

Chapter 2

**COLONIAL STRUCTURES, IDENTITIES, AND
SCHOOLING: MY TAKE ON MULTICULTURAL
EDUCATION AND WHITE SUPREMACY**

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As a graduate student in North Carolina, I was assigned to do ethnographic observations at a local public middle school located in a semi-rural area where the majority of students were White, with a sizeable African American, and growing Latin@ population. During my visit, I noticed a class that was almost entirely White except for one African American student. Given the school's demographics, this called for my attention. Not entirely as a shock, this was the "gifted" eighth grade English class. I entered, sat quietly, and took notes as instructed by my observation protocol. After class, the (White) teacher spoke excitedly with me about her students. She invited me to return the following week for a special "multicultural" lesson she wanted to teach. I went back the following week, took a seat in the back, and took notes. A story was read aloud about a Mexican paper flower street vendor in Mexico City. The story followed a nameless woman throughout her day, only to end the story tired, hungry, and having sold not a single flower. After reading the story, the teacher asked for reactions and commentary from her students. A student raised her hand and shared that she felt bad for the poor woman and that she wondered how she would feed her children if she had not sold a single flower. The discussion became one of pity as more students chimed in with comments, never probing critically into any kind of social, gender, or class analysis. Almost at the end of the class, a White young man raised his hand and said, "I think if that lady's not going to have any food, it's because she's lazy." Immediately, several of the silent students, mostly White boys, began to agree with his comment by murmuring a "yeah" and nodding their heads in approval. The teacher looked nervously at me and unsuccessfully tried to steer the discussion back to pity. In the end, she took a thoughtful sigh and in an effort to be "neutral" she said, "Maybe you're right, maybe she was lazy." When class ended, she nervously came over to me and asked what I thought about the lesson and discussion. An uncomfortable silence engulfed us... In reflection, although this teacher's intentions were

good and she had some materials to present a lesson using the multicultural section of the literature textbook, the class in my opinion was a catastrophe.

The aforementioned class was unsuccessful, not because the White teacher did not have the classroom management skills nor teaching experience, after all she was touted as a “model” teacher, but because she did not know how to lead the discussion to promote critical thinking skills beyond a binary. In this case, a binary of pity and laziness. She had fulfilled after all the typical higher order critical demands of Bloom’s Taxonomy, and had managed to remain “neutral.” What more could she have done? Well, there’s a lot more she could have done. It would have required of her to learn some more about the context, perhaps anticipate some of the comments, but most importantly, it would have required her to unlearn a lot more about her students’ and her own assumptions, especially about teaching and the un-neutrality of teacher neutrality (Bartolomé, 2008). Her knowledge of the complexity of Mexican society was very limited as well as her knowledge of global economic restructuring, gender, and class oppression. Without much left to say, she agreed with the young White male’s stereotypic view that Mexican people, or perhaps poor people, or perhaps poor women, or a combination of all of these, are “lazy,” and ended the lesson by indirectly validating this last opinion. This lesson inadvertently re/centered a colonialist narrative that justifies race, gender, and class oppression in Mexico and international global, North-South political-economic domination.

In this chapter, I offer reflections, like the above experience in North Carolina, on my journey with, and simultaneous battles against multicultural education. Both my appreciation and critiques stem from a critical Latin@ indigenous perspective, namely my standpoint, my personal history, interpretive lenses, ways of knowing, and ways of being in the world. A critical Latin@ indigenous perspective is from within and outside of the larger Latin@ category. A critical Latin@ indigenous perspective is a crossroad that further exposes complex intersectional nuances, inter-group oppression, and enduring colonialist power dynamics within Whiteness and within Latinidad¹. My critical Latino indigenous perspective stems from my experiences as a U.S.-born person, but of P’uhépecha descent. And while Indigenous, also a settler on Indigenous lands, who would generally be categorized as “Mexican” or “Latino,” but whose history is connected to a longer, millennial, Indigenous history and present. While I am Latino, and I often claim (Ch)/Xicano for political reasons, most importantly, I am indígena, and I am P’uhépecha. My lineage is from the community of San Miguel Ncutzepo (father) and from Tócuaro (mother) in Michoacán, México, communities that are at least 500 years old, with his- and her-stories that are twice as old as the United States. From this perspective, I argue that multicultural education within current schooling systems, although well-intended, remains part of enduring colonialist enterprises that compliment continuous re/emerging forms of Whiteness, and sustain foundational and structural White supremacy.

