

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

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated a mi comunidad de Latinas y cultural warriors que están luchando contra los instituciones y las fronteras.

También a mis participantes, Sofia, Patricia, y Itzel. Gracias a compartir sus historias conmigo. Espero que los escribí con el respeto y la justicia que merecen.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....	vii
ABSTRACT .....	viii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Research Questions .....	3
Significance of Project .....	4
Positionality .....	7
Literature Review .....	9
Limitations .....	21
Organization of Thesis .....	23
II. METHODOLOGIES, RESEARCH DESIGN, AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....	24
LatCrit, CRT, and Counterstories .....	24
Las fuertes participantes Chicanas .....	31
Stories as Credible Fact: Interviews as Method .....	34
Writing Stories: Data Analysis Procedures .....	36
III. COUNTERSTORIES .....	38
“That’s just the way it is” .....	39
A brain bilingüe: a balance de idiomas .....	55
¡Dale gas, mijita! .....	73
IV. CODA .....	93
APPENDIX SECTION .....	95
WORKS CITED .....	102

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Description</b>
MARC	Master of Arts in Rhetoric and Composition
HSI	Hispanic-Serving Institution
POC	People of Color
WOC	Women of Color
SOC	Students of Color
AOC	Academics of Color
FOC	Faculty of Color
CRT	Critical Race Theory
LatCrit	Latina/o/x Critical Race Theory
IF19	Incident of the Fall of 2019
CI	Correcting Incident
WME	White Mainstream English
RGV	Río Grande Valley

## ABSTRACT

What does it mean to be in an academic space that doesn't reflect you or your cultural background? As Latina/o/x<sup>1</sup> students navigate higher education, they are isolated as Latina/o/x-faculty-to-Latina/o/x-student ratios continue to be unbalanced. Additionally, Latina/o/x students are preoccupied with negotiating issues on *identidad* management and formation as well as feeling empowered to persevere in a predominately White space. There is already a significant amount of scholarship that stress the importance of ethnic faculty *representación*, but most of this research is focused on K-12 education, not the university level, or does not consider Latina/o/x *representación* specifically. This case study seeks to understand how the lack of ethnic faculty *representación* in a particular place and program—the Master of Arts in Rhetoric and Composition program at Texas State University, a Hispanic-Serving Institution—affects a cohort of Latina students and how it informs (a) *identidad*, (b) *empoderamiento*, and (c) *representación étnica* through academic relationships, participation, and self-identification in a predominantly White academic space. To do so, I incorporate student perspectives through semi-structured interviews with the Latina MARC students enrolled in the Spring 2021 semester.

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<sup>1</sup> To acknowledge the diversity of this community, “Latino” and “Latina,” are used in this paper 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.”

## I. INTRODUCTION

I am a minority

Shaped and judged by the color of my skin

My *identidad* is translated as Other,

My body is judged for Difference.

I am a Woman of Color  
academic... but what does  
that really mean?

The reality: I am a product of  
a White supremacist  
patriarchal dominant system  
that attempts to devalue and  
eradicate difference through  
Americanization.

Soy Latina...

Does that make me a  
diversity token?

I am Brown...

Does that make me a  
minority?

I wrote these poems for an autoethnography graduate course in which I explored my  
*identidad*, name, and the borders that restrict me as a Latina and a Woman of Color<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I use “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.

(WOC) scholar. I was motivated to write about this topic of ethnic faculty *representación, identidad, and empoderamiento* for Latinas in academia because the academic institution reminds me I, and other WOC, don't belong; it is an institution that has historically worked against People of Color (esp. WOC). I constantly fight against its barriers to survive and maintain a presence, to relay my stories and voice. Latina/o/x academics like Aja Y. Martinez, Gloria Anzaldúa, Victor Villanueva, Patricia Zavella, Yolanda Chávez Leyva, Isabel Baca, Karma Chávez, Adela Licon, Ana Milena Ribero, y más produce scholarship que me hace sentir orgullosa of where I come from and where my family comes from and the sacrifices they've made to make it to a country that will give them better opportunities despite the illusions of the American Dream, liberty, and freedom. Because even though they got those opportunities, the road to achieving their goals was de la chingada. It's not a matter of *I made a legacy*. It's a matter of "*I made it through, I survived, I did it!*" (Mercediz 3:48). This is the mentality I have adopted as a WOC academic. I have learned that persevering through academia is going to be a long and exhausting battle simply because of my *identidad*. This is what has brought me to this research topic, to understand how other WOC academics have succeeded, to listen to their experiences and the obstacles they consistently endure, and to *value* their achievements, such as their symbol of resistance simply for being in academia.

Motivation for this project also stems from a portrait project I researched and wrote for a graduate seminar focused on Latina/o/x immigrant stories. My participants detailed their educational experiences; however, the project didn't allow room to further explore or incorporate their educational experiences as I decided to focus on the specifics of their migrant stories such as survival, loss, and fragmentation. One experience that a

participant explained resonated with me until Spring 2021 when I came up with the current topic—ethnic faculty *representación*. The participant explained that when she first entered the American school system, as she is a Latina immigrant, she felt isolated because she couldn't speak English and there weren't any teachers who could speak Spanish, so she didn't learn anything until she learned English. Although this was back in the late 2000s, I wondered if this was still an issue in education—the lack of understanding and knowledge of linguistically and culturally diverse students.

### **Research Questions**

In preparation for this project, I reflected on my academic experiences, my academic friends' experiences, books on borders and language, and drafted the article version for the portraiture paper. All of this led to the following research questions:

- What, if anything, do Latina/o/x students feel about the racial/ethnic makeup of the MARC faculty at Texas State University, a Hispanic-Serving Institution, in relation to their identity?
  - What does it mean to you to be Chicana?
  - In what ways do you identify as Chicana?
  - How do you see your identity reflected, or not reflected, in the MARC program?
  - Is *representación étnica* important to you, and if so, how?
- How does *representación étnica* affect students'
  - writing and research interests;

- relationships with non-Latina/o/x professors and students, or with the one Latino professor or other Latina/o/x students;
- comfort in expressing opinions and participating in class;
- and self-identification as Latina/o/x students and scholars?
- What strategies do Latina students develop and employ in order to support their identities within the MARC program and academia more broadly?

### **Significance of Project**

Thus, my study explores the features of student *identidad*, modes of *empoderamiento*, and *representación étnica* for Latina students in the MARC graduate program at Texas State University. In particular, this case study examines the effects of Latina students' educational experiences, writing and research interests, relationships with professors and students, comfort in expressing opinions and participation in class, and self-identificación. Additionally, there is an emphasis on gender, specifically Latina/WOC scholars and students, in this study because their stories, knowledge, and experiences have been historically silenced. This study works to reclaim space, reclaim power, and reclaim the voices of Latinas in academia.

Although there has been research on inclusive pedagogical or ideological techniques (Martinez *Counterstory*; Martinez "Counterstory"; Martinez "American Way");, creating connections between instructors and Students of Color (Ribero and Arellano; Salinas "voces"), and the different forms of oppression Latina/o/x students endure in academia (Anzaldúa *Borderlands*; Salinas "Latinx"; Vargas et al.; Villanueva "Maybe a Colony"), as will be discussed in the Literature Review section, there has not

been sufficient research exploring ethnic faculty *representación* in a master's graduate program nor its effects on graduate Students of Color (SOC). My study explores how this lack of ethnic, specifically Latina/o/x, *representación* in an English master's program in rhetoric and writing studies affects bilingual Latina students, especially because Texas State University is an HSI, or an institution that "actively support[s] its Hispanic/Latinx population [by] ensur[ing] a robust education experience" ("HSI Funding").

The purpose of this case study is to highlight and understand 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-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. With this in mind, I want to make one clarification: although the MARC professors are comprised of mostly White male and female individuals, this study is not designed to denounce or criticize their credibility as successful and valuable members of the MARC program. In fact, they have become my mentors as they are knowledgeable and open-minded professors willing to help any student. Instead, this project sheds light on a social issue and acknowledges how the students filled this gap.

This study occurs at Texas State University, an HSI of about 38,000 students that can be broken down to 42% White, 39.7% Latina/o/x, 11.1% Black, 1.5% International, and 5.7% unknown as of the fall of 2021 ("University Demographics"). Since my freshman year of university (fall of 2016), there has been a steady increase of Latina/o/x enrollment at Texas State University, beginning with 34.66% in 2016 to 39.7% in 2021.

Among the tenured and tenure-track faculty at Texas State University, 571 are White, 90 are Latina/o/x, 33 are Black, and 110 are Asian. Among the 40 English Department tenured and tenure-track faculty, only nine are Scholars of Color/non-White, and only four are Latina/o/x—there is only one Latina tenure-track professor in the English Department (“General Employee Information: Employee Demographics by Year”).

Furthermore, the MARC program admits about six to eight graduate students per 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”). Further, of the five MARC faculty members who regularly teach graduate courses, three are White women, one a White man, and one a Latino man.

Historically, the Rhetoric and Composition academic field is an English-only field. In fact, it is a colonial field that composes its students into standardized English speakers, writers, and readers. Since the NCTE’s 1974 Students’ Rights to Their Own Language statement, the Rhetoric and Composition field appears to be increasingly concerned with issues of linguistic justice and education. Yet, several decades later, students are still being mistreated for their language use as teachers and administrators perpetuate and advocate what April Baker-Bell refers to as White Mainstream English, or “[W]hite ways of speaking [that] become the invisible—or better, inaudible—norm” that reflects the dominant race and gender in American society (3). As a result, this study stylistically se sumerge en español at appropriate moments to reflect my and the Chicanas’ language—a Spanish-bended English—to break the barriers of the historic

English-only field. Spanish is not italicized (except for the few elements of study) nor translated because it reflects our reality in the *In-Between* (discussed in the Literature Review and chapter 2): bending entre dos culturas, mundos, y fronteras. This practice works as a counternarrative for having to adhere to English-only standards in the academic field. Other scholars, for instance, don't translate high vocabulary/use accessible language, so scholars like me—who speak languages other than English—shouldn't feel forced to comply to English-only standards. And yet, this thesis must still be written primarily in English to be acceptable for my degree plan. So, Spanish is used sparingly. Additionally, there are some concepts and phrases that just can't be translated into English without being butchered. Por ejemplo, *empoderamiento* no es simplemente empowerment. English cannot capture the strength of this concept, feeling, way of living which will be discussed later in the study. Therefore, my use of Spanish is *empoderamiento*, it's reclaiming my voice in a space that historically works against POC/Latinas.

### **Positionality**

My *identidad* as a 2.5 generation<sup>3</sup> Latina, a second-year graduate student in the Texas State MARC program, and an advocate for Latina/o/x rights has influenced my research on a personal level because I strive to contest and critique the dominant culture's control and monopoly over the social and cultural perceptions of Latinas/os/xs. I am a Latina woman of Mexican and Cuban descent, born in San Diego, California, but raised in Austin, Texas. These cities are inhabited by vastly different cultures and communities

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<sup>3</sup> A label unknown to most that means I have one U.S.-born parent and one foreign-born parent

of Latinas/os/xs. I am not pura Mexicana ni Cubana ni Americana. Soy una mezcla de los tres. Striking a balance among these three is crucial to my *identidad* because I am a product of colonization: a mixture of three (if not more) different cultures. Therefore, my ethnic culture varies in some respects to the participants' cultures.

Furthermore, 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. For instance, I am one of the first in the program to be approved for four thesis committee members, one of whom is from a different university and is integral to my committee. My position as the graduate assistant has also allowed me to build relationships with the faculty and students, creating a tightly knit comunidad.

Unlike my participants, I was raised in suburban White America in a middle class (after my parents worked hard to earn that status) home. I did not grow up having close relationships with other Latinas/os/xs. I just didn't connect with them because they spoke Spanish and I couldn't. I could only understand a small amount. When I entered high school, after changing schools from a diverse student population to a predominately White population, I instantly befriended a Salvadoran immigrant because she was the only Brown face in a sea of Whiteness. My high school experience was my first insight to understand how significantly different I am: Latina; capable of speaking Spanish but refused to; able to help the White students in Spanish class; devoid of color; still physically marked as Other. Although my first language was technically Spanish, my parents taught their children English so they would not to be bullied or discriminated against in school, and as a result I did not grow up learning and speaking Spanish.

Instead, I grew up despising my heritage, culture, and especially the Spanish language, probably because I did not understand it, nor did I see it positively reflected in the media. I, like others, went through an internalized racism phase. I did not become refamiliarized with Spanish or begin taking pride in my culture until I entered university and was required to take a foreign language class. I pushed myself to complete four Spanish language courses and tackled a double minor in Spanish. I continue to nurture and negotiate my relationship with my identities, heritages, cultures, and languages.

### **Literature Review**

Unsurprisingly, the topic of Latina/o/x students' educational experiences in higher education, specifically in master's programs, is underexplored. My review of the limited scholarship focuses on three key elements: *identidad*, *empoderamiento*, and general ideas about *representación étnica*. It is important to note that these three elements certainly overlap because if one's *identidad* está representada<sup>4</sup>, then there is a sense of *empoderamiento*. Therefore, *empoderamiento* is the goal, it is center of this study because it shows the ability of these women to defy and break down the structures of power that are purposefully working against them. It indicates how they claim their stories, space, voice, and power. The question is: how do we create an academic space that will not only allow Latina voices to be heard, but listened to as well? For instance, in graduate seminars, how does the academic structure ensure Latinas are heard? It's not a matter of ethnic faculty *representación* but valuing and using the *funds of knowledge*, or the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills,"

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<sup>4</sup> Specifically meaning when marginalized voices and experiences are reflected, valued, and heard in *voces de poder* spaces.

these marginalized<sup>5</sup> students bring and have often suppressed because of the dominant culture's lack of understanding and willingness to listen and learn (Moll et al. 133).

Furthermore, I survey research on Latina/o/x scholars, and other Academics of Color (AOC), to reflect the intersectional work of this case study, to highlight the similarities between some of the issues facing AOC and Latina/o/x students, and to foreground the work and perspectives of AOC whose work and experiences have historically been silenced or ignored.

### *Identidad*

Race/ethnicity is a significant feature of *identidad* that helps shape a person, yet many people struggle to understand this because it can be complex. For instance, issues of *identidad* among people of Latin American origin and descent living in the United States are directly related to the clash of ethnic culture(s) and American life. What does it mean to be Latina/o/x? To be Latina/o/x is not a fixed *identidad* or a rigid list of identifiable features. To be Latina/o/x, as Berenice Sánchez et al. explain, is an intersection of *identidades* that cannot be disassociated, separated, or categorized from being Latina/o/x (7). Thus, *identidades* are fluid. *Identidad* formation and management is an ever-growing process, it does not stop.

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<sup>5</sup> Although “minoritized” is an accurate label for POC and WOC, “marginalized” is used in this study because it is an action word that indicates society (*voces de poder*) have pushed POC and WOC to the margins of society, more so than labeling them as minorities to the majority. However, POC and WOC have reclaimed this *identidad* label because they celebrate living in the margins. The binary of “majority vs. minority” doesn’t limit us, rather it expands our possibilities because it disrupts the norm as we travel between two or more worlds through the *In-Between*.

Cristobal Salinas Jr., an up-and-coming Latin\*<sup>6</sup> scholar, elucidates this issue of identificación through the historical labels for people of Latin American origin and descent. In his article, Salinas concludes that the term Latinx aims to be inclusive but actually excludes people of indigenous backgrounds, Latin Americans who speak a non-Spanish/indigenous language, and people of African descent (“Latinx” 162). The difficulty is homogeneous labels that group people of Latin American origin and descent, such as Latinos, Latiné, Latinu, Latin, Latinx, are pan-ethnic labels that almost always exclude a group since Latinas/os/xs are such a large, diverse population. As Salinas explains, “... language has history and history should not be deleted... terms/labels exist *for us*, and we do not exist for them” (“Latinx” 165). Therefore, *identidad* is a fluid concept that is always changing, so we should acknowledge the identifying labels of each individual in the Latina/o/x community. I bring up this controversy because it clearly shows the foundational issues of *identidad* Latinas/os/xs experience—a mere identifying label. We are a double-colonized people, by the Spanish conquistadores and the American tycoons. Nuestras identidades have been altered, merged, and shaped by our colonizers. So, what are we? What do we want others to call us?

