**“Liberated” Ethnic Studies: Jews Need Not Apply**

**Abstract**

Implementation of Ethnic Studies (ES) classes in K-12 schools has been a contentious issue across the U.S. for several years, especially in the state of California. Due to vociferous challenges to California’s Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC), a new offshoot of ES called “Liberated” Ethnic Studies (LES) emerged. The Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium (LESMCC) focuses on four historically oppressed groups in the U.S. - Blacks, Latinos, Indigenous Peoples, and Asians/Pacific Islanders, including Palestinians and Arab Americans. There is little mention of Jews and anti-Jewish hatred (antisemitism) in the curriculum. Despite increasing antisemitism in the U.S., there continues to be strong resistance to teaching about Jews and antisemitism in the high school ES classroom. This article analyzes the potential arguments for the continued exclusion of Jews in ES and whether Jews have a place within its framework.

**Keywords:** liberated ethnic studies, antisemitism, K-12 education, Jewish Americans, higher education

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**Background**

Beginning with the high school graduating class of 2029-2030, California is slated to be the first state in the United States to require all students to complete a semester-long course in Ethnic Studies (ES) in order to earn a high school diploma (Fensterwald, 2021). The process of creating an ES course that was palatable to the masses was no easy task. The initial draft of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC):

was largely a K-12 imprint of a college-level elective in ethnic studies, and an heir of the Third World Liberation Front, the student movement of Blacks, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans whose five-month strike at San Francisco State University led to the nation’s first college ethnic studies course in 1969. (Fensterwald, 2021, para. 16)

Several ethnic groups in the U.S., such as Armenian, Sikh, Laotian, and Arab Americans, were unhappy with their lack of representation (or misrepresentation) in the various drafts of the framework. [The first draft of the curriculum](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-08-13/ethnic-studies-curriculum-fall-short-state-board-leaders-say) was also “besieged by controversy and criticism, in large part from Jewish groups and legislators who objected to its treatment of Jews, exclusion of anti-Semitism as a form of hate, and mention of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions [BDS] protest movement against Israel” (Agrawal, 2021, para. 12). Due to varied issues of contention from diverse groups, it took about four years and four drafts to create the accepted version of the ES course in the state of California (Asmelash, 2021).

The need for continued course revision was problematic for many of those ES university professors and teachers initially appointed by the California State Board of Education to draft the course. After various revisions were made by the California Department of Education, including adding lesson plans about Jews and antisemitism, all 20 of the original members asked to withdraw their names from the acknowledgment section due to their beliefs that further iterations of the course were compromised and watered-down (Kornfield, 2021; Weissman, 2022). As a result of, “The state’s submission to rightwing demagogues and lobbyists…more than 50 Ethnic Studies educators and activists from throughout California…convened to develop and implement a Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (LESMC)” (LESMC Story, n.d., para. 9). It is now up to individual school districts in the state to adopt the state’s recommended ES curriculum, a “Liberated” Ethnic Studies (LES) version of the course, or another option for use in their schools (Williams, 2022).

Rigorous and well-designed ES courses are found to have profound benefits for all students in the classroom, such as increasing both academic achievement and graduation rates, as well as increasing the likelihood of attending post-secondary education (Bonilla et al., 2021; Cabrera et al., 2012; Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017). The value and necessity of ES courses are neither up for debate nor an issue of contention in this piece. What merits analysis is the fact that Jews have been, and continue to be, overlooked and outright ignored in most ES courses at the university level; this comes in the form of little to no discussion of antisemitism and the lack of acknowledgment that Jews are even a discriminated minority group in the U.S. (Altman et al., 2010; Freedman, 2012; Rubin, 2013, 2018, 2019, 2021). Now, with the implementation of a high school ES curriculum across California by organizations like LES, Jewish people will continue to be overlooked, and in the case of Israel, demonized. This exclusion, which can be argued as being anti-Jewish, is a major concern for the Jewish community in the U.S. and warrants thought and discussion by ES professors, educators, and its proponents across the country.

