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‘Do Latin@ interests always have to “converge” with White interests?’: (Re)claiming racial realism and interest-convergence in critical race theory praxis

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The interest-convergence principle proposes that change benefitting people and communities of color only occurs when those interests also benefit Whites. As newly transplanted Chicano/a residents of a state facing exponential growth of its Latino immigrant population, we have attempted to counter the efforts criminalizing members of our Latino/a community, and have witnessed attempts to do so through an alignment of interests between Latinos/as and Whites. In this article, we examine the current scholarship regarding interest-convergence and present a counterstory of educational leadership and politics affecting our own community. We use the counterstory to particularize and problematize how critical race theory concepts operate in real-world situations. Ultimately, the counterstory reveals that using interest-convergences as a political strategy divorces activism from the foundational tenets of critical race theory, preventing discussions that center race and racism and distorting Bell’s original notion of this principle. We argue that claiming this approach as the primary strategy for social change, negatively affects social justice goals. Our discussion section highlights three tensions that result from this misuse, and pushes critical race scholars to better understand that the concept of interest-convergence carries its greatest impact towards social transformation when it remains directly linked to the foregrounding of race and racism.

Keywords: critical race praxis; interest-convergence principle; racial realism; politics of education

Introduction

In April 2006, the state of Utah witnessed what may be the largest public demonstration in the history of the state. Advocates of immigrant and human rights coordinated the event to coincide with the numerous marches and rallies that were occurring nationwide in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, and New York against HR 4437, pending federal legislation that would make undocumented residents felons.¹ In Salt Lake City, the ‘Dignity March’ – as it was promoted to the public by organizers – totaled an estimated 40,000 parents, children, and community members (Sanchez and Lyon 2006). Prior to the demonstration, organizers circulated emails arguing for an ‘orderly and very respectful’ presence. One email stressed the need to communicate the following to Latino/as,² who made up the overwhelming majority of participants:

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Admonish our neighbors to encourage the students to STAY IN SCHOOL and join us on Sunday and Monday [after school hours]; Don't wear mask or bandana over your face...; suggest that the colors of the United States of America be in abundance at both events; This is not a protest of anger but one of influencing responsible federal legislation.

A widely-distributed flyer communicating the particulars of the march to the public also stated that if marchers wanted to bring a flag, 'bring only USA or Utah flags, no other nations; this is a sign of respect for this land of opportunity'. The planning meetings and email communiqués consistently reinforced the sentiment that an adversarial strategy would only further hostility toward immigrant and human rights. Despite the recent history of anti-immigrant and anti-Latino/a legislation being considered and passed in the state legislature (Sanchez 2007, 2008), the coordinated efforts of anti-immigrant organizations and legislators who sponsored this legislation (Sanchez 2006; Bulkeley 2005), and recent polls indicating increasing percentages of anti-immigrant sentiment among registered Utah voters (Bulkeley 2008), Dignity March organizers argued for a less confrontational strategy, one they purported would garner support even amongst the most powerful and ardent anti-immigrant forces.

The philosophy undergirding this example of political activism seemingly resounds with interest-convergence, a concept advanced in critical race theory by one of its founding scholars, Derrick Bell. First conceptualized by Bell (1980), the interest-convergence principle proposes that change benefitting people and communities of color only occurs when those interests also benefit Whites. As newly transplanted Chicano/a residents of a state facing exponential growth of its Latino immigrant population, we have attempted to counter the efforts criminalizing members of our Latino/a community, and have witnessed attempts to do so through an alignment of interests between Latinos/as and Whites. Engaging with our community on issues such as the Dignity March, has forced us as critical race scholars to examine the efficacy and values underlying this particular approach and its relation to Bell's theory. Situated against the backdrop of local grassroots Latino/a activism, the totality of all the tenets of critical race theory, and Bell's own body of scholarship – especially his *call* for racial realism – this article wrestles with the interpretation and application of the interest-convergence principle by critical race scholars and community leaders. Does 'converging' Latino/a interests with the White majority transform the institutions, policies, and structures that disadvantage Latinos/as and other persons and communities of color? Should critical race scholar-activists utilize interest-convergence in this way?

To wrestle with these questions, we turn to the tenets and theoretical constructs of critical race theory, and offer an overview of these principles in the next section. We then examine the current scholarship regarding interest-convergence, noting that only three scholars have taken up this theoretical construct in relation to the Latino/a community, and only once in regard to education. A brief explanation of the counter-storytelling method utilized by critical race theorists sets up the ensuing counterstory, which we have compiled based in our experiences dealing with issues of educational leadership and politics in our own community. We use the counterstory to particularize and problematize how critical race theory concepts operate in real-world situations. Ultimately, the counterstory reveals that using interest-convergences as a political strategy divorces activism from the foundational tenets of critical race theory, preventing discussions that center race and racism and distorting Bell's original notion

of this principle. Furthermore, we argue that claiming this approach as the primary strategy for social change, negatively affects social justice goals. Our discussion section highlights three tensions that result from this misuse and pushes critical race scholars – or those attracted by some of the tenets and constructs of the theory – to better understand that the concept of interest-convergence carries its greatest impact towards social transformation when it remains directly linked to the foregrounding of race and racism.