Other scholars further complicate the element of *identidad* for Latinas/os/xs by analyzing other contributing factors such as language and geographic and metaphorical location. According to Aja Y. Martinez, cultural warrior Gloria Anzaldúa is one of only two influential Latina/o/x-focused scholars in Rhetoric and Composition focused on race theory (“Counterstory” 68). Anzaldúa exudes the complexities of Latina/o/x *identidad*

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<sup>6</sup> Rather than using the pan-ethnic label *Latinx*, Salinas argues *Latin\** is more inclusive as it seeks to understand and identify people of different Latin American origins and descents, taking into account “sexuality, language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, and phenotype” (164; 155).

through her masterpiece, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, that highlights her theories on borderland rhetorics through prose and poetry. Most famously, Anzaldúa explores the concept of a liminal space Latinas/os/xs reside in; she calls it “a border culture [...] a borderland [...] a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” that is both physical and metaphorical and forces Latinas/os/xs to feel like they do not belong in their family’s country of origin nor their American home (*Borderlands* 25). These borders are everywhere. They surround and suffocate Latinas/os/xs to keep them in “their place,” to keep them from achieving their potential, from reclaiming space, voice, and power, and to keep them from overtaking their oppressors. Thus, Anzaldúa’s focus on borders will form the foundation of my research as my participants and I come from and reside in a borderland.

Anzaldúa’s work also speaks to a social phenomenon I have theorized to further explain this bordered way of life, known as the *In-Between*. This theory engages other Latina/o/x scholars’ work on borders but focuses on the life-long battle of maintaining balance between native and foreign. Chapter 2 explains how it forms the foundation of this study.

Additionally, Anzaldúa validates the disconnections created by borderlands that bordered people experience through her feelings and experiences. For instance, in a section about life in the borderlands, Anzaldúa explains that “we do not make full use [of our potentials;]” instead, “we abnegate. And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim... or to feel strong, and, for the most part, in control” (*Borderlands* 43). She explains marginalized voices can fall to the power of the system that works against them by suppressing and demoralizing them, such as educational

institutions. Or we can rise, “rebel and rail” against the oppressive culture, power system, figure, or whatever is blocking us from achieving our potential (*Borderlands* 43).

Through her words, she gives us feelings of *empoderamiento* to reclaim our voice and power and gives us reason to take back our spaces.

Reclaiming power, on the other hand, is about embracing one’s *identidad*, understanding where one comes from, and using that knowledge to better the self and their people. Reclaiming power means understanding that to ignore the Latina/o/x’s ethnic origins is to ignore the Latina/o/x. I learned to reclaim my space just as Yolanda Chávez Leyva argues “[t]his is my story as well... because generations of my people’s bones lie buried in this earth, I am grounded to this place, the border, as a *fronteriza*,” (2). Our positionalities as *fronterizas* fuel our credibility as Latina scholars capable of writing about *el límite entre estados porque somos de la frontera*, this ethos fuels our power. For Latinas/os/xs living on the border (abstract or physical), language has always been a driving factor of cultural loyalty. In other words, to speak Spanish often means to be less American, and to speak English is to bring shame to your family’s sacrifices because it shows a willingness to assimilate. And yet, the American education system continues to adhere to Angela Valenzuela’s *subtractive schooling* theory, the academic process in which marginalized students are stripped of their language and culture, “leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure” (3). Therefore, these scholars explain reclamation is a step toward embracing one’s multiple *identidades*. It “is not a matter of English or *Español*. It is recognition, value, and practice of both, *de los dos*” (Baca 192). It is about striking a balance while existing in the *In-Between*, learning to bend between American culture and not lose sight of the ethnic culture(s) of one’s heritage—which

institutions like academia are working to eradicate. For this reason, it is important scholars like these provide their perspectives, experiences, and opportunities to act and understand. They remind people like me that *I am not alone*. They fuel my fight against dominant cultural ways and give me words for my anger and frustration because I am of a “blood that is blended” (Rodriguez xi). This study, like many, does not offer an easy solution to all Latina/o/x academic issues; rather, this study provides insight on *identidad, empoderamiento, y representación* for one specific group of Latina master’s students using the personal and experiences as credible facts to explain social phenomena like the *In-Between*.

Victor Villanueva, who Martinez credits as the other Latina/o/x scholar focused on race theory, explores *identidad* and language in his autobiographical book *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. In this book, he addresses the cultural, social, and political issues and complications with identifying as Hispanic<sup>7</sup>/ Latina/o/x in the United States. In particular, he claims, “rhetoric is the conscious use of language,” and “language is our primary symbol system,” so if one’s language is not up to society’s standards, they will be excluded and othered, which often is the case in the education system as Valenzuela discusses (Villanueva *Bootstraps* 76-7). Hence the loyalty complication with learning English as a Latina/o/x.

It is the power of language and rhetoric that historically labels the Latina/o/x *identidad* as inferior to Americans because we are racialized, diminished by marketing ploys: lies, stereotypes, and prejudices that have created pre-determined assumptions for Americans about Latinas/os/xs, ignoring the fact that some were born here. Or the media

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<sup>7</sup> The label Villanueva adopts in the text

portrays Latina stereotypes such as the curvaceous and hypersexualized Latina like J. Lo and Salma Hayek (Blanco “Marginalized Other”). Therefore, Latinas/os/xs are exposed to inaccurate media depictions of Latinas/os/xs. To add to this heightened sense of *identidad* exclusion, Villanueva also explores a difference between *immigrant* and *minority* in the United States, despite the obvious issue of citizenship. He writes,

The immigrant seeks to take on the culture of the majority. And the majority, given certain preconditions, not the least of which is displaying the language and dialect of the majority, accepts the immigrant. The minority, even when accepting the culture of the majority, is never wholly accepted. There is always a distance. (*Bootstraps* 23)

In other words, the minority will continue to fight a losing battle because they will never be accepted in American society, even with forfeiting their cultural roots—which is sometimes not enough. This questions the desire for belonging to a society that has historically engaged in imperial, colonial, racist, slave labor, genocidal practices that are detrimental to marginalized groups. It begs the question: should Latinas/os/xs want to be accepted in American society? Perhaps yes for the obvious reason, which is to avoid discrimination and implications of being othered, as well as a greater variety of life opportunities—though these are often illusions.

Villanueva argues *immigrant* and *minority* can be summarized as “immigration [versus] colonization” (*Bootstraps* 29). However, this disregards the fact that immigrants’ lives are complicated by forced assimilation to survive in the dominant culture, transnational displacement, and other forms of oppression. What I’m suggesting, and Villanueva is attempting to illustrate, isn’t that minorities have it worse than immigrants, but that there is a different form of oppression experienced only by minorities, like how WOC experience a different form of oppression than POC or women (discussed in

chapter 3). The oppression minorities experience centers on the WOC feminist framework of intersectionality, acknowledging that minorities have ties in both American and ethnic worlds. Therefore, minorities are *conquered*, forced to assimilate to American culture (whether they forfeited or maintained some of their cultural roots), and they understand the dynamics of American society and cultural values, yet they are labeled as *minority* because they are other—different from the majority (Villanueva *Bootstraps* 29). A plain and simple fact, yet a reason filled with complexity and confusion. As Villanueva asserts, “[m]inorities remain a colonized people” (*Bootstraps* 31). They didn’t choose the United States to reside in, “[they] were here before here was there” (Rodriguez 109). They didn’t have a choice. And yet, American society seems to think that they did have a choice, that they can “run back to Mexico,” even though most second and third generations don’t have any ties to Mexico—disregarding the insult that not all are lo mexicano. Thus, Villanueva’s focus on rhetoric and language informs my research as my participants and I live in a society that discredits our ethnic cultures and knowledge.

### *Empoderamiento*

As a research element, *empoderamiento* is a significant feature that offers the mentality *I did it, so you can too* that seems valuable to motivate SOC to complete their education and find solace in times of stress and confusion. Further, this element easily identifies issues in the current educational environment because of the absence of equity and inclusion in academia. For instance, Salinas’s article on *voces perdidas* and *voces de poder* discusses the history of marginalization, continued oppression of Latinas/os/xs, and introduces the importance of Latina/o/x *representación* as vital for Latina/o/x students.

Salinas coins the terms *voces perdidas* or “*lost voices*, the narratives that have been forgotten and rejected by a system that often only recognizes *voces de poder*,” and *voces de poder* which “dominate academia and silence non-English speakers, communities of color, and those who do not have access to higher education and scholarship” (“*voces*” 747). My study will use these terms to provide names for those who overshadow the marginalized and for the overshadowed to obtain space and feel a sense of *empoderamiento* to proudly share their stories, as well as to place emphasis on the Spanish language. Because the bottom line is it is not White people who invalidate, discriminate, and belittle Latinas/os/xs or POC. This is done by all people, brought on by a system and culture that was formed by dividing and conquering the powerless, the vulnerable. Therefore, *voces de poder* does not mean White people. *Voces de poder* vary in race, ethnicity, and gender; they are the poisonous, culturally insensitive, critically unaware voices who perpetuate the harmful, traditional academic and societal practices that have historically benefitted White men and excluded, silenced, and marginalized the Other—the one that is different from the majority.

Other scholars further develop ideas on *empoderamiento* by highlighting the social inconsistencies in academia. For example, Villanueva extends the issue of “the colonial sensibility” that language and writing have developed in the composition field; and, instead of further supporting the colonizer school that enforces standardized English, he argues each writer should celebrate and embrace their unique style of writing and feel empowered by their distinct differences (“Maybe a Colony” 184). So, I take pride in using Spanish and playing with poems and style to deliver my participants’ stories. Moreover, Martinez discusses racial inequalities through the idea of *the empire of force*,

which she describes as a White-dominated presence that suppresses the potential of minorities to succeed, to enlighten, to create, to grow, to design, to invent, and so much more (“American Way”). Through this *empire of force*, Martinez emphasizes the need for *representación étnica* by indicating that the vast use of the color-blind racism ideology actually diminishes the value of one’s *identidad* and neglects to acknowledge acts of racism in society (“American Way” 587). Color blindness “ignores racial difference and perpetuates ‘the status quo with all of its deeply institutionalized injustices to racial minorities’”; thereby dismissing the importance of race and the social repercussions this creates for students and, ultimately, the opportunities for ethnic faculty *representación* (*Counterstory* 7). As a solution, she offers the counterstory method/ology—employed in this study—to provide *voces perdidas* with the opportunity to reclaim voice and space by proudly sharing their forgotten stories through “a narrative method [that] theorize[s] racialized experience[s],” to give them the opportunity to reclaim power by detailing their realities, and “to expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege” (*Counterstory* 16; “Counterstory” 70). Counterstory is both a product and a process. As a result, employing *empoderamiento* as a lens of analysis will allow me to highlight how the participants claim their stories in an academic space that has historically silenced SOC and Faculty of Color (FOC) and not just detail their struggles and marginalization.

### *Representación*

On one hand, most research on Latina/o/x *representación* in higher education does not focus on graduate students’ experiences. Instead, the primary focus is on undergraduate experiences that details barriers for Latina/o/x students to complete their

education, such as socioeconomic status; support; culture; mentoring, specifically how “the importance of role models and mentors cannot be underestimated [for Latina/o/x students]”; and Latina/o/x student retention (Castellanos and Jones 9; Hurtado and Kamimura; Orozco). Additional scholarship focuses on obstacles, breakthroughs, administrative positions, and *representación* in higher education for Latina/o/x faculty (Sánchez et al.; Verdugo). A participant in Sánchez et al.’s study on Latina higher education administrators, intersection of identities, and navigating the field expands on the issue of *representación* by detailing how she “cope[d] with feelings [of not belonging] and sought out comfort in literature where she could see herself represented” (7). Finding solace in literature and scholarship is a pattern I have noticed throughout my graduate school journey as I and others have sought texts for *representación*, validation, and understanding. In this case, Sánchez et al. emphasize that if FOC feel the constraints of a lack of *representación*, then SOC must also experience the same, perhaps more so and in other ways.

Some scholarship highlights the importance of ethnic faculty *representación* for the success of SOC. In an article studying Latina/o/x faculty staffing patterns to determine ethnic student-to-faculty ratios at HSIs, researchers concluded “faculty of color frequently serve as role models, encourage academic success, and help to facilitate career goals for students of similar ethnoracial backgrounds” (Vargas et al. 44). Additionally, the authors indicate FOC “send a message that people of color belong in academic spaces” because they “facilitate increased comfort [...] and feelings of ethnoracial empowerment among similarly racialized students,” resulting in SOC performing significantly better (Vargas et al. 50, 44). Moreover, young and emerging scholars have

also discussed this importance. For instance, multiple PhD dissertations reveal marginalized students' experiences in predominately White academic spaces (Hayes; Horsford; Kuehn). Similar work includes a dissertation that explores the importance of a Mentor of Color for the success of students (Riojas). Johanna Riojas concludes mentorship, specifically Mentors of Color or FOC, play a significant role in the success of graduate SOC. Riojas notes that seven of her ten participants mentioned "having a mentor or faculty of color as helpful in their navigation of graduate school" because these FOC "served as an awareness that being a student of color and completing their graduate education was possible" (52). It is the mentality of *I did it, so you can too* that seems invaluable to motivate SOC to complete their education, find guidance and solace, and seek help in situations involving discrimination.

On the other hand, research on racial/ethnic underrepresentation in higher education is primarily focused on African American<sup>8</sup> students and faculty. For instance, Walter R. Allen et al. examine African American professors' access and success compared to their White counterparts at White midwestern universities, while Lori Walkington examines Black<sup>9</sup> women faculty and graduate students' experiences in higher education. Walkington emphasizes Black women as an image of resistance for simply being in higher education (57). This image of resistance is also reflected in scholarship that discusses Latinas/os/xs in higher education—students, faculty, or administrators—as *chingón* (Ribero and Arellano).

Scholarship focused on the lack of Latina/o/x *representación* in academia provides a mentoring program as a solution. Ana Milena Ribero and Sonia C. Arellano

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<sup>8</sup> Because I am not a member of the Black community, the format respectfully mirrors Allen et al.'s article

<sup>9</sup> Because I am not a member of the Black community, the format respectfully mirrors Walkington's article

propose *comadrisimo*, a feminist mentoring practice that takes “an intersectional approach to social justice [to] complicate the binaries of ‘agency and victimhood’ and ‘discourse materiality’ to account for the diverse lived experiences of Women of Color” (341). In other words, a cohort of WOC (particularly Latinas) work together to climb the ladder of success, and, within that group, they each bring a young Latina with them, helping the next generation follow in their footsteps. This framework of *comadrisimo* will aid my research to determine the type of mentoring the Latina students in the MARC program have formally or informally adopted to make up for the lack of ethnic faculty *representación*.

### **Limitations**

As with any study, the design of the current study is subject to limitations. While the small sample size and my focus on Latinas might seem like a limitation in my endeavor to make connections among the experiences of Latina graduate students in a Rhetoric and Composition program, the experiences and knowledge of WOC are traditionally ignored within academia; therefore, I aim to do justice to their historically silenced stories by thoroughly portraying their experiences. Hence the focus on Latina and WOC scholarship, the Latina participants, and the emphasis on the lack of Latina ethnic faculty *representación* in the MARC program.

A limitation this study does create is the sole focus on Texas State University MARC students, which makes the findings less generalizable. What is lost in generalizability, however, it gains in specificity in considering a particular cohort of Latina students in a particular program at a particular time. Future research could include

other English Department programs at other HSIs to develop a pattern for Latina/o/x *representación, identidad, and empoderamiento* across a larger scale, or other issues of culture and language in academia.

Furthermore, my limited scope of Tejano culture is another limitation for this study since my participants are Tejanas<sup>10</sup>. As a Californian Latina, I do not identify with Tejanos, therefore my knowledge of their culture is limited. We definitely have similar experiences, but I will never know what it is like to live in a Texas border town unless I move and reside there for a significant amount of time which I do not plan to do before conducting this study. Similar to how all students don't learn the same way, this limitation speaks to that fact that Latinas/os/xs are not all the same.

A final limitation to my study is the limited interaction between researcher and participants because the interviews will be conducted via Zoom. Although Zoom does capture tone, gestures, and facial expressions better than written responses or phone interviews, it does not allow room to register nonverbal cues that can speak more on what a participant is trying to say or not say, and the human connection that aids in dissolving vulnerability is lost. Further, the rhetorical feminist practice of caring for one another and caring for each other's health is evident in the virtual communication that must be applied since this study is being conducted during a global pandemic—human interaction is both limited and dangerous.

