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Re-defining Counterspaces: New Directions and Implications for Research and Praxis

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I spent two years as a researcher and educator collaborating with elementary aged Brown youth in creating, developing, and sustaining a Critical Race Counterspace within their elementary school. Drawing from Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars within the field of education, I initially understood counterspaces as “sites where deficit notions of People of Color can be challenged” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 70). In thinking about this definition, I sought to co-create a counterspace with Brown youth that would allow them to reimagine what “schooling” or education could look like, given the dismal state of K-12 educational curriculum for youth of color (Valenzuela, 1999).

While CRT provided me with a basis to understand and develop counterspaces, I recognized in my work with youth that CRT scholars had not yet theorized what it meant to make sense of the tensions, contradictions, and growing pains of co-creating a counterspace. As a Chicana scholar with a Chicana feminist sensibility, I drew heavily from Chicana/Latina feminisms and in particular the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, to help me theorize these tensions. Thus, this brief highlights the theoretical and practical implications of braiding together (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2016; Gonzalez, 2001) CRT and Anzaldúa’s Borderlands¹ to make sense of the challenges that are inherent within counterspaces.

Through my own research and praxis with young Brown youth, I was able to formulate a new definition of counterspaces as: dynamic sites where people on the margins engage with one another in critical discourse, bring their whole (and multiple) selves, challenge each other, and make sense of the multitude of contradictions they embody, which are always present, as a means of undergoing moments of transformation. Below, I outline how I conceptualized my braiding together of CRT and Anzaldúan thought which informs my understanding of counterspaces, followed by what this conceptualization means for both theory and practice.

MERGING TOGETHER CRT AND ANZALDÚA’S BORDERLANDS

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the framework that grounds counterspaces. CRT centralizes race and racism, intersecting with other forms of domination, when analyzing and deconstructing the daily lived experiences of communities of color, particularly within a U.S. context (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Counterspaces within CRT literature have often been understood as spaces to build community within hostile environments, particularly educational institutions (Case & Hunter, 2012; Grier-Reed, 2010; Nuñez, 2011; Terry, Flennaugh, Blackmon, &

Howard, 2013). Largely absent from the counterspace literature are the processes by which counterspaces are formed and sustained.

Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* provides a perspective from which to make sense of the tensions and messiness found within counterspaces. Her scholarship centers the multiple subjectivities that we bring into various spaces and how these subjectivities can clash with one another. Specifically, Anzaldúa (2002) identifies *nepantla* as the in-between, liminal space we embody as "colonized" people navigating a white supremacist world. She argues that it is in *nepantla* where we often spend most of our time and that we also learn to call it "home." In writing about *nepantla*, Anzaldúa (2002) states, "[p]ulled between opposing realities, you feel torn between 'white' ways and Mexican ways, between Chicano nationalists and conservative Hispanics. Suspended between traditional values and feminist ideas, you don't know whether to assimilate, separate, or isolate" (p. 548). *Nepantla* becomes a space where we learn to negotiate the various identities we embody, often in ways that are competing or contradictory. Despite these competing and contradictory notions, *nepantla* can be a place of transformation and growth.

I argue that *nepantla* is a useful

tool for understanding our multiple contradictions, particularly as our subjectivities grate against each other in messy ways. Anzaldúan scholarship provides a language to make sense of the tensions that counterspaces can produce, even when they can or are also spaces of transformation. Specifically, within the context of working with youth, I identified four components that I found integral to understanding the nuanced processes involved in co-creating a counterspace. Although these components were developed out of my research with young people, I argue that they also provide implications for developing counterspaces across different identities, including adults. These four components are: relationship building, centering critical discourse, embracing multiple forms of self-expression, and embracing the tension of contradiction. I explain these four components below.

Relationship Building

In developing relationships with youth in this counterspace, I found that I often took on multiple roles as one of the adults in the room. Specifically, I was a "nepantlera" adult, moving between and across multiple roles, and at times embodying these different roles all at once. I often shifted between friend, teacher, educator, and family member. The relationships that the youth had with one another

were also constantly shifting and unpredictable. As such, relationships should be understood within counterspaces as dynamic, rather than static.

Centering Critical Discourse

By their very nature, counterspaces center critical discourse because they challenge deficit notions about people of color. Thus, an important and perhaps more obvious component of counterspaces is that they center critical discussions and discourse in ways that challenge dominant ideologies. These discourses are also pedagogical in that people within a counterspace are learning from and engaging with one another in critical discourse.

Embracing Multiple Forms of Self-Expression

Elenes' (2011) Chicana/o border/transformational pedagogies² allowed me to make sense of how the youth sought to create a space where they would have their multiple selves validated and embraced. Knowing that they were often limited by how they could express themselves in school and in their classrooms, students often wanted to affirm who they believed they were and wanted opportunities to do so. In this way, we shaped the counterspace together such that they could in fact express their multiple selves. For example, when some students

referred to themselves as “nasty” (e.g., conversations about sex) in our counterspace, they did so knowing there was a distinction between how they would be perceived in the counterspace and how they might be perceived during their regular classroom.

Embracing the Tension of Contradiction

Embracing the tension of contradiction was another component of counterspaces, and a particularly difficult one given that many people stray from confrontation. Using Anzaldúa's scholarship, I argue, however, that this contradiction and tension is a necessary part of our process of growing, learning, and transforming. It is in fact, what I argue makes counterspaces so potentially powerful and transformative. When we view these tensions from the perspectives offered by feminist of color frameworks, we can shift our understanding of tensions such that we can recognize how they can lead to transformation, healing, and understanding. This is why Anzaldúa's work has been so central to my understanding of counterspaces because the tensions are actually moments of opportunity rather than despair.

CONCLUSION

Using an Anzaldúa lens to understand counterspaces as

filled with contradiction allows us to be more cognizant and reflective of our own practices within counterspaces. In particular, Anzaldúa's Borderlands allowed me to reflect on my work with youth and counterspaces and think more concretely about what possibilities counterspaces present for personal and collective transformation and healing. Because counterspaces are dynamic, they provide a space from which to consistently challenge, grow, and transform ourselves in the process of building community with others. In viewing counterspaces as places where subjectivities are often in contention, these are important considerations to make. Future research on counterspaces should continue to push these definitions forward, particularly using feminist of color frameworks that allow us to examine processes of consciousness, healing, and transformation.

NOTES

¹ Gloria Anzaldúa's (2002) contribution to Chicana/Latina feminist scholarship is her articulation of a theory of the Borderlands for Chicanas/Latinas within a U.S. context. Anzaldúa situates her understanding of the Borderlands as being both physical and metaphorical spaces where various subjectivities collide with one another. Drawing from the literal, physical border

between the U.S. and Mexico, Anzaldúa develops a Borderlands theory that examines how the 1st (US) and 3rd (Mexico) world produce a subjectivity that can only be understood via one's experiences as a borderlander. The Borderlands presents a symbol for understanding the “in-between” as well as a process of consciousness that encompasses borderlands sensibilities and experiences.

² Alejandra Elenes' work on Chicana/o border transformative pedagogies centralizes a borderlands approach to working with Chicanas/os. Elenes, drawing heavily from Anzaldúa, takes the borderlands as a starting point from which to develop pedagogical practice, including pedagogies where we should face our own discomfort.

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