

Reconceptualizing In Lak'ech: *CERF v. State of California* and the Appropriation of Spiritual Learning

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Abstract

The past and present imposition of organized religion as an institutionalization of spiritual practices—or an extinguishing thereof—has served as a mechanism of colonialism, racialization, white supremacy, and, ultimately, control. This paper engages LatCrit as a lens to situate *CERF v. State of California* as an attempt to maintain and uphold white supremacy within schools. CERF's characterization of In Lak'ech as part of a formal religious doctrine was a misrepresentation of how spiritual knowledges are practiced, conceptualized, and shared. We offer a reconceptualization of spirituality that centers the experiences, desires, sensemaking, and empowerment of Indigenous and Latiné people themselves. We highlight what spiritual practices look like in white-dominant spaces by first critiquing how “religion” and “spiritual practices” have become enmeshed as a discursive and political tool by white power-majority institutions.

Keywords: Ethnic Studies; Mexican American Studies; LatCrit; Spirituality; Curriculum

In Lak'ech

Tú eres mi otro yo.
You are my other me.
Si te hago daño a ti,
If I do harm to you,
Me hago daño a mi mismo.
I do harm to myself.
Si te amo y respeto,
If I love and respect you,
Me amo y respeto yo.
I love and respect myself.

In 2021, the Californians for Equal Rights Foundation (CERF) filed a lawsuit against the State of California concerning the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, the state's standardized Ethnic Studies curriculum required for high school completion (*CERF v. State of California*, 2021). In their argument, CERF claimed that the In Lak'ech chant—a philosophical poem with roots in an amalgam

of Mesoamerican ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identities—included in the curriculum invoked a religious practice that violated articles of the state constitution concerning state-sponsored religious activity and the aiding of religious “sects” (Article I, § 4; Article XVI, § 5). Ultimately, the State of California removed In Lak’ech from its Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (Bell et al., 2022). Thus, a power-majority institution imposed its own rigid definition of “religion”—an inherently white, colonial institution—onto the spiritual practices of people historically racialized and colonized.

In this paper, we engage Latina/é/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) as a lens to situate *CERF v. State of California* as an attempt to maintain and uphold white supremacy within schools. CERF’s characterization of In Lak’ech as part of a formal religious doctrine was a misrepresentation of how spiritual knowledges are practiced, conceptualized, and shared. The past and present imposition of religion as an institutionalization of spiritual practices—or an extinguishing thereof—has served as a mechanism of colonialism, racialization, white supremacy, and, ultimately, control (Nye, 2019). Using LatCrit as an analytical tool, we offer a reconceptualization of spirituality that centers the experiences, desires, sensemaking, and empowerment of Indigenous and Latiné people themselves (Ruiz & Mills, 1997)—thus decentering whiteness. We highlight what spiritual practices look like in white-dominant spaces by first critiquing how “religion” and “spiritual practices” have become enmeshed as a discursive and political tool by white power-majority institutions. Without such critical examination, the spiritual practices included in Ethnic Studies curricula risk appropriation through a neo-colonial gaze.

Tracing Ethnic Studies through Courts and Culture

Ethnic Studies first emerged in the 1960s as a framework to decenter whiteness from school curricula by foregrounding the knowledge, history, and experiences of marginalized ethnic and racial groups living in the United States (Sleeter, 2011; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Research has noted the academic and social benefits white students and students of color have experienced from taking Ethnic Studies courses (Sleeter, 2011). In addition, Sleeter and Zavala (2020) and Cabrera (2013) highlighted the sense of empowerment and advocacy students of color experience after taking Ethnic Studies courses.

The standard approach to incorporating Ethnic Studies has been through elective courses meant to supplement the traditional white- and Western-centric curriculum. However, states such as California and Colorado, which have relatively prominent Latiné, AAPI, Black, and/or Indigenous populations, have made Ethnic Studies a required component of the standard public-school curriculum. In California, Ethnic Studies has even been enshrined as a component of state high school graduation requirements. The state and federal resistance California experienced during and after the mandated Ethnic Studies graduation requirement went into effect (see Santa Ana Unified School District and Temecula School Board lawsuits) not only reflects the historical struggles Ethnic Studies has experienced to enter and stay in school districts, but it is a representation of the immense racism and xenophobia that is emblematic within U.S. society. For example, Bell and colleagues (2022) discussed a legal challenge concerning a violation of religious freedom that resulted in California retracting In Lak’ech, a Mayan phrase, from its list of Ethnic Studies requirements in the classroom. Battles of resistance in the courtroom have not only altered California’s Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, but at the state government level, questions as to

where the curriculum stands in terms of the state's priorities have resulted in the de facto defunding of Ethnic Studies courses across school districts (Blume, 2025).

