Seeking the "Truth" in the Stories We Tell: The Role of Critical Race Epistemology in Higher Education Research

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For the past 30 years, scholars interested in uncovering issues of race and racism in education and the law have relied on critical race theory (CRT) to guide their analyses and to craft meaningful, provocative, and creative representations of data. CRT, "as a discourse of liberation" (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p. 7), provides the anti-racism scholar in education with a framework to envision and "transform those structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of education that maintain the subordination of [students] of color" (Solórzano, 1998, p. 123). Believing that research should lead to transformation and that CRT could illuminate stories not yet shared in the higher education literature, I designed a study on the life narratives of 33 Mexican American Ph.D.s that specifically focused on their educational journeys to the doctorate (Espino, 2008). Embedded in the stories were responses to societal messages

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that either supported or resisted dominant ideologies or "master narratives" pertaining to Mexican American communities. As the researcher-interpreter, I faced a difficult ethical dilemma in (re)presenting the findings from my study in ways that not only exposed master narratives and counter-narratives, but which also addressed the reproduction of master narratives within Mexican American communities themselves. Through critical reflection on my role as the narrator of participants' lived experiences, I was concerned about what truths would be told and the extent to which CRT influenced and affirmed my ways of knowing and the subsequent design of my study.

This article focuses on how critical race theory informed my epistemological perspective and my methodological approach to analyzing participants' educational narratives. Using a storytelling technique employed in CRT scholarship (Delgado, 1993; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b), I incorporate personal reflections, statistical data, and findings from various studies on Latina/o educational pathways to weave together my position as the translator of participants' stories with my conceptualization of the formation, reproduction, and resistance of master narratives. I then describe how I analyzed participants' lived experiences in an effort to (re)present multiple truths about Mexican American educational attainment.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND COUNTER-STORYTELLING

The critical race theory (CRT) movement is "a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationships among race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 2). CRT was developed in the 1970s by legal scholars who were initially part of critical legal studies (CLS) but who found that the research did not address racist discourse that affected the slow progress of civil rights legislation and the experiences of people of color in the judicial system (Tate, 1999). In the mid-1990s, educational researchers applied CRT to their analyses of educational inequities, academic tracking, college admissions, critical pedagogy, racial microaggressions, and best practices, to name a few relevant topics (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker & Stovall, 2004; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Although the tenets have been adapted through the years, four themes are commonly noted as the foundation of CRT scholarship: (a) racism is ordinary and not aberrational; (b) U.S. society is based on a "White-over-color ascendancy" that advances White supremacy and provides a scapegoat (i.e., Communities of Color) for working-class communities; (c) race and racism are social constructions; and (d) storytelling "urges Black and Brown writers to recount their experiences with racism . . . and to apply their own unique perspectives to assess . . . master narratives" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, pp. 7–9).

Master narratives or "majoritarian" stories are based on an inferiority paradigm that "people of color are biologically . . . genetically, [and cultur- ally] inferior to Whites" (Tate, 1997, p. 199). Various scholars have critiqued the deficit model, which is a master narrative in education that attributes low Mexican American educational attainment to a lack of knowledge about college and graduate school admissions processes, a lack of parental involve- ment, limited English language proficiency, and "deficient" cultural traditions (Behnke, Piercy, & Diversi, 2004; Ramirez Lango, 1995; Solórzano & Solór- zano, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). The critical race scholar in education can counter the deficit model by focusing on students' and families' assets and lived experiences and, through careful analysis of the data, inspire action by constructing counter-stories.

Master narratives are "an account that justifies the world as it is" (Del- gado, 1995a, p. 68), while counter-narratives or counter-stories are sites of resistance. They emphasize aspects of the world that have been silenced and provide "competing perceptions of social life" (Aguirre, 2005, p. 151), allowing a more complex depiction of reality to emerge. When constructing a counter- story, one must consider its "revealing function, one that contains critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection . . . self-emancipation and social emancipation" (Giroux, 1983, p. 109). Au- tobiographical, biographical, and composite narratives are three forms of counter-storytelling that create space within academic discourse to affirm cultural values and traditions, dismantle master narratives that perpetuate oppression, and disrupt social reproduction processes (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b). The critical race scholar can use a variety of literary devices within the counter-story to build credibility, while also encouraging the reader to imagine the world differently and consider alternatives to the master nar- rative. The scholar often draws from aspects familiar to the audience, such as the experiences of academics on the job market (Delgado, 1995a), the tenure process for faculty of color (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002), or the educational perspectives of Chicana/o parents (Yosso, 2006).

For this article, I present an autobiographical counter-story that draws from my personal reflections on crafting a research agenda pertaining to Latina/o educational pathways. Inherent within an autobiographical counter- story is willingness to (un)mask oneself, to share the pains of perceiving "the world [as] different from those whose discourse dominates. . . . To explore that difference, to acknowledge it, is to be vulnerable" (Espinoza, 1990, pp. 1885–1886). Rather than dismissing the autobiographical counter-story as self-indulgent, this form of counter-storytelling is a "medium of resistance and counterdiscourse, the legitimate space for . . . throw[ing] doubt on the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography" (Montoya, 1994, p. 201). I commit to unmasking myself, my doubts, and the struggles that I face

in developing a critical race epistemology, to publicly examine that which remains suppressed within my research beneath the scholarly standards of objectivity and neutrality as I center race and racism in the academic discourse.

A BRIEF STATEMENT OF POSITIONALITY

The impetus for this level of reflection was my struggle to interrogate systems of oppression within Mexican American communities, including instances of internalized oppression uncovered in a study based on the life narratives of 33 Mexican American men and women who successfully completed their doctorates in a variety of fields. This research was based on uncovering and addressing my own journey as a Mexican American/Chicana, middle-class, first-generation college student, who is not fluent in Spanish, and the first in my extended families to obtain a doctorate. How did this journey happen for me and not for members of my extended families?

As a military family, we moved very often, and I was accustomed to being one of few students of color in classrooms and/or schools. I articulated my survival by exceeding teachers' expectations of me. I was tracked into the highest academic tracks available, an opportunity I attribute to my parents' advocacy. I always knew I would attend college, and my middle-class background afforded me an opportunity to attend a private, residential Hispanic-serving institution that was located 500 miles away from home, but still in Texas. Although my parents were worried, they felt assured that the administrators and faculty would take care of their daughter throughout the undergraduate years.

After college, I attended graduate school in Ohio and struggled with my identity as a Mexican American and one of few students of color. Although I had successfully navigated predominantly White environments as a child, I had grown accustomed to robust Mexican American communities as a young adult. When I moved away from my community, however, I felt Othered in my courses and at my graduate assistantship. When I shared my struggles with an administrator, he told me, "Don't worry so much about race. You're lucky enough to be able to pass as White."

Stunned by the ignorance exhibited by those who should have supported me, I was determined to take action. I dedicated a majority of my time in graduate school to reclaiming my Mexican American identity—my Chicana identity did not emerge until I was working on my doctorate. The process became increasingly troubling as I read more about Mexican American and Latina/o educational attainment. I felt distanced from the research because I did not fit the prescribed Mexican American characteristics and images crafted by educational researchers. Not "seeing myself" in the research made me feel marginalized both from Mexican American communities and from

the dominant culture that used my experience, along with that of other "high-achieving" Mexican Americans, to fuel the master narrative about the American Dream. (See Cuádraz, 2006, for a discussion on the politics of exceptionality.) As a child, I also reproduced this master narrative, especially because my family was proud to serve in the military and defend American values, even if those values did not coincide with our cultural values.

Although I did not readily identify with the portrayals of first-generation Mexican American undergraduates who came from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the intersections of race/ethnicity, gender, and immigrant status provided some similarities. I analyzed my experiences as a racial and racialized person and addressed my concerns in classroom settings and informal discussions to the extent that I acquired a reputation within my cohort as the spokesperson for Latina/o communities. It had taken years to publicly identify myself as a Mexican American and a woman of color because my survival as a child actually meant trying to ignore my racial/ethnic difference in order to acclimate to predominately White environments.

As expressed by many of the participants in my study, I had not yet found the words to fully articulate my experiences with racism. After working as a student affairs practitioner for several years, I decided that the means for obtaining the language to speak against racism and other forms of oppression was to earn a doctorate. I wanted to call attention to the challenges that I continued (and continue) to face in negotiating my identities as a Chicana feminist, a critical race scholar, and a scholar of higher education in order to amplify the voices of those who are also negotiating the tensions among these identities.

