

# A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Stock Story vs. Counter- story Dialogues Concerning Alejandra’s “Fit” in the Academy

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This essay in counterstory suggests a method by which to incorporate critical race theory (CRT) in rhetoric and composition, as a contribution of other(ed) perspectives toward an ongoing conversation in the field about narrative, dominant ideology, and their intersecting influence on programmatic and curricular standards and practices. As a narrative form, counterstory functions as a method for marginalized people to intervene in research methods that would form “master narratives” based on ignorance and on assumptions about minoritized peoples like Chican@s.<sup>2</sup> Through the formation of counterstories or those stories that document the persistence of racism and other forms of subordination, voices from the margins become the voices of authority in the researching and relating of our own experiences. Counterstory serves as a natural extension of inquiry for theorists whose research recognizes and incorporates, as data, lived and embodied experiences of people of color. This essay argues it is thus crucial to use a narrative methodology that counters other methods that seek to dismiss or decenter racism and those whose lives are daily affected by it.

My story is grounded in research and experience acquired through my 28-year academic journey. I am Chican@, a student, a professor, and am embedded in the academy. However, because I am Chicana,<sup>3</sup> my path has been riddled with pain, anguish, and what Tara J. Yosso refers to as “survivor’s guilt.” Why me? Why did I “make it” out of the Southside of Tucson when so many of my classmates were left behind? “Why her?” is what I have painfully come to know others—peers, family, and colleagues—have wondered about me as well. During my time in the academy, I have met barriers of institutional racism, sexism, and classism in courses I have taken, courses I teach, and through interactions with colleagues and professors.

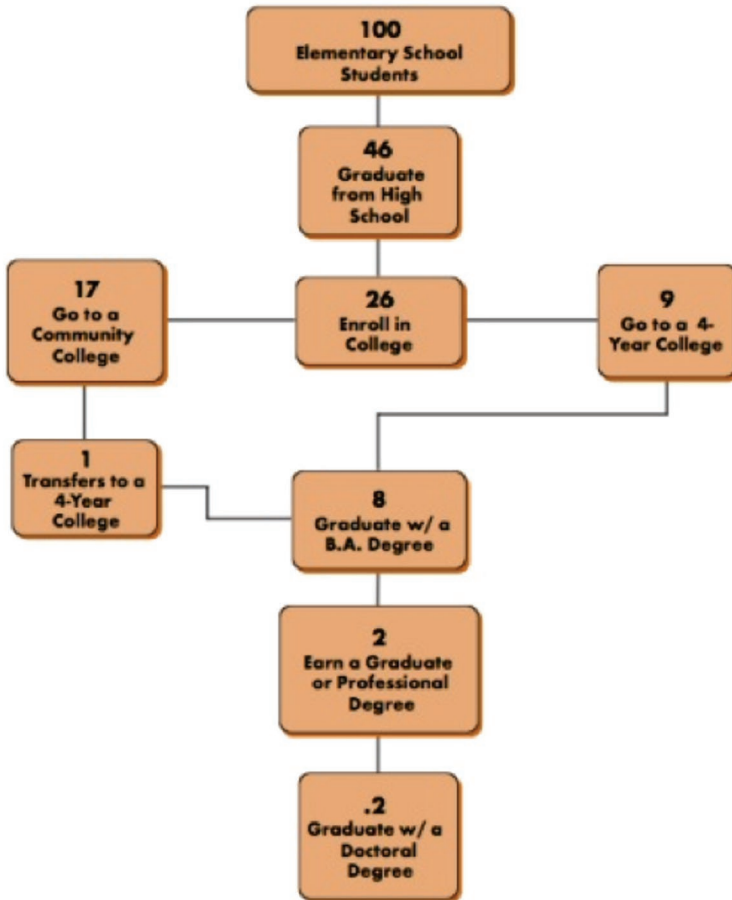
Granted, prior to my time as a graduate student and as a faculty member in higher education, I was surely not beyond the reach of these various “-isms,” however, I have been awakened to a certain awareness of them through a combination of my maturing into adulthood, my taking of courses in which literatures about social injustice and post-colonialism have been provided, and unrelenting experiences in the institution in which my race is continually targeted by colleagues, students, and professors as a personal and professional deficit when I struggle and as an unfair advantage when I succeed.

I am compelled to describe these experiences coupled with knowledge provided by other scholars who have found it necessary to speak from marginalized spaces like mine. And because I come from a culture in which the oral tradition as taken from lived personal experience is valued as “legitimate knowledge” (Delgado, Bernal & Villalpando, 2002, p. 169), I must write this essay as testimony because I cannot continue to forge an academic career without documenting the persistence of racism in the field of rhetoric and composition and in the academy at large. Through a method of storytelling that “challenges mainstream society’s denial of the ongoing significance of race and racism” (Yosso, 2006, p. 10), this essay illustrates a composite portrait told through counterstory (a methodology of critical race theory) to inform our field as it faces a major demographic shift. I focus my work on Chican@s because this is the fastest growing population in the academy, a group from which I feel I can draw upon my “cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2002, p. 11). However, the theoretical, pedagogical, and methodological strategies based on critical race theory and which I make use of in my essay can certainly be adapted to assist other historically marginalized and underrepresented groups in the academy.

## The Pipeline: Reason for Concern

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, roughly fifty million or 16% of the United States population is Latin@ (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas & Albert, 2011). Since the 2000 Census, the Latin@ population has grown 43%, with the largest growth occurring in the Chican@ community, which increased 54%. Currently, 65% of the now 16% U.S. Latin@ population are Chican@, making people of Mexican origin or descent the largest Latin@ population in the US. College enrollment for Latin@s has jumped 65% since 2000; however, completion of degrees in higher education do not reflect this growth (U.S. Department of Education).

