

Hypervisibility and Disciplining the Brown Mujer Body in School: A Counternarrative of Mother-Daughter-Sister Pedagogies for Survival and Resistance

The following is a counterstory rooted in a “looking prism” (Gonzalez, 2001) that blends critical race theory (CRT),¹ Latino critical race theory (LatCrit)² and Chicana feminist³ thinking to explore and theorize about the experiences of Chicanas/Latinas. These frameworks contribute to an understanding of education spaces that unapologetically center a race and gender analysis as experiences Chicana/Latina students intersect with other forms of marginalization. CRT theorists have used counterstories as a tool to center the experiential knowledge of People and Communities of Color.⁴ They challenge and resist racist ideologies and discourses by providing an understanding of the world and reality based on marginalized perspectives and positionalities (Delgado, 1989). The story presented here is in the format of a dialogue and very much rooted in my Chicana cultural

¹ Critical race theory (CRT) is an analytical, theoretical, and pedagogical tool that unapologetically centers race for understanding and uncovering how race and racism intersect with other systems of oppression and shape the lives of People of color in the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). A central tenet of CRT is the centering of race as they intersect with other identities that are tied to systems of oppression and shape the lives and experiences of People of Color.

² Latino critical race theory (LatCrit) is a framework that brings into conversation the racialized experiences of Latinxs to understand how racism intersects in the lives of the Latinx community by gender, sexuality, language, immigration, and other systems of oppression. This story is rooted in LatCrit, specifically drawing from a lens that centers race as it intersects with gender, sexuality, language in Natalia’s experience of getting dress coded on her third day of seventh grade.

³ Chicana feminist scholarship centers race and its intersection with gender, class, and sexuality to understand and theorize about how systems of subordination underlie and shape the lives of Chicana/Latinas and their experiences in schooling (Holguín Cuádriz, 2005). The experiences of Latina mujeres in education are intentionally and unapologetically centered in Chicana feminist scholarship, relocating Latina mujeres as the focal point (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

⁴ Following the writing of critical race theorists and Chicana feminist scholars in education, including Dolores Delgado Bernal, Daniel Solórzano, and Lindsay Pérez Huber, I capitalize the terms Students of Color and Women of Color to engage in a project that moves towards empowerment and racial justice for historically underrepresented racial and gendered groups. I do not capitalize the term “white” in our writing to acknowledge and reject the standard grammatical norms and power represented in the capitalization of the term “white.”

intuition.⁵ It is informed by my personal experiences, the experiences of my sister, and my mother's, as we individually and collectively navigate U.S. institutions and practices, with the resiliency and strength to thrive. I hope that in some way this story connects to the experiences of Latinas in schools and Girls and Women of Color navigating the U.S. education system and context.⁶ The intent of this counterstory is to engage the characters, a mother and her two daughters, in a dialogue about sharing, reflecting, and challenging the racialized and gendered schooling experiences of Latinas. I invite the reader to open their mind, heart, and spirit as they read the following narrative.

Natalia's Third Day of School

Natalia is in seventh grade at a middle school in the Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD). The school is diverse across race for the most part, but as a result of tracking, few Students of Color are in the honor's track. Natalia is usually one of six Latinx students in her honor's coursework.⁷ Of the two Latina students, Natalia is noticeably Brown, with Brown skin, dark Brown eyes, and dark Brown, tight curly hair. These physical features—her warm skin color, her beautiful curls—she has

⁵ Delgado Bernal (1998) describes cultural intuition according to Chicana feminism, as the Chicana/Latina researcher bringing their whole selves into the work they do, to counter the rupturing of the different parts that make us who we are. Cultural intuition welcomes us to draw from our own individual and collective experiences, our families' and communities' histories, and our ways of knowing when theorizing about the experiences of Chicanx/Latinx students. Solorzano and Yosso (2001) draw from theoretical sensitivity and cultural intuition, to root their counterstory on Chicanas in academia, in the data, and in their own personal and professional experiences.

