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Leaving La Puente: A Critical Race Counterstory of Rural Chicana/Latina College Choice

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## **Leaving La Puente: A Critical Race Counterstory of Rural Chicana/Latina College Choice**

Following a rich tradition of counterstorytelling in Communities of Color<sup>1,2</sup> and the application of counterstorytelling as a method by Critical Race Scholars of Color,<sup>3</sup> this counterstory seeks to add to the existing and continuing set of knowledges<sup>4</sup> by unapologetically centering the college choice experiences of rural Chicana/Latina<sup>5</sup> students. Specifically, this counterstory draws on the five tenets of a Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education framework: (1) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (2) the challenge to dominant ideology, (3) the commitment to social justice, (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) the transdisciplinary perspective.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, to develop this counterstory I draw on my cultural intuition,<sup>7</sup> including my own

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<sup>1</sup> This counterstory models the intentional writing styles of Scholars of Color who capitalize terms such as “Communities of Color.” Dra. Lindsay Pérez Huber, for example, argues that capitalizing these terms rejects the standard grammatical norm and moves toward empowerment and racial and social justice. The rule of capitalization will also apply to the terms “Scholars of Color,” “People of Color,” “Students of Color,” and “Brown” throughout this counterstory.

<sup>2</sup> See Solorzano and Yosso (2001) for a discussion of storytelling in African American, Chicana/Latina, and Native American communities.

<sup>3</sup> See Solorzano and Yosso (2001) for a discussion of storytelling and counterstorytelling in the social sciences, humanities, law, and education.

<sup>4</sup> Anzaldúa (1990) argues that as People of Color, we must “. . . occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space” (xxv). Solorzano and Yosso (2001) argue that counterstorytelling is a methodological response to this call. I hope that my counterstory also answers this call by using the methodological tool of counterstorytelling to occupy theorizing space for and with rural Chicana/Latina students and families.

<sup>5</sup> I include both the terms “Chicana” and “Latina” to account for the varying racial, cultural, social, and political identities that collectively represent women who are from or have roots in Latin America.

<sup>6</sup> See Solorzano (1997) for a discussion of the five tenets included in a Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education framework.

<sup>7</sup> Delgado Bernal (1998) theorizes cultural intuition as “the unique viewpoints Chicana scholars bring to the research process” (p. 2). She

personal experiences as a rural Chicana/Latina,<sup>8</sup> my professional experiences as a college access femtor to rural Chicanx/Latinx<sup>9</sup> students and families, and the existing literature on college choice and rural education as it relates to rural Chicanx/Latinx students. This counterstory presents the experiences of Paloma, a composite and data-driven character,<sup>10</sup> whose college choice experiences offer critical insight into the concepts of college choice, college proximity, and spatial inequity. My hope is that this counterstory makes visible the voices, identities, and realities of rural Chicana/Latina students whose lived experiences are marginalized in research and policy discussions. I further hope that this counterstory provides an endarkened<sup>11</sup> understanding of the racist and classist spatial inequities that were built into the higher education system<sup>12</sup> that privilege white,<sup>13</sup> capitalistic, and individualistic theorizations of college “choice.” I ask the readers to suspend judgment and invite them to listen and learn from<sup>14</sup> the college choice experiences of

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outlines four sources of cultural intuition: personal experience, existing literature, professional experience, and the analytical research process.

<sup>8</sup> The term “rural Chicana/Latina” refers to the identities and experiences of Chicanas/Latinas from rural communities. This term will be used throughout this counterstory.

<sup>9</sup> The terms “Chicanx” and “Latinx” are used in this counterstory to intentionally move away from the binary gender pronouns inherent in the Spanish language. These terms remind us that gender is a social and fluid construct, that it is important not to misgender people, and that transgender and genderqueer Chicanx/Latinx people exist and must be included in discussions of race and racism.

<sup>10</sup> My composite and data-driven character of Paloma is modeled after Solorzano and Yosso’s (2001) characters of Professor Leticia Garcia and Chicana graduate student Esperanza Gonzalez.

