

ALEJANDRA WRITES A BOOK: A CRITICAL RACE COUNTERSTORY ABOUT WRITING, IDENTITY, AND BEING CHICANX¹ IN THE ACADEMY

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Writing centers can never forget to talk with students. —Victor Villanueva

[W]hen we can learn to hear the counter in the narratives our students tell, particularly those students who are marginalized, we are awakened to—made to realize—the discursive and material obstacles they face as they work to find a meaningful and productive place in the academy. —Rebecca L. Jackson

This is a counterstory about a student of the Writing Center. I have made assertions in previous scholarship that counterstory, as a method of critical race theory, allows voices from the margins to become central to relating underserved students' own experiences within the academy (see "Critical Race Theory;" "A Plea"). As asserted through the epigraphs above of Victor Villanueva and Rebecca L. Jackson, these narratives are crucial to understanding statistics beyond resulting master narratives formed about underserved students. Concerning my own scholarship and subjectivity as Chicana, this counterstory is a response to this special issue's question: What kinds of support do graduate student writers from underserved populations need and want? The narrative below focuses on statistics specific to Chicana² in the academy and along the Chicana/a Educational Pipeline (Yosso and Solórzano 1). As numerous critical race theorists (Bell, Williams, Delgado, Yosso) and proponents of critical race narrative in rhetoric and composition (Gilyard, Prendergast, Condon, Villanueva) have asserted, marginalized students are the experts of their own experiences and should be the purveyors of their narratives. Gilyard notes, the personal narrative as a primary database serves as "an account that will further illuminate matters for those involved with the education of" minoritized students, such as African-Americans, American Indians, and Chicana (12–14). I craft the narratives below with the intent that the institution of Writing Centers and, specific to this audience, Writing Center administrators, approach underserved students with ears that will listen for that which they do not intellectually, viscerally, or experientially know (Ratcliffe 29). Ratcliffe's call for rhetorical listening is furthered by Flores and Rosa's "raciolinguistic

ideologies" framework that examines "not only the 'eyes' of whiteness but also its 'mouth' and 'ears'" (151), all toward the understanding and belief that we as people of color can relay who we are on our own terms and in turn make change collaboratively.

The Pipeline as Narrative Outline

For every 100 Chicana³ students who begin elementary school, 2% earn a Master's or a professional degree, and 0.2% earn a doctorate (Yosso and Solórzano⁴). Writing Centers concerned with serving students from underserved backgrounds should consider the journey of graduate students along their educational pipelines as one informed by and resultant of educations not informed by ethnic studies or a critical culturally relevant curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional practice (Romero, Arce, and Cammarota). As a practice, unquestioned Euro-Western-centric curricula, pedagogy, and program administration actively chip and strip away writerly identity from Chicana students. Yet this facet of the pipeline is rarely examined due to the sheer clamor of the master narrative that explains these dismal numbers away as factors of cultural deficiency on the part of the student rather than cultural deficiency on the part of the institution. Related from a perspective counter to this master narrative, the counterstory below illustrates these data as narrative vignettes—snapshots of a sort—along the pipeline and presents evidence that writerly identities of underserved Chicana students pre-exist the Writing Center experience. Writing Centers in turn can best serve marginalized students when administrators and staff are trained to listen to, learn from, make space for, and perhaps even assist students in the rebuilding of a writerly identity.

Engaging Villanueva's and Jackson's recommendations of talking to students and centralizing their narratives, we can broaden the conversation *about* underserved students to instead *include* underserved students as we together address and refute institutional assumptions about who we are and the potential for our place in the academy.

A Counterstory: Vignettes along the Pipeline

Episode 1: Alejandra the Writer

Pipeline Station: Elementary School

Chicanx Student Status: 100/100

Alejandra always knew she would be a writer. In Miss Garcia's first grade state-mandated bilingual class, where English-speaking students were borderlands Chicaxs and Spanish-speaking students had parents who were "across the line" *Mexicanos*, Alejandra Prieto, a little 3rd generation "*Español* got stamped out of my parents during their schooling" Chicana (Martinez "A Personal Reflection"), was a lover of words, writing, and books—*en inglés*. When it came to books, this borderlands Chicanita never stood a chance—after all, her mother read all the baby books and dutifully read to her baby in utero as recommended in *Baby Geniuses: It Starts in the Womb!* Alejandra's father sat nightly in front of the TV, eating dinner and watching his favorite quiz game show with his trusty tome of a dictionary at hand—once a new word appeared on-screen, Alejandra's dad quickly looked it up, pronounced it a few times—silently at first, letting the new letters and syllables swirl around in his mouth, then aloud, tossed over his shoulder to his wife and kids at the kitchen table. Alejandra was raised in a house of books and words, research and definitions, so by the time she entered Miss Garcia's 1st grade state-mandated bilingual class, she was reading at a 5th grade level and knew she was a writer.