**Liberated Ethnic Studies and Jews**

The Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Consortium (LESMC), led by Dr. Theresa Montaño (California State University, Northridge) and Guadalupe Carrasco Cardona, is an association of “former members of the ESMAC [Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Advisory Committee], other Ethnic Studies scholars and educators, teacher union activists and curriculum developers” (LESMC Story, n.d., p. 3). While, thus far, there are no large California school districts with official contracts with the LESMC, they have signed contracts with the Hayward Unified School District and Castro Valley Unified School District (Stutman, 2022). It has been observed that leaders from the LESMC are also shaping how ES is taught in larger districts across California, such as the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) (Mireles & Lozada, 2019; Park, 2018). In addition, even for schools not yet affiliated with LES, much of the language from their districts’ ES course programs were taken word-for-word from LESMC online materials and will be implemented in their schools (e.g., Los Angeles Unified School District) (Rubin, personal communication, October 8, 2022).

LES has a huge blind spot when it pertains to the study of Jews and antisemitism in the U.S., and more importantly, it holds a blatantly and vehemently pro-Palestine, anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist stance. While it has not been acknowledged outright, it appears that the LESMC curriculum “dismissed Jews as part of the privileged, white power structure” (Goldstein, 2021, p. 7) in the U.S. that the LES is determined to fight against. As mentioned earlier, there is no discussion of antisemitism in LES course materials, yet “there is language encouraging teachers to promote a campaign to boycott, divest from and place sanctions on Israel for its treatment of Palestinians” (Strauss, 2019, para. 7). In their YouTube videos, the LES accuses Israel of being an apartheid, settler colonial state (AROC Bay Area, 2021). On the LES home page (see: How LESMC supports districts), it states that, “the LESMCC curricular model includes lessons/unit plans on Chicanx/Latinx, American Indian/Native Americans, African American/Black American, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Arab Americans” (para. 2). Therefore, along with the four main historically oppressed groups addressed in ES, Arab Americans are also included. Somehow the Jewish community is neglected even though they have lived in the same region of the world for millennia (Ostrer & Skorecki, 2013).

The LESMC does not insinuate that they are anti-Jew or are opposed to the fight against antisemitism. On the LESMC web site, they declare that:

The LESMCC believes that by centering the stories and histories of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), we are working to eradicate all forms of discrimination, including anti-semitism. The inclusion of Arab American and Palestinian American communities teaches a critical understanding of the histories, lived experiences, and social struggles of these marginalized communities. (para. 3)

It is completely understandable if educators choose to include the stories of Arab and Palestinian Americans in a high school ES course, yet the assertion that LES is attempting to eradicate antisemitism, even though they do not cover any content addressing antisemitism, is quite problematic. This is like saying that one is eliminating police bias against Black people by watching *NYPD Blue* clips on YouTube; one really does not directly impact the other in any substantial way. For the LESMC, Arab Americans (Palestinian Americans, in particular) warrant discussion, yet Jewish Americans simply do not. Furthermore, the LESMC states that ES “centers resistance to colonial conquest, slavery, and the exploitation of racialized peoples…Native Americans, African Americans, Latinx and Asians” and that “a focus on BIPOC is not exclusion of non-BIPOC” (Ethnic Studies Q&A, n.d., paras. 17-18). In the case of Americans Jews, that certainly appears to be the case; Jews are simply excluded, even though they, too, have faced conquest (Ben Eliyahu, 2016), slavery (Cassar, 2014), and exploitation (Roelcke et al., 2021) during their history.

While addressing whether it is antisemitic to include content on Palestine in high school ES courses, the LESMC asserts that ES focuses on the “experiences of people of color because they have been excluded from traditional history courses. Therefore, including Palestinian narratives/history/stories in an Ethnic Studies curriculum is not antisemitic. This includes the role of Israel in human right violations against Palestinians” (Ethnic Studies Q&A, n.d., para. 23). While it is true that discussing Palestine in ES classes is not inherently antisemitic, as soon as the LESMC take an anti-Israel, pro-BDS position, it borders, if not crosses into, antisemitic territory. Using Palestine as justification for the exclusion of Jews and antisemitism in ES appears to be supported and replicated by many university ES programs across the U.S. – that the only real essential discussion of Jews is that of Palestinian tormentor. Jewish Americans have no home in ES, and this is unjustified. While there are few studies on the subject, there appears to be little actual mention of Jews in high school history textbooks; that is, except for the Holocaust[[1]](#footnote-1). In the U.S. the problem remains that, “students are being taught that the Holocaust is the only thing that the Jewish people have contributed to world history and civilization” (Stotsky, 1996, p. 52). It appears that, just like BIPOC, Jewish American experiences are also missing from traditional history courses and require additional coverage.