<sup>11</sup> I draw on Dillard’s (2000) theorization of an endarkened feminist epistemology to purposefully move away from using terms such as “enlightened,” which center and privilege white ways of knowing.

<sup>12</sup> See López Turley (2009) and Hillman (2016) for a discussion of the spatial inequities that were built into the higher education system, which they found severely limits the college opportunities available to rural students, working-class students, and Students of Color.

<sup>13</sup> This counterstory models the writing styles of Scholars of Color who do not capitalize the term “white” to reject the standard grammatical norm that brings power to the term “white.”

<sup>14</sup> I model Solorzano and Yosso’s (2001) call to readers that asks them to suspend judgment, listen, and learn from the experiences of the composite and data-driven characters in their counterstory.

Paloma and her Chicax/Latinx farm working *familia y comunidad*.<sup>15</sup>

### **In the Community of La Puente<sup>16</sup>**

“I got in!” Paloma yelled as she fumbled through her phone. Paloma’s dark brown eyes glistened with excitement. She read and reread her acceptance letter to UC Westside,<sup>17</sup> her dream school. As Paloma sat in her seventh-period AP Literature class in the farthest back corner of the room, she wondered how she had gained admission to the number one public university in the country. Years of subtractive schooling<sup>18</sup> had led Paloma to believe that her cultural and linguistic knowledge as a young Mexican-American *mujer*<sup>19</sup> were a deficit rather than an asset.<sup>20</sup> She had internalized these racially driven deficit perspectives so much so that she had anticipated a rejection letter from UC Westside, despite her high academic qualifications and deep involvement with her school and community.

“I’m in . . . I’m in . . . ,” she repeatedly whispered to herself as she clenched her gold *Virgen de Guadalupe*<sup>21</sup> necklace.

As Paloma logged out of the admissions portal, she noticed that her yell had attracted the cold and piercing stares of her predominately white, middle-class peers. She had interrupted

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<sup>15</sup> Family and community

<sup>16</sup> La Puente is a fictional community that represents the many rural, agricultural communities to which Mexican and other Latinx immigrants migrate for work, often in cheap labor industries where they are exploited and underpaid. La Peh is another name given to represent La Puente throughout this counterstory.

<sup>17</sup> UC Westside is a fictional university that represents the public research universities in the University of California (UC) system. According to the UC system’s admissions index, students who are California residents are guaranteed a spot in one of the nine UCs if they are in the top nine percent of California high school graduates and if space is available.

<sup>18</sup> Valenzuela’s (1999) *Subtractive Schooling* argues that schools subtract resources from U.S.-Mexican youth by dismissing their racial and cultural definition of “education” and by promoting assimilationist school policies and practices that minimize their unique racial and cultural ways of knowing.

<sup>19</sup> Woman

<sup>20</sup> See Yosso’s (2005) theorization of Community Cultural Wealth for a discussion of the array of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities present in Communities of Color.

<sup>21</sup> Our Lady of Guadalupe

the space with her Brown excitement over her unanticipated and extraordinary college admission; Brown feelings and accomplishments that were unwelcomed and uncelebrated in this sea of whiteness. Her face burned with embarrassment as she noticed the white glares of her peers. Her discomfort intensified as her white, middle-class male teacher approached her desk.

"*Pal-oh-muh*," Mr. Smith condescendingly coaxed, "you should be working on outlining your analytical essay. Especially since your last analysis was poorly written and did not reflect the work of an AP Literature student, let alone the work of a college-going student. Please put your phone away and focus."

The class was silently working on analyzing Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Mr. Smith's class overwhelmingly focused on "classics" by "great men," which painfully reminded Paloma that her family and community's knowledge and contributions to this country were peripheral in the classroom setting.

"Yes, Mr. Smith . . ." Paloma replied obediently. Mr. Smith smirked at her and uninvitingly patted her on the head before returning to his desk.