When it came time for show-and-tell, all of the students were excited to find out their only task was to bring their most treasured possession to class, "something really special," Miss Garcia explained, "something only you have that only you can explain to us." Right away, most of the kids started chattering about which toy they would bring. Toys normally weren't allowed at school because Miss Garcia said they caused too much *celos* and too many *pleitos* and she just wasn't going to put up with it! So everyone was excited to find out toys were in.

Pedro declared during lunch that he couldn't wait to show everyone his *chingon* He-Man, and Marisol knew her Barbie with a growing *trensa* would be a hit with all her *amigitas*. Miss Garcia even said there would be an extra 15 minutes of free playtime after show-and-tell before everything would have to be put back into cubbies so they could go back to learning how to read again. Alejandra, eager for such a fun activity, also wasn't sure what she would choose for her own presentation. Her parents didn't have much money, so she knew the few toys she did have would probably

not be very impressive to the others, and she also couldn't think of a single toy she owned that truly qualified as special and something only she had. Alejandra went home that afternoon with an expression her mom called a "*cara pensativa*," and when Mami got home from work she spotted Alejandra's quandary all over her face, right away.

"*Mija*, why the *cara pensativa*?"

"Miss Garcia said we have 'show-and-tell' tomorrow, but I don't know what to take. She said it has to be special."

"Well—" Mami said, thinking, "what about the bracelet Abuela bought you for your birthday?"

"I wear that everyday!" Alejandra replied, "no one's gonna think that's special."

"Hmm—" continued Mami, a *cara pensativa* spreading across her own face now, "Did Miss Garcia say it had to be something you already have, or can it be something you make?"

"But what can I make?" said Alejandra, "I don't have tools!"

"*Pues*, of course you have tools, Ale! You have your brain, and your imagination, *y tus manitas*!"

Alejandra looked down at her small hands and thought for a few moments and then looking up, said, "Well, the other kids are learning how to read..."

"Yes . . ." said Mami, a look on her face like she already knew what Alejandra was going to say next.

"Well, I think books are special..."

"Yes . . ." said Mami, a smile now spreading across her face.

"I could write a book and read it to my friends for show-and-tell!" exclaimed Alejandra, light in her eyes.

"*Perfecto!*" Mami said, with light to match her daughter's.

Episode 2: Alejandra the Lawyer

Pipeline Station: High School

Chicanx Student Status: 46/100

"But you're always writing!" said cousin Chucho, accusation in his voice.

Alejandra and her *primo* were sitting at their *abuela's* kitchen table, a place they spent all of their after-school hours before their parents picked them up after work. Alejandra could usually be found bent over her homework; Chucho was usually chomping noisily on *comida* and poking at her when things got too quiet.

"Ugh," Alejandra sighed in exasperation. "I told you, Chucho, this paper is really important, if I don't finish it for our mock trial team, I'll be in deep shit!"

"*Aye! Muchacha, tu lengua!*" a shout came from the adjacent living room.

Alejandra and Chucho heard their abuela's recliner whine the way it did when she sat up abruptly, as the volume of her *telenovela* was lowered significantly. Now they had her full attention.

"Sorry *Abuela*," said Alejandra, a sheepish grin exchanged with cousin Chucho's smirk.

"*Malcriada*." Chucho silently mouthed at Alejandra.

Alejandra rolled her eyes at her *primo*, but they both remained silent for a few moments more until their abuela turned the volume back up.

"But the game starts in ten minutes!" Chucho continued, a slight whine accenting the "ten." "Are you really going to miss homecoming to write a stupid paper for a stupid law club?"

"Chucho!" came a yell from the living room again.

"How does she always hear us, even with the novela full blast?!" Chucho hissed in a whisper.

"*Déjala!*" Abuela continued. "Alejandra needs to write that paper! She's going to be an *abogada*, which you'll need someday if you don't stop being such a *travieso!*"

Chucho looked indignantly in the general direction of his *abuela's* disembodied voice. He took an angry bite of his quesadilla and vigorously chewed, his nostrils flared.

"Thanks *Abuela*," Alejandra trilled sweetly, following it up by sticking her tongue out at her cousin. He returned the gesture with a choice finger.

