think: Why do people see us that way? And why don't people finish school? Why do some of my neighbors and classmates want to continue to pursue education and go to college or not? And I saw that there are some teachers who made a difference in their classes, who maybe made people feel a little bit more comfortable. I think from that point on I knew I wanted to be a teacher—to hopefully create a class environment where people would want to learn and people would want to be invested in improving their community.

I went to Stanford and that's when I started to learn about ethnic studies because of what was happening in Arizona at the time. SB 1070 was happening, the "Show Me Your Papers" Law, and then hearing about what was happening in Tucson—where they tried to shut down the Mexican American Studies classes. I hadn't really taken classes like that yet, but I remember reading about it and thinking, "That's wrong." People should be able to learn about their history. And that's what inspired me the next year, my sophomore year at Stanford, to take ethnic studies classes.

After I graduated, I taught middle school in San José for a year. I taught at a charter school affiliated with the National Hispanic University on the East Side, which was modeled off of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). There was a history teacher opening, and when I got to the interview, they told me I would be teaching Mexican American History. The administrators were Latino, the teachers were Latino, and it

really interested me that this was a community-controlled school. I had never seen that before. And I got the chance to learn it as I was teaching it.

There was not much support and the school had its own struggles (as many charter schools do), but I had the opportunity to develop interesting projects with interesting lessons. Some lessons were a hit and some were not, but I think definitely teaching about the Indigenous backgrounds, talking about the Aztecs and the Maya, I've always found that students really find an interest in that because it's rarely touched upon in schools. When you tell them about the complexity of Tenochtitlan and how some of our ancestors built this amazing city that wowed the Spanish conquerors that came in. Those are fascinating stories. There should be so many Hollywood movies about them.

I always knew I was going to come back to Stockton—it was kind of just a matter of time. I know that teaching is tough and that your first few years are going to be difficult. But after four years in San José I started to think: Let's see what's going on in Stockton. I had heard about the good work going on. I had seen some articles about people, former classmates of mine, doing ethnic studies in Stockton. This was at the time they were doing the us History Program. I wanted to get involved with that. So I reached out to see if I could be a guest speaker and lead one workshop at this after-school ethnic studies program. I got to teach a workshop on the Chicano Walkouts of 1968. It was fun to teach. It really solidified in my head that all these things I had learned so far in San José, I could bring home. I talked to Dillon, who was the leader of Little Manila Rising and who had set the ultimate goal of getting ethnic studies started in schools, rather than after school. And I got a job at my alma mater, Edison.

My first year at Edison, Ethnic Studies was not officially part of course registration. I was teaching World History and Economics/Government. But I worked with the counselors to put Ethnic Studies on the course registration, and then I worked with students to help recruit others. I made flyers, they helped me distribute them all across campus, and after that first year we had about 200 students register—eight sections! So we had had to get multiple teachers to teach the course that first year.

I went in excited to teach Ethnic Studies, but this was an introductory course where students learned about people of different backgrounds, with themes and principles that I had never taught before. So I connected with other teachers across the district and we were kind of building it as we went. This was a teacher-led effort from the beginning. We weren't getting paid to meet after school. We just really wanted to make good lessons and do justice to Ethnic Studies. So I worked with JR [Ed Arimboanga, Jr.] and Oscar [Garibay] that summer to plan out our units. We met twice a month throughout the year to go over how the lessons were going and what should we do next week. We were co-constructing lessons and units together. JR's experience from San Francisco rooted it, but it was all of us coming together and having discussions. It was beautiful. You

don't see that too often. It was very powerful and inspiring. I felt like I definitely made the right decision to come home. There was a good community of teachers who were pushing the good work that I believed in.

There was a ton of momentum building across all of our schools and our sites. We also worked together to write a resolution to secure support and funding for the program and to clarify that the program is about teaching race, gender, ethnicity, addressing some of the historical wrongs and trying to correct them. It also went on to establish a teacher on special assignment role, which JR filled.

We were bringing community members together to build an inclusive curriculum, and then COVID-19 happened and paused a lot of that. You can't really teach an authentic ethnic studies course unless you're having authentic conversations, you know, in person—so that did a bit to stifle some of the work. But also we remained super connected in terms of talking about politics and keeping our work together. That gave me a lifeline connection with the ethnic studies teachers. I don't know how long I'd be in Stockton Unified School District if I didn't have that group of teachers to work with and bond with. Without ethnic studies, I definitely would have felt very isolated as a teacher throughout that whole "Zoom year."