Part 1 of this article focuses on my reflections on privileged systems of knowing and raced-gendered epistemologies. Part 2 offers insight on the methodological approach I employed in analyzing participants' life narratives. Finally, Part 3 describes the analytical process of the life narratives of two Mexican American Ph.D.s. Similar to other studies that incorporated counter-stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000, 2002a, 2002b) my counter-story contains composite characters that are based on real experiences drawn from personal experience, interviews with research participants, discussions with colleagues, and higher education and social science literature. These characters present oppositional perspectives, my own doubts, and contradictions within educational research. By naming and describing my research experience, my goal is to contribute to an empowering counter-space within our field that nurtures the continued development of researchers who are focused on anti-oppression scholarship.

PART 1: CONTENDING WITH RACIALLY BIASED EPISTEMOLOGIES

Tuesday morning, 9:00 a.m.

I pour my second cup of coffee and walk down the hallway to my home office. After an early morning rain, the sunshine streams through the window. I look at my desk and feel slightly overwhelmed by the books and articles that are stacked in three piles. One pile is for the research methods class. Another pile is for the research team that is analyzing data from the third pile, which contains transcriptions. This semester, Denise Riley, a second-year doctoral student, is serving as my teaching intern; and we are meeting later today to talk about the lesson plan for Research Methods.

I glance at the syllabus: "Week 3: Educational Research and Systems of Knowing. Read Scheurich and Young's (1997) work on epistemological racism; and Delgado Bernal's (1998) discussion of Chicana feminist epistemology." After reading through the articles, I pack my bag and leave for campus.

"Hi, Dr. Espino," Denise says as she enters my campus office. Bright and inquisitive, Denise has already demonstrated strong critical thinking skills while serving on my research team over the past year. She unpacks her laptop and a manila folder from her bag. "You'll probably laugh at me, but I'm going to learn so much in this class! I can't stop thinking about how I'll incorporate our discussion on epistemology into my own work."

I chuckle, "I'm glad to hear it, Denise. Not all students are as excited to talk about research as you."

She smiles as I upload the lesson plan to the Google document that we share. "Now, let's figure out what we're going to do next week."

I begin typing the questions that entered my mind during my drive to campus:

- What is knowledge?
- How is knowledge acquired?
- How do I, the researcher, know what I know?

Denise glances at the Google document. "Oh, good questions. I think it's important to consider these questions when designing a research study, even though interrogating one's system of knowing is a difficult process."

I sit back from the computer. "Yes, it is. Epistemology is a 'system of knowing that is linked to worldviews based on the conditions under which people live and learn' (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 106). How we know what we know and what we value *as* knowledge is often predicated on who determines what knowledge *is* and how knowledge is shared."

Denise nods. "I didn't realize the extent to which epistemologies are 'culture-bound' (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 4). Hmm, maybe we can tie that in with Scheurich and Young's (1997) statement on page 8: '[Systems

of knowing] reflect the social history of that group, race, culture, society, or civilization; that is, no epistemology is context-free.'"

I add: "We need for the students to understand that if epistemologies are based on culture, identity, and context, then some epistemologies could be formulated within racist and sexist frameworks. According to Delgado Bernal (2002), Eurocentric epistemologies disregard experiential knowledge as an aspect of truth while raced-gendered epistemologies view experiential knowledge as an asset in research."

I type another question on the lesson plan: "If experiential knowledge is regarded differently across epistemologies, to what extent does holding a raced-gendered epistemology strengthen the analysis of the experiences of marginalized communities?"

"That's an interesting question, Dr. E.," Denise responds as she reads my note. "Do you believe that your epistemology reflects your culture and experiences as a scholar of color?"

I take a deep breath. "Well, my research stems from my discomfort with essentializing Mexican American communities in educational research, especially because my experiences were not reflected in that research. As a result, I confront traditional paradigms that characterize a monolithic Mexican American *community* by recognizing the multiple dimensions found within Mexican American *communities,* including immigrant status, parental educational attainment, linguistic attributes, phenotype, sexualities, and geographic location, to name a few" (Cuádraz & Uttal, 1999).

"Wouldn't some scholars say that there are drawbacks to taking this position, as working to de-essentialize Communities of Color could 'corrode group identification and solidarity?'" Denise asks (MacKinnon, 2002, p. 75).

I respond: "My intent is to expose the realities of power in the world that are experienced by Communities of Color within interlocking systems of oppression (Cuádraz & Uttal, 1999). In addition, I take to task those in positions of power (including myself) who construct the realities that center the dominant culture in all aspects of society while devaluing communities whose knowledge, languages, and skills are not part of privileged groups."

"But why implicate yourself with the dominant culture, Dr. Espino?"

"Because I must acknowledge my privilege across social identities (i.e., middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied) as well as the marginalization that I experience in an effort to interrogate the extent to which I have contributed to the reproduction and resistance of master narratives. Marginalized communities do not live in a vacuum, Denise. We are subjected to the same socialization processes within our society and even in academe; but in contrast to the dominant culture that views these processes as truth and reality, we recognize that those socialization processes are flawed because they do not account for our lived experience as Communities of Color."

Denise glances at the Jones et al. (2006) book on the shelf. "Hmm, how are we going to approach this discussion in class? I suspect that the students will feel quite challenged in determining not only what they value as knowledge but why they value certain knowledges. Maybe we can help them discuss the differences among objectivism, constructivism, and subjectivism using the table on page 20."

I stare intently at the dream catcher that is hanging in the corner of my office. "Although it is important that the students learn about these episte-mologies, at what point do we disrupt traditional systems of knowing and attend to the racism inherent in these epistemologies? (Scheurich & Young, 1997) Indeed, many Eurocentric epistemologies and subsequent theoreti-cal perspectives 'from positivism to constructivism and liberal feminism to postmodernism . . . draw from a narrow foundation of knowledge that is based on the social, historical, and cultural experiences of [Whites]' (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 107). This concept goes back to our earlier discussion. Com-munities of Color have sets of knowledge that are essential to uncovering and resolving issues of injustice. They are just as important and relevant to answering critical questions about education, yet are often dismissed in the research literature because the presentations of their lived experiences are not generalizable and supposedly distort 'the Truth' (Delgado Bernal, 2002)."

Denise sets her computer aside to concentrate more deeply on the con-versation. "I remember reading about this last semester. Privileged systems of knowing, namely, positivist paradigms found in science, often have grand narratives that seek universal 'Truth' and rationality (Lyotard, 1984)."

"Mmm-hmm, and concepts such as 'truth,' 'rationality,' 'meritocracy,' 'objectivity,' and 'race-neutrality' are often employed to support social hier-archies and 'camouflage the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups' (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 313)."

The buzz from the fluorescent light tube on the ceiling is the only sound we hear as we contemplate these concepts. Denise then says, "By offering multiple truths, contesting these concepts, and (re)presenting the voices of subjugated communities in the literature, aren't we diluting our academic and professional standards?"

I unfasten the top of my dented, green water bottle and take a sip. "Some education scholars argue that questions about research validity and rigorous scholarship are strategies incorporated by the dominant culture to subsume research on people of color (Tate, 1999). We should draw our attention away from positivist concepts and focus on legitimating lived experience."

"But wait a minute, Dr. E.!" Denise's eyes widen. "If 'truth,' rationality, meritocracy, and objectivity are constructions within particular societal con-texts at particular moments in time, couldn't the same be said about racism?"

I fold my arms and lean back in my chair. "Ah, but CRT legal scholars would say that racism, even as a social construction, is permanent and persistent (Bell, 1992)."

Denise's brow furrows, "How can that be the case?"

"Well, let's first focus on the concept of race. The various races and ethnicities that we have today are based on 'categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient' (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). For example, we know that the term 'race' was constructed in the late 17th century to distinguish among the various populations located in North America and Europe. In the 18th century, it was standardized through laws to justify slavery (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). How else could good, God-fearing people defend their enslavement of Black people? They needed a rationale for dehumanizing them. These tactics continued into the 20th century for Mexican American communities. As early as 1916, 'Americanization' and hygiene programs dehumanized Mexican American children who were inspected by school administrators for cleanliness and good hygiene. Children categorized as 'filthy or unhealthy' (Delgado Bernal, 2000, p. 71) were forced to shower in special bathrooms at the schools."

Denise shakes her head. "That's ridiculous. How could anyone think that those programs were appropriate?"

"It is easy to look back and acknowledge that particular policies and practices were racist. It is more difficult to critically examine racist practices today. Remember that race and racism are constructed and they fit within a particular context at a particular time."

