

# Discourses of Racist Nativism in California Public Education: English Dominance as Racist Nativist Microaggressions

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This article uses a Latina/o critical theory framework (LatCrit), as a branch of critical race theory (CRT) in education, to understand how discourses of racist nativism—the institutionalized ways people perceive, understand and make sense of contemporary US immigration, that justifies *native (white)* dominance, and reinforces hegemonic power—emerge in California public K–12 education for Chicana students. I use data from 40 *testimonio* interviews with 20 undocumented and US-born Chicana students, to show how racist nativist discourses have been institutionalized in California public education by English hegemony, that maintains social, political, and economic dominance over Latina/o students and communities, regardless of actual nativity. Teacher practices of English dominance is a manifestation of this hegemony that can be articulated by the concept of racist nativist microaggression—systemic, everyday forms of racist nativism that are subtle, layered, and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color.

Historically, xenophobia has been an underlying theme of public discourse around immigration in the United States. Xenophobia has targeted various immigrant groups throughout US history from southeastern European immigrants during the turn of the twentieth century, to Latina/o immigrants (particularly undocumented immigrants) today. Xenophobic beliefs about immigrants have targeted various groups throughout history because of their perceived threat to a US national identity, which has legally and socially been defined by whiteness (Roberts 1997; Saito

1997; Johnson 1997; Sánchez 1997; Ngai 2004; De Genova 2005; Pérez Huber, Benavides Lopez, Malagon, Velez, Solorzano 2008). Thus, xenophobic beliefs are underlined by nativist perceptions about who “belongs” in the country. In the US Southwest, this “fear of the other” has always been racialized, targeting Mexican immigrants and other Latina/o groups, regardless of immigrant status (Pérez Huber et al. 2008). Understanding xenophobia as a historically racist and nativist phenomenon, I use the term *racist nativism*<sup>1</sup> to describe the ways contemporary xenophobia functions and manifests within US immigration discourse broadly and within educational institutions in particular.

### OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This article uses a Latina/o critical theory framework (LatCrit), as a branch of critical race theory (CRT) in education, to understand how discourses of racist nativism—the institutionalized ways people perceive, understand and make sense of contemporary US immigration, that justifies *native* (white) dominance, and reinforces hegemonic power—emerge in California public K–12 education for Chicana students. These discourses portray Latina/o undocumented immigrants as “criminals” and a burden on government resources, justifying a perceived “non-native” status of this group (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1995; Chávez 2001; 2008; Santa Ana 2002; Hayes-Bautista 2004). Such discourse systematically functions to reinforce hegemonic power of the native, who is perceived to be white, over the non-native, perceived to be People of Color, and immigrants in particular. I use data from forty *testimonio* interviews with 20 undocumented and US-born Chicana students, to show how racist nativist discourses have been institutionalized in California public education by English hegemony (Macedo, Dendrinos, and Gounari 2003), that maintains social, political and economic dominance over Latinas/os, regardless of actual nativity. English dominance, as discursive teacher practice, is an officially sanctioned form of English hegemony, that students experience as racist nativist microaggressions—systemic, everyday forms of racist nativism that are subtle, layered, and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color.

This work builds on past research on racial microaggressions (Solorzano 2010), to introduce the concept of racist nativist microaggressions in explaining how Chicana students experience subtle and layered forms of racist nativism in public K–12 education. It pushes the conceptualization of racial microaggressions to include experiences with racism and nativism for Latina/o students, acknowledging the role of language in the subordination of this group. Furthermore, through the concepts of racist nativist discourses (Pérez Huber 2010) and English hegemony (Macedo et al. 2003), this article attempts to better articulate the relationship between individual experiences with microaggressions and the institutionalized, systematic

forms of racism from which they emerge to expose a process of domination over Latina/o students and communities.

## Theoretical Frameworks

*CRT and LatCrit.* More than 30 years ago, critical race theory (CRT) was developed as a theoretical tool by legal scholars to understand the more subtle, but equally pervasive forms of racism present in the post-civil-rights era (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). CRT was, and continues to be a powerful theoretical framework to expose racism and other forms of oppression. For more than a decade, educational researchers have been utilizing CRT as a theoretical framework to analyze the role of racism and its intersections with other forms of oppression in the lives of People of Color within educational institutions. According to Daniel Solorzano and Tara Yosso (2001), a CRT framework in education can be used in the following five ways:

1. To center the research focus on race, racism, and the intersections of multiple forms of oppression;
2. To challenge dominant ideologies imbedded in educational theory and practice;
3. To recognize the significance of experiential knowledge and utilize this knowledge in our research;
4. To utilize interdisciplinary perspectives; and
5. To guide our work with a commitment to racial and social justice.

Collectively, these strategies allow educational researchers to center the experiences of People of Color and reveal the ways that racism and other forms of subordination mediate educational trajectories. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000), explains “the ‘gift’ of CRT is that it unapologetically challenges the scholarship that would dehumanize and depersonalize us” (423).

Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit) is a branch of CRT that is guided by these same tenants, but also acknowledges issues specific to Latina/o communities such as immigration status, language, ethnicity, and culture. LatCrit enables researchers to better articulate the experiences of Latinas/os through a more focused examination of the specific forms of oppression this group encounters (Solorzano and Delgado Bernal 2001). LatCrit allows for a more refined research focus and has led to the development of other conceptual tools that help expose forms of subordination that occur in Latina/o communities, namely racist nativism.