Critical race theory

Critical race theory (CRT) evolved out of critical legal scholarship and radical feminism during the late 1970s (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Described as a ‘movement’ (Taylor 1998) shaped by scholars ‘interested in studying and transforming the relationships among race, racism, and power’ (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 2), its core premise is that racism is endemic, institutional, and systemic, a regenerative and overarching force maintaining all social constructs (Valdés, Culp, and Harris 2002, 1–5). Six other key rudiments originate from this notion. One precept locates racism in social structures, not in individuals (Ibid.). Critical race theorists expose institutions for their complicity in reproducing a racist social order (Bell 1980; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Matsuda 1995). CRT challenges liberal ideology that has only served to further entrench the normative supremacy of Whiteness. Civil rights legislation and public policies based on the concepts of neutrality, objectivity, and meritocracy are thus deconstructed by critical race theorists (Tate 1996; Valdés, Culp, and Harris 2002; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Ladson-Billings 1998; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). A third aspect values experiential knowledge, multiple perspectives of history, and racialized hierarchical phenomena as sources of fulfillment and communal empowerment (Valdes, Culp, and Harris 2002). This focus has given rise to counter-storytelling, a methodological tool used by critical race scholars to reclaim, recover, and provide a space for the voices of disenfranchised people. A fuller explanation of counterstories will help set up the counterstory included later in this article. A fourth belief gives preeminence to the idea of intersectionality, a concept that acknowledges race is just one of the many social forces shaping identity that functions oppressively. CRT insists on ‘intersectional’ critiques of all such power relations and hierarchies, lending the theory to apply to many, and often, overlapping marginalized groups (Crenshaw 1989, 1995). Fifthly, CRT is essentially a socially transformative theory, intended for practical application to aid those groups situated at the bottom of the racial hierarchy (Valdés, Culp, and Harris 2002; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2001). A sixth characteristic maintains an interdisciplinary focus by pulling from fields like ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, law, education, cultural studies and rhetoric to help situate race and racism in a proper sociohistorical context for analysis (Mackinnon 2002; Solórzano and Yosso 2002a, 2002b; Valdés, Culp, and Harris 2002; Lynn and Adams 2002; Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Along with these guiding CRT principles, we rely on two conceptual pillars – racial realism and interest-convergence – to conduct our analysis.

Racial realism

Bell (1992b) described ‘racial realism’ as a ‘philosophy [that] requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status’ which ‘enables us to avoid despair,

and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph' (373–4). He speaks of how reforms made during the Civil Rights Movement are advancements but also explains how these structurally incrementalist reforms often 'do little more than bring about the cessation of one form of discriminatory conduct that soon appeared in a more subtle though no less discriminatory form' (375). One need only review the work of Kozol (1991, 2005), Anyon (1997), or Valencia (2002) to evaluate the 'evidence' or 'data' that demonstrate how students and communities of color have not achieved the wholesale, institutional, and structurally significant changes purported by mainstream civil rights activists. According to some scholars and activists, Bell's (1992b) notion that '[r]acial equality is, in fact, not a realistic goal' (363), has aroused the ire among Whites and people of color, both progressive and not, because of its non-negotiable, racial realist argument on social reality. Bell however finds hope in this philosophical stance, believing that when people of color accept this reality they will be able to envision strategies outside of the civil rights incremental model that have more promise to alleviate the injustices that endure.

Bell (1992b) and Delgado (2003, 2004, 2002) have critiqued the critical race movement for moving away from racial realism to a scholarship that focuses more on the discursive aspects of racial phenomenon, rather than on the materiality of racism. Delgado (2004) cautioned new CRT scholars from straying from the foundational principles that marked the beginning of CRT work. In his book review of *Crossroads, directions, and a new critical race theory* (Valdés, Culp, and Harris 2002), Delgado writes that 'after a promising beginning' CRT scholarship had 'began to focus almost exclusively on *discourse* at the expense of power, history, and similar material determinants of minority-group fortunes' (122). Observing that CRT scholarship today forefronts the 'analysis of text, discourse, and mindset' (125), he laments that the study of the rhetorical construct of race has overtaken the study of how race operates in the real world. He and Bell both hail scholars to remember the movement origins and reengage with the foundational principles that critiqued the power and racial hierarchy, instigated conflict, and promoted discomfort among those entrenched in their White privilege.

Interest-convergence

Interest-convergence is a by-product of the racial realist philosophy or epistemological stance. First introduced three decades ago, it continues to generate intellectual exercise due to Bell's claim that the *Brown* decision was not the result of White morality or altruistic motives. Rather, Bell argued that 'the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites' (Bell 1980, 523). By critically examining the historical events leading up to *Brown*, Bell repositions the highly-lauded civil rights ruling in response to three contextual realities of the time period: the impending threat of the communist movement and the growing global perception of the hypocritical nature of the United States' rigidly segregated citizenry; the return of African American soldiers following the end of WWII who had just fought for liberty and freedom on foreign soil yet failed to live out those ideals in their own homeland; and, the transformation of the southern economy from an agricultural one to an industrialized one that required a better educated work force, including non-White laborers (Bell 1980, 2004).

Dudziak (1988, 1997) confirmed Bell's assertions with evidence uncovered in de-classified national security documents that legitimate Bell's conclusions. She writes (1997):

The U.S. government has long engaged in the construction of narratives about race in America. During the cold war years, the nature of the narrative, and the moral the story argued for, would change. The country faced searing attacks from the Soviet Union as well as concern in the rest of the world that U.S. moral leadership was suspect when racial violence and discrimination seemed rampant in the nation The story of American race relations, with all its faults, had to be turned into a story about the greatness of America. (1650–1)

Bell (2004) expounded this economic-material-determinist theory to account for several other supposed civil rights gains, such as the abolitionist movement in the northern states prior to the U.S. Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and the passage of the Civil Rights Amendments to the Constitution. His revisionist accounts of these civil rights achievements illustrate how they either maintained or provided a benefit for Whites, rather than reconfigured the structural conditions that foster the racism and inequity that African Americans experience. The next section examines interest-convergence literature. We have categorized this body of work into two groups: scholarship that uses interest-convergence as a conceptual tool and scholarship that encourages a tactical application of the theory.

