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## A Critical Race Counterstory Chicana/o Subjectivities vs. Journalism Objectivity

Sonya M. Alemán

### Abstract

This essay employs a critical race counterstory to problematize how traditional journalism pedagogy's conflation of diversity and integration curbs the presumed aptitude for improved coverage of racial and ethnic communities linked to students of color. The instructional material used to teach *objectivity* to mass communication students, student newspaper articles, as well as personal, professional and communal knowledge inform this composite narrative about the fictional experiences of two undergraduate students of color enrolled in a college news writing course. The tale edifies the way *objectivity* in journalism practice functions to perpetuate an unnamed system of whiteness that ultimately stifles that craved acuity attributed to students of color. Journalism educators are urged to re-image their pedagogy in six ways in order to draw in the racialized perspectives of underrepresented students symbolized by the main characters in the counterstory—ultimately affecting positive change in the reporting practices of *all* journalists.

### Introduction

Mass communication scholars have amassed evidence of biased, hegemonic and exclusionary media coverage, imagery and newsrooms (Cortes, 1983; del Olmo, 1971; Gutierrez, 1980; Lewels, 1974; Maxwell, 1988; Mize and Geedham, 2000; Montalvo and Torres, 2006; Poindexter, Smith, and Heider, 2003; Rivas-Rodriguez, 1998). Fittingly, integration of newsrooms and journalism classrooms attempt to redress this dismal representation. University-sanctioned journalism education,

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however, remains uninterrogated for how it incorporates the lived experiences of students of color in the curriculum. This essay explores how Chicana/o students experience these classroom spaces through a critical race counterstory. Derived from instructional material used to teach *objectivity* to mass communication students, student-generated newspaper articles, and classroom observations, this counterstory unpacks the ways institutionally-prescribed journalism curriculum suppresses the contributions of aspiring Chicana/o student journalists. The composite narrative aims to inspire journalism educators to merge both the bodies and perspectives of racially and ethnically marginalized students in mass communication training.

Nearly half of all degreed journalists, and over 80 percent of entry-level reporters, are trained in journalism or communication departments. Consequently, these spaces deserve scrutiny. Much of the research on diversity and journalism education (Becker et al, 2006; Endres & Lueck, 1998; Manning-Miller & Dunlap, 2002) conflates the bodies of students of color as the solution for improved news coverage of racial groups (Baldasty et al., 2003; de Uriarte, 2004, 2005; Deuze, 2006; Glasser, 1992). Because nearly 70 percent of journalism students are white (Lehrman, 2002), and are trained predominantly by white professors (de Uriarte, 2004), the contention is that without students of color embodying an alternative perspective, white students will not develop multiperspectival views (Kern-Foxworth & Miller, 1993).

De Uriarte (2005) argues that while integration remains vital to journalism education and the industry, it will be ineffective if the ideological components of news writing remain uninterrogated. Students from racial or ethnic groups have comprised about 25 percent of journalism students for decades, (de Uriarte, 2004), but what is their experience in these classes? Do they maintain a coveted unorthodox viewpoint with which to sway white classmates? Or does the academic socialization dilute their insight? Given that by 2035, 40 percent of journalism students will be racial or ethnic minorities (de Uriarte, 2004) and communities of color will compose nearly half of the U.S. population by 2030, these questions hold particular resonance for journalism educators.<sup>1</sup>

### Purpose

In this essay, I employ a critical race counterstory to explore how the conventions used to teach *objectivity* encumbers an aptitude attributed to students of color; positing that integration alone will fail to improve news coverage of communities of color. Instead, I advocate for incorporating the lived experiences of students of color into the journalism curriculum, so that the subaltern standpoint actually impacts the reporting practices of *all* future journalists. I begin by summarizing the theoretical and methodological constructs of critical race counterstorytelling. Next, I detail the data informing the counterstory. The counterstory follows, a composite narrative about the experiences of undergraduate Chicanas enrolled in a newswriting course who live through, write about, and read student-generated

news reports of immigration reform.<sup>2</sup> It underscores how traditional journalism curriculum expunges the cultural sensitivity a Chicana journalist might possess that could reshape majoritarian modes of reporting. The concluding section analyzes the counterstory and exhorts journalism educators to envision a pedagogy that dismantles the whiteness embedded in the curriculum in order to better represent the actualities of people of color.