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<sup>10</sup> I describe the participants as “Tejanas” because of my cultural and geographic position as a Californian Latina. My participants, however, identify as “Chicana” because it is a broader identifying label for Mexican Americans from different geographic regions in the United States. Elsewhere in the study, I defer to their *identidades* as “Chicanas.”

## **Organization of Thesis**

The rest of this thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 covers the specific qualitative research methodological approach. Chapter 3 details the thematically structured stories from the participants that are guided by CRT's nine tenets and connects the participants' experiences to the counterstory method/ology. Chapter 4 offers a coda, or a short piece relaying a story, to conclude the study.

## II. METHODOLOGIES, RESEARCH DESIGN, AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study has been influenced by my own positionality and stance as an AOC. I hold a strong belief that students should be in a space that accurately reflects their culture in order to be successful and respected in that space. In this case, it will be easier for Latina/o/x students to be heard, understood, and feel inclined to participate in writing and language use, research interests, and class discussions if they have some form of *representación* or *comunidad*, whether that be in faculty or peers, because graduate seminars are not safe spaces, students get away with making outrageous and culturally insensitive claims leaving marginalized students vulnerable and defenseless. As a result of this strong belief, I invested time in finding deeply intersectional scholarly works that were written by Latina/o/x scholars about Latinas/os/xs, as I made clear in the Literature Review section. It is important that Latina/o/x scholars address these issues of *representación* in academia, as highlighted in this study, to accurately reflect the community and to be respected in the field for their expertise, all without requiring validation by *voces de poder*—who vary in race, ethnicity, and gender and perpetuate the harmful, traditional practices that have historically excluded *voces perdidas*, as stated in the Literature Review section.

### **LatCrit, CRT, and Counterstories**

My approach to this project is deeply influenced by Latina/o/x Critical Race Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Aja Y. Martinez's work on counterstories as I analyze student experiences with particular attention to counterstories.

The overarching theoretical frameworks for this study are CRT and, specifically, LatCrit. According to Baker-Bell, “CRT functions as an important tool that helps analyze race and racism and critique white supremacy, but it does not precisely name or adequately address the racial oppressions of specific racialized groups” (19). Hence LatCrit which 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 Martinez *Counterstory* 22). Because of my commitment to intersectionality—by studying language, ethnicity, culture, and gender—in this study, counterstory is a necessary method/ology because I consistently argue my participants’ interviews and stories, as well as my own, are credible facts. We, as Yolanda Chávez Leyva argues, are “grounded to this place, the border, as a *fronteriza*,” (2). We are capable and obligated to tell these stories because we’ve lived these experiences. Somos fronterizas desde la frontera. No one else can tell these stories without experiencing what we have endured first-hand. And that’s why I lean on LatCrit because it centers, as Lindsay Pérez Huber explains, “the unique forms of oppression [Latinas/os/xs] encounter” by revealing the way Latinas/os/xs experience the world (79). Therefore, I use LatCrit to frame the key elements of *identidad*, *empoderamiento*, and *belonging/representación* in a predominantly White institutional space, as well as support counterstories—identified through interviews—to recover and highlight the experiences of Latina master’s students, the *voces perdidas* in this space.

This study also leans on CRT because, as Baker-Bell argues, it is “a general theory of racism” that, as Martinez highlights, focuses “on issues of power, race, and racism to address power imbalances, especially as these are racialized,” and “argue against practices that promote and express racial discrimination” (Baker-Bell 19; Martinez *Counterstory* 6-7; Marshall and Rossman 28). 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 (Martinez *Counterstory* 26).

However, scholars cannot employ or engage in CRT without acknowledging its eight tenets that apply to how we analyze counterstories and often intersect with theory, such as systemic racism, cultural hegemonic whiteness, and more. The “permanence of race and racism,” (one) is the understanding that racism is endemic and often times is so engrained in society that it is unrecognizable (Martinez *Counterstory* 10). As a result, POC have experiential knowledge “from having lived under such systems of racism and oppression” that they explore and expose issues facing POC through methods and methodologies like counterstory (*Counterstory* 10). CRT must also challenge dominant cultural ideologies (two) that, like racism described in the first tenet, are deeply rooted in society and have become norms, such as color blindness, equitable education, and more. “Interest convergence” (three) explains White elites/*voces de poder*/cultural hegemony will tolerate racial progress for POC if it also advances White/dominant culture self-interest (*Counterstory* 11). Regardless that scholars agree race is not a biological determinant, society continues to categorize people racially; thereby making “race as

social construct” (four) because it is the outcome of unstable social meanings by political struggles (*Counterstory* 12). This allows race to shape and structure society, which is evident in the centuries of systemic racism in U.S. history. Martinez highlights intersectionality (five), the connections/intersections of different parts of *identidad* (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender), and antiessentialism (five), contesting culturally racist assumptions that homogenize racial groups, as essential for learning *from* POC and not *about* POC (*Counterstory* 14). Similar to H. Samy Alim’s theory of transracialization—the moving across social/cultural boundaries—interdisciplinarity (six), is moving across and blending academic disciplines, such as Chicano Studies or Ethnic Studies which blend “history, literature, sociology, and the arts” (*Counterstory* 14).

Tenets seven, eight, and nine (an added tenet by Martinez) apply not just to CRT, but also to its methodology, counterstory. The “centrality of experiential knowledge and/or unique voices of color,” (seven) refers to allowing POC to tell their racial realities because “[*voces de poder*] do not often acknowledge the experiences of [POC]” (*Counterstory* 15). Martinez makes the argument that, historically, the stories of *voces de poder* have been validated and memorialized as “true” history while simultaneously invalidating the stories and experiences of *voces perdidas* (*Counterstory* 16). Therefore, counterstory, as a methodology of CRT, works to validate the experiential knowledge of *voces perdidas* as critical to understanding and analyzing racial subordination (*Counterstory* 16). As a result, CRT and counterstory must maintain a “commitment to social justice” (eight) by working “to eliminat[e] racism, sexism, and poverty and empower subordinated minority groups” (Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso, qtd. in Martinez *Counterstory* 17). Lastly, Martinez added “accessibility” as a ninth tenet

because “the work is for them... sometimes about them... and inspired by them” so the work must be accessible to *voces perdidas* (*Counterstory* 18). I would like to specify that these works shouldn’t just be accessible to *voces perdidas* in terms of publication location, but also in terms of language and diction. Therefore, my study bends into Spanish and does not provide translations because it is for nosotras *voces perdidas*, no es pa’ la cultura dominante. I will use all nine of these tenets to find and analyze counterstories from the participants’ interviews, as will be discussed in chapter 3.

After framing the theoretical foundation of this study, it is important to make the distinction that counterstory is both a product and a process. It is a product of the resistance against *voces de poder* and a process for *voces perdidas* to reclaim their stories. As Martinez explains, “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). This social science method/ology is incorporated in the Rhetoric and Composition field because it is a narrative method/ology that counters and decenters traditional ways of thinking and being simply by examining the rhetorical choices POC/*voces perdidas* make to survive in a *voces de poder*-dominant society and culture. Furthermore, LatCrit scholars Dolores Delgado Bernal, Daniel Solórzano, and Tara J. Yosso, according to Martinez, “theorized and extended critical race counterstory as a necessary and legitimate methodology of critical inquiry for marginalized scholars” because counterstory centers the voices and knowledge of POC “as legitimate and critical to understanding racism” (*Counterstory* 22).

As a result, I examine student experiences of student *identidad*, modes of *empoderamiento*, and ethnic faculty *representación* collected through interviews. To be specific, 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” (Martinez *Counterstory* 3). Therefore, to focus on student experiences, I conduct semi-structured interviews which have been used by other CRT theorists to allow the emergence and foregrounding of stories. Interviews, LatCrit, and CRT’s tenets, will allow me to look for and identify counterstories that challenge dominant conceptions of race, what it means to be Latina in academia, and understand how student experiences speak against unexamined stock (majoritarian) stories and ideologies. In this regard, counterstories function as a Latina feminist practice to reclaim space, voice, and power since Latinas are often isolated and historically silenced in academia. Counterstories as a feminist practice blend the personal, political, and sisterhood/comunidad which are feminist traits used against the patriarchal society, or *voces de poder*. It is not just that my participants are Brown, Spanish-speaking students, but that they are also women. The dominant *voces de poder* continue the marginalization and exclusion of the participants due to their intersectional *identidades* of race and gender and because their freedom would signify the end to “all the systems of oppression” which cannot happen under colonial hierarchies (Combahee River Collective, qtd. in Martinez 13). Society, as we know it, would collapse because hierarchies are the only thing keeping *voces perdidas* from fulfilling their true potentials to overtake their oppressors.

The foundation of this study is deeply rooted in intersectional scholars and theorists such as Anzaldúa and her ideas on border rhetorics and *brujería*<sup>11</sup>, Martinez and her ideas on counterstory, Ribero and Arellano's idea on *comadrisimo*, and other Latina and POC scholars as discussed in chapters 1 and 2. This study is also embedded in the *In-Between* because it explores and uncovers the physical and emotional connections and disconnections the participants experience in their master's journeys by searching for a balance, if one exists, between conforming to the dominant American culture and preserving ethnic heritage. The *In-Between* is a social phenomenon I theorize that focuses on the balance between conforming to the dominant American culture and preserving ethnic heritage. It is a life-long battle of maintaining balance between native and foreign. Similar to the concept of *nepantla*, "a Nahuatl word for the space between two bodies of water, the space between two worlds" that conjures ideas of blending and mixing for people "willing to change into a new person and further grow and develop," the *In-Between* is a liminal space where Latinas/os/xs are involuntarily placed when living in the United States (citizen and non-citizen alike) that, unlike *nepantla*, is an uncomfortable and frustrating *balance* (Anzaldúa *Borderlands* 276). This theory engages other Latina/o/x scholarship on borders as liminal spaces where people of mixed identities reside but differs because it seeks a balance. 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. It seeks a middle ground to live contently with cultural heritage in

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<sup>11</sup> A Latina feminist spirituality that reclaims power by connecting el cuerpo y la alma to supernatural worlds and concepts of being as spiritual guidance "to deal with political and personal problems" (Anzaldúa *this bridge* 570).

American society. It is my attempt at understanding and navigating my *identidad* as a Latina living in spaces that do not culturally nor ethnically reflect me.

### **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.

I selected and recruited (see Appendix B) participants from the graduating cohort of 2021 because of their experiences in the MARC program, our close relationships, and their individually unique multicultural *identidades* and backgrounds. All three 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. Since they graduated a year before me, their experiences in the MARC program have guided me toward a safer and less chaotic graduate school experience—but not devoid of all forms of discrimination and belittling. Therefore, their experiences and our established trust made the interviews productive and offered rich and compelling data for this project.

As previously stated in the limitations section, I do not share a similar background with the participants. However, the participants share similar backgrounds, having grown up in the RGV and survived White-dominant spaces such as higher education. I, on the other hand, was born in San Diego, California—a West Coast border town which is very

different from Texas border towns in terms of culture, language, treatment by non-Latinas/os/xs, and more—and I grew up in the comforts of White, suburban Austin, Texas. However, we do share a language. Even though my Spanish language reflects my California-Mexican and Cuban heritage, I can still understand and speak with these three Chicanas in a way that is comforting, more so than simply speaking English—some things just can't be translated. We have bonded over equitable and multicultural pedagogies, multicultural literacies and scholars, and engage in *comadrisimo*. Most importantly, we have bonded over struggles and triumphs of navigating White-dominant academia. In fact, the participants offered their help and guidance during my orientation into the program, making me feel less alone from the beginning because three Brown faces said to me, “You got this. I’m here if you need anything.” That’s what brought us together: they’re open, genuinely caring personalities. I owe a lot to these Chicanas.

I have created short profiles for each of the three participants for reader reference below. It is important to note each participant has a different background and academic experiences, no one is more valid than another. They are all brave chingonas for leaving home to prosper through education.

### **Sofía**

Sofía is a recent MARC graduate from Eagle Pass, Texas; she also spent five years growing up in México. She identifies as Mexican American or Chicana and is a proud First Gen student. Sofía is currently pursuing a PhD out of state. She proudly speaks Spanish, English, and Tex-Mex Spanish that is prevalent in the South Texas/Mexico borderland. She has a critical understanding of language practices, border studies, equitable pedagogies,

and students' rights. 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. She also has a critical understanding of language practices, border studies, equitable pedagogies, and students' rights. 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. Like the other two participants, Itzel also has a critical understanding of language practices, border studies, equitable pedagogies, and students' rights. 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.

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

Interviews are the best method for this study because they capture the richness and complexity of the participants' experiences and are used to read and identify counterstories. As previously stated, counterstories are both product and process, a method and methodology. They are identified and used to "strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" (Martinez "Counterstory" 70). I conducted semi-structured Zoom interviews of up to two hours long and loosely followed a set of interview questions (see Appendix A). A semi-structured interview is a planned yet flexible interview that usually involves making questions in advance with the idea that the interviewer will loosely follow them (Blakeslee and Fleischer 149). I focused the interviews on the participants and their opportunities to tell their stories, especially since they might not have had the opportunity before.

As advised by Ann Blakeslee and Cathy Fleischer to audio record and take notes during interviews, I used the recording and transcription functions on Zoom. These interviews flowed naturally as if we were two amigas catching up, which was actually the reality. I began each interview by restating the purpose of the study, beginning the recording, and reminding the participant that they previously agreed to being audio recorded and allowing them to opt out of the interview if they so desired (see Appendix C). After they acknowledged these formalities, I began asking the questions in Appendix A, allowing the interview to venture "off track" from the list to get a better picture of the participants' realities. I asked a lot of open-ended questions or asked the participant to tell me a story, allowing the participant to monologue instead of providing unelaborated responses. In short, my participants' responses guided the interview. If a thought ended, I

would revert back to the list of interview questions, but if we were onto something, I would drive the participant to a point using improvised questions.

Although each interview was different in terms of responses and length, they all progressed naturally and touched on the same key ideas: *identidad*, *empoderamiento*, and *representación*, among others like comunidad and cultural awareness. Leading up to the interviews, I suspected this study would conclude that the participants found solace, mentorship, and friendship in their cohort, so I concluded each interview by asking if they found a sense of solidarity among Latina graduate students.

After each interview, I uploaded each audio recording and transcript to a project page on the university's Canvas website for security and ease of access. 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 (chapter 3) with the participants so they can review them. The participants responded via text with notes on the draft. They 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 attempted to understand these individuals' experiences in the MARC program by identifying three main categories (student *identidad*, *empoderamiento* or agency for students in terms of student responses and emotional orientation, and faculty *representación*, as discussed in the Literature Review), coded the transcripts for references of these categories, reviewed for associations and emerging themes within and across the interviews, and analyzed these findings. I engaged in deductive coding by highlighting printed versions of the transcripts with color codes that speak to the three pre-determined categories as well as two other main codes that reference cultural awareness/knowledge and *comunidad*. I also employed inductive coding by analyzing anything that references Latina/o/x; being from the RGV; graduate school experiences; features of faculty *identidad*; features of student *identidad*; relationships in the academic sphere (with students or faculty); class participation; and overall comfort with being in or a part of the academic world. After making those color-coded highlights, I proceeded by transferring the major experiences and ideas I coded to respective color-coded sticky notes on a corkboard to further organize, focus the codes, and help visually map out the counterstories. For example, anything relating to *identidad* was highlighted in an orange pen and transferred to an orange-colored sticky note. After I transferred the critical codes to sticky notes, I created the main themes (boldface in chapter 3) which incorporate the three elements of study (*identidad*, *empoderamiento*, y *representación*) and the subthemes (italics in chapter 3). I wrote those 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.

I kept all data for this study in the restricted-access Canvas page designated solely for this study, except for the printed and highlighted transcripts and sticky notes.