Explanatory tool

Replicating Bell's work, several scholars have since pursued interest-convergence as an explicatory tool to characterize other heralded civil rights gains, especially those made in regards to education. Lee (2007) points to the *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) Supreme Court ruling upholding the use of race as admission criteria by the University of Michigan Law School, as an example of interest-convergence, arguing that corporations seeking to employ their graduates needed those potential employees 'exposed to minority classmates' (Lee 2007, 928). Delgado (2006) extends Bell's theory into a White–Brown paradigm by utilizing the interest-convergence construct to analyze the 1954 *Hernandez v. Texas* case. Although many champion *Hernandez* as the Latino 'Brown', Delgado (2006) negates the majoritarian story that the ruling was a victory for Latino/as, due partly to the altruism of Chief Justice Warren, who served on the court at the time.³ Instead, Delgado offers a counterstory in which his alter ego, Rodrigo, depicts *Hernandez*, like *Brown*, as serving a greater purpose – preserving the credibility of the U.S. government in the eyes of the international community, a mechanism from which to combat rising communist and socialist thinking and rhetoric in Latin America, and an appeasement of mostly Mexican American World War II soldiers who returned to similar oppressive and discriminatory conditions from the ones they left before leaving to fight, die, and risk injury in a war against European and Asian enemies (Garcia 2002; Felts and Pope 2003). Maria Pabón López (2004) offers an interest-convergence interpretation of the *Plyer v. Doe* Supreme Court case which found that undocumented children are protected by the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, and therefore cannot be denied equal access to public schools. However, because undocumented people are denied the ability to work legally in this country even with high school or college degrees, the interest of the White

ruling class are maintained because the undocumented remain a readily available, inexpensive, under-the-table workforce. She argues that challenges to the law have been rejected precisely because it preserves this labor force, even in the face of growing anti-immigrant sentiment.

Other legal scholars provide examples of the ways interest-convergence has been used to re-imagine policies, laws, or rulings typically described as civil rights milestones. Torok (1995) used interest-convergence to account for the changing immigration policies of the US towards Asians. Interest-convergence provides a useful framework for Washburn (2004) to explain why U.S. courts recognize tribal criminal convictions but not their civil judgments. Crusto (2005) utilizes interest-convergence to highlight that the sexual interests of White antebellum southern males justified why they granted property rights to their free Black mistresses at a time when Blacks were afforded little civil rights at all.

Outside of legal scholarship, educational scholars have also used interest-convergence as an analytical lens in educational settings. Donner (2005) described and demonstrated how African American male athletes' interests at NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Division I institutions, are often compromised by the schools and athletic programs they play for. Taylor (2000) found that the interest-convergence principle functioned as a 'model of explanatory power' (552) in his analysis of Washington state's affirmative action debate. In an interest-convergence analysis of educational policies that maintain the use of Native mascots and refrain from verifying tribal affiliations of its faculty or student body, Castagno and Lee (2007) reveal how these decisions can negatively affect indigenous communities, while seeming to serve their interests and the institutions' interests. Leigh's (2003) extensive historic analysis of an Ohio school district's struggle with desegregation, White flight, busing, district boundaries, property taxes, and the achievement gap reveals that the interests of the underserved Black student population repeatedly took a backseat to the interests of White families and their school children.

Strategic tool

Different from utilizing the interest-convergence principle as a conceptual tool, some scholars have read interest-convergence as a tactic for swaying majority opinion to support racial remedies. In fact, prior to Bell's formulation of the notion of interest-convergence, several activists and leaders in the Civil Rights Movement (Williams 1987) and Chicano Rights Movement (Garcia 2002), operated on a similar principle in order to make gains in their social justice agendas. Since Bell's seminal piece on interest-convergence, various scholars have made arguments for producing social change by deliberately aligning the social justice interests of communities of color with those of Whites. At least 16 different articles argue that converging the interests of students and communities of color with White power interests will lead to social and/or school transformation, the majority from legal studies. While some articles broadly call for coalition building either within or between marginalized groups and/or with White allies (Cashin 2005; Araujo 1996; Smith 2008; Weinstein 2006; Murray 1997), another handful seek specific educational reforms that will improve the educational status of students of color (Adamson 2006; Milner 2008; Su 2007; Skrla et al. 2001; Singleton 2007). Others point to specific sociohistorical contexts as prime interest-convergence moments from which to argue for slave reparations (van Luong 2005), for more socially-just urban and housing development policies (Alexandre

2008), for more equitable lower-income tax credits (Brown 2007), or for greater corporate boardroom diversity (Ramirez 2004; Green 2005).

Many of these scholars adamantly declare hope for social justice progress through the application of Bell's principle of interest-convergence as a tactic. Ramirez (2004, 1605) was convinced that Bell is 'open to the possibility that interest-convergence may be an engine of real progress and real reform' as he examined the lack of corporate boardroom diversity. Although Cashin (2005) rebukes Bell for being 'devastatingly pessimistic in his assessment of the possibilities for racial equality in our nation' (272), she contends that the interests of communities of color as well as 'working class, and progressive whites' (255) can and should spawn more effective progressive coalition-building opportunities. She chastises Bell and other critical race scholars for the message that positive, structural, and sustained racial reform remains unfeasible. In re-telling a story about having to choose between Mexican boxing icon, Julio Cesar Chavez, and his match against Mexican American boxing star, Oscar de la Hoya, Ixta Maya Murray (1997) argues that before Latino/a organizations and communities can begin to make inroads and form coalitions with other marginalized groups by finding the convergence of their interests, they must first contend with the inconsistencies within their own communities. She states that before coalition building can begin with other groups, a 'connection' within the Latino/a organizations must first be made.

Our counterstory explores the advantages and disadvantages of these two interpretations of Bell's interest-convergence principle. However, prior to presenting it, the next section offers a brief review of critical race theory's counterstorytelling methodology.

