

“Indigenous in Me: Reclaiming Chicane Indigenous Identities in the San Fernando Valley”

Abstract

The salience of a race-conscious analysis within Latinx research in education often unintentionally minimizes the urban and social /conditions environments from which racialized groups’ learning practices emerge. There is a need for a research inquiry that questions how conventional schooling systems alienate the localized learning formations in urban communities. Within Chicano education research, seldom emphasis is placed on learning spaces conducive to communities beyond the academic periphery. To that end, I propose *nemachtili* (the spirit of learning) as a conceptual framework that sustains a critical Indigenous approach nested in critical pedagogy to understand how localization affords an entrypoint for Chicanas towards learning engagements. The current study considers *nemachtili* through a virtual learning space that centers Chicane Indigenous knowledge systems in the northeast San Fernando Valley. These are of particular significance, since this learning space features I raise the questions: How does *nemachtili* encompass a Freirean and critical Indigenous methodology to address learning spaces? How is *nemachtili* articulated in an online learning space? This study engages *nemachtili* through a critical case study of a virtual course for Chicano youth as a research approach responsive to the racialized settings that Chicanos inhabit.

Keywords: Informal Learning Contexts, Chicana Education Research, Critical Methodology

Introduction

Recently, the social relations surrounding Chicanas has been a point of inquiry in education (Zavala, 2018). Zavala’s position is that these social relations have impacted Chicanas “through historically and geographically specific contradictions,” an analysis that recalls the primacy of place to their learning encounters (p. 14). He advances that these historical conditions made possible Chicanas’ alienation from their Indigenous epistemic foundations in part by “the control of culture and social spaces as forms of epistemic genocide (p. 15). This analysis of epistemic genocide invites a dialogue on what the contemporary relationship is between Chicane communities and their ongoing ties to Indigenous epistemic traditions. While Chicane education research has mainly focused on identifying strategies to better fit a mold within conventional school settings, there is less attention placed on conventional knowledge systems that are conducive to communities outside of the academic periphery (Calderon, 2014). This community’s alienation from the places where their epistemic foundations are located is telling of the need for a framework that studies how access to this knowledge is reached from Chicane youth in urban communities. In short, the *problematizing* of Chicana urban communities and their decolonial desires must first be contextualized through their localized learning engagements. Luis Rodriguez interprets this understanding as *nemachtili*, or “the Nahuatl word for the spirit of learning” (Rodriguez, 2020, p. 37). To this end, I introduce *nemachtili* as a framework that sustains a critical Indigenous approach nested in a Freirean (Freire, 2000) tradition to locate where learning takes place for Chicanas. The term, which translates in English to “the spirit of learning” from Nahuatl, the most popular Indigenous language of Mexico, was first applied to the public education realm by author Luis J. Rodriguez (2020). In light of prevailing attitudes about conventional schooling models, he posits that a public discussion about the passion inherent in learning has largely gone missing. Instead, Rodriguez offers an Indigenous approach through *nemachtili* that rejects deficit

1. Pseudonyms are used for participants in the study.

perspectives in education and embraces a joy that arises from our collective learning efforts. From its inception, critical pedagogy similarly draws on a commitment to the intellectual base that learning communities engage in. Speaking to these intellectual entrypoints, Freire reminded us that “this ingenuous knowledge is the starting point from which his/her epistemological curiosity will work to produce a more critically scientific knowledge” (Freire, 1998/2000, p. 62). At the crux of Freire’s stance is an analysis of how learning is itself based in, and influences, place.

This study poses critical pedagogy, Rodriguez’s *nemachtili* and critical Indigenous literature in education toward a framework to address the urban entrypoints that Chicanos draw on for learning. I introduce *nemachtili* as a framework that addresses the critical foundations of both theories to address the possibilities that arise for a learning-based social praxis through a setting that embraces the epistemic frames Indigenous to this community. In so doing, I intend to address approaches to educational research that engage urban, racialized settings.

To further ground this conceptual foundation, I introduce empirical research that draws on the efforts of an online class coordinated by a non-profit bookstore and cultural center on Indigenous identity that services a primarily Chicane region. The research presented draws on a 7-week online course it produced that sought to introduce a cohort of 4 Chicane-identifying students to their Indigenous identity. I draw on my role as participant-observer to examine the knowledge shared by those involved in the class, and how learning about their identities was centered. Most importantly, the online course reaffirms the localized understandings and identities of the students, a central facet of *nemachtili* that affirms an Indigenous knowledge approach. By illuminating the immediacy of their ties to an Indigenous identity—and the antagonisms that work to alienate them—the students are propelled to develop a critical lens and are also instructed to engage in research methods to independently find their Indigenous identity. The following research questions were presented in consultation with the course facilitators prior to the sessions:

- How can a framework of critical pedagogy and critical Indigenous methodology embrace *nemachtili* as an epistemic foundation for Chicane learning practices?
- How is *nemachtili* operationalized in an urban virtual learning space?