There have been challenges. As we left COVID, we lost our leader [Ed Arimboanga, Jr.] and our work has been stifled a bit. The politics of the board flipped; it had a more conservative tilt for a couple of years. Despite the fact that our school board and leadership are full of people of color, when we proposed to expand ethnic studies into other branches of African American studies and Native studies, the courses never even went up for a vote.

It was only recently that newly elected leadership in the district did approve new courses for the next school year—"Black & African American Studies," "Native American Indian Studies," and "Art & Ethnic Studies." These course offerings make it so that more of our students have the opportunity to see their families' stories represented in the curriculum. These new additions provide me hope, but this experience also showed me how there is a constant state of advocacy that ethnic studies teachers must have in addition to their regular responsibilities as an educator.

I want to emphasize that ethnic studies is not the silver bullet that's going to keep kids in school, but I think it can help. I think there are some students who are really drawn to it and for some reason those are the classes that they really enjoy. It's one potential solution out of many that needs to happen. But I think the true power of ethnic studies is in the stories and uncovering histories about ourselves and about our city. Our city, Stockton, has a lot of historical significance, and it also has a lot of trauma. There are so many problems that have happened and continue to happen. Unless we can look at it and really understand it, we're never

going to learn and grow from that. It was really cool for us to take these stories, for students to see: Hey, some of your neighbors are immigrants. They left from Mexico for this reason. Some of your neighbors are from Laos. They escaped because of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War out there. It really humanized—for me, and for some of our students—the people around us. It helped us to better understand each other. That’s really what our class is about.

C. *Gloria Alonso: Edison High School Graduate*<sup>59</sup>

*Gloria Alonso was interviewed when she was a senior at the California State University of Sacramento, majoring in Geography (Metropolitan Area Planning). She grew up in Tijuana, Mexico, as the daughter of an Indigenous man from Michoacán and a woman from Oaxaca. Her family moved to the United States when Alonso was a teenager. She was one of the first students to participate in the Stockton us History after-school program while she attended Edison High School. The course helped her gain the confidence, social foothold, and self-advocacy skills she needed to learn English, transfer into general education courses, graduate from high school, and imagine herself going to college. She became a leader in formalizing ethnic studies courses throughout Stockton Unified School District. Alonso’s homeland experiences have shaped her advocacy around environmental issues, equitable land use, and immigration reform, and she now works as a Climate Water Advocate with Restore the Delta, a local nonprofit organization.*

I migrated in 2014 when I was fourteen years old from Tijuana, Baja California, in Mexico. My parents were economically distressed, so they had to migrate and we ended up landing in Stockton. After arriving in the community, I was really earnest to acquire education and just get myself enrolled, but my mom had very strong fears. So in my first few months of being in the United States, I worked in the fields with my mom, and I was okay. I was fine with that.

The person I was there and then was someone already forming beliefs. I remember vividly how I had always been exposed to immigration; within Tijuana there were a lot of asylum seekers and refugees. A lot of people there were not just there because economically induced displacement caused their migration from South America to Tijuana. There were also climate migrants, people that were coming from Haiti or other places like that.

In Stockton we were living in a shared house in one room that was also shared, in the most affordable neighborhood. People in the house had kids who went to school; Mom was encouraged to enroll me. When I finally convinced my mom to enroll me in the closest high school, Edison High School, we struggled because no one was there to speak in Spanish. So my first experience in a U.S. school was having straight-up language

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59. This section is an oral history told in the voice of Gloria Alonso. Interview with Gloria Alonso, Alumna, Edison High Sch., in Stockton, Cal. (Nov. 21, 2022) (on file with the *Columbia Law Review*).

barriers. Later on, we tried again. We took our papers from my schooling in Mexico, and I was able to translate them on Google (This isn't sponsored by Google!). We submitted those things, we filled out a form, and they returned with my schedule. I started my freshman year in late spring, a few months before the school year ended. My actual first day of school was just with a counselor who didn't speak Spanish. It was funny because later on down the road, when I graduated, this was the same counselor that told me I could not apply for financial aid to go to school, which was not true. It was like that.