Counterstorytelling

Counterstories are narratives by disenfranchised people that function to reveal and interrogate dominant stories of racial privilege, or majoritarian stories, that circulate discursively as the natural order of things (Yosso 2006). They have a legacy beyond that of critical race theory, as they have been recounted throughout history by the disenfranchised. They can be located in the traditions of storytelling by African American slaves (Gates 1987), in the oral history tradition of Native peoples (Crow Dog 1991), and in the political consciousness-raising *testimonio* (Menchú 1984) or in the satirical *cuentos* (Burciaga 1993) told by many Latino/a communities. In critical race scholarship, these narratives often take the form of a composite counterstory, which resemble fiction but are told using characters who are composites of actual persons experiencing events or tensions that are common for people of color in sometimes fantastical (see 'Space traders' chapter in Bell 1992a) or real-world ways (Delgado 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Solórzano and Yosso 2002a). In this way, it is grounded in well-documented and researched situations and is often the most idiosyncratic feature of critical race scholarship. This is the type of counterstory we present in this article.

Counterstories 'cast doubt on the validity of assumptions and myths especially ones held by those in power' (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 144), serving both creative and destructive functions. They are meant to build consensus, solidarity and community amongst members of disenfranchised groups and to nurture community cultural wealth, add to collective memory, and strengthen resources for resistance and survival. Their destructive purposes include deconstructing the dominant discourse, subverting the status quo, and exposing White privilege and complicity in replicating

systems of oppression. They are meant to shatter complacency and attack deficit notions about people of color (Yosso 2006; Love 2004).

Counterstories also offer a different way for minoritized communities to hear each other, as well as provide a different way to be heard by dominant society. Upon formulating this approach, critical race legal scholars paid attention to narrative theory in order to find effective ways to tell stories that simultaneously reduce alienation and build bridges across racial divides. For those engaged in composing counterstories, they are seen as a way to offer a vision of a new world, one unbridled with racial injustices. Counterstories are a weapon in the struggle for racial reform, and are considered key ways to adjust perceptions about peoples' of color supposed shortcomings and recall a common humanity among all. It is in this spirit, that we composed this counterstory of educational leadership and politics, and expose the danger of using interest-convergence as political strategy.

The counterstory

Living and working in the New Mountain west

Esperanza and Malaquías Tamez are children of the 1970s, an era in U.S. history that saw for the first time an organized uprising of formally-educated, culturally-proud, and non-conformist youth in the southwest (Acuña 1988; Gonzales 2001; Gutiérrez 1998). They have recently relocated to Mountain Valley, a historically homogenous community where Latino/a communities are swiftly beginning to color this once overwhelmingly White state (Perlich 2004). The university where they both work, Rocky Mountain West University (RMWU), has not changed much demographically since Malaquías' colleague and mentor, Dr. Chenchó Leon was the only Chicano faculty in his department (see Villalpando 2003). Malaquías serves as a full-time faculty member and Esperanza is a full-time graduate student and part-time instructor. In a short four-year time span of stretching their academic and research wings, more opportunities for praxis beckon than they have energy, resources, or time for. Some of the initiatives and projects in which they have already been involved – including opposing a legislative repeal to driving license rights for undocumented workers, serving on an advisory board that critiques and monitors media coverage of Latino/a communities, partnering with a community school to raise awareness and access to higher education for Spanish-speaking elementary school children and their families – have provided them with the opportunity to establish roots in Latino/a and Chicano/a communities outside their university responsibilities. Yet, living as critical race scholars in this environment – where living means engaging in social justice activism while simultaneously raising children, studying, writing, teaching, theorizing, and publishing – is fraught with complexity and tensions for them. Recently, Malaquías has been invited to serve on a legislative coalition by an elder statesman of the Chicano/a political establishment of Mountain Valley, Carlos Canales.

Arriving at home

Malaquías removed his shoes as he quietly locked the front door behind him. The light in the bedroom lit the hallway, but as it was nearly midnight, he suspected his partner of fifteen years, Esperanza, might have fallen asleep by now. 'Malaquías?' he heard her call out. '¿Estas despierta?,'⁴ he said surprised as he walked into their bedroom.

Esperanza sat up in bed with articles piled around her. ‘Yeah, I’m almost done with reading for my class tomorrow’, she said, putting down the pages in her hand. ‘I dozed off for half an hour around 10:30, but I wanted to finish reading for my cultural studies class. Besides, I wanted to hear how the meeting had gone tonight so I waited up for you. *Dígame, qué pasó?*’⁵

Malaquías sat down on the bed. He hadn’t been home since eight that morning and he could have fallen asleep immediately, but so much had happened tonight, he knew he had to share the latest developments with Esperanza before he could rest.

‘*Horita te digo*’,⁶ he said leaning down to kiss her on the cheek. ‘How are the kids?’ ‘*Todos están bien. La chiquitita* asked for her daddy before bedtime, but she went to sleep without any problems’.⁷ She pushed, ‘What happened at your meeting?’

A new member of the Mountain Valley Hispanic Legislative Coalition, Malaquías had just returned from a hastily-called meeting of the coalition. Although only part of the group for several months, he had quickly acquired a sense of the group’s history and purpose. He saw potential in the organization’s mission – to bring together representatives from various Latino non-profit, business, political, and community organizations to discuss and determine positions on pending legislation affecting the Latino community. However, despite this potential, Malaquías was left exasperated after spending the evening with 20 Latino community leaders debating whether they should support the MEChA⁸ students on their planned sit-in at the state capitol. The students opposed a bill that sought to repeal in-state tuition for undocumented students and now were planning political action.

‘It was pretty tense most of the night’, Malaquías began. He briefly shut his eyes and began to paint a picture of the meeting that began hours ago...

Mountain Valley Hispanic Legislative Coalition

Malaquías walked into the conference room at the offices of *Sociedad para la Comunidad* – a non-profit organization dedicated to providing health and human services to immigrant families in the community – five minutes before the meeting began. He had just finished his policy seminar and felt pretty drained. He grabbed a water bottle from the refreshment table and an apple for sustenance, and scanned the room to see who had been able to make it that night.

