

Using LatCrit, Autoethnography, and Counterstory to Teach About and Resist Latina/o Nihilism

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Abstract: Nihilism caused by inequalities and injustices hurts students of color. Educators can help these students with Critical Race theory and storytelling. Latina/o students also face nihilism but there is no clear solution. This study explores a way to use LatCrit in the K-12 classroom to fight for justice and equality.

Race is a major problem in America's schools. African American students find themselves in inferior schools. Students of color find that images and stories that represent them are not in the texts they use in school (Smiley, 2011). West (2009) argues that race matters in America; students of color can develop a sense of nihilism that is tragic when structural forces deny their value, and fighting this nihilism is also central to the democratic process (West, 2011).

Public schools unfortunately can be coercive and controlling to the point of stifling critical thinkers (Chomsky, 2000). Critical Race theory (CRT) seeks to explore how students can give voice to their experiences and stories in a culture that oppresses them (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Concerned educators have begun to use the story telling in CRT to critique the racial inequalities of the educational system (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Role models including teachers especially those of color are important for helping students of color become more positive and strive toward success (Smiley, 2011). Caring, hopeful teachers help students better themselves, see a better future, and reach their goals through education (Van Manen, 1990).

The struggle to fight nihilism goes beyond color and affects other oppressed people who need to become part of our democracy (West, 2011). Latina/o students also face an educational system where images and stories about themselves do not appear in school texts (De Varona, 1996). Education can help Latina/os turn the straw of the everyday challenges of facing inequality into the gold of a better future (Cisneros, 1987). Role models such as educators especially Latina/o educators can be critical to the success of Latina/o students (De Varona, 1996). Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) also offers a form of resistance to Latina/o students who do not all fit into the racial categorizations in CRT. LatCrit uses testimonios as a form of counterstory to resist injustices (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). However, Latina/o educators (De Varona, 1996) who seek to fight nihilism in their K-12 classrooms have few resources and few examples of how LatCrit stories can be created and used specifically by K-12 educators to help students resist nihilism and succeed in the K-12 educational system.

The purpose of this study is to outline a specific way in which a Latina/o educator can create a counterstory to resist nihilism based on their own experiences through autoethnography and use it in the classroom to help Latina/o students find their voice. This study seeks to answer the main question: How can Latina/o educators use LatCrit to create counter stories specifically in the K-12 classroom to resist nihilism? These secondary questions will be used to answer the main question: How can autoethnography be used by a Latina/o Educator to create a counterstory? How can a Latina/o teacher's counterstory be used as a resource in the classroom? This study is important to educators and researchers because Latina/os are a growing population in the United States and their education is important to the future. Knowing how to use LatCrit

in the classroom is important to theorists because the various critical theories intersect within the diversity of cultures, issues, identities, and demographics that are within a classroom. This study begins with an exploration of nihilism, democracy, and CRT. Then Latina/o issues, LatCrit theory, and LatCrit tools including testimonios and counterstories are explored. Then the methods and findings of a study are discussed.

Nihilism and Democracy

Nihilism is a resigned hopelessness based in part on frustration over the persistence of racism even after the end of slavery and the passing of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (West, 1993). West (2004) argues that this nihilism has mutilated democracy and is fostered by three nihilistic dogmas. First, market-fundamentalism is the corporate-dominated political and economic system and its effects on popular culture such as materialism, consumerism, and the worship of wealth and greed. Aggressive militarism is another dogma that promotes imperial motives and war mongering. The dogma of escalating authoritarianism is the loss of our freedoms. Nihilism can be fought by strengthening and deepening democracy with four traditions. First is the reemergence of a Socratic questioning of ourselves, the nature of authority, and dogma. The second is a prophetic pursuit of justice in the tradition of the major religions. The third is a tragicomic hope, which is the ability to laugh and enjoy life and not succumb to nihilism because you sense that a better time is coming. A fourth tradition is called American imaginative self creation where one reinvents oneself through reflection to survive and succeed (West, 2004). Mott (2008) argues for the necessity of students to do personal writing to tackle the big issues in America and uses West's ideas to do so. CRT is one way of using personal writing to counter nihilism and promote democracy.