*Racist nativism.* A further framework developed from CRT and LatCrit examines the “inextricable” link between race and immigration status, contextualized by the historical racialization of Immigrants of Color and considers the current moment of increased anti-immigrant sentiment (Sánchez 1997). A racist nativism framework explains how perceived racial differences construct false perceptions of People of Color as “nonnative,” and not belonging to the monolithic “American” identity—an identity that has historically been tied to perceptions and constructions of whiteness (Roberts 1997; Saito 1997; Johnson 1997; Sánchez 1997; Acuña 2000; Ngai 2004; De Genova 2005; Pérez Huber et al. 2008). These perceptions justify racism, discrimination, and violence committed against various groups of people throughout history. In previous work, my co-authors and I (2008) defined racist nativism as,

the assigning of values to real or imagined differences, in order to justify the superiority of the native, who is perceived to be white, over that of the non-native, who is perceived to be People and Immigrants of Color, and thereby defend the right of whites, or the natives, to dominance. (43)

A critical element of this definition is that racist nativism is based solely on perceptions. Thus, Latinas/os are racialized as nonnatives regardless of actual immigration status. This process of exclusion then, becomes a function of white dominance.

### Discourses of Racist Nativism and the Hegemony of English

Having explained the use of a racist nativist framework, the use of the term *discourses* of racist nativism should also be defined. As I explained in the previous section, racist nativism is a conceptual framework that helps researchers understand how racialized perceptions of the “native” (whites) and “nonnative” (People of Color) have justified exclusionary and inhumane practices targeting People of Color (particularly immigrants of Color), while defending the rights of whites to dominance. Although there are many ways to understand the concept of *discourse*, I use the term to describe the institutionalized ways we perceive, understand, and make sense of the world around us. Racist nativist discourses are then, the institutionalized ways people perceive, understand, and make sense of contemporary US immigration, which assigns values to real or imagined differences, that justifies the perceived superiority and dominance of the native (whites) and reinforces hegemonic power.<sup>2</sup>

This definition may lead to the question, “What do racist nativist discourses look like?” Racist nativist discourses construct and perpetuate stereotypical beliefs and imagery that falsely portray undocumented Latina/o immigrants as “criminal,” “dangerous,” and a drain on government resources, and are perceived as a threat to

the “American” way of life (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1995; Chávez 2001; 2008; Santa Ana 2002; Hayes-Bautista 2004). Such false narratives fuel these negative perceptions and reify the ideological beliefs of Latina/o undocumented immigrants (and US-born Latinas/os racialized as immigrant) as nonnative and, thus, a subordinate group. Framing Latina/o undocumented immigrants in this way, is how most understand undocumented immigration in the United States. (Lakoff and Ferguson 2006; Pérez Huber 2009a).

These discourses become institutionalized, when they are used to justify the social, political, and economic subordination of Latinas/os, and undocumented immigrants in particular. A current and powerful example would be recent legislation passed into law in the state of Arizona that would require any person under “reasonable suspicion” of being undocumented to prove citizenship status. The rationale for this law is the perceived criminality of undocumented Mexican immigrants and the “danger” they pose to the people of the state.<sup>3</sup> In education, two laws were passed soon after, banning teachers with accents from teaching English Learner students and banning ethnic studies programs in public schools. Schools, as sites of social and cultural reproduction, play a critical role in the process of domination, and can explain why Latina/o students in particular are being targeted by racist nativist discourses.<sup>4</sup>

One of the ways that racist nativist discourses have been institutionalized in education is through the hegemony of English (Macedo et al. 2003). Macedo and colleagues (2003) contend that the bilingual education debate in the United States is not about language itself, but with the underlying power, “to deny effective education to millions of immigrant children in their native languages” to achieve political, economic, and social domination (9). Thus, English-only language policies are used as a tool by dominant groups to achieve hegemonic control through what they term the *hegemony of English*. They explain the hegemony of English to be part of a colonial legacy of domination over linguistic minority groups that continues to guide US language policies in education, reinforcing the ideological superiority of the English language and assigning all other languages a subordinate status (Macedo et al. 2003). As language is intricately tied to identity, educational institutions that uphold English-only language policies not only subordinate students’ languages, but also their forms of knowledge, social practices, lived experiences, and their cultures (hooks 1994; Montoya 1994; González 1998; Woolard 1998; Anzaldúa 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Asato 2000; Macedo 2000; Macedo et al. 2003; Galindo and Vigil 2004). Schools as sites of social and cultural reproduction define what counts as legitimate knowledge and uphold dominant (Western) superiority through curriculum, policy, and practice (Giroux 2001).<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 is an illustration of how the theoretical lens of CRT, LatCrit and racist nativism are used to understand discourses of racist nativism, uncovering the hegemony of English—one way the ideological superiority of English and English-dominant students in education is achieved.

