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ISBN

9798190914412

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Publication Date

2026-07-27

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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

**FIRST-GENERATION LATINA GRADUATE STUDENTS ENGAGING
CONOCIMIENTO ACROSS CONTRADICTORY EXPECTATIONS IN
THEIR ACADEMIC AND HOME WORLDS**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

PSYCHOLOGY

by

Katherine N. Quinteros

August 2026

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Abstract

First-Generation Latina Graduate Students Engaging Conocimiento Across Contradictory Expectations in Their Academic and Home Worlds

Katherine N. Quinteros

First-generation Latina graduate students navigate multiple and often contradictory expectations and experiences across different settings (e.g., academia, home life). For example, while graduate education can create opportunities for professional growth and future possibilities, it can also position students within settings that privilege dominant ways of knowing and being while devaluing their own cultural knowledge, familial relationships, and lived experiences. These contradictory experiences can create tight spaces that foster emotional turmoil and fragmentation while also creating opportunities for reflection and transformation. To understand these experiences, I draw from Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) Borderlands theory, which examines how individuals navigate multiple, often contradictory social, cultural, and political worlds. Anzaldúa also theorizes that through the seven-stage process of *conocimiento*, individuals critically make meaning of these contradictions, ultimately developing a *nepantlera* consciousness, or an awareness that enables them to move between worlds, embrace contradiction, and reimagine more integrated ways of being. In this dissertation study, I explore three research questions. First, from a *conocimiento* framework, what contradictory or paradoxical messages, beliefs, and expectations do first-generation Latina graduate students identify as they navigate the academy? Second, what are the psychological experiences and discomfort that

emerge from these tight spaces? Finally, how do these women draw on their nepantlera consciousness to respond to and/or resist their tight spaces, and what barriers do they encounter in that process? To explore these questions, this dissertation research examines the experiences of 12 first-generation Latina graduate students from diverse academic fields and disciplines. Data consisted of initial participant testimonios. After the testimonios, I conducted two rounds of plática sessions. From this data, I explore participants' experiences across their home and academic worlds, paying particular attention to the tight spaces that emerge as they navigate the borderlands across these settings. I analyzed the data using three distinct but interrelated phases and reflexive thematic analysis to identify four themes illustrating how participants engaged *conocimiento* and their developing nepantlera consciousness to make meaning of contradictory expectations and determine their resistance response. The results are organized into four themes. The first explores how participants negotiated separation from and connection to their home and academic worlds to sustain themselves. The second examines how participants questioned expectations of the "good Latina daughter" imposed through gendered norms embedded within family dynamics and broader society to embrace more authentic selves. The third illustrates how participants rejected academic cultures of hyper-individualism by centering community care and accountability. The fourth shows how participants redefined their worth beyond dominant academic definitions of success. Together, these findings demonstrate that resistance was not uniformly practiced but rather shaped by participants' *conocimiento* journeys, positionalities,

cultural wealth and available sources of support. This study extends Borderlands scholarship by illustrating how *conocimiento* functions as a dynamic process through which first-generation Latina graduate students transform contradiction into opportunities for resistance, wholeness, and more expansive ways of being.

Dedication

To all the first-generation eldest Latina daughters, who through transformation and change, still make space for those they love. I see you.

Acknowledgements

I don't remember if I ever imagined what it would feel like to finish my PhD. While it still does not feel real, even after seven transformational years, I'm here. What I do know, is that no first-generation Latina gets through graduate school alone, so I want to say thank you to my community. At various points in this chapter of my life, you gave me strength to push towards being Doctora Quinteros.

Becca, thank you for taking a chance on me, a really hurt and scared girl who wanted to do grad school but wasn't sure she was good enough. Meeting you has been one of the most beautiful moments in my life. Your mentorship has not only been healing, but transformative to how I approach the work and more importantly the relationships that come with the work. Thank you for making space for me to be human and feel. You pushed me to do things I was too scared to do on my own. You always believed I could do hard things and never left me feeling unprepared or lost when faced with challenges. I can only hope to be as amazing a mentor, scholar, and human being as you. Through your love and care, you reshaped how I view the possibilities of what academia can be and do for our communities. Thank you.

Margarita and Rebeca, thank you for being badass Latinas who laid important groundwork for those of us who came after, and for continuing to still do important work that advocates for us and our communities. Your work demonstrates how research can speak from our hearts and not for us. Thank you for being part of my committee and being so generous with your feedback and time.

To my lab sisters who have graduated and moved on to new and exciting stages in their lives, Tiffany, Ibette and Giselle, thank you for welcoming me into your inner circle with warmth and open arms. I had never been the little sister before, but through grad school gained three big sisters for life. You showed me that it's okay to be vulnerable and scared, it's not a weakness, but a part of the process. I love you all.

Valeria, I count myself among the lucky people you see as a friend, even if it was forced at the start, from my side at least. Thank you for being my rock, sounding board, and Hulas happy hour partner through the celebrations and challenges. I love you and count you as my best friend and sister. Vanessa, my pandemic bubble buddy, my favorite Virgo (after Emi) I don't know what I would have done without you during the pandemic when life felt so lonely and unpredictable. I often think about those nights when we stayed up late talking about whatever was on our minds. Thank you for reaching out to check-in even when my mind felt so scattered, you kept me feeling connected and valued. I love you and I am so excited for the amazing things happening in your life.

To all the students I've mentored through CREA, or I have had the honor to know, thank you for bringing community and laughter to my life. I am so proud and honored to have been part of your journeys. Please always reach out!

To my family, I've always wanted to make you proud, your love and sacrifices kept me going even when I had no idea what I was doing. Momma, you always knew I could do it. You never doubted me, even when I doubted myself.

Thank you for being there when I called you crying and overwhelmed. You have always been the fiercest woman I know. I am proud to be your, Ana Quinteros, daughter and I carry your fierceness with me every day. Dad, though we navigate a rocky and fragmented relationship, thank you for sharing your love of storytelling with me. I remember countless car rides from school where you shared family history and daily interactions, and always asked me “Honey, what are you thinking about?”, which showed me how important it was to you how I made sense of your cuentos. Ricky, little brother, you know just the right things to say to bring me back to simpler times. No one can make me laugh like you do. My sisters, Ariel and Ashley, I am in awe of your hearts and passion to help others. Thank you for always make space for the big moments even when I know your lives are busy, thank you for always showing up. Aaron, baby brother, thank you for sharing your stories and life with me, even if I feel so old when you do. I loved the summers you came to visit me in Santa Cruz. I love the person you are becoming.

To las mujeres in my life, thank you for rallying around me when I thought I would break. You created safe spaces for me to rest, regroup, and remember that I can do this. Esme, from one eldest daughter to another, thank you for holding me up when I was in one of the hardest and confusing times in my life. You are truly magic and I am so lucky you are Emi’s tia. Steph, thank you for being a taking the time to show me how to step into this new role of mothering. I don’t know what I would have done without your advice, memes, and visits. You are such an amazing mother to Jade.

To las nepantleras in this study, without you there is no knowledge creation, no theorizing how to move forward in this mess, thank you for your openness and reflections which made this work possible. I am forever grateful to you all.

To Jaime, my partner, we did it, from dreaming about who we wanted to be 10 years ago to making it happen, thank you for never doubting that we would do it and for following me to Santa Cruz, you're wild. I am so proud of the man you are and have loved every version of you. There is still so much life to live.