UNLEARNING THE WHITESTREAM

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I became a middle school teacher by accident after I finished college. By that, I mean that I did not plan for it. I felt the need to enter into a career path that would allow me to give back to my community, but education was not necessarily what I had intended to do. I wanted to study law and become an immigration or civil rights attorney. That plan, however, did not work out. I sought an alternative and was able to become a bilingual teacher with relative ease. I passed a California basic skills test, had a couple of interviews, and was allowed into my own bilingual 8th grade classroom within weeks. Once in my classroom, I quickly realized how unprepared I was to teach, especially students who probably needed the best-prepared teachers in the state. I tried to impose my own experience with schooling onto my students and failed miserably. My critical and social justice orientation, however, did make me reflect enough to realize that I was on the wrong path. I quickly realized that I was involved in a re/colonizing process to impose a whitestream knowledge system on my students that included particular histories, a standard language, norms, morals, and expectations for engagement in accord with White society (Urrieta, 2009). I was involved in the distribution of power in my classroom, in the creation of identities for my students, and in sorting them according to tracks they would enter into in high school.

I knew enough to quickly get rid of the old textbooks and tried to find other ways to engage my students and their realities because although we all were generally categorized as “Latino,” we had very different experiences. In reflecting on my own life, I understood that I was successful in school as a child because I complied with the whitestream expectations of schooling, even when I knew it was killing me inside. My students, on the other hand, for the most part had the courage to resist Whiteness, and in the process, of course, they had to be resistant to me—the teacher. To change things in my classroom, I tried to engage curriculum materials that would teach my students their his- and her-stories from a critical perspective and to engage them in ways that would honor their existence as people and as cultural beings. I quickly also learned that this approach was going to be a battle, not necessarily with my students, but a battle with my school administrators. It was a battle with the official (and hidden) texts of schooling, a battle against standardized tests, and finally a battle against the law, Proposition 227, which outlawed bilingual education in California in 1998.

I learned a lot during my years of teaching in the public school. I became exposed to basic theoretical and pedagogical principles of bilingual education, even if from a deficit perspective. Through my teacher certification coursework at Cal State L.A., I also learned about multicultural education. As I grew as a teacher, I slowly changed my teaching style and focus. While I followed the developments of multicultural education, admittedly, I did not have a clear sense of what it was. I can still recall the “aha” moment I had when I realized that multicultural education was not a separate subject I had to incorporate into my teaching, but an orientation and pedagogy to teaching that could run through the entire curriculum. In the summer of my second year of teaching, I took a summer intensive course on critical pedagogy. I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and that further trans/formed my consciousness in teaching. However, I did not know very much about the history and origins in theory, philosophy, and thought around many of these philosophies and orientations to teaching. My knowledge was very basic and I was most concerned with the day-to-day struggles of teaching. Disillusioned after Proposition 227 passed, and in a constant battle with my school administrators, I decided to pursue doctoral studies in Education.

In my Ph.D. program, through various courses, I learned that while the impetus to create multicultural education programs arose specifically out of the social justice and educational