Denise places her elbows on her knees and leans forward. "So, race and racism are malleable, but not necessarily destructible."

"Yes, unfortunately, because racism, as CRT scholars define it, is not based on the 'acts of individuals, but the larger, systemic, structural conventions and customs that uphold and sustain oppressive group relationships, status, income, and educational attainment' (Taylor, 2009, p. 4)."

I notice a smudge on my glasses and squint as I clean the lens. "Racism is cloaked in terms like 'objectivity' and 'neutrality,' for example, that are not only 'unattainable ideals; they are harmful fictions that obscure the normative supremacy of Whiteness in American law and society' (Valdes, McCristal Culp, & Harris, 2002, p. 1). This is a main tenet of critical race theory: Racism is a social construction and our goal is not only to deconstruct institutions that perpetuate racism, but to reconstruct them in an effort to liberate ourselves" (Bell, 1995).

A grin crosses my face as I watch Denise thinking through what I have said. After a brief pause, she raises her hands above her head in a swirling motion and states, "This all seems so *out* there."

"At first glance, perhaps it does," I reply, "but let's return to our discussion about epistemology and see if we can build the connection."

Denise reaches for her laptop and sighs, "Well, what is valued as knowledge is woven from a fabric comprised of 'racial hierarchies and exclusions' (Scheurich & Young, 1997, p. 7), and what is deemed as legitimate research is based on Eurocentric epistemologies that are infused in our academic training."

I hold my breath as I begin to conceptualize what Denise is saying.

She continues: "So does that mean that what we value as knowledge and how we know what we know is defined within the confines of White supremacy? Oh, my goodness!" she gasps. "Even in the classroom, 'where knowledge is constructed, organized, produced, and distributed,' the type of knowledge that I have access to and that which is validated . . ." Denise's voice crescendos to a higher octave. " . . . I mean, have I been contributing to the construction of social and racial power because I use racially biased epistemologies?"

Immediately, I feel a pang at the pit of my stomach and force myself to exhale. Her question is yet another sign that I need to reconcile the strands of racially biased epistemologies that intertwine with my understandings of race and racism and affect how I craft my work. Noting that the hour is ending, I push back my chair and stand: "I think it's more than just about the individual; this is a systemic issue that affects what is considered as truth. 'Excluding the range of possible epistemologies' (Scheurich & Young, 1997, p. 9) from what is valued can distort the lived experiences of Communities of Color and certainly affects scholars of color who have to be fluent in Eurocentric epistemologies in order to advance their work in our field. Scholars of color carry the burden of being 'epistemologically bicultural' while White scholars may never have to consider how Eurocentric epistemologies emerge from White contexts and culture. But do not be dismayed, Denise. There are aspects of the epistemology of social constructionism that can help us explain the persistence and permanence of race and racism. After all, it serves as a foundation for critical race theory. Perhaps we can reflect on this until the next time we meet."

I begin to gather my tattered schedule, my pink mini-laptop, and the leather-bound journal in which I write down ideas.

"Oh, it's time to go, huh?" Denise asks, still astonished by her personal revelation.

"Unfortunately, I have another meeting, but let's keep working on the lesson plan. You're welcome to jot down ideas on our Google doc and we can talk about it later this week."

Denise's laptop beeps as it closes, and she picks up her bag. "I'll keep working on it. See you at research team!"

I follow her, turn off the lights, and lock the door.

Although we did not finish formulating the lesson plan, my conversation with Denise has prompted me to consider the foundation of critical race theory. Although Scheurich and Young (1997) pointed to Eurocentric, racially biased epistemologies such as social constructionism, many of the early CRT scholars had drawn from this epistemology. It seems that even raced-gendered epistemologies are influenced by the epistemologies of the dominant culture.

As I walk down two flights of stairs and through the automatic doors that allow a rush of cold air from outside, I recall the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966) on the sociology of knowledge and the notions of objective and subjective realities that institutions and individuals continuously (re)construct. I button my coat tightly against the chill. Social control, the privileged knowledge produced, and the common language in which privileged knowledge is understood are continuously reproduced or adapted through a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the institution, which is a vessel for patterns of behavior and accepted values and beliefs. Mechanisms are constructed to enforce and coerce these patterns of behavior, sanction those who break away from the prescribed, and legitimize institutions and meanings.

Still in deep thought, I open the next set of doors to the coffee shop. Subjective reality is constructed through individual considerations of one's position in society and through interactions with others (Montecinos, 1995). Within a given society there may be multiple realities; however, those in power dictate the dominant reality for the rest of society, drawing on "a stock of explanatory scripts, plots, narratives, and understandings that enable us to make sense of . . . our social world" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 221). Marginalized communities do not have access to privileged knowledge and therefore learn to navigate through institutions by constructing their own meanings and/or internalizing and reproducing the dominant culture's interpretations.

I purchase a café mocha at the counter and walk into a conference room that is furnished with a large wooden table and ten black cushioned chairs. Through the windows, I can see the clouds darken and the wind bend the saplings that have just been planted. Not wanting to lose the thoughts that are forming, I take out my laptop and open the Google document. Then I search through my bag for the Delgado Bernal (1998) article. After skimming quickly through the paragraphs, I type my thoughts: "Experiential knowledge is an essential aspect of raced-gendered epistemologies. It is one of the four main sources of cultural intuition. What are the other three sources?" Delgado Bernal (1998) described cultural intuition as a mixture of personal experience, existing literature, professional experience, and the analytical research process itself. Her intuition was informed by Chicana feminist epistemology, which "draws its strength from 'endarkened feminist epistemologies" (para.

2) and Chicanas' lived experiences in an effort to question "objectivity . . . and the Western dichotomies of mind versus body, subject versus object, objective truth versus subjective emotion, and male versus female" (para. 9).

A deep sigh expands and contracts my lungs. Although I stare at the rain that begins to hit the windowpane, I do not see it. I am in liminal space, floating between Eurocentric epistemologies and systems of knowing from "ancestors and elders [who] carry knowledge of conquest, loss of land, school and social segregation, labor market stratification, assimilation, and resistance" (Delgado Bernal, 1998, para. 20). In my interactions with students and colleagues, I talk about transgressing boundaries and the confines of stereotypes that present and subjugate a static, uniform, and uncomplicated community of color. However, in appropriating aspects of social construc-tionism for my epistemology, am I participating in my own colonization? Or am I enacting a form of biculturalism, blending both systems of knowing into a critical race epistemology?

Scholars of color, despite their marginalization, are part of a racist system that distorts the lived experiences of Communities of Color within educa-tional institutions. Even if scholars of color resist Eurocentric epistemologies and use raced-gendered epistemologies that include experiential knowledge, gaining recognition and appreciation for their systems of knowing within the discourse is problematic. For CRT scholars, experiential knowledge is a key component in building agency and empowerment. Bell (1995) says that "the voice exposes, tells and retells, signals resistance and caring, and reiterates what kind of power is feared most—the power of commitment to change" (p. 906). My eyes strain against the illuminated computer screen in search of answers. My colleagues enter the room and the meeting begins.

PART 2
THE INFLUENCE OF A CRITICAL RACED-GENDERED EPISTEMOLOGY ON MY METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Wednesday afternoon, 3:30 p.m.

I take the elevator to the fourth floor of the education building. The doors open, and I follow the carpeted hallway until I reach the conference room. I hear Denise's voice, "So then, I ask Dr. Espino if I'm reproducing racism by the epistemologies I use."

"And what did she say?"

"Yes, what did I say, Denise?" I enter the small conference room that also serves as a higher education library. I always enjoy hearing how students interpret our conversations.

"Well, Dr. E.," Denise nervously laughs. "You didn't really answer the question."

"Hmm, I guess I didn't." I wink at Taneisha Baker, Cooper Maddox, and Davis Foster, who volunteered to serve on my research team because of their interests in race and racism in education. Davis smiles back, "It's like you always say, Dr. E.: Sometimes the answer isn't ready to be found."

"Indeed. But there are some questions that are ready to be answered."

As part of our doctoral program, students were encouraged to participate in research teams. In discussing the goals and outcomes for the team, we decided to focus on the role of race and racism in educational systems, practice analyzing qualitative data using the transcriptions from my study, and develop counter-stories from the data. Jil Wallace briskly enters the room and discards a half-eaten apple. "Sorry I'm late."