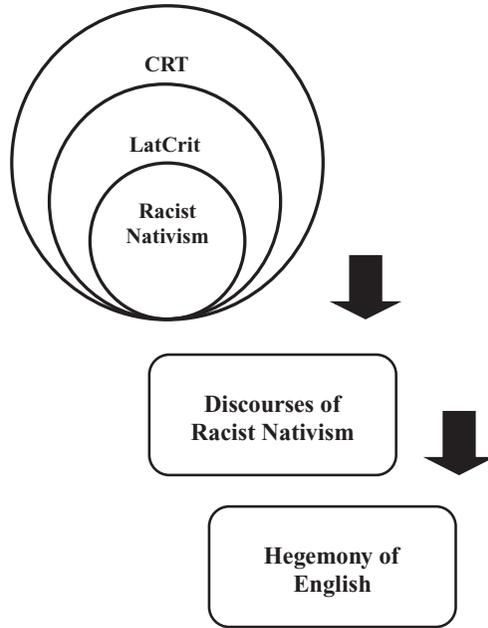


FIGURE 1 Using CRT, LatCrit, and racist nativism to understand discourses of racist nativism that underlie the hegemony of English in education.

### English Dominance

An example of English hegemony<sup>5</sup> in California public education is Proposition 227 (Prop 227), the “English for the Children” initiative passed by California voters in 1998. This legislation was successful in unraveling the rights provided by *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), which had established the right for English Learner (EL) students to receive the same instruction as English-dominant students in K-12 public school classrooms. In effect, Prop 227 ended bilingual education in California public schools, forcing EL students into structured English immersion programs. Although this law affected all EL students, it targeted Spanish-dominant students whom, at the time Prop 227 passed, comprised 81 percent of all EL students in California public K-12 schools (California Department of Education 2006). Despite research that has found restrictive language policies to be unsuccessful in raising student achievement for EL students, California (as well as Arizona and Massachusetts) continues to deny students an education in their primary language.<sup>6</sup>

In California public schools, English-only policies like Prop 227 support and encourage teacher practices of English dominance, enforcing the “linguistic

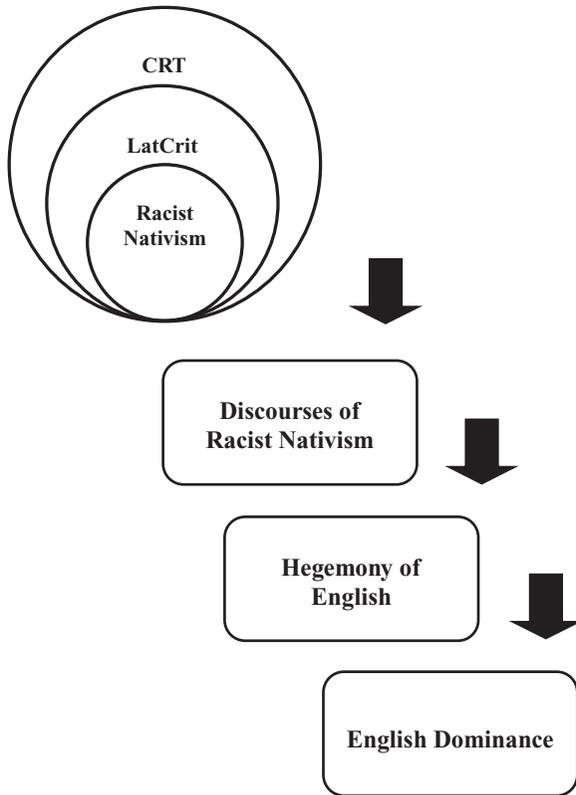


FIGURE 2 Mapping theoretical frameworks to explain and understand English dominance.

domination” of the English language over other languages in schools and classrooms<sup>7</sup> (Gutiérrez et al. 2000; Macedo et al. 2003). Enforced by educational policy, English dominance becomes an officially sanctioned form of English hegemony, which emerges from racist nativist discourses. Practices of English dominance in California public education, then, function to subordinate the language, social practices, lived experiences, forms of knowledge, and cultures of its largely Latina/o student population, and continue a colonial legacy of social, political, and economic domination over this group. In Figure 2, I add English dominance to the theoretical mapping of this study, showing the logic in using these multiple frameworks to explain the practices that subordinate the students in this study. Next, I will present the conceptual tool of racial microaggressions, shifting focus to explain how students experience these practices.

## Racial Microaggressions and Racist Nativist Microaggressions

Despite the underlying power of English dominance to subordinate students, this study found practices of English dominance are often subtle and difficult to recognize without the help of theoretical constructs that can expose them. Racial microaggressions is a concept that is useful in describing how students experience English dominance in the classroom. Psychiatrist Dr. Chester Pierce (1969) first acknowledged the importance of examining the physical and psychological consequences of racism for People of Color in the United States, particularly for African Americans. Pierce argued that it was a subtle and cumulative form of racism, what he termed “offensive mechanisms” (303) that had a dramatic impact on the mental and physical health of African Americans. In later work, Pierce developed the term *racial microaggressions* to describe the consistent and subtle forms of racism that had negative cumulative effects on the mind and body over time. Since Pierce’s initial work on racial microaggressions, researchers from various fields have further developed the concept (Davis 1989; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano, Allen, and Carroll 2002; Smith, Yosso, and Solorzano 2006; Constantine 2007; Constantine and Sue 2007; Smith, Daley, and Allen 2007; Sue, Bucceri et al. 2007; Sue, Capodilupo et al. 2007; Sue 2010; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solorzano 2009).