Critical Race Theory

CRT grew out of a social science critique of the law and civil rights legislation that argued that while classical racism was outlawed, racism in more mundane forms continued in the law and in society that supported a White majority and their ideology, culture, and epistemology (Parker, 2004). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) developed critical race methodology in terms of its utility as an analytical framework to ask research questions, review literature, analyze data, and form conclusions and recommendations. Tenets of a CRT methodology have emerged: Placing race and its intersectionality with other forms of subordination at the center of research, using race in research to challenge the dominant scientific norms of objectivity and neutrality, having the research connected with social justice concerns and potential praxis with ongoing efforts in communities, making experiential knowledge central to the study, and linking this knowledge to other critical research and interpretive perspectives on race and racism. The final tenets emphasize the importance of transdisciplinary perspectives that are based in other fields for enhancing an understanding of the effects of racism and other forms of discrimination on persons of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

CRT has evolved from its early focus on African Americans and the impact of the law on Black-White European American relations to examining how issues related to the law and immigration, national origin, language, globalization, and colonization relate to race. This line of critique formed the LatCrit and critical Asian American legal studies movement that called for a type of CRT specific to these groups of color. For example, LatCrit has drawn similarities with CRT regarding racism within U.S. law. Yet the LatCrit movement sees itself grounded more in documenting through narrative storytelling how other aspects of race, ethnicity, language, and national origin converge to make it so that Latina/os are seen as the other within the U.S. racial context (Iglesias, 1999). Asian American CRT uses the power of narrative voice to inform the

law regarding the Asian American experience. For example, Chon (1995) and Chartier (2001) stress the importance of narrative and storytelling in critically exploring the use of language and discourses that make Asians honorary Whites whose fears can be played against other groups of color. These groups can also have the law used against them (Parker, 2004). CRT and LatCrit are closely related and can be used in the classroom through the use of storytelling. Revilla (2001) used a fictional dialogue between a professor and a student to discuss problems with education. In order to explore LatCrit, some understanding of Latina/o issues is important.

Latina/o Issues

West (2004) argues that nihilism occurs in Black students when years after *Brown v. The Board of Education* very little has changed in schools and society in terms of certain forms of discrimination. Lopez (1998) argues that just as important as *Brown v. Board of Education* is for Black students is the case *Hernandez v. Texas* for Hispanics and Latina/os in America. The facts of this case may be as marginalized as much as Latina/o education is. In 1954, the Supreme Court in *Hernandez v. Texas* decided that the equal protection clause of the fourteenth amendment applied to Mexicans (and in turn Hispanics, Latina/os, and other groups) because they were discriminated against. The verdict was not based on color or race but on being a class distinguishable on some basis and different from a community norm as measured by the attitude of the community (Lopez, 1998). If discrimination exists for Latina/os in education after these landmark cases, conditions exist for Latino nihilism. Students continue to be educated to accept ideologies that serve the needs of the dominant class (Chomsky, 2000). Recent education reform has not changed Latina/o conditions. LatCrit and CRT research has been used, for example, to explore how Latina/os students continue to be marginalized in the Chicago public school system in recent years (Davila & de Bradley, 2010).

The Latina/o population has a high growth rate: Close to a million Latina/os are added to the population, and more than two thirds of them are due to birth and the remainder is due to immigration (Nunez, 1999). Latina/os are expected to be at least 24% of the entire national population by 2050. In the field of education, dominant ideologies of meritocracy, individualism and color-blindness can mask the complex struggles of students of color and the systems of oppression that create the conditions for those struggles (Nunez, 1999). In academia, ideological beliefs maintain White superiority rooted in Western epistemologies that produce knowledges that are deemed legitimate. Other epistemologies are slowly made illegitimate by comparison. An apartheid of legitimate and illegitimate knowledges keeps students of color subordinated and maintains racial, ethnic, and other divisions (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). The years of biased knowledge production have several consequences: An institutional Anglo-Saxonism develops and moves beyond democratic institutions to racial Anglo-Saxonism where some Whites see themselves as superior to Latina/o people. In the minds of many there was a linking of Mexicans and other Latina/os together in one group that works in a way to neutralize their individuality and voice. The Mexicanization of Latina/os is also a downgrading of Mexicans in particular and of Hispanics in general because much of the anti-Mexican fervor is based on stereotypes in general. There is also a linking of Spanish ancestry to the historical enemy of Britain Spain making all Hispanics villains by proxy and Britain as a historic homeland of Whites in America. This belief system also holds that the Latina/o miscegenation with Indian people in the past and the racial mixing caused by the moor invasion or attitudes about slaves validates the distortions created by past sciences of race and identity. The Anglo-Saxon norm is part of institutionalizing racism and other prejudices as tests and other assessments, activities, languages, and processes are based on an Anglo-Saxon norm bolstered by White privilege that