In Lak'ech is a poem (or chant) first introduced in Luis Valdez's (2013) larger poem "Pensamiento Serpentino," which evokes tenets of Mayan philosophy on what it means to be a human being (Valdez & Martinez Paredes, 2012). The phrase itself is meant to nurture interconnectedness between one another, promoting empathy and integrity as prominent features in the human experience (Sosa-Provencio et al., 2021; Villanueva, 2013). In Lak'ech is most commonly referenced in the Mexican American Studies (MAS) curriculum, a subfield to Ethnic Studies, where students are introduced to the knowledge and experiences of Mexican Americans who have and continue to reside in the U.S. Practicing In Lak'ech in schools can take on several forms. Teachers often display the In Lak'ech poem on their classroom wall for students to see. Teachers can also instruct all students to recite the poem, either in unison or as a call-and-response, at the start of every class session (Owens, 2018). Essentially, In Lak'ech is a classroom ritual, wherein each line of the chant serves as a signpost to set the intention for learning and to situate and connect students to themselves and others in the class.

Challenging Curriculum, Legislating Whiteness

The teaching of In Lak'ech, and MAS at large, saw national attention in 2010 when the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) officially ended the Mexican American Studies Department within the district. With the passage of Arizona House Bill (HB) 2281, the state's public schools were prohibited from offering Ethnic Studies courses, like MAS. According to a mostly conservative legislature, Ethnic Studies courses "either promote the overthrow of the United States government or promote resentment toward a race or class of people," including courses that, "are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group [and] advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals" (HB 2281). Here, the language of the bill and its eventual law, the Academic Freedom in Schools Act (2010), not only positions advocacy for "ethnic solidarity" as a threat to students' individuality; it also appears to position "ethnic solidarity" as a threat to white power majority.

Arizona's removal of the MAS curriculum offered to students was overruled in 2015 when a federal court judge overturned the Academic Freedom in Schools Act. The ruling stated that TUSD had violated students' First and Fourteenth Amendment rights by banning MAS and Ethnic Studies broadly (*Arce v. Douglas*, 2015). Arizona's 2010 ban of Ethnic Studies curricula, however, has served as the precursor to the mass censorship taking place throughout U.S. schools in the early 2020s. For example, Gómez and colleagues (2023) discussed how the recent battle on Critical Race Theory (CRT) in schools stems from Arizona's 2010 attempt to ban Ethnic Studies curriculum. Anti-CRT legislation aims to ban curriculum that discusses racism as it exists within U.S. systems and structures. Although similarities do exist, Gómez and colleagues explained how anti-CRT legislation incorporated lessons learned from Arizona's attempt to ban curriculum and has then proceeded accordingly by using "evasive language" to circumvent any potential inclination of targeting a specific ethnic or racial group, as such race-specific targeting proved to be why the ban on MAS was overturned in Arizona.

Although it was overturned within five years, Arizona's ban on MAS—and, indirectly, In Lak'ech—rested on evident and enduring political and racist motivations. For example, in 2021, a 501(c)3

organization called the Californians for Equal Rights Foundation (CERF) emerged to enact its stated mission, “to safeguard and build awareness on the causes of equal rights and merit through policy monitoring, voter education, legal advocacy, rigorous research, alliance building and media outreach” (CERF, 2026b). While CERF alleges that the organization is non-partisan, its website at the time of this publication in 2026 leverages contemporary mainstream “culture war” rhetoric commonly associated with conservative right-wing politics related to issues of equity. For instance, CERF’s home page asserts, “The woke culture is destroying America and its future generations! We need all hands-on deck to stop the attacks on our cultural values and our kids. All Americans must ACT NOW!” (CERF, 2026a). CERF’s website also directly delineates its anti-equity stance. One graphic on its home page, titled, “Our Values | Their Propaganda,” goes so far as to pit “Equality & Merit”—a value against “Equity, Identity Politics, & Lowering Standards”—propaganda (CERF, 2026a).