In the field of education, studies have found Latina/o and African American students to be targeted by low expectations, racist and sexist attitudes, and a racially hostile college campus environment, all forms of racial microaggressions (Solorzano 1998; Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). According to Daniel Solorzano (2010) racial microaggressions are, “one form of a systemic everyday racism that are subtle, layered, and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color that are committed automatically and unconsciously” (Solorzano, 2010). Solorzano describes a model for understanding racial microaggressions that includes:

1. Types of racial microaggressions: how one is targeted by microaggressions that can be based on race, gender, class, language, sexuality, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname.
2. Context of racial microaggressions: how and where the microaggression occurs.
3. Effects of racial microaggressions: the physical, emotional and psychological consequences of microaggressions.
4. Responses to racial microaggressions: how the individual responds to interpersonal and institutional racist acts and behaviors.

This model provides researchers with a tool to expose, understand, and challenge forms of racism that occur in the classroom and other educational spaces that can

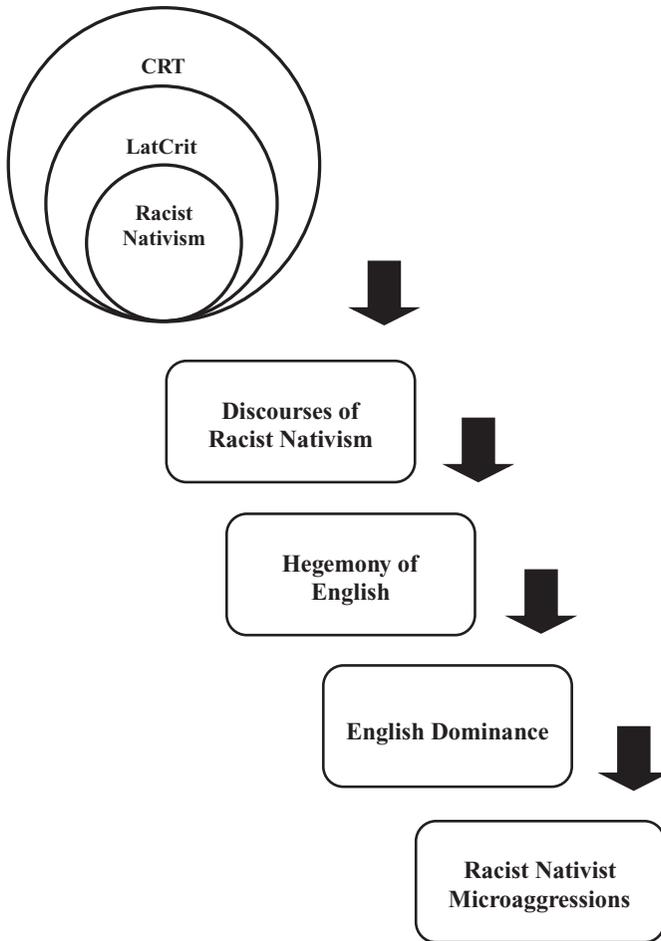


FIGURE 3 Mapping theoretical frameworks to explain and understand English dominance as a form of racist nativist microaggressions.

have negative, lasting impacts on students. This study focuses on the first two elements of Solorzano’s model, types and contexts of racial microaggressions.

As illustrated in Figure 3, I situate racial microaggressions as a conceptual category to explain and understand how students experience English dominance in K–12 classrooms, as a form of English hegemony institutionalized by racist nativist discourses. The theoretical constructs I use to explain English dominance explicitly focus on the mediating power of racist nativism in education. Thus, I use

the term *racist nativist microaggressions* to understand practices of English dominance and explain how students experience the systemic, everyday forms of racist nativism that are subtle, layered, and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color that are committed automatically and unconsciously. Racist nativist discourses and English hegemony articulate the systemic process of subordination and domination these seemingly minor assaults have on those who are targeted by them. Racist nativist microaggressions are different from racial microaggressions in that they explain how race and perceived immigrant status are used, in particular, to subordinate Latina/o students. Returning to Solorzano's model, racist nativist microaggressions are a type of microaggression. The women participants of this study explain how they experienced racist nativist microaggressions in the context of California public K–12 classrooms.

## METHODOLOGY

I used a network sampling method (Delgado Bernal 1997; Gándara 1995) to identify participants who (a) were either undocumented or US-born, (b) were female, (c) identified México as their country of origin, and (d) were from a low-income family. I employed a critical-race-grounded theory approach—an analysis strategy that allows themes to emerge from data while using a CRT lens to reveal often-unseen structures of oppression (Malagon, Pérez Huber, and Velez 2009). Twenty students attending one University of California (UC) campus were interviewed twice, for a total of forty in-depth *testimonio* interviews.