### Critical Race Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory studies and seeks to transform the relationship of race, racism, and power (Taylor, 1998). A key tenet problematizes racism as an endemic, institutional, regenerative, and insidious (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001) two-pronged system that benefits members of the dominant group through white privilege (McIntosh, 1990), while oppressing non-white others. A second principle deconstructs how bastions of majoritarian ideology—colorblindness, neutrality, meritocracy—perpetuate and mask white privilege (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002). Objectivity, for instance, is one such master narrative (Lyotard, 1984; Giroux, 1983) that is critiqued as a racialized discourse based on individualism and merit that obscures the normalization of white privilege (McIntosh, 1990) and renders the subordination of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso 2002; Tate, 1996; Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002).

A third component values experiential knowledge from people of color as sources of fulfillment and communal empowerment (Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002). Critical race theory is theoretically-driven, but experientially-based in the narratives of people of color (Lynn, 2002). Critical race scholars advance the wisdom of those who experience racial oppression, noting these voices lack access to institutional power. CRT scholars' raced-based epistemologies arise from the social, cultural, and political conditions people of color endure that differ from worldviews held by members of the dominant race (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

### Counterstorytelling

A methodological tool critical race theory employs is the counterstory. Similar to the counternarratives used by standpoint feminists (Nelson, 1995, 1996), counterstories challenge majoritarian stories (Yosso, 2006), or the “bundle of presuppositions, preconceived wisdoms and shared cultural understandings” by persons of the dominant race in their discussions of race (Delgado, 1989, 61). They center the White, male, heterosexual, middle class identity as the norm (Delgado, 1995). Majoritarian stories function as master narratives and reinscribe the myths of meritocracy and colorblindness, purport neutrality and commonsense, and invoke

stereotypes that vitiate people of color as dim, criminal, and depraved and exalt whites as intelligent, lawful, and moral.

Alternately, a counterstory is a parable, a chronicle, or a fictional narrative that centers the experiences of minoritized communities and individuals in order to “cast doubt on the validity of assumptions and myths, especially ones held by those in power” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, 144). The disenfranchised have recounted counterstories throughout history: the oral histories of African American slaves, native peoples, and the satirical *cuentos* told by Latina/o communities. They emerge from the “voice-of-color-thesis,” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, 9), an outlook on racial oppression unavailable to those who lack a collective history of racial oppression. Counterstories not only deconstruct dominant discourses by attacking deficit notions (Valencia, 1997) about people of color, subverting the status quo, exposing White privilege and locating complicity in replicating systems of oppression, but they also serve creative purposes, like building solidarity amongst members of disenfranchised groups, nurturing community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006), adding to collective memory, and strengthening resources for resistance and survival.

Ultimately, counterstories build community between both whites and non-whites (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001) by relying on principles of narrative theory in order to effectively tell stories that reduce alienation and build bridges across racial divides. These strategic devices adjust perceptions about the supposed shortcomings about people of color and reveal the inner workings of white entitlement.

Counterstories take various forms, including autobiographical, biographical, or composite (Yosso, 2006). The composite counterstory crafts characters that are amalgams of minoritized individuals. Four types of data—empirical data (focus groups, surveys, or interviews), secondary data, (literature or statistics generated by the social science, humanities, or legal fields); legal documents and proceedings (filings, rulings, briefs, opinions), and individual experiences, assets, cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998) or researcher knowledge (Yosso 2006)—inform the characters, dialogue, and storylines. The counterstory featured here is fashioned from a combination of these types of sources to validate the experiences of Chicanas engaging journalism course material to learn or unlearn journalism practices. The next section outlines the three sources used to compile this counterstory.