In one corner, two MEChistas stood immersed in conversation with Pancho Valencia, one of the founders of the local Council de La Raza, a political advocacy group made up of community activists most of whom were active in the 1960s and 1970s. Neither of the MEChistas there tonight – Debbie or Josué – had enrolled in any of his classes, so he only knew them vaguely and looked forward to hearing what they had to say.

‘Excuse me’, said a voice as a hand reached in front of where Malaquías stood to grab a bottle of water. Malaquías stepped aside and greeted Matthew Diaz, another member of the task force. ‘Looks like a full room tonight’, Matthew commented as he walked towards Sandy Hernandez and Joe Soria. Malaquías nodded. Matthew was one of the more conservative voices on the board, representing Latino Republican constituents as well as a sizable community of immigrants from various Central and South American countries, who had successfully used their affluence, religious affiliation, and formal education to become professionals in the US. Sandy and Joe were self-described ‘US-born Hispanics’, and were active in local Republican Party politics.

At that moment, Lonnie Mora and Becky Martinez-Smith – both Democrats and life-long residents of Mountain Valley – walked into the room and motioned for the group to begin gathering around the u-shaped wooden table. Lonnie had unsuccessfully run for elected office in city government a few years ago and Becky often talked about her aspirations to run for state office, but had yet to do so. Lonnie came to sit next to Malaquíás.

‘I certainly hope that we can stimulate some dialogue in this room tonight. It is so frustrating to keep hearing us talk past each other without listening. We have an important issue facing our community and it weakens us to remain divided over how to handle it’, he emphasized.

The debate

Becky cleared her throat and welcomed the group. ‘Good evening. Representative Donaldson’s announcement this week that he plans to submit a bill to repeal in-state tuition for undocumented students when the legislature reconvenes next week. This is the reason we are all sitting here tonight. Those folks immediately affected – undocumented students currently enrolled at RMWU – and their allies are prepared to begin protesting against this bill by organizing sit-ins at the capitol building’, Becky gestured towards the MEChistas in the room. ‘Many of us made it a point to be here for this emergency meeting because of the impact this issue has on our community and our opposition to the bill. But given the push from the youth, we need to first decide *if* we as the Coalition should respond to the bill and if so, how’, she paused. ‘I’d like to open the floor to the MEChA leaders, who are here to inform us of their plans’.

Debbie and Josué stood. ‘Thanks, Becky’, Debbie began. ‘As of this academic year, over 150 undocumented students benefit from the current bill that simply codifies residential status for graduating seniors who have met all the academic requirements of RMWU. Many of them are involved in MEChA, most have siblings or other family and friends that would be affected by a repeal, and most if not all would not be able to attend the university if they were charged out-of-state tuition. The majority of them have lived a large portion of their lives in the U.S. Many of them fear going public with their legal status and shy away from public demonstrations. Those of us in MEChA privileged enough to not live in that fear want to be their voice. On Monday, we plan to congregate at the capitol and use signs, chants, and our bodies to protest the racist nature of this legislation...’.

‘Wait a minute’, interrupted Matthew. ‘We can’t just march into the capitol and start calling legislators racist. They are the ones who passed the in-state tuition bill in the first place’, he exhorted. ‘Look, I really appreciate your passion, but I think we need...’.

‘Can you let them finish?’ yelled Pancho from across the room. ‘Before you let your Republican ideology speak for you, listen to what these kids have to say from the part of you that is Chicano’, Pancho taunted.

‘I am not a Chicano’, Matthew retorted. ‘I was born in Peru’.

‘You think that disqualifies you from being a Chicano?’ Pancho laughed. ‘It is a philosophy, a political identity, not a nationality. Once you are willing to recognize the injustice and discrimination Brown people have been subjected to in this country – the country in which you now live, and feel passionate enough to do something about it...’.

‘Listen guys. This isn’t a debate over how to label ourselves’, Becky broke in. ‘Debbie, I am sorry you were interrupted. Pancho’s point about listening is right on. We are here to listen as much as we are to talk. I hope we can reserve our comments for rational discussion once we know exactly what MEChA is planning’.

Debbie sighed and began to outline the plan, ‘Several ethnic student groups have pledged to support our efforts. We have commitments from over 100 mostly students of color from the university and local high schools to meet at the capitol at 8 A.M. on Monday morning, holding signs like this one’, pointing at Josué who picked up two placards. One read ‘Racist legislature, Racist legislation = Injustice’ and the other said ‘*Si se puede*⁹ with Equal Educational Opportunity’. ‘Our intentions are to flood the foyer and hallways, sitting peacefully and quietly, linked arm and arm. We plan to hold our positions, making our presence visible as long as it takes to garner enough media attention and votes to defeat this bill. We have parents and other friends who will bring us supplies on a rotating basis to keep us fed and relieve us when necessary’.

‘Do you think that will change minds?’ Carlos Canales asked. He had been one of the founding members of the coalition. ‘If the goal is to keep this bill from becoming law, and many of our congressmen are ready to support Donaldson, do you think this will convince them otherwise?’

‘Which is my point’, said Matthew. ‘Like I started to say before, we can’t let our emotions determine our actions right now. We can’t insult those who have helped us in whatever way they can. I urge MEChA to reconsider their efforts and let us – the members of this board – use our influence and connections to meet one-on-one with legislators and appeal to them individually. I know many of these men. They are Christian men who will have the heart to vote down this repeal’, he finished.

‘Heart?’ asked Lonnie sarcastically. ‘Heart? If the legislature had any heart, this wouldn’t be an issue again this year. Latinos wouldn’t have to be constantly fighting these bills. This isn’t about your personal friends, Matthew, and the relationship they have with you, their “Latino friend”. This is about the systemic practices of our society to marginalize and exclude Latinos. The population is shifting and a larger Latino population – immigrant or not – is threatening to the status quo. These legislators are working hard to retain their power and if it means criminalizing the most defenseless people in society in order to boost themselves up, they will do so’, he stopped and drank from his coffee cup.