*Testimonio* as LatCrit methodology was implemented in this study to challenge the Eurocentric epistemological standpoint of most educational scholarship and disrupt the narrow construction of legitimate forms of knowledge in academia (Pérez Huber 2009b). I use *testimonio* in the tradition of past scholars, mostly Women of Color, who use this method to document experiences of struggle, survival, and resistance within the context of oppressive institutional structures and interpersonal events (Cienfuegos and Monelli 1983; Angueira 1988; Sommer 1988; Benmayor 1988, 2008; Yúdice 1991; Behar 1993; Gugelberger 1996; Brabeck 2001, 2003; Latina Feminist Group 2001; Haig-Brown 2003; Beverley 2004; Irizarry 2005; Burciaga and Tavares 2006; Cruz 2006; González 2006; Burciaga 2007; Gutiérrez 2008; Delgado Bernal et al. 2009). In particular, I use *testimonio* as a LatCrit methodological process, building theory from the lived experiences of the participants to co-construct knowledge about how discourses of racist nativism emerge in the women's educational trajectories (Latina Feminist Group 2001; Delgado Bernal et al. 2009). Thus, *testimonio* can be understood as “a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racist, nativist, classist, and sexist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future” (Pérez Huber 2009b, 644).

*Testimonio* interviews function (a) to validate and honor the knowledge and lived experiences of oppressed groups by becoming a part of the research process; (b) to challenge dominant ideologies that shape traditional forms of epistemology and methodology; (c) to operate within a collective memory that transcends a single experience to that of multiple communities; and (d) to move toward racial justice by offering a space within the academy for the stories of People of Color to be heard. Each interview was approximately one-and-one-half to two hours in length and were conducted in two parts. The first interview discussed the students' educational experiences, beginning with their first memory of being in school, usually at the preschool/kindergarten level through high school. The second interview discussed experiences in higher education and thoughts about the process of *testimonio* we had engaged in.

I position *testimonio* within a Chicana feminist epistemology that enables Chicana researchers to draw on multiple forms of knowledge gained from our personal, professional, and academic experiences through the process of *cultural intuition* (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Burciaga, 2007). Cultural intuition allows the women participants and I to utilize these forms of knowledge in data collection and analysis. I employed a three-phase data analysis process: (a) preliminary analysis, where initial themes were identified; (b) collaborative analysis, in which analysis was co-constructed with the participants; and (c) final data analysis, which synthesized the previous analyses. In the first phase, I used a grounded, line-by-line approach to develop initial codes and identify tentative thematic categories (Charmaz 2006). Phase two, the co-construction of data analysis, took place in focus groups where participants provided feedback on the thematic categories and contributed their own interpretations of the data. This phase of data analysis provided the opportunity for triangulation of data, where participants were able to discuss their experiences and analysis of those experiences, as a group. During this phase, they also wrote "reflections" on the thematic categories that provided an additional source of data for the third phase analysis. In phase three, I synthesized data from the previous analysis phases to finalize thematic categories and revise the coding scheme. I also integrated theoretical memos in this phase of analysis and employed grounded theory strategies (i.e., concept mapping, diagramming), to make larger theoretical connections between micro- and macrostructures (Malagon et al. 2009). Data was organized, coded, and managed using Atlas TI qualitative software.

### English Dominance as Racist Nativist Microaggressions

For most of the women in this study, their early transition into public education was also a transition to the English language. From the twenty women who participated in this study, only three entered school with English fluency. As a result, the women

described feelings of exclusion, differential treatment, and overt discrimination based on language during K–12 education. I argue that these forms of subtle, everyday subordination can be described as types of racial microaggression, racist nativist microaggressions. The context of these microaggressions occurred within California public K–12 education. An excerpt from Alicia's<sup>8</sup> *testimonio* provides a clear example.

Alicia was born in Morelos, México and had college-educated parents who could not make enough money for their family to survive. Alicia remembers crossing the treacherous US -México desert border by foot, arriving in Los Angeles just before her fourth birthday. Alicia attended public schools in the Pico-Union area of Los Angeles. Alicia recounted one of her first memories of being in school at age four, in a state-funded preschool program in the Pico-Union area of Los Angeles, where she grew up. Alicia shared the following experience:

So I got into preschool and back then . . . there were no people that spoke Spanish to you. . . . So for me, I think it was the hardest time, because I didn't know English at all, like nobody had ever spoken English to me and I was the oldest; my mom says that the teachers thought I was really shy and I . . . didn't want to participate, I didn't want to do any of the work, so they called in my mom and they said, let's have a conference, 'cause something's going on with this girl. . . . So my mom was in there and they tell her, you know, "You're daughter's not paying attention, you're daughter doesn't do any of the stuff we tell her and she's pretty much on her own, she doesn't talk and . . . you should go have her ears checked, maybe she's deaf, or maybe there's something else not functioning in her ears," and my mom was like, "Oh my God! Maybe she can't hear, you know!" [laugh] So my mom took me to the doctor 'cause the teachers told her they had to take me, 'cause something was wrong with my ears, so my mom took me to the doctor and everything was fine. So my mom took me back and she said, "Look, you know, my daughter's fine." And when they came to [the] conclusion—it wasn't because I was deaf, it's because I didn't understand nothing they were telling me. And the teachers were like, "Finally! This is it." It was hard for me, because they thought that I had some problem, physical problem, which I didn't—I didn't understand what they were telling me! I was totally lost, no one would help me and, of course, I didn't listen, I didn't know what they were telling me!

