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Citation:

Anita Tijerina Revilla, LatCrit and CRT in the Field of Education: A Theoretical Dialogue between Two Colleagues, 78 Denv. U. L. Rev. 623 (2001)

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Wed Feb 6 22:02:17 2019

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LATCRIT AND CRT IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN TWO COLLEAGUES

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Although Critical Race Theory (“CRT”) and Latino/a Critical Race Theory (“LatCrit”) were originally legal movements, both have picked up popularity in the field of education,² especially amongst race and ethnic studies scholars. As a student and scholar in education, I find LatCrit’s transdisciplinary framework especially appealing. Many of us in education have begun to ask questions about the use and implications of LatCrit for education policy, pedagogy, and reform. In fact, several of us organized a reading group in which issues of identity, education, and politics were rigorously discussed. The following fictional dialogue reflects some of these conversations.

This discussion is presented in the form of a conversation because it aims to meet the story-telling tradition of LatCrit theory and the dialogue style of critical pedagogy.³ My story is unraveled in the interaction between the two fictional characters, two graduate students, in the context of an academic setting. The words and ideas discussed draw from the rich resources that are my classmates, colleagues, professors, and friends. I, like critical race theorist Charles Lawrence, acknowledge that “Every new and important understanding or insight that I have reached and found a way to articulate in my writing has come from dialogue with my [classmates, friends, family] . . . and with teachers [both outside and inside the classroom].”⁴ It is a critical dialogue in that it questions and critiques the ideologies and theories in which the students have been immersed.

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2. See Gloria Ladson-Billings, *Just What is Critical Race Theory and What’s it Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?* in 11:1 INT’L J. QUALITATIVE STUD. EDUC. 7-24 (1998). Ladson-Billings describes the challenge that she had in academia because she uses CRT as a primary lens for her work in education. *Id.*

3. Richard Delgado, *Legal Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative*, in CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE CUTTING EDGE 64 (Richard Delgado ed., 1995). Delgado writes, “The story invites the reader to alienate herself or himself from the events described, to enter into the mental set of the teller, whose view is different from the reader’s own. The oppositional nature of the story, the manner in which it challenges and rebuffs the stock story, thus causes him or her to oscillate between poles.” *Id.* at 73; see also PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* 75-118 (Myra Bergman Ramos trans., 1970).

4. Charles R. Lawrence, III, *The Word and the River: Pedagogy as Scholarship as Struggle*, in CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE KEY WRITINGS THAT FORMED THE MOVEMENT 336, 337 (Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. eds., 1995).

THE DIALOGUE

Delia: In education, we categorize ourselves into different theoretical camps, such as Latina/o Critical Race Theory, critical pedagogy,⁵ popular education⁶ and critical race theory or critical race pedagogy.⁷ However we all fall under the same umbrella because we recognize the need for social and institutional change. The assumption of different political identities creates divisions between us. It doesn't make much sense. Aren't we all pretty much doing the same thing? We're all interested in liberation and empowerment of the oppressed. We just do it in different ways.

Apolar: CRT, critical race pedagogy, LatCrit, popular education and critical pedagogy seem to fall under the same political umbrella because they are all rooted in the struggle to abolish social injustice, but my exposure to these different frameworks suggests to me that our liberatory efforts fall primarily into two separate categories, those that use race as the primary lens through which to understand and address social injustice and those that use class. Although some theorists purport to incorporate race, class, gender, and sexuality into their antisubordination efforts, their political engagements usually prioritize one of those elements. It is also my understanding that critical theory originated in a class analysis of power and oppression, and that LatCrit, and, to a lesser extent, CRT centralize the experience of race and racism while seeking to explore the intersections of race, class, and gender.⁸ While some work in critical pedagogy explores issues of race and gender as well as class, a huge criticism of Paulo Freire's work is that it does not address the issues of race or gender effectively.⁹

Delia: But there *are* many teachers who use critical pedagogy as a tool for dealing with racial and gender oppression in educational institutions.