justice demands of 1960s activists (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004), the goals of this vision were diverted to become more palatable or digestible to whitestream society, especially to conservative legislators and lobbyists. This shift in part was due to standardization and high-stakes testing accountability in the 1990s (Thrombold, 1999). This was something that, as a former teacher, I knew all too well. I still remembered the day I administered “the test” to my Spanish-speaking students with my Vice Principal observing from behind my shoulder. She was there to make sure that everything I said, including the instructions to the test, were read in English. My anger rushed to my head as my newest student, who had arrived from Mexico two days earlier, looked at me with tears running down his cheeks. His test returned blank after two hours, like the look in his swollen red eyes. I knew then it was time to go because there seemed to be dead ends and brick walls at every attempt to implement a transformative educational praxis from then forward. Further into my graduate studies, I was also exposed to the term “whitestream” in Canadian First Nations context in Claude Denis’ (1997) work. Whitestream is the idea that while society (Canada or the U.S.) is not completely White demographically, it is principally and fundamentally structured on Anglo-Canadian practices, principles, morals, and the values of White supremacy, that include social, political, economic, and legal systems (Denis, 1997; Grande, 2004). In previous work (Urrieta, 2004, 2010), I have argued that in the U.S. whitestream indoctrination or the teaching (formally and informally, consciously or unconsciously) that White supremacy is normal, neutral, and even natural in whitestream schools is not exclusively the work of Whites, but of any person, including culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) people, actively promoting or upholding White models as the goal or standard for knowledge and success. Native scholar, Jean Dennison (2014), in her analysis of the ban on Raza Studies in Arizona, referred to this process as “whitewashing.” In order to explain how I came to eventually view multicultural education, in part coerced into a form of whitestreaming, it is important to view schooling through a framework of colonialism.

COLONIALISM AND SCHOOLING

Native and indigenous peoples in America (North and South, not just the U.S.) have endured and survived repeated attempts at physical and cultural genocide (Stannard, 1992). Schools as colonialist institutions served interests of colonizers, Euro-Whites, and *Mestizos*, *Ladinos* in power, throughout America. Settler colonialism, is a form of colonialism based on invasion of and possession of Indigenous lands and its resources, and in which the dehumanization and elimination of Native peoples is the organizing structure for invasion (Smith, 2012; Wolfe, 2006). Colonialist economic and political systems throughout America objectified and exploited indigenous peoples through forced labor, removal, erasure, and/or extermination policies, which continue to this day. Colonialist schools were rationalized as good, neutral, normal, and meant to bring civilization. Assimilation through schooling, in any national context, both as a process and an ideology, has always worked in conjunction with settler colonialism(s) and other forms of colonialist enterprises, and has often been embedded within state-sponsored and religious-sponsored schooling that support nation-state interests, which often tend not to be subaltern or minority groups’ interests (Skutnab-Kangas, 2000). Boarding schools, in particular, throughout the Americas were used as extreme attempts to

assimilate Native and indigenous children and youth through forced physical, emotional, and psychological removal and isolation from their home communities (Luykx, 1999; Miheshua, 1993). Clearly, schools stripped the colonized away from indigenous knowledge systems and indigenous languages while imposing as official curricula the knowledge bases of the colonizers (Willinsky, 1998). Whiteman schools, as colonialist institutions into the present, actively attempt to physically and psychologically subdue indigenous and racial minority students into forced docility through harsh discipline codes, medications, and police forces. Coercion to assimilate to a prescribed and standardized whiteman norm and increasingly to global corporate interests is ever present in schools.

Euro-Western epistemologies in schools actively impose over indigenous, or minority knowledge(s), often erasing these Other(ed) bodies of knowledge and cosmological systems into non-knowledge(s). Justified by Eurocentrism, Western knowledge becomes the fiduciary, and only knowledge system by which all other knowledge(s) are filtered and measured (Doxtater, 2004). When Other(ed) knowledge(s) are minimally included, they are first sanctioned within a Bi/Inter/Pluri/Multiculturalist framework that usually eventually inevitably become connected to whiteman content standards, and ultimately to whiteman standardized high-stakes tests. As it appears, standardized high-stakes tests, at national and international levels, are now widespread and supported by national and international entities guided by cost-benefit and cost-effective formulas that are heavily invested in market-driven education practices. These neoliberal education reforms tend to increasingly rely on universalized assessments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), to compare student achievement and are used to rate and rank nations' development indices. Such educational standards and assessments, based mostly on political, usually elite normative strategies that rely on "claims of universal (i.e., economic) knowledge" (Gustafson, 2009, p. 162), marginalize indigenous and Other(ed) minority peoples by devaluing Other(ed) knowledges, including within Bi/Inter/Pluri/Multicultural education programs. Even when such programs are aimed at remedying past injustices, at least rhetorically, by addressing (minimally) Native and Other(ed) cultural, linguistic, and sovereignty rights, the main motivation is the expansion of global capitalism into the realms of personal life.

