



Center for Critical Race Studies at UCLA

Research Briefs

June 2016 • Issue No. 4

Finding Consuelo Rivera: Linking Critical Race Theory and History Methodologies

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William Tate's (1997) seminal article posed an important question to the field of education by asking "do we in education challenge ahistorical treatment of education, equity, and students of color?" (p. 235). Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education (Solórzano, 1998) as a framework, this research brief illustrates innovative methodological approaches using primary sources to unearth and examine the historical educational experiences of Students of Color. Specifically, it highlights the educational trajectory of Consuelo Rivera, a Chicana student within UCLA's Graduate School of Education in the first half of the twentieth century. Mexican children during this time period were perceived as intellectually handicapped, often attributed to their culture, language and heredity (González, 1990). This in turn led to educational programs for Mexican students that strictly emphasized vocational, non-academic training. Consuelo's story helps us challenge deeply rooted assumptions of Mexican students' intellectual inferiority and highlights the resiliency of this community over time.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

CRT in education as a framework pushes forward perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seek to identify, analyze and transform structural, cultural and interpersonal aspects of education that maintain the subordination of Students of Color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). A key tenet of this framework is its interdisciplinary perspective, which challenges ahistoricism and insists on analyzing race and racism in education in both historical and contemporary contexts using interdisciplinary methods (Solórzano, 1998). My approach builds from this CRT tenet by explicitly centering history and providing multidisciplinary tools to explore the ways racism has been lived and experienced historically in schools. In particular, it's important to find and honor the voices and experiences of Students of Color by identifying rich primary sources that are not always fully explored in the field of education.

DISCUSSION

To illustrate my methodological approach to historical research, I detail the process of locating and recovering the story of Consuelo Rivera, an important piece of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), UCLA and South Central Los Angeles history. While researching the Mexican community of South Central Los Angeles during the first half of the 20th century, I found school yearbooks from Jefferson High, the neighborhood school, to be critical in the research process. Looking at an almost unbroken collection of yearbooks, year after year, each page told a story about the education of those students. I was immediately drawn to Consuelo Rivera's name on the "Where are They Now?" page, which listed alumni and their current professional or academic affiliations. She was the only student with a Spanish surname, and the text indicated she was an alumna from the class of 1930 and a first year undergraduate at UCLA.

School yearbooks are critical in finding, recovering, and centering the lives of actual students. They serve as a window into a school's history

and more importantly, they hold the names and faces of the historical protagonists. Yearbooks hold a wealth of knowledge that can work in conjunction with, for example, U.S. Census records to paint an even more complete picture of the life trajectories of these students. Engaging with both of these sources allowed me to continue the research process and recover the counterstory of Consuelo Rivera.

Daughter of Carlos and Henrietta Rivera, Consuelo was born in New Mexico in 1914. She was the third of four children. Consuelo's father, a bookkeeper at a wholesale house (U.S. Census 1910) passed away in 1915. It is unclear what year the Riveras moved to California, but they appear in the 1930 U.S. Census Population Schedule, living in the neighborhood of South Central Los Angeles, less than two miles away from Jefferson High. By this time, Henrietta worked as a salesclerk at a department store and had remarried. Consuelo's eldest siblings also worked in the department store in different capacities, Consuelo, aged 16, and her younger sister attended the neighborhood schools. In 1930, Consuelo was a graduating senior at Jefferson

High. With a slight smile, her yearbook picture is accompanied by a caption that offers an interesting glimpse at her academic self-perception which reads "Constantly Getting A's, Rich She Is In Legend Lore" (Jefferson High Yearbook, 1930).

After graduating from Jefferson High, Consuelo continued her academic trajectory at UCLA. She majored in Spanish and became involved in the Spanish honors fraternity. By 1934, that fraternity's page in the UCLA yearbook listed her name as a graduating senior. Although her photograph did not appear in the UCLA yearbook, her undergraduate transcripts from UCLA indicate she was a student there from 1930-1934. After receiving her bachelor's degree, Consuelo continued on to obtain a graduate degree in Spanish and a secondary teaching credential from UCLA's Graduate School of Education. After taking a series of Spanish and Education courses, Consuelo earned her M.A. in Spanish on August 2, 1935. Her transcripts indicate UCLA sent her credential to L.A. City Schools, which we now know as LAUSD.



Consuelo Rivera, 1930

To follow Consuelo's trajectory post graduation, I combined information from the 1940 Census Population Schedule with LAUSD employment history data to provide me with a descriptive snapshot of her life. By this time, Consuelo was 26 years old, living in the Westside of Los Angeles. The census listed her profession as a public school teacher but did not list where she taught. LAUSD administrators filled in more details by sharing that Consuelo Rivera served as a Spanish teacher in LAUSD from 1937 to 1974. Despite the unequal schooling conditions Consuelo faced as a Chicana from South Central Los Angeles, her 37 years of service as a teacher is a testament to her resiliency and commitment to education.

CONCLUSION

CRT in education principles guided my approach to methods and sources that allowed me to recover the story of Consuelo Rivera. My approach to historical research leads us towards a Critical Race History Methodology (CRHM). At a time when prevailing social and cultural assumptions regarding intelligence, language, and criminality influenced the unequal education provided to Chicana/o students in South Central Los Angeles (Alonso, 2016), Consuelo is a real-life example of the resilience of Students of Color. Her academic achievement, persistence to and through an elite institution of higher education like UCLA, and career as an educator all symbolize the deep engagement of Communities of Color with schools. Consuelo's counterstory is just one story, out of many. CRHM pushes us to think about other Consuelo's and other Students of Color who have lived in our communities, and whose stories just need to be found.

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This Brief Series was made possible in part through funding from the offices of the Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies (GSE&IS). For more information please visit us at www.ccrs.ucla.gseis.edu