works against minority students. Cultural, intellectual, environmental, genetic, and social deficit theories are promoted by scientists to explain Latina/o conditions (Nunez, 1999). Ironically many Latina/o immigrant students may have too much knowledge or conflicting knowledge because they not only mastered the work in their home country but are now asked to master the same knowledge through a White biased point of view (Zuniga & Hamann, 2009). American White culture paints the Mexican national character as deficient, too full of machismo, and too full of a family cohesion that works against the White patriarchal norm. The Mexican character becomes a proxy for all Hispanics (Nunez, 1999). After years of marginal visibility and relative docility, Latina/os now are made the scapegoats of Anglo choice as Anglo-American society is racked by failures. Recent assaults on Latina/os are mounted as part of the larger civil rights rollback and serve to suppress Latina/o growth as well as to consolidate Anglo power and White privilege more generally. Immigration for Hispanics is defined and feared in the way affirmative action for Blacks is. The political issues are part of a larger minority majoritarian struggle that occurs in the intersection of culture, identities, and nationalities in the space the various critical theories try to explore. Backlash politics and nativistic policies echoes the malevolent motives that produced the racist and ethnocentric architecture of Anglo American legal education and law practice earlier this century (Valdes, 1997). In the middle of this are the K-12 students who are taught biased, marginalized images of Hispanics and lack the resources, models, and literacies in being Latina/o to counteract the biased messages sent to them (De Varona, 1996).

LatCrit Theory

LatCrit theory emerges from CRT in the sense that Latina/o issues are in the intersection of various issues people face. LatCrit addresses four concepts: opposition, justice, structuralism, and particularity. LatCrit theory explores the Latina/os historical engagement in constant opposition and seeking justice as an honorable, an inevitable tradition now set up to understand and change a U.S. socio-legal system that presents a disabling environment for Latina/os social development via new nativism and racism. LatCrit theory's social structural critique explores how long term interests have shaped the Latina/o world. LatCrit's preference for particularity or perspectivism over universalism is useful for social development because it highlights individual and group experiences that are often masked by universal notions that are not objective and that make Latino communities into monoliths (Carrasco, 1997). LatCrit's four functions are to promote knowledge production, a practical advancement of transformation leading to praxis, an expansion and connection of struggles so that elevation of the Latina/o condition in the United States also elevates the Latina/o condition everywhere, and finally the cultivation of communities and coalitions of scholars and activists so that they can share and collaborate. These functions require LatCrit resistance of essentialist assumptions (Valdes, 1997).

LatCrit Tools

LatCrit tools include testimonio, cultural intuition, autoethnography, and counterstory. While testimonio and cultural intuition are more particular to LatCrit and autoethnography and counterstory intersect with other theories, the idea here is that tools should intersect different boundaries of identity, geographies, and culture. This is necessary because the Latina/o educator teach a diverse population of students and not just Latina/os. This allows non Latinos to also tell their stories and teach in classroom. While other tools are available, this list is not meant to be exhaustive put practical. Understanding these tools makes it easier to understand how and why they are combined for the framework, methods, and pedagogy of a study to be discussed later in this paper.

Testimonio

Testimonio is “a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future” (Huber, 2009, p. 644). In LatCrit, a person can use cultural intuition to create testimonio.

Cultural Intuition

There are four sources of cultural intuition researchers draw upon during the research process – personal, academic, professional, and the analytic process itself. Personal experience includes the researchers’ background and personal history, which shape the ways they understand, interpret, and make sense of events, circumstance, and data during the research process. Academic experiences inform how they make sense of related literature on their research topic. Professional experiences provide them with significant insight into the research process. The final source of cultural intuition lies in research experiences (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a reflective and reflexive process of telling, performing, constructing, analyzing, representing, and rigorously studying one’s own stories for what they offer others (Fine, 1994). Autoethnography challenges our assumptions of normalcy, instructs us about forms of socialization, explores our participation in school socialization, and in turn, teaches one about the self. Second, it may teach one to write to practice and share emotions with audiences and to improve the craft for its own sake. Third, autoethnography may also teach one to inculcate and model by exploring self-critical attitudes, offering self-disclosure in teaching and learning, and checking inequity and oppression in our classrooms (Denzin, 2003). Adams-Wiggan (2010) used autoethnography and counterstory in researching the experiences of Black professional women (Adams-Wiggan, 2010). Collective autoethnography allows a group of researchers to analyze and interpret each other’s work while creating a space for class members to respond to that work. Participants write individual narratives based on critical moments that allows for responses to each other (Lapadat, 2009).

