

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE IN AN ACADEMIC SPACE THAT DOESN ’ T REFLECT YOUR CULTURAL BACKGROUND? IDENTIDAD, EMPODERAMIENTO, Y REPRESENTACIÓN

## LATINA IN THE TEXAS STATE MARC PROGRAM

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### BACKGROUND

This case study explores the specific experiences of selected Latina graduate students in the two-year Texas State MARC program, considering there is one male Latino professor and seven Latina/o/x<sup>1</sup>-identifying students, five of whom are woman-identifying. The population of interest this study focuses on are the Latina graduate students who were enrolled in the Spring 2021 semester, even though they graduated before I interviewed them.

It is important to note that Texas State University is a Hispanic-Serving Institution with a 39.7% Latina/o/x population as of the fall of 2021 (“University Demographics”). Among the 40 English Department tenured and tenure-track faculty, only nine are Scholars of Color<sup>2</sup>/non-White, and only four are Latino—there is only one Latina tenure-track professor in the English Department (“General Employee Information: Employee Demographics by Year”). Of the 22 MARC graduate students in the spring of 2021, Texas State University’s Office of Institutional Research indicates five are Latina women, ten are White women, two are Latino men, and three are White men/non-binary, not counting the two students who identify as Black and multi-race (“University Enrollment: Student Demographics”).

<sup>1</sup> To acknowledge the diversity of this community, “Latino” and “Latina,” are used to address individual male- and female-identifying people, as well as “Latina/o/x” and “Latinas/os/xs” to address the general group of people who are of Latin American origin and descent. To acknowledge the individual identities in this case study, I will use the specific labels the participants and myself identify as, such as “Latina” and “Chicana.”

<sup>2</sup> I use “Scholars of Color,” “Women of Color,” “Academics of Color,” “Students of Color,” “Faculty of Color,” and “Mentor of Color” to recognize the shared cultural experiences of academics, women, and People of Color in a predominately White institutional space.

### LAS FUERTES PARTICIPANTES CHICANAS

To protect anonymity, I use pseudonyms for my three participants in lieu of their actual names. To ensure the anonymity of the professors and other students mentioned in this study, I use the character names of my favorite fantasy novel and film series, Harry Potter purely for my love for the Wizarding World. The Chicanas grew up in the Texas-Mexico border space, also known as the RGV, the Valley, or el valle. They are three of the strongest Chicanas that I have ever met, and not only are they some of my closest friends, but they are also my comunidad as we navigate the academic space together. I owe a lot to these Chicanas.

#### Sofía

Sofía is a recent MARC graduate from Eagle Pass, Texas; she also spent five years growing up in México. She identifies as Chicana and is a proud First Gen student. Sofia proudly speaks Spanish, English, and Tex-Mex Spanish that is prevalent in the South Texas/Mexico borderland. Sofia is currently pursuing a PhD out of state, es una de las valientes Chicanas que está luchando por un lugar en la academia.

#### Patricia

Patricia is a recent MARC graduate from Brownsville, Texas. She has lived all throughout the American South from Louisiana to Florida, but Brownsville is home. Patricia identifies as Latina, though also uses the label Chicana, and she is a proud First Gen. She is currently using her newly earned degree in the education sector. Patricia proudly speaks Spanish, English, and Tex-Mex Spanish. During her graduate journey, she worked as an Instructional Assistant, gaining an administrative perspective on academia, and Teaching Assistant, teaching first-year composition classes.

#### Itzel

Itzel is a recent MARC graduate from Edinburg, Texas who proudly speaks Spanish, English, and Tex-Mex Spanish. Itzel identifies as Latinx and Chicana. She is also using her newly earned degree in the education sector. During her graduate journey, she worked as a Teaching Assistant, teaching first-year composition classes. Prior to her TA position, she worked as a writing center tutor which shaped her graduate school journey and approaches to writing and teaching.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

#### LatCrit, CRT, Counterstories

LatCrit is a theoretical extension of CRT that closely examines Latina/o/x experiences that are “unique to the Latina/o/x community,” such as “language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality,” according to LatCrit scholars Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal (Pérez Huber 77; qtd. in Martínez *Counterstory* 22). LatCrit reveals the ways Latinas/os/xs uniquely experience the world.

As a broader framework, CRT will enable my study “to expose, analyze, and challenge” the *voces de poder*, or the academic space that benefits the White male, and provide a spotlight for *voces perdidas* (student, woman, and ethnic minorities) to interrogate the effects of ethnic faculty *representación* and their individual educational experiences (Martínez *Counterstory* 26). To properly engage in CRT, I apply the eight tenets of CRT to analyze counterstories (Martínez *Counterstory* 10-18).