"If my parents did not raise me to be *una persona bien educada*,<sup>22</sup> the things that I would tell this *gringo*!"<sup>23</sup> Paloma thought. Mr. Smith knew little about Paloma, such as her motivations, aspirations, and abilities. He frequently mispronounced her name and almost always belittled her critical comments with a nod of courtesy before directing his attention elsewhere. She felt invisible. To make matters worse, Mr. Smith never tried to relate to or understand Paloma. He erroneously believed that she was an average student without special or unique insight. Mr. Smith did not consider that the curriculum,<sup>24</sup> in addition to her being the only Chicana/Latina student in the class, contributed to her daily silence, marginalization, and disempowerment in the classroom. In fact, this was why Paloma strategically sat in the back corner of the room. Paloma knew that distancing herself from her white peers, who repeatedly

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<sup>22</sup> A well-mannered person

<sup>23</sup> A white man

<sup>24</sup> See Ladson-Billings (1995) for a discussion of the importance of enacting a culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum in public schools in the United States.

spewed racial microaggressions,<sup>25</sup> was a mode of self-preservation.<sup>26</sup> She reminisced of the first time she interacted with her white classmates, a majority of whom commented on her ability to speak English “so well.”<sup>27</sup>

“UC Westside will be different,” she thought. Paloma remembered the UC Westside pamphlet that she had picked up from her counselor’s office during her first year of high school. The pamphlet had faces of Black and Brown students,<sup>28</sup> suggesting to Paloma that the racial/ethnic makeup of her college classes would look different from the composition of her predominantly white AP Literature class. When the bell rang, Paloma darted out of the room, escaping the sea of whiteness at exactly 3:30 p.m.—she had survived another day of AP Literature.

Paloma excitedly searched for her friends in the crowd of Mexican students that populated the high school campus. The school’s large Mexican presence felt safe to Paloma and balanced out the disproportionately white AP classes<sup>29</sup> that made her feel unsafe, isolated, and intellectually unengaged. At a distance, Paloma spotted her *amigas*—Teresa, Maria, and Joanna—all Chicana/Latina students from working-class families.<sup>30</sup>

“Guys! I got into UC Westside!” Paloma exclaimed as she ran toward them.

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<sup>25</sup> Racial microaggressions are subtle, covert, and unrecognized forms of racism that have a cumulative effect on the lives of People of Color. See Pierce (1970, 1980) for a conceptual development of racial microaggressions and Solórzano (1998) for an application of racial microaggressions in education settings from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective.

<sup>26</sup> See Villalpando (2003) for a discussion of how Chicanx college students engage in “self-preservation.”

<sup>27</sup> Being told that one speaks English “so well” is an example of a racial microaggression. See Solórzano (1998) for other examples of racial microaggressions that People of Color frequently encounter.

<sup>28</sup> Colleges and universities routinely use the faces and bodies of Students of Color to falsely portray a racially and ethnically diverse college campus when Students of Color, namely Native American, African American, Chicanx/Latinx, and Southeast Asian students, are severely underrepresented in higher education institutions.

<sup>29</sup> Solorzano and Ornelas (2004) find that “. . . even when Latina/o and African American students attend high schools with high numbers of students enrolled in AP courses, they are not equally represented in AP enrollment” (p. 15).

<sup>30</sup> Female friends

Silence, discomfort, and embarrassment—all reactions from Paloma’s friends.

“Did you hear me?!” Paloma shouted as she frantically waved her hands in the air demanding to be seen and heard. “You are now looking at a future UC Westside student! My dream school . . . I can’t believe it! Can you believe it?!” Paloma twirled and jumped as she excitedly shared her news.

Her excitement was quickly stifled by the lingering silence among her *amigas*.

“What’s wrong?” she worriedly asked.

“Well,” Maria began as she took a deep breath, “I didn’t get into any of the UC schools I applied to . . .”

“Me neither,” Teresa commented.