Considering the clear mission, values, and commitments of CERF, it is no surprise that the organization filed a lawsuit against the State of California related to a curricular program intended to promote equity for marginalized students: the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (California Department of Education, 2021). The Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum includes sample lessons, materials, and implementation guidance for K-12 teachers. In Chapter 5 of the Model Curriculum, a subsection, titled, “Affirmations, Chants, and Energizers,” prominently features the In Lak’ech poem among other call-and-response chants and affirmations (2021, pp. 414–415). In Lak’ech is just one of many concepts and expressions rooted in activist and solidarity-focused movements, but it stands apart from the others in the “Affirmation, Chants, and Energizers” section in that it is the only one specifically relating to themes of empathy, compassion, interdependence, and love (California Department of Education, 2021, p. 416). The inclusion of In Lak’ech became the spearhead of CERF’s lawsuit against the State of California. CERF alleged that the practice of chanting, displaying, and referencing In Lak’ech was religious, and specifically teaching Aztec theology. As such, because it was prominently featured among the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum’s implementation guide and resources, CERF argued that the entire curriculum violated articles of the state constitution concerning state-sponsored religious activity and the aiding of religious ‘sects’ (Article I, § 4; Article XVI, § 5). California chose to settle the lawsuit by removing In Lak’ech from California’s Ethnic Studies mandate. In their arguments, CERF cited religious dogma, as opposed to anti-government sentiments, as the main reason for why the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum should not be present in California schools.

In the following sections, we outline how LatCrit provides the theoretical framework for our argument and analysis of *CERF v. State of California*. Then, using LatCrit, we compare the case studies from Arizona and, primarily, California. We explain how law and litigation have been used to attack a curriculum that centers the knowledge and lived experiences of minority groups (and how the de-centering of the Eurocentric curriculum is regarded as threatening). Moreover, our analysis reveals how the legal and philosophical concept of the Separation of Church and State has been leveraged inconsistently in the U.S. to target the practices and learning for minoritized racial and ethnic community groups specifically—especially when they are constructed as “threats” to the white, Western, Christian, and monolingual English power majority.

Theoretical Framework

Latina/é/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) emerged as a theoretical framework to expand on Critical Race Theory's (CRT) commitments and techniques to interrogate how racism is embedded in laws, policies, and institutions (Valdés, 1997). Latina/o legal scholars identified several shortcomings within CRT concerning its lack of focus and established framework for centering and understanding Latina/o experiences (Valdés, 1998). To address these shortcomings, LatCrit not only continues with CRT's emphasis on exploring the role race plays in law and society, but it centers the experiences, identities, and interests of Latina/o communities, specifically within legal discourse and social policy. LatCrit specifically identifies four functions behind its theoretical purpose: (a) advancing the production of knowledge by creating a culture of understanding of Latinas/os and the law; (b) inciting transformation by creating social change for Latinas/os; (c) expanding and connecting struggles by recognizing theories that acknowledge the intersectionality present in the Latina/o experience; and (d) cultivating community and coalition among those who share the same goals of LatCrit (Valdés, 1998, pp. 1093–1094).

Since its emergence in 1995, LatCrit has served as a theoretical framework in many fields of practice. LatCrit has especially gained popularity within the field of education. LatCrit's focus on education continues with a line of inquiry that started with CRT. In education, CRT has been applied as a way to explore and highlight how race and racism influence the way schools operate to create conditions that negatively impact the learning experiences of students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Villenas et al., 1999). Under a LatCrit theoretical framework, this line of research narrows the focus by exploring and identifying how Latinas/os are directly impacted by racism in schools. While CRT does provide a lens to understand how social and political structures work to the advantage and disadvantage of certain groups of people, it also provides an avenue for people of color to rise above a grim and seemingly hopeless reality. The impact social and political structures have on people of color, especially Latinas/os, is an approach that LatCrit specifically adopts from CRT. In particular, LatCrit embraces the:

subjectivity, particularity, multiplicity and intersectionality; the acceptance of legal scholarship's inevitable implication of power politics; the emphasis on praxis, social justice, reconstruction and transformation; the navigation of sameness and difference to build self-empowered communities; and the recognition of self-critique's continuing importance to intellectual integrity. (Valdés, 1997, p. 57)

This approach not only continues with the goals of CRT, but it also offers an opportunity for “researchers to better articulate the experiences of Latina/o specifically, by addressing issues often overlooked by CRT such as immigration status, language, ethnicity, culture, identity, and phenotype” (Huber, 2009, p. 643).