With counterstories is/as a lens, I looked for counterstories during the coding process that detail the experiences of the *voces perdidas* and read for themes and patterns/connections that speak against stock stories or dominant assumptions. The counterstories are organized into three thematic sections which all incorporate the three elements of study and include three thematically relevant subsections. Rather than narrating the participants' counterstories separately, I blended them together because they faced the experiences together and the back-and-forth movement acts as a conversation among the participants and myself that mimics the swaying *movimientos y ritmo* present in Latina/o/x cultural practices, like dance, music, language (reflecting the Spanish-bended English used in this study and among the participants). As Alejandra I. Ramírez and Ruben Zecena explain, it is “a[n] embodied dance on paper, a textual *intima[te]*” *plática* that exudes “e/motion” and emphasizes the sense of *comunidad* among these four Latinas (19).

### III. COUNTERSTORIES

Historical events

Cultural heritage

Systemic norms

Create experiences that shape our perspectives and opinions

And develop powerful inner wars.

This chapter is organized as follows. The three bold faced themes (“That’s just the way it is”, a brain bilingüe: a balance de idiomas, and ¡Dale gas, mijita!) flow in a pattern of hopelessness to perseverance and ambition, mirroring the Chicanas’ graduate school journeys and leaving the reader with a sense of strength and *empoderamiento*. Each core theme is structured with three italicized subsections that incorporate the three elements of study (*identidad, empoderamiento, y representación*); some subsections integrate all three elements or just one. The following counterstories are framed by theories such as intersectionality, embodied writing, and linguistic racism to name a few. As mentioned in chapter 2, the counterstories subscribe to the follow CRT tenets:

- Permanence of race and racism
- Challenges dominant ideologies
- Interest convergence
- Race as social construct
- Intersectionality and antiessentialism
- Interdisciplinarity
- Centrality of experiential knowledge and/or unique voices of color
- Commitment to social justice

- Accessibility

### **“That’s just the way it is”**

Sofía, Patricia, and Itzel reside in a borderland. Not one of the physical borderlands such as the RGV—Río Grande Valley. They live in the metaphorical border space known as the *In-Between*, the aforementioned inner battle to maintain ethnic culture while living in American society. This border space, as April Baker-Bell claims, “expects [them] to perform whiteness”—to speak White Mainstream English (WME), to know proper grammar, to act and think American, to blend in (102). Sofía, for example, explains “I never really felt connected to my Mexican roots” until she journeyed through the MARC program. Rather than bend between American and ethnic, as the participants’ intersectional identities demand, the system, institution, and society expect them to blend in seamlessly, to be indistinguishable from other Americans. BUT it also views them as diversity tokens. Sofia explains academia is part of “a system [that views] your ethnicity [as] checking off a box”; therefore, if “you’re part of this system, [then] you’re part of this problem,” referring to the problem that academia as an institution does not value or acknowledge the differences of its students and faculty. It is part of a system that will eat you alive as a POC because it is built on systemic powers of racism and sexism that seep into the everyday practices of the institution. Academia, like the United States, was founded and built by the *voces de poder* (wealthy White men) for other *voces de poder*. From Plato’s school to Texas State University, the institution of academia (and education in general) is part of a system “that was not made for [WOC]... they literally are not wanted by the system,” Itzel foregrounds. In fact, the first five WOC admitted to

Southwest Texas State College (modern day Texas State University) were five Black women in 1963, indicating an end to segregation at the college (“First Five”). It has not been 100 years since this university has been racially integrated, so, of course, remnants of a systemically racist system remain strong and exposed.

I could bend your ear about the history of academia, segregation and integration, the copious numbers of Latinas/os/xs who were discriminated against in society and education despite having fought and shed blood for a country that views them as cultural parasites. OR I can show you what that system has done. This section explores the pathetic and overused excuse that many people (of all races and ethnicities, myself and the participants included) use to justify systemic racism, because “that’s just the way it is.”

### *Dis-empoderar*

I invented the term “dis-empoderar” while coding the interviews because of its visual clash of languages and the meaning it provides that is not translatable to either language. It is translanguaging at its finest. The English prefix “dis” means “not” while “empoderar,” as previously discussed cannot be directly translated into English, so “empoderar” (the verb) and *empoderamiento* (the noun) is *comunidad*, *representación*, cultural awareness and knowledge, *identidad*—todos los elementos en este estudio. “Dis-empoderar” is cualquier cosa that doesn’t strengthen a person, rather it belittles and offers excuses like “that’s just the way it is” because people have become desensitized to systemically racist acts, turning them into norms.

Imposter syndrome. It is the phase they say every graduate student goes through during their graduate school journey. I, too, was warned about it. It is the feeling of doubting your abilities and feeling like a fraud. Some ponder questions such as:

*Why am I here?*

*I don't deserve to be here.*

*Am I explaining it right?*

But is it really a phase every graduate student goes through? Or is it one of those norms that is described as “that’s just the way it is” because of the larger systemic powers that weigh down on POC students? Itzel also questions imposter syndrome. She remarks that the *representación* of the MARC faculty fell short because despite a very diverse curricula that allowed them to read about different experiences of POC by POC and WOC, Itzel says the program “fell short... to show that they actually do value women of color and their voices,” because they experienced imposter syndrome. “Is it though?” Itzel questions during our interview, “like they really don’t want us here... it’s not made for us, so it’s gonna be very uncomfortable.” Itzel explains it is because the academic institution and the perpetrators (*voces de poder*) of the systemic issues of the institution view her as having “nothing good to say because... [I’m] a woman... a brown woman,” a minority. As Bettina Love asserts, “racism erases dark bodies from historical records of importance and distorts their everyday reality” by undermining their experiences and devaluing their voices (127).

Nonetheless, WOC and POC do feel those moments when they are a part of this academic world where they feel their work actually contributes to something that matters, as Itzel mentions. To get there, however, SOC and WOC scholars and students have to

continue “to fight that good fight,” as Itzel explains, between “being valued and appreciated” in the academic field by writing in an authentic and linguistically free voice while also “appeas[ing] academia.” Itzel refers to this as a duality, though it is also known as the *In-Between*. This is yet another border space SOC and WOC must grapple with in academia: maintaining a balance between WME and ethnic languages (i.e., Spanish, Black Language, etc.). It is the balance between preserving ethnic culture by being valued and appreciated and assimilating and blending into American society and life. But it becomes a surrender of agency and “a damage of credibility,” as Patricia describes, to avoid discrimination and other repercussions while continuing to place a hidden emphasis on ethnic culture and life.

Why is that?

As Itzel claims, “it’s because the narrative is still very much being controlled.” This isn’t a matter of individual White persons versus ethnic Others. It’s a problem of a dominant cultural hegemony that perpetuates and continues to instill the narrative of WME and American life as superior to other languages and cultures—a system that emphasizes White supremacy. Here’s a simple example: “Christopher Columbus discovered the New World.” A popular historical “fact” most people learned in elementary school. In actuality, Columbus did not (a) discover anything nor (b) find the New World. Columbus put la República Dominicana, Haiti, and some islands in the Bahamas on the European map. He did not discover anything. They were there before he arrived. That rhetoric places a Eurocentric emphasis on conquerors like Columbus—who raped and pillaged their way through the Americas. It is narratives, rhetoric, and the Eurocentric/Western twists that are placed on historical events, societal norms, and

institutions that make SOC and WOC 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 POC and WOC. As Viola Davis strongly asserts in the popular ABC drama *How to Get Away with Murder*, “Racism is built into the DNA of America. And as long as we turn a blind eye to the pain of those suffering under its oppression, we will never escape those origins.” It is as Langston Hughes writes, “a dream deferred.” That is dis-empoderar.

While in the MARC program, Sofia and Patricia “missed [out on] opportunities... to push [themselves] further and to think deeper and more critically,” because they didn’t have access to a Latina/o/x professor who would have given them constructive feedback, guidance, support, and pushed them to be greater and contribute in class. Patricia also struggled to find a faculty member she could relate to who had endured similar experiences to help guide her to a positive position, instead of tumble down a dark hole of anxiety and post-traumatic stress. Patricia confesses all she needed was a powerhouse figure like “Gloria Anzaldúa: [a woman from a] border city, Mexican, Queer,” to tell her she can make it. She needed to see her “racial and linguistic realities reflected” in faculty who had made it—got their master’s, PhD, and are successful professors (Baker-Bell 103). Because the problem comes down to: “are they gonna get it?” Patricia contemplates, “are they really gonna get my struggle?” That is what dis-empoderar feels like. Like the world wasn’t built for you, it can’t support you no matter how hard you try because you don’t belong to a carefully crafted category—White (*voces de poder*)—your intersectional *identidad* is too much for the world and institutions like academia to

comprehend. So there will always be an obstacle. There will always be someone perpetuating what the system has worked hard to enforce: standardized and superior ways of being. That is what it feels like to be in the *In-Between*: an abyss, forever trapped. Pero, these Chicanas, no. They had that moment, like we all do, pero son fuertes, valientes, y están listos pa' luchar.

### *Punish identidad*

But why will there always be an obstacle for WOC in academia, a predominantly White, male institution? As I previously mentioned, the dominant *voces de poder* continue the marginalization and exclusion of the participants due to their intersectional identidades of race and gender. Because, historically, POC have been viewed as inferior to White supremacy due to the reign and control over various ethnic groups; and, women have been viewed as inferior to men because historically men were the breadwinners, “the stronger sex,” while women were “the delicate sex.” As political activist Brittany Packnett Cunningham explains, “... it’s not just that my oppression [as a WOC] is doubled, it’s not just times two. It is actually that at that intersection, there are certain stereotypes, tropes, and difficulties that [WOC] uniquely face... People who have two or more oppressed identities... do not just experience the sum of their oppression, but they experience different kinds of oppression [because] multiple systems are intersecting in her life to create a unique brand of oppression” (qtd. in “Control”). Latinas, as POC and women, experience unique instances of oppression that are specific just to Latinas.

For instance, when discussing an incident with a former English teacher (described in the next section), Patricia realizes that the teacher’s pedagogical technique

is “not even critical, it’s just harsh and it’s punishing the identity of these students.” Punishing *identidad*. For Patricia, that meant halting the pursuit of interests because of discrimination. It meant putting all of your energy into fixing the parts of your *identidad* that others deem “not worthy,” “wrong,” “un-American.” After the Correcting Incident (also described in the next section), Patricia fixated on the words coming out of her mouth instead of participating—contributing her stories and her opinions. She altered her *identidad* to fit a system and society that was not built for her culturally and linguistically diverse *identidad*. Her *identidad* was punished by a system that encourages the devaluation of difference, of Other. The system should change to fit students like her, not the other way around. Her language, a significant part of the Latina’s *identidad*, was criticized so she worked hard to make sure it didn’t happen again. But, as with most features of WOC, it was criticized again. More on that later.

Similarly, Itzel experienced instances of her *identidad* being punished by others. Most notably, is the Incident of Fall of 2019 (discussed in the next section) where Itzel was discriminated against by a faculty member because of assumptions made about her language. As a result of that life-changing experience, Itzel seems to have internalized it as a cruel joke on her *identidad*. I know, and anyone who meets her knows, she is a strong Chicana capable of keeping her head held high, but I couldn’t help but think that this cruel joke may be a repercussion of the discrimination she experienced. During the interview, granted we were approaching two hours, Itzel was discussing the blame that can or should be placed on different systems and people. When discussing the lack of accountability, she said “what’s the word? Like not personal, the opposite. Impersonal. There goes my ESL. I always say that now, I’m like, ‘Oh there’s my ELL marker.’” I

thought, *I think that's a word*. Who am I to know any better? Who am I to even interject and say “No, actually, that’s not a word.” A quick Google search tells me that it is, in fact, a real word. So, I guess it was that sliver of doubt that I noticed in her thoughts and speech. Granted, she had conveyed a plethora of information, experiences, and personal thoughts and maybe she was tired. But, to me, it seemed like that discriminatory experience still loomed over her, waiting to strike and reclaim her agency, after she fought so hard to get it back. Gloria Anzaldúa describes “the new *mestiza*,” also known as Chicana or Latina, as one who “copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity... She learns to juggle cultures” (*Borderlands* 101). Itzel and the other Chicanas are already balancing this overwhelming feat, but to add more to her plate, she “buckles and bends,” because of discriminatory experiences, “but never breaks” (Darrow 2:46).

It comes down to the idea that others continue to undermine the potential of WOC, especially in academia because, as Sofia asserts, academia “does deter a lot of minorities—globalized majorities—from pursuing higher education” because of racial issues and the institution not giving them a fair chance. So when people are completely flabbergasted that Itzel holds two academic degrees, it “is actually super insulting [because] why would you assume that I wouldn’t be able to do that?” Again, it’s the *In-Between*, the duality that Itzel mentions of balancing the stereotypes, tropes, and prejudices that Packnett Cunningham mentioned and the right to be valued. Because if Itzel were to exclaim loudly her inner thoughts about being insulted and people making assumptions, she would be branded the Hotheaded Latina trope. But if she stays quiet,

she'll be branded as submissive and inferior. Both punish her *identidad* and, yet again, make it harder to navigate the *In-Between* border space as she juggles cultures.

On a different note, Sofia experienced a lot of internalized struggles. She left the RGV for her undergraduate degree at Texas A&M University where there was no Latina/o/x comunidad for her. She was in a White space. But this wasn't new to her because she 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: SOC "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).

Sofia's internalized struggles made her realize "[she is] part of this system, [she is] part of this problem." In her hometown of Eagle Pass, everything was "geared toward assimilation... if you weren't assimilating... you weren't going to succeed." Sofia refers to her prior self as an "assimilated Latina, more American than Mexican [who] benefit[ed] off the system because I'm White passing." But can we really punish the *identidad* of a light skin Chicana for not looking "Mexican enough"? Absolutely not! "Latina," "Chicana" do not have a standardized physical appearance. It is not Sofia's fault for having light skin and internalizing racism and White Supremacy. It is the fault of

a system and institution that values light skin and WME over linguistically, culturally, and physically diverse people. It's not even fair to say she got the luck of the draw. As I mentioned earlier when introducing the participants, no one is more valid than another. Sofía's experiences are not objectively easier than Itzel's or Patricia's, they are simply different. Besides, a single individual's success is a collective success for the Latina/o/x community, no matter if she was successful because she is White passing.

We are all “socialized within a white supremacist society, white supremacist educational system, and racist mass media that teaches us [*voces perdidas*] to internalize racism by convincing us that our lives (culture, language, literacies histories, experiences, etc.)” are not worthy of being (Baker-Bell 48). How are Latinas expected to remain strong in a system that not only enforces these ideas, but has forced them to believe these ideas about themselves? 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. Pero, alas, nosotras seguimos luchando. The first method of maintaining that fight is through *representación*, seeing our cultural *identidades* reflected in people who have made it.

*Who needs representación?*

*Representación.* In popular culture, it is seeing our ethnic, cultural, linguistic, racial, gender and other defining characteristics of our *identidades* reflected in the media, such as the recent Disney film *Encanto* that has exploded on social media with young children and adults, specifically the Afro-Latina/o/x community and women who do not fit the traditional ideals of femininity, feeling represented. In academia, as each

participant argued, *representación* is the sense of “feel[ing] like [they] did it, I can do it too,” Sofía argues. It is guidance, support, someone who relates to and/or understands the experiences you went through and shares a similar background; *representación* is a role model, a mentor, “someone you can identify with,” as Itzel explains. For Sofía, *representación* means “a mentor that helps you navigate through the system that wasn’t initially meant for you”—a space where you’re seen as just a token to diversify a program. Especially because Sofía and Patricia are First Gen, their families can’t help them navigate this system because they don’t understand how the system works or what part the Chicanas play in it.

On an individual level, each participant has experienced *representación* differently, in terms of when they needed it, when they didn’t, and who was there. Sofía has never had ethnic faculty *representación* from her undergrad, master’s, or doctoral programs. At least, she never sought it out because “I was used to academia being predominately White, so I wasn’t expecting a lot of representation.” However, in her doctoral program, her advisor, a Mexican American woman from El Paso, TX, chose her to advise. Sofía didn’t seek out HSIs or Latina/o/x faculty when searching for doctoral programs, but she ended up finding a comunidad—or, rather, it found her—of POC, not just Latinas/os/xs. Even though Texas A&M—her alma mater—is an HSI, it was predominately White. Texas State University is also designated as an HSI, yet there are only four Latina/o/x tenured/tenure-track professors available to provide support for graduate Latina/o/x students in the English Department—because who else is going to support them in the way they need it? At least that’s what the university seems to subconsciously argue. As Sofía remarks, Dr. Ludo Bagman, the only Latino professor in

the MARC program, is the *representación* for Latina/o/x students in the MARC program “who has done a lot... overcome a lot and he’s very accomplished and published.” Dr. Bagman seems to constantly prove he is capable of being a tenured Latino professor by building his professional growth and development through publishing, writing, teaching, attending conferences, serving on different boards, and, to pile even more on him, he has to act as the mentor and guide for all Latina/o/x students in the MARC program? “That’s a lot to put on one person,” Sofía argues, “especialmente a person who is trying to be a successful part of a program.”

