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Luck Isn't Why I Made It: Exploring A Latina Educational Journey Within A Latina/o Critical Race Theory Lens

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Abstract

In the last decade there has been an increase of research of the Latina educational experience from K – 12 to college. This work has also tapped into the experiences of Latinas in the academy in their roles as faculty and administrators. However, there is still limited work on the process of getting into graduate school (the admission (access) process) and on what the day-to-day graduate school journey for Latinas from across disciplines/colleges looks like. In this paper using Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), a branch of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework is an essential tool that analyzes and teases out the relationship between the author and the institution(s), that is both the public school system and the ivory tower. By using CRT/LatCrit as an analytical lens to reflect on her own educational journey, the author was able to highlight and theorize elements enhancing her cultural identity, sense of belonging, and further understand the role of family in her aspirations and pursuit of a doctoral degree. Thus, this paper explores 1) access and retention in the early schooling years and 2) the challenges faced and successes experienced by Latinas in the undergraduate journey. This paper ends with a discussion of how the lessons learned early on assist in overcoming challenges in order to gain access and navigate graduate school.

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When I first began my graduate school experience as a master's student at a predominately White private university in Northern California, I felt that I was not equipped with the necessary tools to complete the degree. As a first-generation, low-income, immigrant woman of color, I came with limited tools and preparation on how to survive and meet the expectations of graduate school. In contrast, my peers in the program were from middle and upper class backgrounds. They were expected to go to college and even graduate school, had attended well-ranked high schools and universities, and a majority of them went straight from undergrad to graduate school. It also happened that they were predominately White students. Meanwhile, the handful of students of color in the program were on track to earn a Master's of Education (M.Ed.) degree that would enable them to get raises in their current teaching positions as elementary school teachers. I do not state this as something negative; however, at that moment, none of them planned or aspired to pursue a higher degree (Ph.D. or Ed.D.). I, on the other hand, did.

Thus, my situation in this program became a unique one. I completed the master's degree in less than a year, a short period of time that included writing a qualitative master's thesis, changing my thesis chair at the last minute, and managing to find only one faculty of color to be on my thesis committee – a Chicana from the Department of History. Once I graduated, I was back in the workforce, working with doctoral students of color in the STEM fields while still dreaming of going back to get a Ph.D. A year later, I found myself accepted into a Predominately White Institution (PWI) in the Midwest. With very little to almost no understanding of what a PWI meant, I did not think much of it since I was admitted into a program where students and faculty of color were the majority. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, the daily challenges of this move – including being at a Research I institution located over 2,000 miles away from home and whose dynamics play out in a Black/White paradigm – would simply change the way I understood/lived the graduate school journey, family relationships,

ethnic/cultural identity, language, living “in-between,” and the meaning of first-generation and low income.

During my first semester as a doctoral student, I read Anna Sandoval’s (1999) article *Building up resistance: Chicanas in academia*; I was taken aback. “Nobody gives you strategies. Even the most supportive committee is unable to prepare you for the psychological challenges of writing the dissertation” (p. 92) resonated heavily with me. The article elaborated on how graduate students, specifically Chicanas, are not prepared for the graduate school application process; once they are in the academy, there is a lack of mentorship and guidance, especially if they are choosing to write about work that is connected to their racial/ethnic and cultural identity. “[From] personal experience, I have found that Chicanas and other women of color are met with unique challenges when pursuing higher degrees” (p. 92). She highlights how past *conocimiento* (*beliefs or customs*) of resistance and survival that has been handed down – consciously and unconsciously – by non-academics (family, friends, and/or other students) is usually not welcomed or valued. Instead, the *conocimiento* and tools of resistance and survival are often considered invalid in the academy.

Sandoval’s (1999) writing inspired this paper, as I not only understand her words but I am *living* them in my graduate education journey. Her work on issues faced by Chicanas in graduate school (such as not being prepared, lack of mentorship, or having the “know-how” of the process), though extremely important, is troubling because of the high enrollment of Latinas in graduate school, especially in comparison to their male counterparts. Sandoval’s (1999) concerns triggered questions regarding Chicanas’ journey in gaining educational access as well as what the journey in academia may entail. It is even more critical to investigate these questions when there is evidence that Chicanas face a lonely experience in the academy as graduate students of color. Therefore, in the work that follows, I use both a CRT and LatCrit framework to explore my own educational journey. I find that my analysis supports Sandoval’s

(1999) findings regarding the Chicana experience in graduate school. The use of CRT and LatCrit seemed appropriate for my narrative, as the tenets centralize my voice validating and thus highlighting my experience(s).