5. I am referring to people that utilize Paulo Freire's ideologies to analyze power dynamics in society and education, but I knowingly overgeneralize that their main focus is class instead of race for the sake of comparing a race and class perspective. This generalization is widely based on observations of dialogues that have taken place at the Graduate School of Education at UCLA.

6. See generally Griff Foley, *Clearing the Theoretical Ground: Elements in a Theory of Popular Education* 44(2-3) INT'L REV. OF EDUC. 139, 140 (1998), (defining popular education).

7. See generally Marvin Lynn, *Toward a Critical Race Pedagogy: A Researcher's Note*, 33(5) URB. EDUC. J. 606-26 (1999); William F. Tate IV, *Critical Race Theory and Education: History, Theory, and Implications*, 22 REVIEW OF RESEARCH IN EDUCATION 195-250 (Michael W. Apple ed., 1997).

8. See *Critical Theory and Qualitative Research: Defining Critical Theory* at <http://www.ed.psu.edu/ci/cs597/definition.html>.

9. See Daniel Schugrensky, *The Legacy of Paulo Freire: A critical review of his contributions*, 31 (1&2) CONVERGENCE TRIBUTE TO PAULO FREIRE, 17-26 (1998) (stating "[Freire's] attempt to overcome the fragmentary effects of identity politics was based on a 'unity in diversity' strategy, although in his analysis of oppression, the variable of 'class' seems to have pre-eminence over others.") *Id.* at 23.

In fact, the people who I have known to take critical pedagogy into the classroom are usually teachers of color.

Apolinar: Yes, but I believe that critical theory does not adequately address the needs of students and teachers of color because most critical pedagogues do not deal with the very real effects of racism as a construct of power. Critical pedagogy tends to manifest itself in the classroom as dialogue that leads to the development of voice. If the teacher recognizes that racism affects his or her students, then there may be a discussion about race. But critical pedagogy does not necessarily recognize that racism is endemic in American society and that it affects all people, especially students in schools. This is why I favor LatCrit and CRT frameworks and encourage their development into pedagogical practices: they specifically deal with the effects that racism has in American society. If teachers were exposed to the literature of LatCrit, then their curriculum and teaching practices would reflect the struggle for social justice embedded in that literature. I am especially concerned about scholars who believe that because race is a social construction, the next logical move is to ignore race, as if this alone will end racism. In LatCrit, Ian Haney Lopez writes about the social construction of race.¹⁰ He says that while race is a social construct, we cannot deny the fact that race functions as a real source of oppression in society. We must deal with it, as it exists in present structures and discourses. There are many white postmodernists pushing the social construction of race argument, but in very different ways and for different reasons.¹¹ I think that their intention in deconstructing race is to avoid dealing with their own privilege, primarily as white males. The arguments about class oppression play a similar role in that they take the focus off of white privilege and they push it onto capitalist powers outside of person-to-person interactions.

Delia: I agree with Peter McLaren that “centrisms” and nationalism can create new boundaries that prevent the creation of social and political alliances. He advocates for solidarity, and he encourages people to move away from the tendency to stay within race-based struggle.¹² I am sure that his critique would extend itself to LatCrit because it maintains a primarily Latina/o focus.

10. See generally Ian F. Haney López, *The Social Construction of Race in CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE CUTTING EDGE*, *supra* note 3, at 191-201. Lopez indicates, “[t]he categories of race previously considered objective, such as Caucasoid, Negroid, and Mongoloid, are now widely regarded as empty relics, persistent shadows of the social belief in races that permeated early scientific thought. Biological race is an illusion. Social race, however, is not Race has its genesis and maintains its vigorous strength in the realm of social beliefs.” *Id.* at 200.

11. See generally PETER MCLAREN, *CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND PREDATORY CULTURE* 201-28 (1995). McLaren writes, “Dominant strands of the postmodern critique also tend to delegitimize the recent literature of peoples of color...” *Id.* at 206.