⁶ Crenshaw (1991) argues that an intersectional lens is needed to more fully understand the experiences of women of color, such as the concern for safety and gendered violence that goes ignored and unaddressed. It is necessary to have an intersectional lens for understanding how schools target the Black and Brown bodies of students and how sexist ideologies and constructions of sexuality intersect with race to inflict harm on girls of color. The story demonstrates how Natalia's young, physically "developed," Brown female body was the target of racist and gendered schooling policies and practices, experiences that the white female students at her school did not have to concern themselves about. Natalia's body was made the topic of focus by her teacher, it came to the attention of her classmates, counselor, and peers, as her Brown body and the clothes she wore were outed and constructed as inappropriate and shameful.

⁷ Solorzano and Ornelas (2004) discuss "schools within schools" to describe the racist schooling structures and practices that results in tracking and segregation of students of color and lead to the different schooling experiences, differential access to resources, and inequitable access to college preparation coursework for Students of Color.

learned to love because of teachings and affirmations she receives at home. Esmeralda, Natalia's older sister, is a current college student at the local state university and gets out of class right on time to pick up her sister from school every day on her way home. Today, Esmeralda pulls up to her sister's school and waves at Natalia who is standing near the curb with her arms crossed. As soon as Natalia gets in the car, she tells Esmeralda, "Guess what happened to me today?" "What?!" Esmeralda replied right almost in sync with Natalia finishing her statement. Natalia quickly answers, "I got dress-coded."⁸ Natalia sat in the passenger seat wearing blue jeans, a red shirt that sat at her pant line, her new pair of blue low-top converse, and a wooden carved turtle necklace she got from the family's most recent trip to her mother's hometown in Mexico and that she wears every single day. Natalia points at her shirt, telling her sister that the length was supposedly a dress code violation. While still parked, Esmeralda asked her sister for details about what happened. Natalia began from the beginning of her school day, which is when this all started.

First Period

Natalia has math first period with Ms. Watson, a white female teacher in her 30s. She starts by recounting:

So as soon as I walked into class, Ms. Watson called me out and asked me in front of the whole class that "if I raised my arms up straight if my stomach would show." She didn't even give me a chance to answer when she repeated her question and told me that I needed to put my arms up. I told her, "Yeah, my stomach would show." I didn't want to just agree with her, but I also knew that I didn't really have a choice.⁹

⁸ According to the LBSUD dress code policy, the following is "unacceptable" for female students:

Strapless, spaghetti straps, off-the-shoulder, cut-out designs, floor-length, and sun dresses; low-cut or tight shirts; blouses or tops that bare the midriff at any time; bareback, tube tops, male-type athletic tank tops and plain white T-shirts; see-through and sheer clothing that does not have an appropriate blouse or shirt underneath. LBSUD dress code policy for grades K-8: <http://www.lbschools.net/Asset/files/Uniforms/Dresscode.pdf>.

⁹ Lomawaima (1993) demonstrates the contradictions inherent in policies that reinforce white supremacy. For example, students are asked to not wear clothes that reveal certain parts of their bodies, yet school staff use their power to force students to expose their bodies to their teachers and their peers. This has been a normalized practice

Natalia did not want to reveal a part of her body to her entire class that she was not previously intending, choosing, nor willing to show. Esmeralda asked her sister if she was going to share what happened with their mom, Natalia answered, “When I get home, I want her to hear it from me first because my counselor threatened to call my parents.” They drive home as Natalia continues to fill her sister in on what happened.

La Cocina¹⁰

Natalia and Esmeralda get home and go straight to the kitchen to find their mom, Maria. Maria is starting dinner after getting home from work, so that the meal would be ready by the time her husband got home from work. Maria was cutting some potatoes, tomatoes, onions, and jalapeños, to make her daughters’ favorite plate, pollo en blanco,¹¹ a recipe she learned from her mother. Maria saw Natalia and Esmeralda approaching. Instead of her usual “como estuvo su dia en la escuela?”¹² she asked “que paso mijas?” because she could tell that something was not right. Natalia quickly responds, “I have something to tell you that happened at school today” and she begins the story of what she experienced in the morning. The three mujeres are in the kitchen, leaning against the cabinets as Natalia

in schools with little concern for how students feel shamed, and questions of sexual harassment or assault are not even called into question but viewed as a legitimate exercise of teacher, adult power. These public inspections of student’s conformity to dress code policies is not new. Lomawaima’s (1993) historical analysis of the impact of federal practices in the experiences of Indigenous girls forced to attend Indian boarding schools documents how girls’ uniforms were inspected daily by teachers to ensure their compliance with the uniform policy. During these inspections, girls were required to lift their dresses to prove that they were wearing the required undergarments.