Alicia described her first educational memory in the United States as alienating because she could not communicate with her English-speaking teachers. As a result, she could not participate in classroom activities and had difficulty paying attention in class. Her teachers, as she explained at the end of this excerpt, would avoid interacting with her because they could not communicate. However, instead of considering that perhaps Alicia was a student who spoke a language other than English, they attributed her classroom behavior to a physical impairment and informed Alicia's mother that they would require her to have a hearing test. If

Alicia's teachers had tried contacting Alicia's mother directly, they most likely would have realized that Alicia and her family did not speak English at the time, and this was the reason for her disengagement in the classroom. In this experience, Alicia described how her teachers did not consider the fact that there were non-English speaking students in the classroom, even though this area of Los Angeles is, and has historically been a predominately Latina/o immigrant community. Thus, even within this context Alicia was alienated by her inability to speak the dominant language, which signified a perceived impairment. At a very early age, Alicia was learning that there was something "wrong" with her because she did not speak English.

At first glance, Alicia's experience could be blamed on the cultural ignorance of her preschool teacher about the school's community, not realizing that there were students who did not speak the dominant language. However, situating this experience within the theoretical orientations I have mapped out previously, this experience can be explained as a racist nativist microaggression. The microaggression occurred when her teacher chose to alienate Alicia from the classroom, unwilling to investigate the reasons for her disengagement, and justified these actions by her perceived deficiencies of Alicia because she was a non English-dominant student. This perceived deficiency was an act of subordination, which reinforced English hegemony. This subordination was an institutional manifestation of racist nativist discourses that assigned Alicia a subordinate status based on her inability to speak English as the dominant language. Another student, Carolina, shared a similar experience that also took place in her early years of public education.

Carolina was born in Pomona, California but attended public K–12 schools in Fontana, California, a rural area of Riverside County located approximately fifty miles east of Los Angeles. Her parents were from Sinaloa, México and she was the oldest of four children. Carolina entered kindergarten as a monolingual Spanish-speaking student. Unlike Alicia's schooling experiences, Carolina attended predominately white schools in Fontana. However, similar to Alicia, Carolina described how speaking Spanish was viewed as deficiency in her elementary school. She described,

I can't really pinpoint how I started speaking English. . . . I do know when I went to kindergarten, I didn't know English and then by first grade, they were trying to place me in bilingual classes. But the way that it worked was that bilingual classes weren't really bilingual education, they would just teach you Spanish [and] speak to you in Spanish. I guess the stigma attached to it . . . my dad was a big proponent of getting me out of those classes. . . . Even after that, like second grade, I remember being targeted into like remedial classes where you go and do like, speech therapy. They just make you repeat words, "properly" and by that time I was already speaking English. But I knew that I had an accent because they were trying to kinda like . . .

I wasn't saying words properly. Like one of my big problems was like the "ch" and "sh" sound. . . . I couldn't say it at that time and I remember sitting there and trying to pronounce "chair" versus "shair" and like, I still have problems, I always confuse them to this day. I remember that.

In this excerpt of her *testimonio*, Carolina shares her memory of being treated differently than other children in her class because she was a Spanish-dominant student. Upon entering elementary school, she was placed in a "bilingual" class, which Carolina explains was not actually a "bilingual" education, meant to build student's skills in two languages, but a class with Spanish instruction.<sup>9</sup> Due to the pressure her father placed on school administration, she was placed in the mainstream English instruction classes shortly after. Despite her fluency in English several years later, she was removed from the mainstream classroom to participate in "speech therapy" where she was taught the "proper" pronunciation of English words. Carolina's description of this experience as "speech therapy" signifies that there was something wrong with the way she spoke English that required a remedy. As she explains, this experience is something that she carries with her to this day.

This analysis does not suggest that the microaggression Carolina experienced was being placed in the bilingual class. Rather, the microaggression was what she called the "stigma" of being a "bilingual" student, the ways English dominance was practiced in her classroom and school. This stigma was the perceived deficiency and academic inferiority of Spanish-dominant students. Her father was aware of these perceptions and knew they could have repercussions for her long-term education, so he placed pressure on school administration to place his daughter in mainstream English instruction classrooms.<sup>10</sup> Contributing to the stigma was Carolina's placement in "speech therapy" classes where she learned pronunciation and at the same time, was learning about the perceived deficiencies of Spanish-dominant students that reflected English hegemony (the subordination of Spanish), rooted in discourses of racist nativism that assigned her a subordinate status as a bilingual student.

Yadira provides another example of how she experienced English dominance as a racist nativist microaggression. Yadira was an undocumented student, born in Guerrero, México, who first came to the United States when she was 2 years old. However, after living in the United States for less than a year, her parents moved back to their hometown in Guerrero to be with an ill family member. Yadira completed the sixth grade in Guerrero and at the age of 12, returned to the United States with her family. They settled in South Los Angeles, where she still lived during the time of the interview. Yadira entered seventh grade at a public middle school in this community upon her arrival to California. Similar to Alicia and Carolina, one of Yadira's first memories of being in school in the United States

was an experience marked by exclusion due to her inability to speak the dominant language. Yadira shared,

My P.E. teacher, she was white, Ms. Fox. The day we took pictures . . . I.D. pictures . . . she knew Spanish, but she didn't want to translate for me. She didn't want to tell me to go to the gym because we were taking pictures [there]. That was my second day of school . . . when I first went. So she didn't want to . . . tell me in Spanish, "Oh go to the gym we're taking the pictures over there," Instead I just started walking and trying to ask people, but people didn't care, they wouldn't help me. So I just started crying like, "Oh my God nobody likes me, like, Ugh! I want to go home, I don't want to be here anymore!"

