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LatDisCrit and Counterstories

ALEXIS PADILLA

LatDisCrit is a mode of counterstorytelling about disability, race, and Latinx identities. It brings together the literatures of Latinx critical legal theory (LatCrit) and disability critical race theory (DisCrit), and its driving aims are emancipatory. LatDisCrit is a theory of pedagogy as well as writing. It emphasizes the significance of double consciousness in classroom ecologies (Annamma and Morrison 2018), especially as they foster spaces for decolonial solidarity (Annamma and Handy 2019; Padilla 2021a, 2021b, 2022). This chapter offers an illustrative example in which a special education teacher is, paradoxically, the dysfunctional antagonist with regard to inclusion and anti-ableist classroom dynamics for a five-year-old prekindergarten Latinx autistic student, Billy, in an urban district located in the midwestern United States (see Padilla et al. 2021 for further details and theoretical considerations regarding this example). An alliance between the student, his mother, and a Latinx psychologist yields a LatDisCrit counterstory about his education.

In formulating LatDisCrit, I also borrow two ideas from the critical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur: (1) the notion that authors are the first interpreters of their own work (1981), which has powerful implications for the analysis and facilitation of coauthorship and counterstorytelling as movement building; and (2) the concept of collective action as a social text (1971, 1974). The enactment of this latter idea entails that knowledge workers and activists in emancipatory movements read through specific identitarian lenses. In my case, blindness and Latinx identity are always at work in my authorial and interpretative endeavors. As an advocate, I had the privilege of both observing and helping enact a collective-action counterstory along with Billy's mother and his bilingual therapist.

LatDisCrit is a decolonial project concerned with intersectional disability agency and justice. As such, it deals with identity and alterity as manifestations of intersectional justice in action. It operates in practice as the enfleshment of resistance and emancipation against subaltern-marginalizing discourses and actions. LatDisCrit pursues (Padilla 2021a, 2021b, 2022) a critical integration of the literature strands associated with LatCrit theory[1] (Bernal 2002; E. Dávila and de Bradley 2010; Solórzano and Bernal 2001; Valdés 1999, 2000; Yosso 2000, 2006) and DisCrit[2] (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013, 2016; Annamma, Ferri, and Connor 2019; B. Dávila 2015). The main contribution of LatCrit theory, which

emerged as part of the critical legal studies movement (Unger 2015), was to emphasize the racialized nature of Latinx identities, even when white supremacist structural mechanisms tried to couch multiple forms of Latinidades as purely ethnic, often nationalist and nonracialized or politically neutral modes of being (Valdés and Bender 2022). DisCrit, on the other hand, has emerged primarily within schooling spheres. Still in the making, its original seven core tenets underscore the interlocking nature of race and disability as intersectional dimensions of oppression. DisCrit thinkers stress that these intersectional oppression spheres mustn't be couched merely in terms of interlocking modes of identity or representation, since that takes away their core social justice ethos (e.g., Connor Ferri, and Annamma 2021). Thus, both LatCrit and DisCrit stress the interplay of race/ethnicity, diasporic cultures, historical sociopolitics, and disability in conjunction with the multiple possibilities of Global South and Global North Latinx identities. Most of their explorations take place within Global North contexts, although Global South epistemologies (Santos and Meneses 2020) are an important part of the emerging political embodiments enacted through LatDisCrit, especially if one pays attention to decolonial Latinx and intersectionally grounded critical feminist political philosophers (Alcoff 2009; Calderón 2014; Castro-Gómez 2002, 2007; Mignolo 2000; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Sandoval 2000; Wynter 2003; Yosso 2006).

Latinxness as authorship must therefore be seen as a possibilitarian justice-seeking thirdspace (Soja 1989; Waitoller and Annamma 2017). It's made up of waves and wakes of converging diasporas. These diasporic identities are constituted by what Robert Young (2001) calls tricontinentalism (alluding to Africa, Asia, and Latin America as neocolonial sociopolitical spaces). Often, these diasporic waves and wakes are filled with mixtures of extreme violence and pockets of hope; they embody alterity in the very making of continuous identitarian birth through border-crossing dynamicity. Blackness studies has been indispensable for understanding and explaining the interimperialist legacies of coloniality that make up LatDisCrit's contemporary manifestations of collective action as they enfold, for example, in Global North and Global South classrooms (Dei 2017; Dei and Hilowle 2018; Dei and McDermott 2014). Also shaping the process of decolonial emancipation is the cripping abjection associated with the embodiment of disability (Shildrick 2002), an often-neglected example of what Alejandro Vallega (2014) calls radical alterity or extreme otherness. Even in trans-Latinx embodiments of indigeneity and mestizaje, one needs to consider the vestiges of anti-Black and ableist sentiments. They proliferate through micropolitical, epistemological, and sociocultural oppression (Padilla 2021a, chap. 6).

In sum, in the tricontinental making of trans-Latinidades, there are pervasive macropolitical forces. Modes of interimperialism get enacted via what Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) calls the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being. This multifaceted configuration of coloniality translates at the micro level to

internalized racism combined with deficit thinking and learned helplessness for most students of color with disabilities, their families or guardians, and even many of their advocates. Not surprisingly, it's common for anti-Black sentiment to drive intra-Latinx interactions among communities as well as white-dominated organizations for disabled people (Padilla 2021a, esp. chaps. 6, 8).