‘Does that mean you think we should encourage MEChA to destroy the relationships we have worked so hard to finally obtain?’ Sandy Hernandez offered. ‘I agree that we are fighting against a system, but we have to change minds one at a time. We have to work *within* the American political process. How will calling names accomplish that?’

‘What are you suggesting?’ Pancho countered, ‘That we let you and Joe and Matthew meet with your buddies one on one and offer them all sorts of political support from the Latino community to persuade them not to vote for this? I am tired of fighting the same battle year after year with piecemeal appeasements. It is time to engage in something activist to change the political discourse. Becoming a part of “the process” only replicates those tendencies’.

‘What if we get business people to make the arguments for us?’ suggested Carlos. ‘Maybe they will listen to them, especially when it comes down to money. Many in the business community are ready to organize a letter-writing campaign to help defeat

this bill and have data that illustrate how the economy will suffer if we don't educate these kids'.

Becky was nodding vigorously. 'I know that the Democratic Party would support this approach and our people have many supporters among the business community. They have put together a solid economic argument that can be persuasive to both the legislature and the general public. Let's help society recognize how they benefit from educating our undocumented students and it will enable us to defeat this bill', her voice grew stronger. 'Plus, if we write it in a way that appeals to their interest, we have a greater chance of gathering support from the white community'.

Many voices began to speak at once. Malaquías glanced down at the brief notes he jotted down, took a deep breath, and wondered where to begin as a slight cough and a scraping of a chair caught his attention.

La Señora: *The wise old lady*

Malaquías turned his head and realized that one of the elderly women that he noticed earlier looked up and began speaking, almost as if she was addressing Malaquías specifically. 'Joven', she started in a raspy voice, '*disculpe, pero no puedo hablar muy fuerte. Vine esta noche con este consejo.*¹⁰ I have lived many years in this community – since I was two years old – and have been needed and welcomed and rejected and discriminated against more often than I can count. One thing hasn't changed. *Los gringos deciden quien yo puedo ser – amigo o enemigo, trabajador o criminal.*¹¹ Although most of us in this state have lived here for generations – many even before this was the US – I have begun to see how *los gringos* are becoming more strident in the way they talk about us – all of us, regardless of where we were born, what our primary language is, or how we self-identify. I grew hopeful that our numbers would give us the strength we needed to define for ourselves who we are'. Her frail chest heaved in a huge breath and she leaned forward onto her knuckles as if supporting herself before continuing.

'But it hasn't happened that way. Our growing presence is a threat and dressing ourselves in White American way of thinking has not benefited our community institutionally or structurally, no matter how many personal friends we make. We still have horrendous drop out rates – or push out rates as I call them (Rumberger and Rodríguez 2002), disproportionate incarceration rates (Human Rights Watch 2002), and a lack of access to higher education (Yosso and Solórzano 2006). The percentages reflect why we have to keep fighting the same fights. *Ya me cansé.*¹² To bring about the kind of lasting social change and justice that works, we must first try to find a way to talk openly about the history of racism and discrimination that has shaped our identities. Solely calling individuals out as racist, without speaking to institutional, historical, and pervasive racism, won't initiate the kind of conversations I am talking about'. She looked pointedly at the young college students who seemed to be immersed in conversation with each other. The old woman paused to swallow water from a tall clear glass sitting in front of her.

'Becky said this meeting wasn't about debating how we label ourselves. *Pero yo creo por lo menos,*¹³ before we march or demonstrate or write a letter or ask others to fight our battles, we need to educate ourselves on how pervasive the concept of race has been in shaping the history of this country and especially our communities. We must stop trying to fool ourselves that this is the way it has been and will continue to be. We must no longer be afraid to use "race" and "racism" among ourselves to under-

stand who we are and why we are in the position we are collectively in society – even if the individual privilege that a person happens to have enables them to be a friend to a powerful politician. Race has manifested itself daily in each of our lives, whether we are from the US, or Mexico, or Peru, whether we are “documented” or not, whether we speak Spanish as our first language or butcher it when we try. We need to stop thinking that by “simply playing the game” within a traditional American politics paradigm will garner our communities the type of radical, structural, institutional reform that is needed for social transformation. We have to realize that our interests – if we are truly going to advocate for Latina/o interests – will not always converge with White interests’.

Back at home

‘So then what happened? What did people say? Were people moved by *la señora*’s comments? Who was she?’ Esperanza peppered Malaquías with questions, riveted by the account of the wise old woman. Malaquías could still see the old woman lower herself into the chair, seemingly exhausted from her efforts. However, while scribbling some of the woman’s comments on the pad of paper in front of him, he tuned into the conversation buzzing around him, hoping to hear elements of *la señora*’s message impacting the direction of the meeting. When he went to make eye contact with her in order to ask her name, he realized the woman had slipped out quietly sometime during the ensuing debate.

The room remained deeply divided over what to do. A handful of self-identified Chicanos unquestioningly pushed for the sit-in. ‘We need to join the student leaders to demonstrate our political presence and make the power of our community visible’, they argued.

Another group – most of whom were recent immigrants and naturalized citizens, members of the business community, and self-identified political conservatives – felt a subtler tactic would prove more effective. ‘More gets done behind close doors than could ever be accomplished with protests and placards’, they countered.

The majority in the room, however, wanted to align with the mostly White business community and help them argue through press releases and editorials that the State’s workforce and economy would benefit greatly from educating all its citizens. They wanted to appeal to the majority’s moral conscience.

Malaquías noted, ‘In the end, the Coalition did not take a vote on whether to support the students. Instead, each faction went its separate way. Some members in the group continued to ask the MEChA students to rethink their signs with racist accusations. An alliance from the business community is going to focus on the economic costs of repealing in-state tuition, without mentioning the institutionalized racism that keeps most of our students from getting to the point where they can apply for university admission. And Matthew and his colleagues are going to write letters and are planning to meet with as many legislators as they can to ask them to not support the repeal’, he finished, yawning and stretching out on the bed.