On Yadira's second day of school in the United States, students were taking class photos during their P.E. period. Yadira explained that her teacher, although she knew some Spanish, refused to explain to Yadira where she needed to go to take the pictures. As a result, Yadira was left behind, confused, frustrated, and alienated from the rest of the class. She quickly learned that Spanish was viewed as a deficiency in the school environment as her teacher insisted that students exclusively speak English.

This experience provides a clear example of how English dominance can be practiced to overtly exclude Spanish-dominant students. This practice of English dominance is a more overt type of racist nativist microaggression that occurred when her teacher refused to provide Yadira instructions she would understand. This act could be institutionally justified by the rhetoric of strictly enforced English-only instruction under current educational policy that upholds English hegemony.<sup>11</sup> Yadira, as a Spanish-dominant immigrant student was subjugated by her teacher's actions.

Lorena was born in the Pico-Union area of Los Angeles. Both her parents were from the state of Oaxaca, México, and she was an only child. At the time of her *testimonio* interview, she was living with her parents in South Central Los Angeles, where she attended public, predominately Latina/o and African American K–12 schools. In the following excerpt from her *testimonio*, Lorena retold her memories of her middle school teachers. She described one particular teacher because she remembered how the classroom was physically divided among the Spanish-dominant and English-dominant students. Lorena explained,

By [middle school], we moved again . . . to South Central, so a lot of my classmates were Black now, a lot of my teachers were Black. And the environment changed a lot, and in that environment . . . I remember one teacher. . . . She had a class where it was literally divided, that same class. This half is English, this half is Spanish. And we would have to do our reading quietly in the language she assigned us. So I thought that was weird always.

Lorena described how her middle school teacher divided the classroom to separate the Spanish-dominant and English-dominant students. She also explained that unlike her elementary school in South Los Angeles that was predominately Latina/o, her middle school in the South Central area was predominately African American. Thus, the separation that the teacher imposed upon the students in the classroom also became a racial separation. Similar to Carolina, Lorena explained a type of stigma the Spanish-dominant students experienced, who would often be targets for teasing and ridicule by English-dominant students.

For Lorena, the type of racist nativist microaggression she experienced was when her teacher arranged the classroom to have all Spanish-dominant Latina/o students on one side of the room and the English-dominant African American students on the other, a practice that produced a stigma for students seated in the “Spanish section” of the room. In this example, the separation of the classroom became a visual representation of the English dominance the teacher practiced. Through this practice and the stigma it produced, Lorena and her Spanish-dominant peers experienced subordination in the classroom. English-dominant, mostly African American students internalized this English dominance and used it as a divisive tool that caused conflict between the groups.<sup>12</sup>

The excerpts from the women’s *testimonios* show how they experienced English dominance at various points during their public education, but particularly during their early years in elementary and middle school when they began the transition to learning the English language. Their stories demonstrate that teachers and schools not only viewed speaking Spanish as a deficiency, but at times, even as an impairment, one form of racist nativist microaggression. Another form was perceived academic deficiencies, such as Carolina’s experience with “speech therapy” as an elementary school student. Yadira shared how she experienced exclusion when her teacher refused to communicate instructions to her. Finally, Lorena explained another form of racist nativist microaggression, the physical separation of her classroom.

During their K–12 careers these women described how language became symbolic of the perceived inferiority of the Spanish language and of the students who spoke it. They experienced this inferiority through subtle, layered, and cumulative assaults that are one form of a systemic, everyday racist nativism or racist nativist microaggressions. English hegemony articulates how classroom practices, schools, and educational policy contribute to the subordination of Latina/o students, and discourses of racist nativism help situate this process of subordination within a larger institutionalized form of racism that assigns superiority and dominance to whites as natives of the United States. Whether the women were undocumented or not and attended predominately Latina/o schools or not, their experiences with English dominance were similar, indicating that discourses of racist nativism impact classroom practices regardless of nativity and the public school context.

## CONCLUSION

It is not the English language that hurt me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize. (hooks 1994, 168)

This article has demonstrated the ways teachers in California public education practice English dominance in the classroom, as a form of racist nativist microaggressions. As bell hooks (1994) described, it was not the English language itself that hurt students, but the racist nativist microaggressions they experienced, as forms of English dominance, reinforced by English hegemony and rooted in discourses of racist nativism. Through the theoretical lenses that framed this study, we can see clear examples of how the women experienced multiple forms of racist nativist microaggressions, used to “shame, humiliate, [and] colonize” within the context of California K–12 public education.

