

Autoethnography, a Chicana's Methodological Research Tool: The Role of Storytelling for Those Who Have No Choice but to do Critical Race Theory

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This article investigates the role of autoethnographic research as the methodological tool of choice for a Chicana who positions herself along the liminal perspective. I posit that *testimonios*, autobiographical educational experiences, must be used as valid ethnographic research to contribute to existing knowledge around issues of educational equity. Producing autoethnographic research acknowledges and validates my Chicana presence as well as draws attention to my marginal position inside dominant structures of education. Autoethnography and critical race theory are the manners in which I think about the world and the ways I have chosen to engage in educational research. My work is derived from personal experience in Los Angeles urban schools and later in elite institutions of higher education. These distinct locations present a unique opportunity to problematize the internalized forms of class and racial structures that permeate educational institutions. Grounded in my own educational biography, *testimonios* frame my research perspective to interrogate the role that educational institutions play in the creation of particular ideologies in working-class students of color.

The most profound and liberating politics come from the interrogation of our own social locations, a narrative that works outward from our specific corporealities. “For silence to transform into speech, sounds and words, it must first traverse through our female bodies,” writes Gloria Anzaldúa (1990, p. xxii). It is, in my opinion, the contemplation of the body that is essential in the development and evaluation of an epistemology of Chicana thought and culture. (Cruz, 2001, p. 658)

I am an anomaly in higher education: a working-class, Chicana, first-generation college student with a Ph.D. This unique situation leaves me to wonder, as an assistant professor, how does an anomaly conduct educational research?

Since the beginning of my higher education studies, and in particular, graduate school, I have found that when I write, I am unable and unwilling to create the traditional “academic distance” between the papers I produce and the voices of my educational experiences. The identification of “distance” here is meant to convey the deeply theoretical and intensely abstract papers that are characteristically valued in higher education for their objectivity and their distance from educational practices. From this perspective, distance also encompasses the prized invisibility of the researcher. Admittedly, the production of what are traditionally deemed objective measures

of investigation is undeniably valuable within specific educational goals and contexts. However, the actions and behaviors of our everyday lives—the instances that serve to inform theory—are set aside as researchers prioritize measures to maintain objectivity.

What is needed is a break from this restrictive pattern too often found in academic texts and discourses. It is important to emphasize that to disrupt forms of knowledge that render the author's identity inconsequential, I deliberately chose to situate myself at the margins of this academic sphere. Here, in the margins, is a space where my stories, intertwined with the experiences of my community(ies), are read alongside academic settings and serious texts. Producing autoethnographic research acknowledges and validates my Chicana presence as well as draws attention to my marginal position inside dominant structures of education.

These spaces, the margins, can also be contextualized as the liminal position. I do not stand alone in this consciousness-raising space. Women of color often reside in this location to fully develop research that centers the connections between “experience and consciousness” (Collins, 2002, p. 158) so that we may affirm our existence and “provide a truth far greater than any telling of a tale frozen to the facts” (Moraga, 2011, p. 4). Anzaldúa (1987) refers to this space as the “Borderland” or the ability to “inhabit multiple selves without feeling incoherence” (Hurtado, 1989, p. 414). While I cannot be as confident that there are no “incoherent” feelings in this space, I am convinced that at a minimum, feeling fine with these forms of multiplicity makes for an open mind about the possibilities for change. In addition, the justification to theorize narratives serves to further emphasize the complex relationships between the personal and the political as they pertain to the formation of student ideologies in the construction of their individual beliefs and actions toward education. Further pushing the concept of positionality, Rendón (2009) reflects on this space as a setting primed for “unlocking the polarities” (p. 68) that facilitates the process of disrupting “old belief systems” (p. 68), thus helping to contribute to the production of more inclusive and progressive shifts in ideologies concerning educational equity.

Ideology has been a curious concept to me even before I knew the existence of the word. As I traveled the educational pipeline, my educational stories have unavoidably been impacted by the hegemony of dominant educational practices. My stories are thus an attempt to recreate the instances where I collide with hegemonic ideological constructs. As an autoethnographer, my role serves to unpack the repercussions on my educational identity all along the pipeline. Exploring the development of particular identities may help inform research in understating how Latinas/os and other marginalized students of color experience educational institutions in order to acquire more specific knowledge of their academic successes and failures. I elaborate on this point later in the article.