I nod as I unzip the purple sleeve that holds my laptop and connect the mouse to the USB port. I open the dry-erase board that is mounted to the wall and place red, black, and blue markers on the ledge. Finally, I grab a sample of transcripts that I brought from home and stack them in the center of the table. I clasp my hands together and hold them to my chin: "I'm not sure if Denise shared this aspect of our discussion from yesterday, but we were talking about social constructionism. I believe we've talked in this group about the institution of education serving as a vessel for prescribed patterns of behavior, right?"

"Mmm-hmm," Taneisha replies. "We've discussed how education, in particular, is a conduit for social reproduction because it replicates 'the structure of power relationships and symbolic relationships between classes' (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 71)."

"I'll take notes, Dr. Espino." Jil glances at the group and asks, "Didn't we also talk about merit as a sorting mechanism that determines where children fit as (un)skilled workers along the lines of production?"

In previous meetings, we had discussed the extent to which reinforcing power structures and relationships among social classes ensures that there is a range of workers in various fields, which accounts for sorting mechanisms that push students out of the educational system at all levels. Students of color, in particular, are challenged to persevere despite pervasive, hegemonic forces within educational institutions and ethnocentric processes of socialization that suppress and/or ignore oppressed communities.

I slowly rise from my chair. "Yes, we did, Jil. As we discussed, institutions contain particular forms of knowledge that privilege the dominant culture and language that can decipher that knowledge. This knowledge is distributed through 'stock stories' or master narratives that 'legitimate [the dominant culture's] power and position' (Tate, 1997, p. 216), 'preserve the status quo with regard to power relations and difference' (Bamberg, 2005, p. 287), and justify the subjugation of marginalized communities" (Stanley, 2007). I write the phrase "master narratives" on the board with the red marker.

"It's like what we were talking about yesterday." Denise's glance darts between me and her colleagues. "These are stories that are told 'with the conviction that they are not stories at all, but the Truth' (Delgado, 1993, p. 670), simplifying complex issues and presenting individuals as one-dimensional rather than as social actors with complex identities, experiences, and cultural lives (Aldridge, 2006; Cuádraz, 2006)."

Davis, who is working on his dissertation on the experiences of Black men on a predominately White campus in the South, responds, "Master narratives 'offer people a way of identifying what is assumed as a normative experience' (Andrews, 2002, p. 1), which means that 'White, middle-class American' males 'serve as the standard against which other groups are compared' (Tate, 1997, p. 199)." The students swivel uncomfortably in their chairs as Davis presses his point: "I wish I could say that postmodernism has deconstructed the existence of 'grand narratives' in science (Lyotard, 1984) and elsewhere, but all you have to do is ask my participants and they can tell you that master narratives have simply made their way 'underground . . . buried in the political unconscious' (Jameson, 1984, p. xii)."

I nod in agreement. Master narratives are entrenched in the social fabric to the extent that colonization occurs not through brutal force but through "construction of the word, through the very frameworks by which self and others are experienced, subjectivity and self-understandings made known (Sampson, 1993 as cited in Villenas & Deyhle, 1999, p. 418)."

Cooper leans forward, "A master narrative that comes to mind is the American Dream."

The click-clack on a keyboard abruptly stops. Jil glances at Cooper, "Now, c'mon. The American Dream?"

"Yeah, the American Dream. It's a societal message about personal responsibility and individual success (Hochschild, 1995). Often told through books, seen in movies, and discussed on television, the American Dream is an ideology that (mis)leads all who are part of this country to envision successful lives, equal opportunity, unimaginable wealth, and prosperity for future generations—all achieved through hard work and determination."

"And what's the problem with that?"

I intervene. "The American Dream is an abbreviated story, neglecting to explain how families, communities, institutions, networks, physical and psychological mechanisms, and social structures help or hinder the attempt to achieve the American Dream."

Davis adds, "Those who fail are blamed for not working hard enough, emphasizing attachments to cultural practices, speaking a language other than English, illegally taking advantage of social services, and/or relying on family. The American Dream serves as an example that some master narratives are well grounded and well documented, while others remain uncovered

because they are so deeply embedded within the consciousness of individuals, communities, and societies."

"Maybe you're right," Jil concedes, "but a story like that seems so natural. Why wouldn't you want to believe it?"

I see looks of concern cross the students' faces. I, too, am troubled with how master narratives manage to survive through history and are embraced so fervently by Communities of Color. "How do we explain the process of buying into and perhaps even reproducing master narratives?"

The group is silent. Davis clears his throat. "I'm not sure if this would help; but for my dissertation, I've been reading a lot about Hegel's (1977) dialectic of master and slave, in which the master's identity as master is predicated on the slave's acknowledgement of the master as the person in power."

"Talk more about that, Davis."

Davis moves to the edge of his chair. "According to Hegel, the master's identity is dependent on an external source to legitimize the master's position. As a means of self-preservation, the slaves willingly acknowledge the master, but their identities are not necessarily dependent on the master."

"What do you mean?"

Davis swivels his chair to the right so he can directly address Denise, who is sitting next to him. "The slaves develop counter-narratives that 'first articulate the profound cruelty, the very grotesqueness of slavery [and secondly] recount the acts which freed them from that' (Cassuto, 1996, p. 234)."

"That's right," Cooper interjects. "The slave narratives offered a different perspective on the slaves as their objectification as the Other was diminished and their humanity regained."

I concentrate on the wood paneling in the room and then say, "As counter-narratives are shared, communities that were marginalized, rejected, and disregarded are uplifted, which offers an interesting imagery depicting the position of marginalized communities as they navigate between the dominant reality and marginalized realities." In search of examples, I walk over to the bookshelves and find an old copy of *The Souls of Black Folk*. "DuBois (1903/1989) asserts that double consciousness was experienced by African Americans who simultaneously recognized their 'twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder' (p. 3). In a similar vein, by acquiring the language of the colonizers, the colonized begin to separate from their identities as the Other by wearing the White masks of colonization (Fanon, 1967). Unfortunately, the masks eventually erode the Black and Brown faces of the colonized."

"But it can't be just this binary," protests Taneisha. "Counter-narratives do not only address the deconstruction of master narratives. Don't counter-narratives articulate survival and affirm cultural values and traditions?

(Stanley, 2007) Otherwise, we keep the master narrative at the center of the discourse (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b)."

"A valid point, Taneisha. However, Aguirre (2005) argues that 'to a certain degree . . . one must give the master narrative meaning in order to challenge it' (p. 153)."

Taneisha responds: "So, then, what do we do? Do we recognize and legitimate dominant ideologies in order to resist them and then justify doing so as an aspect of self-preservation? Why not ignore master narratives, dismiss them in the same ways that raced-gendered epistemologies and experiential knowledge are dismissed and ignored by the dominant culture?"

I respond, "Those who frame their scholarship on a critical race epistemology must bear witness to oppression and seek to include the perspectives of marginalized communities in developing a more complex understanding of our reality."

"So, counter-narratives seem to have multiple functions," summarizes Jil. "They are told from the perspective of a marginalized person, someone whose culture, belief system, and identity(ies) are different from the normative (Andrews, 2002). They can 'build community . . . challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center . . . and provide a context to understand and transform established belief systems' (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002a, p. 156)."

"And, Jil," I point out, "the location where these counter-narratives are found is the third space" (Bhaba, 1994).

"The third space? Is there a way you can diagram this on the board?"

I draw the diagram. (See Figure 1.) "The space between Fanon's (1967) masks and faces and DuBois's (1903/1989) double consciousness is what Bhaba (1994) terms 'third space,' which is a position between 'competing cultural collectives,' such as 'colonized-colonizer, indigenous-foreign, local-global, traditional-modern' (Bhatt, 2008, p. 178)."

"Okay, hold on," interjected Denise. "This is getting way complex."

"Well, Denise, it *is* complex. It's about finding a location where culture, beliefs, traditions, and meanings that do not fit into dominant cultural norms can find validation and support. The third space challenges marginalized communities to make meaning from the tensions of opposing ideologies in an effort to emerge transformed, rejecting dominant paradigms, the dominant culture's sanctioning mechanisms, and/or the pulls from social reproduction." I return to my chair. "The third space is where resistance lives, agency forms, and transformation occurs. By applying this concept, we can reclaim identities and histories that are often neglected in traditional scholarship, and even uncover systems of oppression within marginalized communities themselves (Pérez, 1999)."