**What is Left Unsaid**

There has been a small, but growing, body of research addressing the lack of focus on antisemitism and Jew-hatred in university ES programs across the country (Altman, et al., 2010; MacDonald-Dennis, 2006; Rubin, 2013, 2018, 2019, 2021; Schlosser et al., 2009). It is observed that, “Jews have long occupied a strange and sometimes uncomfortable place in the field of Ethnic Studies” (Kelman & Marglin, 2021, p. 1). For the most part, from prominent ES/multicultural academic texts to current research and intellectual thought, there is little mention of Jews being a part of the ES landscape in any capacity (Rubin, 2017). Unfortunately, it is very difficult to pinpoint exactly why Jews are not included in university ES courses, like in the LES high school program. Few will go on record stating their opposition to Jewish inclusion in high school or university ES courses, especially in academic literature.

Jewish academic researchers provide several theories as to why Jews and antisemitism are not often approached in the ES classroom. Primarily, most Jewish people are seen as white due to their light skin tone (Greenberg, 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2020; Maizels, 2011; Schraub, 2019); therefore, they often go unseen amongst their white, non-Jewish peers. Jews are also missing from ES classroom discourse since they are considered to be a successful “model minority” (Freedman, 2005; Gilman, 2003; Schlund-Vials, 2012). Jewish people are also believed to be successful in both political and business arenas (Hollinger, 2004; King & Weiner, 2007; MacDonald-Dennis, 2006) in addition to entertainment, the arts, and sciences (Alba, 2006; Gilman, 2003; Hollinger, 2004). It is also believed that Jews are not discussed in college and university ES classroom discussions because of their invisible minority status (Schlosser, 2006). Many American Jews keep their identities hidden for fear of what might occur if they are found out to be Jewish by their peers (Altman et al., 2010); this leads many Jews to avoid bringing attention to their Jewishness (e.g., through personal identification via dress and ornamentation, by changing their surnames to appear less Jewish). Lastly, it has also been posited that Jews are not mentioned in ES courses because of the “Zionist question and how they personally perceive Israel’s relationship with Palestine. Many feel that Israel is a discriminatory nation, and due to their oppression of Palestinians, Jewish people are no longer seen as victims and in need of academic study” (Rubin, 2019, pp. 194-195).

It is very difficult to debate with an opponent who is unknown and unseen. The same can be said for arguing against the notion that there is an anti-Jewish disposition in the field of ES. Unfortunately, few ES scholars have gone on record stating as such in academic literature. Therefore, the argument must be derived from educated supposition based on available information. In an “Open Letter from Chicana/o-Latino/a Caucus,” it was asserted that Jews have never been a part of ES courses since its inception in 1968, and that “situating Jewish American Studies in Asian American Studies or any other Ethnic Studies…is intellectually dishonest and arguably racist” (T. Montaño, personal communication, March 12, 2021). One of the few available, documented explanations of why Jews simply do not belong in ES comes from Washington Ethnic Studies Now (WAESN) Executive Director and former Seattle Public Schools (SPS) Director of Ethnic Studies, Tracy Castro-Gill. She asserts in an online discussion that, “ethnic studies, historically, has never been about Jewish Studies. The focus has always been on racially minoritized groups…Ethnic studies has always been about Black, Latinx, American Indian, and Asian experiences. *European Jews don’t fall into these categories*” (italics added for emphasis) (Castro-Gill, 2022, para. 7). In order to respond to this assertion, it is important to address the white elephant in the room and discuss Jews and the issues of whiteness and privilege in the U.S.