I remember my first classes were the English Language Development (ELD) classes. First level ELD, Spanish, and I don't remember the other two classes. I was expected to learn English from someone that spoke only English. It was just really difficult those first years, like assimilating completely into what the education system was like and understanding that those were the structural barriers I would have to overcome. A lot of the staff were underqualified to teach migrant students.

It was really explicit to me that I had to level up in the ELD classes to make it out of ELD. I had to pass the standardized test to make it also out of the whole ELD category and access better developed classes, courses that would actually build capacity within me to pursue higher education. So after that first class, I remember I started to emphasize in every single task or assignment or interaction that I had with my teacher that I wanted to get out of ELD because I wanted to complete all my general education requirements and graduate on time—because I was already super behind!

In my sophomore year, one of my teachers was Mr. Sabac, a founding educator of us History. He was really eloquent, he was really passionate, he was really strict, but he was also really community oriented. And Mr. Sabac would go beyond his duties. He'd really connect with students. He would use his phone as a resource and literally translate whatever the students were saying to English and then give back the same energy to interact or create some kind of social education between all the students. I remember students would laugh and would say stuff in Spanish, bad words. Mr. Sabac would be culturally competent enough to say, "I know that's like a bad word. You shouldn't be doing that. You should be doing your work." He was someone who cared. I remember his classroom. He had a lot of posters around. He was really open about pursuing higher education. He was really proud of attending San Francisco State and UCLA and how community members within Stockton helped him get there.

My first interaction with ethnic studies was actually through a flyer! It was outside of Mr. Sabac's classroom. I actually remember explicitly and vividly the day that I walked out of the classroom and I was like, "Oh, Mr. Sabac, what is this?" And he was like, "It's an after-school program! We're meeting this week. It's our second meeting. You should come." Back then I didn't know how to speak English as fluently, but I still tried because I was craving a community and a sense of place.

At the first meeting we were a really energized group. But it made me sad that I couldn't say anything. [The us History educators] did an amazing job at bridging those gaps. Mr. Sabac was there so I had already had one educator I felt comfortable with. And then I met Nancy [Huante], and I was like "What?! There is a whole person that can teach Chicano culture, and Mexican culture, and connect it to the larger Hispanic culture—and she's fluent in Spanish?" So it was super easy to connect with her.

To understand my later education, there's an important story from my childhood. When I was living in Tijuana, I participated in a program with Save the Children to do a short documentary on something that we were interested in. And I chose immigration, so I went to the "wound," as some scholars call it,<sup>60</sup> the crossing between Tijuana and San Diego. You have various trains crossing, a lot of economic activity goes on there. You have a lot of people that are selling stuff without regulations, people that have literally just been deported, people that live in *el bargo*, which is a canal. I was ten years old, and we made a whole narrative out of it, and I ended up winning an award. It was really fun. It was interesting to record these experiences and learn something from it, but they're not your experiences. In hindsight, it's also kind of a narrative exploitation.

Ethnic studies is doing the complete opposite of narrative exploitation. It's as though, now you have this group of people who have suffered all this stuff, but how can we help them to put their lives into context and actually make sense of them under the structure that we live in?

I think when I first came here, I just understood Stockton as a place where I could rest my head after school. After joining ethnic studies, my perspective changed. I cared more about land use—understanding this whole critical perspective about social movements and how disadvantaged communities are affected by industrial zoning. It opened my eyes to how, because of the working conditions, employment opportunities, even climate conditions, people can no longer afford the community they live in—they're going to be displaced. In general, throughout all my schooling, I would have liked to be more explicit or have my educators be more explicit about place, especially because from a very, very young age that was important to me.

Now that I'm doing a lot of water justice work and understanding urban ecology, I see a lot of teaching from cultures that have been erased or oppressed. All community members have a cultural bond to their landscape. They learn about how the landscape works, and they put that to work in their daily lives. So when you talk about water justice, there are Indigenous tribes that have literally been the stewards of waterways for

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60. This term came originally from Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* 3 (1987) ("The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [is an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.").

millennia. They have learned how to take care of the environment. They have learned how to make it sustainable, prevent mass wildfires. If we can apply these concepts that people have developed over time into creating more sustainable infrastructure for the state and localities, that will be fairer. That's the work I want to do with my college degree.