Latinos, the United States, and Education

As it stands, Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States. As of 2012, Latinos made up 56 million (17%) of the U.S. population, followed by African American/Blacks at 12%, and Asian Americans at 5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Latinos are the nation's largest immigrant group and one of the fastest growing populations accounting for more than half of the nation's population growth between 2000 and 2010 (Passel, Cohn & Lopez, 2011). The increasing Latino presence in the United States has implications for the field of education from Kindergarten to higher education. Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic/racial minority group in the U.S., representing 20% of young adults in the 18 to 24 age group in the nation, and it is estimated that Latina/os will make up about 22% of the nation's college-age population by 2020 (*Excelencia in Education!*, 2010), yet they are not graduating at similar rates as other racial/ethnic groups. Latina/o students continue to be historically underserved throughout the K – 20 pipeline. In early 2010, Latinos/as made up a little over 16% of the U.S. population and they are estimated to represent 25% of the population by the year 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The Latino/a population is currently the fastest growing racial/ethnic group in the United States (Fry & Lopez, 2012; Gándara & Contreras, 2009) and approximately 20% of the population is between the ages of 18 and 24. In 2010, 23.5% of Latina/o students had less than a 9th grade education, 26.4% were high school graduates, 22.8% had some college education, 13.2% had a community college degree, and barely 8.5% were college graduates (Fry & Lopez, 2012). By 2011, the Latino/a share of 18 to 24 year-olds steadily grew to 16.5%, of which 76.3% completed a high school diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) degree and nearly half (45.6%) enrolled at institution of higher education. Yet, one quarter (25.2%) were

enrolled at the two-year community college (Fry & Lopez, 2012).

As strides are made in enrollment at the postsecondary level, Latino/a students are still concentrated at the community college level. Simultaneously, in 2011, at least one in four (24.7%) of public elementary school students and 21% of the total public high school student enrollment was Latino/a (Fry & Taylor, 2013; Fry & Lopez, 2012). By 2022, the number of Latino/a public high school graduates in the United States is estimated to increase by 88%, while at the same time, the number of White high school graduates is expected to decline by 15% (*Excelencia in Education*, 2010). It is estimated that Latino/as will make up about 22% of the nation's college-age population by 2020 (*Excelencia in Education*, 2010) and will continue to be overrepresented at the two-year community colleges, thus a minority presence at four-year universities, particularly at selective institutions (Fry, 2011). Therefore, research on underrepresentation in higher education, beyond a four-year degree, is of critical importance (Gloria & Castellanos, 2005; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; *Excelencia in Education!*, 2010).

Latinas and Education

A large majority of the literature on Latino students in higher education groups males and females together; however, the visibly growing presence of Latinas in undergraduate and graduate programs makes it necessary to explore the educational experiences of these women and, in particular, Latina women pursuing doctoral degrees. In 2002, the American Council on Education (ACE) reported that in the 1980s, college enrollment for Latino/a students persisted at about 16% and by 2000, 25.4% of Latinas within the age group of 18 to 24-years-of-age were enrolled in college. In comparison to Latino males within the same age group, Latina women had a 7% lead (American Council on Education, 2002). Additionally, increases in college enrollment were followed by Latina graduation rates exceeding those of other women of color and White women (Council of Education, 2002).

Latinas have also increased their presence in graduate school. Since 2000, there has

been a 63% increase in the number of master's degrees granted to Latinas, from 2.7% in 1991 to 4.4% in 2000 (Council of Education, 2002). The *Minorities in Higher Education: Twenty-first Annual Status Report 2003-2004* data from 2000-2001 found that, of the less than one percent (0.26%) of Latino/as enrolled in graduate school, only 0.06% earned a master's degree and 0.003% earned a doctorate degree (Harvey & Anderson, 2005). Since the late 1960s, there had been an annual growth of 3.4% in doctoral degree recipients (Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2011).

By gender, the number of doctorates awarded to women has increased from 37% in 1991 to 46% in 2011. Women earned the majority of all doctorates awarded to U.S. citizens and permanent residents each year since 2002. By ethnicity/race, the proportion awarded to Latino/as has risen from 3.2% in 1991 to 6.3% in 2011, but being mindful on the parity to non-Latino/a peers of their age and the rate of population growth, the doubling in the last 20 years of doctoral degrees awarded to Latino/as should not be praised that highly. By race and gender, as of 2009 women earned nearly 47% of all research doctorates and Latino/as earned only 5.9% of all research doctorates, with a majority in the disciplines of Social Sciences (7%) and Education (6.5%) (Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2011). To put it in perspective, of the 49,562 degrees awarded only 1,021 (2%) doctoral degrees were earned by Latina women; less than 1% of the entire Latino population.

Latina undergraduate and graduate students face a complex array of issues that make it challenging to navigate the institution. However, the ways in which they respond to those issues throughout their educational journey is still unclear. It was not that long ago that research on Latinas/Chicanas was considered an important topic of research. Within the past two decades, there have been studies that have examined the barriers to education experienced by Chicanas (Rendon, 1992; Segura, 1993; Gándara, 1995; Sandoval, 1999; Delgado Bernal, 2006; Gonzalez, 2006), the marginality of Chicanas in higher education, college choice of Chicanas

(Talavera-Bustillos, 1998), and identity formation of young *Mexicanas* /Chicanas in high school (Gonzalez, 1998). Yet, not until recently has it been encouraged to engage Latinas/Chicanas to write on their lived experiences, to use their narratives, or “voice.” Research has also been limited regarding how this particular group makes meaning of the admissions process (i.e., access) throughout the multiple levels of higher education, how they navigate through these spaces, and ultimately, how they make meaning of their “success.”