In colonialist logics, indigenous people, and Other(ed) dehumanized minorities once constructed as genetically inferior continue to be perceived as culturally deficit and in "need" of being "controlled" or "helped" by the superior, "I know what's best for you" Euro-white, *Mestizo*, *Ladino* society. This justifies the dehumanizing and disposability effects of the colonizing process—bodies that can be removed and disposed of through the school-to-prison pipeline for example (Raible & Irizarry, 2010). In contrast, but equally invasive was the Christian justification of bringing "salvation" to "heathens." Similar to the modern day classroom "discussion" that I observed in the North Carolina classroom, while the White boys took an aggressive and violent approach (laziness) toward the Other, and the White girls a patronizing one (pity), both equally contributed colonialist and deficit perspectives about the Mexican mother in the story. To a large measure, colonialist education (whiteman) persists as "subtractive" schooling today (Valenzuela, 1999). Subtractive schooling promotes rapid assimilation by stigmatizing subaltern cultures and languages, and by disciplining bodies. Deficit perceptions in subtractive schooling portray Other(ed) students as lacking and deficient, and from families that do not value education, or simply are not expected to do well in schools (Urrieta & Quach, 2000). Colonial schooling worldwide often results in the

internalized self-hate, or internalized oppression of the colonized and unresolved feelings of inferiority.

MY TAKE ON MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION SINCE THE 1960S

Although scholarship far before the 1960s raised concerns for including the knowledge and experiences of non-White people in U.S. society in school curricula (Banks, 2002), the multicultural education movement became the outcome of the many civil rights movements of the 1960s. Included in these civil rights struggles are the African American, Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, American Indian, and Asian American activist movements intended as a means to challenge the very structures of inequality in U.S. society (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004). Different goals or emphases for multicultural education have been articulated since the 1960s, but generally a call for inclusiveness and the critical analysis of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and other issues have been central to its development (Gay, 1994). It is apparent that an abundance of literature and scholarship on multicultural education has proliferated since the 1960s and 1970s (Banks, 1996, 2001; Gay, 1994; Grant & Gomez, 1996). Today, multicultural curricula vary considerably, yet generally the most accepted versions, tend to examine differences without a critical understanding of power or an analysis of racism or other issues that plague U.S. society (see Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004). Multicultural education programs have also generally shifted to accommodate and center the epistemological domain of White middle class cultural capital as the omniscient observer of Other(ed)ness. Thus, multicultural education has drifted considerably from the goals and aims of the activists of the 1960s (Thrombold, 1999).

Often the Other(ed)ness festively and uncritically represented in multicultural curricula contribute to further essentialize and stereotype the “non-white other” (Kubota, 1999). In their more “progressive” forms, multicultural curricula only encompass in limited, uncritical ways a racial dichotomy focused mostly on African American and White issues as a racial binary. The focus on the Black/White racial dichotomy often leaves the experiences and contributions of other groups unmentioned, essentialized, and/or mis/represented in superficial ways. Here, my goal is not to blame multiculturalists, those in struggles for a critical, revolutionary, or anti-racist model of multiculturalism for the largely co-opted multiculturalism of today, but once again to focus a critical lens on what the ultimate limiting forces against this movement are and have been. Beginning in the 1980s, multiculturalism, even as it further emerged, faced a largely political backlash, which has largely undermined the movement. Republicans and conservative lobbyists who organized to support Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980 led this backlash against the civil rights gains of the 1960s and 1970s. Education especially became one of the targets beginning with the Reagan administration, with people like Chester Finn, E.D. Hirsch, and Diane Ravitch charging that the quality of education was in terrible decline due to the many special interest groups’ influencing education since the 1960s and 1970s. These attacks against public education continued through the 1980s, 1990s, and into the new millennium eventually also with the support of Democrats like Bill Clinton and Barack Obama’s education agendas, largely undoing the reluctantly conceded gains of the 1960s and

1970s. Yet, even these 1960s gains, although often touted as moves toward greater equality, were never allowed to place the rights of minorities above White interests.