But *representación* is also important for students “who come from universities where they have that representation and they had those advocates,” Sofía explains, so coming to a space where it isn’t presented can be difficult to deal with. Patricia and Itzel attended UTRGV, they weren’t the minorities in that space. In fact, they were part of the majority. They didn’t necessarily have significant ethnic faculty *representación* (White and White Latina/o/x professors), but they did have student *representación*, so they didn’t feel isolated, Sofía interprets “it helped them garner some sort of agency as writers specifically as students, and that led them to a graduate program because they felt [confident in their] abilities.” So, when Patricia was in the MARC program, she found it difficult to find faculty she could relate to. Unfortunately, she found out about Dr. Aurora Sinistra, the only tenure-track Latina professor in the English Department, in her final year in the program—it was too late at that point. You can imagine Patricia was pissed about that. She could have reclaimed her agency and felt supported sooner, rather than pulling herself back together sola. To give you a glimpse, Patricia was reading one of Dr. Sinistra’s articles and had “tears in my eyes” because Dr. Sinistra “went through the same

thing[s]” she went through. Patricia saw herself in this professor and thought, “*I’m gonna be her,*” but she didn’t get the opportunity to form a relationship with her because COVID-19 forced everyone into quarantine and then she graduated. Can you imagine that? Feeling like the light at the end of the tunnel, the hope you craved most, was so close yet so far. Devastating. For the MARC faculty, however, Patricia only “felt súper confiada in [Dr. Remus Lupin, a White male professor], [because] I felt he would always take a second to actually listen to me.” Dr. Pansy Parkinson, a White woman, often portrayed herself as ungenueine, because in a class Patricia took with her, Dr. Parkinson parecía a entender la lucha de Chicanas, but enforced a technical and standardized way of writing. Patricia dropped the class because she didn’t feel supported. Meanwhile, the relationship she had with Dr. Bagman, her thesis director and mentor, “felt forced just because he was the only professor [of color]... who else would I go to, right?”

Itzel has also had her fair share of issues with *representación*, despite being in a majority student population. Back when she started attending UTRGV, the university was originally named University of Texas—Pan American (UTPA)—Gloria Anzaldúa earned her B.A. from UTPA, so it was a decorated and valued name. UTPA merged with the university in Brownsville to create UTRGV. They allowed the students to vote on names and mascots, but it was false hope. Ultimately, a White man chose an offensive mascot, vaqueros who, historically, were not respectful of Mexican farmworkers, immigrants, and others. The student body was not accurately reflected in the new university, so Itzel “[didn’t] really feel part of the community.” When she came to Texas State, a university she chose because it is an HSI and it was the closest rhetoric and composition program to her hometown, she enjoyed the diverse curricula but noticed “there’s a lot of White

women teaching women of color... having women is important and they've actually created a very inclusive curriculum [but] systematically, they're not practicing what they preach if they're not allowing women of color to teach their own experiences." It's about centering the *voces perdidas*. There's a lot of women within the program, students and faculty, but because the only POC faculty is a man emphasizes the fact that *representación* is not just race/ethnicity, it is also gender. As Itzel argues, WOC bring a "built-in compassion within pedagogy... [that] isn't just anti-racist," but a genuine care and value for every student.

But, since we are all human and we are all flawed, not every WOC professor brings this. There definitely are POC professors who frankly don't give a shit. And that's why ethnic faculty *representación* doesn't mean hiring POC and WOC as a solution to this problem. There are empathetic non-POC professors, such as some professors in the MARC program, who do value and care for their students. Besides, just because there is a POC/WOC professor present during a discriminatory event, it doesn't mean they can do anything about it. They might be able to stop the discrimination, but mostly, as Itzel asserts, they and POC/WOC students would only be able to vent "and be angry together" because there is no real solution. We (POC faculty and SOC) don't have enough power to enact that type of systemic change—it would require "dismantling the structures that maintain [the] power and influence [of Whiteness]" (Love 128). Which is why Sofia argues "representation... what does it mean or what's its value if you can't see them as mentors?"

There are specific moments when ethnic faculty *representación* is important. For instance, when as a WOC you have a professor who makes you feel like you're "not

worthy of being in the program, then *that's* when ethnic representation becomes important,” Sofia argues; an advocate to say, “that’s not right,” as Itzel insists, to hold others accountable for their actions. Therefore, the important aspects of *representación* are advocacy, accountability, support. It does no one any good to have professors (POC or non-POC) who don’t want to help students, who genuinely don’t care to help them succeed. That’s the bottom line for professors: they have to care for their students. Otherwise, they’re in the wrong profession, academia is a student-serving profession. To Patricia, ethnic faculty *representación* is important to have POC professors that reflect SOC. But, as Patricia continues, it is more than the number of minorities represented, it’s about hiring people who “are knowledgeable and skilled in race and indigenous backgrounds... who have previously taught in border spaces [so they know how to navigate them] ... especially in a Hispanic-Serving Institution.” Ethnic faculty *representación*, as Itzel confirms, means a safe space from “public humiliation or racism,” no policing or discrimination of language. *Representación* “entails being a professor to a lot of different people from different backgrounds: cultural, linguistic, political, etc. [because] I don’t think it’s fair to say that just having the representation within the faculty would be enough to change anything.”

As I stated earlier, there are POC and WOC professors who don’t care to help their students succeed. As Itzel ponders, “How do you put that in a job description or policy?” Is there a real solution to ending discrimination on the basis of race/ethnicity or gender in academia, on top of other forms of exclusion? Can you hire faculty with that in mind? I don’t know. Frankly, that’s not the purpose of this project either. But it’s

something worth exploring since this project does detail what Latinas in academia experience since, historically, people haven't listened to what they need.

In terms of the benefits of ethnic faculty *representación*, the participants agreed it would give non-POC students the opportunity to learn from these voices directly, to understand their experiences—since all POC experiences are different—and help them navigate the classroom space because it is a border—for those who don't know of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Therefore, having a POC voice to help navigate learning about those experiences would be beneficial because it would “emphasize having a conversation[,] learn[ing] from others [and] give White students a different perspective to what they're used to,” Patricia proposes. For instance, in one of Sofía's doctoral classes, an Indonesian student didn't understand the difficulty with having a common language of instruction for Chicanos. It didn't come out of ignorance; the student is from a place where they speak so many languages that they value a common language of instruction. But the student listened and learned why that was troubling, and Sofía had to explain that since she was the only Chicana present to navigate the conversation. Hence, as Itzel argues, the presence of POC voices to navigate those discussions “allows the student to decentralize the self [and] allow room for the representation of other cultures to matter to them, not just their own[;] to learn how to advocate for themselves and their peers in a way that does not run the risk of singling out a culture as the most dominant or misrepresenting another.” But *representación* should not be a task only placed on students. The university, faculty, and administration “have the resources to ensure representation in an ethical and robust way,” but that's a conversation for another time.

Needless to say, all three participants would have benefitted from a Latina/o/x mentor because they would have helped them navigate this space that is relentless to push them out.

As with most stories, themes tend to blend together. Therefore, there are more instances of dis-empoderar, punishing *identidad*, and a need for *representación* discussed in the next sections that detail the specific events that shaped these Chicanas graduate school journeys.

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

*“We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style... The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another... We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.” (NCTE, 1974 statement)*

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 knowing how to say something in one language and forgetting how to say it in the other. It’s creating words that cross linguistic borders—like “dis-empoderar”—because you can’t find the word in one language. Translanguaging is a newly celebrated, historically discriminated against, linguistic movement that many speakers (not just bilingüe Spanish speakers) engage in on a daily basis. It’s a mobilization of two or more languages because they are your *identidad*, your culture. 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; @JoseMedinaJr89). 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.

After her undergraduate experience, Sofia “wouldn’t necessarily say I was proud of my background... of my language; in fact, I was embarrassed by my accent, I was embarrassed by speaking Spanish... I had perfected words and my writing to be as close to standard American English as possible... and I think that’s why I was successful [at Texas A&M].” You might wonder what Sofia could have gone through, what discrimination could she have endured to make her feel this way about her language, her family’s language, and the language of her ancestors. Sometimes, we don’t go through Hollywood-esque discrimination events. Sometimes, we are simply brainwashed by the cultural hegemony that tells us our language, our bilingüismo, “is incorrect” and that we are uneducated if we practice it, despite it being “a living language” (Anzaldúa *Borderlands* 77). To thrive and be successful in an institution that teaches and idolizes WME, we view Spanish as something that will hold us back. So we have to blend in... again.

Having lived in a “standardized bubble” where she felt “English was the academic language,” Sofia estaba empoderada because Dr. Bagman, the Latino professor, told her she can write in Spanish in academia. He gave her research that supported that “you can write your whole paper in Spanish without any justification, and it would be a professor’s

job to look up the language to translate it.” That emits a sense of *empoderamiento* and a weight off the shoulders that you don’t have to conform, you don’t have to fully assimilate to be successful in this space. “The fact that he was now sitting in a classroom, in a university, talking about writing in Spanish being valid” is more influential coming from this Latino, Spanish-speaking professor who had endured similar experiences than from a non-Spanish speaking, non-Latina/o/x professor because his presence acknowledges that you can be successful and still be your authentic self. Learning, speaking, and maintaining her Spanish is very important to Sofia because “it is the most important tie to my Mexican culture and upbringing [and it] grounds me and ties me to a part of my identity [that] I used to take for granted.” “El español es un lenguaje hermoso y poderoso,” she continues, because it is a “site of connection” with other Latinas/os/xs, especially while being in a predominately White space. Therefore, el español es “an invaluable aspect of my identity... an act of resistance and defiance in a country that once tried to devalue and eradicate different languages for the purposes of assimilation and Americanization... y yo estoy eternamente agradecida y orgullosa de ser Latina.” Therefore, Sofia learned that you can be heard even if you don’t provide translations. That is the goal: to be heard, seen, and valued. BUT, not every Latina/o/x or Spanish speaker can thrive authentically in a system that doesn’t value linguistically and/or culturally diverse people.

Patricia, like Sofia, is a native Spanish speaker. Language is a priority for Patricia to form connections—like with her MARC cohort because they speak/understand Spanish—not just because she is in an English language-dominant field, but because language has grounded her sense of home and comunidad. In her hometown of

Brownsville, TX, Patricia could converse easily with people because of “the integration of both Spanish and English,” often bending into Spanglish—a language that requires linguistic finesse. When in certain settings, Patricia translanguages a lot between the two languages, making conversation difficult. This is because of the brain bilingüe. For instance, Patricia’s language bends between Spanish and English by “first thinking in Spanish and then [speaking] in English and sometimes I just can’t come up with the English word, so I say it in Spanish” which is frustrating for her because her accent is apparent; and, if her translation is off even in the slightest, “I get corrected a lot for the way I speak... somebody will interfere... and I kind of lose agency when I’m speaking because they’re taking [my voice] from me and speaking for me.” This is a prime example of the dichotomy between *voces de poder* and *voces perdidas* where *voces de poder*, or native English speakers, take the agency and voz of *voces perdidas* simply because they think they know the language better than *voces perdidas*, because *voces perdidas* aren’t native English speakers so they can’t possibly know how to speak English—despite actually learning how to navigate the language. This creates the common understanding that our languages have constantly and continue to be critiqued.

Unlike Sofia, there are specific events that have made language a priority and a connection to comunidad for Patricia. One of those instances that she disclosed was an experience in her border town high school English class. The teacher was a White woman with a Spanish surname—no, she didn’t speak Spanish. This woman shunned the Spanish speaking students, the majority of the student population, if they “spoke even a little bit [of Spanish], like ‘a la,’ ‘no mames,’ etc.” This teacher would stop the class and say something like, “No, this is an English classroom. Like can you guys not read? It literally

says ‘English’ all around, you cannot speak any Spanish or you’re gonna get ten points off your essay.” For a classroom full of Spanish speakers, to be denied the right to your own language (the very declaration the NCTE made in 1974 that is quoted at the beginning of this section) is more than frustrating and disheartening. It’s cruel. It is a cruel torture to put young culturally and linguistically diverse minds through, because the implications of that lead to internalized racism and hatred toward your own culture and language—something Sofia and I share in common. But Patricia didn’t come to despise her language or her culture. Instead, she took the route to learn WME, to blend in by using “the master’s tools” but maintained her ethnic roots in secret—not as overt academic endeavors (Baker-Bell 12). This experience, among others Patricia didn’t disclose, shaped her perspective on White teachers because it proved time and time again that her Spanish and culture is wrong in their eyes. Would you associate yourself with people like that? No, you would avoid them. So when something similar happened during her graduate journey, Patricia punished her *identidad*, felt dis-empoderada, and needed an ethnic role model.

### *The Correcting Incident (CI)*

It was her first semester in graduate school, first time at Texas State University, her first time away from home, from her culture and comunidad, and her first time in a professional academic setting. It was fall of 2019. She was battling imposter syndrome.

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. As I mentioned earlier, 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." After her part of the presentation was complete, Patricia left the classroom. She couldn't talk anymore; instead, she cried. It was an emotional incident because 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 WME.

From that moment, Patricia suffered both physically and mentally. She distanced herself in her classes, not participating as much as she would have had this incident never happened. She obsessed over the way she spoke, looking back at Zoom recordings (during the academic year COVID-19 pushed classes online) to take note on linguistic mistakes she made. As Carmen Kynard found, a student who "produce[s] hypercorrection and experience[s] writing anxiety directly affect[s] how she behave[s] in class" (qtd. in Baker-Bell 27). Patricia focused on communicating in WME, learning advanced English vocabulary and pronunciations, making her discussion posts sound very academic and standardized simply "so I'm not called out anymore." Though I'm not a medical doctor, this is something I would call PTSD, or post-traumatic stress. Patricia endured a trauma, one that has shaped her life. As Baker-Bell notes, "hypercorrection occurs when speakers... internalize the message that others view their language as wrong, therefore,

they strive to use the standardized language so perfectly that they overarticulate in ways that miss the target of the perceived standard language in an effort to replace the seemingly incorrect language patterns” (27). Patricia was called out of her language and her voice and forced to “view her racial, linguistic, and intellectual identity through the white gaze in ways that negates her value” (Baker-Bell 54). So “instead of being like creative and meshing words together that semester, I just focused on communicating in [WME],” punishing her *identidad* and denying herself the right to speak, write, and use her own language. As I wrote in the portraiture project that initiated inquiry for this study, this is better known as forced conformity to avoid discrimination that traditionally shapes an immigrant’s experience, though this occurred within a supposed safe space—an HSI that is supposed to protect and support Latina/o/x students (Blanco “Fragments” 1). Additionally, Patricia also felt like her “voice wasn’t heard in the class after that incident... like I was seen as stupid or less than everyone else who corrected me.” Patricia’s confidence as a speaker and worthy and capable graduate student shattered. Even though she has very meaningful and beautiful ideas to share, she did not feel comfortable participating in her classes because of the CI; instead, she remained quiet and “wouldn’t talk a lot.” As a result, she dealt with anxiety and panic attacks. Even when she had to do more presentations for classes, she would get panic attacks and stress about her speech, her language—something a student shouldn’t have to worry about. Riddled with fear of discrimination and bullying because she was ridiculed for her language and accent, she was forced to assimilate. Patricia was so impacted by this CI that she questioned whether she belonged in this space—as an academic, a graduate student, a scholar, a professor. Patricia experienced what the field refers to as imposter

syndrome. But based on what Itzel previously asserted, Patricia experienced the dark reality POC suffer because they exist in a space that wasn't built for them, that doesn't cater to them, and that doesn't exist for them. Metaphorically speaking, Patricia got caught in a hole on her mountainous climb to success—which seems to be a never-ending climb as obvious with Dr. Bagman who continues to work hard despite being a tenured, accomplished academic. So, naturally, Patricia contemplated dropping out of the program because she felt discouraged and degraded when she was corrected by faculty and fellow students.