The educational experiences of Latinas have been challenged by the high rate of poverty in many of their communities, learning problems associated with a lack of English language proficiency (for those for whom English is their second language), racism, and sexual harassment (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). Their families lack the communication skills, knowledge, and experience to take advantage of educational, cultural, and social opportunities. Equally important, the short-term economic needs of the family may supersede the desires of parents to support their children's long-term education goals (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). Latina students have higher dropout rates in comparison to their White female counterparts; a likely reason for this is their lack of access to academic enrichment programs and to advanced placement courses (Solórzano, Ledesma, Perez, Burciaga, & Ornelas, 2003). Additionally, approximately 70% of Latino/a high school students are not enrolled in classes that will prepare them for college; therefore, access to academically enriched programs are not the only resources that Latina students do not have access to (American Association of University Women, 2001). Lastly, other educational inequalities they face in the P-12 system include a lack of enriched curricula and qualified teachers, tracking into remedial instruction, school segregation, and under-financed schools (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Each of these issues can lead to fewer positive educational outcomes. Yet, despite such obstacles, many Latinas persist and achieve success in school, and the number of Latinas in college has been steadily increasing, although their rate is still much lower than that of their White counterparts.

My lens: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit)

Critical Race Theory and Counter-Storytelling

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the mid-1970s with the early work of Derrick Bell (1992), who was concerned about the slow pace of racial reform in the U.S. He argued that the traditional approaches of filing briefs, organizing protests and marches, and appealing to the moral values of the people had little to almost no gains than in previous times. Thus, current CRT scholarship within the field of education has a close relationship to the early work of the Critical Legal Studies movement and serves as a prime reason for why CRT scholars frequently criticize the legal system for being slow in creating changes in the material lives of people of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Angela Harris (In Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) writes that CRT not only dared to treat race as central to the law and policy of the United States, it dared to look beyond the popular belief that getting rid of racism means simply getting rid of ignorance, or encouraging everyone to get along. As such, CRT has become an analytical framework developed primarily, but not exclusively, by legal scholars of color to address social injustice and racial oppression in U.S. society by studying and transforming the relationships among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

CRT in education derives from the original ideals of CRT within legal studies and holds similar tenets (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Scholar Daniel Solórzano (1998) outlines five CRT tenets for educational settings: (a) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge (storytelling/counter-storytelling), and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective. Villenas, Deyhle, and Parker (1999) point out that “a CRT analysis of local schooling practice can reveal the racism undergirding typical schooling practices related to tracking or ability grouping, disciplinary procedures, testing, and curriculum and instruction” (p. 33).

CRT tenets are not new in and of themselves, but collectively, they represent a challenge to existing types of research involving race. CRT exposes the ways in which racism has been disguised in language, as it is often hidden within what society considers as “shared normal values” and “neutral” ideologies and practices (Ladson-Billings, 1998). However, with a CRT lens beliefs of racism are examined and racist acts are named, thus victims of racism can find their voice. Marginalized groups of color can become empowered when they hear their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments against and for them are framed, and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). By engaging in an analysis that exposes the problems with master narratives and that questions what is considered to be standard practice in education, CRT and counter-storytelling (Delgado, 1989) help us to reconsider those norms and offer new visions.

Richard Delgado (1989) has argued that, if in legal discourse stories and narratives are used to formulate arguments for the person on trial to prove their innocence or guilt, then in education, stories and narratives can provide “voice” for marginalized students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Voice is defined as a very personal expression that allows our experiences and lessons, learned as people of color, to convey the knowledge we possess in a way that is empowering to us and to those on whose behalf we act (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). Delgado (1989) describes counter-storytelling as stories that can shatter complacency and challenge the status quo. He also adds that counter-stories are narratives of the lived experiences of people of color in the United States (Delgado, 1989). Ladson-Billings (1998) adds “historically, storytelling had been a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression. The story of one’s condition leads to the realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated, thus allowing one to stop inflicting mental violence on one-self” (p. 14).

Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit)

Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) is rooted in and branches off from CRT. However, LatCrit is concerned with a broadminded sense of an allegiant Latina/Latino pan-ethnicity, and it addresses issues often ignored by critical race theorists (Valdes, 1996). LatCrit theoretically aims to emphasize the multidimensional identities of Latino/as and to address the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression. It goes beyond the Black/White binary and adds important dimensions to critical race analysis. For example, LatCrit is explicit on issues such as language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality, all of which at times may intersection simultaneously (Valdes, 1996; Hernández-Truyol, 1997; Johnson, 1997; Montoya, 1994). Additionally, LatCrit has a tradition of gender analysis and, therefore, it “can address the concerns of Latinas in light of both our internal and external relationships in and with the worlds that have marginalized us” (Hernández-Truyol, 1997, p. 885). Indeed, Delgado Bernal (2002) argues and adds that as theory, its intersectional analysis offers an important lens from which to envision a raced-gendered epistemology, especially for Chicanas/Latinas.