LA CHICANA: THE FOCUS ON ONE WOMAN'S STORY

I was born and raised in a Spanish-speaking, working-class city called South Gate, located just ten miles from downtown Los Angeles in California. The city derives its name rather practically; South Gate is positioned as the south “entrance” to downtown LA. It is cradled between the cities of Compton and Downey, both within walking distance from our home, but worlds apart. Growing up, Compton as well as the neighboring city of Lynwood, was a city demographically composed primarily of African Americans, although today, large influxes of Mexican and Central American immigrants live in both these cities (Camarillo, 2005). Compton, which had a notorious reputation at the height of the Crips and Bloods turf wars, contained a large number of housing projects

lodging the poorest of them all (Flores, 1997). Conversely, Downey, in our minds, was filled with large, beautiful homes owned by middle-class, white families. The buzz between the students around the time we reached high school was their spirited aspirations of moving to the next city over: “When I grow up, I’m going to live in Downey!” We did not claim other nearby cities, like Bell, Cudahy, and Huntington Park, as our future home since they were demographically similar to South Gate. Moreover, given that most of us were not exposed to real opulence and privilege, Downey, in our eyes, was the “city of gold.” Sadly, no one ever made us question the racial or class implications explicit in these statements.

My parents are Mexican immigrants who speak little English and have a basic general education. As a child, I attended elementary, middle, and high school in the city of South Gate, part of the Los Angeles Unified School District. By the time I reached third grade in the early 1980s, the neighborhood schools’ ethnic demographic became increasingly Latino (Zonta & Ong, 2003); at the same time, the majority of these schools became declared Title 1¹ schools (Stein, 2004; Timar, 1994).

Unfortunately, these shifting demographics and the high increase in poverty created an educational atmosphere where college was rarely discussed or even encouraged for the majority of the student body. So while my parents continuously stressed the importance of going to college, significant formal educational resources were unavailable; and when they were, they were inadequate. This situation is not unique to the schools I attended nor is it news that schools remain in very similar conditions today; other researchers have come to similar conclusions in their investigations inside overcrowded under-resourced schools where students of color are the majority (Kozol, 2005; Oakes, 2002; Oakes, Mendoza, & Silver, 2004).

As a consequence, I entered college underprepared yet ripe for critical comparisons on the subject of educational disparities. I formally learned about the process of writing as an undergraduate student in a small, elite, private, liberal arts college located in Western Massachusetts that was incredibly patient with me. I spent endless hours sitting alongside my writing instructor during those college years, meticulously going over my drafts with Professor Levinson² as he pointed out everything from basic grammar errors to opportunities for deeper analysis. Four years of intense writing instruction and mentoring, however, can only begin to make a small dent after all those years of being under-schooled. As a result, writing is not a pleasant task for me. I struggle greatly with it while I kick, scream, and procrastinate. Writing, in my opinion, feels more like an unruly younger sibling than best friend you love to hang with.

Despite this serious writing setback, I still claim to have gained a steady intellectual development. Possibly because of it, I have been reflective of my schooling experiences in critical ways and even more so when I became immersed in the economically and culturally privileged educational settings of higher education. I relate to my own sense of awakening with the words of a working-class man Freire (2003) encountered in a discussion group:

Perhaps I am the only one here of working-class origin. I can’t say that I’ve understood everything you’ve said just now, but I can say one thing—when I began this course I was naïve, and when I found out how naïve I was, I started to get critical. (p. 35)

In my case, the distinctions that brought on my comparative critiques were evident on many levels. Witness the use of the word “distinctions.” With this word, I imply the deep-rooted recognition that I traveled to and from an array of radically different educational settings. These distinct locations, coupled with extensive theoretical development in graduate school, offer me a unique opportunity to understand the internalized forms of class and racial structures that permeate

educational institutions (Apple, 2003), for they are grounded in my own educational biography. Against this backdrop, an important aspect that emerges is the implication of educational institutions to “proudly affect consciousness, identity, cultural cleavage, and social antagonism” (p. 5). Producing autoethnographic texts thus contributes to those cultural struggles taking place in education. These texts serve as a tool of “subaltern resistance” (Gonzalez et al., 2003, p. 234) to “challenge the very legitimacy of political and cultural dominance” (Apple, 2003, p. 5). Detailing my uncommon educational trajectory and drawing on it as a way to frame my research, takes advantage of this unique position to interrogate the role that educational institutions play in the creation of particular ideologies in working-class students of color. In order to facilitate the process of unlocking dualities (Rendón, 2009), I heed the call to describe the “specificities of situations” (Apple, 2003, p. 5) in education that have not been previously identified. This includes holding educational institutions “up to rigorous questioning” (Gandin & Apple, 2003, p. 193) by those who benefit least from the ways these institutions now function.