### Sources of Data and Methods

The first source is the journalism textbook, *Reporting for the Media* (2005) by Fedler et al, one of the five “most widely used modern textbooks” (Mindich, 1998, 8)<sup>3</sup> in journalism schools and departments nationwide. Textbooks carry significant weight (Apple, 1988; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006; Miranda 1998, 2001), impacting daily classroom interaction, course design, structure, and objectives, as well as acting as gatekeepers of legitimate knowledge. Most undergraduates read anywhere from 25,000 to 30,000 textbook pages while earning their degree. (Apple, 1988;

Hardin & Preston, 2001), consuming this information “with a fairly uncritical eye,” (Clawson & Kegler, 2000, 181). The politicized process influencing textbook content legitimizes certain ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives, while devaluing other types of knowledge. Nonetheless, students often interpret the information as incontestable (Hardin & Preston 2001), precluding them from interrogating it for “missing, misconstrued, and misrepresented voices” (Ndura, 2004, 152).

The table of contents and index of *Reporting for the Media* yielded roughly nineteen pages of text for analysis.<sup>4</sup> Guided by a critical race lens, I scrutinized the text for ways in which objectivity was operationalized as an achievable and essential goal for aspiring student journalists. Also, I looked for discourses that normalized white privilege or white supremacy—either by the absence of discussions about race (Crenshaw, 1997), by othering non-white individuals or groups, or by benchmarking a white experience.

Eight news articles about issues impacting the local immigrant and Latina/o community written by student journalists for a daily campus newspaper published during the spring of 2006 also generated the counterstory. A college newspaper is often the first training ground for journalism students (Hardin and Sims, 2008; Wickham, 2004). Limiting the content to student-produced news articles underscores how mass communication students manifest the reporting practices mapped out by the aforementioned textbook. College newspapers are often disparaged for their deficient coverage of communities of color, as well as for their predominantly white staffs (Garza, 1997; Hardin & Sims, 2008; Lederman & Shea, 1993). While the sample size was small, it revealed how student news accounts mirror the lamentable coverage of communities of color by mainstream media (Mize & Geedham, 2000; Montalvo & Torres, 2006; Poindexter, Smith, & Heider, 2003; Rivas-Rodriguez, 1998).

In the tradition of other critical race counterstorytellers, (Alemán Jr. & Alemán, 2010; Baszile, 2008; Dixon & Dingus, 2007; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2006; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Villalpando, 2003; Villalpando & Delgado Bernal, 2002), I also drew from the recollections of peers, students, friends, family, and acquaintances who advocate for these communities. Additionally, I incorporated my experiences working with Chicana/o mass communication students in journalism classrooms.

Hence, an academic textbook, student-produced media, teaching experiences, and communal activism converge in the counterstory. The tale distills these multiple data sources through the perspective of two hypothetical college Chicanas attending Pioneer University, a fictional four-year Research I university in the western United States pursuing a degree in journalism. They both are enrolled in a newswriting course and use Fedler’s (2005) book as their main text.

## Counterstory

Isabel Nuñez awoke seconds before her alarm went off. As she reached to

shut off the radio, her arm paused midair when she heard Juanes singing “*Camisa Negra*.” She sang along to her favorite Latino artist, convincing herself that today, her second month into her second semester at Pioneer University was going to be a good one. As the first in her family to go to college, Isabel constantly agonized over her torn feelings about the *orgullo* she felt by honoring her family with that distinction and the isolation that plagued her on the predominately white university she attended (Yosso, 2006). But today, well, today she would wear her favorite black shirt—inspired by the master *Columbiano* himself—and she vowed to voice her dissatisfaction with the constraining news writing norms taught in class. After yesterday’s events, she could finally identify the vexing feeling that had lingered since she turned in her first writing assignment about Pioneer students who participated in a recent march for immigration reform. She interviewed members of MEChA (*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán*),<sup>5</sup> other student participants, and a professor who had issued public statements against immigration reform in order to balance out the piece, reluctantly incorporating some of his comments about immigrants committing crimes and crowding schools. She also cited two reports: one that said immigrants displaced low-skilled U.S.-born workers and another that said local and federal governments benefit from the sales and property taxes that all immigrants pay. Because she had to write using inverted pyramid style—with the most important facts or source at the beginning of her article—the professor’s comments and statistics outranked the MEChA students, who ended up in the last paragraph of her piece. Despite her exemplary grade, she felt dirtied after she wrote it, but couldn’t express why. Nor could she formulate a question to ask about her troubled thoughts in class. Isabel had anticipated honing her journalistic skills when she enrolled for this course last semester, but so far the material, assignments, and discussions felt foreign to her. If she wanted to be a reporter, Isabel knew she had to do well in this class. She paused as she layered on her wooden beaded bracelets depicting images of *santos* and *la Virgen de Guadalupe* to recall what her friends had helped her figured out yesterday afternoon....

