



## Introduction

Like many Ethnic Studies educators and practitioners of social justice, *In Lak'Ech* is one maiz-based concept (Rodríguez et al., 2010; Rodríguez, 2019) that helps tap into student consciousness-raising, regardless of institution, course title, or students' ethno-racial, socio-cultural, and national identities; "*tu 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*" becomes the heartbeat for classrooms and community-based events alike, and serves as a reminder that beyond the walls of the colonial university (Cordova, 1997) and "structures of colonialism and racism" (García Peña, 2022, p. xvi), we must ultimately love and respect each other as we love and respect ourselves in order to sustain trust, accountability, and mutual understanding.

In recent years, Ethnic Studies has been institutionalized in public education systems, enjoying unprecedented expansion, but this growth portends conflicting best practices approaches regarding pedagogies and among pedagogues. Despite a lack of training in the discipline, some faculty have attempted to encroach upon Ethnic Studies general education requirements by offering courses that engage the studies of indigeneity, ethnicity, and race, but are not in fact, Ethnic Studies courses. Thus, in this newly burgeoning educational landscape comes renewed opportunities for co-optation and further whitewashing of the field and its pedagogies. In fact, as the only Ethnic Studies collaborator to this piece has shared, a common lament among Ethnic Studies educator-scholars is that with Assembly Bill 1460<sup>41</sup>, it seems "everyone and anyone can now teach Ethnic Studies" seem to abound. However, as García Peña (2022) indicates, to transform the colonialism and racism ingrained in U.S universities, "we need more than inclusion and diversity; we need revolution and rebirth," (p. xvi); simply adding new courses that lack the integrity of Ethnic Studies tenets does a disservice to the field.

In institutions of higher learning, "diversity" has become the latest buzzword, a problematic pillar, and a single metric in which racism, sexism, and classism are assessed, interpreted, and among other things, used to secure grant funding (Karimi, 2022). Several scholars have suggested that the Global North's current 'diversity moment' is more placebo than cure (Ahmed, 2012; Ferguson, 2012; Melamed, 2011) to historic and ongoing socio-political illnesses; they condemn how historically marginalized identities and people have been commodified to serve the Neoliberal University's commitment to and participation in the global racial capitalist order.

Our own educational, social, and political positionalities provide the impetus for this collaborative praxis essay. We are all educators committed to the critical study of difference, privilege, and social (in)justice. Collectively, we reflect on the consequences of the development of department and policy while recognizing our various privileged positionalities. We consider the impact of Assembly Bill 1460 which resulted in the 2020 state law which requires 1 course in Ethnic Studies (worth 3

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<sup>41</sup> Assembly Bill 1460 requires all students enrolled on all 23 CSU campuses to take a 3-unit class in Native American studies, African American studies, Asian American studies or Latina and Latino studies. The bill was proposed by Assemblywoman Shirley Weber. The new law (2020) makes California the first state to require ethnic studies as a university graduation requirement.

credit units) for all California State University (CSU) graduates that generated considerable conflict between Ethnic Studies faculty and university leadership over its implementation. As Bañales (2019) reminds us, “In its current iteration, [Ethnic Studies] should continue to actively challenge and call attention to racism, power relations, and the inner workings of the neoliberal university, which includes how it implicates and seduces marginalized scholars and students to conform” (p. 235). As incorporated in General Education in the CSU, this element of Ethnic Studies pedagogy runs the risk of losing integrity.

While public teaching institutions with a dearth of faculty of color may applaud themselves for their willingness to rapidly embrace and respond to state mandates to build and offer Ethnic Studies curriculum, the principals of the discipline are threatened. The leveraging of funding to redirect research agendas—Francis (2019) has coined it ‘movement capture’—along with the strategic manipulation by those in power to distort and distribute public resources to meet their own ends—Táiwò (2020) refers to this as “elite capture” directly impacting teaching and the way diversity unfolds in practice. The challenges of developing new programs and curricula with limited faculty experts in the field – in addition to offering new courses at institutions with weak tenure density – exacerbates the tensions that arise in merging theory with practice in the Ethnic Studies classroom. Put simply, the ‘move fast and break things’ approach does not serve Ethnic Studies well.

### ***Weaponizing Diversity; In & Outside the Classroom***

This problem, we believe, can be aptly described as the ‘weaponization of diversity discourse.’ “Weaponizing Diversity” charts a critical intervention into how Ethnic Studies educators, social justice practitioners, and students should understand the contemporary forms of appropriating the discipline and the violent implications of legitimating this practice. When diversity is weaponized, it damages meaningful discourse, and Ethnic Studies’ responsibility to cultivate social justice, resistance, and social transformation is eviscerated.