Historically in the U.S. when White interests converged with Black Americans or Other(ed) minority interests like those of Mexican Americans, the terms of the *racial contract* would change, but only to the extent to which White interests and gains could outweigh benefits gained by non-White groups (Mills, 1997; Brown & Urrieta, 2010). Legal scholar, Derrick Bell (1980) defined this kind of political relationship as *interest convergence*. Bell (1980) aptly argued that historically the advancement of racial inequality causes for African Americans only became a priority in the U.S. if they converged with the ideological interests and economic gains of Whites. More recently, the political backlash against Civil Rights gains, such as attention to the unequal, and inequitable conditions of education, have been fought back with legislation after legislation to undo the path toward greater access and educational justice for the poor and racial minorities. In the 1990s, this push for market driven reform led to the standards movement, vouchers, community schools, and charter schools. Combined, these reforms have led to resegregation, inequitable distribution of school funding, and ultimately to an assault on public education through high-stakes testing, accountability, and to schools primarily attended by minority and poor children. The focus on tests has ultimately, all but wiped out, academic freedom for teachers and diverse perspectives on curriculum, including the most progressive forms of multicultural education.

LATIN@ DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Limited and generally essentialized has been the inclusion of Latin@s in multicultural curricula. Latin@s, if at all, are usually represented as a unitary people, a single and separate “race,” often depicted mostly as recent immigrants, and non-English speakers. Multicultural curricula have tended to make relevant connections to Latin@ children by including stories about distant places in Mexico or other parts of Latin America, often failing to address U.S.-Latin@ realities and the realities of Latin@ children in the U.S. and how they are connected to those distant places. For example, César Chávez has only minimally been included in curricula as part of Latin@ his-story, but the larger and complex struggle of Latin@s within U.S. racialized labor histories, such as the Bracero Program and the undocumented immigrants rights labor movements, is largely absent. Latin@ identity depictions fail to address the complexities and multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-generational (in the US), and multi-lingual experiences of Latin@s. This is true especially about the diversity represented by Indigenous and Afrodescendant Latin@s, who tend to be largely absent from larger discussions of Latinidad. Critical Latino Indigenous perspectives, within and outside of the Latin@ category, have only recently begun to emerge.

Unless a teacher is well informed, the Chican@, Asian American, and American Indian movements are rarely included in school curricula. Unfortunately, even the African American civil rights movement has been reduced to stories of individuals taking monumental stances out of personal conviction or circumstance, rather than of organized collectives within larger networks of historical struggle. Indeed, the civil rights movement and the story of school integration have been incorporated into a larger “stock story” that supports the idea that the U.S. has resolved its racial issues, which recent attention to police brutality and the murders

of Black men contradict. This incorporation of civil rights heroes, as of Black History Month and Chinese New Year, is also in line with interest convergence. Whites benefit more from incorporating these into the curriculum (minimally) because having these celebrations/observances in schools protects White privilege and White supremacy by making Whites invisible, thus making Whiteness normative. These minimal curricular inclusions about minorities actually support the power of White privilege, because Whiteness remains unquestioned and at the center and referent of everyday school knowledge.

Regarding Latin@s' racialization, a racial hybridity, *mestizo/a*, has been assumed as a general "Brown" racial identity for the collective (Oboler, 1995). Hybridity implies that there are distinct origins infusing themselves together, racial origins in this case that do not disappear with hybrids (Urrieta, 2003). *Mestizo/Ladino*, propagated as the national identities of several Latin American nations, also contribute to a false notion of racial equality within the Latin@ collective, another "stock story" that obscures the ethnoracial, gender, and class disparities in, and within Latin American societies. This includes deeply racist sentiments and practices toward Indigenous peoples and Afrodescendants in Latin America, which create complex intersections of race, class, and gender intergroup oppression. Clearly, knowledge of these complex intersections would have been helpful to the teacher in North Carolina in leading a more critical discussion about the paper flower sales women in Mexico City and the many complexities of her precarious existence and survival. To a larger extent, Latin@ identities in the U.S. add further complexity due to yet another context of Anglo-White racial hegemony. Latin@ identities are thus deeply racially, socially, economically, and historically complex, even in their essentialized hybrid form as "Brown" or *Mestizo* (Gutiérrez, 2001). This is far more complex than multicultural curricula currently can do justice for Latin@s.