To my fur babies, those who started this journey with me and those who had to leave, thank you for bringing comfort and joy to my life! I'm sorry some of you had to wait so long for me, but I'm so grateful for the time we shared in Santa Cruz. Nina, my little girl, it hurts that you're gone but I know that you are waiting for me on the other side with your brothers.

To my son, Emiliano, you've transformed my life, being your mother has shifted my own reality and made my commitment to making this world a better place for you even stronger. I will always cherish the quiet memories of working late at night while you slept right next to me. I love you papa.

There are so many people to thank, and I know I haven't named you all but thank you for being part of my village. Beautiful friends, you helped me feel seen and validated through the hard times. Mentors, you formed the bridge I needed between my life and academia. Family, you grounded me through your love and joy. You all helped this girl from LA become a doctor!

First-Generation Latina Graduate Students Engaging Conocimiento Across Contradictory Expectations in Their Academic and Home Worlds

First-generation Latina graduate students can navigate multiple and often contradictory expectations across their academic and home worlds. While graduate education can create opportunities for upward mobility, professional growth, and expanded possibilities for themselves and their families, it can also simultaneously position these women within institutional environments that privilege Whiteness and dominant ways of knowing and being that devalue their cultural knowledge, familial relationships, and lived experiences (Burciaga, 2007; Espino, 2016; Espinoza, 2010; Heredia, 2011; Rosales, 2023). As first-generation Latina graduate students move between home and academic spaces, they may experience tensions surrounding how they should act – and who they should be – based on which parts of themselves are accepted or rejected within each setting. These contradictions can create tight spaces that foster emotional turmoil and fragmentation from existing between worlds without fully belonging to either. Yet, these tensions can also create a path toward reflection, resistance, and transformation.

To understand these experiences, I draw from Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987, 2002) framework of *conocimiento*. *Conocimiento* conceptualizes the painful yet transformative process through which marginalized individuals confront contradictions and make meaning of fragmentation. *Conocimiento* emphasizes how moving through contradiction can foster critical awareness and healing as more expansive understandings of the self emerge. Through this framework, first-

generation Latina graduate students' experiences navigating multiple, contradictory worlds can be understood not only as sites of pain and distress, but also as opportunities to challenge dominant beliefs about who they are and can become. This process can then lead to a reimagining of their relationships within these spaces.

To understand how first-generation Latina graduate students experience and move through their home and academic worlds, I first draw on Borderlands theory to conceptualize the psychological, cultural, and relational tensions that stem from living between worlds (Anzaldúa, 1987, 2002; Burciaga 2007; Heredia, 2011; Valle & Covarrubias, 2023, 2024). I then examine how tight spaces across higher education and the familial home function as sites that produce often contradictory expectations for first-generation Latina graduate students. Here I draw on home-school cultural values mismatch, and scholarship on everyday resistance to contextualize the psychological and relational tensions that first-generation Latinas graduate students navigate in home and school contexts. Finally, I introduce *conocimiento* as a framework for understanding how they make meaning of these contradictions and engage in transformative processes that reshape their identities, relationships, and ways of being across home and academic spaces.

Literature Review

First-generation Latinas in Graduate School: A Borderlands Perspective

Relying on familial and community support has been vital to making it to graduate school for first-generation Latina graduate students (Espino, 2016; Espinoza, 2010; Gutierrez et al., 2022; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). Access to these

types of support often leads to a strong commitment to pursue higher education as a means of achieving upward social mobility for themselves and their families (Espinoza, 2010; Gutierrez et al., 2022; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020, Rosales, 2023). Yet, in graduate school, first-generation Latina graduate students often become distanced from their familial support systems (Gutierrez et al., 2022, Rosales, 2023), face encounters with discrimination and oppression (Espino, 2016; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020), and experience a lack of emotional and technical support needed to complete a doctoral degree (Gutierrez et al., 2022; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). Altogether, these challenges can position first-generation Latina graduate students within a space of contradiction, where the gap between anticipated and lived experiences of graduate school creates identity-based tensions that these women must navigate amid loneliness, imposter phenomenon, and burnout (Espino, 2016; Espinoza, 2010; Gutierrez et al., 2022; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020; Rosales, 2023). To understand this psychological terrain and experience, I turn to Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands* framework.

Borderlands theory, like similar critical theories of intersectionality (Azmitia & Thomas, 2015; Hill Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991), emphasizes that individuals experience their social worlds through their various social identities (e.g., being both a woman *and* a person of color *and* a first-generation college student). These social identities influence how individuals come in contact with and experience marginalization, and privilege in a given context. While intersectionality highlights how overlapping systems of oppression structure individuals' experiences,

Borderlands theory focuses on how individuals confront the tensions that arise from living within and across these intersecting social worlds (Anzaldúa, 1987).

The focus on cultural, social, and psychological tensions reflects Anzaldúa's own experiences of being physically located in a border town between México and Texas. Although Anzaldúa found connection with people immigrating from across the border, her U.S. citizenship also placed her in an in-between space of power and privilege that separated her from specific parts of her identity as a Mexicana and as a U.S. citizen. Just as borders are not confined to a single geographical location, but rather are spaces that exclude and marginalize, Anzaldúa argued that these physical borders also shape understandings of identity. People do not fit neatly into one category but instead spill across multiple worlds (e.g., being a U.S. citizen while simultaneously being marked as "other"), creating "in-between" cultures and spaces where individuals exist as both part of the dominant culture and outside of it (see also hooks, 1984).

Recognizing that borders extended beyond citizenship and geography, Anzaldúa theorized that similar borderlands existed wherever individuals navigated conflicting cultural worlds. Drawing from her own experiences growing up in an interdependent, Mexican immigrant, low-income home while also being embedded within the highly independent, White, elite world of academia, she described the conflict between a home-self rooted in community and interdependence and an academic-self expected to prioritize individual achievement and success (Anzaldúa, 1987; Langhout et al., 2023). Rather than belonging fully to either world, these

competing cultural expectations left her feeling fragmented as she navigated the contradictions between her home and academic worlds. She found no space to move fluidly between interdependence and independence. Psychologists have labeled this conflicting feeling as *home-school cultural values mismatch*, which describes the tension first-generation Latinx students face when having to choose between competing values, such as prioritizing family or prioritizing academics (Covarrubias et al., 2020; Covarrubias & Valle, 2023; Valle & Covarrubias, 2024; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015, 2021; see also *cultural mismatch theory*, Stephens et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2020).

Valle and Covarrubias (2024) extend the concept of home-school cultural values mismatch by situating it within a Borderlands framework. Through a narrative analysis of five Mexican American undergraduate women, the authors examined what it means to navigate between and across social worlds during the transition from home to college. To study this transitional space, the authors drew from Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of *nepantla*, a state of in-betweenness where individuals experience tension across diverse cultural worlds. Within *nepantla*, individuals negotiate competing expectations and contradictions in ways that allow them to move toward a sense of harmony. Valle and Covarrubias (2024b) argued that as Mexican American undergraduate women navigate the transition from home to college, their *nepantla* includes experiences of mismatches across their different contexts. Put differently, *nepantla* offered a culturally rooted perspective on home-school cultural mismatch for these women. The authors theorized that home-school cultural values mismatch

represents a particular borderland where dominant narratives clash, and nepantla becomes the space where students experience the psychological turmoil of navigating these contradictions.