In “Leaks in the Chicana and Chicano Educational Pipeline” Tara J. Yosso and Daniel G. Solórzano illustrate the Chican@ educational pipeline as gathered from the 2000 U.S. Census (specific to the category “Hispanic,” and disaggregated to account for Chican@s, see Figure 1). According to the 2000 Census, only 9% of



*Figure 1. The Chicana/o Educational Pipeline illustrating low academic outcomes at each point along the educational pipeline in 2000. (Yosso & Solórzano, 2006a).*

Chican@s ever enroll in four-year colleges, 8% graduate with a bachelor's, and less than 1% of the latter graduate with a doctoral degree. In 2010 the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics released a report on enrollment and completion trends based on the 2010 U.S. Census. Eight percent of Latin@s completed bachelor's degrees in 2010, compared to the 6% of Latin@s who completed bachelors in 2000, translating to an increase of 2% in ten years. Three percent of Latin@s completed doctorates in 2000 compared to the 4% who completed their doctorate in 2010. If this data were disaggregated to account for Chican@s as an isolated category, the 2010 data would likely not reflect a significant increase in completion reflective of enrollment trends.

In “On the Rhetoric and Precedents of Racism,” Victor Villanueva cites field-specific numbers concerning Latin@s/Chican@s in rhetoric and composition. Villanueva reports that in 1995, 26 of the 1,373 individuals who earned doctorates in English language and literature were Latin@ which rounds out to 2% (1999, p. 651). In 2010 there were a total of 1,334 doctorates in this discipline with 40 earned by Latin@s, thus representing only 3% of the degrees conferred, so in all, an increase of 1% in fifteen years (U.S. Department of Education). As a more representative sample of the demographics specific to rhetoric and composition, Villanueva details the break-down of CCCC’s membership, reporting that in 1999 Latin@s accounted for 1% of all members. As of 2012, Latin@ membership has risen to 2%, reflecting an increase of 1% in approximately 10 years (Suchor, K., email December 14, 2011, “FW: CCCC demographics,” 2010). If I were to break down any of these statistics further, I am sure that someone like me—a first-generation Chicana, single mother of a teenage pregnancy—is an anomaly. Because of the numbers reflecting a disproportionate Latin@ enrollment to success and completion rates, institutions and their programs have a serious need to examine the disconnect preventing entire fields from best serving this burgeoning student demographic. These statistics, literature on Latin@ student success and retention, and my own personal experience reflect the fact that higher education, and particular to this study, rhetoric and composition, are in need of theory, practice, and methods that better serve individuals from underrepresented backgrounds.

## A Call for Critical Race Theory

In “Working with Difference: Critical Race Studies and the Teaching of Composition,” Gary A. Olson calls for greater attention in the field of rhetoric and composition to critical race theory (CRT) so as to assist writing programs and their instructors becoming better prepared, pedagogically and administratively, for underrepresented student populations (2003, p. 209). Olson contends that CRT provides our field with the tools by which to interrogate the effects of racial bias that actively impede success and retention in rhetoric and composition for marginalized students. Despite important contributions from scholars such as Keith Gilyard, Shirley Wilson Logan, and Jacqueline Jones Royster, Latin@s in this field have but two influences significantly referencing a theory on race scholarship concerning Latin@s—Gloria Anzaldúa and Victor Villanueva. Even so, as Olson suggests, “[Rhetoric and Composition] has witnessed no sustained examination of race, racism, and the effects of both on composition instruction and effective writing program administration” (2003, p. 209). Like Olson, I suggest we turn to CRT, but I extend this argument to focus on the field’s methodology, counterstory,

in our field's pursuit of actively challenging the status quo with all of its deeply institutionalized prejudices against racial minorities as it exists and continues to prosper in U.S. institutions of higher education.

Particular to critical race theory's counterstory, the methodology used in this essay, this method of research has potential for producing scholarship and informing pedagogy and mentorship in the field of rhetoric and composition studies. As an interdisciplinary method, CRT counterstory recognizes that the experiential and embodied knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices. In this essay, I employ CRT counterstory as a hybrid form of scholarly inquiry and specifically rely on composite counterstorytelling as a writing genre. This form of counterstory differs from fictional storytelling. It instead critically examines theoretical concepts and humanizes empirical data while also deriving material for counterstory's discourse, setting, and characters from sources. These include, but are not limited to, statistical data, existing literatures, social commentary, and authors' professional/personal experiences concerning the topics addressed. As a writing form and a rhetorical methodology, I argue that counterstory has applications for both scholarly publication and craft in the composition classroom. However, the biggest hurdle to overcome in the present racialized era resides in programmatic and institutional recognition and acceptance of the ideology responsible for structural forms of inequality which are alive and well in the academy. In an effort to humanize this data, this essay illustrates, through two tellings, a "stock story" and a counterstory, that serve as tellings of Chican@ experience along the educational pipeline, with a focus on the .2% completion rate of Chican@ Ph.D.'s. In an effort to provide talking points for our field to engage in pedagogical but also in programmatic planning (including admissions/hiring practices and mentoring), my counterstory contributes a perspective that expands dialogue and understanding as to why this completion rate of doctoral degrees for Chican@s is nearly non-existent.