Racist nativist microaggressions is a concept that can help better understand how the English language is used as a tool to subordinate Latina/o students in the classroom. In revealing these experiences as a form of racist nativism, educational researchers learn about the ways dominant discourse about Latina/o immigrants is about more than just negative perceptions and racist stereotypes of this population. These discourses filter through to California public education and become lived through the educational experiences of students. This study has found that, regardless of immigration status, both undocumented and US-born Chicana students were targeted by discourses of racist nativism. These findings suggest that race and immigration status, as perceived constructions of identity, will shape the experiences of Latina/o students regardless of actual ethnic subgroup origins (Mexican, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, etc.) or nativity (born in the United States or abroad). In exploring the relationship between the individual experiences students encounter with racist nativism and the larger institutionalized systems of oppression from which they emerge, we can better articulate the process and systemic elements of subordination students experience in education, to disrupt them.

Future studies should examine other forms of racist nativist microaggressions in the educational trajectories of Latina/o students that uncover institutionalized and systemic oppression targeting this student population. Understanding Latina/o student educational outcomes as shaped by historical processes of colonialism and subjugation deconstructs and disproves theories of cultural deficiency used in educational research to explain dismal academic outcomes for Latina/o students. Particular attention should focus on the experiences of K–12 students, a group not often examined within the microaggressions scholarship. Finally, as outlined in Solorzano’s (2010) model of racial microaggressions, the effects and responses to these forms of microaggressions should also be examined.

In their discussion of English as hegemony, Macedo et al. (2003) argue that progressive educators must “acquire critical tools that would facilitate the development of a thorough understanding of the mechanisms employed by the dominant culture in the reproduction of those ideological elements that devalue, disconfirm, and subjugate cultural and linguistic minority students” (42). This article has identified racist nativist microaggressions as one of the mechanisms employed in schools that leads to the subjugation of Latina/o students. The theoretical frameworks of CRT, LatCrit, and racist nativism, and the concepts of English hegemony, English dominance, and racist nativist microaggressions are the critical tools that have helped uncover these experiences and understand them within a larger context of systematic, institutionalized racism in education. As researchers and educators, it is imperative that this work continues.

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### Notes

1. Racist nativism is a conceptual tool that has been developed from critical race theory (CRT) and Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit) to understand the experiences of Latinas/os at the intersection of race, immigration status, class, gender, and other marginalized positionalities. This concept is further discussed in the “theoretical framework” section.
2. Generally, the term *hegemony* refers to the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971) who used the term to describe how an elite ruling class could politically and economically control the working class segment of a capitalist society through ideological coercion. Specifically, he links the role of language in the process of ideological domination.
3. The Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act was introduced as Senate Bill 1070 (SB 1070) and signed into law by Arizona Governor Jan Brewer in April 2010. An injunction has been filed, blocking the implementation of the law and challenging its constitutionality. See the official Website for Arizona Senator Russell Pearce, author of SB 1070, for the law’s rationale focusing on the criminality and danger of undocumented immigrants crossing the Arizona-México border, at <http://russellpearce.com>.
4. Henry Giroux (2001) explains how social and cultural theories of reproduction help us understand how schools “utilize their material and ideological resources” to maintain and reproduce “the social relations and attitudes needed to sustain the social divisions of labor necessary for the existing relations of production” (76).

5. I use the terms *English as hegemony* and the *hegemony of English* interchangeably throughout this article.
6. See generally, Gándara and Hopkins (2010) on the history of restrictive language policies for EL students. See Wentworth, Pellegrin, Thompson, and Hakuta (2010) for results of their study on EL student achievement since the implementation of Prop 227 in California.
7. *Linguistic terrorism* (Anzaldúa 1999), *linguistic colonialism* (Freire 1985), *linguistic hegemony* (Shannon 1995), and *language restrictionism* (Galindo and Vigil 2000) are some of the terms other scholars have used to explain the relationship between language, power, and domination in the subjugation of People of Color.
8. All names used in this article have been changed to protect confidentiality, including those of participants, schools, and teachers the students described. Before describing each woman's experience, I provide a brief background about of the student, which provides a context to their K-12 schooling experiences.
9. California Education Code uses the terms *bilingual education* and *native language instruction* interchangeably, defining bilingual education as, "a language acquisition process for pupils in which much or all instruction, textbooks, and teaching materials are in the child's native language" (See section 306, article 3, part e).
10. The father's educational advocacy to place his daughter in English-instruction classrooms could also be understood as a response to racist nativist microaggressions, an element of Solorzano's (2010) racial microaggressions model presented earlier. It also challenges deficit perspectives of Latina/o families as uncaring and uninvolved in their children's education.
11. Under California Education Code that was implemented as a result of Prop 227, Yadira had a right to participate in a sheltered/structured English immersion program for at least her first year of attending public school and receive classroom instruction in her home language (See article 305). Thus, her teacher should have translated classroom instruction for Yadira. However, the rhetoric of English-only instruction that educational policies like Prop 227 produce can disarticulate teacher practices and immigrant student's rights.
12. Understanding racism as a function of power and ideologically imbedded in white supremacy, People of Color cannot be racist. However, People of Color can internalize that very notions of inferiority oppress them and use these same practices against other People of Color. In previous work, I have used the term *internalized racist nativism* to describe the ways Latina/o students come to accept racist nativism and commit racist nativist acts (Pérez Huber 2010). The actions of the African American students in Lorena's *testimonio* could be explained by the same concept.

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