A Kinder Story: Fall 1978

It was the big day. Mom dressed me in bell-bottom dark green jeans with a polyester screen tee, the one with the yellow cap sleeves. It was an itchy choice for a dry Southern California summer, but it was my favorite tee, and I wanted to wear it for the grand event. I had practiced counting to 100 all month and was eager to reap the rewards: a striking certificate with my name beautifully handwritten across the center acknowledging my impressive accomplishment along with a giant lollipop the size of my head.

Mom and I found Ms. Stevens, my kindergarten teacher, scrambling about corralling her students, asking them to form “nice and neat straight lines, one for the boys, one for the girls.” Mom prodded me toward the girl line, outside the classroom doors as she did every morning after having dropped off my sister in first grade on the other side of the school playground. Mom made her way back out the school gates and waited while she chatted with the other mothers who watched their kids until each teacher filed their students into the classrooms, shutting the door tightly behind them. When the kinder playground cleared, mothers and babysitters disbursed too, taking the local gossip with them.

“Minerva!” Ms. Stevens exclaimed as I passed her on my way into the classroom, “Are you ready to count to 100 today?”

I smiled up at her and nodded. She lowered herself to my level and smiled at me so broadly that I watched her eyes disappear amidst the wrinkles hugging her round face.

“We’ll see, little girl,” she said. “We’ll see. It’s such a hard task! Heavens!! And you only speak a little English.” She patted my back and said, “But you can do it! You can do it!”

I know I could do it, I said to myself. I counted to 100 even before I started kindergarten. I counted while I sang along with *The Count on Sesame Street* on PBS everyday. I also recited my numbers beside my sister, Carla, last year when she practiced for her kindergarten class. I watched as Carla returned triumphantly with her certificate and giant red lollipop in hand for having accomplished such a grandiose feat for such a small kindergartener. Now it was my turn, and I could hardly wait to count for my own class. It was so exciting.

After Ms. Stevens took attendance, she collected our lunch tickets and read us a short story. When she finally exclaimed, “It’s time, kindergarteners!” I felt like I would burst from the excitement.

Such anticipation was equally shared among the students in my class. We all squealed in delight, and a flurry of movement ensued among us.

Ms. Steven made us sit in rows so that we were better able to see the student reciting the numbers. The counting had begun when she called us up in alphabetical order.

Most students did not have any problems counting, but when the Latina/o students stepped up to face the class, Ms. Stevens stopped them repeatedly. “No, Maria. It’s not tu, it’s pronounced twoooooo, whooo, whooo.” She corrected Maria, stretching out the vowel of that poor three letter word before exaggerating the “w” sound at the end. I watched her mouth do strange things just to say two. “Again,” she requested. “Let’s hear that oooo, oooooo and whooo whooo at the end.”

And so there was Maria, flustered but determined, singled out by Ms. Stevens for her improper English pronunciation. It was even more painful to watch when Jose’s turn came up. Every number was corrected so much that Ms. Stevens lost her patience and exclaimed, shaking her pointer finger at him, “Jooossaayyy, it looks like YOU didn’t practice your counting.”

Jose turned tomato red.

“You’ll need to practice harder at home. Why don’t we try again next week?” But it really was not a question. It was more of a declaration and an easy way to move things right along.

I witnessed several English-only speaking students take their place toward the front of the classroom, reciting their numbers flawlessly and I noticed how Ms. Stevens did not interrupt them even once.

Then it was my turn.

I walked up to the front, faced the class and in a nervous move instantly began tugging at the flaps of my cargo jean pockets. “1, 2, 3, . . .” I began, delivering my numbers as if they were second nature, thinking about the next one to come, when an odd feeling overcame me. I quickly managed to count all the way to 49 and stopped dead in my tracks. A few seconds went by, and I shut my eyes tight trying hard to find my lost voice. Where did it go?

But I knew where it went. I simply could not retrieve it from where it was.