¹⁰ The story is organized by specific spaces that are part of Natalia’s everyday life as a student, highlighting how oppressions takes place in multiple contexts and spaces within schools and how resistance can also take place within these spaces. La Cocina, the Kitchen, is often depicted as a female-gendered space that conforms to gender roles, yet La Cocina is also a space of mujer-centered conversations, passing down of knowledge and tradition, of sisterhood, and strategizing survival and resistance.

¹¹ I do not italicize Spanish within my writing to engage in a political project that normalizes the diverse ways of communicating among Latinx students and families in the United States. In doing so I engage in challenging linguistic terrorism, ways in which language has been used by the dominant culture to regulate and delegitimize the ways in which we linguistically communicate (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Pollo en Blanco is a chicken dish with potatoes and jalapeños cooked in its own juices and served with a side of rice. My mom learned this recipe from my grandmother.

¹² “How was your day at school?”

shares how her math teacher sent her to the office to change her shirt because she thought it was in violation of the uniform policy. Maria puts down the knife she was using to cut the vegetables as she hears that Natalia was required to change into a shirt with the school logo, wear it for the entire day, and return it to the office after her last class.

The Counselor's Office

“The shirt didn't even fit me, it was two sizes too big, and students at school could tell as I walked around all day that I was wearing a loaner shirt,”¹³ Natalia told her mom and sister. The shirt she was forced to change into served as an indicator to her peers that she had a dress code violation and was forced to change as per school policy. When Natalia went to the office, she talked to the counselor, Ms. Bautista, a Filipina woman.

I told Ms. Bautista that my mom had just bought me this shirt for the beginning of the school year. I asked if I wore a tank top under the shirt if I could wear it again to school, since Ms. Watson said the problem with my shirt was the length. And my counselor told me no, that the shirt was in violation of the dress code and that if she saw me wearing it again, I would be suspended not only for violating the dress policy, but also for disobedience.

Maria jumped in angrily, “Why aren't schools more worried about students feeling welcome and safe. You go there to learn, why don't they focus on that.”¹⁴

¹³ According to the LBUSD dress-code policy, “Students attending school must be clean. Clothing worn to school must be neat and clean. It must fit. Oversized, baggy or saggy clothing is prohibited.” This rule is often used against students of color and culturally racist assumptions of cleanliness of Communities of Color, yet in this instance, this specific part of the rules does not apply because those in power get to decide if and when certain rules apply.

¹⁴ Lopez (2003) describes the LBUSD dress code as the “most extensive uniform policy in place in the United States” stating that the districts purpose in implementing the dress code was for promoting a “healthy and equitable learning environment” and drawing from data to demonstrate how the implementation of this dress code has decreased “crime” and student absences. The researcher does not disaggregate student data by race to determine if these policies benefit students of color or are beneficial only to white students. A CRT critique of this liberal agenda and justifications provided in this article makes it clear that these policies are in place to protect the safety of white students, from a presume safety concern that schools perceive in students of color and their communities, and this protection of white students comes at the expense, harm, criminalization, and shaming of students of color.

Natalia agreed with her mom:

I was so mad, I told the counselor that I wouldn't wear the shirt again, but that the school should be more worried about students learning instead of worrying about what we wore to school. And Ms. Bautista raised her voice at me. She told me that as a young woman, I shouldn't be walking around in revealing clothes,¹⁵ that the boys in my class would get distracted and not focus in class.¹⁶ Why is it my fault what boys do? And my shirt was not even revealing! Then the counselor handed me the shirt to change in the nurse's bathroom and as I walked away, she told me I had to tuck in my turtle necklace, or take it off completely, that it was also not within school policy.¹⁷ I didn't even respond to her, I just walked away and went to change in the bathroom. I hid my necklace when I walked by her and took it back out as I walked into class.¹⁸

Natalia pauses and all the mujeres stand near each other in the kitchen upset with what happened. Natalia continued, "I was so angry and I wanted to tell her that it's not my problem if boys are not taught to be

¹⁵ Assumptions of "propriety" are based on white constructions of what is appropriate and rooted in the want to police, control, and a need to "protect" female "purity." Lamb, Roberts, and Plocha (2016) discuss the intentional historical portrayal of Black women, women of color, and immigrant women as "impure" and exotic to reinforce the constructed purity of whites and protestants. Consequently, schools function as institutions to teach and reinforce these ideals.