#### CONCLUSION: ETHNIC STUDIES AS DESEGREGATION

With exceptional levels of racial and ethnic diversity and a student body that was overwhelmingly non-white, Stockton's ethnic studies leaders built a curriculum to celebrate and reflect the city's global heritage, to contextualize local inequality, and to humanize groups separated by barriers of language and other cultural differences. It was integration work in a deeper democratic sense: They were laying the foundation for future trust and cooperation in a diverse city. They were helping to break the intergenerational harms of segregation and racial inequality by freeing individuals to imagine they could draw courage, talent, and role models from all of Stockton's ancestors.

As it happens, the desegregation function of ethnic studies in Stockton is connected to the curriculum's history. In 1974, the Supreme Court in *Milliken v. Bradley* held that federal courts did not have the power to move school district boundaries to remedy a history of school and housing segregation.<sup>61</sup> Courts could, however, order states and school districts to invest in the life chances of children growing up in segregated, non-white districts.<sup>62</sup> For at least two decades, in school districts from Delaware to Indianapolis, from Minneapolis to Tucson, courts approved remedial desegregation orders that included funding for an ethnic studies curriculum and teacher training.<sup>63</sup> Courts understood this curriculum as

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61. 418 U.S. 717 (1974).

62. See *Milliken v. Bradley*, 433 U.S. 267, 294 & n.2 (1977) (Powell, J., concurring) (upholding a remedial order in a desegregation case in which the state was required to fund new educational opportunities for Detroit children, including "inclusion of 'multiethnic studies' in the curriculum, with a request for federal funds to support 'in-service training for teachers involved in such programs'" (quoting *Bradley v. Milliken*, 402 F. Supp. 1096, 1144 (E.D. Mich. 1975))); see also *Berry v. Sch. Dist. of City of Benton Harbor*, 515 F. Supp. 344, 374 (W.D. Mich. 1981), *aff'd* and *remanded*, 698 F.2d 813 (6th Cir. 1983) (ordering the Coloma and Eau Claire School Districts to adopt a policy monitoring and approving textbook selection to ensure "lack of racial bias and depicting black participation in all aspects of American learning, society and culture"); *Bradley*, 402 F. Supp. at 1144 ("Multi-ethnic studies are essential elements of the curriculum of any outstanding school system; desegregation serves only to emphasize the need for inclusion of these studies."). See generally M. Isabel Medina, *Silencing Talk About Race: Why Arizona's Prohibition of Ethnic Studies Violates Equality*, 45 *Hastings Const. L.Q.* 47 (2017) (examining the role of ethnic studies curriculum as a desegregation remedy, exploring the roots of Tucson's Mexican American Studies curriculum in the city's desegregation litigation history, and arguing for the virtues of ethnic studies in the context of racial inequality).

63. For Delaware, see *Evans v. Buchanan*, 582 F.2d 750, 771 (3d Cir. 1978) (affirming a district court's remedial order that curriculum "must preserve respect for the racial and ethnic backgrounds of all students" and "emphasize and reflect the cultural pluralism of

a deliberate remedy for segregation—a source of relief from the shame and hopelessness experienced by children of color raised in schools that were both poor and racially segregated. Scholar Richard Delgado captured this idea in plain terms:

For such a child, ethnic history and literature come as a tonic, for they supply reasons for her community’s low estate. Nothing is wrong with her people. Their poverty, lack of cultural capital, and statistically low levels of achievement are the product of years of systematic suppression. With the burden of self-blame lifted, the child can dive into school and, learning with a strong heart, resolve to become knowledgeable and an agent for social change.<sup>64</sup>

The harms of segregation, the old cases held, could not be wished away—especially given that de facto racial segregation among school districts would continue. Majority-minority school districts unable to integrate with suburban, majority-white districts would instead need to draw more youth of color into the fold of education, helping them believe in themselves as agents of change. Describing the role of ethnic studies in desegregation cases, scholar M. Isabel Medina put it this way: “Ethnic identity, like any other group-based identity, historically has been used to denigrate, repress, and target; better, instead, to use it as a cause for celebration and as a way to maximize individual opportunity.”<sup>65</sup> Without the ability to desegregate the districts and children, in other words, courts turned to *integrating the curriculum* to include the literature, histories, and leaders from communities of color.

