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THE RODRIGO & LUZ CHRONICLES: A COMPOSITE COUNTERSTORY

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The Rodrigo & Luz Chronicles: A Composite Counterstory

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We provide a composite counter story based on our own experiences grappling with investigating elementary Latinx learners' experiences and how we have leaned on each other to resist the whiteness of learning to do research in pursuit of a Ph.D. As the counterstory shows, we collectively worked together to write our own continuations of the story between Rodrigo, a graduate research assistant on a project about Latinx learners' experiences, and Luz, a 4th grade Latina learner who is participating in the study. Together, we supported each other to use storytelling to challenge dominant narratives of the relationship between researcher and researched. Our hope is that this counterstory helps others to reflect on and explore issues of assimilation and provides them permission to challenge how we do research.

Greetings reader, colleague, and future friend,

We hope this letter finds you well. We have worked diligently together to create this counterstory inspired by Bell (1992), Delgado (1996), and other contemporary composite counterstories (Gonzalez, 2024; Martinez, 2014). Our goal was to explore our own assimilation, whitewashing, and erasure through educational institutions, including our graduate education programs. In our work studying upper elementary Latinx¹ learners' experiences navigating the whiteness of school mathematics, we had not paused to work on storying our own assimilation and erasure. Taking the time to reflect and name our own whitewashing would help with better understanding our phenomenon of interest. Additionally, we wanted to explore issues of reciprocity and

¹ We use the term Latinx to include all genders of people of Latin American descent (Salinas & Lozano, 2019).

social responsibility to our partners² (see Dorner, 2015; Fine et al., 2000). It is a collective endeavor to push each other to disrupt the internalized dominant narratives of the academy. We do this resistance and protest with *cariño* (Shotwell, 2016). We have learned to unapologetically share our experiences with whiteness and weave in our stories as part of the project's data. We want to challenge power dynamics by providing more epistemological authority to our partners—"who can legitimately know and who can produce legitimate knowledge" (de Lissovoy et al., 2013, p. 30). Are we willing to be as vulnerable as our partners?

Counterstorytelling has been a key tool for us "that mocks, jars, displaces, or attacks some majoritarian tale or narrative" (Delgado, 1996, p. 194). As a tenet of critical race theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), a counterstorytelling approach challenges dominant storylines seen as natural ways of knowing the world (see Delgado, 1996; Yosso, 2006). "Use of narrative to center the stories of people of color is a corrective to dominant whitewashed stories that justify and harm...incorporating these stories challenges erasure and forces a recognition of heterogeneous perspectives" (Ray, 2022, p. 91). Counterstories, therefore, help to expose and challenge dominant narratives (Martinez, 2014). Composite counterstorytelling, in particular, helps in moving away from telling to showing how marginalized individuals navigate, resist, and protest systemic racism (Dixon, 2013). The characters are developed through multiple sources of data including interviews, observations, the literature, newspaper articles, and personal experiences to name a few (Dixon, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Although composite counterstories may read as fictional accounts, the composite characters and situations are purposely constructed to illustrate aspects of systemic racism; in our case, assimilation, whitewashing, and erasure. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argue, "the 'composite' characters we develop are grounded in real-life experiences and actual empirical data and are contextualized in social situations that are grounded in real life" (p. 36). Through counterstories the experiential knowledge of oppressed populations (e.g., Latinx, queer, 1st generation), can be pushed to the forefront to resist dominant narratives.

It took a long time to begin the process of unlearning and relearning how to navigate the whiteness of the academy (see Cordero-Siy & Gómez Marchant, 2022; Gómez Marchant & Cordero-Siy, 2023). Finding a supportive community was a requirement. As the Mi3 Collective our goal is to establish community through acts of care (Valerio, 2019) of our stories. The stories shared below demonstrate our projected experiences through the composite characters Rodrigo, a graduate research assistant, and Luz, an upper elementary learner in Rodrigo's advisor's study. Rodrigo was based on our experiences in graduate school, our current reflections on working with Latinx children, colleagues who have shared their own navigation of graduate programs, and the literature documenting the counterstories of other scholars and students (see Espino et al., 2010; Gonzalez, 2024; Santa-Ramirez et al., 2024). Luz was a composite character developed from the interviews and observations of our upper elementary Latinx partners, literature on the experiences of Latinx children, and our own histories navigating schools. Additionally, we recorded our Mi3 Collective meetings when we

² We use the term partners to refer to the group of elementary learners participating in our research studies. We do this to commemorate how the research group and learners are all working together to learn about navigating white institutional spaces (see Moore, 2008).

discussed our stories. The quotes at the meetings come from these recordings. Through these characters, we were able to explore our ethical dilemmas, journeys being whitewashed, desired research practices, and what it could mean to work in partnership with elementary Latinx learners. It is this idea of sharing navigational knowledge and joy that got us here, and hopefully, can get you where you want to be. To contextualize Rodrigo and Luz's chronicles, we have embedded their stories within the timeline of the Mi3 Collective's evolving ways of thinking and reflection of our own journeys. Thereby, each subsection in the story is dated to show the evolution of our ideas and to show the messiness of our work (Law, 2004). Rodrigo and Luz's experiences are woven within our own. Magical realism is used as a narrative form to push past the boundaries of reality but still using the building blocks of reality to "achieve a particular effect on the reader" (Aldama, 2013). In our case, to emphasize our emotional academic journey and to honor storytellers from the global south as "magical realism is a well-known characteristic of the modern Latin American novel" (Angulo, 1995, p. xi).

We are grateful to the Latinx learners we have worked with who have shared so openly their own counterstories and ignited our conversations looking back at our own historias. We are also indebted to our families—biological and chosen—as each of our stories started with what they envisioned and dreamed as unimaginable for them.

Nico, Gerardo, Amy, Alex, Karina, & Mona

February 16, 2023

The Mi3 team settled into their seats, eating pizza, and chatting about their past week. After checking in, Nico asked the group for feedback on a counterstory he wrote to reflect on the group's grappling with the data they'd been collecting. "I hope this rough draft is a place to start expanding on some of the ideas we've discussed. There is a lot of room for play in the story." They had spent time reading counterstories in Bell's and Delgado's tradition, but they had not taken the risk of writing their own stories. Leaning forward, Nico cleared his throat: "I wanted a space to reflect as we work with these amazing Latinx learners on their stories of navigating white institutions; yet, I don't think we have spent time working through how we have been whitewashed in the academy." Nico felt he was sounding too academic. Taking a deep breath, Nico reminded himself to be more vulnerable: "This story was a way for me to reflect on this tension I've been feeling lately; coming to heads with what we are taught conflicting with who we want to be. When I was working on my Ph.D., I wanted so badly to belong; to be—not famous but known for my work. I still feel professional jealousy more often than I want to admit. Rodrigo's story was a way for me to imagine what if I was braver and questioned more back then. Like Rodrigo, I needed to work with children to come to this realization. Their joy, resilience, and honesty pushed me to think more about how I was treating their stories. I removed their humanity for my benefit as a scholar. The *regalito* left behind by Luz is what I feel the children gifted me. They gave me more than just their stories to take care of, but also the ability to see how I had treated my own *historia*." Nico recognized he spoke for too long: "So let's take some time to read the story again with all that in mind."

Luz' Regalito

As the interview came to an end, Rodrigo's head was starting to hurt. Having minimal questions in the interview protocol required Rodrigo to listen carefully to Luz as

she shared about her experiences in her mathematics class. The research team decided it was important for him to share his own testimonios to help co-construct a vulnerable space for Luz to share her own historia³. Rodrigo made many on-the-spot decisions to have the conversation be less like the clinical interviews he saw in his coursework⁴. There was a great back-and-forth, but it was exhausting to be present. Rodrigo was satisfied with how Luz shared her own testimonios participating in Ms. Prat's mathematics class, her ideas about race, and her languaging.

Some of Luz' stories were difficult for Rodrigo to hear and echoed in his brain. He scratched his arm as if the scars were still there, in the same ways as Luz⁵. She shared so much of herself, she started to look tired. She laid down her pencil after writing Viviana—her selected pseudonym—on top of her paper in bubble letters. "Thank you again Luz for talking with me." Rodrigo said, relaxing his shoulders, not realizing how tense he had been. Luz quickly responded. "De nada." Smiling, Rodrigo got up from his seat and walked to the door. "Let's get you back to class."

They walked quietly down the hall. Approaching Ms. Prats' classroom, Luz paused at the door. "What are you—" she stopped to find the right words. "¿Que vas hacer con mis historias?"

Rodrigo instinctually responded with his advisor's words: "We're going to analyze them along with the others to train teachers to better see Latinx learners' brilliance." Luz nodded her head, taking in every word. Before heading into class, she whispered, "Trata mis historias con cariño."⁶

"Por supuesto." Rodrigo instinctively said unsure of what treating her stories with care meant.

Lost in thought, Rodrigo entered the room where he interviewed Luz, he stopped in surprise. On the table where he and Luz sat was a small, gift-wrapped box with a note. Rodrigo looked around for someone in the empty room. Slowly walking toward the gift, Rodrigo could see it was quite worn. The box was wrapped in red paper, but the color was matte and faded as if let out in the sun. The edges were smoothed out and had streaks of white. The dog-eared creases were barely holding on to the box. It was wrapped with a fringed bow that had lost its bounce; lying flat on top of the box. A small note was attached. "What a story you must have," Rodrigo said admiring the box' resilience. Rodrigo turned his head to read the note without touching it:

Rodrigo, ten cariño con mi historia. Te la regalo a ti porque ya es muy tarde para mí. Para mí y otros como yo, no se puede vivir una vida sin ser una persona racializada.⁷ Siempre seré la otra. Pero mi lengua es indomable. Mi lengua no es

³ A decision made by the Mi3 collective after our first interviews with our partners felt too impersonal and extractive. See also Latina Feminist Group (2001)

⁴ Mi3 collective members decided to conduct pláticas (see Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) instead of interviews but often still referred to them as interviews because of our own whitewashed ways of communicating about our partnerships.

⁵ Inspired by Anzaldúa (1987) and how she spoke of wounds that do not heal but are tended.

⁶ Inspired by Limerick et al. (1996): "It is useful to conceptualize the interview as a gift of time, of text, and of understanding, that the interviewee gives to the interviewer" (p. 458). In the Mi3 Collective, Nico refers to the stories partners give the group as fragile gifts.

⁷ Gutiérrez (2001); Orozco Marín (2022)

salvaje sino inimaginable⁸. El inglés es demasíadamente ordinario para la maravilla que soy⁹. Me escucharan en estos espacios donde no me dejan hablar. Mis historias, mis recuerdos, corren por mi sangre. Esto incluye la manera en cual mis antepasados me enseñaron cada calculo y operación¹⁰.
Cuida mi historia. Cuida la tuya. - Luz

Sitting, Rodrigo was conflicted as he had not previously considered the responsibility of the promise he made to Luz. Caressing the ridges on the side of the box, he thought about how to amplify her voice and not exploit it. How to focus on her resistance and perseverance instead of centering her damage¹¹. All his coursework had taught him was to be precise with his excisions on other's stories, how to code, analyze, slice and dice sentences to decontextualized statements. The stress of publishing did not allow for the nourishment of people's stories.

Unsure of how to proceed, Rodrigo packed up the equipment that held Luz' stories in one sense. He carefully put Luz' regalito in the palm of his right hand and cupped it with the other. Rodrigo took a deep breath; he knew the challenging conversations to come. He opened the door using his hip to the brightly lit hallway; filled with the sound of children's laughter.

FIN



Artwork generously provided by Neftali Vazquez

As everyone finished reading the story, the group's meeting time was running out. Nico said, "I'm sorry we don't have time to discuss this. Please send any feedback to me."

March 9, 2023

A couple of weeks had gone by since reading *Luz' Regalito*. Other items on the Mi3 Collectives agenda had taken priority. Nico pushed the group to return to the story. Before the meeting, Gerardo sent an email to the Mi3 Collective¹². He was inspired by the description of Rodrigo's experience. Feeling the urge to work through his own feelings in academia, Gerardo wrote his own counterstory projecting his feelings and struggles to Rodrigo. He attached the story's draft to his email. Gerardo's urgency to share his own story was a welcome disruption to the traditional feedback process. His vulnerability became a mold for new possibilities.

At the meeting, Gerardo excitedly shared, "There's always some vulnerability towards sharing your writing. The nature of the stories we've written blur boundaries."¹³ It

⁸ Anzaldúa (1987)

⁹ Inspired by Frohman's (2013) poem *Accents*

¹⁰ Stated by a student in 2010 in their mathematics autobiography assignment.

¹¹ Tuck & Yang (2014)

¹² Gerardo sent email to the group on March 9, 2023 at 7:46 AM

¹³ Dixon (2013)

was quite nerve wracking to share something this personal; however, despite that fear I sent it out anyway in hopes that sharing my story would ignite a spark in others. To live vicariously through Rodrigo (and by extension, myself) could encourage us to reflect deeply on our current position as graduate students and the sacrifices we've made along the way. I'm not sure that the sacrifices I've made were worth it, but I guess I'll never know for certain¹⁴." Gerardo paused, reflecting on his confession. "I wrote this time traveling tale to make this tension a reality. As I look back, I shudder at how much I've assimilated into white academia. Truth be told, the young version of me would look up to who I've become, based on markers of success my parents instilled in me. This story enabled me to play out what it would have been like if the 'Gerry' from the present met the Gerardo from the past¹⁵." With that, the team read Gerardo's counterstory.

Nightmares of the Past/Sueños del Futuro

A sound of buzzing static builds, followed by a loud CRACK and a warp. The chaos subsides. I open my eyes and I'm sitting in the same classroom. Walls decorated with anchor charts designed to evoke prior lessons. Around my kidney table lies a familiar set up, a series of camcorders and microphones ready to capture every detail. I stand to hit record on each device. Like clockwork, the classroom door swings open. In walks Rodrigo, exuding a sense of pride with each step in his well-worn Chivas jersey¹⁶. "Hi Rodrigo! Thank you for joining me! Please take a seat right here." I gesture towards the empty seat in front of me.

Rodrigo puffs up his chest taking long strides to the chair. "Hi sir, is this another English class?"

"No no, nothing like that, I'm hoping to have more of a..." I trail off distracted by Rodrigo cracking his knuckles. Trying not to raise my eyebrow I continue "...conversation with you about your experiences here. Is that ok?"

"Yeah, that's ok." Rodrigo nodded. Learning forward clasping his hands, as if assessing the situation. "Can I speak to you in Spanish?"

I sit up. Quickly looking across all equipments' red lights to make sure that was captured. "Of course! That's the reason I'm here! I want to learn more about your experiences."

"Muchas gracias señor!" Rodrigo sighed as his shoulders sank. He rolled his neck more relaxed. "Es que a veces se me olvidan algunas palabras en inglés. Todavía me mandan a las clases 'ESL' para que siga practicando, pero aunque me den este tiempo para practicar todavía me canso de estar hablando en otra idioma."

I nodded in understanding trying not to get too overwhelmed by my own memories. "That's a big part of why I'm here. I'd like to ask you a few questions. It's going to feel like an interview but I'm hoping it's more of a conversation. Ok?" I pause trying to read Rodrigo's face. He's all business. "Let's start with this one. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your family."

"Pues yo nací aquí en California. Mis papas son de Mexico. Tengo una hermanita, tiene 4 años, y yo tengo 9¹⁷. Me encantan todas mis clases, pero especialmente las

¹⁴ From Mi3 meeting recording July 2023

¹⁵ From Mi3 meeting recording July 2023

¹⁶ In reference to Lopez, one of our partners who frequently wears soccer team jerseys.

¹⁷ Autobiographical for Gerardo

matemáticas porque me dicen mis maestras que soy muy rápido¹⁸.” He half-smiles, shrugs, and sinks into himself a bit.

I lean in and lower my voice, “Wow Rodrigo, that’s really good! I’m really glad you can see your smartness because it matters¹⁹! So you said both your parents are from Mexico, right? Can you tell me about a time when you felt proud of being Mexican at school?”

Rodrigo’s demeanor immediately changes. No longer the confident boy from the start, a dark cloud loomed. I could feel beads of sweat start to form. He turns away to face the wall avoiding eye contact with me. His words come out slower, more selective.

“Bueno pues...casi no. A cada rato me regañan por que hablo en español²⁰. No estoy diciendo nada malo pero no importa. A veces se siente como que me atacan solamente porque no me entienden. ¿Como me puedo sentir orgulloso sobre esto?”

I lean in and wait until I meet Rodrigo’s eyes. I want him to hear me. “I’m sorry Rodrigo.” I clear my throat wanting my words to sink in. “It is easy to think a lot about these moments where other people make us feel like we’re less than. And while I cannot deny your feelings, I think there might be moments where we can see how being Mexican helps us! This is something I’d like to learn from you, if that’s ok?”

Rodrigo shifts back in his seat, lifting himself up with both hands. “Oh ok... bueno. Me siento orgulloso de mi familia.²¹ Ellos me apoyan lo más que puedan. Mi familia en Mexico también me hechan porras cuando nos hablan por teléfono.” Rodrigo returns to looking at me. Chest puffing out again “Todos me dicen que voy a ser doctor, y eso me hace sentir orgulloso.”

I could no longer speak. The room was spinning. My chest heavy. Every word weighing on my heart. I grasp my hands tighter, but his words were painful. I’m drowning in my memories. Time froze. I could see the spirits of our ancestors standing behind Rodrigo, hands on his shoulder. All looking as proud as he was at that moment. My eyes darted through the spirits, but no one was looking at me. No one standing with me. Through the crowd, my eyes meet one woman’s disappointed look. I could not stare away. And in my silence, Rodrigo continued.

“Yo se que algún día, ellos dependerán de mi. Entonces es importante que yo salga adelante, que cumpla mis metas para ser un doctor y ayudar a mi familia. Así como ellos ayudaron a mis abuelitos cuando inmigraron a los Estados Unidos, yo tengo que ayudar a los míos.”

The sheer weight of the conversation is too much, my mind races to find words of affirmation. Words to convince Rodrigo that some sacrifices aren’t worth making. Her eyes are all I see.

“Mis papas me dicen que le heche ganas a la escuela para cumplir mis sueños. ¿Tu también eres mexicano no? ¿Y a ti como te fue?”

I’ve failed. She turns away. The spirits disappear. Rodrigo is staring at me. Waiting. “I have to step outside for a moment. A colleague will take over. I’m sorry about this.”

¹⁸ Our elementary partners have equated being good at mathematics with speed. This was a common story for the members of Mi3 too.

¹⁹ Featherstone et al. (2011)

²⁰ From interview with 3rd grader Antonio (pseudonym) and personal experiences.

²¹ Lopez interview (4th grade)

My legs could not move fast enough. Out of the classroom, left, then another left. I blink and am back in the teacher's lounge. Alone. I unlock my smart watch and press return, and the sound of static begins to rise and swirl around me. CRACK.

I am back in my corner office with a view of the city below. Walls are adorned with awards to Dr. Rudy Sanchez.²² Each award serves as a reminder of my successful career. Yet, each a futile attempt to bury a past not welcomed. For three decades, I held up a facade encouraged by white academia. I feel broken, disconnected from my family.²³ Tears run down my face for the first time in a long time. I touch them to make sure they're real.

Out of the corner of my office, a familiar sound.

Tenga cariño con mi historia. Te la regalo a ti porque ya es muy tarde para mi... Luz' Regalito! It was more worn than I remembered it being. As if it had been tumbling in the depths of my life since it was gifted to me. Even still, the letter seemed unfazed. I felt it. My calling. My name isn't Rudy. It's Rodrigo²⁴. Breathe Rodrigo. You're back. I can do this. I looked at my smart watch and pressed it again. CRACK.

May we do the work that matters. Vale la pena.²⁵

FIN

As the team reads the story, Gerardo nervously looks around the room. Slowly each member looks up. Alex speaks, "This is great. I wish I could write something like this." Gerardo immediately pushes back, "Why not?" Amy leans in whispering, "Could we? I mean I struggle with these ideas of power too."²⁶ The groups gaze turns to Nico. Nico closes his laptop thinking through the opportunity in front of them. "Let's keep Rodrigo and Luz' story going. Next time we meet try to bring in an idea, a possibility, if you feel that same sense of urgency Gerardo did."

On her bus home, Alex blinks rapidly returning from her memory of the meeting. She digs through her backpack for scratch paper, a story needing release²⁷. "A-ha!" The other bus riders do not respond to Alex's excitement. Shaking out her nerves, she writes.

March 24, 2023 (Story 1)

At the meeting after spring break, the team is ready to continue their conversations. "I want to share my story first," Alex said with a mix of confidence and nerves at her vulnerability. She controls the cold chill she feels at the idea of sharing childhood details and her writing in Spanish for the first time. "I thought about how I felt as a kid, about how the Corky Gonzales Elementary kids might feel, and if I could write as Luz I could explore that. I thought about my family and the little things I cared for, and the ways I cared for them that adults around me couldn't see or didn't appreciate. I thought about my experience as a 'half' Guatemalan kid not feeling seen because there weren't many Guatemalans in my hometown. I wanted a story about a kid that shows how they care for things without using a mocking tone. I felt for Luz because I wondered when she said 'cariño' if Rodrigo knew what she meant²⁸.

²² Gerardo and Nico went by Americanized names (Gerry and Nick) through their k-12 schooling.

²³ Cordero-Siy & Gómez Marchant (2022); Gómez Marchant & Cordero-Siy (2023)

²⁴ Kohli & Solórzano (2012)

²⁵ Anzaldúa (2015)

²⁶ See Gonzalez (2024); Martinez (2014)

²⁷ Latino Feminist Group (2001)

²⁸ Mi3 Collective Meeting recording July 2023

Luz's Care and Care for Luz

Mom fell asleep on the couch again tonight. She's so tired after work, but she's always there to wake me up in the morning. I put a blanket over her chest and shake Jorge sleeping next to her, holding his hand while we go up the narrow stairs to his room. Once I see his head hit the pillow, I turn off the light. I try to stay quiet as I step to avoid the creakiest floorboards to my room. I stand at my door listening for the sound of the TV and mom's snoring; another good night. My pile of stuffed animals wait for me at the end of the bed. They're all so special. I don't make eye contact with them as I pull the red paper list of their names from the nightstand. Carolina's next. I pull Carolina away from her friends and put the red paper back in my drawer.

Before putting my muñeca quitapena under my pillow, I tell her my worries about tomorrow. Rodrigo's going to ask me about me. What if I'm not who he wants for his important work? I know she's listening as I feel my worries leaving me and my feet no longer touching the ground. My muñeca quitapena sits up and pats the palm of my hand. "Gracias mi muñeqita." I put her down at the edge of my bed and watch her disappear under my pillow. I squeeze Carolina closer to my chest and say a silent good night to the rest of the animals at my feet. Once I know everyone's had a goodnight I plop onto my pillow and snuggle under the sheets. I go to sleep listening to the hum of my muñeca quitapena taking care of my worries.

"Luz, ya es hora que te levantes." Mom smiles bending down to kiss my forehead and then leaves, reminding me to get dressed. I put on my comfiest dress and dig through my pile of bows. The white one is my least favorite, and right away I feel bad for it. It's my oldest bow and barely stays on my head. It's got fringes that give a bit of a worn-out style. Out of guilt, I clip the white bow on and run downstairs. Mom is looking around double checking to have everything. I should eat breakfast quickly. She's ready to go. "Luz, no te vas a olvidar tu chumpa." Mom squats down next to me to squeeze my shoulder. I scrunch my nose when I smell her perfume. She wraps my coat around me in a hug. I wish she could come to school with me today. I smell my coat to make sure some of her perfume stayed with me.

In class, I tap my sneakers together under my desk, watching them light up. Ms. Prat tells me to look up at her. I turn my head up but keep my eyes away from her face. I don't want her to see how nervous I am. I look at the board, but my mind is picturing something else. I think about all the times adults have asked me about me. Why are you late to school so often? Why are you always daydreaming? What are you thinking about? I never feel like I have the right answers.

"Luz. Luz!" I look up. "I've been saying your name over and over. Rodrigo is here for you." I see Rodrigo's familiar face. He looks a little sad, almost guilty. Walking down the hall, he asks how I'm doing. "Estoy bien." That's not the whole truth, but he doesn't make me say more. Rodrigo opens a door to a room we've never used before, and I hold my breath a little before I walk in. My shoes feel heavier.

Our talk is over. As we walk back to class, I watch the lights from my shoes reflect off the hall floor. Ms. Prat waves me in after I open the door, rushing me back to my desk. I feel bad. She scrunches her face at me. She thinks I'm late. My desk mate Lucrecia turns around to look at me and whispers, "Hey Luz, where's your bow?" I pat my hair and feel the usual dent on the back from when it's been up for a long time, but no bow. My scalp even aches from the hair clip. I know I put my bow on this morning. I

raise my hand to ask Ms. Prat if I can go look for it. Ms. Prat keeps teaching and moves her arm downward slowly. “It’s not time yet to ask questions.” Darn. I turn around to see if my bow’s behind me. Camille taps my shoulder. “Hey Luz!”

I mouth back, “Yeah?”

“You can have my bow if you want. I have an extra.” Camille doesn’t worry about being too loud like I do. She reaches into her backpack and puts a bow on my desk. I look at it, turning it over in my hand. This one is a lot nicer than my white one. Maybe too nice for me. I didn’t like my white bow, but I’m still going to miss it. I put the new one in my hair and look back up at Ms. Prat. We smile at each other, and while she talks, I think about all the things I told Rodrigo. I hope he keeps his promise.

FIN

Amy could not wait for everyone to finish reading the story. “This story really makes me think about the care that students are displaying towards so many different things. Now I’m thinking how many adults really see that or really have this opportunity to think about what children care about, especially in school spaces, so I’m glad you’re bringing this idea of care. And I love how much of your childhood you brought into the story. That helps me add to the character of Luz. Thank you for sharing all that.”²⁹ Murmurs of agreement and praise fill the room. Nico speaks over the murmurs, “I think we all can use a little bit of walking break to linger with this story some more. We’ll return in 10 minutes and continue with Amy’s story.”

March 24, 2023 (Story 2)

The Mi3 Collective slowly walk into the conference room. Some needed a bit more than 10-minutes to walk and think through their ideas. Amy put down her cold brew to share her story’s inspiration. “I wrote in my meeting notes ‘Luz continues to ask about being interviewed again.’ Inspired by our weekly visits to the elementary school, I wanted to focus on the tension Rodrigo feels when he is in the classroom. I’ve had a unique opportunity to pay close attention to how the students are behaving, what they are saying, and when they are invisible. It is extremely difficult to watch students be reprimanded. I often hesitate to speak up for the students. I fear getting in trouble and being told not to return. I tried to articulate the tension Rodrigo—and I—feel when deciding how and when to communicate with the students.”³⁰ Amy let her words fade when Nico began projecting her story on the large screen. Her eyes dart across the large text.

Clearing her throat, Amy said: “The process of writing this story, reading other counterstories, and taking time to discuss them as a group has shown me a new perspective to approach research, one in which we put the learners first and do our best to humanize the entire experience. This was a wonderful reminder that learners are sharing their stories, lives, and daily experiences with us. The least we can do is treat them with care. When students speak up, they deserve to be heard. I wanted to make sure I included a section that focused on the idea of the gifts, the regalitos, students give us.” Amy’s eyes look back toward the projected text.

Tales of a Fourth Grade Mathematics Class

“When are we going to have another meeting?” I ask Rodrigo as soon as he walks into my class. It’s not even 8:00 am and I am already finished with my math

²⁹ Mi3 Collective Meeting Recording June 2023

³⁰ Mi3 Collective Meeting Recording June 2023

worksheet. The 1000th one this semester³¹. Rodrigo looks around the room pretending to not be sure who just spoke to him. He even shields his eyes like he was outside blocking the sun. I giggle and wait for our eyes to meet. “Oh ahí estas!” He laughs. “That’s a great question, Luz. Sometime in the next few weeks I hope. I need to talk to Ms. Prat about when we can schedule another interview.” I sigh dramatically and give him a big eye roll, twisting the worn white bow at the end of my braided hair. “Ugh. That’s what you told me last time. I really want to talk to you again.” Rodrigo knelt next to me. Quietly he said, “I can’t wait for our next meeting.” He then walks toward the back of the classroom to place his backpack on the floor in the corner of the library. I see him digging through his bag to get out his notebook that carries weeks of notes. Sometimes he lets me write some of my thoughts. It feels very official³². I look at Rodrigo, and my ears start to ring. Everyone in the room freezes, even the clock stopped ticking. Suddenly, I hear what sounds like an old-timey projector click on. It lights up where Rodrigo is kneeling, hands looking through his backpack. The room is now dark except for the projection on Rodrigo. Images appear behind him of our conversations. They are bright with colors. I feel a warmth bringing feelings of joy and wonder. Are these Rodrigo’s memories? Pictures of our interviews and other smaller conversations we’ve had keep flashing. Suddenly, Rodrigo is on the screen. It’s him kneeling in front of the projector like he is in the classroom. It repeats what seems like forever. I hear the click of a tape player.

“I really need to schedule another interview with Luz.” It’s Rodrigo’s voice playing through the hiss of a worn-out tape. It echoes through the images of infinite space. “I think back to our first interview. We didn’t know each other at all. Luz shared so openly about her concerns. I held back. I still do.³³ ‘¿Que vas hacer con mis historias?’ How I regret my answer. They weren’t my words. ‘Trata mis historias con cariño.’ I’ve since realized how caring for and about³⁴ is a form of resistance, of protest³⁵. I feel a new sense of empowerment working with these students.³⁶ But I only seem to be willing to talk in the research group or at a conference. Why not at the school?” Trailing off, the lights kick back on. The sound of the classroom returns.

“Luuuuuzzzzz.” Ms. Prat stretching out my name to get my attention. She doesn’t say anything once our eyes meet, but there’s still an understanding of what I wasn’t doing. It’s 8:15 and already I’m in trouble. Ms. Prat starts yet another lesson on classifying triangles, and I wave Rodrigo over. “Sit next to me,” I whisper loudly. The rest of the students at my table nod in agreement. I secretly squeeze the new stuffy my mom got for me on her trip to El Paso.³⁷ I need to give this one a name. I can ask Carolina and the others before I go to sleep tonight.

³¹ Small group meeting with learners October 2023

³² The Mi3 Collective has let learners do the same when they ask us to add their own notes in our notebooks.

³³ The Mi3 Collective has over the years had various conversations about missed opportunities to advocate for our partners. Regretfully, we still do not believe we do this as well as we should.

³⁴ Caruso & Rosenthal (2022)

³⁵ Shotwell (2016).

³⁶ Nico’s Tenure Materials - Research Statement.

³⁷ One of our partners, Kitty, traveled frequently to El Paso to visit family. Our partner, Billy, often had stuffed animals with her that her father would bring to her from business trips. Nico also grew up in El Paso.

Rodrigo catches me squeezing my new stuffy. I can feel my cheeks warming up and turning red. He leans towards me, “I still feel afraid of getting caught too. Like, I don’t know when I can speak up.” I can see Ms. Prats looking in our direction. I don’t think I should say anything to avoid her gaze. I pat his hand like my muñeca quitapena does to me. I hope he feels his concerns lifted. “Gracias Luz. Estoy cuidando tu historia, no te preocupes.”

I look toward Ms. Prat as she explains the characteristics of an equilateral triangle for what feels like the millionth time. Since I can’t talk to Rodrigo, I secretly pull my journal out of my desk and begin to write another letter to him. Why don’t you come here every day? I write, looking up every few seconds to show Ms. Prat I am listening. Math drags on with a whole-group lesson, two worksheets, and 25 minutes of fact practice on the computer before I am allowed to get up out of my seat again. Not a lot of time to chat with Rodrigo. As we walk to music, I give Rodrigo a big hug, thinking about what else I want to say to him in my next letter. “I can’t wait to see you next week!” he exclaims.

FIN

“Thoughts?” Amy said. Gerardo leans forward to share his thoughts, “Something I really appreciate from your story is how you talk about the relationship between Luz and Rodrigo; about them listening to each other. That, to me, is the light at the end of the tunnel. That we can, and should, and still will build these relationships and nurture them. And through that we can also find ways to care for ourselves to be able to care for them. And that’s what I’m holding onto.”³⁸ Nico ends the meeting with a reminder that Karina and Mona were next, but that due to the end of the year, things will slow down a bit.

As everyone goes their separate ways, Alex and Karina decide to walk to get some tea and reconnect. Talking through their list of responsibilities, they were glad for the opportunity to check in on one another. Reflecting together, though brief, helps Karina in thinking through her counterstory. Locations, characters, and genres race through her mind. Returning to their offices, they share their excitement for the potential.

April 6, 2023

Nico closes the last remaining pizza box and turns on the projector. Immediately Karina’s story appears. Karina clears her throat: “I felt really compelled to write this story. It really let me unleash a lot of things that were very—I don’t want to say violent—but for me being a researcher and being in these spaces of tension forever. The bus is a centering point. That is where I can be with people I grew up seeing. I can have conversations in my head with my mom. It really helps me be grounded. I really wanted Rodrigo to go through what I was going through but also think about what it means to be a researcher; what it means to be a person in a place that is constantly in tension. What does it mean to be a person in spaces that are never designed for you? This story is just a box of tensions and how we’ve compartmentalized them in a way we don’t want to talk about. Then when we do talk about them or confront them, it feels like you’re choking. It’s been very hectic for me.”³⁹ One by one, the group began to read.

Dolores del corazón/Claridad

³⁸ Mi3 Collective Meeting June Recording 2023

³⁹ Mi3 Collective Meeting Recording July 2023

Rodrigo stood at the bus stop, letting his mind wonder. "It's been so difficult to schedule another interview with Luz, especially with STAAR⁴⁰ testing coming up. Ms. Prats has had her students do a lot of worksheets, fact recall on their computers, and practice STAAR problems. Ojala que puedo hablar con Luz pronto."⁴¹ Rodrigo lets out a deep sigh, inaudible to others due to the sounds of construction nearby. "I want to learn more about how Luz's Guatemalan⁴² identity has or hasn't shaped her mathematics identity. I remember from the interview she talked about how proud she felt when her teacher asked her to teach some words in Spanish during reading time⁴³. When she talked about this memory, her smile lit up the room. But she told me Ms. Pratt wouldn't let her speak Spanish with others during math time because it makes other students uncomfortable.⁴⁴ I could feel the hurt that she felt."

Rodrigo's eyes watered. His stomach started to hurt, yet he had an urge to binge eat; a physical manifestation of his anxiety.⁴⁵ He wiped the tears and pressed his cold hands on his eyes. The cold soothed him a little. It gave him something to focus on other than his stomach and the urge to eat. Rodrigo added more pressure onto his eyes, but the tears wouldn't stop. He pushed harder, making himself dizzy. Rodrigo looked up, wiped his face, and saw the bus door open in front of him. Sanctuary. He walked to the open bus door trying to hide his state of mind. Rodrigo flashed a small smile to the bus driver and swiped his ID. Beep. He saw a seat at the middle of the bus by the window, so he moved quickly to get it before the sea of people filled the bus. He sighed again and looked out the window. The same gloomy weather loomed all week.

Rodrigo placed his backpack on his lap and dug to find his headphones. Being on the bus was a space for Rodrigo to decompress from the day's meetings. He could strip away his academic mask and not feel the pressures of performing academically. He was just another person riding the bus. The bus was a mobile library, different people getting on the bus, each had a story to tell. Listening to music added a layer to his curiosity. Rodrigo pulls out his headphones and places them over his head. Silence. All he could hear was his own heart. Thump thump. Thump thump. He unlocked his phone and looked through his playlists. He pressed his "March ✨" playlist and looked out of the window.

Me ciega el desprecio y la rabia que tengo; Está escrito en el cielo que llega esta noche el final ⁴⁶

When Rodrigo heard this lyric, it wasn't its usual sound. It was distorted, like someone added a static filter and slowed the music down.

Y...cuento...un,...dos,...tres

⁴⁰ State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness is the state standardized test taken yearly from 3rd to 8th grade.

⁴¹ The month leading up to state testing were difficult to do observations, interviews, and other informal conversations due to the testing schedule.

⁴² As a composite character, many of Luz' characteristics and actions are based on our partners and our teams' biographies. Luz is Guatemalan because Alex has imbued Luz' story with many of her characteristics.

⁴³ From interviews conducted for EL ALMa Project (see Gómez Marchant et al., 2020)

⁴⁴ See Gómez Marchant et al. (2020).

⁴⁵ This is how Nico's anxiety physically manifests.

⁴⁶ Lyrics from "Papa Topo" by Ópalo Negro

Rodrigo looked at his Wi-Fi signal. Everything was fine. He didn't know what was happening.

Y...todo...el...mundo...está...al...revés

The lights in the bus started to flicker. One by one with each flicker the others on the bus disappeared until Rodrigo was the only one. The windows turned pitch black. Rodrigo rushed to stand and hammered the stop button. Nothing. The bus wasn't stopping. Rodrigo frantically hit the button and yelled "STOP THE BUS!"⁴⁷

No response.

Rodrigo ran to the back door. He struggled to keep his balance with the way the bus swayed. He put his weight against the door. Then kicked at it. Nothing. Panic consumed him. "LET ME OUT." Rodrigo continued banging the backdoors. Nothing. Red started painting the doors. Rodrigo took two steps back. He closed his eyes and tried to control his breathing. Moved with the bus. Kept his hands on his heart. Focused on the feel and sound. Thump thump. Thump thump. But then, he started to sink into the floor.

"CRAP!" His attempt to relax failed. "I need to get out of here." Rodrigo tried to step towards the bus seat. He sank faster. Rodrigo's legs no longer moved. The floor was up to his waist. He grabbed the edge of the bus seat, but the pull was too strong. He felt his nails being pulled away. When his hands slipped, he scratched the jagged floor. He felt the metal ridges cutting into his fingers; leaving blood and skin. It didn't matter. He wanted to stay in his sanctuary. As the floor engulfed him, the music continued to play:

Hoy soy yo quien decide que es el mal y que es mal y que es el bien
Darkness.

Rodrigo woke up on a hard surface. Sitting up in a panic, he touched his face. Looked at his hands. No blood. Shocked, he can't believe what happened to him. He slowly got up and looked around. Darkness. Nothing but darkness. It was endless. Dumbfounded on where to go, he knew he wasn't going to stay at this stop. "Why is this happening? Why is this happening??" Rodrigo walked aimlessly. There was an urgency pushing him forward.

"Rodrigo..." His name echoed in the darkness

Rodrigo looked around. "Who's there?" He forced the words through his throat.

"Rodrigo...why?...Why pretend to care?" A different voice bounced around him.

Rodrigo looked around unsure of which way to speak. "What are you talking about?"

Various cackles surrounded Rodrigo. In the distance, Rodrigo could see a dais appear with three amorphous figures elevated. The first got up. "You got to be kidding?! Do you want to be a researcher? Why listen to students' stories?"

The second stands and hold the first one back. "I know right? You get the data and get out. Don't waste time. You aren't going back. Publish or perish."

"Publish or perish. Publish or perish. Publish or perish." The others chanted. They continued getting louder and louder.

"No, you're wrong!" Rodrigo responded covering his ears. "That's not who I want to be. I want to listen to students. I want to elevate their voices. I don't want Luz to feel

⁴⁷ As many in the group are 1st-generation, there is a pressure to not quit regardless of how much these academic endeavors begin to take over our sanctuaries.

she has to fit into a mold." Rodrigo felt his eyes swell up, but he wasn't going to cry. Silence. Rodrigo fell to his knees. The dais still floated far ahead. A third panelist stood, he pointed to Rodrigo and growled. "You make me sick. You're setting up yourself to fail. Why be this social justice warrior when you can't get things published or make a valuable contribution? Just give up!"

"Just give up! Just give up! Just give up!" They chanted. The darkness shook with each call. Rodrigo cried. He didn't know how to stop it or prove otherwise. He placed his hands over his eyes and applied pressure. He focused on his pain. "stop...stop...stop...STOP this!" The voices sounded closer. The first panelist whispered almost caringly, like he was looking out for Rodrigo. "Why? You should stop this facade. You were taught better than that through your coursework...you go to the classroom, don't talk to the students, get the data that you need, analyze the data and write a paper. It's not hard." Rodrigo felt a hand patting his shoulder. "We're just looking out for you."

Rodrigo applied more pressure to his eyes. He spoke through his tears. "No, you're wrong! That's not the kind of researcher, the kind of person I want to be. Tengo que proteger la historia de Luz. Le promete. Trata mis historias con cariño. What good is a publication if it doesn't honor her?"

"It is with great regret then that we must inform you that you are not meant for this program." The voices all yelled at once.

Rodrigo's hands fell, not able to apply the pressure any longer. As his eyes adjusted, two arms appeared from the darkness. The hands wrapped around his neck. He gasped for air. He tried to push a scream through his throat, but the grips were too tight around his neck. The hands lifted him. Rodrigo kicked but was hitting nothing.

The voices were in his ear. "We're putting a stop to this. It's for your own good. Don't you want a job? All you needed to do was follow what you were taught. Nothing more."

Rodrigo began to lose consciousness. He stopped fighting. He let his arms go limp. "They're right. Who am I to make these promises? Why live in tension? I can just conform. How nice might it be to stop fighting." Rodrigo opened his eyes. There was still darkness. Even giving in did not provide a bit of hope. A mouth with sharp, jagged teeth appeared. The hands wrapped around his neck left go. Even though Rodrigo had the opportunity to breathe, he didn't. He didn't want to. He had fully given up. Falling. Rodrigo stared into the darkness. No longer crying. He closed his eyes and waited.

Thump. Thump.

Rodrigo slammed onto a surface, but it didn't hurt. He felt a breeze. And gasped cool, sweet air. He felt a nostalgic warmth. Like each breath reminded him of home. Keeping his eyes closed, Rodrigo ran his hands on the ground. It was cool and textured. What he imagined the popcorn ceiling of his childhood bedroom felt like. He coughed and opened his eyes. He was moving. He sat up and opened his eyes. Something swooped in and caught him. Rodrigo saw that he was on a turtle shell. As he looked around. Green, blue, orange, and purple feathers surrounded the shell. In continued disbelief Rodrigo whispers, "Where am I?"

"I saved you. My name is Xochitl. It's nice to meet you!" A voice boomed. "You were so close to being assimilated" The ground shook with each word. Rodrigo was on a creature. Something about the voice provided a sense of calm over Rodrigo. He

relaxed his shoulders. He let out a sigh and laid out on the shell. "There are so many questions, but right now I feel safe." Rodrigo sat up and got a better view of the mysterious creature. On its multiple-colored feathers were different size polka dots. "Where are you taking me?"

"To the glass building."