To contextualize this study, I consider how my cultural ties to my hometown of San Fernando extend to the methodological access I was afforded as participant observer. This access was made possible in part by the proximity that this cultural center had to me—by connecting with this community staple from a young age, I developed a relationship with several of the participants that continued well into my graduate studies. Prior to the start of the research inquiry, I approached both instructors respectfully and received permission to join the virtual learning space from a research lens. Similarly, the instructors joined the cultural center through their own interests in learning about how they embodied an Indigenous identity. Like me, they were raised in the Northeast San Fernando Valley. Like me, they also self-identify as Chicanas who were educated in both formal and informal learning contexts. What distinguishes them, however, is an embrace of Indigenous traditions rooted in ancestral Mexica teachings passed down to them from *kalpullis*, groups of Chicane-identifying people brought together by active ties to Mexica dance and teachings. The knowledge these instructors present, in turn, advances a line of lessons not readily accessed through conventional school settings. *Nemachtili* synthesizes this access together by engaging learning engagements through the places these emerge from.

Conceptual Framework

To understand how *nemachtili* may articulate itself against the backdrop of historically racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized populations, I position *nemachtili* alongside critical pedagogy to consider the role of learning in a Chicane learning approach. Freire believed it was imperative to understand literacy as engaged in tandem with becoming historical subjects, because when “[people] learn to read and write, they begin to take initiative in shaping history... [they are] being present and not merely represented” (Freire, 1981, p. 29). Freire’s understanding of literacy was not simply an educational one, but towards a negation of the social forces that inhibited the humanity of the oppressed. This analysis both informs and reflects a critical approach towards the identification of an agentic relationship between both the educator and student. This also engages the significance of a pedagogical translation practice that should be taken on in learning environments that center localization—a practice that Freire frames as a practice to center the starting point. In a conversation Peter McLaren recalled with Freire, for instance, Freire spoke on the importance of “translat[ing] his work within the contextual specificity of where I was standing—where I was located—as a teacher and where my students were located as students” (McLaren, 2015, p. 243). What McLaren alludes to here is the importance of critical work that considers the learning desires from the places, cultures, and epistemologies that foreground a learning community. In this light, we can pose *nemachtili* as an insurgent praxis that places critical education research as a process of educating alongside, rather than for, Chicane communities at large. This articulation provides a stance by which to understand how intellectual starting points are embraced. It is this ability that localization brings to *nemachtili* in place of a hierarchical positioning of knowledge in the research. In Freire’s words, “Educands’ concrete localization is the point of departure for the knowledge they create of the world” (Freire 1994, p. 85)

Similarly, relationality is the driving force by which Wilson draws a relationship between the presence of ideas, relationships, and communities as interconnected (Wilson, 2008). In a phrase not unlike a page from Freire, Wilson states: “When ceremonies take place, everyone who is participating needs to be ready to step beyond the everyday and to accept a raised state of consciousness” (Wilson, 2008, p. 69). In the context of research with Chicane communities, then, reclaiming can be considered a tool for learning that involves Indigenous communities learning about their past and ongoing engagement with Indigenous practices. In the context of research with Chicano communities, it is important to realize the knowledge of indigenous identity and social and material conditions alike. For if to engage in decolonizing research entails a consciousness of one’s own indigeneity, it should be clear that the act of learning should be one of reclaiming, too.

I envision localization as a main focal point to *nemachtili* because it is a flexible concept that engages the learning formations from racialized groups, including Chicane communities. Alongside localization, we can pose reclaiming as an active catalyst that aims to re-member the Indigenous knowledge systems that Chicanos have been alienated from through epistemic genocide (Zavala, 2018). This way, *nemachtili* does the work of localization as a starting point for urban social conditions that gives rise to reclaiming.