## Richard Delgado and Counterstory vs. Stock Story

In his foreword to Richard Delgado's *The Rodrigo Chronicles*, Robert A. Williams, Jr., comments on Delgado's stories as being outsider stories. Williams says these stories "help us imagine the outside in America, a place where some of us have never been and some of us have always been, and where a few of us . . . shift-shape, like the trickster, asking the hard questions . . . without answers, questions about what it means to be outside, what it means to be inside, and what it means to be in-between in America" (1995, pp. xii-xiii). Delgado characterizes counterstory as

“a kind of counter-reality” created/experienced by “outgroups” subordinate to those atop the racial and gendered hierarchy. While those in power, or as Delgado offers, the “ingroup,” craft stock stories to establish a shared sense of identity, reality, and naturalization of their superior position, the “outgroup aims to subvert that ingroup reality” (1989, pp. 2412–2413). Delgado describes stock stories as those which people in positions of dominance collectively form and tell about themselves. These stories choose and pick among available facts and present a picture of the world that best fits and supports their positions of relative power (Delgado, 1989, p. 2421). Stock stories feign neutrality and at all costs avoid any blame or responsibility for societal inequality. Powerful because they are often repeated until canonized or normalized, those who tell stock stories insist that their version of events is indeed reality, and any stories that counter these standardized tellings are deemed biased, self-interested, and ultimately not credible. Counterstory, then, is a method of telling stories by people whose experiences are not often told. Counterstory as methodology thus serves to expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance.

Delgado outlines several generic styles counterstories can take: chronicles, narratives, allegories, parables, and dialogues (1989, p. 2438). In this essay I extend his discussion of counterstory by including dialogues, with a nod to sophistic argument, by presenting two tellings of the same event. The dialogue, as a theoretical device, is more than familiar in the field of rhetoric and composition and has been most notably employed by Plato to aid philosophical inquiry. Victor Villanueva reminds us that Plato’s “writing is significant by virtue of its genre, an attempt at representation of dialogue, of storytelling . . . not as logocentric discourse but as [dialogue] as representation of discourse *in action*” (emphasis mine; 2004, p. 16). Also, Bizzell and Herzberg note the value Plato places on depicting oral exchanges because of their ability to respond “flexibly to *kairos*, the immediate social situation in which solutions to philosophical problems must be proposed” (2001, p. 81). Likewise, Delgado’s specific method of placing two dialogues side-by-side provides him as author the opportunity to develop his ideas through exchanges between characters that represent and voice contending viewpoints about contemporary social issues. The audience is invited to first experience a version of the events from a status quo point of view, which in the case of this article’s stock story represents that of the institution. Following the stock story, a counterstory is then presented to develop the author’s marginalized viewpoint and to critique the viewpoint put forth by the stock story while offering alternative possibilities for the audience to consider. I call this method of placing two dialogues concerning the same events side-by-side “stock story vs. counterstory.”

Beyond the styles of counterstory outlined by Delgado, Tara J. Yosso also explains these styles as generally composed in the autobiographical, biographical,

or composite genre (2006, p. 10). For this essay, I compose my counterstories as composites dialogue, and an important feature of composite counterstory is the composite character. Composite characters are written into “social, historical, and political situations that allow the dialogue to speak to the research findings and creatively challenge racism and other forms of subordination” (Yosso, 2006, p. 11). Because these characters are written as composites of many individuals, they do not have a one-to-one correspondence to any one individual the author knows (Delgado, 1995, p. xix). In many cases, and as is the case for this particular stock story vs. counterstory, the composite characters are abstractions representing cultural or political ideologies, and could mistakenly be read as overly-stereotyped depictions of certain ideologies and politics. However, in the case of Delgado’s work, and mine as well, composite characters in stock stories and the counterstories represent more than just a single individual and are intentionally crafted as composite characters that embody an ideology, such as institutional racism or a Chicana@ academic identity. Accordingly, the stock story and counterstory crafted in this essay involve dialogues conducted among composite characters that represent university professor stocktypes, Chicana@ students, and parents of underrepresented students.

## **A Stock Story Discussing a Chicana Graduate Student’s Status as Qualified to Proceed in Her Ph.D. Program**

In the particular graduate academic program providing the setting for this story, a qualifying exam is conducted to assess students’ potential for joining the professional conversation in the field of rhetoric and composition. This exam consists of a meeting between students and the program director where the director engages in a qualifying assessment of each student’s records in the program and the writing in her/his portfolio. The materials in the portfolio are meant to provide the director with a detailed sense of the student’s analytical and writing skills. Aspects of the student’s scholarship in the portfolio are evaluated based on a reflective essay and other academic writing (seminar papers) by the student. These writings indicate whether the student can step back from her/his writing and recognize her/his strengths and weaknesses as a scholarly writer and whether the student has developed a research trajectory indicative of her/his ability to perform graduate level work. In this story’s program, the qualifying examination is intended as a mentoring opportunity for the participants to have useful conversations about the student’s possibilities for writing and research. This particular step in the graduate school process was chosen because it serves a programmatic gate-keeping function for graduate students and can be especially problematic for underrepresented students, like the student discussed next.

## The Stock Story

*Setting.* The program director and two professors are in a department conference room to discuss Alejandra Prieto, a Chicana graduate student who has failed her qualifying exam. In this program, as in others, if a student does not pass the qualifying exam, then a committee of professors will discuss the student, her portfolio, and her ability to continue in the program. The committee in this stock story consists of the program director and two professors, all of whom are white. The program director, D. Mosley, is male, from a middle-class background, and tenured. One of the professors, F. Hayden, is male, from a working-class background, and untenured, and the second professor J. Tanner, is female, from an upper middle-class background, and tenured. Alejandra has completed her first full year of the Ph.D. program after entering the program with a B.A. in sociology. The reasons for the committee's meeting are the student's failed attempt to pass her qualifying exam and also faculty concerns about the student's research interests, writing ability, and an assigned final grade of C in a core program course (C's in this graduate program constitute a failing grade; two C's can result in expulsion.)