**Jews and Whiteness**

Jewish people have three main lineages: Ashkenazim, Sephardim, and Mizrachim. Ashkenazi Jews come from Central and Eastern Europe, have a light skin tone, and are the largest Jewish group in North America (Solomin, 2019). That is why it is often asserted that, “The Ashkenazim…are, quite often, the face of American Jewry” (Schlosser, 2006, p. 426). The Sephardim are those whose descendants were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula (i.e., Spain and Portugal) during the Spanish Inquisition; the Mizrachim originate from North Africa and the Middle East (JVL, 2019). In a recent Pew Research Center survey (2021a), it was found that, “8% of U.S. Jewish adults identify as Hispanic, Black (non-Hispanic), some other single ethnicity or race other than White, or as multiracial. The majority (92%) identify as White (non-Hispanic)” (para. 24). There is a growing population of Jews who identify as BIPOC; for example, there are Black Jews from Ethiopia, Latino Jews from Central and South America, Asian Jews from China, and mixed-race Jews in the U.S. (and around the world). Therefore, it is an erroneous assumption that Jews are simply white. This is why Goldstein (2021) asserts that, “the growing racial diversity within the Jewish community has added another layer of complexity to the question of where Jews reside within the racial and ethnic landscape” (p. 8). Jews being accepted as white has a very complicated history.

This complexity of Jewish positionality along the “Black/White” binary, and the question of whether Jews should be considered white, has been investigated and debated in recent years (Greenberg, 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2020; Rubin, 2019, 2020, 2021; Shraub, 2019). Schraub (2019) notes that, when people think of Jews, in both the U.S. and around the world, they are often seen as white, just as is asserted by Castro-Gill. American Jews are all grouped together as white and are summarily dismissed from potential ES discussion; therefore, Jews do not really deserve the protections offered to non-white people facing racism (Baddiel, 2021). According to Michels (2021):

American Jews prove difficult to define because standard demographic categories do not accommodate them well. The vast majority of American Jews…do not belong to the configuration of groups typically designated as People of Color. Yet they do not, on the whole, fit easily into the white category either. Religion, culture, and physical appearance demarcate Jews to varying degrees, depending on social and geographic context. They form an in-between group that defies simple classification. (p. 4)

This uncomfortable Jewish positionality has been described as being located within a “liminal zone” (Biale et al., 1998) or “space between” the Black/white binary (Rubin, 2017). Jews cannot simply be amassed as white; it is an oversimplification that refuses to acknowledge nuance and the lived realities of Jews throughout history. If anything, according to Schlund-Vials (2012), “American Jews remain ‘partly colored’ because of their unique status as an anomalous ethno-religious minority” (p. 46).

Throughout world history, white society has vacillated between assigning Jewish people to the white race, and at other times, some type of off-white race (Brodkin, 2000). In the U.S., European Jews only began to only be considered white after WWII, very often for reasons of safety and security (Altman et al., 2010; Cieslik & Phillips, 2021; Goldstein, 2006). According to Levine-Rasky (2020), “Learning ‘the ways of whiteness’ entailed a transition from reviled European immigrant to model white North American citizen…The outcome of the process of Jewish mobility was inclusion into dominant culture. They became white” (p. 363). So, while American Jews were able to move freely in the U.S., their assimilation did not come without a price. Along with the comfort of being welcomed into the white community, being accepted as white resulted in community breakdown, alienation, and emotional pain (Goldstein, 2006). It is an understatement to assert that being viewed as white has also had its disadvantages for American Jews.