There are trans-Latinx students with ancestry from virtually all countries as well as racial and ethnic configurations in the Latin American tricontinental spectrum of sociopolitical diasporas. As such, they're endowed with what W. E. B. Du Bois (1924, 2007), alluding specifically to Black folks, called double consciousness (see also Rabaka 2010). Double consciousness is a paradoxical gift. Within dysfunctional classroom ecologies (Annamma and Morrison 2018), it "is most keen for those that exist at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities. . . . In a system of interlocking oppressions rooted in white supremacy, multiply-marginalized People of Color are most aware of how those oppressions function" (Annamma and Morrison 2018, 71–72). Hence, these multiply marginalized people of color, with or without disabilities, must be the center of analysis when one seeks to dismantle racially disparate outcomes and disabling modes of normalizing practices in and around classrooms (2018, 72). The focus on students of color without disabilities here is very significant. They are core allies for students of color with disabilities and their families to carry out their justice quests. They understand via double consciousness the racialized contours of oppression, and even when their understanding of disability dynamics may be partial or polluted with ableist or normalizing ideologies, their practical help is often paramount to concretize emancipatory victories.

As the example of Billy will show, to disrupt dysfunctional classroom ecologies, teachers aren't indispensable. Unfortunately, some of them are at the root of dysfunctional dynamics. But even when their role as emancipatory catalysts is preeminent, they shouldn't become messianic figures. They simply need to open doors to the collective gifts already present among their students and their families and advocates. Teachers and other students are invited to become coauthors and counterstorytellers. In Latinx and Chicanx circles, the concept of counterstories is interchangeable with that of *testimonios*, which, as defined by Cherrie Moraga (2011), are theories in the flesh. This means that counterstories are always embodied, and they're much more than mere narrative exercises. They theorize complex ways to disrupt and resist oppressive modes of domination through alternative knowledges and ways of undoing things that aren't right. In the emancipatory context of counterstorytelling, teachers are to roll up their sleeves and enact their power in the classroom as equals, as catalyzing forces in the process of creativity inherent to subaltern intersectionality. The rich legacy of witnessing (and experiencing) genocide and microaggressions among Indigenous, Black, pan-Asian, and trans-Latinx students with and without disabilities in the classroom will do the rest. In line with the theme of writing underscored

in this section of the book, it's paramount to add here that teachers' writing is a tool of power. Even those notes that children bring home from their teachers are perceived by parents and guardians, especially among Latinx families, as statements of power. For children with disabilities, little ones like Billy, the diagnostic power of teachers' written and spoken words is immense. These words have the potential to either empower or leave terrible scars on a child's identity that lead to internalized deficit thinking, low self-esteem, and ableist self-perceptions.

In Billy's emancipatory counterstory, the initial source of ableist dysfunctionality came from his prospective special education teacher. Billy's counterstory illustrates the importance of thinking creatively about classrooms in terms of spatial justice, race (Bonilla-Silva 2006), and disability ecologies that transcend the physical classroom walls.

I met Billy's mother, Viviana, at Graciela's office. Like Viviana, Graciela was from Mexico. Graciela was a psychologist who provided bilingual therapy services for Latinx families in our community. Billy was five years old when I met him, and he was in the process of entering public school. During the latter part of prekindergarten, Billy's parents were convinced by Billy's prospective special education teacher (in a manner that wasn't so transparent) to have Billy psychologically evaluated. The results indicated that he exhibited an "extreme" mode of "nonverbal autism." Graciela strongly disagreed. Graciela felt that it was crucial to demonstrate the inaccuracy of the nonverbal proclamation via one-on-one therapy with Billy in order to prepare the family for a second evaluation. Indeed, in a matter of months Billy started speaking a number of words. Despite the exclusive use of Spanish at home, the bulk of Billy's emerging vocabulary was in English.

Based on recommendations from other Spanish-speaking neighbors, the family had chosen a Spanish-English dual-language school for Billy, and they did not want him to have to move to another school for kindergarten. When they shared this decision with the school, the special educator—a white individual embedded in a primarily nonwhite context—took on an antagonistic attitude aimed at dissuading Billy's parents, going as far as contacting Graciela to request her help in convincing the parents to take Billy elsewhere. Eventually, this educator was removed from the school, presumably for health reasons.

In terms of agency and awareness raising—that is, double consciousness in action—Viviana and Graciela's almost daily interactions generated a relational bond. The choreography of this bond acquired paramount significance since it allowed listening and even risk-taking strategies that were discussed at length within the safety of Graciela's therapeutic spaces. Moreover, Graciela's recent involvement with high-profile district administrators on account of another early childhood episode of overt ableist discrimination directed against Latinx families paved the way for the prompt removal of the special education teacher who attempted to block Billy from attending the school of his family's choice.

It was Billy's embodied intersectionality as a seemingly nonspeaking autistic and brown Latinx student that triggered the animosity from his prospective special education teacher. Regardless of the microdynamics at work, one must keep in mind that this classroom reflected broader macrosocietal issues. Thus, while removing the white supremacist and ableist instructor in this case was relatively easy, it's crucial for Latinx families with disabled children in this district to remain on guard. Perhaps harder to accomplish, it's also crucial for fellow teachers, emerging teachers, and teacher educators to contest similar racist and ableist episodes.

NOTES

1 LatCrit theory evolved as a Latinx version of the critical legal studies movement of the 1960s and 1970s, e.g., Unger (2015).

2 DisCrit centers its sphere of analysis on issues of disability studies in education at the intersection of race and disability. Overwhelmingly, DisCrit has been concerned with schooling matters in the U.S. and Canada. See, Migliarini et al. (2018) for an example of DisCrit works outside North American contexts.

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