Mosley: Thank you for finding the time to meet today. I know the beginning of the semester is a busy time for us all, so I'm glad we could all decide on a time at last. Now I know you are unfamiliar with this sort of meeting, but it's official procedure after a student has failed his/her qualifying exam.

Tanner [*teasing*]: Yes, Mosley, I went ahead and double-checked the program handbook to see that this meeting was a legitimate way to proceed, considering we've *never* experienced a student failing her qualifying exam, at least not in the sixteen years I've been program faculty, not to mention the four additional years I served as chair.

Hayden: Well, that's not exactly true; I recall other faculty saying some students have been of questionable qualifying status before, but I hear they usually leave the program before we have to come to this stage of committee discussion.

Mosley: Either way, Alejandra's progress and status in the program have become a concern for those of us in the room today. After reviewing her course schedules for the past two semesters, it seems she's taken all but one of her courses from each of us, all courses in rhetorical theory and one in composition pedagogy with Dr. Burton. Of the four courses she's taken so far, Alejandra's grades are three A's, and one C, which you Tanner assigned her. Now I met with Alejandra earlier this week regarding her qualifying exam and let her know concerns had been raised about her performance in class and about her writing. I also had specific questions for her about the C she earned in your class, Tanner, to which she did not have an adequate answer. So I guess I'd like to start there with what happened in your class; what's your assessment of this student?



Tanner: Well, to be honest, she's a sweet girl, she really is. You know she even brought some sort of Mexican cake to class one day to share with everyone. Sweet girl. However, as I recall, I raised a major concern about this student when we were in committee meetings about new admits, and it's the same concern I'm raising now: Is this student a good *fit* for this program? You both served on the program admissions committee with me back when we were forming Alejandra's cohort and you both . . .

Hayden: Yes, Tanner, we remember how you objected to her admission because she would be starting the doctoral program with only a B.A. in what you deemed an unrelated field. But I also remember that she was one of a very few minority applicants that year, and even, as an undergraduate, had impressive experience documented on her CV as a research assistant on nationally-funded projects. Plus, with the direction our field needs to go concerning the changing demographics of student and faculty populations, it couldn't hurt to admit a student whose focus is on social issues related to race and education, rather than the mostly literature and creative writing folks we usually get. We need to be more interdisciplinary, you know that.

Tanner: That aside Hayden, we're a top five ranked program, and we demand a lot from our students. Our curriculum is rigorous, and our students need to be the best and the brightest *in our field*, and it does nobody any favors to admit students who can't even tell you who and what the major theorists and journals of our time are!

Mosley: Okay, there's no reason to raise our voices. What we need is to return to the reason for this meeting, Alejandra's status as a student in this program. Talking about whether or not she should have been admitted is pointless because she's here, she's in the program, and we need to move forward and decide whether she should remain or go. Now, when I met with Alejandra for her qualifying exam, she was pretty emotional and not able to coherently discuss her progress in the program to this point. She even asked me outright if we admitted her as some sort of "affirmative action" recruit!

Tanner: [*mumbles something incoherent under her breath*]

Hayden: She didn't really ask that, did she? What did you say?

Mosley: She most certainly did, and I denied it, of course. This program, because of its ranking and rigor, is strictly merit-based, and I told her as much. Curiously, she somehow knew she wasn't a first priority admit and was on our second list of admits.

Hayden: Well, I always thought it a bad idea to have grad student reps on admissions committees. They gossip too much, and sometimes damaging information falls into the ears of those never meant to hear it.

Mosley: Yes, well, back to the original question, Tanner what happened in your class that resulted in this C on Alejandra's record?

Tanner: Right, well, did you ask her?

Mosley: I did, but I'd like to hear your perspective on the issue as well.

Tanner: Well, as I've said, again and again, Alejandra is just not a good fit for this program. She rarely spoke in my class, and the few times she did, her comments always drew the material back to her comfort zone of social oppression, particular to race. I mean sure, race is an issue, but it's all she wants to talk about! And then her writing! Her seminar paper was just not par with the rest of the students, not in content or quality. She tried, in my opinion unsuccessfully, to tie everything she read and studied in my course back to what I feel are likely recycled papers from sociology courses or projects. That aside, this attempt she makes to fuse her old discipline and ours comes across as awkward, at best, in her prose. It's just not clear writing; there's no focus and no connection or contribution to the field. Plus, she doesn't even use MLA and seemingly makes no attempt to do so. I stand my ground and still contend she is not a good fit for this program. She *earned* that C in my course.

Hayden: Ouch, Tanner, a C may as well be an F in this program, but I hear what you're saying regarding her participation in class. I experienced the same thing in the course she took with me. She rarely ever spoke, which made me begin to question whether or not she read and, more so, if she even comprehended the material? I mean she was practically silent the whole semester.

Mosley: Did she ever miss class?

Tanner and Hayden: No.

Mosley: Yeah, she never missed a day of my course either, but I recall her silence as well. So Tanner, did you ever speak to her regarding your concerns about her classroom performance or her handling of course materials?

Tanner: She knew as well as any other student that I hold an open door policy. I am *always* happy to assist students in any way possible, and I set office hours and appointments with students whenever needed.

Mosley: Yes, I asked her during our meeting whether she ever visited you concerning her progress in your course or if she ever discussed her grade with you. She said she hadn't.