FIN

Taking the time to feel their feelings and reflect on Karina' narrative, the group sits in silence. Alex speaks first, "I love the inclusion of the bus. It felt like you were letting yourself be. The experience of the bus is part of your world. It's how you get to and from these places that are supposed to be—like you sort of prepare yourself: I'm going to be a researcher today. You sit there with your writing, your reading, sometimes your nothing. It is a space where you let yourself collapse and have that be the place where there is something scary; something good too. I do a lot of my kind of big feelings or big thinking on the bus. So I love the inclusion and the bus being so central."⁴⁸ A silence of appreciation lingers.

"I really appreciate the end." Nico said with hesitation. "I kind of like it's not done. It just stops. That's it. I think this ending captures the same feeling of I don't know what the hell is going to happen next. I went through all this violent experience and I'm not going to give you, the reader, this happy ending of who I have become now. I have no fucking clue. I don't know. This is just where I am and it stops here."⁴⁹ Karina nods and looks to each member in appreciation. She wants to leave the story there until she is ready to return to it. The group agrees and disbands to work through their feelings of incompleteness.

July 11, 2023

Even though many of the stories were written and shared, Mona reluctantly writes her own story. After months of debate, she decides to share her continuation of Rodrigo's story. The Mi3 Collective meets at a local coffee shop to avoid paying for summer parking. The coffee shop provides an informal feeling to the meetings. Mona joins through zoom to talk about her story. Excitement flavors their coffees as learning about someone's writing processes provokes conversation. The group welcomes Mona and immediately asks her to speak about her story.

"Reading some articles that Nico shared and reading the other counterstories, was kind of like an inspiration for me to write my own. I found out how a counterstory can play a vital role in providing a platform for unheard voices demanding for social change. Reading all the counterstories was kind of like expanding my own understanding of the complexities and challenges that exist. More importantly, I reflected on the needs of teachers to work with Latinx children. Studying in another country and learning another language at home and then English at university to work as a researcher, I tried to put myself in their place and understand their dilemmas."⁵⁰ With that, Mona welcomes the group to read her story.

Bridging Voices through Personal Journeys

Rodrigo walked out of the room with the small gift in his hand, "Did I construct a space for Luz to share her historia? Does she trust me enough to share more details of

⁴⁸ Mi3 Collective Meeting Recording July 2023

⁴⁹ Mi3 Collective Meeting Recording July 2023

⁵⁰ Mi3 Collective Meeting Recording July 2023

her experiences next time? How can I help Luz to build a good relationship with her mathematics teacher?” Rodrigo also kept picturing the last moment of their conversation when Luz whispered, “Trata mis historias con cariño” Rodrigo’s promise to Luz was heavy on him. “How can I treat her stories with cariño as a researcher? How do I make sure her words are not misused?”⁵¹

Rodrigo felt bitter remembering his school experiences as a Latino student. He struggled with learning mathematics, communicating with his teachers, and not feeling comfortable asking questions in class. It was difficult for Rodrigo to resist and uphold his identity in a predominantly white environment. He felt he was projecting these feelings onto Luz. But she shared that she “sees herself as a math person, but she doesn’t feel comfortable participating in classroom discussions due to the fear of being wrong or her peers making fun of her.”⁵²

Rodrigo was aware of the challenges that came with growing up in a Spanish speaking home. He recalled the times when his parents were unable to assist him with the homework. He learned to stop asking them for help to prevent the sad look in their eyes. The deep sighs as they looked at the symbols in front of them, unable to decipher. A halo of light began to envelope Rodrigo as he walked down the hall. He realized at that point how proud he was of his family. They were so supportive and always encouraged him to pursue his goals for a brighter future. They may not have been able to support me in that way but provided so much more.⁵³ Rodrigo could see how some of the same inequities and violence of his school experience is being perpetuated in the stories of the Latinx learners. Schools can be different. They do not need to perpetuate these dominant narratives. He felt a renewed responsibility for keeping his promise. As he knocked on the front office door waiting to be buzzed in, Rodrigo looked down the hallway. Small seeds of light trailed back to where he had interviewed Luz. Some seemed to seep into the ground, others stayed on the surface. At the end of the hall, Rodrigo saw Manuel, a 3rd grader, walk out of his intervention classroom. Rodrigo waved at Manuel who shyly waved back. The door buzzed, and Rodrigo walked in to sign out. Manuel noticed the small seeds of light. He pocketed one for later and dreamed of all the ways he wants to help others.

FIN

Gerardo did not wait before speaking. “I really enjoyed your story. Something that really makes me angry is the ease at which I see myself in the children. Because it speaks to how similarly we have been marginalized across generations. Seeing these students reminds me of me. And how much I want to make sure that they don’t have to go through what I went through. This speaks to the whiteness of academia. And how we continually run into these issues, whether you’re in elementary school, a postdoc, or a graduate student. The ethical dilemmas vary but that one is the one that speaks to me the most.” Mona thanked Gerardo for his kind words.

August 13, 2023

Greetings new friend,

⁵¹ The rhetorical questions have been central to many of the Mi3 Collective’s conversations over the years as we continue doing our ethnographic work.

⁵² EL ALMa interviews.

⁵³ Reference to community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006).

Writing, reading, and working through collectively the compilation of Luz and Rodrigo's counterstory was a cathartic experience. We grappled with differing personal, epistemological, and/or ethical dilemmas. We accept our adjacency to whiteness and continue to work towards (un)learning together. We hope our counterstory is helpful in inspiring others to disrupt majoritarian narratives of what it means to do research. To proceed, though, we needed permission. We sought permission from each other to tell our stories. We were reluctant because we were never taught how to share our experiences as evidence and data (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Our stories were not valued until we constructed a counterspace "where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000, p. 70). In our space, our stories mattered and were valued for navigating the institution. Our experiences with our partners pushed us to see how important our stories are and can be for others.

In our space, collisions were an expectation to find ways to coalesce. We needed to create a counterspace to be vulnerable, share out, learn, feel, and wonder with and for each other. Counterspaces are not bubbles, but ways to build ourselves an armor to disrupt an oppressive system to flourish. There is a lot of pain poured into these stories. We projected our struggles to learn more about ourselves and what could be in academia. We have a responsibility to the Latinx learners we are working with to treat their stories like fragile gifts. Rodrigo made that promise to Luz. This paper is our promise to Lopez, Amber, Mark, Billy, Tony, Lola, Kitty, and Kobe. *Trataremos tus historias con cariño.*

contigo en la lucha
Nico, Gerardo, Amy, Alex, Karina, & Mona

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