The authors adopted a “tight space” lens to further explore and unpack this psychological turmoil while also interrogating how dominant systems of power impose these constraints through competing cultural expectations. Tight spaces can be understood as conditions imposed by dominant systems of power within and across social settings, such as home and school, that constrain how marginalized people are able to act, often producing consequences when they deviate from what is expected of them (Rosales & Langhout, 2020; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). Valle and Covarrubias (2024b) examine the role of master narratives, which are dominant cultural scripts that dictate how individuals should “think, feel, and behave” (p. 466), in creating these tight spaces. Rather than locating home-school cultural values mismatches solely within two separate settings, they demonstrate how competing master narratives operating across and within home, school, and broader society create contradictory expectations that students must continually negotiate.

The authors documented how these intersecting master narratives created different tight spaces for participants depending on their social positioning. One master narrative confronting first-generation Latina students positions higher education as a pathway to upward mobility while simultaneously suggesting that academic success requires distancing oneself from one's family and community. The authors offer the example of Ana María, a participant in the study. As a first-

generation Latina undergraduate student, Ana María felt deeply responsible for staying emotionally connected and available to her family while also pursuing higher education as a means of creating expanded opportunities for herself and her loved ones. Yet, these competing narratives became evident in interactions where her academic labor was not recognized as "real work," reflecting tensions between family understandings of productive labor and institutional expectations that demanded extensive time and commitment to academic work. This left Maria feeling frustrated and emotionally hurt as she navigated the demands of school alongside her commitment to remain connected to home.

As the women in the study navigated home-school contradictions, they experienced *nepantla* as a space of psychological tension where they had to continually negotiate their sense of self and what felt meaningful to them. A tight space framework also enabled the authors to understand how part of the negotiation process was to push back against and resist constricting expectations, adding to the understanding of how Latinas do not only experience cultural mismatch but move through them through reflection and resistance. As such, the authors focused on the everyday acts of resistance of these women to the cultural mismatches they experienced.

Everyday acts of resistance are subtle ways that marginalized people challenge oppression that often are not easily detected by those in positions of power (Rosales & Langhout, 2020; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). Valle and Covarrubias (2024b) further demonstrate that these acts of resistance are not enacted in isolation

but are rooted in students' community cultural wealth, which include the cultural knowledge, skills, relationships, and resources cultivated through marginalized communities (Yosso, 2005). Community cultural wealth encompasses multiple forms of capital that recognize the strengths and resources marginalized communities cultivate and draw upon (Yosso, 2005). Relevant to this study are aspirational, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. *Aspirational capital* refers to maintaining hopes and dreams despite structural barriers. *Familial capital* consists of the cultural knowledge, values, and support nurtured through family and community relationships. *Social capital* comprises the resources gained through social networks and community connections. *Navigational capital* is the ability to maneuver institutions that were not designed for marginalized communities. Finally, *resistant capital* refers to the knowledge and skills developed through challenging inequality and resisting oppressive structures. How individuals engage in everyday resistance often depends on their social locations within these tight spaces and the cultural wealth and resources available to them.

For Ana María, her resistance materialized in her refusal to fully embrace dominant academic narratives that equated success with overwork, constant productivity, and distance from family. Instead, Ana María adopted a *un día a la vez* [one day at a time] approach that allowed her to center her well-being as a daily practice while staying emotionally connected to her family and moving through college in ways that aligned with her values and sense of self. Although subtle, these strategies reflected her resistant capital (Yosso, 2005) as she rejected academic norms

that sought to define her worth and success based on how well she conformed to them. Rather than simply adapting to competing expectations, her everyday acts of resistance allowed her to center her own values and priorities while pursuing her educational goals.

I build on this work by exploring the tight spaces and everyday resistance strategies of first-generation Latina graduate students who are navigating their own cultural mismatches and contradictions. Next, I describe the features of these tight spaces across school and home contexts.

Tight Spaces Within the Academy

Higher education systems organized around Whiteness, hyper-individualism, and epistemological racism can create tight spaces that fragment first-generation Latina graduate students' sense of self (Burciaga, 2007; Espino, 2010; Espinoza, 2016; Gutierrez et al., 2022; Heredia, 2021; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). In this section, I highlight three key interrelated tight spaces within the academy, including the institutional privileging of hyper-individualism, the devaluation of knowledge systems of marginalized people through epistemological racism, and experiences with racism and sexism that constrain student well-being and success.

In U.S. higher education, White supremacy refers to an ideological and systemic structure that positions White people and White cultural norms as superior and maintains this hierarchy through the systemic privileging of Whiteness (Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2019; Foste & Irwin, 2020). Whiteness operates as an ideology that privileges Eurocentric knowledge and cultural practices while devaluing

the strengths, desires, and knowledge of marginalized groups (Patton, 2016).

Community cultural wealth offers a strengths-based response to this deficit framing by recognizing that marginalized groups possess multiple forms of cultural wealth that are often overlooked or devalued within educational institutions (Yosso, 2005). Rather than lacking the resources necessary for academic success, students from marginalized communities often enter higher education with culturally rooted strengths that institutional norms fail to recognize. Consequently, dominant institutional cultures and social norms continue to reproduce middle-class, White values as the standard against which students are measured (Kim & Markus, 2002; Lareau, 2015; Stephens et al., 2012).

Middle-class White contexts, like many university settings, socialize individuals primarily into norms of independence, such as seeing oneself as autonomous and being rewarded for self-expression and competition (Kim & Markus, 2002; Lareau, 2015). Yet, many first-generation Latinx students are embedded within communities where interdependence, reciprocity, and collective responsibility are central cultural values (Azmitia et al., 2018; Azpeitia & Bacio, 2022; Covarrubias et al., 2019, 2021; Yosso, 2005). Community cultural wealth recognizes these values as important cultural strengths that support students' educational persistence and well-being (Yosso, 2005). University systems are often organized around norms of individualism that privilege independence while obscuring community-based cultural strengths as vital for student success (Valle & Covarrubias, 2024a; 2024b). Such prioritizing can undermine academic success and well-being for first-generation

students (Phillips et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2012, 2014), particularly those from racially-marginalized backgrounds (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2019; Tachine, 2022). While research has shown that students from marginalized backgrounds value and engaged in both independence and interdependence, it is the systemic privileging of individualism within university culture that creates a tight space for them (Covarrubias & Valle, 2023; Valle & Covarrubias, 2024).

These tensions can intensify in graduate school, where academic culture often demands deep immersion into individualistic norms that may conflict with students' cultural values, relationships, and broader understandings of success and belonging. Stemming from her own experiences as a first-generation Latina graduate student, Rosales (2023) described how graduate education created conditions that required her to be "selfish" with her time to succeed academically (p. 237). Rosales (2023) further explained that the lack of racial and ethnic representation, the centering of Eurocentric curricula, and the limited institutional support for multicultural perspectives contributed to feelings of cultural isolation, alienation, and doubts about belonging within academia. Extending research on home-school cultural values mismatch, these experiences suggest that first-generation Latina graduate students may encounter a range of tight spaces as they navigate competing priorities and expectations, including maintaining family and community relationships, protecting their well-being, honoring their cultural values, and meeting dominant academic expectations for success. Importantly, the priorities that become sources of tension

are not uniform but vary across individuals, contexts, and time, creating different forms of psychological strain and different opportunities for resistance.