### ***Mechistas and Walkout!***

After her last morning class, Isabel and her friend Lisa Garza joined their fellow MEChistas for a viewing of the movie *Walkout!* It was the first time Isabel had seen the film and the injustice depicted in the movie lodged tears in her throat, preventing her from speaking during the question and answer session afterwards.<sup>6</sup> Especially disturbing were the scenes depicting the actual news coverage of the 1968 walkouts and the unprovoked police brutality against young high school students. The reports used in the movie sounded like the copy she had turned in, but Isabel realized that they in no way depicted what actually happened to the student protestors.

Daniel Zapata, co-president of MEChA, raised the issue of media coverage when he discussed the scenes from the movie that illustrated the public’s inaccu-

rate perception of what MEChA and the Brown Berets stand for. “It was almost comical to see the FBI and cops taking pictures of the members and keeping files on them. It reminded me of an article that ran in the campus newspaper earlier this semester. A spokesperson for the Minutemen said that MEChA was a radical group that advocated the return of the southwestern United States back to Mexico” (Gardiner & Muir, 2006). A chuckle spread throughout the room. Daniel, who was engineering major, continued after the room quieted down, “I know that those of us who belong to MEChA because of the cultural solidarity and support we give each other (Villalpando, 2003) think that it is laughable. But I distinctly remember that article because it ended on that quote, without refuting or substantiating it, like it was a fact just because someone said it.”

“Yeah, I remember that article, too,” said another girl Isabel recognized but only knew by her nickname, *Güerrita*. “It was about how the Minutemen were opposed to in-state tuition for undocumented students. The paper ran it the day we organized our march to the capital in support of in-state tuition, *pero* it was all about how the Minutemen are opposed to it and how expensive and discriminatory the law is for white people. Everything that guy said was undisputed, like he was an expert,” she paused. “*N’hombre*, the whole reason he was there was in response to the walk *que nosotros* organized, because of our democratic efforts to be a voice for the most vulnerable of our society—but do they write anything about that?” The room cheered in support of the girl’s comments.

“I was the only MEChA student quoted in the article,” said Gloria Lopez, a tall senior that Isabel met her first week on campus. She was the one who recruited Isabel into MEChA. “The reporter included my quote about the racial undertones to all the recent immigrant bashing, but follows it with a line that says we cry racist when we run out of facts. *Me da tanto coraje* when those in positions of power define what racism is and who is or isn’t. Shouldn’t the people who have to experience it everyday be the experts on what is or isn’t racism?” (Matsuda, 1995). Again, the room buzzed with agreement and *gritos*. People began to talk among themselves and Isabel finally trusted herself to speak.

### ***Journalism 101***

“Lisa, remember the article that ran after the Dignity March?” Isabel asked her friend. Lisa nodded. She kept up with current events and paid attention to the media a lot because she, too, was a communication major. They were in different sections of the same news writing course so they compared notes a lot.

“Of course. I remember the lead because it said that only 10,000 people participated, when other estimates had it closer to 20,000 and some even at 40,000 to 90,000 (Breton, 2006b). I kept reading to see what MEChA student they were going to quote because we all worked so hard to organize it and I figured they would incorporate a student angle. But instead, the only sources were the mayor,



who spoke before the march began. You know how news always has to come from a sanctioned government official,” she nudged me (Fedler et al, 2005, 271). “And the guy from the Minutemen, a student with a white-sounding last name who admitted to being at the march on a whim, and then a university student who marched with the Minutemen.” Lisa was two years older, but only one semester ahead of Isabel in credit hours because she had to work two jobs to help support her family and pay for school. “Why are you asking about that article?”

Isabel responded, “That Minuteman guy’s is not a government source—why is he quoted everywhere?”