In the Stockton Unified School District, ethnic studies was built for similar purposes. It was never about rage or blame against white people. Ethnic studies in Stockton has been about education—learning the history

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the students”). For Indianapolis, see *United States v. Bd. of Sch. Comm’rs*, 506 F. Supp. 657, 672 (S.D. Ind. 1979), *aff’d in part, vacated in part*, 637 F.2d 1101 (7th Cir. 1980) (“History courses . . . which ignore the contribution of racial and ethnic groups are antithetical to the successful implementation of a . . . desegregation plan. . . . [A]ll schools should assess their curricular offerings for . . . bias. If present, this bias should be replaced by instruction which is in keeping with the goal of cultural pluralism.”). For Minneapolis, see Paula G. Forbes & James A. Cunningham, Jr., *Desegregation & the Minneapolis Public Schools*, 17 *Hamline J. Pub. L. & Pol’y* 209, 214 (1996) (describing a remedial desegregation order in Minneapolis requiring curricula and programs, such as ethnic studies, as well as “multi-ethnic learning materials”). For Tucson, see *Fisher v. Tucson Unified Sch. Dist.*, 329 F. Supp. 3d 883, 952 (D. Ariz. 2018) (quoting the 2013 desegregation order’s mandate to “develop and implement culturally relevant courses of instruction designed to reflect the history, experiences, and culture of African American and Mexican American communities” as a strategy to improve student achievement); *González v. Douglas*, 269 F. Supp. 3d 948, 950–51 (D. Ariz. 2017) (describing the 1974 school desegregation case brought by Latino and Black students against Tucson Unified School District, which became the *Fisher* case, leading to a remedial consent decree and thus the district’s 1998 implementation of a Mexican American Studies (MAS) program intended to help close the achievement gap between Mexican American and white students).

64. Delgado, *supra* note 13, at 1538.

65. Medina, *supra* note 62, at 90–91.

of high school students' families, the backstories of their neighbors' families, the origins of their neighborhood environments, mechanisms of activism and democracy, and the power to create change across generations. It has carried forth Stockton's broader, truer history—not just as a Gold Rush town, but as a jewel of American diversity. "Little Manila and the Filipino American story is one of activism and people fighting for their rights," says Delvo. "It's panning for gold. That's the real El Dorado. The gold is our history."<sup>66</sup> The classrooms Delvo helped to build found gold in the voices and writings of Stockton's global ancestors, whether rooted in Mexico or Cambodia, the Black South or the Native tribes of California, or dozens of points beyond.

At "us History" sessions and other youth gatherings in Stockton, former Stockton Mayor Michael Tubbs sometimes described how he felt in seventh grade when he read a poem by Tupac Shakur about a rose that grew from concrete.<sup>67</sup> It gave him courage to think that he could grow that way, too. Tubbs recited the poem to call forth his city's next generation of roses:

Did you hear about the rose  
that grew from a crack in the concrete?  
Proving nature's laws wrong,  
It learned to walk without having feet.  
Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams,  
It learned to breathe fresh air.  
Long live the rose that grew from concrete  
When no one else even cared!<sup>68</sup>

Ethnic studies has helped a new generation of Stockton youth imagine that they can grow and thrive despite adversity. In a video celebrating that curriculum with a series of "I am" messages about the speaker's families and the resilience and activism in their diverse communities' histories, a high school student named Nikki Chan cracked a joke—a loving reference to her region's most celebrated crop. "I am," Chan began before a comic pause followed by laughter, "The asparagus that grew from concrete." Stockton's future will rely on all of its seedlings breaking through, each one softening the earth for those coming behind.

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66. Anderson, *Fight to Save the Town*, *supra* note 19, at 43–44; Interview with Dillon Delvo, *supra* note 5.

67. See, e.g., Jake Lamarra, *Rose That Grew From Concrete*, StaggOnline (Oct. 29, 2010), <https://staggonline.net/student-life/rose-that-grew-from-concrete/> [<https://perma.cc/4QAF-PQA5>].

68. Tupac Shakur, *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*, *in* *The Rose That Grew From Concrete* 3 (1999).