Currently, most scholars agree that the majority of Jews in the U.S. benefit from white privilege (Berkovits, 2018; Goldstein, 2021; Maizels, 2011; Moosavi, 2014), yet that privilege only goes so far. For example, “an American Jew whose grandparents immigrated from Austria might unambiguously benefit from White privilege when passing a highway patrol car, but not enjoy it in any way whatsoever when White supremacists are looking for a target to harass” (Schraub, 2019, p. 380). Recent studies have shown that antisemitic incidents in the U.S. reached an all-time high in 2021. This includes 2,717 incidents of assault, harassment, and vandalism, which is the highest number of antisemitic incidents on record since the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) began tracking in 1979 (ADL, 2022). In addition, it has been found that one out of every four Jewish people in the U.S. has been a victim of antisemitism over the past year (AJC, 2021). The latest Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) statistics show that anti-Jewish religious hate crimes continue to maintain the top position of anti-religious bias at 63% (Wray, 2022, para. 11). Antisemitism is not just a growing concern in the U.S. Current reports and surveys also show an increase in antisemitic incidents in many foreign countries, such as the U.K., Australia, Germany, and France (Jikeli et al., 2022). The perception of antisemitism is also an important issue for American Jews. The American Jewish Committee (AJC) (2021) found that a large majority of U.S. Jews believe that antisemitism is a serious or somewhat serious problem (90%), but among the general public, that number drops to 60% (para. 4). It appears that mainstream America does not understand the extent to which antisemitism impacts Jewish people and the fears that it causes. For Americans Jews, the lived reality is that:

The depiction of Jews as white and powerful—unusually powerful at that—obscures their ongoing racialization by white supremacists. If Jews are obviously white, then why do the guardians of whiteness treat them otherwise? If Jews are highly powerful, then why do they remain vulnerable to violent hatreds? (Michel, 2021, p. 6)

In the U.S., antisemitism is an increasing problem that effects how Jews live their everyday lives - whether that be in the classroom, the synagogue, or the workplace. Most Jews are perceived as white yet are hated by the very white group they are supposed to belong. It is reported that there are 733 hate groups across the U.S. (SPLC, 2021), and most, if not all, are virulently antisemitic. It is a reality that, “[Violent Jewish attacks] in one form or another is a constant reminder of Jewish differentiation from the white norm. This reality sits in tension with another: Jewish social mobility in North America, arguably one outcome of Jewish identification with whiteness” (Levine-Rasky, 2020, pp. 362). The ultimate question remains – how is it acceptable that American Jews are classified as white if many white people (individuals and hate groups) hate Jews and consider them to be somehow inferior to European whites? That is a question that has yet to be answered. It appears that, besides being seen as white, an additional reason why Jews are not included in ES courses, such as LES, is because of Israel’s perceived negative interactions with Palestine.

**The State of Israel**

Israel is a sovereign nation and subject to international humanitarian laws, and many believe that Palestine has a specific right to self-determination in the Occupied Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Hajjar, 2001). Israel is often accused of perpetuating the “’brutal,’ illegal ‘occupation’ of Palestinian lands...[as well as] being a ‘colonial settler state’” (Cravatts, 2011, p. 408); therefore, many believe that Israel is violating Palestinians’ human rights (Ghanem, 2016; Lasson, 2010). Human rights organization, Amnesty International, asserts that, “Israel has been systematically committing serious human rights violations against Palestinians for decades. Violations such as forcible transfer, administrative detention, torture, unlawful killings and serious injuries, and the denial of basic rights and freedoms have been well documented” (para. 42). The Israeli government has also been accused of the forced evictions of Palestinians by house demolitions all while erecting a separation wall and creating strategic entry checkpoints (Green & Smith, 2016; Griffiths & Repo, 2021). It could be argued that the Israeli Defense Forces’ (IDF) actions against Palestinians (and groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas) are justified due to the fact that, by percentage, Israelis are killed by terrorists more than in any other democratic country (Freilich, 2017). Creation of entry checkpoints, a security barrier, and tactics such as house demolitions, are used to combat and deter suicide attacks and terrorism against Israeli citizens (Benmelech et al., 2015). The IDF claims to use house demolitions “in clearing operations [in order to] prevent snipers from firing at Israeli targets from these houses and areas [as well as deter attacks from] Palestinians suspected of, detained in connection with, or convicted of involvement in terrorism against Israelis” (Benmelech et al., 2015, p. 29). It is also important to note that Amnesty International and similar groups have been accused of having a disproportionate focus and bias against the state of Israel (Bernstein, 2010; Steinberg, 2019). It would take an entire paper, if not text, to explore and dissect the previous claims. At the very least, it can (hopefully) be agreed that Israel and Palestine have a very complicated and fragile relationship, one that is marked with a complex history.