But like any earthly hole, there is always a bottom and a way to get out. Patricia's cohort, specifically Itzel, Sofia, and Luna Lovegood (a member of the Chicanas' graduating cohort who is racially a White woman, but "honorary Latina" as Itzel describes her, with the serene and caring disposition of an ethereal goddess) helped Patricia build up her agency and they fostered a space where they could discuss their personal and academic problems, such as the CI. However, "it was just my classmates that helped, it was [also] reading Gloria Anzaldúa! Reading a lot of texts—Victor Villanueva... Cherríe Moraga"—which ultimately led her to stay in the MARC program and continue to fight. But because she had to rebuild her confidence and self-esteem, "I felt like I needed a strong, Brown woman to guide me... someone who is like me, like Gloria Anzaldúa... border city, Mexican, queer. I had to hear ["you can do it"] from someone like that." Y esto es lo más importante porque Patricia needed to see herself in her guide, un reflejo real que le dan support and advocacy. Patricia needed to interact with the physical person who came from a similar background and made it, someone who

succeeded in this space to know that she can also succeed. That Brown woman very much could have been Dr. Aurora Sinistra.

Although Patricia did endure a trauma, she is a survivor. Pa' reclamar este incidente y seguir la luz, she fought back. Patricia incorporated a lot of Spanish in her master's thesis—even using Spanish in the bloody title—and it got published. In her last semester of the MARC program, she was more agent over her language and writing and, while teaching, her students didn't correct her language. She was free of the damage the CI instilled. She took this incident and transformed it into culturally responsive pedagogies, open and safe spaces for linguistically and culturally diverse people, and continues to write in Spanish—not just reclaiming her voice and languages, but her *identidad*. Patricia deserves to be free, linguistically free, and to thrive in this space to pave the way for other Latinas and WOC. Because although she is free of the damage of the CI, she is still traumatized, not ready to pursue another degree for fear of another correcting incident or belittlement. Patricia explains she is taking a break from academia and pursuing employment in the education sector because she had to work hard to restore her confidence and self-esteem. When she does choose to pursue a PhD, she will “need to build like a kind of barrier” so she won't be discouraged and want to quit the program. Because academia is a system that is not built for WOC, Patricia has to build a thick skin, her own layer of protection in order to thrive.

#### *The Incident of Fall of 2019 (IF19)*

When discussing the duality (also known as the *In-Between*) between cultural and linguistic freedom and appeasing academia, Itzel remarks that being able to write in your

own language gives students “agency to feel like good writers.” But it’s more than just writing in Spanish or Black Language, for example. It is using words to portray ideas that are authentic to your *identidad*, personality, and *pensamiento*. “[Students] write bad because they’re not writing like themselves,” Itzel argues, “they’re writing like the person that they’re reading that they don’t understand so they’re using words wrong and they’re throwing semicolons in places they don’t go.” Students punish their own *identidades* and *pensamientos* because they have been brainwashed to think they are not enough; they do not fit the rigid lines of academia. There is a violence in that. As Itzel asserts, “[a] violence in silencing people and not allowing them to write in their own languages” ultimately fails the student and fails their education. And that’s why Itzel deduced this duality of preservation and appeasement/assimilation. In order to survive higher education, especially as SOC working to stay in the academic field, they have to maintain this balance. SOC are, yet again, trapped in the *In-Between* because, frankly, it’s very hard to change large systemic issues, to create a system built for POC. How do I know? Itzel showed me the reality of a system that can eat you alive due to lack of support and advocacy.

Growing up in the RGV, Itzel was never ridiculed for her accent. Her first day on the Texas State campus, people were saying things like “Huh?”, “What did you say?” Needless to say, it was a very different culture and ambiance at Texas State University compared to the RGV. In their first semester of graduate school in the MARC program (fall of 2019), the three Chicanas now remark on the literacy gap they experienced that semester. In Dr. Ludo Bagman’s class, they were discussing and reading about racial inequalities in language and education. In Dr. Mafalda Hopkirk’s class, they learned

about the NCTE's 1974 statement about a student's right to their own language which gave each of the participants a sense of *empoderamiento* during a time where their languages were degraded. But in Dr. Pansy Parkinson's class, a SOC was getting docked points for her language use. This isn't just a gap in the MARC program, it's a gap in academia that was made very clear in the fall of 2019.

While working at the Writing Center, Itzel had to pass a Standardized Grammar Exam (SGE) to ensure she is knowledgeable of the English language to tutor students on English essays—every new hire has to take and pass this exam, or so she thought. Having failed the SGE, Itzel was instructed to pass the exam twice and shadow fellow tutors for two weeks, but she shadowed for a month and found out the new hires also failed the SGE but didn't have to shadow. She began realizing she was being treated differently. There was also the uncomfortable situation of Itzel's supervisor also being her professor, Dr. Pansy Parkinson. They do not have similar academic interests; Dr. Parkinson enjoys ancient Greek rhetoric while Itzel prefers contemporary cultural rhetorics. So, Itzel felt uncomfortable when Dr. Parkinson wanted to take her under her wing. Dr. Parkinson put Itzel on these special projects which “inadvertently were writing projects,” so Itzel started questioning, “are you just trying to make me a better writer? I can't be mad at this, right? She's investing time.” Itzel came to realize that it was about recognition, “[Dr. Parkinson] wanted to be the one to make me an academic,” but a standardized, traditional academic, devoid of Itzel's culture, language, and *identidad*. This is only the first incident of discrimination from the IF19. The second comes from the second hat Dr. Parkinson wore—as Itzel's professor.

In October of 2019, Itzel started receiving grades on her essays for Dr. Parkinson's class. It was her second or third time getting another B on her essays while everyone else was receiving A's. It doesn't sound terrible, an 80 is average. But, as a SOC, first time in a new space, and having already dealt with discrimination at the Writing Center, Itzel was feeling concerned. She is a published academic with a degree backing her name, how could she be getting 80s on essays that she puts all her effort into writing? Then Itzel reviewed the feedback Dr. Parkinson left on her essays: tons of highlighting and marginal comments made the paper bleed.

"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. That's when Itzel saw through the façade; Dr. Parkinson wasn't trying to help Itzel, she was trying to make Itzel sound like her so she could value and appreciate Itzel. Dr. Parkinson singled her out, seeing potential to mold a "real" academic. "[Dr. Parkinson] didn't want me to sound like me, she didn't want me to write like myself."

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. She was viewed as not only bad at Spanish (she isn't ESL and doesn't speak Spanish well), but bad at English. Dr. Parkinson made it seem Itzel wrote and sounded very rancho. It's the same kind of forced voicelessness Itzel experienced with the name change of UTRGV, except this time her individual *identidad* and language were insulted, belittled, and devalued.

At first, Itzel sought support from her cohort. They read her essays and couldn't understand why she was receiving 80s. They helped her see she is not in the wrong, Dr. Parkinson was discriminating against her. An investigation spurred in the Writing Center because Itzel was accusing Dr. Parkinson of discrimination while in conversation with a coworker, but, like most discriminatory-focused investigations, nothing came out of it. Instead, it became a matter of covering it up: assigning other MARC professors to teach the mandatory classes and giving her a pity assistant job with one of the professors which took Itzel out of the Writing Center instead of punishing Dr. Parkinson. Eventually, she worked to become an Instructional Assistant and a Teaching Assistant.

Through the experience, Itzel didn't fully register what was happening to her, she simply thought she was getting help. That is until she took the time to understand and process what she experienced by reading and exposing herself to different texts: NCTE's 1974 Student's Right to Their Own Language statement, Gloria Anzaldúa, Andrea Lunsford, Nancy Sommers, and more. All of these texts gave her *empoderamiento* y oportunidades a reclamar su *identidad*. "I had this image of what grad school would be like," she confesses, "and this wasn't it." Having a bruised ego, a sort of broken heart, and battling imposter syndrome—really the realities of being in a system not made for

you—gave Itzel a new lens when reading Anzaldúa’s work. “[Anzaldúa’s] writing was there for me as a guide not just to navigate the cultural and racial insensitivity I was dealing with,” Itzel says, “but to do the work [and] feel secure and agent as a graduate student who happens to be bilingual... [to] make the experience beautiful again.” Most notably, Itzel learned from Bronwyn T. Williams that imposter syndrome is more heightened for Latina/o/x and Black students “because the system is not made for them, and they literally are not wanted by the system. Your professors could be all really great people, it could be women of color, but you are in a system that is built to make you believe [you do not belong].” Having this newfound knowledge—as in reading it with a different lens—Itzel wrote and published an article titled “Reclaiming Agency” that helped her understand the effects of the IF19 because it told her counterstory. Her article emphasizes her experience in a way for people to care about it. It was so impactful to fellow Latinas/os/xs and the Writing Center, that they want to use her article in their trainings so incidences like that don’t happen again. Therefore, highlighting the significance of her article, of her experience.

The cohort was nervous to go to the faculty for help because their reactions were unknown.

*What if the faculty sides with Dr. Parkinson?*

*What if they get in trouble for causing trouble?*

*What if nothing happens and they ignore the situation?*

But ultimately, the discrimination Itzel experienced needed to be addressed and brought to the attention of the faculty. To ease into it, the cohort first went to Dr. Ludo Bagman, the Latino professor. Then they went to Drs. Hopkirk and Lupin, who are White

professors. Sofía didn't feel uncomfortable going to White professors for help, they validated the cohort's feelings and anger at the situation. Dr. Lupin plays an interesting part in the IF19 because he wasn't present during that semester, he was teaching abroad. However, these three Latinas felt súper confiada en él, although this will be discussed later, that he was their comunidad. "[Dr. Lupin's] reaction [to learning about it]," as Sofía recalls "was validating like I didn't feel like I couldn't talk to him about it." The cohort had good rapport with Dr. Hopkirk, so they also felt comfortable talking to her about it. But they did not feel comfortable talking to Dr. Parkinson about it. Unfortunately, Itzel had to do so alone. To make things "right," some of the faculty told Dr. Parkinson to personally apologize to Itzel—I mean, what else could they do? The damage was already done. They can't change the ways of academia or reverse time.

However, Dr. Parkinson and Itzel's meeting turned upside down: Dr. Parkinson informed Itzel she misunderstood what she was saying, laid her personal sufferings on Itzel, and Itzel ended up apologizing to Dr. Parkinson, saying something like "maybe I did misinterpret" which denies Itzel's experience and validates the discrimination imposed by this professor. And it's not like this was the first race-related incident with this professor. So, when Itzel learned her professors shared her outrage "but there was no movement," she felt very unsupported because "no one wanted to be the one to call out their colleague, no one wanted to be the one to change the curriculum." However, Itzel doesn't blame the faculty. How could she? She is critically aware that "they [must have] felt like their hands were tied, and they would probably get in trouble if they allowed someone else to get in trouble." So it very much became a political issue rather than

ensuring the safety of the student: Itzel's agency and ability to write were so damaged that she considered dropping out.

On top of that, Itzel punished her own *identidad* and her own background by using the language of her oppressors. She specifically wrote an essay about how UTRGV didn't give her a worthy education because she felt like she was lacking academically compared to her classmates. She wrote she comes from an "underdeveloped area" because Dr. Parkinson had used that language and that rhetoric to describe Itzel's hometown. How was Itzel to know any different? Dr. Parkinson was the academic, the model. Why wouldn't she follow her? Aren't professors, at the graduate level, supposed to be models, mentors, guides to success? Sometimes, professors forget that they are role models.

This affected the other WOC in the program because they too felt unsupported when they realized someone of the same background and *identidad* was treated poorly and how that easily could have been their experience. During my first semester without these Chicanas (Fall 2021), I very quickly realized that nothing systemic is going to change. I can only go to my comunidad to vent and be angry together. I can't stop working my way up this mountain, I have to persist. Sometimes I have to swallow my pride and take the heat, because

our very existence in this institution is an act of resistance.

Somos poderosas.

However, to get to that mindset, we have to endure the dis-empoderar, we have to punish our *identidades*, and "get beaten down," as Patricia claims, "to come up again."

Itzel's moments of dis-empoderar were realizing her experience was a product of tokenism. She felt that the inability of the faculty to advocate for the cohort and hold others accountable for their actions "proved that they didn't value us beyond the [diversity] box that we checked." "Why was I hired?" Itzel ponders, "because I'm Latina. I was hired because I'm Brown and you need Brown people here." It seemed to turn into implementing diverse texts to throw ethnic students a bone by giving them Scholars of Color, like Anzaldúa, to keep them quiet and content. However, using diverse texts in a rhetoric and composition classroom is more than that. It is about understanding racial/ethnic/economic/political/social/etc. difference. It is more than simply quoting Anzaldúa, it is understanding and valuing the conflicts de *identidad*, language differences and diversity, and "the struggle for culturally diverse students to achieve and maintain power over their own educational experiences" (Chenowith 36). That is what those texts teach WOC and SOC: to believe in and validate our own experiences as valid and equal to the cultural hegemony. That's what Itzel learned from those texts. And that's what she needed: an advocate, someone in a position of power to hold others accountable for their actions. However, as Sofía remarks, it's hard to do that in academia because of the academic tenured structure.

Instead, Itzel had professors who extended some compassion to her, they made her feel valued and needed by valuing her voice and her experience. Drs. Lupin and Hopkirk were there, but it didn't make up for the lack of accountability that Dr. Parkinson never received. We need people who will tell us things like, "Remember the power of your words and the contributions you [bring]. You belong and are needed!" My newest mentor told me this right before a very important interview. I felt supported by all

four of my mentors, but that put the cherry on top. And that's the feeling these participants (and WOC scholars) needed as we navigate/d through graduate school—some as First Gen. We need to be reminded by members of the institution that we are needed and valued, that we belong to this space too, because being valued means protection. If you're not ensuring the safety of your students, specifically linguistically and culturally diverse students, Itzel claims “you're valuing the integrity of an institution over the experience of a human being... If you refuse to keep your own students safe, who are you to be a teacher?” You're not doing a disservice to students by extending compassion to them.

As Itzel looks back on this experience in a new light, she feels the IF19 has shaped her in a positive way by showing how important it is to be a modern-day professor—one who is prepared to teach students of different cultural, linguistic, political, etc. backgrounds and is prepared to value and extend compassion to them. This is because, as she asserts, “it's not fair to even say that one or like five Latinx professors would be enough, because it is an entire systemic issue[:] you're still telling Latinx students that they sound like beaners when they write... so what's the [real] issue? Representation or not having the skills to be a professor in 2021?” Part of the blame does go to the professor who wasn't exposed to Latinas/os/xs to understand their stories and backgrounds, but the other part also goes to the institution that failed Itzel because she was a minority and a minority *sin representación*—no cultural advocates. I read recently on social media a quotation from Civil Rights icon W.E.B. Du Bois, “a system cannot fail those it was never meant to protect.” Although the participants and I discuss the system and how it was never built for us so we have to fight to stay in it, we can't blame the

system for its lack of protection for us and other POC. It's up to the faculty, the department culture, the members of the institution to enforce protection of its students. To make change. Just like the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment which gives U.S. Citizens (born or naturalized) the privileges and immunities laid out in the Bill of Rights, so too should institutions. This is why my language revolves around "institution" and not "system" because institutions can change, systems are harder to change. And that comes down to the fact that students, POC and WOC in particular, shouldn't have to advocate for themselves. Systems should be in place to do so. But because a system can't protect us if it wasn't built for us, what are we to do? How are three Latina graduate students supposed to succeed, persevere, y reclamar?

The answer: step by step.

### **¡Dale gas, mijita!**

*"We ha[ve] to assert our dignity in small ways [through] little details that tell the world we are not invisible." (Abuela Claudia in the film In the Heights).*

Although a fictitious Cuban immigrant, Abuela Claudia's words echo with the strength and perseverance Latinas/os/xs, and other marginalized groups, must fight to maintain—el espacio, la voz, y el poder. We have to fight to maintain our presence, to be heard, and to be seen because we are global majorities in a White dominant space, therefore systems and institutions are not built for us. These three Chicanas have fought the good fight throughout their graduate school journeys—and continue to do so—despite being in a system and part of a system that is constantly working against them. They have done so in small ways, through "little details," like ensuring they are heard, taking agency

over their teaching styles and research endeavors, forming a comunidad that believes in them, and embracing their authentic selves.