1. Permanence of race and racism
2. Challenges dominant ideologies
3. Interest convergence
4. Race as social construct
5. Intersectionality and antiessentialism
6. Interdisciplinarity
7. Centrality of experiential knowledge and/or unique voices of color
8. Commitment to social justice
9. Accessibility—an added tenet by Martínez

Counterstory is the method/ology of CRT that “functions through methods that empower the minoritized [*voces perdidas*] through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian [*voces de poder*] methodologies” (Martínez *Counterstory* 3). Counterstory is both a product and a process. According to Aja Y. Martínez, “counterstory as methodology is the verb, the process, the critical race theory-informed justification for the work... whereas counterstory as method is the noun, the genre, the research tool” used to “tell [the] stories [of] people whose experiences are not often told” (Counterstory 2; “Counterstory” 70). For this study, counterstories are identified through interviews.

#### Stories as Credible Fact: Interviews as Method

I conducted semi-structured Zoom interviews of up to two hours long and loosely followed a set of interview questions. The interviews flowed naturally as if we were two amigas catching up, which was actually the reality.

I had to retype parts of the transcripts because my participants have a slight accent and a fluid language (they bend into Spanish even now and then when they speak English) which Zoom cannot detect. Despite this limitation, the audio and transcription services captured the participants’ language and natural dialects to provide a sense of authenticity to their stories and an understanding that these students are not the traditional, White, English-only students.

To adhere to member-checking and ensure the participants retain authority over their stories, I shared a copy of the counterstories with the participants so they can review them. The participants did not have any requests for corrections, they simply shared their admiration for my work with their stories, indicating I did them justice.

#### Writing Stories: Data Analysis Procedures

To analyze the data I collected, I identified the three elements of study (*identidad*, *empoderamiento*, y *representación*). I deductively coded the transcripts with these three categories, and cultural awareness/knowledge and comunidad, in mind. I inductively coded for associations and emerging themes such as anything that references Latina/o/x, graduate school experiences, features of faculty and student identity just to name a few.

To code the transcripts, I made color-coded highlights on printed versions of the transcripts. After making those, I proceeded by transferring the major experiences that shaped the study to respective color-coded sticky notes on a corkboard (Figure 1) to further organize, focus the codes, and help visually map out the counterstories. After I transferred these codes to sticky notes, I created the main themes (in the next section) which incorporate the three elements of study, and the subthemes (in italics). I wrote these in a journal and went through each color-coded sticky notes set to write out the participants experiences that related best to each section/subsection (Figure 2). I stored all data in the restricted-access Canvas page for security and ease of access.

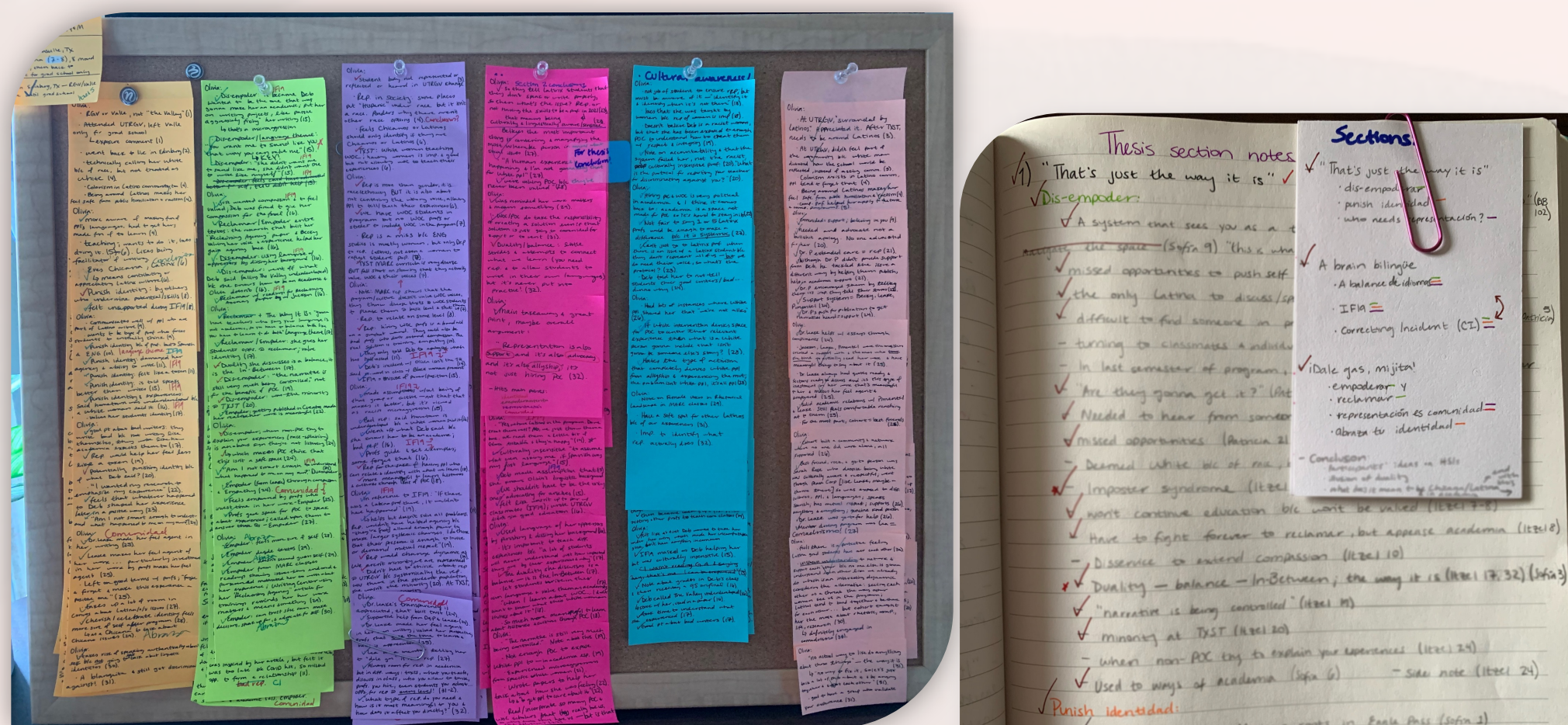


Figure 1: corkboard sticky notes

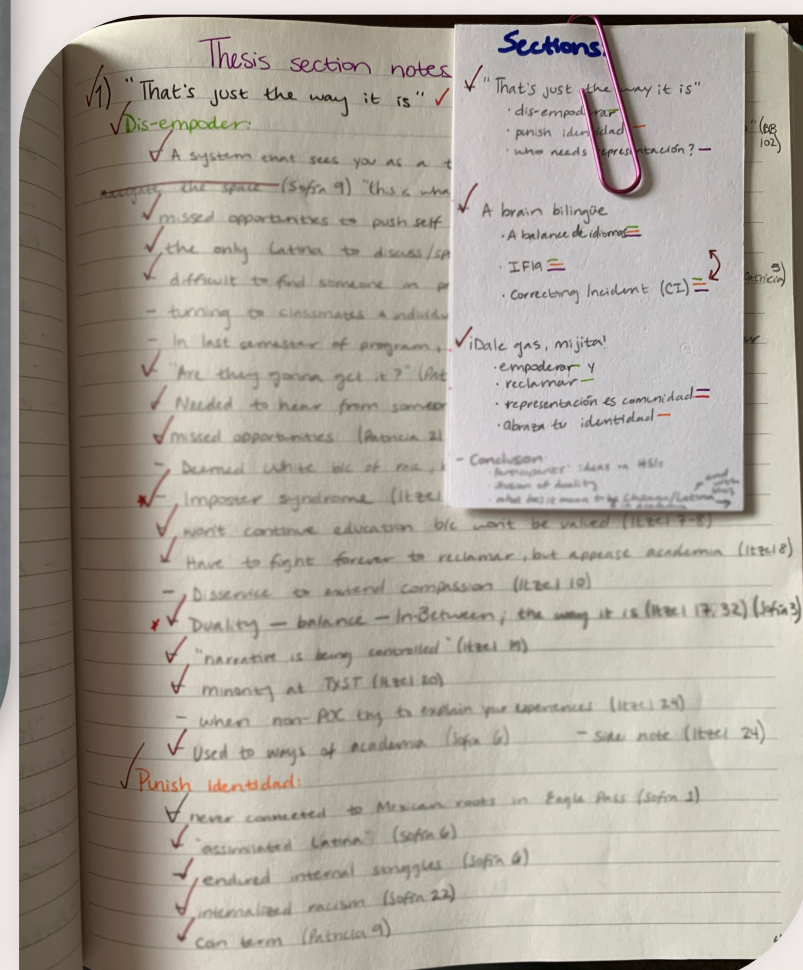


Figure 2: journal notes

### COUNTERSTORIES

Below are snippets from the three main themes and select subthemes that make up the counterstories chapter to reclamar el espacio, la voz, y el poder para estas Chicanas.

#### “That’s just the way it is”

The three Chicanas live in a borderland. Not the physical borderland known as the Río Grande Valley, but the metaphorical one unknown as the *In-Between*. In this border space, they are “expect[ed] to perform whiteness”—to speak White Mainstream English, to know proper grammar, to act and think American, to blend in (Baker-Bell 102).

#### Dis-empoderar

While in this space, the Chicanas engage in many instances of dis-empoderar—a term I invented that displays translanguaging at its finest that refers to instances that belittle and offer excuses like “that’s just the way it is” because people have become desensitized to systemically racist acts, turning them into norms—such as imposter syndrome. Itzel questions, “Is it [really imposter syndrome]? Like they really don’t want us here... it’s not made for us.” It is narratives, rhetoric, and the Eurocentric/Western twists that are placed on historical events, societal norms, and institutions that make Students of Color and Women of Color experience imposter syndrome. It is not that Sofia, Patricia, and Itzel were fraudulent and not worthy of being graduate students. It is that the system is inherently not built for People of Color and Women of Color. It is as Langston Hughes writes, “a dream deferred.” That is dis-empoderar.

#### Punish Identidad

Sofía is critically aware that academia and higher education is a predominately White space that is not built for people like her. Sofia wasn’t experiencing the struggles Itzel and Patricia endured in the same way because “I was used to it... this is what academia is, this is what they’re going to do to you.” Some might say, myself included, that Sofia learned how to play the game. She adopted standardized White Mainstream English and adhered to White supremacist beliefs which, in turn, legitimizes White hegemony and internalizes the racist message of inferiority: Students of Color “despise their mother tongue [and] see themselves through a White gaze [which] correlate[s] whiteness with rightness” (Baker-Bell 21, 24). Afterall, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 95). We punish our identidades because the society we live in and grew up in told us to do so. There is a constant reminder that we are not good enough, that we can’t do it, that we will never make it.

#### A brain bilingüe: a balance de idiomas

What is it like to be bilingüe? Unsurprisingly, it is another border space—a linguistic border space that is recently acknowledged as a form of racism (Baker-Bell 16). Being bilingüe is a frustrating balance of translanguaging—the multilingual equivalent of codeswitching. It’s creating words that cross linguistic borders—like “dis-empoderar”—because you can’t find the word in one language. As Dolores Delgado Bernal asserts, “Bilingualism is often seen as un-American and is considered a deficit and an obstacle to learning” because these speakers sound como “los del rancho,” “the language of the uneducated” (562; @JoseMedina189). For the participants, language and translanguaging is vital to their identidades, to being seen and valued as Chicana academics, and a major element that shaped their graduate school journeys.

#### Correcting Incident

Patricia was teaching the class with a partner, a mandatory class assignment. She couldn’t think of a specific word, so she struggled for a moment to recall it. When the word finally came to her, she pronounced it “wrong” according to some of her classmates and her White professor. Some of her classmates understood her, but the ones who didn’t immediately interjected and corrected her language. The *voces de poder* rendered Patricia’s *voz perdida* voiceless. This interjection stopped Patricia’s train of thought, mid presentation. She felt like “I’m here, I’m in a grad program like it’s supposed to be professional, I’m in front of all these adults and I just messed up a word and [I was] corrected... I just felt ridiculed.” She experienced the dark and vicious reality of the power and superiority *voces de poder* have over *voces perdidas*, an instance of the cultural hegemony instilling its dominant principles on marginalized groups—that of White Mainstream English.

#### Incident of Fall of 2019

“This is an ESL marker.”

“Here’s another ELL marker.”

“You shouldn’t be making these mistakes at the graduate level.”

These comments are not only assumptions about Itzel’s linguistic background but are passive aggressive which makes them sting more than someone yelling racist slurs in your face. These comments are microaggressions, or what Sujey Vega refers to as banal, “subtle and perhaps unconscious acts that communicate superiority over people of color” because they “communicate a level of discomfort and prejudice present just beneath the surface” (140-1, 136). “To assume without even asking me if Spanish was my first language, to just assume boldly,” Itzel asserts, is culturally insensitive. Itzel was called out of her language and *identidad* by a *voz de poder* who was supposed to be a trusted guide in the academic space.

#### ¡Dale gas, mijita!

#### Representación es comunidad

“I don’t think without [my comunidad] I would have succeeded at all,” Sofia confesses. “I feel like they brought me up... I feel like I’m in a PhD program because of them, and I’ll never forget that. I think that’s the problem with... some successful POCs, they forget who helped them up and I don’t ever wanna forget that.” Sofia’s comment solidifies *comadrisimo* as a mentoring practice to fulfill the void the faculty couldn’t deliver and marks the importance of being authentic and humble to one’s *identidad*. Aside from “gushing about each other,” as Itzel giggles, the three Chicanas hold a special place in their heart for each other and their support. Just as Itzel, Patricia, and her other comunidad members helped Sofia get to her PhD program, these three Chicanas have helped me get through my master’s program and to a PhD program. It’s cyclical. What they did for me I expect and hope to do for someone else.

### WRITING STYLE

Stylistically, this study se sumerge en español at appropriate moments to reflect our natural language—a Spanish-bended English—and to reflect our reality in the *In-Between*: bending entre dos culturas, mundos, y fronteras. This practice works as a counternarrative to break the barriers of the historic English-only field. Additionally, I play with style by including a blackout poem for the final subsection (Abraza tú identidad) because poetry articulates what cannot be said. The blackout poem is made from a combination of my thoughts, the participants interviews, several cultural warriors’ poems, and Glass Animals songs—a recent obsession.

#### Abraza tú identidad

To be Chicana in education	I am not Hispanic—that’s an insult.	I didn’t ask to be born
Es	I am not Mexican American—that’s an insult.	Latina, no más tuve suerte
Un	I am Chicana, Latina.	I’m not just an academic,
Honor	It means I’m worth something too.	But a Chicana academic.
Llena mi alma	It means presta atención	¿Me entiendes?
Con corazón,	Tengo algo que decir	
espíritu, y amor	Y no quieres perdértelo	

### THE 3 ELEMENTS OF STUDY + MORE

**Identidad:** To be Latina/o/x is not a fixed identity or a rigid list of identifiable features. To be Latina/o/x, as Berenice Sánchez et al. explain, is an intersection of identities that cannot be disassociated, separated, or categorized from being Latina/o/x (7).

**Empoderamiento:** No es simplemente empowerment. It is a feeling, a lifestyle, comunidad, *representación*, cultural awareness and knowledge, *identidad*—todos los elementos en este estudio that offers the mentality *I did it, so you can too* that seems valuable to motivate Students of Color to complete their education and find solace in times of stress and confusion.

**Representación:** La *representación* isn’t the number of minorities present, it’s the number of people who are culturally aware and respectful, those who will support you. In the words of Itzel, “representation is also support and it’s also advocacy and it’s also allyship.”

**The In-Between:** A social phenomenon I theorize that focuses on the balance between conforming to the dominant American culture and preserving ethnic heritage. In line with brujería, the *In-Between* seeks a balance like those of the natural and supernatural worlds: life and death, light and dark, good and bad. Unlike the concept of *nepantla*, the *In-Between* is an uncomfortable and frustrating balance where one must learn to bend between American culture and not lose sight of their ethnic culture(s).

**Voces perdidas:** Coined by Cristobal Salinas Jr., this term refers to “*lost voices*, the narratives that have been forgotten and rejected by a system that often only recognizes *voces de poder*” (747).

**Voces de poder:** Also coined by Cristobal Salinas Jr., this term refers to those who “dominate academia and silence non-English speakers, communities of color, and those who do not have access to higher education and scholarship” (747).

**Comadrisimo:** A culturally specific feminist mentoring approach of the movement upwards by one group of Latinas by another group of Latinas, coined by Ana Milena Ribero and Sonia C. Arellano.

### POSITIONALITY

I am a 2.5 generation (one foreign-born parent and one U.S.-born parent) West Coast Latina, a second-year graduate student in the Texas State MARC program, and I work as the graduate assistant for the MARC program, so I have a glimpse of an administrative perspective in the academic world. I know how political academia can be and how difficult it is to enact change.

I was born in San Diego, California, but raised in Austin, Texas. These cities are inhabited by vastly different cultures and communities of Latinas/os/xs. I did not grow up learning and speaking Spanish and English. My household was mostly English, and my childhood grappled with internalized racism. I did not become refamiliarized with Spanish or begin taking pride in my culture until I entered university. I continue to nurture and negotiate my relationship with my identities, heritages, cultures, and languages. My ethnic culture varies in some respects to the participants’ cultures.

### CONCLUSION

The Chicanas’ stories serve as counterstories because they justify and provide their *voces perdidas* with the opportunity to speak against *voces de poder*, using counterstory as rhetorical method/ology, emphasizing the humanity of People of Color which is “too often denied” (Martínez *Counterstory* 26). Because this project centers marginalized voices, it aims to be a model for rhetoric and composition by emphasizing the need to center marginalized voices, critique systems and institutions, and offer compassion and empathy toward students, especially Students of Color. Therefore, these counterstories are more than just an academic performance of anti-racist, decolonial theories because they are a rhetorical strategy against *voces de poder*/cultural hegemony/stock stories.

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