12. See MCLAREN, *supra* note 11. McLaren writes, “Attempting to abandon all vestiges of the dominant culture in the struggle for identity can lead to a futile search for premodern roots that in turn leads to a narrow nationalism” *Id.* at 215.

Apolinar: First, I would argue that McLaren and other neo-Marxist/critical pedagogues leave the discussion of race too quickly. Racial nationalism is often the first step toward a critical consciousness. Many people do not jump into a discussion of solidarity until they have explored the power dynamics of their everyday social interactions. For people of color, their social relations are racialized. Solidarity proponents have probably forgotten the process of race consciousness that led them to advocate for solidarity-based political organization. This is why, in addition to discussing the social construction of race, LatCrit scholars also analyze the ways in which the socially created categories have become destructive and enforced by the law through policies against people of color. I fear that some critical educators are attempting to create a space where people don't necessarily have to face the implications of race oppression. Secondly, the objectives of LatCrit are very different from traditional identity-based scholarships because both legal and education scholars make it clear that their purpose is not to create boundaries based on ethnic identity; rather the intention is to ensure that the voices of all "out" groups are heard and interconnected.¹³

Delia: But you cannot deny the overwhelming effect of class oppression. As popular and critical educators, we choose to involve the oppressed in movements from the ground up. We want people to be involved in a critical analysis of the world around them so that they can address the injustices that affect their lives.¹⁴ The reason we analyze class oppression is because it crosses race and national boundaries and it forces us to examine our own politics as members of a capitalist system. Critical pedagogues and Marxist scholars have drastically affected the way I perceive racial justice. They, and especially Antonia Darder, have actually pushed me to look more at the issue of economic justice. Antonia believes that identity politics leads us to our quest for social justice, but that we will never get there if we only explore our own identity struggle.¹⁵ She believes that a plan for social justice that does not demand economic justice is a faulty plan, and I totally agree with her. Again, I believe that this poses a strong critique of LatCrit and CRT because the literature that I have seen, for the most part, does not address the need for a more just economic system, rather the focus seems to remain on the advancement of "minority" groups.

13. See generally Francisco Valdes, *Outsider Scholars, Legal Theory & OutCrit Perspectivity: Postsubordination Vision as Jurisprudential Method*, 49 DEPAUL L. REV. 831 (2000). Francisco Valdes' discussion about 'OutCrit' coalitions is particularly important for envisioning a theoretical umbrella group that adequately embraces all social justice movements.

14. See Foley, *supra* note 6, at 139-53.

15. An idea she discussed on February 17, 1999, while conducting a three-day workshop on critical pedagogy at the 1999 California Association for Bilingual Education conference at the Los Angeles convention center.

Apolinar: I agree. I'm not against the evaluation of different forms of prejudice and injustices. But what I fear is that people outside of LatCrit and CRT are moving further away from issues of race because they believe that other areas must be dealt with before they focus on race oppression. I agree with Omi and Winant that our "central work is to focus attention on *the continuing significance and changing meaning of race*."¹⁶ Race has become a subsidiary problem in the struggle for class justice. And just as Darder suggests that social justice without an economic element is inappropriate, so is social justice void of a racial dimension.

Delia: I believe that popular educators abroad do deal with race and ethnicity, but it's not their sole focus. For example, in Mexico, Latin America, the Caribbean, and other areas, their work is very much tied to race and ethnicity because people in these particular countries confront ethnic or racial oppression. Of course, since the political process of racial formation works differently across national boundaries, the dynamics of international work changes. And perhaps race appears to be a secondary element in the work that popular educators do in those countries because of that distinction.¹⁷

Apolinar: Well, I'd be interested to learn more about the racial dynamics abroad that we often do not discuss in U.S. classrooms. Many serious racial problems exist but are ignored in many other countries. At least that is the perception here in the U.S. But still, when you compare popular educators' work abroad to the work of critical pedagogues in the United States, it is evident that race is not central to the work. When Freire wrote of the oppressed in 1970, he meant the economically oppressed. It wasn't until much later in life that his race and gender consciousness was raised.¹⁸ As a result, many critical pedagogues that have followed his work make the mistake of not centralizing race and racism in their work.

Delia: Are you denying that Critical Race Theorists do the same thing to class and even gender when they discuss race? Certainly, you don't believe that CRT adequately addresses class oppression. This has been my primary criticism of the field. Even before I read some of the CRT literature I was beginning to question whether racial equality meant racial *and* economic empowerment because it is unusual for people who speak

16. Michael Omi & Howard Winant, *On the Theoretical Status of the Concept of Race in RACE, IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION IN EDUCATION 3* (Cameron McCarthy & Warren Crichlow eds., 1993).

17. See Chan Lean Heng, *Talking pain: educational work with factory women in Malaysia*, in *GENDER IN POPULAR EDUCATION: METHODS FOR EMPOWERMENT 202-25* (Shirley Walters & Linzi Manicom eds., 1996); Elie Ghanem, *Social Movements in Brazil and their Educational Work*, 44 *INT'L R. EDUC.* 177-89 (1998); Foley, *supra* note 6, at 139-53.

18. Asserted by Antonia Darder at California Association of Bilingual Education conference on February 20, 1999; see also Schugurensky, *supra* note 9, at 23.

about the fight for equity to do so without the language of empowerment, opportunity, and access. Power has become an extremely suspicious thing to me. Does it really matter if people of color gain access into the middle class or positions of power if, essentially, another working class person that will also be exploited by the capitalist system will replace them in the blue-collar job that they leave behind? Without classconsciousness, we inevitably recreate oppressive class structures.

Apolinar: The woes of capitalism are tremendous. There is no doubt about that, but does that mean that we should give up on the study of race and the analysis of racism in the U.S.? Furthermore, do we give up trying to get people of color, specifically Chicanos and Chicanas in your own community, into higher education and positions of power?

Delia: At the very least, we must recognize these contradictions. I can not pretend that I do not know that in our capitalist society the social mobility of any population comes at the expense of the exploitation of another population; it doesn't matter what color they are. In order for the capitalist system to thrive, a labor force must be exploited. This idea, that in order for my family to have wealth someone else's family must be subject to poverty, upsets me. People of color, especially students, get offended when I say this. I have been asked, "Are you saying that we shouldn't aspire to be CEOs, doctors, lawyers, entertainers, athletes, or even professors?" What I want people to understand is that those professions are elite and not everyone has access to them. And I don't believe that we should push young people to pursue those professions for the sake of economic "success". And I most definitely do not agree with the gross disparities of pay in our country. Why should an architect make so much more money than a construction worker? I believe that a more egalitarian society can exist, even in a capitalist society, but first there must be an awareness of the fact that workers are being discriminated against and that no one is really making an effort to rectify that situation.

Apolinar: While you might believe this, you certainly are not practicing it in your daily life because you are at an elitist institution of education that rallies behind capitalism, and you participate in it in full force.

Delia: True. This is my hugest contradiction, but a higher education is not the enemy. The important thing to consider is the purpose of the education that I receive and the way in which I use this education. This is why my work focuses on labor and class struggles. My intention in the field of education is to raise consciousness and help facilitate social movements that will lead toward the democratic participation of the oppressed.¹⁹ I recognize and value the resources and ideologies of the oppressed. I believe that education will lead to liberation.

19. See Thomas J. La Belle, *From Consciousness Raising to Popular Education in Latin America and the Caribbean*, in 31(2) COMP. ED. REV. 201-17 (1987).

Apolinar: Can you really just raise consciousness amongst workers and expect liberation? I guarantee you that a non-capitalist society is not a race-free society. Nor is it free of racism, sexism, or homophobia. If the consciousness that you speak of does not truly address the intersections of class, race, gender, and sexuality, then how can we move toward solidarity?