In addition to privileging hyper-individualism, Whiteness also manifests as a structural privileging of specific knowledge systems, which scholars have termed epistemological racism (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Fernandez et al., 2021; Kubota, 2020). Epistemological racism is the process through which knowledge creation and dissemination reinforce racist power dynamics, such as by ignoring or devaluing the cultural knowledge, goals, and lived experiences of marginalized groups (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Fernandez et al., 2021; Kubota, 2020). Testimonios with 12 Latina doctoral students, many of whom identified as first-generation, revealed how they experienced epistemological racism in their departments (Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). They shared how their doctoral institutions claimed to value diversity of their students, such as in mission statements or on visit days to prospective graduate students. However, when Latina doctoral students centered issues of diversity and equity in their research, they experienced pushback and rejection from faculty who did not see their work as significant or rigorous enough to count as “real” research or as generalizable beyond marginalized people. This conflict in messaging resulted in the Latina doctoral students questioning the diversity and inclusion missions of their institutions and their belongingness to these spaces.

A Borderlands lens further reveals how Latina doctoral students experience and negotiate the tensions produced by racism, including epistemological racism, within broader systems of oppression, as they contend with pressures to reshape their

identities in ways that align with dominant academic expectations (Anzaldúa, 1987; Espino, 2016; Gutierrez et al., 2022). For Latinas, this encompasses both racist and sexist experiences in academia. One study exploring the experiences of 25 Mexican women pursuing a PhD, most who were first-generation to college students, found they had to strategically manage raced and gendered expectations in graduate school to avoid being dismissed and overlooked (Espino, 2016). For example, to avoid being sexualized as an ethnic commodity by a group of men at a conference, one woman used assertive, authoritative language to center her research and reinforce her academic identity to ward off any unwanted advances. In contrast, another graduate student felt pressure to adhere to qualities associated with femininity, such as smiling more and being perceived as caring and nurturing to secure higher scores on teaching evaluations. Both examples illustrate how dominant academic expectations function as tight spaces, restricting and controlling how Latina doctoral students express their identities within academic contexts.

Tensions also arise for first-generation Latina graduate students as they move between academic and home worlds. While pursuing higher education can provide structural opportunities—such as increased independence, the ability to prioritize academic growth, and access to professional pathways not previously available (Covarrubias et al., 2021; Yi & Ramos, 2022)—these shifts can simultaneously create distance and strain in familial relationships as closeness and access to family were often relied on to access cultural resources and strengths previously. As first-generation Latina graduate students move through academic spaces, they may find

themselves negotiating differences in values, expectations, and ways of being between their home communities and the university (Espinoza, 2010). These experiences position them within a borderlands space, where privilege and marginalization coexist and produce tensions that must be continuously navigated. For this reason, it is critical to examine how these tensions unfold within the home and shape the relational dynamics of first-generation Latina graduate students.

Tight Spaces of the Home Context

While higher education introduces one set of tight spaces, the home remains another critical site where tensions and contradictions emerge for first-generation Latina graduate students. CCW highlights how the family often plays a critical role in the schooling experiences of first-generation Latinx students, from their undergraduate years (Azmitia et al., 2018; Azpeitia & Bacio, 2022; Covarrubias et al., 2019) to their graduate years (Espinoza, 2010; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). In addition to serving as a motivator to pursue higher education, family relationships often function as important sources of cultural wealth that supports the persistence of first-generation Latinx students (Azmitia et al., 2018; Azpeitia & Bacio, 2022; Carrión & Torres, 2023; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Marrun, 2018). For example, families offer encouragement to succeed through *dichos* (sayings) y *consejos* (advice) that provide students with cultural knowledge and guidance (Azpeitia & Bacio, 2022; Carrión & Torres, 2023; Marrun, 2018). Family values, such as communicating the importance of resilience and hard work for survival, can also be critical for first-generation students who draw on these values to

push through barriers and obstacles they experience in higher education (Azmitia et al., 2018; Burciaga, 2007; Covarrubias & Valle, 2023; Covarrubias et al., 2021; Fernández et al., 2023; Yosso, 2005). In graduate school, families can also provide valuable resources to Latina graduate students, such as culturally-sustaining foods that remind students of home and provide a sense of familiarity as they navigate new environments (Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). Altogether, family support can be a central avenue of support that helps retain first-generation Latina graduate students.

At the same time, navigating and maintaining familial connections can come with their own set of conflicts and contradictory experiences. Tensions can emerge when graduate education is organized around expectations of independence while students remain embedded within family and community relationships characterized by reciprocity and collective responsibility (Espinoza, 2010; Gutierrez et al., 2022). Centering familial needs reflects the concept of familial obligation, which is the "psychological sense that one should help, respect, and contribute to their family" (Telzer & Fuligni, 2009, p. 271). Such obligations can be particularly salient in low-income Latinx contexts, which are often shaped by social and economic conditions that require multiple household members to contribute to their family's collective well-being and survival (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009). Importantly, these obligations do not exist apart from broader patriarchal systems. Gendered expectations operating across families, higher education, and broader society often position first-generation Latina graduate students as responsible for caregiving, domestic labor, and prioritizing the needs of others. For example, first-

generation Latina graduate students have reported experiencing sexism through gendered expectations to cook and clean for adult male family members, as these responsibilities are often viewed as a woman's role (Morales & Perez, 2020). When they resist these expectations, they often face criticism, which can create tension within familial relationships (Acevedo, 2023; Burciaga, 2007).

Indeed, first-generation Latina graduate students can experience mental and physical distress when negotiating familial obligations and expectations with their own desire to pursue individual goals related to their education (Burciaga, 2007; Espinoza, 2010; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). Drawing on Ramos and Torres-Fernandez's (2020) work, this distress manifested as persistent feelings of guilt, discomfort, and disconnection from family, as well as a sense of being pulled between home and academic spaces without fully belonging to either. For many of the first-generation Latina graduate students, this tension was intensified by having to constantly shift how they acted and behaved between academic and home environments, explain academic work to family members only to be misunderstood or have their work devalued, and navigate changing family dynamics fueled by feelings of abandonment or accusations of thinking they were better than family. Distress also took a more internal form, as first-generation Latina graduate students grappled with the painful realization that they were no longer the same people they once were, leading to a loss of identity.

Amid this distress, first-generation Latinas find openings for resistance. Indeed, tight spaces can be sites of resistance, such findings ways to hold onto

cultural values even when faced with pressure to prioritize academic values (Rosales & Langhout, 2020). In doing so, individuals create space to balance, embrace, and redefine their relationships to both settings while prioritizing their own goals (Covarrubias & Valle, 2023; Valle, 2023). Burciaga (2007) documented how Latinas in doctoral programs, a majority first-generation to college, resisted dominant academic expectations that framed caregiving and family commitments, such as motherhood and community accountability, as incompatible with being an academic. Although participants expressed fears that academia would create distance between themselves and their loved ones, many still imagined futures in which they could pursue meaningful research, mentor students, support their communities, and sustain healthy familial relationships. By doing so, the participants challenged dominant academic norms rooted in individualism and competition and sought ways to redefine success on their own terms. In this way, their resistance was not only about surviving academia, but also about imagining how to transform it into a space where multiple worlds could coexist and they could thrive.