“I was admitted into one . . . UC Eastgate,” Joanna murmured. “It was my last choice.”<sup>31</sup>

At that moment, Paloma’s excitement rapidly turned into immense and unshakable despair. She was so consumed by her admission to her dream school that she had almost forgotten about her friends and their aspirations. Admission to these universities was not the norm, but the exception for students who looked like her and shared her background. Even her sharpest friends, who had persisted through the K-12 educational pipeline, were systematically denied entry into the ivory tower.<sup>32</sup> Paloma was the only one, the sole survivor of an educational system that was not designed with Chicana/Latina students and families in mind.

Paloma walked home that afternoon thinking deeply about her friends and their futures as well as her own. As she casually and comfortably strolled through her *barrio*,<sup>33</sup> she got a whiff of

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<sup>31</sup> Joanna’s “last choice” highlights the complexity of college admissions policies and students’ decisions. Although Joanna gained admission into one of the UC schools, it was not her top choice, which could be because of the distance between the university and her home, the limited financial aid package offered, or even the lack of racial/ethnic diversity and known racist climate of the institution. Admission into particular universities, as guaranteed by decontextualized college admissions formulas, may be inconsistent with the unique realities, considerations, and aspirations of college-going rural Chicana/Latina students.

<sup>32</sup> See Solorzano and Yosso (2000) for a discussion of the “Chicana and Chicano educational pipeline,” which describes the various points Chicana students are pushed out of educational spaces and systems, beginning with elementary school and ending with graduate school.

<sup>33</sup> Neighborhood

*Don*<sup>34</sup> Pepe's *lonchería*,<sup>35</sup> on the corner of Plano and Rosa. Her mouth watered as she saw the rotisserie spinning the marinated pork meat from a distance. "Damn," she sighed, "does the city of Westside even have *tacos al pastor*?" Paloma began to list the things that she would have to give up for her dream school. "No more *pan dulce*<sup>36</sup> from *Doña*<sup>37</sup> Lola's *panadería*,<sup>38</sup> no more *fiestas*<sup>39</sup> with the *primos*,<sup>40</sup> no more *misas los domingos*<sup>41</sup> *con mi familia* . . ." <sup>42</sup> The words "*mi familia*" rang loudly in her head as she approached her home. Paloma realized that she would not only be leaving her friends and community behind, but her family, too.

Paloma leaned her back on the fence of her home. She sank to the ground, burying her face in her lap. "*¿Que voy hacer?*"<sup>43</sup> she wondered, as she firmly grasped her head with her hands as if to stop it from spinning. Paloma had never left her community—she was born and raised in La Puente. Her parents had labored as migrant farm workers in La Peh and in the surrounding agricultural communities all her life. This was her home. Her parents had forcibly relocated to La Puente due to the lack of educational and economic opportunities in Mexico, but it was nevertheless her home. She had known no other place. "Who will I be without La Peh?" she asked herself.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> A Chicax/Latinx cultural term used to show respect to an older and wiser Chicano/Latino man. English equivalents of this term can be "Mr." or "sir."

<sup>35</sup> Taco truck

<sup>36</sup> Mexican sweet bread

<sup>37</sup> A Chicax/Latinx cultural term used to show respect to an older and wiser Chicana/Latina woman. English equivalents of this term can be "Mrs." or "ma'am."

<sup>38</sup> Bakery

<sup>39</sup> Parties

<sup>40</sup> Cousins

<sup>41</sup> Sunday masses

<sup>42</sup> With my family

<sup>43</sup> What am I going to do?

<sup>44</sup> Paloma's line of questioning interrogates the close attachments and ties rural students have with their home communities, which is inseparable from rural students' identities. It pushes the conversation of sense of place and self-identity further by interweaving her parents' migration story into a conception of rurality that accounts for historical, cultural, and political experiences. See Pini and Bhopal (2017) for a discussion that moves rurality beyond dominant constructions of whiteness.



Paloma's stomach began to turn as she wondered how her *papás*<sup>45</sup> would react to her news. She so desperately wanted their blessing and enthusiasm. She wanted nothing more than to make them proud. Yet, Paloma knew that leaving home would greatly affect the way her family members navigated their everyday lives. She was the translator, the counselor, the babysitter, among many other multiple roles that she willingly fulfilled for her hardworking parents. "I could continue my education at La Puente Community College," she thought. This route would allow her to stay with her family while in college. She could live at home, look after her siblings, and find a part-time job to continue contributing to the household income.<sup>46</sup> "My parents have already experienced so much hardship," she pondered. "They left their homes and families only to migrate to a new country where they break their backs for scraps! Why am I making things harder? How could I abandon my family like this? I can't just leave them behind . . . ," Paloma contemplated. Using her hands, she applied pressure to her stomach, but the uncertainty of her pending choice was all-consuming, and the pain would not go away.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Parents

<sup>46</sup> Paloma's consideration of La Puente Community College as a potential viable option in lieu of UC Westside rejects the capitalistic logics embedded in college choice theories and models, which value prestige and selectivity. Academic undermatch theory, for instance, argues that college-going students with high grades and high standardized test scores should apply, enroll, and graduate from selective colleges and universities because of their perceived high academic abilities (Freeman, 2017). If Paloma were to consider enrolling in La Puente CC, she would theoretically be categorized as someone who experienced "undermatching." However, these theories fail to consider that there are non-academic factors that also heavily influence the college choice process, particularly for rural students, working-class students, and Students of Color who have many other roles and responsibilities to consider in their decision-making processes. See Freeman for a discussion of the community college choice experiences of rural "Hispanic" students.

<sup>47</sup> The turmoil, distress, and uncertainty that Paloma experiences is intentionally centered in this counterstory on college choice. Leading college choice theories and models fail to engage the emotion and complexity that occurs throughout the college choice process, especially for Students of Color. This counterstory challenges and resists the linearity embedded in these white-centered student models that are unfit to explain the experiences of rural Chicana/Latina students who navigate multiple identities, roles, and responsibilities.

Paloma began to question whether it was worth pursuing her dream of attending UC Westside. She felt as if she was losing so much in the process of realizing this *sueño*.<sup>48</sup> She wondered how many other college *sueños* of Mexican students from La Peh had also been stunted because of the distance to UC Westside and other universities like it.<sup>49</sup> “Why do we have to travel so far? We have to uproot everything we know and love just to access the necessary tools and skills to help those we know and love. Do other students have to deal with this?” she questioned. “Do other students have to travel this far to pursue their dreams? Do other students have to leave their families, knowing their families need them? How will I even travel back and forth between La Peh and UC Westside? I don’t know the bus or train routes. Will UC Westside provide me with additional financial support to visit my family, my community? Why don’t we have a UC Westside? Who decided that we weren’t good enough to have our own university located right here in La Peh?”<sup>50</sup>

Paloma got up from the ground and started pacing back and forth rapidly. She felt hurt, discouraged, and frustrated by the numerous educational inequities that impacted the lives of

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<sup>48</sup> Dream

<sup>49</sup> There is a growing body of research that seeks to understand the impact that distance from colleges and universities has on the college choice experiences of rural students, working-class students, and Students of Color (Hillman, 2016; López Turley, 2009; Mattern & Wyatt, 2009; Moore, Tan, & Shulock, 2014). This research overwhelmingly finds that (a) geography matters for college access and choice, and (b) distance to higher education institutions plays a large role in shaping students’ decisions and in reinforcing persisting educational inequities across space.

<sup>50</sup> Applying a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, particularly the first tenant of the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, this counterstory argues that the location of colleges and universities and those who are privileged to live near them are by no means accidental. One example includes López Turley’s (2009) discussion around the creation of the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). López Turley argues that this institution was originally created to serve a poor and predominantly Latinx population; however, it was subsequently built near “the upper-income, white-dominated northwest periphery of the city” (p. 142). The location of UTSA and other universities like it exacerbates inequities in college access and choice for rural students, working-class students, and Students of Color. See Vélez and Solórzano (2017) for a discussion of the intersection of race and space as it relates to the field of education.

her rural Chicana/Latina community members of La Peh. “It’s not fair,” she thought, as she walked from one end of the fence to the other. “It’s almost as if they don’t want us to attend these universities.” She stopped pacing abruptly. “Come to think of it,” she speculated, “we are rarely visited by college recruiters.”<sup>51</sup> Throughout her time at La Puente High School, Paloma and her peers had only been exposed to the local community college and other surrounding institutions which included technical schools, for-profit schools, and some public universities that were closer in proximity to La Puente but did not offer the same opportunities as the far away, selective, and research-intensive institutions like UC Westside.

“There’s nothing wrong with La Puente CC,” Paloma reflected. She had *primos* who attended this two-year college and she knew that choosing to attend La Puente CC was a strategic decision to maintain employment, save money, and stay closer to family. “But why is it that we are concentrated at La Puente CC?<sup>52</sup> Why don’t other colleges and universities visit us? Why doesn’t our school take us on trips to visit those far away colleges?” She wondered if exposure to colleges and universities outside of La Peh would be enough to encourage students to uproot their identities, families, and communities for a “world-class education.”<sup>53</sup> After all, she had learned of UC

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<sup>51</sup> See Gettinger (2019) for a discussion of why college recruiters do not visit rural communities and Jaschik (2019) for a discussion of where college recruiters do visit, which largely include wealthy and white high schools.

<sup>52</sup> While Latina students are concentrated at the community college level in the state of California, Zerquera, Acevedo-Gil, Flores, and Marantal (2018) find that “in more than half of the states (n=28) Latina/o/x students were enrolled in four-year colleges at higher rates than they were enrolled in community colleges” (p. 95). These scholars urge us to challenge the dominant narrative surrounding Latina college student access and choice, given the heterogeneity and diversity among the Latina student population that varies across geographic contexts.

<sup>53</sup> This counterstory challenges traditional approaches to increasing college access and “improving” students’ college choices that center on expanding the knowledge and information available to students to help them make “better” and “more informed” decisions. Consumer information tools such as the College Scorecard, College Navigator, and the Financial Aid Shopping Sheet rely on a set of major assumptions about the college choice process and they further overlook the large role that social, cultural, financial, and geographical characteristics have on students’ college decisions. See Turk and Hillman (2016) for a discussion of utility of consumer information tools.

Westside early on in her high school trajectory, yet she was still contemplating fully committing to this top-notch university. Years of academic preparation were not enough to lessen the emotional pain that Paloma was currently experiencing.

Her stomach growled. Paloma had been outside her home for about 45 minutes thinking about her admission to UC Westside, what it meant to leave her family and community, and what it meant for these institutions to be so far away and exclusionary. “I have a couple of months before I officially have to decide,” she told herself in a gentle tone. “And I still have to talk with my *papás*. This decision is going to affect us all, not just me. We have to make it together.”<sup>54</sup> Paloma felt nervous about having to initiate a conversation with her parents, as she was the first in her family to pursue higher education. She was also the first in her extended family to seek enrollment in a university that was far away from La Puente. This would complicate the discussion. She wondered if she was well-equipped to answer her parents’ questions and ease their potential fears and concerns. “I can’t even ease my own,” she thought.

Paloma walked into the kitchen to grab a snack and was surprised to see her mother home before sundown. She was also pleasantly surprised to see and smell her mother’s delicious home-cooked *enchiladas* ready to be devoured.

“Hola *mamá*,<sup>55</sup> what are you doing here?” Paloma asked.

“I finished early today *hija*,<sup>56</sup> but your *papá*<sup>57</sup> is still at work. He’ll join us later. Come eat. I made your favorite.”

“Great,” Paloma groaned, “another thing I will have to give up.”

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<sup>54</sup> This counterstory challenges the individualism that is embedded in leading college choice theories and models that assume that students make decisions solely based on their own individualistic and meritocratic aspirations. The aspirations and decisions of rural Chicana/Latina students are intertwined and inseparable from those of their families. This interconnectedness between Chicana/Latina students and their families should not be viewed as a deficit, but rather as an asset that guides and informs their decision-making in a collective as opposed to an individual setting. See Alvarez (2010), Ceja (2004), and Martinez (2013) for a discussion of the critical role of family in the college choice processes of Chicanx/Latinx students.

<sup>55</sup> Mother

<sup>56</sup> Daughter

<sup>57</sup> Father

“What?” her mother responded as she plated the *enchiladas*.

“Nada, *mamá*. Let’s eat.”

Paloma watched as her *mamá* poured the *crema*<sup>58</sup> and *salsa roja*<sup>59</sup> over the *enchiladas*. Her mother’s hands were rough and calloused after decades of laboring in the agricultural fields. Hands that had put food on the tables of millions of homes in the United States.

“Ready!” her mother excitedly remarked.

As Paloma cut into her *enchiladas*, she thought about the various *consejos, dichos y cuentos*<sup>60</sup> her *mamá* had shared with her throughout her adolescence. She had learned a lot from her *mamá*. She had learned to make these very *enchiladas* that she was digging into, to keep a clean home, and to *valerse por si misma*.<sup>61</sup> Her home knowledge<sup>62</sup> was a critical tool that had helped her navigate the numerous educational obstacles that she faced in pursuit of higher education as a rural Chicana/Latina student. The lessons her *mamá* shared with her had equipped Paloma with the necessary strategies to survive and thrive in a white, competitive, and individualistic educational system. But this extraordinary accomplishment, her admission to UC Westside, felt wrong.

“Paloma why aren’t you eating?” her mother pressed.

Paloma looked at her *mamá*. Her mother’s sunburnt yet tender face filled Paloma’s heart with so much love. “How can I leave her behind?” Paloma thought. She already missed her *mamá*.

“Paloma? *¿Qué tienes?*<sup>63</sup>” her mother probed.

“*Mamá* . . . I was admitted into UC Westside,” she replied nervously.

“UC Westside? *¿Qué es eso?*”<sup>64</sup> her mother demanded.

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<sup>58</sup> Sour cream

<sup>59</sup> Red salsa

<sup>60</sup> Advice, proverbs, and stories

<sup>61</sup> To be self-reliant

<sup>62</sup> See Delgado Bernal (2001) for a discussion of the lessons that are learned in the home and community that Chicana/Latina students draw on to “survive and succeed within an educational system that often excludes and silences them” (p. 623).

<sup>63</sup> What is wrong?

<sup>64</sup> What is that?

“It is a university, *mamá*. The best university. My dream university . . . ”

Paloma’s *mamá* watched as her oldest daughter’s face lit up as she talked about her dream school. She was immensely proud of her daughter’s accomplishments, but she had real fears and concerns that needed immediate answers. She had questions about her daughter’s safety in this new and distant city where they had no relatives. She had questions about the affordability of UC Westside and about where Paloma would live and with whom. She wondered how often she would see her daughter.

“*Mi Palomita*,” her *mamá* began as she affectionately caressed her daughter’s face, “I migrated to this country with dreams of a better life for you and your siblings. I am so proud of what you have accomplished for yourself. I never wanted you to end up like me . . . ”

“*Mamá*,” Paloma interrupted, “I have studied hard because of you. I want to do this not for myself, but for you, for our *familia*, for our *cultura*,<sup>65</sup> for our *gente*.<sup>66</sup> I want to especially do this for the Chicanx/Latinx students that UC Westside overlooks.” Paloma remembered her friends who were denied access to the UC system. “This is for them and for others like them,” she added.<sup>67</sup>

Paloma’s *mamá* smiled at the *chingona*<sup>68</sup> daughter she had raised.