¹⁶ Instead of teaching students how to respect each other and other people's bodies falling within the patriarchal and heteronormative rhetoric that "boys are just being boys." The counselor refers to the male students as "boys" while referring to Natalia as a "young woman," even though the students are all the same age, demonstrating how Natalia's Brown body is constructed by school staff and society.

¹⁷ This necklace was an expression and marker of culture that the counselor viewed as problematic and not abiding by school uniform policy, which is expressive of how dress codes are used for assimilation purposes and the intent to erase Students of Color. Angela Valenzuela has argued that schools are subtractive in nature and delegitimize the traditions and cultural pride of communities. The LBUSD uniform policy broadly states that "decorations, ornaments and accessories not appropriate for elementary or middle school" are not permitted. Clearly the use of loose descriptions and language can be utilized by people in power to subjectively include or exclude.

¹⁸ Solorzano and Bernal (2001) provide a framework for understanding the agency and resistance of students of color that challenge and oppose unjust schooling policies and practices. Lomawaima (1993) demonstrates how Indigenous girls would resist the colonial and racist practices. The collective "bloomer story" in this piece, describes how girls were required to wear bloomers, an undergarment, under their dresses always. The girls would layer their dress and bloomers over their pants from home and would then remove the bloomers as their uniforms were inspected.

respectful of other people's bodies, I should be able to wear what I want, but I just walked away." Maria told her daughter, "lo siento mija, I know you didn't do anything wrong, this is not your fault, it's the school and your teachers for singling you out. Estoy orgullosa de ti, que te defendiste, you spoke up when you felt you needed to."¹⁹

Schools Uphold Whiteness

Natalia continued by angrily explaining that the rest of the day, she was very hyper aware that many white female students were wearing crop tops, that purposefully showed their midriff at all times, but were not dress-coded.²⁰ These students were not forced to change and wore the clothes they came to school with all day long. Esmeralda then chimed in:

I'm sorry this happened to you, it's not fair. Based on what you are sharing with us, it seems that you were singled out because of who you are as a Brown Latina²¹ since the white female students were clearly in violation of the supposed dress code, yet were not told anything by the school staff. Your shirt is right at your pant line, not even showing any skin, and that they even dress-coded you for something so minor is so infuriating.²²

Natalia followed by explaining:

¹⁹ "I'm proud of you for defending yourself."

²⁰ This shows discriminatory enforcement of dress code, and discipline policies, and hypervisibility of girls of color in school. Girls of color are punished for the clothes they wear if they are seen at revealing or sexual to school staff, even if white girls wear the same or more revealing clothing. It is the colored body that the clothes are worn on that teachers and school administrators find problematic, demonstrating how race is central in this unfair treatment of Girls of Color.

²¹ Kiyama, Harris, and Dache-Gerbino (2016) demonstrate how Latinas educational experiences are shaped by the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and other systems of oppression that results in violence targeting Latinas and their bodies.

²² Lamb et al. (2016) demonstrate how racist and gendered ideologies intentionally shorten and threaten Latinx and Black girlhood and schools are complicit and rooted in these ideologies and practices. Latinx families have the tradition of marking the transition from girlhood to womanhood with a quinceañera, a big party to celebrate a "girl turning into a woman" at the age of fifteen. In reality, moments at school that bring hyper visibility to a socially hyper sexualized and fetishized body, through the labels of "impurity" that schools force upon Girls of Color, construct girls as women. Being dress-coded at school, chastised by her teacher and counselor, shamed in front of her peers, forced to change into clothing that was not hers, is part of Natalia's introduction to being constructed, seen, and treated like a Brown woman in the white education system that so many girls of color know too intimately and experience in and out of school from a very early age.