### *Empoderar y Reclamar*

Patricia reflects on the texts she read for her courses that offered her the greatest sense of *empoderamiento*. She's glad the MARC professors incorporated POC authors and not just traditional White scholars. Although there weren't many classes that focused primarily on race/ethnicity-focused coursework, she is grateful she was exposed to as many POC written texts as she was. Therefore, she claims she indirectly experienced *empoderamiento* from the MARC professors because of their diverse range of texts. Similarly, Itzel also used the texts to *reclamar su voz y poder en este sistema* because they gave value to her experience during the IF19, helped her understand what she experienced, and gave her the words, *empoderamiento*, y fuerza to write her article "Reclaiming Agency," as previously discussed.

Words, like the words of Abuela Claudia that opened this section, hold a lot of power because they offer *voces perdidas* the opportunity to take those words to give our voices a voice, space, and power. As WOC feminist scholars like bell hooks have indicated, "knowledge cannot be separated from experience" (hooks *Critical Thinking* 185). Especially after the IF19 when others tried to rewrite Itzel's story, she had to believe in herself and her experiences and Scholars of Color informed Itzel that her experiences are valid and credible, and no one can take them away from you. Therefore, we speak through the words of successful and respected POC to give us a hand up the ladder of success—a form of *comadrisimo*.

On that note, Itzel recalls moments when the MARC professors called upon SOC to share their experiences when discussing POC-focused issues. And for these three Chicanas, they have no reservations in participating in these discussions. In fact, Patricia exclaims she had the opportunity to *reclamar su voz* when she “provide[s] her stories as a tool in class to support” her ideas or the ideas that the texts reflect. Itzel explains it is “a really powerful experience” to offer your experiences as credible support for classroom discussions, and one she takes up a lot of space in, because it not only gives you *el espacio y el poder* in the classroom, but it also highlights *su voz* and your experiences as just as valid as the experiences of the cultural hegemony who dictate the education curriculum. In that sense, that is what creates *empoderamiento*—feeling useful, like “it mattered... [you] meant something.” Sofía, on the other hand, understood incorporating and discussing race/ethnicity issues in class from an educational perspective. She explains that professors who don’t address race/ethnicity issues in the classroom—whether for White fragility, guilt, or *cualquier excusa*—then the students suffer because “they don’t challenge themselves... the master narrative [remains unchallenged] and [is pushed] forward in their classrooms.” Therefore, as Patricia and Itzel assert, being that voice “to navigate the conversation in a way that helps [people] understand” is *empoderamiento* because it pushes and centers *voces perdidas*—and that’s the ultimate goal: to be heard, to encourage people to be “willing to listen and learn.” “It’s empowering,” Sofía claims, “to be a Chicana in academia” and to arm yourself with the weapons of rhetoric and voice to reclaim space and power in an institution and system that has historically worked against POC and WOC. SOC will “realize how important it is that they are in a grad program [to become] the [*representación* they needed] in the

future,” Sofia asserts. So, they get to take these instances of *empoderamiento*, disempoderar, y reclamar and apply them to their classrooms where they can inspire others to do the same; in other words, the practice of *comadrisimo*. As a result, despite the duality Itzel mentioned—the state of the *In-Between* in which we have to preserve our authentic ethnic selves while also appeasing academia—the Chicanas’ missions are to teach students to value language and different backgrounds, to extend compassion and grace to students, and to encourage students to think critically because they won’t get it from a whitewashed system. These three missions were all the Latinas wanted and needed while in their educational journeys—not just graduate school. They needed to be told they and their languages are valid, shown that they are deserving of empathy and patience, and that more academics should teach about the experiences of POC because young POC need to have textual *representación* and words to describe their experiences—like how Abuela Claudia’s words give me strength that “...we are not invisible.”

### *Representación es comunidad*

Previously stated in the first section, la *representación* is a mentor, a guide, someone you can identify with. More importantly, Itzel claims “representation is also support [como comunidad] and it’s also advocacy [como *identidad*] and it’s also allyship [como *empoderamiento*].” 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. La *representación* es comunidad porque es un grupo social que forma parte una persona. Por eso, la conexión que las comunidades crean is spiritual and suggests, as Cynthia B.

Dillard claims, “an ongoing spiritual striving” to “more fully love and serve human beings and to serve life... through the work that we [academics] do in the world” (102, 42). Las comunidades forma parte de la alma because, as Dillard explains, it is “something *that needs the other to make sense of itself*”; they work together like a symbiotic relationship where neither can succeed without the other—como los elementos en la brujería: la vida y la muerte, la luz y la oscuridad—and work together to understand their individual identidades. La *representación* is also a spectrum, it isn’t just about having POC professors. Itzel claims it’s also about “what you teach, what you talk about, who you allow to talk about it... the students that you allow into the school,” so there are opportunities for *representación* at every level. But it also comes down to the individual student to ask “what type of [*representación*] do they need? How is it most meaningful to you? How does it affect you directly?”

“How do we keep our people lifted without [a sense of] comunidad?” Sofía ponders. I can’t answer that question. I honestly don’t think anyone could answer that question. Comunidades are there to support and celebrate you: one person’s achievement and success is OUR achievement and success. “Without community,” as Audre Lorde argues, “there is no liberation” (95). Because of the centuries of oppression and marginalization our people have endured, we have striven to maintain a united comunidad—not a homogeneous *identidad* that makes us all the same. No. We value our differences. It’s not all Latinas/os/xs that form a collective comunidad, but small pockets. We are too diverse a people to have a homogeneous, easily digestible *identidad*, so we can’t have a large collective comunidad. But, when, in small pockets, we are faced with adversity such as racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, we lean on our comunidades.

As Itzel explains, a comunidad is “a group of people who validate your experiences [and] believe in you, as a student... an academic.” Although comunidades are not restricted to race/ethnicity, gender, or other *identidad* markers, it is beneficial to have *representación étnica en la comunidad* because of an “unspoken understanding,” Itzel explains, that POC have to network and support each other because, as Patricia questioned before, who else is going to look after them? It’s like “a soft spot [we have] for other Latinas because of our own experiences,” Itzel continues. That is why these Chicanas had two comunidades, one with specific MARC faculty members and another made up of students.

As Sofia stated earlier, professors are supposed to be mentors and role models, guides to help navigate the academic institution and education system that works against POC. For the three Chicanas, the MARC professors who provided this support, advocacy, and allyship were Drs. Remus Lupin, Mafalda Hopkirk, and Ludo Bagman. Dr. Lupin is a White man and Dr. Hopkirk is a White woman, but the Chicanas feel they both “have a critical understanding of their Whiteness and the people that they’re mentoring.” For example, when aware of Sofía’s thesis topic on the racialización of language and her interest in Dr. Lupin as her thesis director, Dr. Lupin did not use his Whiteness as an excuse not to get involved. Even though Sofia’s thesis topic wasn’t his specialty, she says “he took the time to learn, and he gave me a lot of resources and that meant a lot to me... my [thesis] defense was just so welcoming... I couldn’t have done it without him.” That is *representación*. It is support and taking the time to learn and value difference. Because even though Sofia’s thesis committee was made up of three White professors, she informs me “it was important that they were part of my committee so they could see and grow from it.” Ultimately it would have been beneficial for her project to have a POC on

her committee to give feedback from the perspective of a polished academic POC, because it would have been validating to hear from someone of the same background, same language, same ethnicity. But, Sofia “never felt like they wanted me to fail... I never felt like what I was doing didn’t matter because I was getting support from faculty, White faculty at that.” When she had emergency family problems come up during the semester, Dr. Lupin understood completely and supported her. In fact, Sofia considered Dr. Lupin her mentor as well as Dr. Hopkirk because “they cared about me outside of academics... they cared about my success and development as a student and academic... I still hold a special place in my heart for them.”

Similarly, Patricia also felt súper confiada en Dr. Lupin because he would check in on her, encourage her, and “I feel like he would always take a second to actually listen to me... I felt like I could trust him with anything that I had to say.” To illustrate, Patricia was having some problems with a White peer in an online discussion forum for Dr. Lupin’s class one semester and “it wasn’t even me bringing [it] up to Dr. [Lupin], he, himself, saw the discussion posts, he closed the comments,” and emailed Patricia to ensure she was okay. “But the way he said it was not directly telling me ‘Oh, you’re a Brown girl, are you okay?’... it was more ‘I understand your struggle and I know some of these things are hard to deal with, especially with race, sino sé que... whenever you need a change in the classroom or in the discussion groups, I’ll be happy to do that for you.’” That is *representación*. That is advocacy and support, just in a behind the scenes kind of manner.

Needless to say, Dr. Lupin was very understanding and accommodating. The three Chicanas think it's because his specialty is empathy studies, but I have another

theory, other than the fact that he must just be a genuinely caring person, “the only White man [we] trust.” Knowing a bit of Dr. Lupin’s background, he served in the Peace Corps at one point in his life. A fellow cohort member the Chicanas also felt súper confiada en, Luna Lovegood, also served in the Peace Corps. This isn’t to say those who serve in the Peace Corps become these empathetic, heartwarming humans, but it is to say they were exposed to different worldly cultures and languages that they gain “a mutual respect, no matter who you are,” as Itzel reflects on her dear friend Luna. But who knows? Like Sofia mentioned with Dr. Lupin not using his Whiteness as an excuse, Itzel remarks that he expressed a type of transparency where he wasn’t embarrassed to admit his limitations and “that’s why I trusted him so much.” He also uses positive reinforcements when he provides feedback on essays as a way to build the writer up while also helping them focus their ideas and feel agent over their writing, a crucial feeling they needed that offers them a sense of *empoderamiento*. They also felt he actually read their work because he always had “quotes ready and sections ready to discuss... that type of investment in my work is very meaningful to me that makes me feel agent and empowered,” Itzel observes. For instance, Drs. Lupin and Bagman worked with Itzel “all the way into August with my thesis [which] built really solid academic relationships.” Dr. Lupin also seems to genuinely be interested in learning and passing the baton to those more skilled in areas he isn’t, such as when he asked Itzel questions on pain theory because she had research so much of it for her thesis which also highlights the fact he values her perspective. That is *representación*. It is advocacy and support and knowing when to listen and not speak. Therefore, Dr. Lupin was her definite go-to for help, and he never seemed bothered by her countless emails—something I can attest to, too. I think it’s safe to say we all share a

genuine adoration for Dr. Lupin, as Harry did the real Remus Lupin. We should probably tell him that.

On the other hand, the Chicanas had mixed senses of support from the other two prominent MARC faculty: Drs. Hopkirk and Bagman. Sofia and Itzel had formed a sort of rapport with Dr. Hopkirk. Sofia and Dr. Hopkirk had gone through similar COVID related issues, so Sofia felt supported by her during those times. After the IF19, Dr. Hopkirk “seemed to value [Itzel’s] voice and experience” and was the one who encouraged her to write her article “Reclaiming Agency.” However, the relationship the Chicanas had with Dr. Bagman felt forced at times. As Sofia previously explained, it is too much pressure and responsibility to send Latina/o/x students to Dr. Bagman to mentor simply because he is a Latino professor. Patricia noticed this forced relationship “because he was the only professor that was a POC, so I felt like I had to kind of make him my thesis director and kind of confide in him with all things race[-related] in my thesis... who else would I go to? If I didn’t have that foundation and trust with White professors, who else would I go to?” The fact these Chicanas have to question and search for a support system is shockingly real. Instead of placing greater focus on their studies, publications, attending conferences, applying to other programs like most graduate students do, these Chicanas had to focus on finding support and value in feeling needed and worthy of their position as academics. And that is the true crime: robbing them of a sufficient education because the system and institution hasn’t been altered to benefit them—to give them the same privileges that their White counterparts are already given, a bloody support system.

Furthermore, Dr. Bagman didn't necessarily provide the support these Chicanas needed. For instance, Patricia "felt like [she] was being used" when Dr. Bagman suggested she use the diversity card to get into a PhD program. However, he did help her through her first year when she was dealing with agency issues after the CI. Dr. Bagman also provided multiple opportunities for all of his students to publish their work, even though it wasn't directed specifically toward the marginalized students, these Chicanas felt cared for in that sense because he was encouraging them to publish and let their narratives be heard. For Itzel's "Reclaiming Agency" article, Dr. Bagman easily could have rejected her paper because it makes the university look bad, instead he was supportive and told her the truth that it is a risky paper, but she shouldn't back down from that potential risk. As Itzel explains, "... even though he wasn't supportive in terms of going after [Dr. Parkinson] the way maybe I thought she deserved it, he was definitely like, 'she's not gonna help you. I am. Don't worry about it, you don't have to go to her anymore, go to me' and I appreciated that." So, Dr. Bagman's form of support gave the Chicanas an alternative, an opportunity that others may not have given them. He opened doors for them and made Itzel realize that her writing "is meaningful and it has a purpose and it's deserving of being read by other people." That is *representación*. That is extending care and compassion just in a different light. Though with most things, there are pros and cons: the Chicanas still needed an advocate to fight for their experiences and not cover them up.

Although relationships with these few MARC faculty was purely academic, the faculty, ultimately, provided academic guidance—they did their job. As Sofía asserts, "representation doesn't matter if you have professors who don't want to help." The

selected few MARC faculty the Chicanas felt supported by are the types of professors who do care and do want their students to succeed. Sofía never felt like they wanted her to fail, in fact they encouraged her and supported her. So even though the Chicanas didn't get the type of support from the faculty that they got from the texts—that of actual navigation and guidance and being able to identify with figures of power in academia, like Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Andrea Lunsford, bell hooks, and more—the faculty did support them in other ways that texts can't. So, there, too, was a balance between the support the faculty and the texts provided. The question each individual student must pose is which is more important—that from human or textual interaction? As of now, the Chicanas are still in contact with these professors though mostly on an academic basis—providing updates, requesting letters of recommendation. That genuine human interaction that I value of checking up on people, making sure they are okay like they checked up on me during my graduate journey is kind of lost. I think both parties (faculty and student) endured a lot during the Chicanas' two years in the program.

Sin embargo, la *representación* de la facultad no es suficiente. The second comunidad the Chicanas had was with their cohort, though there were also specific members they trusted and identified best with. For instance, Patricia found solidarity among the Chicanas and Luna Lovegood because they shared a language and a deeper appreciation for that language. Spanish reminds Patricia of home and ties her to her Mexican culture. Spanish is the reason she didn't build relationships with the other MARC students (predominately White) “because there was a language barrier” since her language bends between Spanish and English, engaging in Spanglish—a language that is just as valid as English, WME, Spanish, and other languages because it is also an

indicator of culture. Therefore, with the Chicanas and Luna, Patricia found her *raza* in this academic space, her people. In English, “*raza*” has come to mean “race,” but this is a false translation, pointing to yet another language limitation. “*La raza*,” that which Patricia refers to, is more aligned with “the people” and “the community” than “the race,” especially since Latina/o/x is not politically nor socially defined as a race. With that sense of *conexión*, having endured similar experiences such as not feeling equipped or intelligent enough, and feeling comfortable confiding in each other, Patricia explains she received the most support from this *comunidad* of students, having turned to them after the CI, that the faculty couldn’t provide because of cultural differences—that human interaction and *conexión* that the texts also couldn’t provide. For example, when the MARC classes lacked information about race issues—the academic interests for the Chicanas—Patricia turned to Sofia, learning from her and reading the texts Sofia read for classes outside of the MARC program.

Sofía, on the other hand, also turned to her *comunidad* (consisting of a larger selection of members from their cohort, such as a White female peer who grew up in a borderland in South Texas like the Chicanas) to confront internalized views she had of her *identidad* and struggle that are considered racist, problematic, and “used to keep Chicanos out of spaces that I believe we belong in and we’re needed in,” because they listened to her and understood those internalized views because they are prevalent among *la gente marginada*. Her *comunidad* and her share similar cultural knowledge and understandings that the texts discuss and faculty lack, but the *comunidad* offers that human *conexión*. The *comunidades* provided the best support and sense of *empoderamiento* because (a) the human *conexión* that creates *comunidad* and (b) cultural

knowledge and understandings that create *identidad*, specifically the Chicana *identidad*. As the Chicanas explain, the solidarity among the cohort stemmed from a shared appreciation and use of Spanish, knowledge of border spaces and bordered people, exposure to POC and WOC, and sharing similar traumas and childhood experiences. Because of this, the Chicanas felt they had a space with their cohort, as Patricia explains, to discuss their problems and build up their agency. Their comunidades also extended beyond their MARC cohort. Itzel's comunidad included Arabella Figg, a Latina MARC alumni who graduated a year before the Chicanas' cohort. Itzel refers to Arabella as her mentor through the program who provided a sense of *empoderamiento* because she reminded Itzel to "Dale gas," calling her "mijita"—a Spanish term of endearment—who showcased the *you can do it* mentality with Latina, Chingona finesse. They applied *comadrismo*, the feminist mentoring approach Ana Milena Ribero and Sonia C. Arellano coined, or the movement upwards of one group of Latinas by another group of Latinas.