Episode 3: Alejandra the ESL Student

Pipeline Station: 4-Year College

Chicanx Student Status: 8/100

Alejandra couldn't believe her eyes. A B+++++? What the hell kind of grade was that? How is a professor even allowed to write that on a paper? And how many of those pluses would she have to earn to make it an A? Or at least an A-. And she had worked so hard on this essay. She employed all the strategies recommended in her freshman year English 101 course. Write a "shitty first draft." Check, she did that. Have a peer take a look. Check, both Mami and Papi read it—Papi of course fine tooth-combing it with his trusty dictionary at hand. Write a second draft. Check. She did it all, exactly as directed, and still resulting in a B+++++. It seemed her only and last option would be to actually attend office hours with Professor Kent, something she had avoided with most professors up to this point in her college career. But she was a junior now; she shouldn't still be afraid of one-on-one time with professors, even if it was a Shakespeare professor who announced on the first day of class that he was a graduate of Harvard who went to the institution back when they still gave you the option between math and

Latin as a prerequisite—(Dr. Kent opted for Latin, he let the class know, rolling his eyes as if math were a contender in the choice). So this was it, this was Alejandra's choice: face office hours with this guy or be satisfied with the B+++++.

Alejandra knocked shyly on Dr. Kent's office door. No answer. She knocked a bit harder, heard a metal chair scrape against the linoleum floor, and was soon sitting face-to-face with her professor.

"How can I help you Ali?" said Dr. Kent.

Alejandra winced internally at the familiarity with which he shortened and Anglicized her name.

"I—I" Alejandra stammered, "I wanted to talk about my paper—the grade you gave—"

"The grade you earned!" Dr. Kent interrupted cheerfully. "The grade you *earned* my dear."

Alejandra gave a slight nod and swallowed. "Okay," she started again, "then about the grade I earned."

"Do you have the paper in question?" Dr. Kent asked.

"Yes, it's here," said Alejandra, retrieving it from her bag and placing it on his desk.

Dr. Kent picked up the paper, surveyed it page by page, then placed it back on the desk and said, "Well this is a great essay, Ali! Very nuanced understanding of the way Shakespeare is using Othello's character to get audiences to examine their own prejudices, very good work! What is it you wanted to discuss?"

"Well—" Alejandra began in an unsure tone—

"Project, my dear! Use your theater voice with this Shakespeare professor, from the diaphragm!" he cheerfully boomed.

"It's the grade—" Alejandra sputtered, a bit louder and more forceful than she had intended, "It's the B+++++. I want to know what I'll need to do to earn an A? What you wrote on my paper says it's good, and right now you just said it's good. So I want to know what to do to get an A?" Alejandra finished lamely, a bit out of breath.

Dr. Kent fixed Alejandra with a stare for a moment, just long enough for Alejandra to begin to fidget and look elsewhere in the room. Then he sighed and began,

"Well, Ali, I've been teaching in this part of the country for a long time now, and with the border to Mexico so close, I've become accustomed to my students having varying degrees of proficiency with the English language—"

Alejandra, nodded her head, uncertainly, but well aware of borderlands versions of Spanish, English, and everything in-between here in her hometown.

“So,” Dr. Kent continued, “I’m well aware that not all of my students are equipped to handle the language, and with your own ESL background—”

Alejandra blinked and shook her head. Did she hear him correctly? Did he just say she was an ESL student? Did he just say her writing was not at the A level because he assumed *English* was her second language (Flores and Rosa)? ESL. A status Alejandra could never claim because her own parents had been corporeally punished in their own educations for speaking Spanish. Her parents were punished to the point they never actually taught Alejandra or her siblings the language. Did Dr. Kent know she mourned the loss of this language, and now he informed her English was a tongue she hadn’t mastered as well? Did *he* understand (Martinez “A Personal Reflection”)?

Episode 4: Alejandra the Bad “Fit”

Pipeline Station: Graduate or Professional Degree
Chicanx Student Status: 2/100

Alejandra was getting kicked out of her graduate program. They told her to “take the masters and go.” They told her she wasn’t a “good fit” for their program. They told her she didn’t write on par with the other students. They told her she didn’t know how to use MLA. Her peers struggled to read her writing, because after all, she struggled to write it. It wasn’t her voice, the writing they wanted was foreign, another language, one she was not proficient in, yet no one knew how to translate and help her learn. They knew good writing based on what they said wasn’t good writing. They knew what they didn’t want, and they didn’t want Alejandra. She was a “bad fit” (Martinez “A Plea”).

Episode 5: Alejandra the Writer

Pipeline Station: Doctoral Degree
Chicanx Student Status: 0.2/100

She first read his work when it was announced he was a candidate for a new position in her program. The title of his research talk and publications were provocative; the titles spoke to her and invited her in. She wanted to read his work, which surprised her because it was the first time in longer than Alejandra could remember that she was excited again about books and reading. And his writing reignited her interest in writing. Alejandra wanted to write again. She didn’t know if it was acceptable to reach out to a job candidate, but her program chair provided all candidates’ email, and after several years now of stumbling over the cultural speedbumps of the institution, Alejandra was increasingly of the mind to

do first and beg forgiveness later. So Alejandra wrote an email.⁵

Dear Dr. Fresh-Shores,

I cannot tell you how much I am looking forward to your campus visit and the prospect of you becoming faculty in this program. You will be the first person of color in my field who I have ever met. In fact, you are the first person of color whose work I’ve ever been assigned in the two years of coursework I’ve completed in this graduate program (no joke), and I cannot say enough about how much your work speaks to me and my experience in this field—in life really. You are an inspiration, in fact, until I read your book I had not felt inspired to write. I really was beginning to believe I couldn’t write, that I had nothing worth saying, and that I wasn’t meant to exist in this space. I am happy to say I wrote a short narrative essay about my experiences as a writer from a young age (first grade in fact!), and how I’ve lost my light and way after being told time and again by professors and peers that I have nothing worth saying. Your narrative approach to writing has helped me recall my own voice, and I’m not sure if this is okay, but I’m attaching the essay here. I know you’re really busy and probably won’t have time to read it, but I felt brave and inspired enough by your work to throw caution to the wind and just let you see it. Thank you so much for your work and leading the way for students like me who have lost our way. I cannot wait to meet you, and I hope beyond hope that you get the job, you’re truly needed here.

Sincerely,
Alejandra

And to Alejandra’s happy surprise, he wrote back.

Dear Alejandra,

Thank you for such a kind welcome and for the very sweet praise. I am very excited about the prospect of working at your institution, especially if it means I get to work with students like you! You’re right, I am busy, but never too busy for students, so I did get a chance to read your essay, and WOW. You write like Geneva Crenshaw. You have a very similar narrative style, and girl, don’t discount your voice! You have one, and we all need to hear it. Don’t stop writing. You ARE a writer. I’ll look forward to hearing more from you soon.

Best,
V. Fresh-Shores

Upon reading the email, Alejandra thought, “Yes. Who am I, if not a writer?” A dim but visible light was awakening in her eyes.

Thus, Alejandra’s story is one of reclamation. She seeks to reclaim the writerly identity that was stripped from her through an educational process that communicated both implicitly and explicitly that she was not a writer, that her people do not write, that she does not exist. So at the conclusion of this counterstory, the question remains: What can Writing Centers do to open space, provide pathways, and to help in the rebuilding effort for students with stories like Alejandra’s. Further, how can Writing Centers encourage their institutions to follow suit? The challenge is ours.

In closing, Writing Center administrators and professionals should aim to engage the narratives of underserved students not so much as cultural insight, but as an institutional indictment of the “colonizing impulses” (Prendergast 46) that exist within well-intentioned and liberatory missions of Writing Centers. As Stokely Carmichael reminds us, institutional white supremacy exists within “the fallacious notion that white people can give anybody their freedom. No man can give anybody his freedom. A man is born free” (2). So as a caveat, a Writing Center is best positioned to truly serve the underserved when their conception of liberation is expanded to realize students possess an understanding of who they are as writers and how this relationship has been shaped (for better or worse) by the academy. It is then the responsibility of the Writing Center, not to liberate underserved students, but to recognize its own complicity within the colonial functioning of the academy, to reflect on these colonial tendencies, and to build resistance and space with underserved students through coalitional practices that centralize the narratives of marginalized students as crucial to best serving their needs in this space.

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Notes

1. According to Scharrón-del Río and Aja: “The use of the identifier ‘Latinx’ (pronounced “Latin-ex”), [is] born out of a collective aim to move beyond the masculine-centric ‘Latino’ and the gender inclusive but binary embedded ‘Latin@,’” and moves toward “[r]ecognizing the intersectionality of our identities as well as our locations within the various systems of privilege and oppression—on a personal and social level [and] fosters solidarity with all of our Latinx community and is also necessary to engage in liberatory praxis.”
2. Chicanx is used in my work synonymously with Mexican-American. These terms are used in my work to refer to peoples of Mexican descent or heritage who live in the United States. According to Yosso (whose 2006 work uses the a/o identifier), “Chicana/o is a political term, referring to a people whose indigenous roots to North America and Mexico date back centuries” (16). Also see Rudolfo Acuña’s work for more on the history and origins of this term.
3. I am aware that the definition of Chicanx has been extended in some scholarship and social commentary beyond the census informed demographics cited here by Yosso and Solórzano, to include peoples with more recent migrations from Mexico, as well as all over the Americas. However for the purposes of the character subjectivities as informed by the data, literatures, and personal experience used to craft the narratives, Chicanx here is used with the above definition (endnote 2) in mind.
4. For more on Yosso and Solórzano’s work with the Chicana/o Pipeline, including the pipeline graphic, see: http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/files/LPIB_13March2006.pdf
5. Condon’s work describes how email can be used as a method for creating counterstories.

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