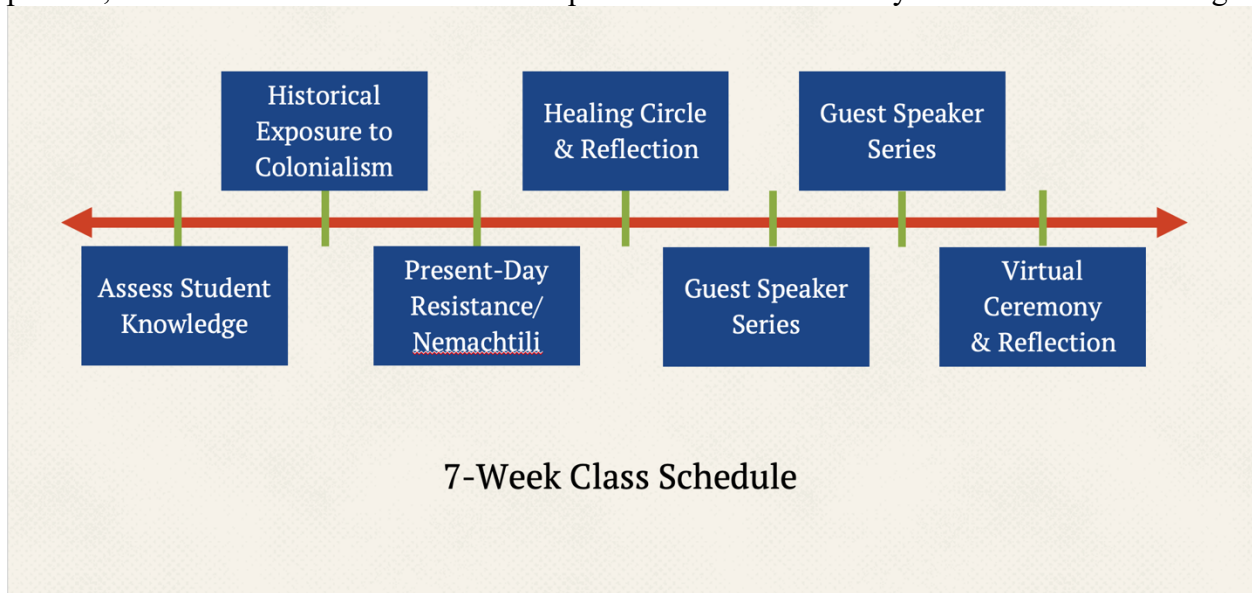
Research Design

The online course, *Indigenous in Me*, took place over the course of eight sessions between May 13th to July 1st, 2020. The course was designed and taught by Vanessa Cruz¹, the director of the cultural center’s youth development program, and Dominique Gonzalez, the center’s executive

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director. The course’s objective was to “understand what it means to be Indigenous, be able to choose to identify as Indigenous, and know different actions they can take to be able to honor the Indigenous in them.” The course recruited students through a flyer on social media shared by both the development program and the cultural center. There were three students in the “Indigenous in Me” program, which included two minors and one adult. All but one of the participants were residents of the Northeast San Fernando Valley, from which the cultural center is based.

Through a case study design, I analyze four class sessions that took place over a seven-week online course in the Northeast San Fernando Valley on Indigenous identity. I argue that this research site is essential for the development of *nemachtili* as a methodology, not only through the humanizing approach to the research, but through the subjectivity that is geared towards this racialized group of young people. Moreover, as a virtual learning space, the students enrolled in the program voluntarily. The course necessitated a virtual environment due to the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic that was at its height during the summer of 2020. In the midst of a global pandemic and mass social uprisings amidst unwarranted cases of police brutality, they were not moved by a formal educational requisite to take part in the program. Further, the program is unique in its ability to assess and foster an identification with Indigeneity through a dialogical relationship in the process, instead of a hierarchical relationship that is often furthered by formal education settings.



Data Collection

I began by obtaining permission from the class facilitators to take on a participant observation role in the online class. Through Zoom, I participated in weekly sessions while taking field notes on the relevant cultural encounters presented in the class. This role encouraged me to reflect on my own participation within the course as participant observer during reflective activities, opening circles, and closing circles.

Transcripts drawn from audio recordings of each class were used for process and in vivo coding to make meaning of the online learning practices. Specifically, these codes allowed me to foreground the primary contexts and places that participants considered most immediate to

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learning about their Indigenous identity. I also drew on sandwiched vignettes to analyze specific examples in which participants shared these learning contexts during the sessions.

The data analysis foregrounds the significance of learning particularly in the context of a virtual setting. The description and visual expression depicted through Zoom exhibited itself much differently than what the transcript alone revealed, and my initial thoughts and observations helped to triangulate the inferences I made from data points presented in the transcript.

Below, I elaborate on these themes and the accompanying codes that support their assertions. Within each theme are subthemes that foreground the understandings and thought processes of the learning community. These subthemes, or codes, represent groups of similar ideas brought forth and vocalized into the learning space that support the broader themes identified.