Bringing about these reimaginings within tight spaces is not easy. Tight spaces can be sites for resistance (Quinteros & Covarrubias, 2023; Rosales & Langhout, 2020; Valle & Covarrubias, 2024; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013) but navigating them can also be painful (Quinteros & Covarrubias, 2023; Valle & Covarrubias, 2024). Tight spaces can create a feeling of “walking between two worlds” for first-generation Latinas, as they struggle to fully belong to either world (Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020, p. 383). As sites of both pain and resistance, these

tight spaces can also create openings for new understandings of self. By resisting the constraints imposed within these spaces, first-generation Latina graduate students challenge dominant narratives that dictate who they should be and how they should navigate systems of power. Through this process, they begin to reimagine their relationships to home, academia, and themselves, creating more expansive ways of being that move beyond oppression and domination. To understand how first-generation Latina graduate students engage and challenge tight spaces and engage this process of identity transformation, I turn to *conocimiento* as the central theoretical framework guiding this study.

Theoretical Framework: The Seven Stages of *Conocimiento*

Conocimiento is a process of coming to know and understand oneself, others, and the world through engaging moments of contradiction. This process of stems from Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of the "mestiza," a woman of mixed Spanish and Indigenous ancestry formed through colonization. Drawing from this position, Anzaldúa theorized the hybrid identities that developed across the Americas. Having grown up in a border culture, she experienced firsthand the tensions of being both a U.S. citizen and a Mexican woman who was also a lesbian, deepening her awareness of the challenges of inhabiting multiple, and often conflicting, worlds (Anzaldúa, 1987; Hernandez, 2020). It is from these lived contradictions that she theorized *conocimiento* as a process of engaging and making sense of these tensions. By moving through *conocimiento* and its stages, Anzaldúa (2002) and scholars after her

(Koegeler-Abdi, 2013) theorized that one gains a *nepantlera consciousness*¹. This consciousness emphasizes how individuals draw on their awareness of contradiction to bridge worlds and reimagine their relationships across them.

Conocimiento invites those existing on the margins to use the conflict they encounter as gateways for change in themselves and in the worlds around them (Anzaldúa, 2002; Burciaga, 2007; Heredia, 2011). Conocimiento is a cyclical and conscious process of self-discovery with seven stages: el arrebató, nepantla, the Coatlicue state, the call, Coyolxauhqui state, the blow up, and shifting realities (Anzaldúa, 2002). To illustrate the process of conocimiento and its connection to the experiences of Latina graduate students, I draw from Heredia (2011), whose personal essay is based on her experiences as a mixed Persian and Mexican woman pursuing a doctorate degree.

Stage One: El Arrebató

In the first stage, *el arrebató*, individuals experience a rupture or fragmentation of their identities. One example of a rupture is when first-generation Latinas enter graduate school and realize that their cultural values and beliefs are in contradiction to the values and beliefs upheld in academic spaces (Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020; Heredia, 2011). Realizing this contradiction can lead to

¹ Anzaldúa's (1987) theorization of *nepantlera consciousness* is derived from her earlier concept of *mestiza consciousness*, which describes the awareness that emerges from living across conflicting cultural and social worlds. Through *mestiza consciousness*, individuals learn to recognize, hold, and negotiate the contradictions shaping their identities, moving toward a more expansive sense of self that embraces tension rather than resolving it through binaries. Deriving from Anzaldúa's later writings, scholars (Koegeler-Abdi, 2013) argue that *nepantlera consciousness* extends this framework by emphasizing the relational, transformative, and action-oriented possibilities that emerge from navigating these contradictions.

experiencing un susto, or a profound psychological, emotional, and spiritual disruption that emerges when deeply held assumptions about oneself or the world are fractured. Similar to what psychologists describe as a dissonant experience, a susto reflects a painful awakening to contradictions that can no longer be ignored. This disruption creates a split in the body, mind, and spirit, calling Latinas to contend with the pressure to contort or fragment parts of themselves that do not fit what is expected in academia (Heredia, 2011). This can include minimizing or hiding their social justice or community-oriented goals within their research and graduate school activities (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020).

Heredia's (2011) *arrebato* came when she realized that even though she was in a feminist department that presented itself as an inclusive and socially aware space, she still faced racist and sexist remarks from peers and faculty. This conflicting experience created "cracks" so deep that she experienced un susto, fundamentally changing what she believed she could expect from graduate school (p. 40). Similarly, Latinas in higher education have documented painful sustos throughout their academic careers, including having their research and scholarship dismissed as insufficiently rigorous or worthy of pursuit (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). Sometimes these ruptures are so profound that women choose to leave academia altogether (Burciaga, 2007). As individuals grapple with these contradictions, the fragmentation can foster a double sight, or the ability to recognize that multiple, often competing expectations are being communicated about how they should think, act, and belong. This awareness shifts individuals into the next stage of *nepantla*.

Stage Two: Nepantla

Nepantla² is the uncomfortable liminal space where individuals negotiate the multiple identities they hold and the often-contradictory expectations attached to them. Those who inhabit this in-between space are often described as nepantleras. As individuals move through *nepantla*, nepantlera consciousness becomes more visible as they begin to make sense of contradiction, move between worlds, and imagine new ways of relating to the identities they hold. For first-generation Latina graduate students, nepantlera consciousness is critical for navigating the tensions between home and academic spaces, which are filled with tight spaces. In nepantla, there is potential to create a more fluid and expansive understanding of the self, outside of strict borders—a new third self. While in nepantla, nepantleras can feel torn between their identities and experience psychological pain in balancing their opposing worlds. They realize that their old ways of relating to the world are not accepted, and navigating these tensions can be draining both physically and mentally.

In this transitional space, a new reality is forming, one that “put[s] you in between your old story of who you were and the new story of who you’re becoming” (Lara, 2005, p. 44). Heredia explained a feeling that she must keep her worlds separate from each other (Espinoza, 2010; Heredia, 2011; Ramos & Torres

² *Nepantla* is a Nahuatl word meaning “in the middle” or “in-between.” Anzaldúa (1987, 2012) reinterprets the concept through a Chicana feminist lens to describe the lived experience of inhabiting multiple, often contradictory social, cultural, and political worlds. Burciaga (2007) emphasizes that *nepantla* is not merely a liminal state, but a site shaped by histories of colonialism, race, gender, and migration where individuals negotiate competing expectations while developing new forms of consciousness and possibility. Drawing from this work, *nepantla* represents both the pain of fragmentation and the potential for transformation.

Fernandez, 2020). This separation would manifest itself in physical ways such as not being able to sleep and experiencing panic attacks. For many Latina graduate students, separation can also create distance from vital support systems, like family and friends, leading to feeling of isolation and alienation (Gutierrez et al., 2022; Ramos & Torres Fernandez, 2020).

Due to the heaviness that can arise from separation, a desire to repress all the negative feelings and ignore what is happening can emerge. Psychologists link this dissociative strategy to experiences of cognitive dissonance (Levin et al., 2013). Festinger (1957) conceptualized cognitive dissonance as the psychological discomfort that arises from holding conflicting beliefs, expectations, or experiences (Taylor & Reynolds, 2019). To reduce this discomfort, individuals may change their beliefs or behaviors, disengage from the source of tension, or downplay the significance of the conflict (McGrath, 2017). Existing research suggests that dissonance is an everyday experience for graduate students of color, particularly when their identities, values, and goals are positioned as incompatible with academic norms (Levin et al., 2013). For first-generation Latina graduate students, these tensions can lead to behavioral shifts such as distancing themselves from academic spaces or relationships to reduce discomfort, though these strategies often result in isolation and do not fully resolve the underlying contradictions (Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020).