Jil stares intently at the figure on the board. "So what this diagram shows, then, is that master narratives are constructed by dominant groups but must
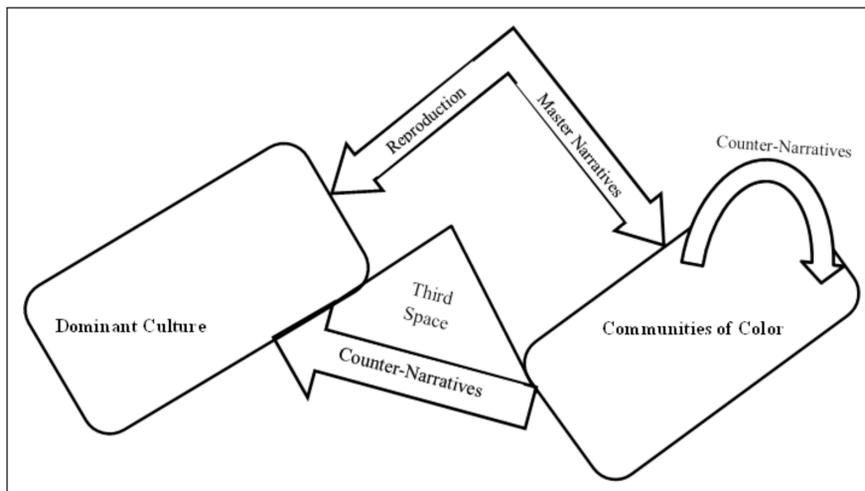
Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the relationships between the dominant culture and Communities of Color, as well as master narratives and counter-narratives.

be reproduced by marginalized communities, either as a means of self-preservation or as a result of coercion, in order to maintain the dominant culture's social positions and power in U.S. society."

Cooper adds, "And counter-narratives are not only created in reaction to master narratives, but to uplift marginalized communities."

The students lower their eyes in deep thought. As I gather my ideas for facilitating the rest of our meeting, I consider the complex role of the counter-narrative as resistance, disruption, deconstruction, and empowerment. Eventually, exposing master narratives and constructing counter-narratives will make way for reconciliation. Anzaldúa (1999) encourages me to envision that possibility:

> A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed . . . ; both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. It's a step towards liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two moral combatants somehow healed. (p. 100)

I check the time. "Let's take a five-minute break just to stretch and get refocused, okay?"

Most of the students leave the room. I reorganize my stack of transcripts and then check email. I notice that Jil has not moved from her chair. As I click on a message, she rolls her chair closer to my side of the table and places her laptop next to me.

"Um, Dr. Espino?"

"Yes, Jil?"

She clicks on a computer folder and scrolls through various files. "I've been working on the literature review that you assigned to me a few weeks ago. I uploaded the articles on our e-learning commons and am finishing the annotations. Do you mind if I just talk through some of the information I have gathered?"

"Oh, that's great. I'm excited to hear what you've found."

"Well, let me first tell you that I'm actually pretty bothered with what I am finding in the literature. Talking about master narratives today made me think about the deficit models that are often used to analyze Mexican American educational attainment."

"Mmm, let's talk through it and see how we can reframe some of those deficits."

Jil reads from her computer screen, "Okay, so I found that Mexican Americans are the largest subgroup within the Latina/o population and are considered the future of the U.S. workforce, yet have the lowest completion rates in high school and college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Currently, 52.4% of Mexican Americans over the age of 25 have graduated from high school compared to 60% of the entire Hispanic population. In terms of attaining postsecondary education, only 8.6% of Mexican Americans over the age of 25 have earned a bachelor's degree or higher compared to the total Hispanic population at 13% and the entire U.S. population at 28%. In contrast, 89% of non-Hispanic Whites over the age of 25 have high school diplomas and 30% have earned a bachelor's degree or higher."

The stark figures she has gathered certainly indicate disparities in the rates of Mexican American educational attainment, especially in contrast with non-Hispanic Whites.

Jil continues, "It seems to me that increasing Mexican American under-graduate and graduate school access as well as retention and completion rates in college and graduate school is imperative, not just for Mexican American communities but for all of us. What troubles me is that most of the literature focuses on academic failures attributed to individual students, parents, and families, with little consideration for institutional or systemic factors that limit educational opportunities for marginalized communities."

I am reminded that deficit models serve as another example of how one's epistemology can affect who is considered the norm in educational research. For example, cultural determinist theory places blame on Communities of Color that retain their cultures and transmit so-called dysfunctional, non-White cultural values that stress the family and "'immediate versus deferred gratification,' but give decreased importance to 'education and upward mobil-ity' (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 6)." I comment: "Unfortunately, this is not surprising, Jil. By focusing solely on individual responsibility, the dominant

culture never has to be held accountable for oppressive systems within society that prohibit access and opportunity for marginalized communities."

"I agree, Dr. Espino. It seems to me that deficit models work in cyclical fashion, formed from educational research and then informing researchers who base their work on deficit models. This negative discourse is then translated and expressed in media, politics, and education, among other social institutions, in the form of master narratives." Jil places her head in her hands. "I feel so frustrated that we have to keep directing our attention to the negative, rather than focusing on the assets that these communities have."

"Theorizing about race and racism, addressing the inequities in education, and challenging deficit models is taxing to the mind and spirit," I acknowledge, "but that's why you have to hold on to asset-based models such as funds of knowledge (Moll & González, 2004), which focus on secondary education and the knowledge transmitted in Latina/o homes and on community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005, 2006) that uncovers Mexican Americans' experiential knowledge based on several types of capital. These forms of capital include linguistic (real-world literacy skills), social (kinship networks and loose ties to other social networks), navigational (manipulation of the educational system), resistant (awareness of and agency against racism, sexism, and classism), aspirational (high expectations for academic achievement), and familial (cultural identity and sense of belonging)."

Jil clicks on another folder. "Familial and aspirational forms of capital are evident in the research I found demonstrating that Mexican American parents value education and have high aspirations for their children. As several studies on Mexican American doctoral student experiences attest, having strong support from family, supportive advisors, social networks in departments and on campus, and a strong sense of self-efficacy can help Mexican Americans successfully complete postsecondary degrees (Cuádraz, 2006; Gándara, 1982; González, 2006)."

"This information is very helpful, Jil, because we are not only focusing on higher education but on entire pathways to the doctorate." I click through the e-learning commons to view the articles that she uploaded. "We can also add this information to the few studies that hold institutions responsible for creating barriers along the educational pathways such as work critiquing teachers' low expectations for Mexican American students (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995), curricula that ignore their communities and histories (Valenzuela, 1999), hostile campus climates (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), and sorting mechanisms in graduate school that filter out students who do not meet faculty expectations or demands (Lovitts, 2001)."

I swivel my chair to address the students who have now returned from the break. "Folks, I hope that you've had a chance to review Jil's annotated bibliography. The research she's found on Mexican American educational attainment will help us develop a coding scheme and guide the analysis."

"Dr. E., I also found information that can help us," offers Denise.

"That's great, Denise. What did you find?"

Denise opens the small red journal in which she writes down her ideas. "Our conversation yesterday challenged me to consider how concepts like 'meritocracy,' 'objectivity,' and 'race-neutrality' are employed to 'camouflage the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups' (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 313)." She nervously looks around the table and clears her throat. "I know that if I say this we may go off on a tangent, but I don't understand why meritocracy is problematic. I think we've all been raised to believe in the American Dream, to believe that we will be rewarded for our hard work, and that we should earn what we have."

Cooper smiles. "Sure, we can think that if we're on a level playing field, but didn't we just discuss that the American Dream is a myth and that oppressive structures exist in our society to prohibit others from advancing? That's why affirmative action policies are needed—to address the extent to which structural oppression has affected entire groups of marginalized people."

Across the table, Davis groans, "Really, Denise? Are we going to have a debate about meritocracy and affirmative action?"

Denise shrugs and sinks lower in her seat. "That really isn't my intention. I just want to clarify these concepts as a group."

I glance at the clock on the wall. "I think we have some time to briefly talk about affirmative action, especially because many of the participants' educational experiences were affected by this policy. Who can provide an overview?"

Cooper answered, "'Affirmative action [in education] came about because our campuses were White, male centers of learning' (Tierney, 1997, p. 168). I think it started in the 1970s, right, Dr. Espino?"

"I guess it depends on what you label as affirmative action, Cooper. Legacies have always been valued in college admissions as well as athletes and even veterans who get special accommodations based on the G.I. Bill. Yet special consideration for these groups is seldom questioned. Within the past 30 years, affirmative action policies have been focused on addressing previous and present discrimination, and on developing a multicultural workforce" (Tierney, 1997).

Denise rolls her chair closer to the table, "I understand the importance of this type of policy, but I'm sometimes at a loss about what to tell the White peers in our cohort or even strangers who wonder how I could possibly get into this doctoral program. Was it only because I met a quota? How do I, as a woman of color, respond to a White man who says that he's being punished because of issues like slavery or discrimination that occurred centuries ago? I'd rather say that I got here on my own merit than at the expense of someone else."