“Ah haaa . . .” Ms. Stevens prompted me to go on, “Forty-nine . . .”

I stared at her with all my insides screaming, “Fifty!!! I know it’s 50!” *Say it*, I encouraged myself. *Just say it*. But it was too late. I heard my inside voice pronounce 50 and knew Ms. Stevens would not approve of its sound. I had heard my inside voice say “feet-tee” and recognized that it was wrong. *Say 50*, I encouraged myself. *Fifty*. But no amount of self-prompting worked. Why could I not simply skip it and say the rest of the numbers? I can do it, I know I can, but my inside voice insisted on Feet-tee.

“Minerva?” Ms. Steven asked gently. “Did you practice ALL your numbers at home?”

I lowered my head and shook it.

“You can sit down,” Ms. Steven whispered. “Stanley, you’re next, and don’t you disappoint me.”

I returned to my place on the colorful carpet surrounded by students who proudly displayed their certificates and giant lollipops on their laps.

THE PERSONAL ROLE OF METHODOLOGY

From the onset, I acknowledge that my educational research does not ignore the premise that we are all in a relationship with existing social, political, and economic conditions that are structured hierarchically to one another. An important reason to do autoethnographic research is to help

uncover relations of domination in the “ordinary” fabric of educational contexts. One way to do this is by problematizing how we live our daily lives, for it is in the social, political, and cultural practices that our perceptions of the “common sense” are formed that, in turn, affect how we live our lives (Apple, 1995). Underlying my discussion on autoethnography as a research methodology for the marginalized is the principle that hegemonic forms of ideology are not to be taken lightly and, therefore, must be highlighted as I consider how aspects of my own student identity were formed in relation to particular ideological constructs, such as the use of language in the *Kinder Story* above. Macedo, Dendrinos, and Gounari (2003) remind us that “simple communication implies linguistic interactions between humans in given historical, social, and cultural contexts” (p. 25). Furthermore, the idea of using autoethnographic research in the *Kinder Story* calls attention to how dominant forms of assimilationist ideology function within educational institutions in shaping students’ behaviors in schools. In my case, I felt silenced brought about by my feelings of shame in language use by a well-meaning teacher who engaged in practices of linguistic discrimination. To be a “nice” teacher, Nieto (2010) claims, is not enough.

A quote from Apple (1995) summarizes the implications of ideology in our lives:

[I]deologies [are] filled with contradictions. They are not coherent sets of beliefs. It is probably wrong to think of them as only beliefs at all. They are instead sets of lived meanings, practices, and social relations that are often internally inconsistent. They have elements within themselves that see through to the heart of the unequal benefits of a society and at one and the same time tend to reproduce the ideological relations and meanings that maintain the hegemony of dominant classes (Richard, 1979). Because of this, ideologies are contested; they are continually struggled over. Since ideologies have both “good and bad sense” within them, people need not be won over to one side or the other, if you will. Particular institutions become the sites where this struggle takes place and where these dominant ideologies are produced. The school is crucial as one of these sites. (p. 14)

As a Chicana researcher, I use educational narratives in order to focus on the concept of ideology and to draw attention to how ideology plays out in more nuanced ways. To be sure, the theoretical concept of ideology is heavily abstract and complicated. For this reason, I unravel ideological underpinnings by underscoring their appearance in the various educational settings where I have traversed, or rather, transgressed, by behaving properly—that is, according to white norms and privileges. But I do not fool myself in thinking that my proper behavior in elite institutions, and not-so-elite institutions, such as urban schools, has been without conflict. My very presence, the presence of the brown, female body and the lived experiences contained within, after all, is a reminder of class and racial inequities. Speaking about the role of people of color in institutions of higher education, Córdova (1998) observes:

Our presence, as working-class people of color (especially women of color), in an institution which values itself on its elitist criteria for admission, forces the debates and challenges previously sacred canons of objective truth. Our presence, therefore, and the issues we raise, threaten the class legitimization function of the University. It is probably for this reason that our presence here is so complex—and so important (p. 18).

Ultimately, I am influenced by the work of Córdova and others (Carter, 2005; Delgado Bernal, 2006) to think about important relationships in schools and the ways that ideologies are formed as they directly relate to issues of power. Current forms of academic and personal relations between the adults in urban schools and the students who attend them are created under dehumanizing conditions that limit the capacity for students and their teachers to build relationships based on

conscientização (Freire, 2003)—the ability to connect the social, political, racial, and economic contradictions that frame our contexts in ways that require us to mobilize against those existing conditions that serve to oppress and dehumanize us. Without *conscientização*, the situation turns troubling as the effects of these conditions limit students' abilities to be academically successful.