We apply LatCrit when interrogating the argument in *CERF v. State of California* that frames In Lak'ech as a religious practice. In the process, *CERF v. State of California* completely ignored the spiritual components of In Lak'ech. Spirituality, as seen in In Lak'ech, represents the embodiment of lived experiences as historically experienced by Latinas/os in the Americas. We discuss how religion has not only been historically employed to advance the political objectives of a mostly white dominant group—in the process subjugating Latinas/os in the Americas—but we also make the argument for why religion and spirituality operate separate from one another. We conclude

by emphasizing a participant-observer role that students who do not share the spiritual and lived experiences of Latiné students can adopt when learning about and participating in the observance of In Lak'ech in Ethnic Studies classroom.

In Lak'ech as Spiritual Practice/Spiritual Practice as Learning

In this section, we interrogate the past characterization of In Lak'ech as a “religious” practice. We argue that In Lak'ech could be reconceptualized as spiritual in nature, which is deeply distinct from religion, and crucial to learning for racially and ethnically marginalized students. Religion, as an institutional practice, has historical ties to white European Protestant Christian traditions which, in part, have served as the foundation of Western systems and structures that historically subjugated and stripped indigenous groups of their cultural ways of being (Lofton, 2012; Nongbri, 2013). As part of the colonial project, moreover, religion served to construct the indigenous people of the Americas as the “other” in relation to Europeans and justify the imposition of European religious values and practices that were meant to “save” indigenous people from their “savage” ways of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, 2014). Religion served its purpose to usher in indigenous people into an age of “modernity” during colonial times. In contemporary U.S. society, religion has also served as a vessel for groups in power to effectively maintain control over a subjugated group.

In Lak'ech is described as a “chant or mini poem” that invokes an ancient Mayan philosophy on how to love and respect oneself and others (Owens, 2018). Mayan philosophies predate contact between European settlers and people of the Americas. While accurate interpretations of Mayan, and Mesoamerican teachings and philosophies at large, were lost due to colonization, scholars have noted the common “fundamental metaphysical themes regarding the nature of reality, human beings, and the interrelationships between human and nonhuman realms” (Maffie, 2009, p. 10). In part, Mayan philosophies ventured into the realm of situating a person's role and place in relation to the world around them. Whether it was by emphasizing the connection that exists between oneself and others (e.g., In Lak'ech) or the connection between oneself and the cosmos as a single life force (Cobo, 1990), Mesoamerican cultures were conscious of how everyday actions could have significant impact both on people and the world around them. Mutuality and reciprocity are key to these precolonial philosophies. For example, Toltec knowledge arises from the reciprocity of honoring spiritual masters who taught on Earth and trained apprentices to spread their wisdom and guidance to others to maintain a way of living (Ruiz, 1997). Colonization framed both Mesoamerican practices and the people of Mesoamerica as subhuman, thus establishing the rationale for why religion was needed to save or civilize those who followed a way of seeing the world like it is reflected in In Lak'ech. In Lak'ech lays in contrast to the European Protestant Christian values that colonial powers aimed to implement. As such, In Lak'ech invokes a sentiment more spiritual than religious given the way In Lak'ech offers a lens of existing in the world, devoid of the necessity or obligation to follow a specific religious institution—a trait common in the construct of religion.