Some scholars consider how dissonance can produce new ways of understanding the social world. For example, generative dissonance describes how interruptions to one's everyday assumptions can prompt individuals to question and

reinterpret their social realities (Galleta, 2017). However, this work primarily focuses on outcomes of dissonance rather than the process through which individuals make sense of these contradictions. What remains less understood is how individuals navigate multiple, intersecting contradictions across different settings, such as academic and home spaces, and how meaning-making unfolds through this process. One possible avenue is to acknowledge and confront the contradictions causing distress, even if this road leads to moments of pain and unease, this is the *Coatlicue state*.

Stage Three: The Coatlicue State

Anzaldúa theorized that in the *Coatlicue state*, nepantleras confront dissonance rather than avoid the discomfort it causes. The Coatlicue state is a period of painful reflection in which individuals sit with contradiction instead of immediately trying to resolve it. This creates space to question their held beliefs, make meaning of their experiences, and begin the process of imagining new possibilities for themselves and their relationships to others across their spaces. This state is considered the “hellish phase of the journey” where the blinders come off and one realizes the cost to oneself and others because of the fragmentation. Heredia (2011) recounted losing Women of Color friends because the split caused them to question their ability as academics. In this state, Heredia realized that if she did nothing, she would continue to lose more friends. She refocused her anger in not letting that happen. When first-generation Latina graduate students start to question why they need to keep parts of their identities separate, they begin to reveal the ways

in which structural forces reinforce fragmentation. For example, first-generation Latina graduate students may question the cultural narratives rooted in White Supremacy and patriarchy that are passed down through family/community and higher education and the effects of these narratives on their lives (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Espino et al., 2010).

Stage Four: The Call

Next is the *call*. In this state, it's time for rebirth by facing the shadowbeast, which includes working through the pain and doubts of fragmentation. Here, first-generation Latina graduate students realize that there are ways to break through their tight spaces and create something new. For Heredia (2011), she questions her belief that she is not a good academic if she puts family first and questions whether to pause having children for the moment. In her questioning, she embraces that other realities have to exist and is open to understanding and looking for ways to make these realities true for her. She has not quite figured out how to do this, but her determination brings her both mental and physical peace. In cognitive dissonance theory, peace of mind only comes through alleviating dissonance, but Heredia's story points to the possibility that peace can also come in the form of confronting dissonance and choosing to work through it. For first-generation Latina graduate students, being open to re-envisioning their relationship to various cultural settings they inhabit can provide a momentary peace while they make sense of their shifting realities. Openness can come in the form of seeking community with other academics

who strive for the same possibility, such as through conferences or support groups (Acevedo, 2023).

Stage Five: Putting Coyolxauhqui Together

After this stage, it is time to *put Coyolxauhqui together*. Coyolxauhqui was the Mexica moon goddess who was cut into pieces for defying her brother and who then turned her into the lonely moon. First-generation Latina graduate students can often feel cut to pieces trying to both assimilate and resist the dominant narratives fostered by tight spaces. In the Coyolxauhqui state, first-generation Latina graduate students can finally begin to rewrite their stories, as many times as needed, now that they question all the assumptions placed on them. In this stage, because of this new freedom, they can also begin to build intercultural communities (Espino et al., 2010).

Heredia (2011) explains that for her, community started with her advisor, a Women of Color, who also wanted to put Coyolxauhqui together. This support was critical for Heredia to move towards the goals of shattering the myths around Women of Color and of forming partnerships with other scholars. Heredia's process of *conocimiento* brought her to the place of wanting to transform how Women of Color are spoken and written about in academic work. For first-generation Latina graduate students, finding community in graduate school to navigate ambiguities and tensions is critical for surviving the academic pipeline and for reimagining academic and home spaces that allow for vulnerability, truth-telling, and resistance to dominant narratives for themselves and others (Acevedo, 2023; Espino et al., 2010).

Stage Six: The Blow Up

Before getting to the last stage, first-generation Latina graduate students must experience the *blow up*, or the letting go of old ways of relating to themselves and others to finally dream of new futures. Heredia (2011) describes this psychological experience as a confusing and unsettling time of realization. What initiated this experience was a faculty member, a Woman of Color, who told a prospective PhD student that she would never make it to the PhD in Feminist Studies because she is White. Heredia explains the uncomfortable feeling she faced due to the faculty member crushing the hopes of a woman “insinuating that the only reason women of color or international women get into Ph.D. programs is because of our race/ethnicity.” (p. 43). For Heredia, this moment made her realize the assumptions she had about who can perpetuate racism and who can experience discrimination. The faculty member, another Woman of Color, perpetuated a racist narrative through her own internalized racism which deeply unsettled Heredia. For first-generation Women of Color in graduate school, entering a space that values Whiteness can be unsettling, in particular when other People of Color who one would consider allies, also embody Whiteness through values and beliefs.

Stage Seven: Shifting Realities

The experience of the “blow up” shifted Heredia’s reality, which is the final stage of *conocimiento*. She understands that Women of Color can also perpetuate forms of oppression onto other Women of Color. In shifting realities, she makes space for these critical mental shifts that allow her to relate to others and her social world in a more nuanced way. Now that she shifted her understanding of who can

perpetuate oppression, she opens up space for social transformation in how she relates to others, both White people and People of Color. She now has the ability to see through the contradictions and conflicts and move towards a new hybridity within her identity. This hybridity allows Heredia, and others who travel through *conocimiento*, to connect across social identities instead of being defined solely by them. Hybridity allows for bridging across cultural, social, and political lines.

The Power of *Conocimiento* for Bridging

While *conocimiento* describes the process of engaging contradiction and fragmentation, this process also facilitates possibilities for bridging across worlds that are oppositional in the lives of first-generation Latina graduate students. Through *nepantlera* consciousness, individuals begin to reimagine how they relate to home, school, family, and self, creating more fluid ways of existing across these borders. By going through *conocimiento* and engaging their *nepantlera* consciousness, first-generation Latinas develop bridging practices that help them navigate and transform tight spaces. For example, bridging practices create space for first-generation Latinas to connect with others who experience different forms of marginalization and build solidarity amongst each other. Different from cognitive dissonance theory which states that individuals avoid others who can foster dissonance, bridging allows Latinas to embrace and reflect on experiences that may cause others to hold different perspectives from their own.

Heredia (2011) highlights that this stage does not feel like an end, but rather the possibility for new beginnings. Through this consciousness, individuals come to

recognize and hold the contradictions shaping their identities and relationships across worlds. Nepantlera consciousness extends this process by emphasizing how individuals act on this awareness through bridging practices that challenge dominant narratives and create new ways of relating within cultural and social settings. As nepantleras, living between cultures allows for both seeing and embracing the complexity within cultures to bridge worlds and ways of being that often seem disconnected. While this theory appears to advocate for full reconciliation of all contradictions, Anzaldúa (1987) was adamant that this process is not a coming together or balance of contradictions but rather a new creation, a new identity “greater than the sum of its severed parts” (p. 102). Instead of reconciling these identities, marginalized people learn to make bridges for the contradictions, form new connections between others and their environment, and sever relationships that do them harm.