An Exclusionary Tale, Fall 1986

Dr. Sanders was our middle school principal, known for his loud, belly-shaking jolly laughs. They were the kind of laughs that reminded us of Santa. He resembled the mythic man, too: large, round, and white. The principal's charm made all the students feel as if Dr. Sanders was their best friend, and so he was treated like a Hollywood celebrity around campus, especially during lunchtime. The principal would wrap his enormous arms around us, enveloping all the middle-schoolers into a colossal side bear hug. It was quite possible that he could fit as many as 30 giggling students within his reach. He would ask us how we were and often inquired about our parents or older siblings, "How's your mother?" or "How's your brother doing in high school? What is he now, a sophomore?" A boisterous laugh and the usual warning followed every sentence, "I'm going to call them to make sure!"

Dr. Sanders delighted me until I learned about whom I truly was in the eyes of the school principal; I was in eighth grade, attending to my duties as an office aide, my favorite period of the day. I was stuffing teacher's mailboxes with weekly school newsletters, hot off the copy machine in the main office one early afternoon when I overheard a conversation.

"Dr. Sanders?" Ms. Whiteford, the friendly main office secretary stopped the principal on his way in from roaming the campus after the last lunch period.

"Yes, gorgeous?" he replied heading toward her desk, picking up all the red jellybeans from her overflowing candy platter and popping them into his mouth several at a time.

"Well. I'm a bit worried," she began. "We haven't received any of the math textbooks, and it's already three months into the new school year."

"That's it?" he commented, surprised.

Selecting the orange jellybeans this time, Dr. Sanders looked at her. "Well, um, yes," she continued. "The teachers are complaining, saying that the students have nothing to do."

"No rush," he said. "These kids are gonna be factory workers anyway."

He broke out in laughter and the rest of the staff laughed along with him as if it were the funniest joke he'd ever cracked. The staff didn't seem fazed by his revelation. In those days, unlike today, the middle school office staff was made up of older, white ladies who aligned themselves with the principal's interests or, rather, forgot that they themselves were working-class folk, too. Dr. Sanders went back to his office, sat in his beautiful, high-back, leather chair and continued with his day; business as usual for everyone at South Gate Middle School. Meanwhile, I continued stuffing teachers' mailboxes with the weekly newsletter banner across the top announcing, "South Gate Middle School is a great place to be, nice place to learn!"

A CHICANA'S RESEARCH TOOL OF CHOICE: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Stories are the ways humans make sense of their worlds. Stories are essential to human understanding and are not unique to autoethnography. Stories are the focus of Homeric literature, oral

traditions, narrative analysis, and fairy tales. Given their importance, I argue that stories should both be a subject and a method of social science research (Ellis, 2004, p. 32).

There are good reasons to use autoethnography. In calling my research autoethnographic, I mean to accentuate how this method uses one's own experience in a culture to look at our culture and ourselves. In doing so, I emphasize the direct ties between individual lives and larger notions of social formations and historical processes (Chávez, 2010). Additionally, autoethnography can be defined as the union of "autobiography, story of one's own life, with ethnography, the study of a particular social group" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 6). Ellis (2004) explains autoethnography in this way:

Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationships to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and the cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition. (p. 38)

Although social scientists now use the term autoethnography to refer to studies that include the researcher and his or her experiences in the field, as well as to express in a narrative form how people "do" culture, I use the term autoethnography as it was originally conceived, that is, "cultural-level studies by anthropologists of their 'own people,' in which the researcher is a full insider by virtue of being 'native,' acquiring an intimate familiarity with the group, or achieving full membership in the group being studied" (Ellis, 2004, p. 38).

To elaborate, instead of the traditional ethnographic study of immersing oneself in "the field" of another culture, autoethnography allows me to center my own educational experiences. My elite graduate school experience at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, uncovered the insight that it was popular for privileged, well-educated Whites to conduct research in urban schools for a period of time in order to gain an understanding of the failures of urban schooling. But as an educational researcher and a product of urban schooling, am I now supposed to ignore these experiences? That is unlikely; I consider it an advantage that I now have the tools to use these experiences to produce new knowledge from an organic position. Delgado Bernal (2006) speaks of this Chicana epistemology as research that is generated from "collective experience and community memory" (p. 114). In order to ensure the integrity of these experiences and memories, autoethnographic work enables me to extract my K-12 years of "research" at the same time that critical race theory (CRT) then becomes the theoretical validation that demands that I speak up.

There are compelling reasons to do this kind of research; I am optimistic about the effects of two particularly stimulating elements in autoethnography. Foremost, it is the unconcealed and unapologetic use of emotion utilized by the researcher in the writing style that contains the possibility to position readers in an unconventional spot: squarely alongside the "despised other" (Apple, 2006b, p. 683): the Chicana protagonist. This positionality creates an opportunity for dissonance or what Rendón (2009) describes as a "dialectical space where new understanding might emerge through the integration of polarities" (p. 68). Thus, autoethnography becomes an effective method to engage academic readers by pulling them away from interpreting this research as simply a distant "unit of analysis" text. If done well, autoethnography has the potential to create conditions of emotional jarring. Moreover, autoethnography has the possibility to create

relationships that can be based on more basic human feelings to create authentic and meaningful connections (Rendón, 2009). In a similar fashion, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) describe stories by people of color as a way to “catalyze the necessary cognitive conflict to jar dysconscious racism” (p. 58). In such situations, I contend that these jolts have the potential to contribute to engendering closer relationships with the “marginalized other” through storytelling. Coles (1989) observed:

[S]tories are renderings of life; they can not only keep us company, but admonish us, point us in new directions, or give us the courage to stay a given course. They can offer us kinsmen, kinswomen, comrades, advisers—offer us other eyes through which we might see, other ears with which we might make surroundings. (p. 159–160)

I consider how this initial sense of connection, empathy, or differing perspective may begin to uproot those firmly planted in detrimental common sense ways of understanding difference. The notion of being uprooted, the sense of being lifted up and off the hegemonic center, must be channeled by bringing these new relationships into the margins so to de-center dominance in order to produce more equitable educational spaces.

I call attention to the use of autoethnography. This methodology has been practiced since the early 1970s (Anderson, 2006), yet it is still at the margins of mainstream forms of research methodologies (Jewett, 2008). Autoethnography confronts and defies traditional investigative methods. In addition, autoethnography challenges the role of objectivity in research since it underscores the positionality of the researcher in this investigation. I am exceedingly comfortable in this methodological zone; hence, autoethnography and the use of CRT are an attempt to reclaim representational space. I do this to have an unconventional voice, with an unconventional story, and still be included in the academy.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY: WEAVING STORIES WITH THEORY

Given the above discussion, I tenaciously use my autobiographical experiences as valid ethnographic research to contribute to existing educational knowledge around issues of educational equity. I wish to build on critical race theorists, like Delgado (2009), Montoya (2002), and Solórzano and Yosso (2002, 2009), who make claims to the liberatory and empowering effects of this epistemology. These theorists rationalize the margins as a place for counter-storytelling, and they justify the role of critical race theory as a framework that:

(a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process . . . [I]t also challenges the separate discourses on race, gender, and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of people of color; (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of color; (c) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination; and (d) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color. . . . [I]t views these experiences as sources of strength and (e) uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, humanities, and the law to better understand the experiences of students of color. (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24)

The use of critical race theory is easy to understand. The level of experience that is required to do critical race theory for me has been ripe from the beginning. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) explain critical race theory in education to be “a set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seek to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom” (p. 25). Additionally, they developed five elements that highlight the framework. First, they include “the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination” (p. 25). This aspect of critical race theory acknowledges that racism does not stand alone, that racism is a facet of other forms of subordination that include, for instance, gender, class, language, and sexuality. These features of intercentricity call attention to race and racism in relationship to other forms of oppression.

The second advantage to using this theoretical framework includes “the challenge to dominant ideology” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 63). This aspect of CRT questions the pervasive American narratives of equal educational opportunity by challenging claims of neutrality at the same time that it exposes the liberal discourse of colorblindness as a tool to reframe and protect white privilege (Leonardo, 2004) and the historical and contemporary forms of whiteness as a property (Harris, 1993).