LatCrit provides an anti-subordination and anti-essentialist project that attempts to link theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community (LatCrit Primer, 1999). LatCrit offers epistemological, methodological, and theoretical contributions to educational research, but it has not yet been adopted as widely as CRT in the educational field (Fernandez, 2002). Carrying out educational research through a CRT and LatCrit lens makes sense when considering that “the classroom — where knowledge is constructed, organized, produced, and distributed — is a central site for the construction of social and racial power” (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 5). As such, while both CRT and LatCrit have added to the understanding and highlighting of Latino students’ experiences, in particular within the K–12 system, it is still a partial view. Thus, I use this space and put forth my own narrative of my educational journey to

offer the possibility of another lens that is more holistic and that can provide a deeper analysis of the day-to-day experiences of Latinas in the academy.

My Narrative/Mi Camino

Haber nacido en un país extranjero con una madre soltera, sentí, era lo más difícil que había vivido y luego entre a mi posgrado!

My mom was only 19 years old when I was born. She had limited resources in Mexico as a single mother and had to make some difficult decisions. I lived with my grandmother for a few years before she could come back to get me. I was maybe 5 or 6 years old when this happened. I was glad she came back for me. We moved to Tijuana, a border town, and eventually moved to the United States (California, to be exact). Sadly, in California, my mother worked almost 12 hours a day; I barely saw her. She worked at a factory and then sold Tupperware. When I came home from school, she was not there. I came home, made myself a sandwich, did my homework, and waited for her. She worked long hours to ensure I had a roof over my head, food on the table, and clothes on my back. Time to help with my schoolwork was limited to non-existent, but she loved me and always told me to work hard.

Haber tenido que aprender un nuevo idioma, sentí, era lo más difícil que había vivido y luego entre a mi posgrado!

I went to Lexington Elementary School. My teacher was White, and my classmates were all Latinos. I was Mexican and did not know English, or so they said. I was enrolled in an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) group. There was no formal class. We were taken away from class instruction and, in the corner of the class, we had our ESL lessons. It was predominately Mexican kids that sat in the circle memorizing words by writing them over and over and saying them aloud. However, we were rarely given the opportunity to hold conversations in English or given enough instruction to do so. I am not quite sure if my informal education in Mexico had an impact, but I was soon pulled out of the ESL group and was in the regular class with the rest of my peers. I no longer felt like an outsider.

Enterarme que era indocumentada y que mis sueños de ir a la universidad rápidamente se estaban desapareciendo, sentí, era lo más difícil que había vivido y luego entre a mi posgrado!

During my junior year in high school, I participated in the Upward Bound program, a federally funded program, and we began filling out mock college and financial aid forms. At the beginning of the workshop, we were asked to make sure that our social security number was clear and correct. Since I did not know mine by memory, I made a note to ask my mother for the number. I came home that afternoon and I told her that I needed this number so that I could complete my application. She gave me the oddest look, as if I was speaking to her in another language. I did not understand what it meant, but I knew it was not a good thing because she quickly sat me down and told me, “*No tienes papeles, no tienes ese numero*” (you don’t have papers/documents, you don’t have that number). My world crumbled. How could it be that I had spent almost half of my life in this country and, yet, I was not a *legal* member of its citizenry? All that work, all those classes, all my hopes, our hopes, our dreams were fading away.

Ser la unica de 30 amigos ir directamente a la Universidad, sentí, era lo más difícil que había vivido y luego entre a mi posgrado!

Going off to college was not easy. I was the eldest of three children; my youngest sibling was 15 years younger than me. I was the first in my entire family to take this next educational step and I was doing this on my own. Although I had participated in Upward Bound, this time I was completely on my own. I had decided to go to the nearby university because, although I was accepted to my first choice, tradition would not permit me to be too far away from home. In exchange for not going to my first choice school, I lived on-campus instead of home. Even that was difficult for my mother. Nevertheless, this new adventure was a sign of reaching the so-called “American Dream.”

According to many of my friends, I was in fact living the “American Dream.” My graduating high school class was a little less than 150 students, though we started at over 300 students my freshmen year. Of the 150 or so that graduated high school, only a handful of us

were going on to a college or university, not a trade school or community college. I went off to a 4-year university where I was given a full ride because I was poor. We were a family of five and we made about \$25,000 a year given our two-person income. The majority of my high school friends went to the local community college. I went off to college by myself. As the first in my family to go to college, I did not know what I would encounter, and had no close friends to hold on to. At the end of the day, no matter how many workshops and events were held by Upward Bound, nothing could prepare me for what “college” truly meant. Nor was I prepared for the price I would pay for being a first-generation, low income Latina looking for the “American dream.”

Leer libros así como en la secundaria que apenas entendía y tener que estudiar el doble para recibir una B en la clase, sentí, era lo más difícil que había vivido y luego entre a mi posgrado!

I was a good student in high school. By the time I was a junior, I was taking honors courses. (Unfortunately, my high school did not offer AP classes until after I graduated.) My grades were good. I graduated with a 3.39 overall GPA. It would have been higher if I had not failed pre-calculus, but that is another story.

I tested into remedial math and English my freshmen year in college. I took a total of 12 credit hours and only 4 counted for my general education requirements. My testing abilities were never questioned; no one knew what I was capable of. I passed my remedial class with an A. Later on, I passed my general education math with a B. I passed my English 101 class with a B, my philosophy class with a B. I took supplemental writing courses because I was afraid that I did not have what it takes to do well in college classes; nevertheless, this was after I had taken English 101 and Philosophy 101. By the time I graduated from college, I had been on the Dean’s List and earned a 4.0 GPA for three consecutive semesters.

Verme en el espejo y saber que era diferente del resto de mis compañeros, sentí, era lo más difícil que había vivido y luego entre a mi posgrado!

I lived in a dorm with nine other young women. I was the only person of color who was the first to go to college and who came from a low-income background. They were White. They took 12 credit hours per semester and did “volunteer” work in their “free time.” I took 14 credit hours and had to work 20 hours a week to pay the bills. I could never ask my parents for money. I chose to go to college, and now I had to make it work! (At least that is what my mom made clear when I moved into the dorms!) My mom and little sister visited me only once during the three years I lived on campus.

Estar sentada en clases universitarias en donde yo era la única persona de color y de ser la representante de los mexicanos en su conjunto, sentí, era lo más difícil que había vivido y luego entre a mi posgrado!

Just like in high school, I had classes in college with predominately White students. Although Sonoma State University was not a research I institution and was more of a liberal arts college, there was an increasing number of White females from Orange County taking over the school. I started college in 1998; I was part of the last class to come in under affirmative action policies. By the time I graduated college, it was clear that students of color were not as present as they had been in the past. In my general education courses, there were a handful of Latinos and African American students, with a maximum of five of us in each class. The faculty was also predominately White. It was very lonely.

Haberme involucrado políticamente con MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano@ de Aztlán) y ser visible bajo mis condiciones, sentí, era lo más difícil que había vivido y luego entre a mi posgrado!

Resistance! Home! Being the only one did not sit well with me. That is when I found M.E.Ch.A (Chicano/a student movement of Aztlan). M.E.Ch.A became my home away from home. In this organization, I learned of the power of my voice and I used my voice to fight for equity. It was here that I was able to connect education and social inequalities, and was able to understand how injustices played out in my community. M.E.Ch.A was also a space where I was able to find support and like-minded individuals that understood what it means to be the

“only one” in the class – the representative of all Latinos, regardless of our differences in nationality, language, generation, social economic status, citizenship, etc. The Raza Youth Conference was the first time in which I felt empowered. We brought over 100 students of color to campus. We had speakers and workshops, as well as dialogue about the possibilities that come with having a college education. In the words of Sal Castro, 1968 Walkout teacher and leader - “It was a good day to be a Chicana.” I felt comfortable in my own skin, using my native language. It was then that I found the importance of Chicana/o and Latino/a Studies.

Regresar a casa y no poder convivir en simple actividades familiares como jugar La Loteria o ver la Novela, sentí, era lo más difícil que habia vivido y luego entre a mi posgrado!

I only lived 20 minutes away from home while I was in college. However, that 20-minute distance seemed miniscule compared to how many miles apart I felt from my *familia*. The more classes I took, the more I read, and the more involved I became in organizing, the more I felt like I no longer belonged. I tried to talk to my mother about social inequalities, the importance of getting involved in my siblings’ educational journey, on how working at Wal-Mart was so wrong, and so on. My mother simply wanted me to sit down with her and watch *novelas* and other shows that I just did not find interesting or intellectually stimulating. I did not know how to talk to my mother. There were times were I gave in, sat down, and watched the *novelas* in silence.

Trabajar como niñera para una familia gringa, limpiar las casas de familias gringas y ser mesera para poder pagar mis gastos universitarios sin tener que pedir dinero a mis padres, sentí, era lo más difícil que habia vivido y luego entre a mi posgrado!

My senior year marked the most critical year of my undergraduate career; my internship and financial aid had come to an end. I was in disbelief when I received my financial aid package and the only thought that ran through my mind was - *This has got to be a mistake!* I went down to the financial aid office and spoke to just about everyone, but there was no mistake. I burst into tears. My internship was cut because of funding; consequently, I could not finish the semester. I had no money. I was already struggling to make ends meet. I had

exhausted my loan amount for the semester. My parents even took the PLUS loan to help me, but I already had to start paying it back. And I definitely could not ask my family for any money. I had chosen to go to college, and they had taken out the loan in their name for me. That was it; so, it was all up to me. I had a good work ethic because of my mother. My mother had worked backbreaking jobs that she had hoped I could avoid. She had worked up to three jobs at one point; crying over not having money was not an option for me. I found myself finishing up the internship for free, working as a student assistant, cleaning houses, and being a nanny for a White family. I found myself working four jobs, taking 19 credit hours, leading 2 organizations, and missing class more often than I wanted. I felt lost, confused, and ashamed.

Estar atrapada entre dos idiomas, dos culturas, dos mundos, sentí, era lo más difícil que había vivido y luego entre a mi posgrado!

I finished college; I graduated. It was a proud moment that I barely got to enjoy. I was, however, ecstatic that my parents were at Raza graduation. It was the first time that my family would join me in celebrating such a monumental accomplishment. On this day, I was able to share with them, in our native language, my sincere gratitude and love. At commencement, I found myself saddened by the fact that the program did not include my name. I was graduating with honors with two degrees – one in Chicana/o and Latino/a Studies and one in Spanish. My mother noticed the omission of my name but did not say a word. My heart dropped. All of this work and they (the university) had taken away my moment. No apology, not even from the president, would ever really compensate for that hurt. I was the first in my family to go off to college and to graduate.

Y luego entre a mi posgrado!

It took almost four years after graduating college for me to come to the decision to go back to get a graduate degree. After multiple attempts to understand the application process, to take the necessary exams, and to meet with the “right” people, I was admitted to a private university on the cusp of northern and central California. A professor from the university wanted

to meet with me in person since we were both local. I agreed. It was frightening, as I did not know if this was a normal part of the process. However, during this meeting, I was able to get an assistantship, which I learned was a way to pay for my schooling and to have my tuition completely covered. Everything seemed to be going smoothly until school started, and I realized that I had not attended an orientation. I did not know where particular buildings or my college were located, for that matter, or whether or not I was taking the right class sequence. After a week or so, I also realized that, once again, I was the token Latina in the majority of my classes. Conversations about Latino/a and African American youth/students were typically discussed using deficit language, and there were few classes in which my experiences as a woman of color, immigrant, “successful” student, and past educator were truly valued.

As a master’s student, I attended a private university, with my tuition waived, a graduate assistantship, and had the privileges of having the dean of my college know my name and my first faculty advisor take me out to brunch. Yet, I was bothered by the fact that the faculty members at my institution were predominately White, as was the student body, and courses on topics such as race and class were minimal to non-existent. While I was welcomed with open arms, I often wondered about my academic abilities. I felt that I was playing catch up, and the mentorship was minimal and, at times, felt judgmental.

Once I decided that I would go ahead and write a master’s thesis versus doing a project, I was, for the most part, on my own. The decision to write a thesis came at a time when I felt a lot of pressure from home to finish up my schooling, but I was beginning to understand the graduate school process and felt that a master’s thesis would prepare me for a doctoral degree (or so I thought). I completed the IRB paperwork, courses on methods, literature review, and interviews in a matter of a month and a half. I had a first draft completed by the end of the spring semester, and, by the first of July, I defended my master’s thesis while still taking two classes to complete my required course hours. While the work was torturous, it was my relationship with

my new thesis advisor that led me to know CRT in the flesh, if that is even possible. Because I had planned to defend my thesis in the summer, my original advisor – a White, male hippy who had worked with Dr. Antonia Darder – would be gone to do his own research. I had to get a new thesis chair, and choices were limited. The college itself was limited in terms of faculty of color and, in particular, tenured Latino/a faculty. I had only one person of color on my committee, a Chicana professor from the History Department whose work was on Afro-Latinos. My new thesis chair was a Jewish, White man from Chicago, and he was a Sociology of Education scholar (not my first choice); however, he was the only tenured faculty on campus for the summer open to chairing my thesis. Our interaction was cordial but limited. However, a few days before my defense, after he had read and edited my thesis, he asked me to explain why I was using CRT. A CRT approach was appropriate to re-examine the 1968 Walkouts and the evolution of education access for Chicano and Latino students. I explained that centralizing the intersectionality of race and racism, within this specific time period would be key in challenging the dominant ideology/narrative. The thesis also centralized the participants' experiential knowledge and used storytelling/counter-storytelling as the method for the data collection. Overall, the thesis was my commitment to social justice within research/scholarship. My response seemed to satisfy him. As I walked out of his office, I reminded him that the defense was on Thursday at 11 a.m. He smiled and nodded, and I walked out.

The day of the defense, he was nowhere to be found! I was unsure of what had happened. One of my committee members had to request for him to be called. An hour after the defense was to take place, he finally showed up, blaming me for *his* tardiness! He claimed that he thought it was an afternoon defense and not a morning defense, and he felt that I should have reminded him of the time and date, which, in fact, I had done earlier that week. Despite the delay, we proceeded. He offered no apology. We sat at an oval table and my committee stared at me blankly. They were expecting a presentation, but I was not aware that I had to do a

presentation of my thesis. I had provided them with a copy of my thesis and assumed that they would just ask me questions, but that was not the case. As I scrambled to organize my thoughts and prepare a 15-minute oral presentation of my thesis, I could see that they were getting anxious and that this was not going to be an easy process. Nevertheless, I was able to articulate my thoughts and main points and move forward to the Q and A. I was taken aback when the first comment from my chair was that he did not understand why I used CRT. He stated that it was not really a theoretical framework and that he did not understand the point of my study in the first place. I had to take more than a minute to gain my composure. I was shocked, but I felt that I should not have been surprised. One of my committee members, Dr. Ramos, came to the rescue by asking questions that really mattered and by providing positive feedback and constructive criticism. I eventually calmed down since now I felt supported. I survived this phase of my academic journey because of the support of two women of color: Dr. Ramos from my committee and my immediate supervisor, Lisa, whose academic experiences provided me with advice and reinforcement that I was not crazy and that issues of race, class, gender, and their intersectionalities were really happening. They are not imaginary.

Y luego entre a mi posgrado!

In the spring of 2009, I received an email informing me that I was accepted into the Educational Policy Studies doctoral program at a Midwestern university. It was a proud moment, indeed. That day, I told my mother over the phone that I had been admitted and that I would be enrolling. It was one of the most difficult decisions of my life. I had been waiting on a letter from the University of California-Los Angeles, and it finally arrived stating that I was unfortunately not admitted. I was forced to tell my mom the disappointing news as well as explain to her my decision to attend the university located in the Midwest, which not only admitted me early but had also offered me great funding. There were a lot of silent moments during that phone call. She asked me if I could reapply the following year to any other graduate program in California,

or if I could find a job closer to home and just forget about a doctorate since I already had a master's degree. I was devastated. This was supposed to be an amazing phone call; I was one of the lucky ones that had been accepted to a doctoral program and had funding! At the end of our conversation, I decided that I needed to be the one who was determined to reach my own personal goal and pursue a doctoral degree. I was, after all, one of the "lucky ones."

Yet, even with my luck, nothing prepared me for the lessons I would learn outside of the classroom. During my first year as a doctoral student, I had the opportunity to take a CRT course with a well-known CRT scholar. I was thrilled to take the course because the instructor was my advisor and I had previously done work using CRT. However, once again, I found myself having a very different background compared to my peers. Unlike my colleagues, I came from the West coast; was an immigrant of Mexico (but having lived in the United States for more than half my life); was the eldest of three children; was the only one in my family (both immediate and extended) who had graduated from high school, college, and graduate school; and had experience working with youth of color from low-income backgrounds for over a decade. What was particularly disconcerting was the fact that, in a class of 20 students, there were a total of only two Latino students, and I was one of them. At the end of the semester, I learned so much more that was beyond theory. I learned of invisibility, vulnerability, and ignorance. I learned that in some spaces, even as the numerical majority, Latino/as are given no room in the conversation. But yet, I was one of the "lucky ones."

Connections

As I wrote this paper and reflected on my situation in this space of academia, I found myself thinking about my "luck" and how I had beaten the odds. Tara Yosso's (2006) research on the Chicana/o educational pipeline where she looked at 100 Chicana/o students and the breakdown of their educational attainment crosses my mind over and over. The diagram starts with 100 Chicana/o students at the elementary level, and by the time they reach high school 56

have dropped out or been pushed out and only 44 graduate. Of those 44 only 24 (55%) go on to pursue a postsecondary education; 13 (55%) go to the community college and 11 (45%) go to a 4-year institution. Of those at the community college only one will transfer to a 4-year institution. Of those who went straight to the 4-year institution only seven will graduate, and with the community college transfer only 6 will graduate with a bachelor's degree. Sadly, only 2 of the 6 will continue on to pursue a graduate or professional degree and less than 1 will earn a doctorate degree. I am that one.

By many accounts and according to Yosso's research, my story is a "success story." I came to the United States from Mexico at a young age, quickly learned English in a semi-effective bilingual education program, mainstreamed into regular English classes by the time I reached high school, graduated from high school, and finished my bachelor's degree. Now I am in graduate school pursuing a Ph.D. Considering that less than one Chicana/o student will even get to that level, this would suggest that my journey has been successful. Nevertheless, despite this success, I am very critical of my educational preparation in school (middle school to college). In fact, I have become critical to the point that I question the actual impact that educational institutions have had on my strategies to survive in the ivory tower.

As a theoretical framework, CRT and LatCrit offer a great deal of potential to contribute significantly to the work done on and about students of color. These theoretical frameworks prioritize the social categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality, recognizing them as not only social constructions but also as categories that have material effects on real people. Since CRT and LatCrit place marginalized participants at the center of analysis (Valdes, 1998), they direct us to capture the stories, counter-stories, and narratives of marginalized people. They force us to recognize and address the lives of students of color who are often the objects of educational research, but yet are often absent from or silenced within academic discourse (Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, 1998).

For CRT and LatCrit scholars, storytelling or narratives serve several important methodological functions and benefit the person of color in a number of ways. In my case, this theoretical lens has allowed me to reflect on my lived experience within the public educational system. Secondly, my narrative has allowed me, as a marginalized person, to speak and to make my story public. Thirdly, this counter-story also challenges White hegemony and the master narrative (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998) regarding how Latinas/Chicanas make it out of educational institutions. By offering an alternative, my story places the truthfulness and “objectivity” of this master narrative into question. Finally, my story has been transformative and empowering. This experience has raised my consciousness of others with similar experiences and has opened up the possibility for social action.

I came from a school that did not fully prepare me for the academic, emotional, and psychological challenges presented to me in college. CRT and LatCrit have presented me with the opportunity to share how students of color experience and deal with being at an institution that was historically not created for them. I am an immigrant child with immigrant parents. I did not know the language spoken or the culture; thus, I was forced to learn in order to survive rather than learning solely to gain knowledge. While in school, I was also silenced for those same reasons – not knowing the language or the culture.

The Spanish *stanzas* before each vignette are reflective of what CRT and LatCrit ultimately aim to do – to voice the story of those who are silenced. I can relate to being invisible and silenced; those feelings were ever so present throughout my high school and undergraduate experiences. My current experience in graduate school makes me question the invisibility and silencing of the Latino/a experience within the Black and White paradigm. It appears easy for a Latina woman to become invisible within a patriarchal society in the home; just as it was easy for me to become invisible within a privileged society, or invisible within a political minority due to my citizenship “status.” Not only was I becoming invisible, but also

apparently mute, as I was unable to communicate within academia due to my mediocre public education. I was also unable to communicate with my family, as the recollection of my rich Spanish vocabulary has begun to fade. I am not alone in this experience. Women of color are rarely “given space to speak on, reflect, and interrogate the ways in which we are socialized” (Brown, 2009).

Yet, by purposefully writing the *stanzas* in Spanish in my narrative, I am both resisting and advocating, representing my daily way of being. I may speak in English but think in Spanish, and vice versa. I do not speak just one language at a time because both are constantly there. I communicate with my parents in this way as well. There are times in which my parents speak to me in Spanish and I reply in English. I use my bilingualism, whether strong or weak, to speak and voice my struggle and that of others. I use it as well as a way to empower and validate the silences of my parents who are only able to speak Spanish and, therefore, they are often left out of conversations. I weave together my home language and the language of the academy as part of the balancing act. Nevertheless, by not giving up either language, I am resisting both forms of oppression; I can still communicate and empower my family and community while simultaneously having a voice and becoming visible within the ivory tower.

Ni de aqui, Ni de alla (Nor from here or there)

Throughout my educational journey, I have suffered greatly because I began to feel like an outsider in my own home. I did not belong there. There was something wrong with me. At one point or another, my parents called me “feminist” and even “radical.” These names went hand-in-hand with being White, and I was being ostracized because of that fact. I was not Mexican enough; yet, I was not “White” enough to be White. I thought that, as an American girl, I could be independent and educated. I should be valued as an individual and allowed to question the norm. However, my outside appearance did not match those ideals. While racially by law I would be categorized as White, I was not White or considered to be a U.S. American. In

the United States, I was a Mexican immigrant, U.S. permanent resident, and self-identified Xicana, acknowledging my indigenous roots and my political consciousness.

I am neither from here nor there. I do not belong within one culture or another. I do not follow Mexican traditional roles because I have become educated and outspoken, have gone away to college, and can depend on myself financially rather than depend on a man. Yet, I am not part of the American culture because I still hold a strong sense of responsibility to my family and my community. I refuse to give up my language and traditions. I refuse to be individualistic, and I acknowledge that I am in the academy so that I can eventually go back home and work with and for my community.

Conclusion

Coping and learning to live between these non-physical spaces/borders has been influential to my educational journey. Through a CRT and LatCrit theoretical framework, I have been able to showcase the racism embedded in educational institutions, and the use of LatCrit has been instrumental to understanding my particular experience as a young, immigrant Latina. It has helped me highlight how I was able to deal with balancing the daily life challenges of being part of neither culture/world while still becoming a “success story.” Analyzing and digging deeper into my own narrative through these frameworks, I am able to bring forth “how” I got to the next level of my educational journey. Through these frameworks, I am able to bring to light the unspoken actions of my parents and how they have motivated me to continue on this journey. Their lived experiences have taught me how to endure and to be resilient while facing a racist educational system along with its racist curriculum, instruction, and assessment of knowledge, funding, and scholarship.

Although my narrative may not be much different from other Latinas, it was a story that needed to be shared, that *I needed* to share. This narrative speaks to the need for more work on Latinas, specifically on first-generation and low-income self-identified *Mexicanas* who are

immigrants to the United States. It calls upon policy makers to look deeper into the needs of the subgroups within the Latino/a community. Even though there is much research on the area of Latino/a academic failure, scholars do not focus on their success and tend to homogenize the experiences of multiple Latino/a groups. There is a need to break apart Latino subgroups - by their nationality, gender, social economic class, and citizenship status (e.g., refugees, immigrants, undocumented). Policies are produced and expected to serve the entire Latino/a community, but there is usually no consideration for the needs of individuals and each individual group. My narrative explored the journey of an individual who is a part of one subgroup but whose journey is complicated by the various intersections of her gender, citizenship status, culture, and language. However, in many ways, my narrative has also silenced the narratives of others and their subgroups that still need to be spoken.

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