Jil opens her laptop. "Which group are you going to focus on, Denise, 'a group that has been excluded from equal opportunity in the past [and] deserves redress, [or] a group that fears exclusion based on an affirmative action policy in the present'? (Tierney, 1997, p. 170)."

The room is silent for a few minutes as the students gather their thoughts. Jil makes some notes. Davis folds his arms and pushes his chair away from the table. I know that he is frustrated with the conversation. I am, too, but I want to be careful with my tone and the extent to which I will address Denise's concerns; the past few days have been focused on consciousness-raising and I know there will be a point when she will begin to resist the critical perspectives we are discussing. She seems to operate from an equal opportunity perspective that is "based on the assumption that the world will work in a fair and just manner and that an organization is not systematically racist or sexist (Tierney, 1997, p. 172)." By acknowledging that affirmative action policies may have positively affected her educational journey to this point rather than her own merits, she may feel that she does not deserve those opportunities—that she is deficient, which is a noted argument in the affirmative action debate.

"Hmm," I wonder aloud, "how many White, middle- and upper-class women share similar concerns as you, Denise? After all, they're the group that has experienced the largest gains from affirmative action. Are they also toiling under this burden of proving themselves?"

"Uh, well, um . . . "

I smile at her.

"Dr. Espino, why do you always answer a question with a question?" she blurts out.

The students chuckle.

"My goal is to help you arrive at your own answers. This conversation has offered an opportunity to reflect on a few assumptions about our society—namely, that without affirmative action, the dominant culture will be fair and just. So, folks, when considering the history of this country, when have you witnessed the dominant culture operate as fair and just of its own accord? The response to those who say they are being punished because of affirmative action need to recognize that we are not blaming them for what happened 400 years ago but are trying to rectify a horrific legacy that affects Communities of Color in the present day. The dominant culture allows for policies that resemble affirmative action (i.e., legacies in admissions) when it is convenient and reverses affirmative action policies when they perceive that they will lose power. Change occurs only when members of the dominant culture perceive that changes to the status quo will actually preserve their power in society."

Jil stops typing and says, "I believe what Dr. Espino is referring to is interest convergence, which critical race theorists employ with regard to eradicating

racism. For example, Bell (1980) argued that the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* could occur only because the racial remedies of desegregation would 'secure, advance, or at least not harm societal interests deemed important by middle and upper class Whites' (p. 523). On a global level, desegregation in the United States would lead to greater economic and political opportunities to fight against Communism. The Supreme Court decision had very little to do with advancing African American equality."

Davis adds, "And now, our school systems and neighborhoods are just as segregated as they were before desegregation."

I nod and take a deep breath. A year ago, the students would not have confronted one another and cited literature to substantiate their arguments. Many of them are uncovering their systems of knowing and worldviews. By centering race and racism in the discourse, they are seeing critical perspectives and crafting a better picture of the individual and systemic challenges that Communities of Color face in pursuing higher education. The research team has provided a venue for them to practice these skills and will hopefully lead to increased learning and scholarly development.

I notice that Denise's brow has furrowed; she seems deep in thought. "Thanks, Denise, for bringing up this important topic. Let's see how our conversation fits with the data analysis."

The students gather their notes and transcriptions. Silence fills the room as students wait for one of them to speak. Taneisha takes out the table of the participant demographics from her stack of papers. (See Table 1.) "I'm still amazed that you were able to capture most of the participants' stories over the phone."

I smile. Participants *wanted* to share their stories, resulting in 101 hours about self, experiences, and meanings. I recruited participants via email through a variety of social networks. I was grateful for the opportunity to delve into stories from 25 female participants and 8 male participants. Twelve participants had at least one parent who received a minimum of a two-year postsecondary degree; two identified as third-generation college students. All but one participant, who earned his doctorate in the late 1970s, had earned their doctorates within the past 15 years.

"Aside from the gender imbalance," comments Cooper, "it looks like a pretty diverse sample, including participants who self-identified as poor/low-income (4 participants), working class (15 participants), and middle class (13 participants). Wait, that doesn't add up to 33."

"That's because one participant only interviewed once and never completed her set of interviews. Good catch, Cooper."

I stare at my notes from the last meeting as if to recollect our discussion on recruiting participants, but the process is very clear in my mind. I had conducted a majority of the multiple open-ended, semi-structured inter-

TABLE 1

PARTICIPANT SAMPLE

Demographic Information
Born in U.S. (29), Mexico (3), and Canada (1)
Raised in Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, New Mexico, New York, and Texas
Seventh-generation New Mexicans (2)
Biracial (White and Mexican) (3)
Poor/low income* (4)
Working class (15)
Middle class (13)
Unknown (1)

Doctoral-Granting Institutions Represented and Number of Participants
Arizona State University (6)
California State University-Sacramento (1)
Colorado State University (1)
Ohio University (1)
Stanford University (1)
University of Arizona (2)
University of California-Berkeley (2)
University of California-Los Angeles (2)
University of Iowa (1)
University of Michigan (3)
University of New Mexico (2)
University of Southern California (2)
University of South Florida (1)
University of Texas-Austin (7)
University of Texas-San Antonio (1)

Doctoral Field and Number of Participants
Arts and humanities (3)
Education (9)
Life sciences (1)
Physical sciences, mathematics, engineering (5)
Social and behavioral sciences (15)

Current Occupation
Faculty (22)
Researcher/analyst (6)
University administrator (2)
K-12 administrator (2)
Therapist (1)

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*Self-reported

views via telephone and focused on participants' family histories, experiences in secondary and postsecondary education, and the mechanisms they employed to successfully navigate through their educational systems. Then, after transcribing a majority of the interviews, I sent the transcription drafts to the participants for review as a way to maintain trustworthiness. Many of the participants are the only Mexican Americans or faculty of color in their departments, laboratories, and schools and may be easily recognizable depending on their discipline and social identities. In an effort to maintain confidentiality, I renamed institutions and locations, as well as employing pseudonyms for the participants. I also did not share participants' specific disciplines, referencing the National Research Council's (2006) taxonomy of doctoral fields instead.

Jil exhales loudly. "So now we use narrative analysis, right? As we analyze these transcripts, we are taking as our 'object of investigation the story itself' (Riessman, 1993, p. 1)."

Denise drums her fingers on the table. "In our data analysis class, we practiced using narrative analysis to uncover the process of representation within a story. 'Narrative is retrospective meaning making—the shaping or ordering of past experience' (Chase, 2005, p. 656)."

"In addition," I respond, "the person telling the story 'shapes, constructs, and performs the self, experience, and reality' (Chase, 2005, p. 657). In this case, we should be able to tell when participants are signaling (Jones, 2002) that their stories are unique or are told in response to a master narrative, such as 'I'm not a typical Mexican,' 'My parents always valued education,' and 'My dad is a very traditional man, but . . . '"

I watch the students read through the transcripts. "Even saying something like 'I'm not a typical Mexican' demonstrates multiple realities and interpretations of self that exist based on who is telling the story. We may find some stories that actually uphold the status quo of White supremacy and inferiority."

"I know we should find that for ourselves in the transcripts," asks Cooper, "but can you give us an example, Dr. E.?"

"Sure, Cooper. When I asked how participants' parents and families shaped their educational aspirations as children, the typical response began with the statement, 'My parents always valued education.' It appeared that the participants were responding to stereotypes about Mexican American communities and a master narrative that described Mexican American families as *not* valuing education, which is inculcated in a majority of educational research." (See Valencia & Black, 2002 for a discussion that challenges this myth.) I see Cooper scribble "master narrative about not valuing education" in her notebook. She looks back at me and asks, "But how did you know that this is what the participants were doing?"

"Because I often said similar phrases—always trying to separate myself from the stereotype to the extent that I was eroding my connection to my community."

"But you know you don't have to talk about it, Dr. Espino," Jil observes. "You can hide the fact that you reproduced a master narrative."

Just like I could supposedly hide behind my light skin as that administrator once told me, I think.

"Couldn't that level of transparency be misconstrued or used against you by the dominant culture?" she continues.

"There have been others who have shared similar concerns, Jil (Aguirre, 2005; Cuádraz, 2006). As the researcher-interpreter, I determine how personal experiences are explicated, as the telling of experiences demonstrates how participants want to be 'known' to the audience. I contextualize participants' stories by incorporating their personal identity(ies), as well as educational settings and circumstances as I construct their voices and realities, but I cannot control 'the extent to which [the participants] told stories that they themselves wanted to hear, the stories that they might have come to embrace over time, or the stories that they were politically invested in telling' (Cuádraz, 2006, p. 103)."