The third element explains “the commitment to social justice” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Solórzano and Yosso are clear to acknowledge the contradictory forms that exist in educational settings, voicing their understanding of the ways in which schools function both as oppressive institutions and institutions where forms of resistance against hegemonic practices are to be found and cultivated. Therefore, the call for social justice by critical race theorists requires the eradication of “racism, sexism, and poverty and the empowering of subordinated minority groups” (p. 26).

The fourth component calls for “the centrality of experiential knowledge” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Critical race theorists call for the recognition of diverse forms of knowledge, created by people of color, as a challenge to hegemonic forms of understanding the experience of the “despised others” (Apple, 2006b, p. 683). In particular, the methods by which people of color are choosing to describe their knowledge include forms of “storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, *cuentos*, *testimonios*, chronicles, and narratives” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Critical race theorists call for the validation of these ways of understanding the world as a form of resilience and resistance by people of color and express the need to include and legitimize these diverse texts when considering alternative forms of understanding our existing social (dis)order.

Finally, the fifth element argues for a “transdisciplinary perspective” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Critical race theorists recognize the importance of generating new knowledge from the diversity of academic disciplines, in a sense, mirroring our intersecting social realities. Of most prominence in CRT are the fields of “ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, law, and other fields to guide research that better understands the effects of racism, sexism, and classism on people of color” (p. 27).

The Perfect Marriage: CRT and Autoethnography

At the center of this discussion is my perspective that has been marginalized. I use critical race theory because I have no choice; it is what I know and how I come to know. It is the heart

of my epistemological frame. By grounding my work within CRT, I intentionally underscore the interrelated roles of schools as apparatuses assisting in the process of capital accumulation, legitimation, and production—thus calling attention to the impact on the ideological roles that educational institutions play in the sorting practices that influence the formation of particular identities (Apple, 2006a). By weaving theory and narrative together, my *testimonios* aim to problematize the ways in which diverse educational institutions have influenced my ideological perspective regarding race, class, and culture.

Both stories included in this piece are offered as illustrations of the impact of ideology that help emphasize particular forms of identity development as a student of color in urban schools. Without the use of *testimonios*, without the power of the first person account and the role of bearing witness to educational injustice, my ability to challenge dominant perceptions around language and class would be limited. Accordingly, the use of the Kinder Story sets the tone for my trajectory in education: a story that encompasses my position from the margins. In retrospect, speaking with an accent in kindergarten and being judged against fluent English speakers brought about my own silencing, as was the case at various other moments in my education. Developing resiliency sometimes means that it was simply wise to stay silent. Elenes (2000) argues for the need to voice such *testimonios* as a way to “situate knowledge” (p. 115) uniquely gained from the perspective of the oppressed. Indeed, these *testimonios* reveal the contradictions inherent in my developing identity as a student, for they serve to identify the moments when I consciously succumbed to ideological dominance and those when I rebelled against it, such as was the result of the Exclusionary Tale. Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) describe this rebellion as a characteristic of “transformational resistance” that occurs when oppressive situations create an “I’ll prove others wrong” (p. 319) attitude in the Chicana student. I recall the principal incident and his comment most vividly when I needed to push myself through difficult and challenging experiences in education. In essence, *testimonios* trace the path that reveals a “map of consciousness” (Elenes, 2000, p. 115) as I developed ways to proactively navigate dominant ideological settings in schools. My *testimonios*, generated from oppressive situations, cement my desire for social justice and fuel the need to improve schooling conditions for those students of color who follow.

Marrying CRT with autoethnography constructs the *testimonios* of the anomaly in unique ways. Together, they represent new alternatives in thinking about the voices that have been excluded in the academy. I draw on storytelling in order to provide a more critical understanding, in particular, of the urban school experience and its consequences on the shaping of student identities as a result of the inferior schooling conditions that are typically found in such schools (Fernandez, 2002). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue for “voice” in the form of storytelling as an integral component of critical race theory. As they contend, voice is:

[A] first step on the road to justice [that] provides a way to communicate the experiences and realities of the oppressed. Thus, without authentic voices of people of color (as teachers, parents, administrators, students, and community members) it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities. (p. 58)