To demonstrate the power of bridging, Delgado Bernal (2001) explored how 32 Latina undergraduate women bridged their home and college settings. Through interviews, Delgado Bernal documented how participants described tension and disconnection across these cultural settings, often struggling to reconcile identities they experienced as oppositional. Participants used their biculturalism as a form of resistance to dominant educational norms and pressures to assimilate. Rather than viewing their Latinidad and U.S. identities as mutually exclusive, many students found ways to integrate these worlds and draw strength from both. For example, participants maintained strong commitments to their families, communities, language,

and cultural practices while simultaneously navigating the expectations of higher education, refusing to internalize the belief that academic success required distancing themselves from their cultural identities or assimilating into dominant White middle-class norms.

While Delgado Bernal's work centers on how Latina undergraduate women bridge tensions across home and college spaces, I shift to the experiences of first-generation Latina graduate students and how they engage their *nepantlera* consciousness to navigate contradictions across academic and home worlds. Delgado Bernal's (2001) findings highlight how students resisted dominant pressures to assimilate by remaining connected to their home communities and cultural identities while pursuing higher education. I aim to extend this conversation by examining how first-generation Latina graduate students not only navigate these contradictions but also come to reinterpret and renegotiate their relationships to these spaces through processes of deep reflection in *conocimiento*. I add to scarce literature engaging *conocimiento* to understand the experiences of first-generation graduate students of color (see Acevedo, 2023; Burciaga, 2007; Heredia, 2011).

Specifically, I explore three research questions. First, from a *conocimiento* framework, what contradictory or paradoxical messages, beliefs, and expectations do first-generation Latina graduate students identify as they navigate the academy? Second, what are the psychological experiences and discomfort that emerge from these tight spaces? Finally, how do these women draw on their *nepantlera* consciousness to respond to and/or resist their tight spaces, and what barriers do they

encounter in that process? To explore these questions, this dissertation research examines the experiences of 12 first-generation Latina graduate students from diverse academic fields and disciplines. Through testimonios and pláticas, I explore participants' experiences across their home and academic worlds, paying particular attention to the tight spaces that emerge as they navigate the borderlands between these settings. In doing so, this study examines how participants move through nepantla and make meaning of the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities for transformation that arise within these spaces.

Method

The University Context

Participants were recruited from a research one (R1) university on the west coast that grants both undergraduate and graduate degrees. The university is one of 21 R1 institutions that hold dual designations as both a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) (UTEP, 2022). To be an HSI, 25% of the undergraduate population must be from Latinx backgrounds and 50% from low-income backgrounds (Garcia et al., 2019). For AANAPISI status, institutions need to enroll at least 10% Asian American, Native American, Pacific Islander undergraduate students and a large portion of students from low-income backgrounds (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Given these designations, the target university has a large population of both racially and/or economically marginalized undergraduate students with diverse experiences and needs. In Fall 2024, the year of the study, the full-time undergraduate

student population totaled 17,940. The racial-ethnic background consisted of 30.5% White, 30.7% Asian, 27.5% Chicanx/Latinx, 4.8% African American, 0.8% Native American, 0.2% Pacific Islander, 3% of international students and 2.5% of students racial and ethnic backgrounds being unknown. First-generation students consisted of 31.3% of the population (IRAPS, 2026). In terms of gender, 50% of students identified as women, 44.9% as men, and 5.1% as other or unknown (IRAPS, 2026).

Because HSI and AANAPISI designations are based on undergraduate enrollments and not graduate student enrollments (U.S. Department of Education, 2026), the representation of graduate students does not mirror that of the undergraduate population. In Fall 2024, this university had 1,434 students enrolled in doctoral programs, with 33.1% of students who identified as White, 32.4% International, 13.5% Hispanic or Latinx, 12.1% Asian, 4.1% African American or Black, 0.8% Native American and 4% unknown (IRAPS, 2026). First-generation status is not tracked by the institution for graduate students. The gender breakdown included 46% of students identifying as men, 43.5% as women, and 10.5% as other or unknown (IRAPS, 2026).

Given the differences in the racial and ethnic composition of the undergraduate and graduate student populations, this context created unique opportunities and challenges for first-generation Latina graduate students. Participants described feeling connected to the undergraduate population, particularly first-generation students of color, and felt a strong responsibility to mentor and create welcoming spaces for students navigating experiences similar to their own (Mireles-

Rios & Garcia, 2019). Yet this commitment often exists alongside their own unmet needs (Gutierrez et al., 2022). As participants navigate graduate school with limited emotional and academic, they can face tensions between caring for themselves and showing up for others in meaningful ways. Understanding this university context is therefore critical for interpreting how participants navigated these competing demands and engaged in forms of community care while moving through their own tight spaces.

Recruitment and Participants

In Fall 2024, I recruited 12 graduate students pursuing a PhD who identified as first-generation to college and as Latina. Following other sample sizes from research utilizing testimonio and plática methodology (Cho et al., 2023), gathering a sample of 10-15 students allows an opportunity for deep storytelling and participatory reflection and data analysis (Benmayor, 2012; Delgado et al., 2012). To reach a wider pool of participants, I recruited through graduate student listservs at the department and campus levels. Invitation emails stated that I was recruiting participants to learn about “their experiences navigating both home and graduate school settings”. Interested participants completed a Google Form embedded as a link in the recruitment email. This form asked for their consent to participate in one 60-to-90-minute testimonio and two 60-to-90-minute pláticas.

All 12 participants identified as first-generation to college as neither parent attended college, and nine of the participants were the first of their siblings to graduate college. Participant ages ranged from 23 to 36 years (*Mean Age* = 27.08,

years, $SD = 3.82$). Eleven of the participants identified as cisgender women, and one participant identified as gender non-conforming and as “Latina”, as they were perceived by others as a woman and grew up with cultural expectations of being a Latina daughter. Nine out of the twelve were eldest daughters. Participants’ ethnic backgrounds included Mexican ($n=8$), Central American ($n=2$), South American ($n=1$), and African and South American ($n=1$). Participants ranged in their years in their program: one first-year, three second-years, two third-years, two fourth-years, two fifth-years, one sixth year, and one eighth year. Five participants were from the Sciences, five from Social Sciences, one from the Humanities, and one from Engineering³. To assess social class, participants rated their social class on a 1-5 scale (1=working poor, 2=working class, 3=lower-middle class, 4=middle class, 5=upper middle class, 6=upper class). The average social class ranking was 1.75 ($SD=.45$, range = 1-2), indicating that the sample predominantly came from working poor and working-class backgrounds.

Researcher Positionality

My positionalities as a first-generation college student, daughter of Salvadoran immigrants, and graduate student in psychology shaped how I approached and related to this project (Flores & Morales, 2021; Flores Carmona & Luciano, 2014). As a psychology student, my research has explored how marginalized students

³ To protect participant confidentiality, I do not directly associate participants’ departments with their social identities. Given the small number of first-generation Latina graduate students at this institution, linking departmental affiliation to specific experiences could increase the risk of participant identification.

psychologically navigate cultural clashes in higher education and the mental and emotional distress these conflicts create. At the same time, my work also examines the psychological strength and resilience that can emerge when students resist oppression and affirm their existence within academia. In sitting with these observations, I could see how even within challenging tight spaces, students were fighting to make room for their needs and goals. These patterns pushed me to further explore how first-generation Latina graduate students psychologically make sense of and respond to the contradictory expectations they encounter across their worlds and make space for themselves between these worlds.