Lisa said she thought it had to do with the way reporters try to present both sides of every story. “It is like the chapter we are reading on objectivity for class tomorrow,” she said. “In order to demonstrate objectivity, you have to balance your article with at least two viewpoints. You don’t have to be an authority—you just have to have to be willing to voice your opinion on the record. As long as the reporter notes that someone else but themselves said it, then the piece is balanced,” Lisa took a drink from her soda (Fedler et al, 2005, 66-70, 135, 246). Isabel remembered her own piece and felt a troublesome sense of guilt.

Her memory of the march still filled her with a warm glow. The Dignity March reached historic proportions and Lisa was right—no one could agree on how many people marched that day. If she had written that article, how would she ascertain that fact? Who would she ask? Who would she believe? It involved some judgments—some sort of filters—even just to ascertain how many people were there. Isabel was so glad she could count herself among the thousands and so her memory of what happened was the one she shared with her family back home. They had seen news coverage of it on television, but were in awe at Isabel’s tale of innumerable and far ranging solidarity.

“You know what else bugs me about that article?” Lisa continued after she chugged down her drink. “Again it has to do with balance. No matter what estimates you use about how many of us were there—it was a thing of beauty, *que no?*—we were such a show of strength in numbers. Thousands of us to a handful of Minutemen, yet for the sake of balance, the reporter has to present both sides as if they were equally important to that event,” (Fedler et al, 2005,135).

Isabel nodded in contemplation. They walked around a bit and then decided to each head home to finish up homework. Isabel said goodbye to Lisa outside the library and jumped on the bus back to campus. Deep in thought, Isabel kept asking herself if that was how she was going to pay her family and friends back when she began her journalism career—by reflecting a version of reality so distorted from what her family actually experienced (Villalpando, 2003)?

Isabel decided to collect those articles her friends had talked about tonight and read over them, comparing it to the material she was reading for class. She read exhortations that good journalists should be objective, neutral, unbiased observers, who merely gather facts and convey them (Fedler et al, 2005, 66, 135, 153),

but she knew it worked had differently in the movie. And now that she thought about it, it worked differently in the student newspaper and in the writing she did for class. She printed out the articles they referenced from the online website for the campus paper and some additional ones. This year had generated a lot of news coverage regarding immigrants. The proposed legislation to repeal in-state tuition for undocumented students that Daniel brought up caused a lot of debate and was covered in three articles, as well as the nationwide immigration reform bill that prompted that historic march. In addition, Isabel found four other articles that discussed immigration in some way (Breton 2006a, 2006b; Gardiner 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d; Gardiner & Muir, 20006; Gehrke, 2006).

She sat down with her textbook and the freshly printed articles and began making some notes. The pieces seemed to follow the standard format outlined in the text: neutral in tone, opposing sides discussed. She couldn't figure out why that felt inauthentic.

She decided to call Lisa, even though it was pretty late. She knew Lisa's mom was already at work—she worked cleaning office buildings late at night—and so she wouldn't disturb her. Isabel was pretty sure Lisa would be happy to help her think through some things.

"*Bueno*," Lisa answered after the first ring. "Lisa, it's me Isabel. I have been thinking—"

"Of course you have!" Lisa laughed, "I think I was kind of waiting for your call. This afternoon *nos dio* a lot to think about, huh?"

"Yeah. I came home and downloaded the articles we talked about tonight and even found a few more and I get that the techniques the book explains force this imagined objectivity on the things they cover, but I can't figure out exactly why it works that way or how to report differently. Any ideas?"

"Are you sure you are ready for my theory?" Lisa countered. She was often accused of seeing conspiracy in everything, and joked about it often.

"*Andale*, just tell me," Isabel urged.

"OK. I think it comes down to race. I think the whole idea of objectivity is racist, but not in the way we normally think about race."

"But race isn't supposed to have anything to do with it! In fact, there wasn't much in the text that links race and objectivity. For example, did you see the section about stereotypical 'isms'? It says that most newspapers have guidelines that say you are not even supposed to mention race unless it is 'clearly relevant to the story'" (Fedler et al, 2005, 68).

"I know. Point to the part where it says why a reporter shouldn't ever mention the race of white people," Lisa challenged.

"What do you mean?" Isabel asked, surprised.

"In all the pages assigned for class tomorrow, there are two sections that even mention the word race and they are all in conjunction with discussions of people who are non-white. The rest of the chapter talks about "the typical American or

average person” as an empty, race-less shell. What that really means is a *white person*. Whiteness stands for normal, for not diverse, for not different. And this is the perspective that is neutral, that is objective (Fedler et al, 2005, 69; Dolan, 2005). And we all believe it because who has all the power in our society? *No es nosotros*,” Lisa paused.

Isabel frowned. She scanned the textbook material quickly, trying to find a section that didn’t sound like it assumed whiteness was the measuring stick for how things should be understood in the world. Lisa certainly made sense when talking about white people having power. It was not difficult to see who had access to most of the resources in this country. But she still needed a little more clarification on Lisa’s theory.

“O.K. *A veces eres un poco loca*, but I think you are making sense about this. But how does your theory show up in these articles?” Isabel countered.

“Let’s start with the one about the Utah-Mexico relationship—did you print that one out?” (Gardiner, 2006d). Isabel pulled it to the top of her stack. She had scanned this one as it printed out and recalled that it was about a study analyzing the economic relationship between Utah and Mexico. The report documented that Mexican immigrants contribute nearly \$70 million dollars a year in taxes to the U.S. and Isabel thought it presented the immigrant community in a positive light, especially since most anti-immigration rhetoric depicted Latinos as a drain on society. Lisa drew Isabel’s attention to the very last line.

“For many people, the very rapidly growing Hispanic population is almost invisible’—*oye*, do you feel invisible Isabel?” She laughed before continuing, “This report makes people look more broadly.’ What ‘people’ do you think he means? *Us Immigrantes?* I don’t think so. Those ‘many people’ who don’t see Latinos—are white people. But he doesn’t have to say it. They are PEOPLE. Normal people are white. The rest of us, well, we are ‘invisible’ at best.”

Isabel was intrigued. “What else?” she asked.

Lisa asked her to find the article on another report recently issued from a different university professor. This one indicated that, “Latinos have become the most segregated ethnic group.” The headline got Isabel’s attention.

“Hey, *porque dice* ‘become,’ *como si* it happened by magic or something?” Isabel probed.

“*Exacto*. Now you are thinking. This whole article makes it seem that there are some natural or biological forces at play—not humanly constructed policies and social practices that have been institutionalized to oppress one group and privilege another one—or worse, that Latinos are bringing economic inequities onto themselves. Even though the author clearly points to a racial divide, the rest of the neutral, passive, nonjudgmental language that doesn’t dig deep enough behind the numbers to find the systemic reasons for the discrepancies in capital.” Lisa quickly read off a few lines to illustrate her point.

“The increased segregation is a result of the dramatic increase in Latino im-

migrants. Do they stay in segregated communities, or do they integrate? There are often few quality job opportunities in those communities,'—like jobs just automatically decide where to locate themselves. There is no discussion about the different access to power and capital between Latinos and whites that contributes to these segregated situations," (Martin and Davis, 2001). Lisa finished, out of breath. She quickly inhaled and then said, "White people operate as if they are unquestioningly deserving of their privilege and access and it has been so ingrained and accepted by us all, that it never gets questioned why they have it and others don't. It is normal for them to have this entitlement (Wise, 2008; Tatum, 1992, 1994; McIntosh, 1990). And reporters who are forced to write in these seemingly objective ways, perpetuate this idea, too," Lisa sighed.

"You have given me a lot to think about." Isabel said.

"*Pos que bueno. Necesitamos pensar asi, Isa.* We have to be critical, even when it is hard to in class because we might be the only ones who think that way," Lisa encouraged. Isabel knew she was right. She thanked her friend, hung up, and went to bed and slept soundly until Juanes jolted her out of bed.

### *More Than a Body*

As she walked into class at 8:00 a.m., Isabel replayed yesterday in her mind and knew she was prepared for more than today's discussion. Her desire to be a journalist coincided with her passion to be an advocate for her community—she didn't want to disconnect those dreams. From the way she was recruited into this program, she knew that the institution and the industry needed people of color like her to join the press corps. But her presence did no good if she reported stories of her community similar to her White counterparts—ones that reinforced the status quo, but were disguised in impartiality. She needed to develop her writing so it resounded with the disenfranchisement experienced by members of her community and was laced with messages of empowerment and advocacy. If she wanted to do well in the courses for her major, however, that meant conforming to norms that prohibited such activism. Navigating this conflicting terrain would be no easy feat, but she knew a first step was challenging the restrictive standards against which her writing would be measured. She didn't quite know what form her writing should then take, but that wasn't going to stop her from ensuring that her presence in the classroom did indeed help transform coverage of her community. She refused to ignore where she came from or why she was there, which was going to give her the confidence to ask some hard questions in class today.

### Discussion

The story unfolds through Isabel Nuñez's struggle to reconcile her lived experience of marginalization with both mainstream media accounts and her burgeoning training as a journalist. Initially, Isabel feels dissonance between her social reali-

ties and her developing reporting skills, but through the help of fellow MEChA members and a politicized Latina student—Lisa Garza—she notices the unspoken ideologies protected within the long-established blueprint of news writing. It also shows the dilemma students like her encounter: adopt the idealized professional norms unquestioningly, implement the customary rubric knowingly and harm her community inadvertently, or jeopardize her very education by challenging them. Journalism educators have yet to explore these quandaries when calling for greater racial representation in their classrooms.

Lisa's deconstruction of the textbook with Isabel exposes how Whiteness is ensconced in the core of journalistic traditions. She points to the way the text does not consider "white" as a race, but rather typifies its normalcy. As she explains to Isabel, "people" refers to white people, but remains unmarked. Her sharp eye understands *objectivity* as a reinscription of white discourse and dominance. African American journalist Jill Nelson (1993) pinpointed this correlation in her memoir *Volunteer Slavery: My Authentic Negro Experience*. As a reporter for the Washington Post, she wrote that Black journalists wrestle daily with objectivity, "a notion she equates with a white voice" (qtd in Mindich, 1998, 4). Furthermore, additional studies have revealed how Black reporters produce news copy from a white viewpoint (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) or that "the hegemony of whiteness can persist even in a newsroom with a relatively high level of racial diversity" (Pritchard & Stoubely, 2007, p. 232). Lisa and Isabel challenge the directive to write 'objectively.' Although merely at the cusp of re-envisioning journalism practice, these women recognize that adopting standard techniques of newswriting saps their inimitable voice.

The written assignment Isabel alludes to exemplifies how indoctrinating Chicana students, as well as other students of color, with traditional writing styles and values not only stifles this ability, but also proves dysfunctional for their families and communities. Although Isabel adheres to the sanctioned guidelines for her first assignment, she later taps into her collegiate support network to help her make sense of her discord. Scholarly critiques of objectivity shaped the censures MEChA students voice at their gathering and to Isabel. For example, MEChA members articulated that striving for 'balance' in news articles leaves attributed opinions as potential sites for perpetuating racist ideas, reinforcing dominant and deficit ideologies (Yosso, 2002) about communities of color, like the misperceptions of the purpose of MEChA. Condit and Selzer (1985) noted that the conventions of attribution—binary viewpoints juxtaposed and framed by quotation marks—are an essential marker of objective news reporting practices, yet obscure the motivations behind those quotations. Without this transparency, those statements lack contextualization and distort rather than reflect reality because they equalize viewpoints, ignoring power differentials between parties (Condit & Selzer, 1985). In an examination of historical newspaper accounts of lynching, Mindich (1998) contends that five traditional components of objectivity—detachment, nonpartisanship, inverted pyramid structure, facticity, and naïve empiricism—all mask cultural biases, hinder-

ing comprehensive representations of the horrors endured by the African American community during Reconstruction. Lastly, Lisa suggests that relying on expert sources often means that members of racially marginalized communities acting as civically engaged citizens are disregarded and silenced. Dolan's (2005) analysis of newspaper coverage of the controversy over a Chicana artist's rendition of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in New Mexico concurs that these standards "privileged the almost exclusively male protester" and left "many underlying issues surrounding the controversy largely unexamined" (379).

