

## Andrea Smith, University of California, Riverside



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With the attacks on ethnic studies and affirmative action in Arizona and elsewhere, people of color often find themselves in a defensive position of trying to “save” ethnic studies and multicultural education from the state. In doing so, however, we presume that ethnic studies and multicultural education is a gift of the state and that the state can take them back. In fact, gender and ethnic studies did not develop because educational systems suddenly decided “We’re racist and sexist. We should do something about that.” Rather, they emerged as a result of movements for racial and gender justice that forced universities to incorporate gender and ethnic studies. Once these movements become incorporated into the academy, however, scholars in these fields often cut themselves off from the movements that enabled these fields to be in the academy in the first place. A consequence is that the larger political vision behind the struggle for ethnic studies and women’s studies becomes diminished into a politics of representation. The people who challenged white supremacy in the educational systems of the 1960s did not fight for affirmative action, more tenure positions for women and people of color, and simple curriculum reform — they fought for a liberatory educational system that would be accountable to the community. Affirmative action and multiculturalism is what they got.

A consequence of losing this larger political vision is not only that it leaves us politically vulnerable to the current attacks on gender and ethnic studies, but that our presence in the academy can then be used to serve its interests rather than ours. While the origins of ethnic studies historically can be traced to anti-imperial internationalist movements such as the Third World Strike, the institutionalization of ethnic studies generally has proceeded with the presumption that its development occurs primarily along the lines and categories of identity; i.e., Asian-American studies and Native studies. Identitarian scholarship has laid the crucial foundation for analyzing the intersections of racism, colonialism, immigration, and slavery within the context of the United States. However, it has become clear that ethnic studies paradigms have become entrapped within — and sometimes indistinguishable from — the discourse and

mandate of liberal multiculturalism, which often relies on a politics of identity representation that is diluted and domesticated by nation-building and capitalist imperatives. In addition, in our post-affirmative action and so-called “post-racial” society, an ethnic studies narrowly confined identitarianism fails to speak to the emergence of a multicultural white supremacy and settler colonialism. People of color become ethnographically entrapped within academic discourse. As Rey Chow contends, ethnic studies scholars are often entrapped within the role of becoming self-confessing subjects who display their ethnicity in the service of multicultural representation. Our assigned intellectual task is what Denise da Silva describes as a “neoliberal multicultural” representation that “includes never-before-heard languages that speak of never-before-heard things that actualize a never-before-known consciousness.” Thus, it is often the case that gender and ethnic studies scholars who do not challenge logics of current disciplinary formations or their assigned role to display their “difference” actually prosper in the academy. Their success is then used as an alibi to attack scholars who do refuse their position of ethnographic entrapment. Furthermore, ethnic and gender studies is never positioned as a field of thought that can fundamentally question or reshape larger academic discourses. By shifting the focus and expanding the scope of inquiry of ethnic studies from multiculturalism representation to the analytics of power and domination, ethnic/gender studies would become situated as an expansive field that addresses how the logics of domination structure the world for everyone, not just those who are racialized or gendered in particular ways.

The Status of Women in the Profession, Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession, and Status of LGBTIQ Persons in the Profession Committees of the AAR will be hosting a special strategy session the Friday before the next AAR Annual Meeting to organize how we can do more than simply pursue career survival strategies for marginalized groups. While such work is important, it is necessary to question the presence of people of color in the academy as an unquestioned good. Does tenuring more gender or ethnic studies scholars necessarily contribute to an inclusive academy, or does it serve to further retrench a colonial academic system by multiculturalizing it? Does our position in the academy help our communities or does it enable us to engage in what Cathy Cohen describes as a process of secondary marginalization that creates an elite class that can oppress and police the rest of the members of our communities? Have we fallen into the trap Elizabeth Povinelli describes of simply adding social difference to the multicultural academy without social consequence? Does our presence help challenge the political and economic status quo, or does our presence serve as an alibi for the status quo?

To answer these questions we must ask ourselves, once we get into the academy, what work will we pursue? Will we accept the current heteropatriarchal and white supremacist foundations of the current disciplinary formations, or will we use our space to develop different kinds of knowledge and intellectual practice that will challenge the status quo? In this special strategy session, we will have the opportunity to interrogate the politics of the academic industrial and locate the neoliberal university itself as a site of contestation and struggle over the political, economic, cultural, etc., structures of the world we inhabit. In doing so, we hope to create a space for interested AAR members to foster a collective intellectual agenda that is not content to seek representation within the multicultural academy, but instead challenges the intellectual presupposition of the academy itself.

In this moment of danger for ethnic studies, gender studies, and public education in general, this work is important in helping us to remember that, in the end, ethnic and gender studies does not belong to the state or its attendant academic industrial complex. They were birthed by social movements, and they will continue as long as the movements behind them continue. Thus, it is critical that we create spaces like that which will happen at next year's AAR Annual Meeting not to simply react to current attacks, but to put forth a proactive intellectual and political agenda for creating the world we want.

Come join us for this session at the AAR Annual Meeting in San Francisco  
**Overcoming Barriers to Underrepresented Scholarship:**  
**Friday, November 18, 9:00 AM–4:30 PM**  
**Session A18–100**

Presiders: Melissa M. Wilcox, Whitman College, and Andrea Smith, University of California, Riverside, P

Sponsored by the Status of Women in the Profession Committee, Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities

Panelists:

Miguel A. De La Torre, Iliff School of Theology

Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, Vanderbilt University

Judith "jack" Halberstam, University of Southern California

Tat-siong Benny Liew, Pacific School of Religion

Judith Plaskow, Manhattan College

Emilie M. Townes, Yale University

Despite more than four decades of feminist, antiracist, queer, and other insurgent scholarship, this work