‘This is so strange. Didn’t you ask if anybody had listened to *la señora*?’ Esperanza fired.

‘I was so intrigued and appreciative of her comments that I didn’t notice if anyone else was listening. She helped me to process the debate and to better understand and question the use of Bell’s (1980) notion of interest-convergence as political strategy’, Malaquías said.

‘What do you mean?’ Esperanza asked.

‘You know we’ve always discussed the politics of improving educational opportunities for Chicana/os and Latina/os. One strategy that is often discussed in our community is the idea that we need to accommodate and/or change our approach to better align with the White majority, that we can only “change the system” by playing to their interests’.

‘So are you saying that you believe that now?’ followed up Esperanza.

‘No, I’m not saying that. Activists or leaders can do that, but as a critical race theorist my concern has always been finding ways to put theory into practice and I believe that many people have been misconstruing or misinterpreting the way that Bell and others conceptualized interest-convergence. For example, although from rival political parties, Becky and Matthew each argued that by aligning our interests with those of the White community our objective could be reached, whether by playing their style of politics, not playing the “race card”, or by letting the white, business community make the argument for us. This seems to parallel what Murray (1997), Ramirez (2004), and others suggest – that interest-convergence may be utilized as a political strategy’, Malaquíás offered.

‘But these options leave out the possibility of talking about race in the process at all. Employing any of these strategies completely disavows the presence of racism’, Esperanza thought aloud.

‘Exactly’, Malaquíás said, opening one eye.

‘Doing so seems to ignore the more fundamental principles of CRT, primarily that racism is endemic, permanent, and a very real part of US society. It is like the two are irreconcilable’, she said.

Malaquíás sat up, appearing somewhat reenergized. ‘What I hear you saying then is not that we should essentialize Latina/o political activism or that those wanting to converge their interests with the dominant group are wrong, rather you are saying that this strategy cannot be called CRT praxis or the implementation of interest-convergence. A strategy that does not allow you to center a discussion of race and racism is not interest-convergence. It more nearly resembles the civil rights strategies of the 1960s and 1970s, when leaders attempted to be part of the mainstream political process and strove to be “invited to the decision-making table”. So are Latina/o leaders perverting the interest-convergence principle as developed by Bell?’

‘No, I don’t think they are perverting it. They are just doing something else – accommodating to the power structure, negotiating from a marginalized position, engaging in the political process in traditional ways – however they are not utilizing interest-convergence, like it is a chess strategy. I believe that Bell did not intend for it to be used as political strategy, but instead meant for it to be applied as an analytical lens or conceptual tool’, Esperanza stated. ‘The way I understand it is that before we can work towards sustainable and transformative social change that benefits all people of color in society – as critical race theorists – an acknowledgement of what race and racism mean in our society and to us must be put forth. We don’t have the option of ignoring race and racism. CRT praxis holds this as non-negotiable. However, we also don’t want to essentialize the activism, requiring everyone to think the same way. We will always benefit from a multi-strategic approach, but I think claiming that Bell meant for interest-convergence to be used as a political strategy is misinformed and compromises the social transformation aim of CRT and its practitioners’.

Discussion

This counterstory underscores our concern over the misappropriation of the interest-convergence principle and the potential that a misunderstanding of CRT and its tenets may have on slowing change for communities of color. We recognize that there is no prescriptive for community mobilization or activism and do not advance that notion here. However, as the counterstory reveals in the concluding dialogue between Malaquías and Esperanza, it is our contention that as critical race scholars seeking to enact CRT praxis in our Latino/a communities, we should not conflate an interest-convergence-like approach with CRT praxis. This assertion is grounded primarily in the entirety of the theory's principles and tenets, and on the concept of racial realism advanced by Bell (1992b) and Delgado (2002). We contend that rather than foster the radical transformation needed to alleviate oppressive and inequitable educational settings, this approach merely reproduces the conditions that CRT seeks to problematize and results from at least three tensions: 1) a resistance to discussions that center race and strategies that focus centrally on the elimination of racism; 2) the acceptance and seductive nature of incremental gains in the political process; and 3) the framing of responsibility for inequity solely on the individual rather than on the institutional or systemic racism that exists. Each of these circumstances distorts CRT's guiding maxims in the name of short-term gains.

Resistance to the permanence of racism

As the character of Matthew indicated, public policy makers often characterize rhetoric or protests that confront legislation as racist as distasteful and unproductive. Within the counterstory, characters from both sides of the political spectrum argued that employing the student strategy would not be effective. Rather, they argued for 'using personal connections', 'appealing to the legislators' Christian morals', and 'utilizing the White business community to make the argument' as strategies for converging Latino/a interests with those of the White majority. From a CRT perspective, however, discussions of race and racism and their implication for public policy and social life are central, regardless of how unpleasant these conversations may be perceived to be. We reconcile this tension by interpreting the work of Bell, Delgado, and others to be non-negotiable in this regard. We furthermore recognize that this tension remains because many, even in communities of color, do not adhere to the foundational principles that form a racial realist view, that racism pervades and infiltrates all aspects of daily life and institutions and will continue to do so as long as power remains a limited commodity. Therefore, we seek to foster discussions of race and racism as a means of educating and preparing community leaders and to eliminate resistance to discussions about, and strategies that combat, racism; the discussions are foundational to CRT praxis.