LES views this conflict through a “decolonial” lens, in which Israelis are seen as colonizers and Palestinians are viewed as indigenous victims of European colonialism (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2022). Israel has been associated with “New World” white settler societies like the U.S., Canada, New Zealand, and Australia (Busbridge, 2018; Svirsky, 2022), in which the “intention [is] to acquire and occupy land on which to settle permanently, instead of merely to exploit resources” (Glenn, 2015, p. 69). Israel has also been associated with self-determination for a historically oppressed group in its ancestral home. According to Strawson (2019):

Jews who arrived in Palestine from the 1880s onwards saw themselves as both pioneers and returnees…If the Jewish claims about their relationship to Palestine were correct–and after all the United Nations had accepted the historical connection in 1947 – then Jewish immigration was not colonial as such. (p. 40)

Scholars have debated for decades whether Israel can be described as a white settler colony (Ayyash, 2020). However, in LES, as in many university ES programs, it has already been pre-determined that Israel is a colonial-settler state; there is no debate, discussion, or opposing viewpoint provided. This lacks critical thought and is more in line with indoctrination than actual exploration and analysis.

Similarly, the idea that Israel is an apartheid state is prevalent in LES educational materials concerning Palestine. It has been asserted that, “Apartheid is a loaded term; saturated with history and emotion” (Dugard & Reynolds, 2013, p. 867), and this is particularly true in the discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There has been a wide-ranging debate among scholars about whether Israel is an apartheid state, one that only really began to gain momentum in the last twenty years (Zreik & Dakwar, 2020). On one hand, some feel that, “The attempt to equate Israel with apartheid is little more than ‘name-calling’ and a convenient challenge used to delegitimize the Jewish state” (Ellis, 2019, p. 63). On the other hand, there are those who believe that Israel is an apartheid state, similar to that of South Africa. It can be explained that using a term like apartheid “is primarily an attempt to get attention while simultaneously placing Israel in a bad light, [and] it is also a way to disseminate knowledge along with a narrative built on a particular experience and understanding of the world” (Fischer, 2021, p. 1136). In other words, the application of the term apartheid in Israel draws direct and negative images of South African apartheid, whether the term is truly applicable or not. The purpose of this article is not to resolve these debates, but to question why, in U.S. ES courses, there is such a focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the promotion of common Palestinian American perspectives, whilst excluding Jewish American voices.

Israel plays an important, and often complex, role in the lives of many American Jews. Research shows that a majority of Jews are attached to Israel, with about 83% saying that they are very or somewhat emotionally attached to Israel. There are generational differences on this issue, as younger Jews feel less connected to Israel than their elders, partly due to disagreements over Israeli politics and government policies regarding Palestinians. As summarized by Gilboa and Bloch-Elkon (2022), “The attitudes of American Jews toward Israel in the first two decades of this century have still been favorable. But there are signs of serious cracks” (p. 17). The continuing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians is quite conflicting to many American Jews as well as Jews around the world (Gilbert & Posel, 2021; Waxman, 2017). A recent study found that while 84% of American Jews identify as “pro-Israel,” 65% are also critical of some or many Israeli policies (Bar Nissim et al., 2022). Nevertheless, 71% of American Jews under 30 continue to see Israel as an essential or important part of their Jewish identity (Pew, 2021b).

An ES course could, in theory, explore the complex relationships between Jewish Americans, Palestinian Americans, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Instead, in LES, this is another area where Jewish perspectives and experiences are excluded or misrepresented. The fact of the matter is that American Jews are no more responsible for the behaviors of the Israeli government than American-born Chinese have any say in the behaviors of China’s government against the people of Tibet. In LES and ES classes, Chinese Americans are not called upon to defend their country of family origin and actions of its government against the Tibetan minority. Arab American students do not have to answer for Saudi Arabia’s human right’s abuses, especially in regard to women and the GLBTQ community (Martino & Kjaran, 2018; Topal, 2019). The same should be true for Jewish American students, but they face a blatant double standard. The reality is that many American Jews, on high school and college campuses, are put in the position to have to defend Israel, and they are often ostracized for believing that Israel even has a right to exist (Farber & Poleg, 2019). While the U.S. has lobbying groups that advocate for pro-Israel policies (e.g., the American Israel Public Affairs Committee [AIPAC]), ES should not just pick and choose which perceived Middle Eastern human right’s abuses it focuses on, especially when it vilifies the only Jewish state in the world. It is wrong and flat-out dangerous for Jews in a world already drenching in antisemitism.