Tanner: No, she didn't, and as I've said, my door is *always* open to students.

Mosley: Well as the handbook states, the official purpose for this meeting is for us to discuss whether the student has made satisfactory progress, maintained a 3.5 grade point average, or had other problems in the program. We need to assess Alejandra's potential for joining the professional conversation in our field, and this is based on her record in the program, her writing in coursework, and her meeting with me as program director. After hearing both of your concerns, I'm pretty sure she shouldn't continue on toward the Ph.D. I'll be meeting with her again next week for a follow-up to her exam, and she and I will discuss a plan of what she should do next. I'm thinking it'll be in *her* best interest to just take the master's and go. Are there any last topics either of you would like to discuss?

[*Tanner shakes her head no.*]

Hayden [*tentatively*]: You know, Mosely, I feel as if I'm pointing out the obvious, but I'm surprised this hasn't come up and that you're already considering she not continue in the program; despite Alejandra's C in Tanner's course, she did earn three A's in yours, mine, and Burton's courses. Does this not count as satisfactory progress? And come to think of it, for all the lack of contributions she made to course discussions, she did write really thoughtful, provocative reflection essays each week to the assigned reading in my course, so it was wrong of me to say and assume she didn't read or comprehend course material. And from what I remember, her seminar paper, while rough, was not any worse than those written by other first-years who came in with their B.A.'s and, in fact, wasn't too far off the mark from what some M.A.'s turn in. But Tanner, I think what makes her work . . . what's the word . . . difficult? Yes, I think her work is difficult for us to wrap our minds around because it's unconventional, probably by and large due to the fact that she approaches it from a perspective we're not trained in or accustomed to . . .

Mosley: Yes, Hayden, I hear exactly what you're saying. In fact, she did speak at least once in my course, and it was to ask what the "Eastern canon of rhetoric" is? [*laughing*] Different perspective indeed!

Hayden: So then, maybe it's not that she doesn't show potential for joining the professional conversation in our field, but perhaps it's that she has potential to say things we're uncomfortable with because her research interests are beyond our areas of expertise and her approach is something we've just not experienced before. Potential . . . I think she has it but just requires a better investment in mentoring—on our part.

Mosley: Tanner?

Tanner [*shrugs*]: I'm just not interested in her work. I don't understand it. And to be perfectly honest, I feel we've all done the most we can to help this student be successful. Her difficulties and failures in this program are hers, not ours. And Hayden, for all the positives you point out, do they in all honesty outweigh this student's shortcomings? Are you seriously suggesting we all, as faculty, shoulder the responsibility of teaching her *how* to be a student, a scholar, and a professional in *our* field. It's a little late in the game for her to play catch up in that regard, and I'm not paid enough to take on this task. You're either ready or not. You're a good fit, or you're not, and from what I've seen, she's not prepared to jump in and be the graduate student our program has such a successful record of bringing to degree and placement. So what does taking on Alejandra's lack of preparedness mean for us? More work. You, Hayden, of all people should be wary of this situation, what with your teaching load and the fact you still have quite a publishing quota to meet before you go up for tenure in a couple years. Do you honestly have the time it's going to take to mentor an underprepared student like Alejandra? Can you truly commit to mentoring this individual and showing her the ropes of this profession

while also juggling the responsibilities you have to your own career and to the students who *are* prepared and *truly* need you? A student like Alejandra is unfair to us as professors who are pressed for time as it is. As I've already said, I'm not paid enough to teach someone how to be a student, and even if I were, I just don't have the time, none of us do.

Hayden: I never really looked at it that way . . . but how about if we . . .

Mosley [*interrupting*]: Good points Tanner, I believe Hayden and I hear you loud and clear [*winks at Hayden*] [*Hayden shrugs, shakes his head and looks down*], and we share your concerns. There's never quite enough time or money, now is there? [*chuckles*] Okay, I'd like to thank you both for taking the time to meet with me, and I'll take what you both have to say into serious consideration before meeting with Alejandra next week.

## A Counterstory in which a Chicana Graduate Student and Her Mother Discuss Her Status as Qualified to Proceed in Her Ph.D. Program

*Setting.* Alejandra has just left the office of D. Mosley, program director, after their follow-up meeting. The meeting consisted of Mosley recounting various talking points from the committee meeting (described in the stock story) and asking for Alejandra's response to the concerns raised by each professor in that meeting. The meeting lasts nearly an hour and results in Mosley suggesting Alejandra consider finishing the program with the M.A. and perhaps seeking the Ph.D. in another program or field. Tearfully, Alejandra calls her mother to discuss the meeting.

Alejandra: *¿Hola Mami, como estás?*

Mami [*concerned*]: *Bien. ¿Estás llorando hija? ¿Qué pasó?* Was it your meeting?

Alejandra [*defeated*]: Yes . . .

Mami: Why, what happened?

Alejandra: He told me I should just take the master's and go—

Mami: What?! And go? Go where? *¿Qué te dijo?*

Alejandra: I don't even know if it's worth getting into because he's right. I don't think I'm cut out for this program, maybe not even for grad school, I don't know . . .

Mami: Bullshit. *No es cierto hija.* You've worked too damn hard to start telling yourself "no" now . . .

Alejandra: I'm not telling myself "no" Mom; they are.

Mami: You have every right to be in that program, and no *pendejo* has the right to tell you that you can't . . .

Alejandra: But they're kicking me out.

Mami: Kicking you out? What exactly did he say?

Alejandra: Well, Dr. Mosley met with two of my professors to discuss my “progress and potential” in the program.

Mami: Which professors?

Alejandra: I’ve only taken four courses so far, and Dr. Burton is in Brazil for the semester, so beside Dr. Mosley, it had to be Dr. Hayden and Dr. Tanner.

Mami: Tanner? That *babosa* who gave you a C?

Alejandra: Yes, her . . .

Mami: Oh great.

Alejandra: So anyway, he said they all talked about my work in the program, and he told me they all “really like me as a person,” and mentioned that Dr. Tanner had said how sweet I was because I brought Mexican cake to class one day to share with everyone . . .

Mami: That’s nice *mija*, you did that?

Alejandra: No, I didn’t; it was left-over cornbread from a barbeque place I went to the night before. And you raised me not to waste food, so I brought it in to share rather than throw it away.

Mami: What?! And because you’re Mexican she assumes it’s “Mexican cake”? Didn’t you tell me once she’s from the South? How can she not recognize cornbread when she sees it?

Alejandra: I don’t know *Mami*; I think Dr. Mosley was just trying to give me a compliment before dropping the bomb.

Mami: Okay, so besides the cake, what else did he have to say?

Alejandra: He said each professor had specific concerns about my writing, my research interests, my classroom participation, and my overall “fit” for the program.

Mami: “Fit,” what do they mean by that?

Alejandra: I don’t know. Dr. Mosley’s concerns about my research interests were really confusing. First, he asked how I think the fields of sociology and rhetoric and composition are related, but before he let me answer, he asked “Do you really think the discussion of ‘race’ *still* has a place in this field?” Which I guess was his way of saying this field has already discussed race?

Mami: And so by “fit,” is he saying your research interests in “race” aren’t a fit for this field?

Alejandra: I don’t know, but if you remember, one of the most racist things that ever happened to me was in Dr. Mosley’s class.

Mami: ¿*Qué?* Refresh my memory . . .

Alejandra: He gave us a list of fifteen theorists from this book called *The Rhetorical Tradition*, for the fifteen of us in the class to choose from and present to the rest of the class on their major contributions to our field. I don’t know if people of color gravitate toward likeness, but the two of us in Dr. Mosley’s class (me and this guy from St. Lucia) sat in the back corner, and by the time the list got to us, we

looked at who was left and then both looked at each other with ironic grins. Guess who was left for us “colored” folks to choose from?

Mami: Who?

Alejandra: Frederick Douglass and Gloria Anzaldúa. You know who Douglass is right?

Mami: *Sí*, the Black abolitionist, but I’ve never heard of Anzaldúa. *¿Es Mexicana?*

Alejandra: *Tejana*, and she identifies as Chicana, but isn’t that crazy?

Mami: I know you’re brown and got the *Tejana*, so does that mean the person who got Douglass is Black?

Alejandra: Yep, Chev looks like what we’d classify as “Black,” but he’s not African American. He’s from the Caribbean, and me, well, I’m definitely not *Tejana*, and I’ve never called myself Chicana . . .

Mami: Right, you’re Mexican. Your dad’s Mexican, I’m Mexican, so you’re Mexican.

Alejandra: Well, so I thought, but funny enough it was Dr. Mosley who called me “Chicana” today during our meeting. He said, “with your working class Chicana identity, you should have a wealth of cultural experiences to share and write about.”

Mami: Why did he assume you’re working class? If brown, then poor?

Alejandra: I know Mom; that’s my point; it’s all about assumptions in this program. No one bothers to ask me anything; they all just assume to know things about me, and it’s like they all speak above me or around me, like I’m not here, as if it’s easier for them to ignore me, unless I’m “sharing my wealth of cultural experiences” . . .

Mami: Like the Mexican cake?

Alejandra [*chuckles*]: Yeah. Exactly.

Mami: So let me get this straight: Mosley doesn’t want you to talk about race as it relates to his classroom or the field, but instead prefers that you talk about your culture? What’s wrong with this picture? Only talk about race if it has to do with happy topics like *tamales*, *mariachi*, and *folklorico*? *No cambian las cosas*.

Alejandra: I feel like my presence makes the professors and students uncomfortable.

Mami: Okay, so I can see *they* don’t understand the “fit” of your research interests, but what was all this *cagada* about your participation being a concern?

Alejandra: Oh that. Dr. Mosley said the faculty is worried because I never speak up in class.

Mami: You don’t speak in class?

Alejandra: No, not really, but here’s why; in Dr. Tanner’s course, for example, I genuinely tried to engage the material because I really identified with the gender and socioeconomic class issues brought up by the theorists she had us read, but when I would ask in class why race wasn’t part of the discussion, since I know race,

class, and gender are so interconnected in this country, Tanner would shut me down, every time. She'd say things like "Well that's not really rhet/comp material you're referring to," when I'd cite sociologists who discussed the same issues but with race as a focus. I felt unwelcome in her class, like the knowledge I brought with me, from sociology and from my personal perspective concerning race, was always automatically dismissed, because, according to her, I wasn't really using a rhet/comp perspective.

Mami: So you didn't feel like you could make a contribution to the conversation? But I thought they brought you into the program because of your sociology background, because it was—what was the word?

Alejandra: Interdisciplinary. Right, that's what I was told too, but now Dr. Mosley's saying they're unsure if I'm a good "fit." And maybe I'm not a good fit. In Tanner's class I just felt defeated. So silence became my refuge; it seemed like my only immediate option for survival.

Mami: Mija, I'm sorry, that sounds terrible, I had no idea . . .

Alejandra: It's alright, *Mami*. But what I guess I don't understand about the students I'm in class with is this constant chatter they engage in—and that, according to Dr. Mosley, they're expected to engage in. But it happens in every class I take, so I guess I understand the professors' concern that I don't speak, but Dr. Mosley actually asked if my silence was due to the fact that maybe I had trouble comprehending the material?

Mami: What?! What a terrible assumption to make!

Alejandra: *Mami*, to them silence equals lack of comprehension. And it wasn't that I didn't "get it"; I just wasn't prepared to contribute to half of the discussions taking place because I'm new to the field. I'm still learning. And the few times I did speak, I was either shut down or given strange looks as if I said something disturbing. So I decided silence would be my best strategy for the time being. It's as if there's some cultural standard in grad school that I don't understand and am completely out of place in.

Mami: It sounds more like a foreign country than just school, but what I don't fully understand yet is how you got to the point in the conversation where Mosley said you should take the master's degree and go.

Alejandra: Oh right, well, he brought up the C in Dr. Tanner's course and said Dr. Tanner claimed I never spoke to her about it and never sought her out during the semester for help in the course. But I basically told Dr. Mosley I'm terrified of Dr. Tanner, that she was so hostile, unwelcoming, and discrediting toward me in her class that the last thing I wanted to do was put myself in a vulnerable position like office hours with her, especially after the heinous grade she assigned me. *Mami*, a C in this program is pretty much an F, and an F-U, for that matter. I hope never to work with her again and will avoid her at all costs.

Mami: So what did Mosley have to say about that?

Alejandra: Well, Mosley didn't like that I haven't attempted to resolve this grade issue with Dr. Tanner and pretty much concluded the meeting with his recommendation that I finish the master's and perhaps look into other programs for doctoral work.

Mami: And how do you feel about his recommendation? I've noticed you're not crying anymore . . .

Alejandra: Well, to be honest *Mami*, now that I've had the opportunity to talk about it, I don't feel sad anymore. I'm kinda pissed. It makes me mad that these professors would rather be rid of me than face working with a student who is unconventional and is then what? Scary? Threatening? A waste of time? What is it they dislike about me?

Mami: It's not that they dislike you; they don't *get* you.

Alejandra: And I guess that would make sense; it's not like there are any other Latina/os or Chicana/os in the program, not as students or faculty, so their discomfort has to be about more than just the fact that I come from another field. I think it's because I'm the first Latina/Chicana/Mexicana they've ever had in their program, and they don't know what to do with me.

Mami: Yes, as if accepting you into their program was all the work they needed to do to diversify. But what about making sure you succeed? No, apparently your success is not their problem and is definitely not what they're prepared to do.

Alejandra: I'm not gonna let them tell me "no." I'm going back to Dr. Mosley's office tomorrow for another meeting. We need to discuss what it's going to take for me to succeed in this program. I'm going to talk about race, I'm going to be interdisciplinary, and I'm going to make these people *see* me.

Mami: Good *mija*, that's what you need to do—get mad and get to work. Call me tomorrow to let me know how it goes; I've got to hang up and get dinner going . . .

Alejandra: Mmmm, what are you making?

Mami: I was thinking of whipping up some "Mexican cake."

## A Plea for Narrative: A Place for Counterstory in Rhet/Comp

When commenting on the conventions of academic discourse, Victor Villanueva notes the strength of *logos* but the pronounced weakness of *pathos* in academic exchanges. This leaning toward logic and reason to best communicate "serious" thought, and the pitting of logic against the assumed unreliability and volatility of emotion reaches far back into Aristotle's original suspicions that a too-heavy reliance on *pathos* leads the audience away from truth—the kind verifiable by facts and "proof." But as Villanueva argues, the personal, too often tied to emotions beyond logic and reason, "does not negate the need for the academic; it complements,



provides an essential element on the rhetorical triangle, an essential element in the intellect—cognition and affect” (emphasis in original; 2004, pp. 13–14). For people of color, the personal as related through narrative provides space and opportunity to assert our stories within, and in many instances counter to, the hegemonic narratives of the institution.

Solórzano and Yosso characterize these hegemonic narratives as “majoritarian” stories that generate from a legacy of racial privilege and are stories in which racial privilege seems “natural” (2006, p. 27). These stories privilege whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference. A majoritarian story distorts and silences the experiences of people of color and others distanced from the norms such stories reproduce. A standardized majoritarian methodology relies on stock stereotypes that covertly and overtly link people of color, women of color, and poverty with “bad,” while emphasizing that white, middle and/or upper class people embody all that is “good” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2006, p. 29).

Narratives counter to these majoritarian or stock stories, then, provide people of color the opportunity to validate, resonate, and awaken to the realization that we “haven’t become clinically paranoid” in our observations and experiences of racism and discrimination within the institution (Villanueva, 2004, p. 15). In fact, as Villanueva points out, it is almost shocking to realize in the academic institution in which the sheer numbers of people of color are as exceptional as they are, how “our experiences are in no sense unique but are always analogous to other experiences from among those exceptions” (2004, p. 15). What’s more, as these experiences are narrated through spoken and increasingly written and published work, people of color come to realize not much by way of diversity and inclusiveness in the institution has changed. Thus, my work in narrative counterstory within this essay is inspired by narratives specific to rhetoric and composition, such as Anzaldúa’s *Borderland/La Frontera*, Villanueva’s *Bootstraps*, Gilyard’s *Voices of the Self*, Vershawn Ashanti Young’s *Your Average Nigga*, and Frankie Condon’s *I Hope I Join the Band*. Each of these scholars uses a narrative voice to relate racialized experiences, and as a necessary function of counterstory, these narratives serve the purpose of exposing stereotypes, expressing arguments against injustice, and offering additional truths through narrating authors’ lived experiences. My work extends this narrative trend already in use in rhetoric and composition by crafting counterstory, but deviates from more familiar forms of autobiographical or biographical narrative through using a composite approach to the formation of these narratives, an approach most notably employed by critical race theorists Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Tara J. Yosso, and constitutes the methodological basis for my greater body of work (Martinez, 2013).

As noted in my reference above to Condon’s work, whites can and do tell counterstories, and people of color in contrast, can and do tell majoritarian stories

(Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p. 151; Martinez, 2009, p. 586). The keepers and tellers of either majoritarian (stock) stories or counterstories reveal the social location of the storyteller as dominant or non-dominant, and these locations are always racialized, classed, gendered. For example, Ward Connerly is African American, from a working-class background, male, and a prominent politician and academic. From his racialized position, Connerly is a minority, but speaks and represents himself from dominant gendered and present-day classed locations. From the position of an upper-class male, Connerly crafts stock stories to argue against affirmative action and to deny racial inequities. On the other hand, Condon's work narrativizes embodied whiteness and individual responsibility as a white ally. Although Condon is white, she is also a woman who speaks from a non-dominant social location, while as a white ally, she uses her dominant racialized location to craft critical race narratives that disrupt "discourses of transcendence" often responsible for leading audiences of white antiracists to believe they are somehow "absolved from the responsibility of doing whiteness" (2012, p. 13).

Condon makes an especially powerful case for the necessity of narrative by stating, "We need to learn to read, to engage with one another's stories, not as voyeurs but as players, in a dramatic sense, within them, and as actors who may be changed not only by the telling of our own stories, but also by the practices of listening, attending, acknowledging, and honoring the stories of our students and colleagues of color as well" (2012, p. 32). In my crafted dialogues above, I take up Condon's call to write and invite audiences into a dramatic engagement with these dialogues in hopes that through the detailing of the stock story vs. counterstory, my audience will locate their own subjective identities within the characters and thematic focuses of the text. Although I write the above narratives to commune with an audience of people of color who I assume will identify with and have academic experiences similar to those of Alejandra, this audience is not my primary target. My primary audience is the audience Condon herself identifies as the more difficult to persuade: "academics . . . who hope to join in the work of antiracism [who] need to stop minimizing the complexity and significance of narrative, stop depoliticizing the personal, and start studying the rich epistemological and rhetorical traditions that inform the narratives of people of color" (2012, p. 33).

Thus, I position my work in counterstory within social scientific interests with an active Humanities perspective, maintaining three main objectives, the first being that my work act as vehicle by which to raise awareness through counterstory of issues affecting the access, retention, and success of Latin@s in higher education, particularly in rhetoric and composition. Second, I hope this work will begin discussion concerning strategies that more effectively serve students from non-traditional backgrounds in various spaces and practices, such as the composition classroom,

mentoring, and graduate programmatic requirements so as to *achieve* access, retention, and success. And third, I offer this demonstration of stock story vs. counterstory as a guide for counterstory not previously theorized by CRT, but which I believe will resonate with scholars in rhetoric and composition who are familiar with narrative forms spanning from Plato to contemporary scholars, and who seek options and variety in narrative forms to employ in the composition classroom and to publish work about these important issues.

As a narrative form, counterstory functions as a method for marginalized people to intervene in research methods that would form “master narratives” based on ignorance and on assumptions about minoritized peoples like Chican@s. Through the formation of counterstories or those stories that document the persistence of racism and other forms of subordination told “from the perspectives of those injured and victimized by its legacy” (Yosso, 2006, p. 10), voices from the margins become the voices of authority in the researching and relating of our own experiences. Counterstory serves as a natural extension of inquiry for theorists whose research recognizes and incorporates, as data, lived and embodied experiences of people of color (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 314). It is thus crucial to use a narrative methodology that counters other methods that seek to dismiss or decenter racism and those whose lives are daily affected by it. I have used personal stories as counterstory throughout this work to raise awareness about ongoing and historic social and racial injustices in the academy through reflection of lived experiences combined with literature and statistics on the topic (Yosso, 2006, p. 10). This essay in counterstory suggests a method by which to incorporate CRT in rhetoric and composition, as a contribution of other(ed) perspectives toward an ongoing conversation in the field about narrative, dominant ideology, and their intersecting influence on programmatic and curricular standards and practices. I offer this essay as a contribution and argument for using narrative in our field, and as an invitation to those who would continue the story.

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## Notes

1. This essay is reprinted with the permission of its original publisher, the journal, *Composition Studies*, Fall 2014, 42(2).
2. Sandra K. Soto (2010) states that her use of the “@” ending in Chican@ “signals a conscientious departure from the certainty, mastery, and wholeness, while still announcing a politicized collectivity” (p. 2). This “@” keystroke serves as an expression of the author’s “certain fatigue with the clunky post-1980s gender inclusive formulations” of the word and announces a “politicized identity embraced by man or woman of Mexican descent who lives in the United States and who wants to forge connection to a collective identity politics” (original emphasis, p. 2). It also serves to unsettle not only the gender binary but also the categories that constitute it.
3. Chican@ and Chicana/o are used in my work synonymously with Mexican American. These terms are used in my work to refer to women and men of Mexican descent or heritage who live in the US. According to Yosso “Chican@ is a political term, referring to a people whose indigenous roots to North America and Mexico date back centuries” (p. 16). Also see Acuña (2010) for more on the history and origins of this term.

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