Tippett (2010) states that the spirit, and the presence of a spiritual reality, may be something that is naturally prevalent in humans. A religious doctrine is thus not needed for: (a) one to be truthful with themselves; (b) to perceive the world around them with positivity; or (c) have the motivation to put forth one's best effort, ultimately to work towards personal fulfillment and success (Ruiz, 1997). Spirituality is often recognized as a positive trait to have and is often glorified when exhibited in individual successes. For example, Slater (2005) mentions how, “we refer to a person

as having spirit, we describe a person's behavior as spiritual and uplifting, a person may be in high or low spirits [. . .] athletes give spirited performance beyond their everyday capabilities, and we take things from others in the right or wrong spirit" (p. 60). Spirituality can thus be that defining feature that gives purpose or meaning to one's life (Huebner, 1999; Palmer, 1980). In Lak'ech applied spiritual elements in the way it serves as guide or code of conduct for how one should see themselves and the world around them. *Tu eres mi otro you; you are my other me* captures the relationship between oneself and others. *Si te hago daño a ti; if I do harm to myself; me hago daño a mí mismo; I do harm to myself* captures the reciprocity that exists in people's actions and how the manifestation of either positive or negative actions can come back to impact the one who wishes goodwill or ill on others. Lastly, *si te amo y respeto; if I love and respect you; me amo y respeto yo; I love and respect myself* emphasizes the interconnectedness that exists between oneself and others and how extending love to those around you can serve as an act of self-love. Thus, embracing one's own, and others', humanity.

While the common association attached to the word "spiritual" does conjure up, "religious dogma, [and] a set of beliefs and practices [that] one might have" (Lantieri, 2010, p. 7), it is important to note that the term "spirituality" can never be a "neutral" idea and that, "discourses exist beyond the level of a particular society, culture, or political context" (Nye, 2019, p. 14). To frame spirituality as a religious practice imposes a white standard approach to defining people's diverse ways of being and of existing in the world. Spirituality as religion contrasts the goals of colonialism which defined Mesoamerican practices and ways of being as inherently barbaric and violent. As was the process that came with labeling Mesoamericans as "savages" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, 2014), nothing produced by the Toltecs, Mexico, or Mayans was seen as civilized under the gaze of the colonial project. The distinction was thus drawn between what religion is and what practices or perspectives laid counter to the goals of religion. Distinguishing spirituality from religion served European settlers in their efforts to colonize Mesoamericans' minds, hearts, and spirits, for sakes of exploitation and the institutionalization of whiteness in the Americas. The lens CERF adopted in *CERF v. State of California* largely ignores the historical construction of spirituality and religion. Albeit intentional, labeling spirituality as religion served a larger purpose of giving leverage to CERF's mission to do away with any content or curriculum that interfered with the teaching of the mostly Eurocentric curriculum found in all U.S. public schools. Under the pretext of labeling spirituality as religion, given the separation of church and state that is fully exercised in public institutions such as schools, immediately scrutinized In Lak'ech, thus detaching it from its intended purpose.

CERF v. State of California proceeded under the argument that In Lak'ech is a "religious practice" and thus, California's mandated Ethnic Studies curriculum violated the state's constitution with the aiding and promotion of a specific "religious sect." Incorrectly framing In Lak'ech as a religious practice not only ignored the historical role European religions served to replace Mesoamerican practices like In Lak'ech, but it points out the contradiction in terms of which established creeds should be followed and promoted within schools. Including In Lak'ech in the teaching of Ethnic Studies in California was seen as an attempt to replace the largely white Christian values that are sprinkled throughout the traditional public-school curriculum. CERF's decision to challenge In Lak'ech's inclusion in California's Ethnic Studies curriculum echoes fears presented in the Great Replacement theory by white nationalists who see the incorporation and inclusion of diverse practices in U.S. society as an attempt to replace traditional white values which have historically been pushed by white institutions (Feola, 2021). Conservative forces have actively taken measures

to ensure the preservation and interests of whiteness within U.S. society. For example, Donald Trump passed Executive Order 14291 in 2025 which set out to safeguard and expand religious liberties, including eradicating any anti-Christian bias from public institutions (Exec. Order No. 14291, 2025). It is interesting to note how four years after In Lak'ech was removed from California's Ethnic Studies curriculum citing concerns over the state sponsoring a certain religion, Donald Trump in his capacity as President of the United States, sponsored Christianity within all U.S. schools. Framing In Lak'ech under the construct of religion was an imperative move that utilized courts as a mechanism of power to maintain white supremacy within California public schools. It also establishes precedence for how the white power majority will boldly ignore the law to protect Christianity all while subjecting Mesoamerican spiritual practices like In Lak'ech to the full interpretation of the law despite the absence of any religious association.

Within the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, In Lak'ech is situated as a routine, multilingual affirmation which serves as a guiding framework for seeing and situating yourself in relation to others. Empathy, compassion, and interdependence are central messages of the poem, affirming the interconnectedness of human experience (Sosa-Provencio et al., 2021; Villanueva, 2013). Such themes—especially interdependence—might seem in contention with the hegemonic values and norms of Western societies, which tend to emphasize independence, conformity and compliance within hierarchical power structures, rugged individualism, and capitalistic venture. As such, the themes and affirmations presented by In Lak'ech “threaten” the power majority’s status quo and hegemony by foregrounding interdependence and connection—rather than independence and individualism. In Lak'ech not only “threatens” some of the hegemonic political, cultural, and social values of the U.S. power majority. Crucially, in *CERF v. State of California*, the spiritual elements of In Lak'ech were emphasized by the plaintiffs, albeit under the construction of In Lak'ech as “religious” in nature.

Si Te Hago Daño a Ti, Me Hago Daño a Mi Mismo: Participant Observers in Ethnic Studies Classrooms

In this section, we make recommendations for multi-ethnic and multi-lingual participation in Ethnic Studies programs. Considering the increased interest among white communities in Ethnic Studies curricula and learning experiences, there has recently been an increased demand and motivation for passing legislation to incorporate Ethnic Studies curricula and content in K-12 public schools (for example, see Committee of 100, 2023). With over 50% of California’s high school students identifying as Latina/é/o, the need for Ethnic Studies curriculum becomes more evident given the overwhelming racially marginalized populations California public schools aim to educate. At the same time, it is equally important that the white population of students in California meaningfully engage with past and present settler/colonial histories of violence—alongside content and concepts which elevate the voices, knowledges, joy, and contributions of racially marginalized groups in the U.S.

Of course, how one articulates and conceptualizes their own racial and ethnic identity does depend on a variety of factors, including those at the crossroads of gender and socioeconomic status. Nonetheless, research on Ethnic Studies shows that students whose history and experiences are not highlighted in Ethnic Studies curriculum (i.e., white students) still benefit academically and socially from their exposure to a broadened perspective. As such, Ethnic Studies becomes crucial in educating a U.S. population that is both tolerant and accepting of diverse cultural practices and

ways of being. While In Lak'ech is officially not included in California's required Ethnic Studies high school curriculum, the question does emerge: how would one participate in In Lak'ech if their racial and/or ethnic identity does not match the identity of those who In Lak'ech attends to directly? With Ethnic Studies being offered at an exponentially larger rate in schools across the U.S., exploring this question is crucial to prevent potentially co-opting In Lak'ech and having its original purpose being lost in translation—as was done by CERF.

In Lak'ech is a clear example of *Spirituality in Learning* that embodies the knowledge and experiences of many Indigenous peoples across the Americas. Students and teachers whose history, background, and lived experiences do not match those of Latinas/és/os can take a specifically adapted role when participating in In Lak'ech. This role should be one of a *participant-observer* (Johnson et al., 2006). Often defined in the field of ethnography, a participant-observer requires an ethnographer to be actively present as they immerse themselves in the practices that take place within a particular social context. The ethnographer may at times be more of an observer since “ethnic and cultural differences would allow the ethnographer to maintain only an amateur standing in the culture at best” (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 112). While observation may be the initial entry point for mostly white students to take part in In Lak'ech, their role may take on that of a participant after critically interrogating their positioning in relation to those in the classroom space. Given the history of colonization which did away with many of the Mesoamerican traditions that are highlighted in Ethnic Studies classrooms, it is essential to safeguard these sacred practices to avoid the improper use of Mesoamerican knowledge for personal gain or power (Ruiz, 1997).

For those participant-observers who choose to embrace the spiritual knowledge and way of being enveloped within In Lak'ech, they may do so by first interrogating their status, power, and autonomy to maintain culturally defined roles within an Ethnic Studies classroom. White students must first recognize their own privilege if they are to gain full cultural understanding of In Lak'ech. Knowing how communities practice and have preserved In Lak'ech despite attacks from a white power majority is vital towards psychologically undoing whiteness which has contributed to the labeling of Mesoamerican practices as lesser to European values and traditions. Recognizing the significance of In Lak'ech can contribute to undoing the construction of Mesoamericans as savages, effectively re-humanizing a group of people that have largely been constructed under the gaze of the colonial project. After white students undergo the process of recognizing their own privilege, their participation can grow to the point where they can authentically participate in In Lak'ech. While the spiritual element of In Lak'ech does reflect a way of life grounded in Mayan knowledge, experience, and practices, participant-observers can engage with the promise of In Lak'ech by focusing on the ethics and principles enveloped within the poem itself.

Three core principles can be identified within In Lak'ech: (a) emphasizing oneness in the human experience; (b) self-reflection; and (c) living by a moral code. *Oneness* is captured in the eloquent flow of words in how In Lak'ech shifts between “tu” (you) and “yo” (I), thus establishing that connection between oneself and others. This message of oneness can further achieve the goal of Ethnic Studies where the deconstruction of Mesoamericans as “others” can lead white students towards a more unified and collective front, realizing the interconnection that exists in human experience (Sosa-Provencio et al., 2021; Villanueva, 2013). Recognizing how participant-observers can see themselves reflected in the experiences of Latinas/os/és can also build a sense of collective responsibility in addressing past and present injustices severely impacting indigenous

communities. *Oneness* leads into *self-reflection* emphasizing how one's actions not only impact others but oneself as well. Participant-observers can build on examining their status and power by recognizing the influence their actions can have, as possible co-conspirators (see Love, 2020) in building a more just world. Through self-reflection, participant-observers can be advocates for those multiply marginalized within society, echoing oneness as is reflected in the initial lines of In Lak'ech. Lastly, In Lak'ech can serve as a *moral code* for how one can promote love, empathy, and respect for others. Participant-observers can reflect this key principle of In Lak'ech in their decision to listen carefully to those whose experiences are not reflected in the dominant narrative within U.S. schools and society while also setting out to treat people with dignity in their daily interactions.

The idea of the participant-observer creates the conditions for white students to not co-opt spaces largely meant for students of color. Defining roles within a space is essential when considering how whiteness can shape spaces to attend to the comfort of white bodies, allowing them to move easily within a space, all while making non-white bodies feel out of place (Ahmed, 2021). As participant-observers, white students within an Ethnic Studies classroom can exist without interfering with the purpose of Ethnic Studies in creating a counterspace for the teaching and honoring of knowledge and culture not prioritized within the traditional school curriculum. Being a participant-observer allows the opportunity for one to envelop themselves directly into a community. Not only do participant-observers get the opportunity to study and learn from a culture firsthand, but they also come to embody the practices which comes from active participation in the community. As participant-observers, the knowledge, traditions, and practices learned in an Ethnic Studies classroom will follow white students even if they are extracted from that community. Thus, white students adopting a participant-observer role can address the concern that comes with whiteness as property and how it has historically operated as a means of taking resources from, as opposed to being in unison with, communities of color (Harris, 1993).

Conclusion

Ethnic Studies has been targeted by conservative, right-wing power majority legislatures, communities, and organizations. These entities have desperately pointed to isolated components of Ethnic Studies curriculum, or they leverage vague or color-evasive legal discourse (see Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Gotanda, 1991) to alter or ban Ethnic Studies curricula entirely. At the same time, the increased interest convergence and demand demonstrated by some white-dominant communities seems paradoxical: If there are many white people in power who are motivated to take up Ethnic Studies in their public school communities, how can other white power majority entities justify their attacks on Ethnic Studies with claims that it threatens American culture, "values," and politics in the classroom? In effect, Ethnic Studies—along with other educational initiatives associated with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion—is being subjected to whiteness both in its destruction and its proliferation (through the interest convergence of white stakeholders). For this reason, we take up the idea of the participant-observer as a potential starting point for mediating the tendencies of white stakeholders (e.g., white students) to center themselves in a program where they are not inherently at the center. In so doing, we hope to contribute to the larger dialogue shaping the future of Ethnic Studies and the *Spirituality in Learning* for racially marginalized students, especially Latiné students.

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