Delia: Yes, this is the bigger question, how do we get past micro-levels of transformation and move toward a vision of social change? I do not believe that any of us can claim that we have a complete vision of liberation, a vision of justice that will work for all people for all time. Consider this tension: people believe that the more you invest in freedom, the less equality you have, and, conversely, the more equality you have the less freedom you have. In other words, equality of economic resources indicates to some people that there will be less freedom to indulge in wealth, leisure, and independence. This is why some racial equity advocates adamantly oppose social stratifications based on race but believe it is perfectly fine to have social stratifications based on class.²⁰ I think that many scholars, for example, are unwilling or unable to analyze class oppression because as professors in elitist institutions, they are very much entrenched in a capitalist structure.

Apolinar: So what of the plan for social justice, what can we do now to ensure that we are working toward a positive end?

Delia: Well, I agree with Eagleton that, "The feminist, nationalist, or labor unionist [has to] come to recognize that in the long run none of their desires is realizable without the fulfillment of the others."²¹ Kobena Mercer says, "solidarity does not mean that everyone thinks the same way, [instead] it begins when people have the confidence to disagree over issues of fundamental important precisely because they 'care' about building a common ground."²² But even as I talk about this in terms of solidarity, I question how realistic that is. What comes to mind is Carlos Torres' book in which he describes his hope for a democratic multicultural citizenship.²³ A democratic multicultural citizenship calls for the participation and acceptance of multicultural people in a nation that values the numerous perspectives of the people. One of the virtues that he believes is critical for a multicultural citizenship is the ability to dialogue

20. A UCLA law student in a Critical Race Theory seminar yelled, "If you think capitalism is the enemy, then you're staring at the enemy right now!" She refused to consider the negative repercussions of class systems based on capitalism (1999).

21. Terry Eagleton, *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment*, in *COLONIALISM AND LITERATURE* 37 (Univ. of Minn. Press 1990).

22. Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the jungle: identity and diversity in postmodern politics*, in *IDENTITY: COMMUNITY, CULTURE, DIFFERENCE* 68 (Jonathan Rutherford ed., 1990).

23. See generally Carlos Alberto Torres, *Democracy, Education and Multiculturalism: Dilemmas of Citizenship in a Global World* (1998).

and "the possibility of reaching a rational agreement."²⁴ Does this seem realistic to you? Do you think that you and I can ever come to a rational agreement about social justice or liberation, for example?

Apolinar: That depends. While I recognize the class-based prejudice that pervades this country, I agree with West and Ladson-Billings, and Critics in general, that race matters. Short of a social revolution, I believe that the best way to tackle the problems of social inequality in our society is to expose the role race and racism play in circumscribing people's access to higher education and their overall social mobility. I agree with Danny Solórzano that, "There's a racial dimension that middle class and elite people of color experience called racism. You may have class privilege, but racism provides a sting"²⁵ to your everyday life as a person of color. To what extent do you think race matters?

Delia: I agree that it does, but I maintain that until people move beyond race and examine the other large-scale structural elements that foster the oppression of people of color and poor people, you cannot say that you believe in equity. You might believe in equitable opportunities, but you most certainly don't believe in equity and equal value of all people. It's interesting that you bring up the concept of "revolution," as so many activists have continued to do since the civil rights movement. My research examines people's visions of social change that utilize the language of revolution. I don't see revolution as merely a historical, romanticized, or naïve idea; instead I see it as means to discuss both reform and transformation of the United States. People have been talking about revolution in this country for ages, and there's a reason that the language of revolution remains with us even to this day. While it is students that primarily "romanticize" revolution, it is nevertheless a concept that many activists (non-academic and academic) still hold up as a goal. For example, the Raza Women's organization on campus hosted their Fourth Annual Chicana/Latina conference this year, and the theme of the conference was "El Fuego de Nuestro Espiritu Continua la Llama de Revolución Colectiva: The Fire of our Spirit Continues the Flame of Collective Revolution." The conference invited women to participate in a day filled with educational workshops and cultural activities that dealt with Latino issues of all sorts. In the conference program they wrote, "This years [sic] theme...represents our internal passion, the ability to motivate ourselves and create change. It is the fire that burns within us to destroy the many "isms," such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism that attempts to dismantle our communities."²⁶ They believe that revolution has to do with the ways that they try to examine their own lives and how

24. *Id.* at 258.

25. Daniel Solórzano, remarks in his Chicanos and Education class at UCLA (May 18, 1999).

26. Raza Women de UCLA, Student Organization, Program for Fourth Annual Chicana/Latina Conference 4 (1999).

they “continue the flame of collective revolution.”²⁷ They indicate that their “sisters, mothers, great grandmothers, the neighbor across the street, the women at the bus stop, and the women half way across the world, all carry on the tradition of struggle of economic, political, and social justice.”²⁸

Apolinar: Those women are not talking about a violent revolution. When you say revolution, I think of a violent uprising. Which one are you referring to?

Delia: There are some who believe that violence is the only way that revolutionary or transformative change can take place, and historically this is the way social change has been accomplished. But my research explores ways in which consciousness raising and paradigm shifts are efforts toward a non-violent revolution. People should be able to envision large-scale transformative social change without being made to feel that they’re being too idealistic. What’s wrong with thinking that the U.S. political structure should value the well being of the human being, the laborer, more than it values the development of capital?

Apolinar: Have you ever seen or heard of a capitalist system that would rather close down a bank than lay off a worker? That will never happen here.

Delia: Perhaps, but that’s my vision of social justice. For me, it isn’t enough to struggle for opportunity and access anymore. I feel that too many people are content with opportunity, and they forget about the masses of people who remain exploited while a few gain access to capitalist gains.²⁹ We need social movements if we expect change to occur.

Apolinar: Yes, but these movements must be based on a notion of intersectionality,³⁰ in which we recognize multiple forms of oppression that should be part of the struggle as well.

Delia: Furthermore, it is fundamental to the struggle for social justice that we stop blaming poor people, people of color, Queer people, and women for their refusal to assimilate or adopt the values of the dominant power structure in the U.S. We have to revolutionize our perception of what is good, valid, and “successful” to move forward in this struggle.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*

29. See McLAREN, *supra* note 11, at 172.

30. See CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE CUTTING EDGE, *supra* note 3, at 241; see generally GLORIA ANZALDÚA, BORDERLANDS/LA FRONTERA: THE NEW MESTIZA 20 (1987); ANA CASTILLO, MASSACRE OF THE DREAMERS: ESSAYS ON XICANISMA 40 (1994); CHICANA FEMINIST THOUGHT: THE BASIC HISTORICAL WRITINGS 7 (Alma Garcia ed., 1997); MAPPING STRATEGIES: NACCS AND THE CHALLENGE OF MULTIPLE (RE) OPPRESSIONS (María Antonia Beltrán-Vocal et al. eds., 1999).

CONCLUSION

This dialogue has summarized and drawn from many conversations that I have had at school, in my home, in my community and in numerous other locations. As a student and teacher, I have been able to engage in discussions that have pushed the boundaries of the classroom and the academic structure. As a result my vision of social and economic justice expands as I strive to make sense of my purpose in academia. The exploitation and destruction of the lives of millions of people due to social and economic injustice is what keeps me situated within the walls of academic institutions. I am hoping that the dialogues that I engage in daily will lead me to a better understanding of liberation. Education has indeed been the tool that has provided the basis for much exploitation; thus, I dedicate myself to challenging the dominant oppressive ideologies in schools and educational policies. Latina/o Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory are tools of analysis and calls for action now active in the field of education. Scholars in these fields are not only theorists, but also leaders and advocates of the struggle against inequality, and hence of great importance to the field.