Diversity is weaponized when it:

- is used for self-serving purposes;
- argues superiority and authenticity based on identity politics;
- impedes the ability to be critically conscious, reflective, or accountable;
- manipulates resources to serve superficial purposes (i.e., metrics, checking boxes, and benchmarks of ‘liberal progress’); and,
- obscures the pedagogical purpose of Ethnic Studies as rooted in the 7 Cs (cultivate, celebrate, center, critique, challenge, connect, conceptualize).

Currently, the ongoing cultural wars crossfire in which Ethnic Studies finds itself requires that educators reflect and re-assess the direction in which the discipline is headed. As Bañales (2019) cautions, “Ethnic Studies should further question our academic training, pedagogy, curriculum, means of evaluation, and ways of relation to one another” (p. 235).

From justifications by Ethnic Studies K-12 educators envisioning the inclusion of Ethnic Studies as a way to address gaps in educational achievement, opportunity, equity, and justice (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2019), to the ways Ethnic Studies are embraced and integrated into institutions,

which remain resistant to responding to inherent systemic structural inequities, critical questions of legitimacy, efficaciousness, and impact of pedagogies, Ethnic Studies must be examined from within and outside of the academy.

### ***Ethnic Studies Pedagogies as Intentional, Purposeful, Meaningful***

Ethnic Studies pedagogies are rooted in love and activism that at their core, challenges power, hate, and ignorance. In the classroom, student engagement is achieved through the 5 S's: (1) "recovery of *self-identity*"; (2) *stories* that "honor the historical and contemporary voices"; (3) interrogating U.S. *systems* through "developing critical consciousness, reclaiming hope and healing"; (4) examining *social* movements and the need to become active community agents to ensure education as liberatory practice, and; (5) fostering *solidarity* and cross-racial and inter-ethnic relationships (LESMCC, Curriculum, n.d.). As Sleeter's (2011) seminal review found, Ethnic Studies pedagogies are effective and transformative, and have social and academic value for students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Indeed, the value of multiple, diverse voices speaking from various vantage points, subjectivities, and platforms fosters a synergy that avoids the situation that is created when groups are trapped with detached insular thinking and become mired in circles of isolation (Fyre, 1983). For Ethnic Studies practitioners, the advantage of many perspectives is that they serve to uphold the values of the field while self-examining one's own practices, and not dehumanizing one another. For example, In Lak'Ech grounds, connects, humbles, and reminds us that for many of our students or colleagues who are new to exploring the current Ethnic Studies movement and the historical traumas and material realities of settler colonialism, imperialism, and racial capitalism, we must cultivate and center empathy, accountability, and sense of holistic worth.

The upward battle and struggle from what Lorde (1984, p. 110) identified as the complexities of "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" necessitates understanding how the relationship between Ethnic Studies content and pedagogy is interwoven and grounded within an intellectual framework that promotes critical consciousness, while challenging oppressive conditions, and recognizing the diverse positionalities of all contributors. Ethnic Studies, as a pedagogy of possibilities, becomes problematic in the current neoliberal multicultural arrangement that privileges fleeting diversity initiatives at the expense of deconstructing structural inequality and transforming it with empowering alternatives. Below we offer observations of 'weaponized diversity' as counterproductive to the intellectual, political, and pedagogical project of Ethnic Studies.

### ***Theory Meets Practice: On "The One" and the Weaponization of Diversity in the Name of Ethnic Studies***

In her powerful memoir, *Community as Rebellion: A Syllabus for Surviving Academia as a Woman of Color*, Latinx Studies educator scholar-activist Lorgia García Peña (2022) dissects her experiences navigating higher education systems in the United States and while unpacking the hegemonic colonialist and racist logics that sustain discourses of racial liberalism, offers recommendations to ethnic studies scholars and allies on how to push back and transform the University, using localized, ephemeral projects.

In describing the logic of “The One”—a lone faculty of color who can/must simultaneously checkmark “diversity” for several service commitments—García Peña (2022) identifies top-down (vertical) violence that institutions founded upon white male hetero-patriarchy create for faculty- and women of color, and also names the lateral (horizontal) violence that faculty/people of color can inflict upon each other, which she notes is a “most pervasive” and “hardly spoken about” effect of “The One” (p. 20).

As in some violent video game, there could be only one winner once all the competition was eliminated; thus I –along with any other ‘competition’—would need to be eliminated for them to succeed. The logic of The One is inherently violent. Believing ourselves to be The (Deserving) One can be... paralyzing, isolating, and incredibly damaging.... [faculty of color’s] glaring complicity with the university colonizing project hindered their ability to create freedom spaces for themselves and their students, for their energy was focused on becoming The (Only) One. (p. 22)

We take García Peña’s (2022) notion of “The One” and return to central tenets of Weaponized Diversity, describing how it operates in academia diametrically juxtaposed across politicized spaces capable of leveraging critical dialogue, solidarity, and community-based action.

Weaponizing Diversity occurs when “The One” assumes sole mastery, authenticity, and intellectual ownership over the sublime premise and promise of Ethnic Studies and its original four founding academic fields (African American/Black Studies, Asian American Studies, Chicana/o Studies/Puerto Rican Studies, Native American/American Indian Studies), in addition to its expanding and evolving fields of intellectual inquiry (i.e., Arab American Studies, Pacific Islander Studies, Queer of Color Critique, Central American Studies). Weaponizing Diversity allows for the self-serving purposes of “The One” to assume that critical pedagogy (the ability to create, engage, and learn with our students) belongs to one person exclusively. Within the breadth of Ethnic Studies, this type of thinking limits opportunities for others, and therefore detracts, rather than enhances, or as Lorde (1984) reminds us, “divide and conquer must become define and empower” (p. 112). What does it signal to students when educators of color minimize other faculty’s credentials, academic skill sets, and scholarship in the name of Ethnic Studies (and AB 1460)? Furthermore, when these transgressions occur with little accountability, the status quo is perpetuated, reinforcing normative practices historically entrenched within the educational system.

Weaponizing Diversity allows for hierarchies of oppression to sustain logics of superiority and authenticity based on identity politics. Combined, it erodes the central tenets of intersectionality, a central foundation by which Ethnic Studies practitioners understand the 7 C’s and 5 S’s. When we allow faculty to assume positions of power based solely on the premise that “*my identity is my credential*” (Lugo-Lugo, 2023) the notion of “The One” ultimately rationalizes any individual’s claim to superiority and authenticity. What message does this convey to students, and how does it effectively negate the value of learning in Ethnic Studies?

Weaponizing Diversity also impedes the pedagogues’ abilities to be critically conscious and reflective, both vital requirements for effective Ethnic Studies pedagogies. When diversity is weaponized, it allows bad actors to seize spaces reserved for critical reflective discourses and turn potentially fruitful discussions into damaging and distracting sideshows that diminish colleagues’ expertise, perspectives, and contributions. When such provocateurs intentionally justify the use of microaggressions, including micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations to denigrate

others, they derail collective efforts in many areas, including in curriculum development and in the carryout of department initiatives. The message to students is: *practice what I teach, even if it is counter to what I do*. Essentially, the weaponizing of diversity sustains a hierarchy of oppression, internalized racism, and internalized forms of oppression (Tolteka Cuauhtin, 2019). The consequence of witnessing such disruptive practices is that students may interpret and assume that toxic behavior is acceptable practice in Ethnic Studies, that the *end justifies the means*. This message subverts the very tenets of Ethnic Studies pedagogies.

## Conclusion

If such practices are allowed to go unchecked, Ethnic Studies as a revolutionary, transformative, and critical apparatus to combat the modern colonial, racist, classist, and heterosexist formation of North American society and the Western/Euro-centric neoliberal university (Maldonado-Torres & Figueroa-Vasquez, 2020) will be misunderstood, undervalued, and denigrated. The destructive nature of critique from external sources is damaging, but when disruption emanates from within, it serves to frustrate, undermine, and sabotage the field's inherent transformative power.

Weaponizing diversity is antithetical to the purpose and vision of Ethnic Studies, which strives to “respond to students by developing their critical understanding of the world and their place in it, and ultimately prepare them to use academic tools to transform their world for the better” (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2019, p. 21). Students are likely to absorb what educators and faculty model inside and outside the classroom, and therefore beyond conveying subject content, it is vital that Ethnic Studies educators and social justice practitioners be “reflective and be able to critically interrogate their own identities and experiences” so that students, our future leaders, professionals, and organizers, remain willing to entertain critical reflection and practice empathy (p. 24). In Lak'Ech is a classroom pedagogy, but it is one of many pedagogies required to know one's self, and the self in relation to others. We urge Ethnic Studies educators and social justice practitioners to be aware of how the current moment is conducive to the repurposing, co-optation, and appropriation of Ethnic Studies by those who stand to benefit from identity politics. In many ways, the struggle remains the same, but it is now masked in 'new' and compelling sinister formats.

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