Findings

Theme #1: “Ceremony as Learning, Learning as Ceremony”

This theme encompasses recurring invocations of situated knowledge and Indigenous knowledge systems. The theme “Ceremony as Learning, Learning as Ceremony” observes learning systems that are conducive to mediated praxis via a horizontal relationship. This is encompassed by a focus on how Indigenous knowledge systems became dialogical, localized, and self-directed for this group of Chicanos. Participants drew on a relationality to define and honor the knowledge they introduced to the class (Brayboy et al., 2012). The codes most salient to this engagement were place-based knowledge; mediated praxis; and organic learning. I elaborate and provide examples for these codes in the following paragraphs below.

Place-Based Knowledge

Participants attributed urban landscapes as a significant factor that brought upon a disconnect from Indigenous traditions but still engaged their intellectual and place-based locations. As one of the visiting panelists reflected with students, “when they were out there [in nature], they would be more likely to sit in circle, to share their stories and just not be distracted like in the many ways that we are sometimes when we are in the city.” The panelist’s reflections on young peoples’ experiences with nature poses Land as a learning-based catalyst towards their connection with Indigenous protocols (Tuck and McKenzie, 2015). Her students were more inclined to embrace these ideals because their geography became more conducive for it, not because it led to a fixed outcome. The panelist also shares that “this disconnect [with Indigenous knowledge] ... happens not just amongst us who are out in the cities, it happens in the reservations too.” Her emphasis on the disconnect points to the learning potential that place-based knowledge takes on in this process: an agentic relationship with students for learning. For another panelist in the course, this “ceremony as learning” emerged through a community teach-in on Mexica calendar counts that took place in Ritchie Valens Park, a park at the edge of San Fernando and Pacoima. The arrival of instructors from the University of Nahuatl to the park presented the panelist with a unique entrypoint by which to engage in learning through a setting local to him. These “presentations on Nahuatl, and the Native philosophies, and our [Mexica] calendar counts,” in turn, transformed his proximity to the park to a place-based social praxis to learn about Indigenous cosmology, something that he otherwise wouldn’t have learned about. This disposition highlights importance of geography as a factor by which participants stood at a disposition to learn from and alongside

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place. Similarly, it was through localized understandings that students drew on to make a relationship to place—and their Indigenous identities—possible.

Mediated Praxis

Mediated praxis features a horizontal dynamic towards student concerns or interests and an active localization of learning objectives through the pedagogy. This relationship is best exemplified by “palabra,” a reflection period during our time together for participants to each share their meditations from the sessions. This palabra was passed on and shared with all those present in the class, including the course instructors. In several instances, the instructors proceed to extend the palabra towards the IT person within the course for them to share their thoughts and reflections. Despite the virtual setting and relative inexperience of the participants with the online platform, this was a primary practice that maintained a horizontal relationship was amongst the class.

From the outset of the session, the instructor in the course outlines an interest on “where you’re at with what you have learned so far... we felt that it would be very important to just hold space for you all to process... and what it is that we could offer for the next sessions to come.” That the class instructors included this midway check-in during the course development of the course speaks to their articulation of a class that is organic by design, not by need. This, alongside the reflexivity that the instructors took to respond to the participants’ concerns or ideas, developed an engagement in which the students were comfortable to learn without boundaries. Such an interaction is reflected within Damaris’ efforts to learn more about ancestral healing practices, for instance. Upon expressing these ideas, the instructor Vanessa suggested that she follow and explore the “sessions on learning herbal medicine and... classes through Zoom” provided by a Los Angeles-based organization, *Hood Herbalism*. Despite being at the cusp of concluding with the session, the instructor’s suggestion to outside resources suggests a relationality to both their learning processes. Rather than keeping this wisdom to herself, Vanessa’s efforts to share and extend this resource humanizes and validates Damaris’ interests even further. For both the instructors, however, their resources are not limited to outside settings.

As an extension of this mediated praxis, the instructors also make an effort to connect the students to available resources within their extended circles. For the program, this appeared as a set of books that were sent to the students in appreciation of their participation in the course. Mayra, as the coordinator of the youth program through which this course was enacted, also made numerous invitations to the students to join some of their ongoing programming. Vanessa, as one of the “*cabezas*,” or heads of her Danza Azteca *kalpulli*, also engaged with her practice by introducing mentors, customs, and practices in an organic fashion. These and other examples realize the course’s efforts to establish a transitional space for participants to realize their identity, and how this relates to their daily practices.