Indeed, without this voice, educational institutions would be limited in their perspective in constructing more equitable schooling conditions for all students. How I chose to think and write about the function of storytelling in my new role as an educational researcher is worth noting. To be sure, this theoretical lens and autoethnography represent the political forms of my

development; more significantly, however, they are inextricably intertwined with my personal development. Critical race theory already spoke to these forms of intimate connections (Delgado, 2009). Critical race theory and autoethnography are the manners in which I think about the world and the ways I have chosen to describe my experiences.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC LIMITATIONS

It is important to consider the limitations of autoethnographic writing as a research tool. First, from an educational researcher standpoint, this form of writing will routinely suffer for its difficulty to claim generalizability from a single autoethnographic account. However, centralizing the voices and stories of subjugated scholars of color facilitates understanding how “sociotemporal notions of oppression and the normalization of racial inequality in public schools and society” (Duncan, 2005, p. 2) function to produce particular student identities. Hence, recognizing racial and class inequality in American schools cannot fully be examined without capturing the narratives of those who lived through these experiences.

Second, given that the researcher and the participant are the same individual, many scholars will be “teetering on edge,” so to speak, by this epistemological framework. Some have claimed that autoethnographic writing must be balanced delicately so as not to tread on the side of essentialism (Buzard, 2003). However, the obligation to make scholarly contributions to the development of our own critical consciousness is imperative. Rendón (2009) furthers this positionality by claiming that the “work of transformation is not only about changing what is ‘out there’; it is about transforming what is ‘in here,’ our own internal views and assumptions” (p. 48). Understandably, the limitations imposed by the construction of self-knowledge are challenged by our humanness as we “interview ourselves” to discover that we must rely on our fragmented sense of memory or our limited capacity to understand and reflect upon our own experiences. I want to make clear that in the act of retelling, we are simultaneously reinterpreting the events we choose to depict regarding our lived experiences. Thus, while stories are many times fragmented bits and pieces of our own collective memory, these instances serve to deepen our understanding of the ways in which social relations are embedded within existing hegemonic structures—in this case, educational institutions.

CONCLUSION

“Autobiographical stories really make theory and history come alive, don’t they?” (Ellis, 2004, p. 23)

The stories I research are my own—the stories of my understandings and perceptions regarding my schooling experience, the data that make up my educational experiences as a working-class Chicana who traveled through the (treacherous) educational system, relatively unscathed. I emphasize *relatively*—the seemingly successful educational ways, according to mainstream notions of understanding educational success; that is, success measured by a bachelor’s degree or a graduate degree from a college or university (Huber, Huidor, Malagon, Sanchez, & Solórzano, 2006). This is an important form of analysis in the face of reigning positivistic methodologies. At the same time, autoethnography combined with critical race theory serve to highlight the much larger critique of the effects of schooling on poor and working-class students of color. It

is a deliberate attempt on my part for the personal and cultural to become indistinguishable as I demonstrate that trying to separate the two creates subtractive schooling conditions (Valenzuela, 1999). If schools are serious about successfully educating Latina/o students and other students of color, the autoethnographic texts from a Latina who “made it” could uncover factors that led to such “success” across the educational pipeline. I wish to include my narratives as opportunities to assist in “unlock[ing] polarities” (Rendón, 2009, p. 68) experienced in education. In a more fitting sense, Rendón contends that “unlocking the polarities requires surrendering old belief systems and working with our growth edges as we begin to uncover larger truths that join two realms of reality” (p. 68) to produce new forms of knowledge and understandings of our practice and our role within these educational spaces. Expanding on Rendón’s notion of unlocking polarities to dislodge outdated forms of thinking about what constitutes truth, narratives in the academy further the scholarly contribution of a more complicated analysis of social inequality in schools. Toward this end, stories capture the nuanced forms of how oppression and inequality function in educational settings told from the perspective of those who experienced such microaggressions, the subtle form of racism (Sue, Lin, Tortino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). As a result, I bear witness to the experiences of those schooled in urban educational institutions. I find myself armed with educational theory, writing stories that push me to be inwardly reflective as I consider ways to transform educational institutions into more socially just places that recognize the diversity of all our students. Inward reflectivity, therefore, is certainly a good place to start if our sustained goals are to change these highly politicized and unequal structures within the field of education.

NOTES

1. Title I was enacted in 1965 with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was created to relieve the effects of poverty by providing schools with additional funding in order to meet state and academic based standards tailored to particular school needs. In order to qualify, schools must show evidence of at least 40% poverty rate based on free and reduced-fee lunch applications.
2. All names have been changed.

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