That day, Paloma accepted her admission to UC Westside. The journey ahead was going to be difficult for Paloma. She would face an innumerable set of academic, social, and emotional challenges associated with attending a selective

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<sup>65</sup> Culture

<sup>66</sup> People

<sup>67</sup> Students of Color, and Chicanx/Latinx students specifically, typically pursue higher education to give back to their families and communities. This aspect of choosing the path of higher education is usually not centered in leading college choice theories and models. In fact, Chicanx/Latinx students’ social justice pursuit of higher education is often interpreted through deficit lenses because of the types of colleges and careers students choose to realize their long-term aspirations of service and care for their families and communities. See Pérez Huber, Vélez, and Solórzano (2018) for their Critical Race Occupational Index (CROI) theorization that centers the importance of service and care in exploring the occupational outcomes for People of Color.

<sup>68</sup> Badass

university with few Brown students and even fewer Brown students from rural communities. But Paloma was resilient. She had persisted this far in the educational pipeline because her parents had taught her the meaning of hard work and perseverance; her first mentors. She hoped to model her parents' hard work ethic in college and hoped to one day repay them for their endless sacrifices with a diploma from UC Westside. Until then, leaving La Puente was one of the many sacrifices Paloma was determined to make for them just as they had always made for her. Paloma's absence would be felt by her family and others in her community. They would wonder where she went, wonder why she went so far away.<sup>69</sup> But she was leaving to come back.<sup>70</sup> She would come back for the others. For her *papás*, her *amigas*, y *el resto de La Peh*.<sup>71</sup> She was

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<sup>69</sup> The ending of this counterstory is modeled after Cisneros's (1989) Esperanza character in her coming-of-age novel *House on Mango Street*. See the following excerpts from the novel:

When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are. (Cisneros, 1989, p. 105)

One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to hold me here forever. One day I will go away. Friends and neighbors will say, "What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?" They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out. (Cisneros, 1989, p. 110)

<sup>70</sup> The literature on rural education finds that rural students do not return to their home communities after leaving to pursue higher education because their communities do not offer sufficient career opportunities. This counterstory seeks to counter this "brain drain" effect that is typically discussed in the rural education literature by deliberately emphasizing Paloma's desire to return to her community to help others. The desire to return and make an impact on one's home community is consistent with the literature on Chicanx/Latinx college access and choice, although it is largely missing from the rural narrative. Importantly, rural education literature tends to be overwhelmingly written by white scholars about white rural communities and literature on Chicanx/Latinx college choice tends to focus on students from urban backgrounds, which can explain the gaps across these two fields of literature.

<sup>71</sup> For her parents, her female friends, and the rest of La Peh.

leaving La Puente for college, but she was bringing along her entire family and community in body, mind, and spirit.

## **Discussion**

The Critical Race methodological tool of counterstorytelling allows for voices, perspectives, and realities from the margins to be centered and made visible in research and policy discussions. The college choice experiences of rural Chicana/Latina students is a story that is not often told and intentionally developed in this special issue to demand awareness and justice for rural Chicanx/Latinx students and families. Leading college choice theories and models have widely attempted to remove the messiness and complexity from the college choice process by promoting a series of college choice phases that are generalized across student groups regardless of history, context, and identity. Further, the leading research on rural students continues to omit the experiences of rural Students of Color, including Native Americans, African Americans, and Chicanxs/Latinxs. The composite character of Paloma, a rural Chicana/Latina student, challenges the linearity embedded in college choice models and disrupts the whiteness embedded in rural education literature.

Although Paloma's character represents the college choice experiences of rural Chicanas/Latinas, it is important to note the variability of experiences among this group of students. The conversations with her *amigas* about their college admissions and Paloma's own reflection about those who were denied entry into the ivory tower depict this variability. There are many Palomas like the one characterized in this counterstory who thrive in educational spaces despite structural inequities, but there is an even greater number of Palomas whose aspirations are curtailed because of an unjust, racist, and classist education system. I do this work for all the Palomas whose individual and collective narratives demand racial, social, and spatial justice for rural Chicanx/Latinx communities.



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