Lastly, the existing overlap of these themes on one another is found again with mediated praxis. While a focus on horizontal relationships is evident, the localization and pedagogy for this group of students also reveals a connection with place-based knowledge. The call for mediated praxis is implied largely through the avenues for learning that are available and in capacity for the participants in their immediate geographies. What mediated praxis extends in extension with Indigenous worldviews showcased within the course are respect, tolerance, and relationality for the learning pace and starting points of these students. I outline this not to say that both themes are

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dependent on each other, or that they are not unique, but instead to highlight the relationality that blooms from both. The dynamic that space in relation to other social locations has with learning is of utmost importance to these themes, particularly through an Indigenous understanding of surroundings. I speak further on my identification of learning as a site for reclaiming and resistance in the following analysis.

Organic Learning

Given the context of learning in an informal learning space and its location as a medium with pedagogy and place-based knowledge, there are several implications on this virtual class as an active resistance site. These developments trace and uphold a learning style that needs not the approval of formal schooling for its goals or objective. In the process, there appears a learning pattern that is both inspired by and reflected through Indigenous and dialogical practices. Although the main objective of Indigenous identity, learning gained a central focus through the role that it played in participants' livelihoods. Beyond their usefulness within the course, learning in this manner was understood as autonomy to continue the learning process outside the confines of the school. One of the instructors in the course credits "my own healing process and decolonizing of my own mind and really learning things based on what I felt aligned with my morals and my values rather than what I was just learning in school just to learn." As an instructor in the course, her discourse embraces a line of learning that sustains both this autonomy and embodies Indigenous belief systems in the process. This reflexivity is likewise shared by one of the students, who took it upon herself to learn further about the history of racialized people through books. She observes that learning history "through an African American and Latinx lens about the history with these communities... is contrary to what I've always been learning in school." Her efforts to become exposed to racialized histories even prior to the learning space alludes to a pursuit for learning beyond the school gates.

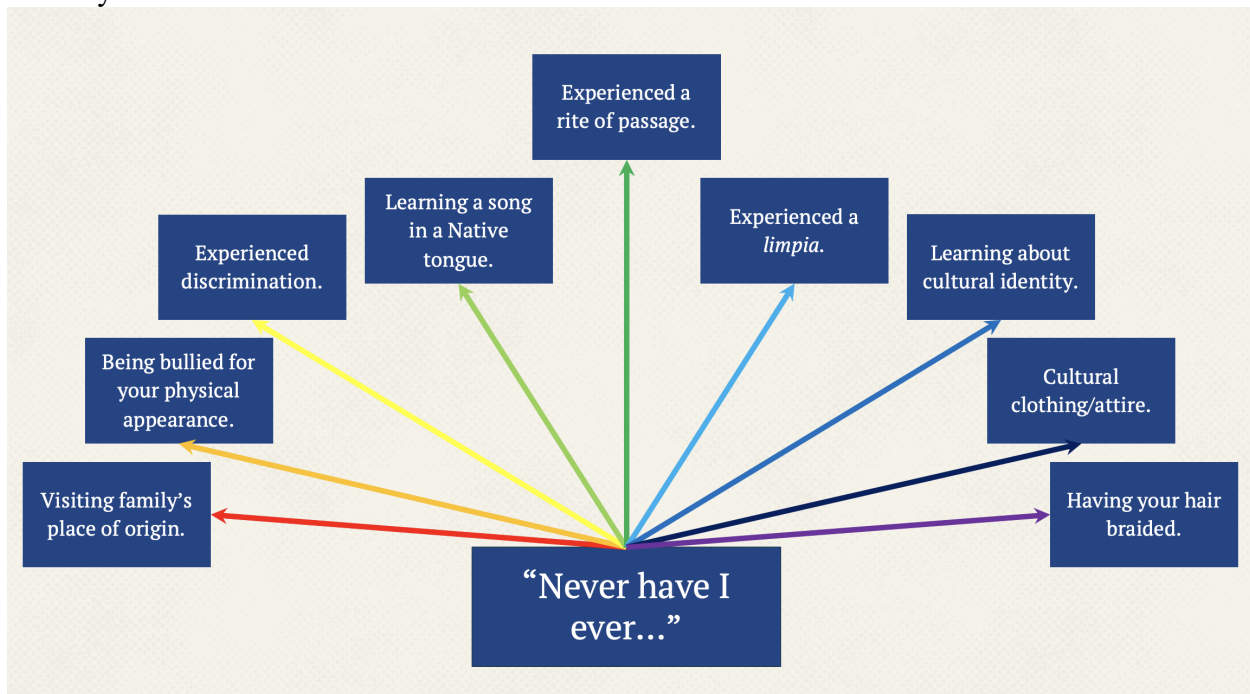
As a whole, this class sustains a collective of learners driven to discover, unlearn, and relearn what has been exposed to them in formalized settings. By way of its epistemological roots, this virtual space flourishes organically a sentiment to continue this drive with both new and seasoned learners alike. At the heart of this theme is the realization that learning has the potential to be furthered by leaps and bounds outside of formal institutions. For purposes of this engagement, this is compelled by the Indigenous understandings brought forth by the instructors and the students who grow from it.

Theme #2: "I remember learning that growing up"

This theme represents repeated efforts and situations in which the learning community within the online course remembered and sought to reconnect with their Indigenous roots. Whether through familial ties, Indigenous protocols, or in-class exposure, these efforts represented an ongoing desire to embrace practices that were forgotten or otherwise removed from the community's reach. What distinguishes this theme was an active engagement shared by all members of the learning community shared; it carries no finish line nor quantifiable metric. Its organic nature is best captured by the accessible way the instructors engage this reconnection with the participants. As a site of learning, this theme is likewise shared in a horizontal approach wrapped carefully in a sentiment of purpose and respect. The codes that represented this theme were: Indigenous practices and protocols; reconnection and reclaiming.

Indigenous Practices/Protocols

Indigenous practices were a recurring pattern in the class that involved the input and recollection of all the learning community. For participants further removed from Indigenous practices, the strategies the instructors engaged to enable them to return and question many behaviors they otherwise considered quotidian. This was beautifully crafted within the second session of the course on May 20th, 2020, in which the participants were asked to take part in an opening activity commonly referred to as “Never have I ever...” (see Figure 1). Through their objective to reconnect, the instructors presented several Indigenous practices and experiences meant to spark a memory within their minds.



This practice immediately raised a level of confidence in the learning community’s familiarity with Indigenous practices that was otherwise unnoticed before the activity took place. In this role, the instructors helped them to reconnect with either previous or ongoing practices taught by their familial or other interpersonal relationships. As a site of learning, students were also free to admit not knowing or being familiar with some practices without feeling guilt or discomfort. This also extends to the significance and respect necessary to hold this knowledge, particularly for Indigenous practice. In expanding on sage and its multipurpose function, for instance, Mayra shared the importance of “not just taking [sage] because it’s a cool thing, or it’s an ‘it’ thing to do right now. But more so seeing the planet as an elder that’s there to provide medicine for us.” The guidance that is alluded to within her illuminates both the responsibility and guidance that is centered at this learning site. To embrace these responsibilities and hold accountability in the learning process for this reconnection to occur speaks highly of her dedication. In another example, Dominique shares context on the best times to sing a song that’s introduced to the participants during the course. Through her practice of relating it to everyday practices like hiking or “welcoming the sun,” there is a quality of accessibility that’s communicated for the participants. This, in turn, extends an embrace of culture and Indigenous identity that’s not reserved or kept for a chosen few. The Indigenous protocols and practices shared have direct implications for reconnection, which I expand on below.

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Reconnecting/Reclaiming

The Indigenous practices that the instructors share or relate to the students has the direct impact of fostering a sense of reconnection with students. Whether from within the course or outside, students on several occasions are exposed to practices not immediately separated from their social locations. For the participants, opening these practices as a real possibility felt like a liberatory emotion. For Lindsay, this learning site “has definitely made me feel like it’s never too late to go and reconnect in whatever way that seems and... bringing back those traditions to future generations.” The significance in the development of her self-identification with these practices is crucial, not only through the desires of her own reconnection, but with that of future generations around her. This intergenerational quality was indeed a fundamental aspect to the course, which tasked students to embark on a project to trace their Indigenous lineage through family, research, and their histories. Several student accounts spoke to the difficulty of obtaining this information, with two students explicitly citing their efforts to reach back to family in Mexico to obtain further information. In this context, then, the course acts as a facilitator of this reconnection. Building on this desire to reclaim, one should also notice the aspect of resistance the entire learning community identifies towards this aim. In her pursuit towards reclaiming, for instance, a participant revisited the opening activity and shared she “didn’t realize all these little things I actually did were acts of resistance, like braiding my hair [or] my mother giving me tea.”

Theme #3: “By contributing, we’re able to learn more”

Within the encounters that the learning community engaged, perhaps none was as fluid as the role of dialogue to reach understanding and a horizontal dynamic. This involves, amongst other things, the role of outside speakers or influences to the learning site and their role towards the objective of engaging with Indigenous identity. It also relates to active questions sought by the participants and their understandings of the course material in relation to their own lived realities. Through this continued engagement and the broader community as a learning site, I drew from participants’ reactions to observe how this dialogue either compelled them or disengaged with the learning objective.