Counterstory

Counterstorytelling is both a technique of telling the story of often untold experiences and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power that is often a natural part of the dominant discourse (Delgado, 1989). Counterstory has been used in CRT and LatCrit (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). A fictional counterstory can be powerful because it tells a truth that can be tragic and sometimes comic. Derrick Bell’s (1992) fictitious “Space Traders” story, for example, dealt with the idea of Blacks in America being traded away by political leaders to aliens offering a truth of how Blacks were valued politically. Delgado (1989) created the Rodrigo chronicles as a counterstory on Latino issues. Counterstorytelling was used to examine student resistance in the 1968 East Los Angeles school walkouts and the 1993 UCLA student strike. Interviews were done with participants in the events and then a counterstory that briefly listens in on a dialogue between two data-driven composite characters was created to illuminate the concepts of internal and external transformational resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Counterstories can build empathic communities among those at society’s margins by putting a human face to educational theory and practice; challenging conventional wisdom from society’s center; revealing opportunities; using stories and reality to create a better world, and providing a space for challenging established belief systems (Delgado, 1989).

Method

This study used content analysis. Content analysis is any “technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1969, p. 14). The researcher created and sampled his own work and experiences to create data for his cultural intuition, testimonio, autoethnography, and counterstory. Data collection was done through notetaking. For a month, the research kept a journal where daily ethnographic sketches were made related to Latina/o issues and nihilism. At the month’s end, the journal of ethnographies were categorized by the thematic categories of cultural intuition. In cultural intuition, the thematic categories are personal experiences, professional experiences, academic experiences, and research experiences. Because the methods are part of answering the research questions, the analysis is further explained with examples in the results and findings section of this study.

Findings

This is an excerpt from my autoethnography related to my professional experiences: “The conquistadors are big part of the curriculum I am asked to teach and then there are huge gaps in the appearance of Hispanics...”. Within each cultural intuition thematic category, the data was analyzed for larger themes. This was used to create a testimonio as I expanded on themes with a fervor for justice. This is an excerpt from my testimonio related to the autoethnography excerpt: “Latina\os are not considered equal in the present if they are rendered invisible from history...”.

How can autoethnography be used by a Latino Educator to create a counterstory?

The content from the testimonio was analyzed to create a counterstory. The process used was to look at a point in my testimonio and then make the opposite point in my counterstory in a satirical way. For example, if I testified that most national holidays were not Hispanic, my counterstory would have a Hispanic national holiday. The following is an excerpt from my counterstory: “The school was empty for the Cesar Chavez national holiday. I had spent the night worrying that my White Anglo students’ lack of bilingualism was hurting them on the SAT. Anglos don’t get how we improved the English language with Spanish masculine and feminine word forms. Everyday I say: A male teacher is a teachero. A female teacher is a teachera...”.

How can a Latino teacher’s counterstory be used as a resource in the classroom?

The researcher then used analysis of his counterstory and how it was made to brainstorm ways in which the data could be used for teaching. My pedagogy consists of having students do what I did at a much smaller scale after I had role modeled it in the classroom and follow that with a discussion. The only change would be a brief discussion of other forms of discrimination and critical theories because Latina\o educators do not just teach Latina\o students. Tools like testimonio must adapt to fit those changes. Using satire creates fun which promotes engagement.

How can Latina/o educators use LatCrit to create counter stories specifically in the k-12 classroom to resist nihilism?

Data used to answer the secondary question can be used to answer the main question via brainstorming. Teachers can discuss nihilism, have students respond with autoethnographies, and then use collaborative learning to have student groups create collective autoethnographies. The class can decide on a class testimonio document. Learning can be extended by having them fight nihilism through their counterstories that could be posted on a wall or electronically.

Conclusion

In sum, concrete action, reflection, recognition, democratic, and multicultural practice is promoted. This study challenges nihilism because students are forced to question their

experiences, pursue justice, express tragic comic hope, and reinvent themselves through counterstories and discussions. For this study, the presentation of my work had to be abbreviated. In class situations, students would have full access to all my writing to learn from. Future researchers may use this approach and pedagogy on specific issues or events.

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