**Do Jews Belong in Ethnic Studies?**

Taking into consideration what are suspected to be the main concerns prohibiting American Jews into university and high school ES courses – Jewish whiteness and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict – the question that must be asked is whether or not Jews belong in ES. Based on the conflict over ES in California, it appears that, “At no time in U.S. history…has the place of Jews in the nation’s ethnic and racial landscape been as hotly contested as it has been over the past few years” (Goldstein, 2021, p. 7). Concern about antisemitism continues to grow (Waxman et al., 2022), and their coverage in ES courses like LES can only help alleviate the problem. MacDonald-Dennis (2006) asserts that since, “non-Jews do not include Jewish issues in multiculturalism [and ES], I argue that this tells Jews that their experience is of no importance and exacerbates Jewish students’ invalidation of Jewish identity and anti-Semitism” (p. 276). Antisemitism has been referred to as the world’s oldest hatred, yet that does not mean that it is acceptable and should be ignored in the classroom. Being left unstudied and unanalyzed, antisemitism continues to grow in the U.S. and around the globe.

The idea of bringing Jewish Americans into the world of ES “makes some people uncomfortable,” and that may stem from the fact “that in our world of discourse the term ethnicity is often associated with skin colors and cultural characteristics that are very different from those of most American Jews” (Morahg, 1992, p. 111). American Jews are predominantly light skin toned, yet that should not immediately deny them representation in ES. Jews have a great deal in common with their brethren of color. It is believed that “the distinctive contributions of Jews to Ethnic Studies and the overlapping, intersectional experiences of Jews with and within communities of color mean that inclusion of Jewish Studies is warranted and anything but a step on a slippery slope to multi-culturalism” (Fields, 2021, p. 17). The inclusion of American Jews can only enrich and expand upon critical and theoretical thought in ES at all levels.

Like Blacks, Latinos, Indigenous Peoples, and Asians, American Jews are a distinct minority group in the U.S. Jews comprise only 1.9% of the U.S. population (Saxe et al., 2021), which is smaller than each of the main four groups already covered in ES[[2]](#footnote-2). Therefore, Jewish Americans are a distinct minority group by number and by threat. It is important that all minority groups in the U.S. stand together for collective strength and power. In that vein, Levine-Rasky (2020) affirms that, “Solidarity is particularly urgent given the growing hostilities toward all Jews regardless of their identity locations. Jews share this vulnerability with other ethnic, racialized and religious minorities” (p. 364).By being represented in ES, Jews will be viewed as a group that also falls victim to prejudice, discrimination, and white supremacy in the U.S. Jewish experiences are also relatable to the human experience. Morahg (1992) posits that:

Consecutive waves of Jewish immigrants sought entry into American life by adopting the ‘melting pot’ ethos of a nationally monolithic but religious pluralistic society. They projected, and often unwittingly embraced, a reductionist image of the Jews as just another religious denomination rather than what they really were: a people with a distinct history and culture, or in other words, an ethnic group. (pp. 111-112)

American Jews should be discussed alongside BIPOC as a way to learn what being an American Jew truly means as they attempt to straddle racial, ethnic, and religious categories in the U.S. on a daily basis.

**Personal Observations**

I had a chat with a BIPOC ES professor at a large U.S. university about a decade ago when I was first beginning to explore the notion of Jews and their place in ES. I approached the notion of American Jews and their place in ES, and her response was something along the line of, “Well, yes, the Holocaust was an important part of history, but Jews don’t come close to facing the issues that Blacks do today.” I was upset and felt dismissed and belittled. Addressing the American Jewish experience does not mean that other oppressed groups are not important and do not have specific needs. While there certainly appears to be a “hierarchy of racisms and some *are* more important than others” (Baddiel, 2021, p. 75), ES does not have to be a zero-sum game where someone has to be the winner of the “Oppression Olympics” (Martinez, 1994). We are all fighting the same battle against white supremacy, whether we would like to admit it or not. The ES debate may really come down to misunderstanding (or no interest in understanding) the lived experiences of American Jews in the U.S. today.

While some Jews may be able to hide under a cloak of whiteness that others cannot, that should not discount the difficulties of navigating unscathed in a predominantly Christian society where antisemitism is rising. Some Jews have just mastered “passing” as white due to the need for self-preservation; this does not mean that they are not still Jewish (Demsky, 2019). They are still victim to negative stereotypes on television, microaggressions, and flat-out scorn on social media, which only continues to grow on platforms like TikTok and Twitter (Czymmek, 2022; Weimann & Masri, 2021). Jews are reminded daily of being the “other.” Many Jews:

continue to live in fear of the coordinated attacks…that have arisen in almost every generation for centuries, knowing that they would be easily identifiable as Jews in our age of linked databases powered by AI. In addition, any false appearance of whiteness…belies personal histories of microaggressions, macroaggressions, and sometimes even physical violence as well as almost unbelievably painful personal and family histories of deportation, torture, and mass murder. (Kuper, 2022, p. 2)

To be a victim of antisemitism is traumatizing, often internalized, and then passed down from generation to generation (Bacha et al., 2021). That is in addition to the historical and intergenerational trauma from the Holocaust, which can result in anxiety and hypervigilance to threat; this still affects Jews in the U.S. and around the world (Fuhr, 2016; Johns et al., 2021). Therefore, despite benefitting from white privilege to a certain degree, the Jewish community is “in a kind of existential quandary. They are both raced and un(raced) at the same time. In very real and deadly ways, Jews continue to be raced and treated as a persecuted racial group” (Parham, 2020, p. 128). It is difficult to explain Jewish racial and sociocultural positionality if those in ES refuse to listen. One would think that studying the “complexities of whiteness, anti-Semitism, and the multiplicity of Jewish identities” (Alhadeff, 2014, p. 316) would be an invaluable asset to understanding race in the U.S. As of right now, that appears not to be the case.

**Conclusion**

There needs to be space created for Jews in ES programs, in both California and across the country. There is much to be gained from the investigation of American Jewishness. Goldstein (2021) asserts that:

scholars of Ethnic Studies would be wise not to dismiss Jews largely because they fail to fit neatly into the conventional categories that have been used to define American difference. In fact, the Jewish experience has much to teach us about race and ethnicity in the United States precisely because Jews have challenged and troubled the traditional categories of difference, and in doing so they have revealed not only the fluidity and contingency of racial categories, but also some of the underlying motivations that led white Americans to invest so significantly in the idea of a black-white racial binary. (p. 10)

The LES program in California is emblematic of the widespread absence of Jews and antisemitism in ES programs. As high school ES programs like LES continue to grow across California, as well as other states such as Washington and Arizona, it opens doors to continued prejudice and discrimination of the Jewish people.Representation matters. Seeing oneself is reinforcing. It is difficult to build pride in oneself when the only exposure one sees in LES curriculum is negative portrayals of the state of Israel and the definition of antisemitism in a glossary. All students deserve better. According to Adelman (1989), “the academic study of the Jewish people is the only opportunity to challenge tendentious, polemical, and self-serving interpretations of the Jewish experience” (p. 13). Antisemitism cannot be addressed or overcome by avoiding its existence. Just like the four major groups of oppressed peoples in the U.S., American Jews merit attention and dialogue in ES. They are not demanding equal time; they simply want to be invited to be a part of the discussion.

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1. And even when taught, textbook coverage of the Holocaust has often been found to be factually and inferentially inaccurate (Lindquist, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Indigenous Peoples now comprise 2.9% of the total U.S. population (Rezal, 2021, para. 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)