"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 *comadrismo* 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. Their comunidad is more than enduring similar experiences, it is understanding each other's cultural backgrounds because that is what influences our futures. As Maya Angelou claims, "if you don't know

where you've come from, you don't know where you're going." These Chicanas understand where each has come from and, as *comadrisimo* explains, will help each other get to where they need to be, just as Itzel, Patricia, and her other comunidad members helped Sofia get to her PhD program, just as 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. Therefore, the solidarity these Chicanas hold among each other and with selected members of their MARC cohort didn't arise simply because they're in the same program or they had to stick together after the IF19. This solidarity arose from being "very culturally aware and respectful of each other," something academia lacks which knits them tightly, not allowing anything to disrupt their *conexión*.

As with race, women are socialized in a patriarchal society, as cultural warrior bell hooks explains, "to see ourselves as inferior to men, to see ourselves as always and only in competition with [other women] for patriarchal approval, to look upon each other with jealousy, fear, and hatred. Sexist thinking [makes] us judge each other without compassion and punish one another harshly" (*Feminism* 14). But in the MARC program, these Chicanas, nor their comunidades, never felt a sense of competition. The Chicanas worked with each other rather than against despite being in academia where it is very competitive and cutthroat as a WOC because the system only allows so many to be successful. Collaboration instead of competition. In fact, their comunidad was a network that supported each other in ways such as talking out writing topics, providing feedback on papers, not working alone.

It comes down to the fact that's it is not about hiring POC or WOC. It's just not. It's about patience and a willingness to learn and listen and understand to the best of one's ability the background and differences of each individual. It's about having an open mind. It's like what Paulo Freire advocates, we must learn *from* others, not teach at others. It's about valuing by building off a student's *funds of knowledge* rather than working to change and belittle the student for their diverse background (Moll et al. 133). The discriminatory experiences these Chicanas endured in a two-year program and the resulting aftermath is not a White people problem. Yes, Whiteness and White supremacy that built systems and institutions like academia began with White people, but it is all people who perpetuate these race/ethnicity/nationality-focused social issues. You can't call for an end to the White race and expect all race/ethnicity issues to disappear, because as rapper Tupac and author Angie Thomas assert, *The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody* (also known as THUG LIFE). We can't place blame on yet another race because that's how everything started to begin with. If we keep pushing this hate toward White people and other imperial oppressors, nothing is ever going to change. That's giving into the binary that a race can be bad. Nothing is inherently bad, it's all subjective and influenced by historical, cultural, social factors. You can't put out fire with fire. It is important to acknowledge and never forget that this started with White people, but at this point it is a collective effort. It's come down to ending internalized racism by maintaining an open mind, a willingness to learn, to educate yourself, to ask questions, to be involved just as the White MARC professors and peers did/do. As Itzel asserts, "a human experience is happening and I'm not gonna deny White people... allyship and

experiencing the movement.” It’s about “valuing people of color because they’ve never been valued [before]... centering and magnifying [POC voices].”

*Abraza tú identidad*

For this final subsection, I have put together a blackout poem using a combination of my words, the participants words from their interviews, Jamila Lyiscott’s “Three Ways to Speak English” poem (quoted in Baker Bell 89-90), Denice Frohman’s poem “Accents,” Gloria Anzaldúa’s “Arriba mi gente” poem (Anzaldúa *Borderlands* 214-5), Audre Lorde’s words on “Divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower” (96), and “It’s All So Incredibly Loud” and “The Other Side of Paradise” songs by Glass Animals—a recent obsession. I chose to write a blackout poem for this final subsection because poetry articulates what cannot be said—it expresses outrage, anger, and pain that not only falls in line with the embodied writing of this study but expresses the emotions Latinas/os/xs feel about their complex *identidades* in an unapologetic manner.

Went through the program  
A shell that just wanted to make it through  
To survive

I’m breakin’ down  
Whispers would deafen me now

I wish you could see the wicked truth,  
Caught up in a rush, it’s killing me.

I have to be more confident like other Chicanas  
Power through  
No pare, sigue sigue!  
Keep going

Sigue, sigue!

I fight.

Abrazó mi *identidad* Chicana  
I fight back with two tongues  
I'm not "white-washed"  
I'm not "rancho"  
Yo soy yo!  
A balance perfecto de mis identidades

Soy orgullosa  
Of speaking Spanish  
Of my parents  
Of my roots

Agency to talk about my issues and struggles  
In *my* languages  
Because the English language is a multifaceted oration  
Subject to indefinite transformation  
I switch it up porque yo puedo

I know that I had to borrow your language porque la mía fue robada  
Estas palabras se hablan  
By someone who is simply fed up with the Eurocentric ideals of this societal plan  
And the reason I'm forced to speak your language  
Es porque la mía was raped away along with my history

I am an act of resistance and defiance  
In a country that once tried to devalue and eradicate difference  
For the purposes of assimilation and Americanization

My voice is one size better fit all  
And you best not tell me to hush  
I waited too many years for my voice to arrive

My language got  
Too much hip  
Too much bone  
Too much conga  
Too much clave

Pero  
Wepa  
Dale  
It points me

Towards home  
Towards mi gente  
Mi gente que dice  
Arriba  
Alabanza  
Mira la luz  
Síguelo

So I stand up.  
I stand tall  
I remind myself  
Yo puedo

Soy surer of myself  
As a Chicana  
To talk about Chicano issues.

Surer of myself  
As a woman  
To talk about women issues.

Chicana? —you might ask  
Mira compa,  
It means  
La Chingona.

To be Chicana,  
Is a reminder of the long fight for justice  
Socially

Politically

Economically

Culturally

The fight our people have been fighting  
I keep these cultural warriors alive in me  
Through Teaching

Writing

Researching...

It's culturally engrained in me  
And everything I Do

See

Write

Research...

Soy una agent for change  
Because I can make  
The Divide and Conquer

that built this country To  
Define and Empower

To be Chicana in education  
Es  
Un  
Honor

Llena mi alma  
Con corazón, espíritu, y amor

Puedo speak up for myself now  
Advocate for myself now  
Pero like,  
Who else is going to?

I am not Hispanic—*that's* an insult.  
I am not Mexican American—*that's* an insult.  
I am Chicana, Latina.  
It means I'm worth something too.  
It means presta atención  
Tengo algo que decir  
Y no quieres perdértelo

I didn't ask to be born Latina, no más tuve suerte  
I'm not just an academic,  
But a Chicana academic.  
¿Me entiendes?

This study, as Martinez describes, “illustrates a rhetoric of transformational resistance” that details and critiques the social oppression the Chicanas experienced and offers valid reasoning for the need for social justice reform within the academic institution (Martinez *Counterstory* 28). 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 POC which is “too often denied” (Martinez *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 SOC. 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. To illustrate this point, the counterstories engage the nine tenets of CRT by indicating “theories of the social constructs of race assert a permanence of race” (one and four); challenging hegemonic racist norms in academia specifically (two); demonstrating interest convergence, such as when Dr. Parkinson helped Itzel to improve her image as an academic not for the betterment of Itzel (three); highlighting how the Chicanas’ intersectional identities contribute to marginalization and denounce racist assumptions that create homogeneous identities (five); reiterating interdisciplinarity in the entirety of this project and in the Rhetoric and Composition field (six); centering experiential knowledge and/or unique voices of color because the counterstories focus on the realities of POC (seven); emphasizing a commitment to social justice that is implied as necessary because it theorizes racialized experiences in *voces de poder* spaces (eight); and aiming to be accessible for the very people it is for—the Latina/o/x comunidad—by using accessible diction and, hopefully, is available to these readers (nine) (Martinez *Counterstory* 12). My dream is that this project will give Latina students the courage and comunidad to pursue higher education and offer their amigas comunidad y *empoderamiento* through *comadrismo*.

#### IV. CODA

Hispanic-Serving Institutions: a failure of bureaucratic, cultural hegemonic, politically incorrect justice reform.

When asked what an HSI does, none of the participants could answer. I don't know what an HSI does, other than provide a "nice little title that [offers] more funding," as Sofia snorts. Hispanic-Serving Institutions "just have to have 30% of a Hispanic<sup>12</sup> population," she recalls, though it's actually 25% of the student population, indicating the basic knowledge we do know about HSIs isn't even accurate.

So, what *should* HSIs do?

They should "guide students who are Hispanic, who speak not only English, to find familiarity and a sense of community in the university," Patricia proclaims. HSIs should not allow Latina/o/x students to navigate the academic space blindly. Instead, "it should have protocols and resources that ensure a safe experience," Itzel states, "and safe in terms of not allowing discriminative practices to go on, especially in the schools' resources like writing centers, tutoring centers... to... protect students of color and linguistically diverse students." To begin enacting change, Sofia proposes "professors [should] go through a training regarding a critical understanding of the culture of the students that they serve... to better serve their students, especially graduate students... even for professors who identify as Latinx, [it would be a] good reminder of the students that they're serving."

As I've mentioned before, Texas State University is a Hispanic-Serving Institution, but it has not lived up to that title. Academia is a student-serving space.

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<sup>12</sup> "Hispanic" is used because it is *Hispanic*-Serving Institutions, not Latina/o/x-Serving Institutions, a label that needs to be updated to fit the experiences of Latinas/os/xs.

Academic people must serve students. When the student population has a high percentage of Latina/o/x students, professors and administrators must be prepared and trained to serve these students. It is not a request, but a demand. Because, oftentimes as described through the Chicanas' experiences, "it's up to us [POC students] to help each other succeed," Sofía argues. The system isn't there for us because it was never there for us.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### Appendix A: Interview Questions

- Where did you grow up?
- Did you like living there?
- Do you like the culture?
- Was it racially/ethnically diverse?
  - What is the racial/ethnic demographic makeup of your hometown/region?
  - How does that make you feel? Like are you most comfortable around people who look like your hometown's citizens?
- Why did you come to Texas State University?
- Why are you pursuing (Why did you complete) a Master's in Rhetoric and Composition?
- What do you want to do with this degree?
- What are your future plans?
- In what ways do you identify ethnically<sup>13</sup>?
  - What does it mean to you to be \_\_\_\_?
- What, if anything, do you feel about the racial/ethnic makeup of the MARC faculty at Texas State University, a Hispanic-Serving Institution?
  - Do you know what an HSI is?
  - Do you know what it is supposed to do?
- How might your identity best be recognized, supported, and reflected in the MARC program?

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<sup>13</sup> So I know which ethnic labels and pronouns to use in their stories

- Do you think ethnic representation should be important for students in the program, and if so, how?
  - For a specific type of student?
  - Do you think some students need ethnic faculty representation more than others?
- Tell me about a time you felt you needed ethnic representation in your graduate school journey.
- Tell me about a time you felt you **didn't** need ethnic representation in your graduate school journey.
- Tell me about a time when ethnic faculty representation seemed important at any point during your education journey.
- Do you think ethnic representation affected your graduate school journey?
  - Has it affected the advancement of your writing?
  - Has it affected your research interests?
- Does the lack of Latina/o/x faculty representation bother you?
- Have you ever felt uncomfortable talking to a non- Latina/o/x professor about Latina/o/x struggles or experiences?
  - About a POC-focused research project?
- In what ways do you feel supported or empowered by MARC faculty? You are welcome to speak generally or specifically.
  - What is the race/ethnicity of the faculty that you feel most supports or empowers you?
  - In what ways do you not feel supported or empowered by MARC faculty?

- How would you describe your relationship with the MARC professors? You may speak generally or specifically.
  - Why do you think that is?
- Do you have relationships with professors not in the MARC program?
  - Are they strong relationships?
  - What is their race/ethnicity?
- How would you describe your relationship with the MARC students?
  - Why do you think that is?
  - What is their race/ethnicity?
- Comfort in going to non-POC professors and students.
  - Who is your go-to professor or student for help, academic conversation, personal conversation, vent, career advice?
- Do you have a mentor?
  - Who? Are they in the MARC program?
  - What is their race/ethnicity?
- Do you feel comfortable in participating in class? When discussing race or Latina/o/x related issues? When a non-Latina/o/x speaks about Latino struggles and issues?
- Has your self-identity been altered since you started the MARC program?
- In what ways, if any, do you feel a sense of solidarity among Latina graduate students?
- What do you think has altered your self-identity?

## Appendix B: Recruitment Email

To: [Use this line for individual addresses or your own address if BCC line is used]  
From: cab353@txstate.edu  
BCC: [Use this line when sending the same email message to multiple addresses]  
Subject: Research Participation Invitation: Ethnic Faculty Representation

This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Dear XXX,

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a voluntary research study about Students of Color experiences in graduate school regarding ethnic faculty representation.

There is an abundance of scholarship that details the difficulties and struggles for Latinas in higher education as faculty/staff. But there isn't enough scholarship about the student experience, specifically Latinas and their journeys to remain and be successful in higher education as students and future educators which, research has stated, Mentors of Color are a contributing factor. Therefore, I want to study your student experience as a Latina in the MARC graduate program which only has one Latino/culturally representative professor. So, I want to know what you did to be successful despite the lack of ethnic faculty representation.

Participation includes one interview of up to two hours long, depending on comfort of participant. I plan to conduct these interviews in mid-to-late September, though am open to the participants' availability.

The anticipated value of this research project will better people's and the academic world's understanding of Women of Color scholars', academics', and students' experiences in graduate programs in higher education, as well as the potential importance of ethnic faculty representation.

If you choose to remain anonymous, we can make that work. However, there is a risk that some answers to the interview questions will easily identify the participant. Therefore, I will make a great effort to protect your confidentiality.

To participate in this research or ask questions about this research please contact Clarice Blanco (512-501-9428) or [cab353@txstate.edu](mailto:cab353@txstate.edu) or Dr. Eric Leake ([eleake@txstate.edu](mailto:eleake@txstate.edu))

This project (IRB # 7963) was approved by the Texas State IRB on September 14, 2021. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – ([dgobert@txstate.edu](mailto:dgobert@txstate.edu)) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Specialist 512-245-2334 - ([meg201@txstate.edu](mailto:meg201@txstate.edu))

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

**Study Title:** 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

**Principal Investigator:** Clarice A. Blanco    **Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Eric Leake

**Email:** cab353@txstate.edu

**Email:** eleake@txstate.edu

**Phone:** (512) 501-9428

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

### PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn more about the experiences of Students of Color in graduate programs. The information gathered will be used to write and complete a master's thesis using interviews and the counterstory methodology. You are being asked to participate because you have completed the Texas State MARC program, you identify as Latina, and your experience in the program is valuable to understand and perhaps enhance the experiences of other Women of Color academics and students.

### PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in one interview of up to two hours that will be conducted in mid-to-late September via Zoom. During this interview, you will be asked to share and detail your experiences in the MARC program regarding comfort in sharing opinions in class, participation in class, relationships with Latino and non-Latino students and faculty, mentors, self-identification, and ethnic faculty representation. The interview will be audio-recorded and the researcher may take notes as well.

### RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

Potential risks from participating in this study include some answers from the interviews may make an individual person identifiable. However, I will make every effort to protect participants' confidentiality. If you are uncomfortable answering a question, you are always free to decline to answer.

In the event that some of the interview questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you

are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time. Should you feel discomfort after participating, please contact your primary care doctor for help.

## **BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide will shed light on Women of Color student experiences in graduate programs.

## **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

## **PAYMENT/COMPENSATION**

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

## **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

## **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Clarice A. Blanco, at (512) 501-9428

This project 7963 was approved by the Texas State IRB on September 14, 2021. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – ([dgobert@txstate.edu](mailto:dgobert@txstate.edu)) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - ([meg201@txstate.edu](mailto:meg201@txstate.edu)).

## **DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

Your participation in this research project may be recorded using audio recording devices. Recordings will assist with accurately documenting your responses. You have the right to refuse the audio recording. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

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