Seductiveness of incremental gains

The characters of Pancho and Lonnie exemplify the frustration that some feel in implementing a strategy that seeks incremental gain in the absence of a racial realist critique. They contradict notions of a steady improvement that are promoted by characters such as Becky and Sandy, who believe that it is by working with established political parties and duly elected officials that change occurs, from inside the political

apparatus. The conflict in the counterstory illustrates the seductiveness of such a strategy in that it relies on notions of meritocracy, colorblindness, and ‘fair play’ within a democratic system, all without critiquing the power differentials that remain intact. This tension is inflamed by CRT’s rejection of civil rights incrementalism and admonishment to those attempting to enact social justice to avoid this temptation. We forthrightly acknowledge that incrementalism has led to authentic change in the lives of people of color, and we live today with the full knowledge that it was this struggle that has afforded us the privileges that we now enjoy. However, our critique with this approach is when community leaders present it as the *sole* strategy in the struggle for change. We contend that it has failed historically in the transformation of institutions and policies that disadvantage communities of color. As evidenced by the multiple and pervasive achievement gaps that continue to exist within the educational system – originally established by and for Whites – (Kozol 1991, 2005; Alemán and Rorrer 2006; De Jesús 2005; Love 2004; Zarawsky 2004; Sanderson 2005). Despite the fact that *Brown* was decided over 50 years ago and with increasing numbers of educational leaders and professionals of color – many who self-identify as Latino/a – educational inequity and oppression through a lack of education access for Latina/os remains the norm (San Miguel and Valencia 1998; Yosso 2006; Kohler and Lazarin 2007). As critical race theorists, we argue that interest-convergence principle should not be utilized as a justification for an incrementalist strategy of change in the political arena.

Emphasis on individual versus institutionalized or systemic racism

Along with a resistance to a racial discourse and an emphasis on incrementalism, a tension exists with those who do not understand racism as institutional, historical, and systemic. In the counterstory and among society at large, some contend that racism (meaning individual-level racism) has ceased to exist in ways that were commonplace several decades ago. As the counterstory exchanges between Matthew, Sandy, and Lonnie exemplify, tensions between those that understand racism as individual versus those who understand it as systemic, continue to limit progression on social equity. CRT scholars predicate their theory on the belief that the racism at the heart of disenfranchisement and oppression is rooted in systemic and institutional forces. While individual racist acts are symptoms of a larger White supremacist ideology and continue to exist in all regions and aspects of the country, critical race theorists seeking to implement praxis must struggle to resist and rupture this White supremacist ideology. CRT guides activists to attack society’s embedded racist structures, shifting blame and responsibility away from individuals.

Conclusion

The attraction of critical race theory to us – emerging scholar-activists of color – is indisputable because how it resonates with our lived experiences and how it helps us to articulate a world predicated on a normalized racial hierarchy that privileges a White majority (Yosso 2006; Villalpando 2003). Although the principles of CRT and grassroots work sometimes appear disconnected in the activism we seek to enact, we contend that it is in this messiness of praxis that we are best able to work in our community while surviving in the academy. For us, disconnecting core CRT principles from our experiences is not an option in pursuing our scholarship and activism. As revealed in the counterstory, an often used tactical approach seemingly based on the

concept of interest-convergence disengages from the other vital components making up the framework of critical race theory. As products of a generation imbued with civil rights ideology, we are not miraculously well versed in deconstructing the normalization of Whiteness and the social construction of race. Acquiring the vocabulary and the arguments that explicate our lived experience takes study, reflection, practice, and experience. CRT assists in making this praxis feasible.

As our review of interest-convergence literature and counterstory indicates, a tendency to malign Bell's notion of interest-convergence as a potentially successfully political strategy manifests itself among scholars and community activists of color alike. Characters Carlos and Becky represent the passionate and dedicated leaders leading many fights on behalf of their Latino community. They in a sense represent the ideas published by academics that utilize Bell's work as a means of allying themselves with marginalized communities. Both raise a major incongruity when carrying their suggestions out to their logical conclusion: in order to convince the majoritarian community to ally with historically marginalized communities on a social issue, White interests must get served, leaving out implications of race and racism or the discomfort of a discussion of White privilege. As critical race theorists we continue to rely on the words of *la señora* from the counterstory: Latino/a interests do not always have to converge with White interests. Implementing such a tactic becomes incommensurable if not intolerable for CRT activist scholars because CRT praxis unequivocally foregrounds a racial realist view of the world and its politics.

Notes

1. The use of the label 'undocumented residents' is purposeful here. In order to counter the negative criminalization upon a group of people that is implied by the terms 'illegal alien' or 'illegal immigrant', we deliberately value the perseverance, dignity, and contributions this population makes to the United States by the use of this term.
2. We define Latino/as as persons born or who self-identify as having familial connections to countries in Central or South America, or the Caribbean. In Utah, as in the rest of the US, the majority of those classified or self-identified as Latino/a are Mexican or of Mexican heritage. See Perlich (2004) for more on the Utah immigration context.
3. The *Hernandez* case involved Pete Hernandez, a Mexican American agricultural worker, who was convicted of murder by an all-White jury. Hernandez's attorneys argued that the county in which he was tried had not had any people of color, and Mexican Americans in particular, seat on a jury in 25 years although Mexican Americans made up a significant portion of the population. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Hernandez. Delgado (2006) speaks to the Court's motives and rationale for this decision. It contradicts the view that the justices acted on moral grounds, but rather, were merely attempting to serve majority White interests.
4. 'Are you awake?'
5. 'Tell me, what happened?'
6. 'I will tell you in a minute'.
7. 'Everybody is fine. The little one...'
8. Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) is a national student organization that was born out of the Chicano student movement in 1969 and today mostly consists of students that are US born and/or immigrant Latino/a students with roots in various Spanish-speaking countries such as Peru, El Salvador, Guatemala, Argentina, and Mexico.
9. 'Yes we can', a term first coined by civil and human rights activist and co-founder of the United Farmworkers of America union, Dr. Dolores Huerta.
10. 'Young man, excuse me, but I can't talk very loud. I came tonight with this advice'.
11. 'White people decide who I am – friend or enemy, worker or criminal'.
12. 'I'm tired of this already'.
13. 'But I think at the very least...'

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