Not surprisingly, this topic also reflected my own experiences as a first-generation Latina graduate student in nepantla. Halfway through the project, I had my baby and became a mother. This process reminded me that taking on a new identity is a transformational process that can feel overwhelming, exciting, and painful. I became even more attuned to the pull to meet different expectations, such as being a safe and consistent space for my child, meeting the requirements to finish my PhD, while also managing postpartum ups and downs. This *susto* deepened my awareness of the tight space I was embedded in and highlighted how little room existed to bridge home and academic spaces. Yet, I found that I still got up, engaged my nepantlera self, and found ways to bridge these divides, though imperfectly. I leaned on interdisciplinary readings and research from feminist women scholars, such as Anzaldúa, who wrote about what I was feeling. In addition, *conviviendo* with my community of *mujeres*, *hermanas* who then also became *tias*, both in graduate school

and back home, became a source of strength and love that helped me move through my *conocimiento* cycle.

This new phase in my life, along with my educational experiences, motivated my questions surrounding identity, tension, and how first-generation Latinas confront and bridge these contradictions for themselves and those who come after them through community, resistance, and love. These lived experiences shaped both the questions I asked and the methodological approach and tools I chose to guide this project.

Critical Race Nepantlera Methodology

My approach to this project was guided by Critical Race Nepantlera Methodology (CRNM; Acevedo-Gil, 2019), which emphasizes reflexivity, relational reciprocity, and collaborative knowledge creation between researchers and participants. CRNM draws from Chicana/Latina Feminist Epistemology, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Anzaldúa's (1987, 2002) conceptualization of *nepantla*. Together, these perspectives recognize that knowledge is shaped by individuals' social locations and lived experiences while also attending to the broader systems of power that structure those experiences (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Peña et al., 2023; Solórzano, 1998). As a result, CRNM positions participants as knowledge holders whose insights are critical for understanding and challenging inequities, while requiring researchers to remain reflexive about how their own identities, experiences, and ways of knowing shape the research process.

CRNM also draws from Anzaldúa's conceptualization of nepantla, centering the knowledge that emerges living between often contradictory worlds. Rather than focusing on participants' experiences of tension and contradiction as individual struggles, CRNM emphasizes collaborative meaning-making of these collective experiences in nepantla as a path towards transformation. This perspective complements CRT's commitment to identifying and resisting oppressive structures by emphasizing how individuals make sense of, respond to, and transform these conditions through collective reflection, which can then build solidarity amongst the sense makers and potentially lead to collective action. Together, these foundations position CRNM as a methodology concerned not only with understanding lived experiences but also with fostering opportunities for resistance, healing, and social change for the nepantleras.

To demonstrate how I apply this methodology, I intentionally weave my own positionality and reflections throughout the research process to illustrate how my lived experiences shaped my interpretations, relationships with participants, and engagement with the study. The first tenet of a CRNM calls researchers to take an intersectional lens when making sense of how social identities and locations shape knowledge creation. Contending with intersectionality as a researcher required me to reflect on both the oppression and privilege, I carry (Acevedo-Gil, 2019). I am a U.S. citizen and a cisgender, heterosexual woman in academia. While I navigate challenges related to my gender, ethnicity, and class, I do not know the impacts of homophobia or anti-immigrant sentiment. Remaining aware of my positionality

allowed me to be more attentive to how participants described and understood these lived realities.

The second tenet calls for the use of cultural intuition, which entails acknowledging, validating, and reflecting on the knowledge that both researchers and participants bring to the research process (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Anzaldúa (1987) explains that living in *nepantla* can cultivate critical awareness and cultural intuition. I carried this awareness into my conversations and data analysis. Leaning into my cultural intuition, while also practicing reflexivity, helped me recognize the strengths and shared understandings I brought to this project while remaining mindful of my outsider status. This process helped foster conversations grounded in trust, mutual reflection, and shared understanding by allowing me to share my own experiences, reflections, and points of connection as participants shared their stories.

The third tenet invites researchers to interrogate oppressive systems and identify collective ways to resist them. As such, I designed the research project with the goal to create space to reflect on what it means to navigate U.S. higher education systems rooted in White supremacy as first-generation Latina graduate students (Cho et al., 2023; Patton, 2016). I approached my conversations with participants as spaces to *convivir*, where participants and I could collectively reflect on our experiences moving across home and academic contexts.

The fourth tenet centers participants' needs by drawing on both participants' cultural intuition and the researcher's own to remain attentive to moments of openness and emotional vulnerability within conversations. This allowed me to

remain responsive to participants' well-being throughout the study. At times, this openness created opportunities for conversations to move into unexpected areas, particularly as participants reflected on their experiences moving through and between stages of *conocimiento*. These moments became opportunities for collaborative theorizing about how *conocimiento* is felt and lived in the lives of first-generation Latina graduate students.

Finally, the fifth tenet positions participants as co-creators of knowledge. Throughout the study, participants were invited to engage in collaborative reflection and interpretation of their experiences. This emphasis on collective meaning-making shaped the methodological and research tools I utilized in the research, which included both *testimonios* and *pláticas*. Together *testimonios* and *pláticas* allowed me to center both individual reflection and collaborative meaning-making among first-generation Latina graduate students. These methods aligned with CRNM's emphasis on relationality, reciprocity, cultural intuition, and collaborative knowledge production by supporting participants in critically reflecting on and collectively theorizing their experiences, responses, and evolving understandings of self through *conocimiento*.

Testimonios and Pláticas as Methodology and Method

Testimonios

Testimonios served as both a method of data collection and a methodological tool grounded in CRNM. *Testimonios* position participants as knowledge holders whose lived experiences provide important insights into systems of oppression and

what it means to exist and resist within them (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). In doing so, testimonios create opportunities for participants to critically reflect on experiences of contradiction and marginalization while theorizing how these experiences shape their identities and responses to the world around them. As a "transformational rupture" in knowledge production (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017, p. 5), testimonios created a space where I, the researcher, could engage in active listening and sensemaking alongside other first-generation Latina graduate students (Burciaga et al., 2024; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).

To develop the testimonio protocol, I developed a draft with my advisor and then piloted the interview questions with three first-generation Latinas who had recently graduated from their programs. With participants' permission, I audio recorded each session and invited feedback on the clarity and relevance of the questions. Additionally, a team of six undergraduate research assistants who identified as Latinx (five women and one man; five first-generation) and I reviewed the recordings to identify moments of confusion, ambiguity, and opportunities for improvement. Together, we discussed what should be revised, added, or removed until we felt the protocol aligned with the goals of the study.

In Fall 2024, I conducted 12 semi-structured testimonios with first-generation Latina graduate students across disciplines. Eleven testimonios were conducted in person and one virtually to accommodate participant availability. Participants were invited to reflect on their educational journeys, relationships to home and family, experiences in graduate school, and the contradictions that emerged as they navigated

multiple worlds. Consistent with CRNM, these conversations functioned as relational spaces where participants and I engaged in reflection that created openings for meaning-making and early theorizing about the experiences shaping their lives. Participants received \$30 compensation for their time.

Pláticas

While testimonios supported deep individual reflection, opportunities for collective theorizing remained limited. For this reason, I paired testimonios with pláticas to create space for participants to collectively share, reflect on and make meaning of their experiences.

Pláticas emphasize theorizing from the everyday experiences of marginalized communities through reciprocal and relational conversations (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Flores & Morales, 2021). Similar to conversations shared around a kitchen table, pláticas create informal and vulnerable spaces where researchers and participants engage in mutual storytelling and knowledge sharing. Researchers are expected to participate in reciprocal dialogue by remaining open and willing to answer the same questions posed to participants (Flores & