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# Critical Race Theory in Chicana/O Education

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CHAPTER  
SEVEN



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*Critical Race Theory in Chicana/O Education*

This article extends our ongoing national discourse about the use of a growing body of scholarship in the field of education, critical race theory (CRT). As a collective, we share our work in CRT to demonstrate how this framework can address and challenge the impacts of race, class, gender, language, immigrant status, accent, and sexual orientation on Chicana/o educational attainment and achievement. Educational statistics demonstrate that nationally, only 45% of Chicanas/os have attended four-years of high school or more, in contrast to 83% of non-Latina/o Whites. Similarly, just 6% of

Chicanas/os have acquired at least a baccalaureate degree, in comparison to 23% of Whites. These two pieces of information suggest a need to examine Chicanas and Chicanos in all social areas, but especially in education. Our work in CRT attempts to address this need. Specifically, the goals of our work are:

1. To provide an analysis of Chicana and Chicano K-through-college education in the U.S. from critical race theoretical perspectives.
2. To explore some of the innovative critical race epistemological, methodological, and pedagogical approaches that can help us understand the educational experiences of Chicanas and Chicanos.
3. To address the strategies Chicanas and Chicanos use to resist educational structures, processes, and discourses that help maintain their subordination.
4. To examine and analyze the educational curriculum and pedagogy for their treatment of gender, race/ethnicity, class, culture, language, and immigration status.
5. To offer concrete examples of how critical race theory is being applied through quantitative and qualitative studies in education.

#### CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN EDUCATION

Our working definition of critical race theory in education<sup>1</sup> is to develop a theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and pedagogical strategy that accounts for the role of race and racism in U.S. education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating other forms of subordination such as gender, class, and sexual orientation (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw, 1993). At least five themes form the basic perspectives, research methods, and pedagogy of CRT in education.

**1. The Intercentricity of Race and Racism:** Critical race theory starts from the premise that race and racism are pervasive and permanent (Bell, 1987). CRT in education centralizes race and racism, while focusing on the intersections of racism with other forms of subordination.

**2. The Challenge to Dominant Ideology:** A critical race theory in education challenges the traditional claims of the educational system such as objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. Critical race theorists argue that these traditional claims act as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society (Calmore, 1992; Solórzano, 1997).

**3. The Commitment to Social Justice:** A critical race theory in education challenges us to envision social justice as the struggle to eliminate racism and other forms of subordination while empowering groups that have been subordinated (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001). CRT seeks to advance such a social justice agenda.

**4. The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge:** Critical race theory recognizes that the experiential knowledge of People of Color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education. CRT in education views this knowledge as a strength and draws explicitly on the lived experiences of Students of Color by including such methods as storytelling, family history, biographies, scenarios, parables, *cuentos*, chronicles, and narratives (Bell, 1987; Carrasco, 1996; Delgado, 1989, 1993, 1995a&b, 1996; Olivas, 1990).

**5. The Interdisciplinary Perspective:** Critical race theory draws from the strengths of multiple disciplines, epistemologies, and research approaches (Scheurich & Young, 1997). A critical race theory in education challenges traditional, mainstream analyses by analyzing racism and other forms of subordination in education in historical and interdisciplinary terms (Delgado, 1984, 1992; Garcia, 1995; Olivas, 1990).

Critical race theory frames what we do, why we do it, and how we do it.

- What do we do? We focus our work on addressing the many forms of racism and their intersections with other forms of subordination.
- Why do we do it? The purpose of our work is to challenge the status quo and push toward the goal of social justice.
- How do we do it? We work by listening to, reading about, and centering the experiences of People of Color.

#### CRT'S INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

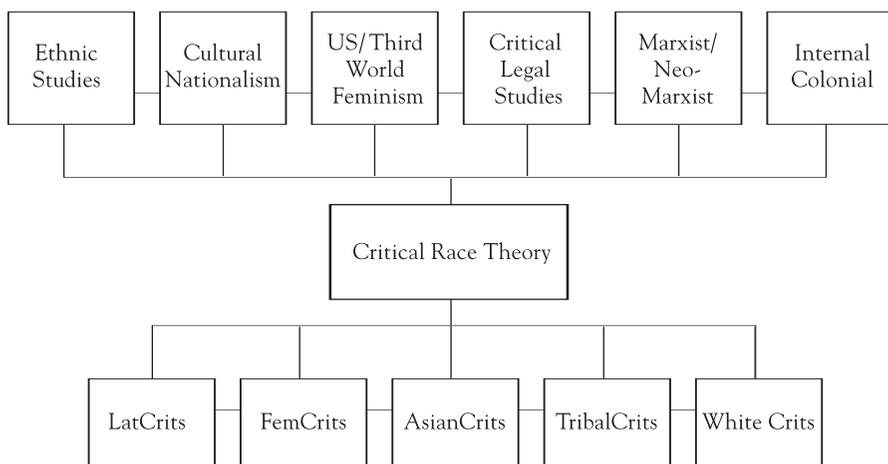
If senior anthropologists feel that the discipline's crown jewel [culture] has been ripped off by cultural studies, faculty and students in ethnic studies programs often feel that cultural studies is an only slightly disguised effort to restore white male authority in areas where ethnic studies programs have a chance of speaking with some authority. If certain majority scholars distance themselves from cultural studies by saying it is nothing more than ethnic studies writ large, certain minority scholars counter that the covert agenda of cultural studies is to allow white authority to co-opt ethnic studies programs (Rosaldo, p. 527, 1994).

Renato Rosaldo's (1994) quote above raises an important question of genealogy: Who has been doing work addressing the intersections of racism and are we going to acknowledge this work? Questions and theories about culture and identity, about race and racism, and gender and sexism have been a part of the work and discourse of Ethnic and Woman Studies disciplines for decades. Rosaldo's insight indicates that at best, work in Ethnic and Women Studies has not been adequately acknowledged, and at worst, has been appropriated by scholars in Cultural Studies. Rosaldo wonders if this lack of recognition is an

attempt to “restore white male authority in areas where ethnic studies programs have a chance of speaking with some authority” (p. 527). Rosaldo’s concerns resonate with the many Educators of Color who rarely see their work cited as part of the literature known as ‘critical pedagogy,’ which is ironically the supposed to be an empowering pedagogy for oppressed peoples. We attempt to outline critical race theory’s family tree for two reasons: (1) We feel it is important to recognize the work of those who have come before us; and (2) We can learn from previous bodies of literature to strengthen our arguments and thoroughly address critiques.

As we began to read the literature in law, we noticed that we had seen many aspects of CRT before. In fact, W.E.B. DuBois’ (1903, 1989) often quoted line from *The Souls of Black Folk*, “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (p. 29) takes the discussion of race and racism back to at least turn of the last century. However, the way the legal scholars articulated CRT was an innovative way to theorize about race and racism in U.S. society. Figure 1 attempts to examine CRT’s family tree. It is important to note that branches of this tree are both acknowledged and unacknowledged in the CRT literature <sup>2</sup>.

FIGURE 1. A GENEALOGY OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY



In its post-1987 form, CRT emerged from criticisms of the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement. One of the criticisms was the inability of CLS scholars to incorporate race and racism into their analysis. Indeed, these same criticisms had been taking place in Ethnic Studies and Women Studies Departments throughout the United States. These departments were struggling to define and incorporate cultural nationalist paradigms, internal colonial models, Marxist, neo-Marxist, and feminist frameworks into their intellectual and community work. Similarly, CRT is expanding to include branches in LatCrit, FemCrit, AsianCrit, WhiteCrit, and TribalCrit scholarship<sup>3</sup>.

Although initiated in the law, these branches are moving into fields outside the law. Much of this work is taking place in the field of education. For instance, William Tate's 1994 autobiographical article in the journal *Urban Education* titled, "From Inner City to Ivory Tower: Does My Voice Matter in the Academy" represents the first use of CRT principles in education. A year later, in 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate wrote a paper titled, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education" in the *Teachers College Record*. Two years later, Daniel Solórzano's 1997 essay on "Images and Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotyping, and Teacher Education" in *Teacher Education Quarterly* applied CRT to a specific subfield of teacher education. Also in 1997, William Tate's "Critical Race Theory and Education: History, Theory, and Implications" in the *Review of Research in Education* furthered our understanding of the history of CRT in education. The field was expanded significantly with the 1998 "Special Issue on Critical Race Theory in Education" in the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*. Critical race scholars continue to help us better understand the racialized, gendered, and classed structures, processes, and discourses in the field of education.

#### CRT AND COUNTERSTORYTELLING <sup>4</sup>

Counterstorytelling is also an important aspect of critical race theory. Counterstorytelling as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences that are not often told (i.e. those on the margins of

society). The counterstory is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counterstories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform. Yet counterstories need not be created only as a direct response to majoritarian stories. As Lisa Ikemoto (1997) reminds us: “By responding only to the standard story, we let it dominate the discourse” (p. 136). Indeed, within the histories and lives of People of Color, there are numerous unheard counterstories. Counterstorytelling these experiences can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance.

Storytelling has a rich and continuing tradition in African American (see Bell, 1987, 1992, 1996; Berkeley Art Center, 1982; Lawrence, 1992), Chicana/o (see Delgado, 1989, 1995a, 1996; Olivas, 1990; Paredes, 1977), and Native American (see Deloria, 1969; R. Williams, 1997) communities. Richard Delgado (1989) reminds us that, “oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation” (p. 2436). Critical race scholars continue in this tradition and have practiced counterstorytelling in at least three general forms: (1) autobiographical stories/narratives (Espinoza, 1990; Montoya, 1994; Williams, 1992), (2) biographical stories/narratives (Lawrence and Matsuda, 1998), and (3) multiple-method stories/narratives, which offer both biographical and autobiographical analyses and utilize composite characters (Bell, 1987, 1992, 1996; Delgado, 1995a, 1995b, 1996; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, in press; Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano and Yosso, 2000, 2001; Villalpando, in press). Each of these counterstorytelling methods draws on research data, existing writings in areas such as the law, social science, history, and literature, and professional/personal experiences in order to discuss racism and other forms of subordination.

#### TOWARD A CRITICAL RACE FRAMEWORK IN CHICANA AND CHICANO EDUCATION

Critical race theory furthers our understanding of epistemology, methodology, pedagogy, curriculum, and policy in Chicana/o education and how each of these areas intersects with the other (Figure 2).

**1. Critical Race Epistemology:** Epistemology can be defined as the study of knowledge. Critical education scholars have asked questions such as: what is knowledge and whose ways of knowing are more privileged in schools? A critical race epistemology recognizes Students and Faculty of Color as holders of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Critical race epistemologies reflect a raced history and focus on the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination in recognizing the multiple knowledges of People of Color. These epistemologies also include a rich historical legacy of resistance and survival and translate into a pursuit of social justice in both educational research and practice (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001). Critical race epistemologies directly challenge the broad range of currently popular research paradigms (i.e., positivism to constructivisms and the critical tradition to postmodernisms) that draw from a narrow foundation based on the social, historical and cultural experiences of Whites.

**2. Critical Race Methodology:** Methodology can be defined as the place where theory and method meet. Critical race theory challenges traditional methodologies, because it requires us to develop “theories of transformation, wherein knowledge is generated specifically for the purpose of addressing and ameliorating conditions of oppression, poverty, or deprivation” (Lincoln, 1993, p. 33). Critical race methodology pushes us to humanize quantitative data and to recognize silenced voices in qualitative data. (Solórzano and Yosso, in press).

**3. Critical Race Pedagogy:** Pedagogy can be defined as an approach to teaching. Traditional pedagogies often marginalize students based on race, class, gender, language, accent, phenotype, or immigrant status. A critical race pedagogy challenges White, middle-class, and male privilege in traditional pedagogical practices and creates spaces to learn from pedagogies of the home. Because power and politics are at the center of all teaching and learning, the application of household knowledge to situations outside of the home becomes a creative process that interrupts the transmission of “official knowledge” and dominant ideologies.

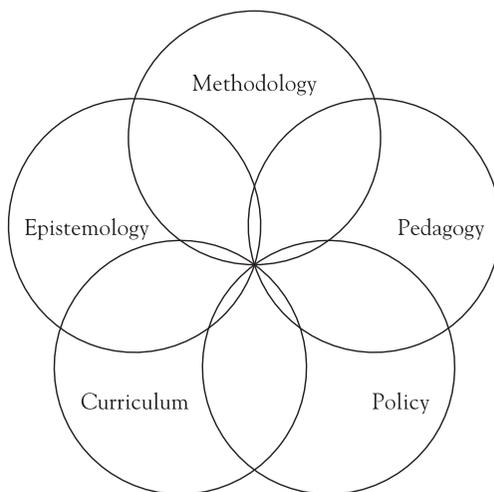
**4. Critical Race Curriculum:** Curriculum can be defined as formal or informal methods of presenting knowledge. In schools, curriculum is presented through textbooks, courses, and programs of study. Outside school, curriculum is presented through media, church, and community venues (Yosso, 2000; in press-a). Traditional curriculum distorts, omits, and stereotypes Chicana/o, African American, Asian American/ Asian Pacific Islander, and Native American knowledges and experiences. This curriculum rationalizes racial, gender, and class inequality in schools. A critical race curriculum analyzes and challenges racism and other forms of subordination that pervade formal and informal curriculum. (Yosso, in press-b).

**5. Critical Race Policy:** Policy can be defined as a rule or guideline that is used to organize and regulate the function of social institution. A critical race policy challenges traditional policies and legislation effecting education from a perspective that humanizes People of Color and draws on their experiences as strengths to learn from, not deficits to correct.

#### CRT NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

Critical race theory has begun to be deployed in educational research. Collectively, we have conducted research at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels of education. Specifically, we have completed at least three CRT empirical studies dealing with issues in K-12 education. For example, we utilize quantitative methods to analyze advanced placement enrollment patterns in an urban high school (Solórzano and Ornelas, in press). We also analyze the Chicana/o educational pipeline from elementary school through higher education through a counterstory (Solórzano and Yosso, 2000). Furthermore, we document Chicana/o high school and undergraduate students' historical and contemporary strategies of resistance against educational inequality, through oral history and counterstorytelling (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001).

FIGURE 2. THE INTERSECTIONS OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN EDUCATION



In addition, we have conducted at least six CRT empirical studies focused on Chicanas/os in higher education. Many of these studies use qualitative methods, such as in-depth and focus group interviews, to address the undergraduate experiences of Chicanas/os and the barriers and successes of Chicana/o scholars (Delgado Bernal, in press; Solórzano, 1998, in press; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000). We also draw on quantitative data to tell a counterstory about undergraduate Chicana/o experiences (Villalpando, in press) and to address the experiences of Scholars of Color nationally (Villalpando and Delgado Bernal, in press).

We are excited to see that our collective projects are moving the discourse in CRT forward. We believe that our research demonstrates the contributions CRT offers to educational research in the field of education. Scholars in fields outside of the law and education are also taking note of the power of CRT to propel discussions of racism forward (Aguirre, 2000). The National Association for Chicana and Chicano studies has been an important forum for us to share our work in CRT

and receive feedback. In addition, we have begun teaching courses in CRT at our individual campuses, where we are learning alongside our students how a CRT in education can help us better challenge racialized inequality inside and outside the classroom.



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Our definition of CRT in education draws on the growing body of Latino Critical Race (LatCrit) Theory scholarship. LatCrit theory extends critical race discussions to Chicanas/os and Latinas/os in education. Our working definition of LatCrit Theory informs our definition of critical race theory and visa versa. As such, we feel it is important to state this working definition, which is adapted from the LatCrit Primer (2000):

A LatCrit theory in education is a framework that can be used to theorize and examine the ways in which race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact on the educational structures, processes, and discourses that effect People of Color generally and Latinas/os specifically. Important to this critical framework is a challenge to the dominant ideology, which supports deficit notions about Students of Color while assuming ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity.’ Utilizing the experiences of Latinas/os, a LatCrit theory in education also theorizes and examines that place where racism intersects with other forms of subordination such as sexism, classism, nativism, monolingualism, and heterosexism. LatCrit theory in education is conceived as a social justice project that attempts to link theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community. LatCrit acknowledges that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize co-existing with their potential to emancipate and empower. LatCrit theory in education is transdisciplinary and draws on many other schools of progressive scholarship.

We see LatCrit theory as a natural outgrowth of critical race theory, but we do not see them as mutually exclusive. For us, LatCrit scholarship is evidence of an ongoing process of finding a framework that addresses racism and its accompanying oppressions. LatCrit draws on the strengths outlined in critical race theory, while at the same time, it emphasizes the intersectionality of experience with oppression and resistance and the need to extend conversations about race and racism beyond the Black/White binary.

<sup>2</sup> The following resources are some examples of the different frameworks cited: Ethnic studies (see *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*); women’s studies (see *Frontiers: A Journal of Womens Studies*); cultural nationalist paradigms (see Mofi Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987); critical legal studies (see Mark Kelman, *Guide to Critical Legal Studies*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Marxist and neo-Marxist frameworks (see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, and Mario Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979; internal colonial models (see Frank

Bonilla and Robert Girling, Eds. *Structures of Dependency*, Stanford, CA: Stanford Institute of Politics, 1973); LatCrit (see Arriola, Elvia. 1998. Difference, Solidarity and Law: Building Latina/o Communities Through LatCrit Theory. *Chicano-Latino Law Review*, 19, 1-612; Valdes, Francisco. 1997. LatCrit Theory: Naming and Launching a New Direction of Critical Legal Scholarship. *Harvard Latino Law Review*, 2, 1-501; Valdes, Francisco. 1998. LatCrit: Latinas/os and the Law. *La Raza Law Journal*, 10, 1-600); WhiteCrit (see Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic (Eds.). 1997. *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press); FemCrit (see Adrienne Wing (Ed.), 1997. *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press.); AsianCrit (see Chang, Robert. 1993. Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-structuralism, and Narrative Space. *California Law Review*, 81, 1241-1323).

<sup>3</sup> Each of these branches of CRT focuses on specific populations similar to approaches taken by specific Ethnic Studies Departments (Asian American, African American, Native American, and Chicana/o). Because each branch centralizes its analysis from the experiences of a particular racialized population, it expands CRT's discussion of how race and racism intersects with other forms of subordination.

<sup>4</sup> A story becomes a counterstory when it begins to incorporate the five elements of critical race theory (CRT). A majoritarian story is told from the perspective of racial privilege. Disguised as the norm, the standard, or a "natural" part of everyday life, majoritarian storytelling maintains racial subordination. A counterstory challenges racial subordination through the experiences of People of Color. Counterstorytelling exposes the deficit discourse and racial privilege embedded in majoritarian stories.



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