In the racialized and politicized experience of cultural politics and popular culture in the U.S., "Latin@" has indeed become a relational identity in the process of being re/made within the larger context of U.S. media. Often compared to past immigrant groups, some Latin@s have become seduced into the U.S. myth of incorporation through "success" stories, especially with the relatively recent "crossovers" of Latin@ actors and singers such as Jennifer Lopez, Ricky Martin, Marc Anthony, Paulina Rubio, Sofia Vergara, and Shakira as representative images. Unfortunately, the Hollywood "border crosser" reality is far from the reality of the vast majority of Latin@s who literally and daily do cross borders. Such images of Latinidad, or Pan-Latino identity obliterate a long historical and complex presence of Latin@s in the U.S. We know that multicultural education curricula have incorporated Latin@s, if at all, in superficial ways, either as people living far away, like the nameless paper flower saleswoman somewhere in Latin America, as newcomers, recent immigrants to the U.S., or as newly crossed over Hollywood pop stars. Besides César Chávez, such representations overlook a long and complex historical presence within the U.S. These depictions overlook that recent mass migrations from Latin America are connected to U.S. involvement in past civil wars in Central America, to economic restructuring in global context that dislocates people and turns them into economic refugees, and also that Latin@s have made vast and extensive contributions to build U.S. society (Gutiérrez, 2001).

I argue that indeed global trends in mass migration, economic restructuring, and the demographic "Latinization" of U.S. society call for urgent critical attention to Latin@ issues, past and present, especially in transforming multicultural education into what it was intended to be—critical. Latin@s are not coming en mass without economic, social, and global trends causing these migrations, especially by financial restructuring in global capital and neoliberal

globalism. The racial hybridity of Latin@ identity itself is a challenge against the essentialist, stereotypical portrayals of Latin@s as the “Brown” people in currently simplistic, festive, uncritical, Cinco de Mayo, or Taco Bell “fiesta menu” approaches to multicultural curricula. We must refocus and reframe to make sure that multiculturalism does not lose its revolutionary social and racial justice foci to superficial and celebratory emphases on discreet aspects of “culture” that do not consider or engage real human sufferings and silenced Latin@ voices.

CONCLUSION

Multicultural education can learn valuable lessons by revisiting its activist racial and social justice foundations. Likewise, it is critical that we evaluate its position within a White supremacist colonialist society and system of education. This is not an easy charge, especially when the potential indictment is that the current accountability system based on standardized high-stakes testing is a normative system, so pervasive that it expunges attempts at diversifying the whitestream curriculum. However, we all are a part of this system, and as result, our stories and my story must be told. While we are coming to terms with the ways in which neoliberal globalism has infiltrated the educational system of most countries around the world, we cannot be fooled into thinking that we have only made progress. That has been the premise of my chapter.

If multicultural education is to survive and reclaim its origins in activist struggles, it must be re/politicized and reconnected with a grassroots struggle against the governing structures that undermine it. We have far too long remained silent on issues that are critical to us such as the standardization of education, the current reign of terror brought on by high-stakes testing, and the continued onslaught on education by corporate and market-driven reform. Current austerity measures as well as data- versus quality driven assessment of education programs and outcomes need to be challenged with political action. All of us, but especially poor and racial minority children are paying the highest price for compromising with and appeasing the whitestream hegemony. Finally, we must take colonialism seriously as a theory and structure in order to help re/frame multicultural education as a critical challenge to socio-cultural assimilation, domination, and erasure.

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