The school is so worried about what we wear. The first day of school, which was just two days ago, they had a whole presentation in three of my six class periods about the school dress code policy, and even though there are rules for all students, the list for female students is twice as long!²³ We can't wear tank tops, can't have our bra straps showing at any time, if we wear a skirt it can't be above the knee, and the list goes on and on. It's not fair that they make it seem that something is wrong with our bodies, that if we show even a little skin it's a problem.²⁴

"I agree completely with what you are saying Natalia," replied Esmeralda. She continued:

I also believe students should have control over their own bodies and selves. Schools and other institutions should never have control over a person's body and this shows that schools utilize their power to dominate and police their students.²⁵ You know that uniforms are a tool for socialization and assimilation, especially of Black and Brown bodies and female bodies. Uniforms have been a tool of control since Indigenous children were forced to attend boarding schools. They were required to change their hairstyles and clothes that were rooted in their traditions and practices.²⁶

The mujeres were clearly upset, Maria said, "te mando a esa escuela para que aprendas, and mira como regresas de alli."²⁷ Natalia responded to her mom's and sister's comments, "I missed the whole period by the time I even got back to class. It was a waste of my time and Ms. Watson told me that I was going to get zero points for participation credit since I wasn't in class when it was her fault I was out of class in the first place!" Out of all the frustration, Natalia started crying and the conversation paused between the mujeres. They held space for Natalia to feel and process the anger, frustration, shame, and the harm from this incident that she had to largely

²³ The hyper control of female students through dress code policies is evident in the LBSUD dress code policy: <http://www.lbschools.net/Asset/files/Uniforms/Dresscode.pdf>.

²⁴ Schools and U.S. institutions have control over the bodies of students and dress code policies serve this function.

²⁵ Morris (2005) discusses how schools reproduce, race, gender, class inequalities through the policing and controlling of students' bodies, particularly Black students' bodies and Latinx bodies, in comparison to their white and Asian peers.

²⁶ Lomawaima (1993) highlights how federal education policy and practices of training and clothing female students' bodies based on racist ideologies that assumed mental and physical inferiorities of Indigenous peoples.

²⁷ "I send you to school to learn, and look at how you come home from there"

keep bottled up all school day. Maria hugged Natalia and tried to console her.

Mother-Daughter-Sister Pedagogies

This story featuring Maria, Natalia, and Esmeralda, draws from Pedagogies of the Home (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Elenes, Gonzalez, Delgado Bernal, & Villenas, 2001) and Mother-Daughter Pedagogies (Villenas & Moreno, 2001). It highlights the teaching and learning that occurs within the home by drawing from the consejos, stories, and experiences of the family, particularly those transmitted between mothers and daughters. It highlights the cultural knowledge that supports students when they navigate and resist the U.S. educational system that aims to control and erase them and their communities. This story contributes towards an understanding of critical race feminista *sistering*, to demonstrate how mother-daughter-sister pedagogies that take place in the home and how family can support students in navigating the harm rooted in racism and sexism that they experience in schools.²⁸ This story highlights the braiding of experience and knowledge of Latina mothers, the wisdom they pass down to their daughters, and the tools that daughters carry with them in navigating racist educational contexts and spaces. Chicana/ Latina mothers, sisters, and daughters possess and cultivate powerful tools and strategies for our collective success and liberation.

²⁸ In her testimonio as a mother and scholar-activist, Delgado Bernal (2018) draws from a critical race and gendered understanding and critique of the world and braids this lens in her parenting and pedagogy. This form of critical race feminista praxis, weaves principles of CRT and Chicana feminist theories in how she approaches mothering her three children. I am the first in my family to have access to an academic space where I learn about critical race theory and have the privileged opportunity to reflect and theorize on my own experiences and my family's history, particularly the history of the muxeres in my ancestral line. The experiences, conversations, and learning that has occurred throughout the last few years between my mom, sister, and me, has led me to think about what critical race feminista praxis in mothering and sistering looks like, as mother-daughter-sister pedagogies intersect in my home and family.

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