Isabel feels culpable for perpetuating these detrimental tendencies—even if only in a class assignment—and reflects on her role in the class and profession as one of the few persons of color. *What does she have to offer if she does nothing differently from her White counterparts?* she ponders. Recognizing that she embodies a distinct set of experiences, Isabel wants these to inform her writing in a way that enriches the quality of life of her community. She wants her words to enact social transformation, but realizes doing so is antithetical to the teachings in her textbook. The counterstory, then, attempts to re-tether the social responsibility of the press with advocacy that a misguided adulation for *objectivity* has unfastened. Moreover, it suggests that allowing students of color journalists to shape their reporting in this way may rectify coverage that has damaged these communities for so long, as well as reinstate the advocacy function of the press for all of society.

### Conclusion

The preceding counterstory reveals refutes the notion that the newsgathering and reporting paradigm is a deracialized practice. While a myriad of factors proscribe comprehensive coverage of communities of color, the concept of *objectivity* as currently edified by a widely used journalism textbook impedes this transformation, as does the undetectable system of whiteness implanted in journalism practice. Isabel's growing awareness exemplifies the realization mass communication scholars must face: the news paradigm is always already racialized to serve the interest of the majoritarian group. It must be overhauled so that it no longer privileges one viewpoint. Even though *objectivity* has been problematized for decades (Gans, 1979; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Mindich, 1998; Mirando, 2001; Schiller, 1981; Schudson, 1978; Tuchman 1972, 1978) it is still promulgated by media educators as a key component of journalistic writing and remains emblematic of the profession (Condit & Selzer 1985; Schudson qtd. in Hackett, 1984). The textbook analyzed here (Fedler et al, 2005) expressly exhorts students to be objective reporters, solidifying it as a cornerstone of journalism education (Hulteng qtd. in Condit & Selzer, 1985, 211; Mindich, 1998).

The counterstory also exposes how populating journalism classrooms with Chicanas and other students of Color inoculates them with conventional news writing standards—particularly *objectivity*—negating epiphanic revolutions of journalistic

writing. Media instructors must engage the question about what students like Isabel offer the practice of journalism besides her presence in order to recalibrate journalism curriculum to better accommodate their assets. Rather than simply concerted efforts to recruit underrepresented students, reinvigorate journalism pedagogy by dismantling the white normative standards in journalism education. If revivifying coverage of diverse communities is a sincere goal, then these traditional standards deserve this level of scrutiny. Otherwise, the rationale that Chicanas and other student of color journalists possess an acumen that can transfigure news gathering and writing to better represent their racially and ethnically disempowered communities is thwarted. By heeding the stories that Chicana student journalists like Isabel and Lisa might share—albeit unorthodox ones—journalism educators can begin the long-overdue task of revisioning journalism pedagogy.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the downloadable excel table titled Projections of the Population by Net International Migration Series, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States: 2010 to 2050 located at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/2009comparisonfiles.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The unnamed city and state in this essay prop up the plot of the counterstory. It is the locale in which the author-scholar-activist experienced, endured, and witnessed the events reimagined through the narrative. The city and the state are emblematic of large predominantly White metropolitan communities that have seen exponential demographic shifts in their populations and whose educational, government, and cultural institutions are struggling to either accommodate or repudiate those residents.

<sup>3</sup> Faculty colleagues attested the widespread use of this textbook. Moreover, the Monument Information Resource (MIR at <http://www.facultyonline.com>)—a database for college instructors and faculty to review textbooks—indicated a preponderance of faculty members used this text during the spring 2006 semester. MIR also ranks textbooks according to sales data gathered from college bookstores.

<sup>4</sup> (Several studies provided a useful model for this technique. See Hanson, 1999; M. Hardin & Preston, 2001; Mirando, 1998)

<sup>5</sup> MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) is a Chicano student organization often criticized as a separatist organization partly because of a phrase from one of MEChA's guiding documents, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*. It reads, "*Por La Raza todo, Fuera de La Raza nada*" is often misconstrued to mean "for the Race, everything, for those outside of the Race, nothing." MEChA members interpret the phrase to mean: "By the people, everything; outside of the people, nothing," which echoes the sentiment, "United we stand, divided we fall."

<sup>6</sup> *Walkout!* (2006) is a film directed by Edward James Olmos for HBO about the 1968 walkouts during the Chicano civil-rights movement in California. Over 10,000 Chicana/o students walked out of their predominately Latina/o high schools in East Los Angeles and boycotted classes in order to protest the inferior quality of their education. Their actions received local and national attention and support. See Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) for more information.



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