Jil nervously clicks and retracts her pen several times, then says, "But if we are narrators of others' experiences, then that process 'opens up a range of complex issues about voice, representation, and interpretive authority' (Chase, 2005, pp. 657–658). Doesn't our analysis become an ethical concern?"

"That is correct, Jil. We have an ethical responsibility to articulate multiple truths and realities in order for a more complex picture of Mexican American educational attainment to emerge. We also have to consistently evaluate the extent to which our systems of knowing affect how we see and think about the data. Reflexivity helps us to think about the ways that our assumptions about the research change or remain the same as we delve more deeply into participants' stories (Jones et al., 2006)."

Davis asks, "Maybe the uneasiness you feel, Jil, is related to (re)presenting multiple truths rather than just the Truth?"

"Mmm, maybe, Davis, but let's not forget that 'working from within a critical raced-gendered epistemology does not mean that [we should] replace an old body of knowledge that purports to be the truth with an alternative body of knowledge that claims to be truth' (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 120)."

I lean back in my chair in contemplation. Jil is right to be concerned with the ethics of representation. When I interviewed the participants, I understood the power I had as the interviewer to guide the conversation and my role as narrator, weaving together participants' lived experiences and taking the responsibility for (re)presenting these narratives with care and respect. After a few minutes, I clear my throat. "Before we can get to issues of rep-

resentation, we first need to critically evaluate the transcribed experiences. Based on my epistemology, theoretical framework, and position(ality), I formulated similarities and differences in experiences across the sample."

"This is more than just coding, though. Right, Dr. E.?"

"Why do you say that, Davis?"

"Well, you have to look at these interviews in their entirety. Listening to the stories is an essential component of what Chase (2005) calls 'narrative strategy.' We need to honor and listen for the complexities found within each participant's narratives."

I look at the students and ask, "So, how do we begin our analysis?"

Denise responds, "I think we first need to consider our 'cultural intuition' (Delgado Bernal, 1999), which extends beyond theoretical sensitivity."

"In what ways?"

"Um, well, theoretical sensitivity is 'the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn't' (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b, p. 33). From a Chicana feminist perspective, cultural intuition is a complex process that extends beyond theoretical sensitivity. It 'is experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic' (Delgado Bernal, 1998, para. 29)."

I nod and respond, "When we consider the example I used earlier about the master narrative that Mexican American parents/families do not value education, I was drawing from aspects of cultural intuition such as my personal experience, the literature that focuses on debunking this master narrative, and professional interactions I've had with faculty and administrators who have reproduced this master narrative. In conducting an analysis of these participants' lived experiences, we must be cognizant of our systems of knowing and the extent to which the literature has informed our understanding of a problem."

Taneisha spoke up at this point: "And based on our conversation this afternoon and in previous meetings, we're taking a critical perspective regarding the relationship between education and Communities of Color. I don't want to speak for everyone, but I think there's general consensus that education is part of an oppressive system that is not invested in teaching Communities of Color and that every level of education creates mechanisms that weed out students who do not fit with prescribed notions of achievement and merit; and those who do are tokenized as an exception to supposedly deficient communities (Cuádraz, 2006)."

"Good, Taneisha. For the purpose of this session, let's focus on race and racism within participants' narratives. Any additional thoughts or questions before we begin?"

Davis asks, "Are there key questions that we should ask ourselves as we listen to the participants' narratives?"

I place my arms on the table. "Well, some questions you can ask are: How did the participants frame their stories? How do I interpret the silence within their narratives? What master narratives are present in the construction of the story? In what ways are counter-narratives developed?" The students write or type the questions. I pick up my stack of transcripts. "Are you ready to practice analyzing?"

I hear a resounding "Yes!"

PART 3
(RE)TELLING MULTIPLE TRUTHS

I begin my orientation: "As we discussed when the research team formed, one of our goals is to construct counter-stories about Mexican American educational attainment. Fortunately, we have some great examples of counter-storytelling in the CRT literature (Bell, 1987; Delgado, 1995a, 1995b; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Yosso, 2006). As evidenced in these examples, formulating counter-stories requires critical analysis that helps participants (re)claim their past to make sense of their present and future experiences. The challenge of the counter-storytelling process is contextualizing Mexican Americans' lived experiences within larger social structures that privilege some groups while subordinating others, particularly if the participants do not explicitly articulate those power differentials within their narratives (Cuádraz & Uttal, 1999)."

Davis turns the pages of the transcription he is reviewing: "I really appreciated Dr. O's story: Mexican American, working class, first-generation college student, social behavioral sciences. Would it be okay if we looked at his experience?"

Everyone nods.

Cooper adds, "And then let's analyze Darcy's experience."

"Okay," I say. "Davis, can you give us a brief overview of Dr. O's story?"

"Well, Dr. O frames his story as a series of *milagros* [miracles] as he searched for his life's purpose. His mother, who was undocumented, did not complete high school, and his father finished high school despite having dyslexia. They had Dr. O when they were in high school. At some point, his mother returned to school and earned a GED."

Jil clears her throat, "I really appreciate this quotation on page 3, line 1. Dr. Espino asks him about how his family influenced his educational aspirations and he says, 'Well, my mom's love for learning definitely, I think, had a major role in just pursuing education. Just seeing that she was going was a cool thing because she had to drop out [of high school] with a teenage pregnancy. . . . I really attribute a lot of this to my mom and her push with the importance of education.' When considering an asset-based model like community cultural wealth, you can see how Dr. O's educational aspirations

were shaped by his mother's resolve to complete high school. Although he later describes a troubled childhood filled with violence and trauma, his mother's example kept him motivated and inspired."

"Mmm-hmm." I rise from my chair and write "resiliency" and "aspirational capital" on the dry-erase board. "These concepts may serve as codes for our analysis. Let's continue with the story."

Davis renews his narration, "Okay." He pauses to find his place on the transcript. "And then he talks about starting at a local community college after high school, which connects to previous studies that discuss how community colleges are the entry point for most Latina/o students (Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005)."

Jil turns a page, "But look here on page 5. His college choice process illustrates how students are weeded out of education. He wasn't encouraged to attend college, he wasn't on an academic track in high school, and he was heavily recruited by the military during his senior year. He indicates that his high school counselor spent maybe five minutes with him and just asked, 'So do you want to go to college or what?' There was no intention there to help Dr. O consider college. And then he shares how he decided to go to college on line 31 after realizing that he didn't 'wanna work at Burger King the rest of my life so I remember thinking, I wanna go to college. But I had no clue what in the hell I wanted to go to college for.' Maybe a code we can add to our list is 'college choice.' Dr. O's story seems quite different from the college choice models in the literature (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). He doesn't seem predisposed to attend college, didn't necessarily actively search, and didn't make a rational decision."

"Mmm, I think he made a rational decision," Cooper responds. "It was either work at Burger King or go to college."

The students chuckle. I give a slight grin and say, "Ah, but be careful with just looking at this one incident and determining that this led to his decision to attend college. What can you find in his transcript to illustrate the concepts of labor and hard work?"

The students intently return to the transcript. "Dr. Espino, does working as a migrant worker serve as an example?" asks Cooper.

I nod, "Explain that, Cooper."

"When his mother was a child, she worked in the fields 'doing seasonal work' and she decided that Dr. O and his brother would do field work, 'chopping weeds in the field.' After his first experience doing that type of labor, he returned home, determined that 'I don't wanna be a migrant farm worker' and then started working at Burger King, which eventually led him to college."

"And what does that tell us?" I look around the room.

Taneisha offers: "Mmm, that rather than his journey to the Ph.D. beginning with wanting to go to college, Dr. O focused first on what he *didn't* want to do?"

"Okay, Taneisha. Let's go a little deeper. What else does this journey tell us?" The students shift in their seats and stare at their papers as if the transcripts will tell them the answers.

Denise sighs, "How about the role of experiential knowledge on the college choice process? He learned what he wanted to do because he saw the struggles in the fields and the limited opportunities in the service industry. That informed him more than any college brochure."

"Good point, Denise. For many of the poor and working-class participants I interviewed, the concept of labor changed as they obtained their college and graduate degrees. Many of them observed or were made aware of the challenges that their parents and families faced because of limited education. This was not done out of shame for the type of labor they produced, but for wanting their children to aspire to work along the lines of knowledge production rather than through physical labor. If you read further into Dr. O's transcript, you can see how much his mother's experiences of working in the fields, dropping out of high school, and then earning a GED affected his journey and motivation for earning a doctorate." I look at the dry-erase board, "So can you see how the preliminary coding process works and how framing lived experience can differ depending on your systems of knowing and whether you support deficit-centered or asset-based models?"

"Yeah, I think I get it, Dr. E.," Davis says. "Let's try another transcript to see if we can draw connections between participants."

We search for the transcription of Darcy's interview.

"Hmphf."

I look up, "Who grunted?"

"Oh, it was me, Dr. Espino," Cooper replies. "I wanted to talk about Darcy's transcript because it really bothered me. I mean, her story is disturbing on different levels."

I feel slightly tense about Cooper's response and say: "I know that we've discussed how objectivity doesn't exist, especially when analyzing data, but let's not judge someone's lived experience either."

"I can give the overview, Dr. Espino," Taneisha volunteers.

"Okay, go ahead."

"Darcy identifies as a Hispanic, middle-class, a second-generation college student in the physical sciences. She's from the same geographic area as Dr. O; they both grew up in the Southwest. Her parents met in college, and her father earned a master's degree. They divorced when she was still in elementary school, but that didn't affect her school work. She did very well in school; and when her mother remarried and moved the family to another town, Darcy says on page 2 that she persuaded 'my mom and my teachers that, rather than starting 8th grade [in the new town], that I should just start 9th grade . . . and they actually all went along with it.'"

"In that brief introduction, what do we learn about Darcy?" I unwrap a piece of chewing gum and wait for a response.

Jil walks to the board and writes "self-efficacy." She turns to the group. "At a young age, Darcy is able to advocate for herself and demonstrates a high level of self-efficacy. We know that self-efficacy is connected to higher levels of persistence in college (Solberg & Villarreal, 1997) and contributes to a positive perception of the university environment, increased cultural congruity, and decreased perceived educational barriers" (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005).

Denise agrees, "She believed in her abilities and her hard work led to a college scholarship."

Cooper appears agitated and sarcastically responds, "Yeah, her hard work. She took advantage of affirmative action policies."

I grit my teeth and sigh, "Now, Cooper, what do you mean?"

"Well, Dr. E., look at her discussion about her biracial identity on page 3. Her father is Irish and her mother is Mexican, but both identify closely with their cultural identities. Darcy says: 'My birthday's on St. Patrick's Day so that was always a huge deal and we'd go to the parade in town. I definitely learned to play violin, learned to play Irish folk music, but also, at the same time, I was doing *folklorico* dancing, and going to bilingual school and learning Spanish. [This] gives me a very strong sense of my culture and where it comes from.'"

Denise shrugs. "It seems to me that she is blending her cultural identities. What's the problem?"

Cooper scoots her chair closer to Denise and points to a line on the transcript, "Here, on line 46 and then on page 4, she talks about filling out college and scholarship applications. She says, 'But I always had a hard time on the demographic forms. They always ask you to choose just one and I remember asking my mom about that, "If I'm half and half, which one do I get to choose?" And she said, "Well, it's probably better for the school and the demographics that you check off as Hispanic," so that's what I've been doing ever since, but I identify with both cultures, I'd have to say.'"

Cooper's voice is angry: "Isn't that an abuse of structures that are put in place to support students of color?"

Denise quietly responds, "But the forms force someone who is biracial or multiracial to mark one box. How is that fair? You're forcing someone to choose."

"Yeah, and she inevitably chose the one that would provide an advantage. How is that fair to the students of color who really needed those scholarships?"

I place my hand on my chin and prop my elbow on the arm of my chair. The students had identified concerns similar to those I had when I first interviewed Darcy.

"Dr. Espino?" Taneisha brings me back to the discussion.

I look at Cooper. "I want to understand the deeper concerns that you have about Darcy's story. Can you explain why you feel so distressed?"

"I'm sorry, but I just don't understand why she is included in this sample. She is middle class, both of her parents went to college, she's biracial . . . ."

I look at Cooper intently, "And so, because she doesn't fit with the image projected in educational research pertaining to Mexican American students, she shouldn't be included. She doesn't count?"

Cooper stammers, "Uh, well, I . . ."

"What if we interrogated the mechanisms that are in place that prevent a student from being able to claim his or her various identities? What if we focused on understanding how Darcy shifted her monoracial identities according to the situation when she was in high school but now holds a biracial identity as an adult? (Renn, 2008) Why do you empathize with Dr. O's experience more than with Darcy's experience? Does Dr. O's experience fit better with the stereotypes that you may have about Mexican American communities? Is it easier to talk about oppression when you can analyze the lived experience of a poor, first-generation Mexican American Ph.D. rather than a middle-class, second-generation Hispanic? If you read further, you can see that she struggled with accusations of meeting a quota and anti-affirmative action rhetoric as one of few women of color in the physical sciences. Darcy reminds us of the complexities of representation, and there's a lot we can learn from her experiences as well as from Dr. O's in gaining a better understanding of Mexican American educational attainment."

It is apparent to everyone that I am triggered by the conversation. Davis attempts to ease the tension in the room. "I think our discussion today reminds us that there is 'truth' in the stories we tell. Our lived experience is truth. We can't extricate truths that make the (re)presentation of Communities of Color more definitive, less complex, and, perhaps, more palatable to our guilty conscience. How do we deal with dissenting voices within our communities? To what extent do we sacrifice the differences within to present a united front against larger oppressive forces?"

I begin to pack my bookbag. "There's much to think about, but we need some time to regroup. Let's meet again in a couple of weeks to talk more about fashioning our findings into a counter-story." I quickly leave the room to catch the elevator. As the elevator sinks to the first floor, I am reminded that I drew inspiration from fellow Mexican American, Chicana/o, and Latina/o researchers who wrote about (re)claiming Mexican American identities and voices in educational research while confronting our portrayals of a monolithic set of Mexican American educational experiences, namely, those of working class, first-generation Chicana/o students. What are the implications within our scholarly community if we continue to unfold educational discourses that disregard Mexican Americans who are middle-class, do not identify as

Chicana/o, are monolingual in English, live in areas of the country that are not traditionally known as Mexican cultural centers, are not the first in their families to graduate from college, and/or can trace their family lineage in the United States for generations?

Perhaps we are also in a master narrative framework in education and cannot transcend it until we come to terms with the ways in which we perpetrate these images of our community and neglect the diversity within Mexican American communities. The challenge in doing so is balancing our advocacy for educational equity with (re)presenting the vast diversity of Mexican American communities and experiences. These narratives that we gather have the power to reshape, reframe, and transform traditional paradigms pertaining to Mexican American educational attainment and, through the use of counter-narratives, combine elements both from participants' experiences and from the current reality to help researchers, practitioners, and community members construct another reality for future generations of Mexican American Ph.D.s.

Although I recognize the vulnerability inherent in exposing the rigor of my epistemological perspective and level of textual analysis, the process of counter-storytelling becomes a "rejection of objective, neutral truth in favor of a truth situated and partial . . . emerging from particular . . . relationships . . . that define [my] perspective and provide the location for meaning, identity, and political commitment" (Harris, 1993, p. 1727). Based on my training and cultural knowledge, my role as researcher-interpreter affected the way I analyzed and (re)presented these interviews.

Certainly, there are lessons learned from that process and questions that remain unanswered. I can understand the perspective of those who seek to discredit CRT; the "truth" in the stories shared by participants can, perhaps, seem unfounded. The search for truth begins with transparency; stating one's position(ality), revealing the inner workings of analysis, and presenting participants' stories, including the stories that do not fit the researcher's expectations. I reach my truck and drive home in silence.

Epilogue: Monday Morning, 8:45 a.m.

"Hold the elevator!"

I press the hold button and wait for Denise to enter. Then I press the button for the fourth floor.

"How was your weekend?" she asks.

I want to tell her that I spent much of the weekend contemplating the interactions in our research team meeting but instead, I say, "It was productive."

"I'm sorry that we couldn't talk more about the lesson plan," she says.

The elevator doors open and I let Denise walk out first. "Not a problem."

I think, This is more than just about a lesson plan. This is about thinking, reading, theorizing, taking a leap of faith, and analyzing subjectivities. This

is about empowerment and inviting honest reflection to illuminate one's systems of knowing. By searching from within, I committed myself to this reflexive journey, to face my truths, and find peace in them.

"Denise," I say, "I think we're ready." We turn the corner and enter the classroom.

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