External Validation

Towards a goal of embracing their Indigenous identity, in several instances the online class also borrowed from learning connections made beyond the learning site. This practice, which I identified as external validation, developed a sense of confidence amongst the students and their outside practices. One of the participants embraced this relationship, sharing “certain things were... every time you guys would say something, I would connect it to something I learned from other things.” Establishing a dynamic to outside examples specific to the social locations around the participants expanded their belief as holders of knowledge and their proximity to Indigenous identity. As a learning site, their experiences were verified and upheld by other members of the learning community. The participants outside experiences were advanced “through learning with all these sessions, with the resistance and everything, it has really decolonized my way of thinking about my Indigenous identity.” Beyond an example of dialogue, it is an indication of the participants’ confidence in the knowledge they already arrive with.

To recognize the outside wisdom these students carry establishes the importance of dialogue for all in the learning community. From this Indigenous standpoint, this was established by the

instructors as what has been taught to them by their own mentors. For instance, one of the instructors shared about “an elder from Canada. And really, his message was the importance of us reminding to smudge ourselves as we begin our day. And as actually as we end our day.” This external reinforcement developed itself beyond the learning community by learning and embracing Indigenous worldviews. Notably, this external validation also arose through invitations extended by the instructors to extend their personal, cultural and professional networks with the rest of the class.

After providing the space for students to think of what new material they’d like to learn, the instructors provided reinforcement, sharing: “I want to say that all of you, what you just shared is very important to us as facilitators. And as you all spoke...I was able to think of the right folks to be able to invite to be able to address or further flesh out some of the discussions that we’ve had so far.” The embrace of the instructors to engage participants in further dialogue embraces the importance of a space that embraces the contributions of all the learning community and their lived experiences. As the learning community revealed, there were also instances in which this outside reinforcement assisted to dispel negative or stereotypical notions of Indigenous identity and participants’ social locations.

This facilitated the meaning-making process and how participants summoned their own learning formations to gain further insights towards meeting their course goals. For instance, one student shared an occasion in which their grandmother used herbal medicine to treat an injury one of her cousins had in Mexico, and how that exposed to them available alternatives to Western medicine. They mention later in this session that their interest in Indigenous medicine motivated them so much that Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2015) was a book that they eventually took on for personal learning.

Through the lessons exposed by the instructors on Indigenous identity, the participants were also able to learn further about dispelling some of the beliefs that were expressed to them outside of the course. This proved helpful in the development of their own Indigenous identity and feeling more liberated to express their observations over the course of their journeys. These confessions, on some occasions, made some participants feel dismayed at the thought of continuing down this path. Damaris, for instance, initially shared that “a lot of people [were] saying if you don’t grow up practicing Indigenous traditions, it doesn’t count anymore. You don’t count as an Indigenous person. And so that would always be very discouraging.” Through her trust in this learning community, Damaris draws a contrast between this discourse and the embrace that the online class responds to her curiosity on Indigenous ways. To do away with these understandings illuminates the role of discourse and movement towards a horizontal relationship with the learning community.

The dynamic of relating her struggles to have her journey embraced to the broader community works in two ways in this relationship: first, as a positive reinforcement towards the younger participants in the community; second, as a self-motivating tool to examine and reflect on her personal growth.

Discussion

The relationality of the themes with one another, including the codes themselves, carries implications that should be noted through the exchange of ideas and dialogue in the learning

setting. As the researcher, what I initially identified as a constraint in scope to develop the themes I later understood as rich pedagogical encounters and their embodiments through language, learning, and discourse (Vossoughi and Zavala, 2020). The praxis present within the learning setting was dynamic, fluid, and horizontal, which necessitated the use of multiple mediums to invoke the goal of learning and embracing an Indigenous identity. Both “learning” and “reclaiming” themes can be identified with the June 24th course session, for instance, in which a guest speaker shares hip-hop verses in English, Spanish, and Nahuatl to relate to questions of how he arrived at his Indigenous identity. This aligns with the research’s orientation towards a critical Indigenous methodology, as there is a horizontal placement of these observations with one another. In this fashion, these themes should be understood as complementary and supplementary towards one another, not oppositional. Through the virtual setting, a large portion of the interactions with the learning community was conveyed through dialogue. The significance of the learners and their contributions was therefore promoted further through this medium.

One of these dialogues was a series of “I Am” poems arranged by the facilitators in the class. To highlight the growth taken on by the participants, the facilitators asked the participants to write one at the beginning of the course, and again at the end. The template they provided for participants to guide them is as follows: I am (your name); Born from (family lineage); Reside on (describe the land you live on); Lover of (two things you cherish); Moved by (person, place or thing that inspires you); Member of (where do you fit in); I look forward to (greatest aspiration); I am (three adjectives that describe you); I am (your name). Below, I share a combination of two “I Am” poems that I wrote both at the beginning and at the end of the “Indigenous in Me” class:

I am Brian

Born from Jalisciense parents

Reside on Tataviam Land.

Though my homies know it as San Fer.

Lover of Critical Reflections and

Watching others Grow.

Moved by knowledge-seekers and wisdom dealers,

University and street teachers.

Member of academic circles by force, with two

Feet in the city that’s home. Or

At least I hope.

I look forward to saying “I PhiniseD,”

Not for you but for all of us.

I am jittery, learning, and breathing in.

I am Brian.

As a participant, sharing this poem aloud to the rest of the participants present in the learning community was both reaffirming and reciprocating, as we all grew and immersed ourselves in an effort to learn further about ourselves and what defines our identities. The template’s emphasis on place and geography also prompted me to think critically about the depictions that my peers have on place, my scholarship, and belonging. I confided in this learning community my longing for a sense of place as I transitioned from the community college to UCLA, and back home given the remote learning setting in the midst of the pandemic in 2020. This activity, as one of the few engagements with writing, piqued the interest of the participants to listen to and engage in one another’s learning formations. These poems spanned questions of Indigenous identity, community, and language. Finally, these poems from the learning community also embrace the creativity and mediums that participants engage with seamlessly through their previous connections with various forms of arts through an Indigenous lens. They relate to a spirit of learning that is not limited by grades or standards and rises organically for a spirit of community to be shared.

One of the initial concerns found within the beginning stages of data analysis, for instance, was the multiple cases of translanguaging (Orellana and Garcia, 2014) and their application in the transcripts. Because this often featured back-and-forth exchanges between English, Spanish, and Nahuatl, I used my position as researcher and bilingual speaker in both English and Spanish to produce an accurate transcription. Reflecting on this position informed my belonging in the study and the role of language as a medium to engage participants’ multiple knowledge sources, whether in family or other interpersonal relationship. My role as participant observer in the process informed my understanding of these different languages as a means by which the community grappled—indeed, struggled with—the conceptualization of themselves and their relationship with an Indigenous identity. Their social location as Latinos or Chicanos in this discussion further nuanced this learning objective in the course, a preliminary assertion presented by previous literature from decolonial and Indigenous scholars alike. Where this learning community elaborated further on this line of analysis is the role of place and learning towards the conceptualization of identity and racialization.

Where a virtual space lends the expectation that engagement will decrease, the course facilitators and broader learning community raised the opposite standard. Several activities, including passing “la palabra,” sharing opinions on the class presentations, and exhibiting opportunities for physical engagement even developed. Towards the conclusion of the course, the participants in the class were gifted several items specific to the subject of the class for their dedication and engagement with the material. As a medium for learning, the virtual setting did not remove itself or get in the way of the participants’ ability to gain a closer understanding of their Indigenous identity. The online medium also allowed for the learning community to quickly find and access information

1. Pseudonyms are used for participants in the study.

that related to relevant information shared. This included book titles, community organizations, and names of certain songs that were shared. In sum, the online space in which the community learning took place only supplemented a push towards organic learning further.

Equally integral to the virtual learning space was the development of a collective movement towards learning. Rather than moving at individual paces, the learning community recognized the importance of moving as a unit and took focus instead on moving forward until all questions were addressed. To return to the concept of *palabra*, there were several occasions in which the learning community, including the online technician, were asked to reflect on their learning and takeaways from the class. Coinciding with a Freirean understanding, the learning desires of all participants were considered in a way that was grounded according to the lifeworlds of the learners in question. This meant that as the course continued, the outlook of the course material was elaborated further to deepen understanding of Indigenous themes and issues. One significant takeaway from this course was the critical foregrounding that these Indigenous issues were organized and presented: despite the emphasis on reconnection and identity, these issues were not fetishized or reified to take up a single or sole interpretation. Instead, the course offered a plethora of embodiments of what an Indigenous identity can look like, whether embodied by educators, social workers, university students, community activists, Mexica *danzantes*, or nonprofit directors. These examples provided direct examples of what growth and a continued commitment to *nemachtli* resulted in for community members, often from the same cities as the participants. As one of the guest speakers alluded to in her response, “the education that I got... I got from my community. But I had to pay for those little letters, which is the MSW.” To this end, this study showcases how a Chicane learning operationalizes learning. Shedding an emphasis on the knowledge and knowledge production of racialized populations through the places they inhabit should be a research frame likewise pursued in diverse places and cultural contexts.

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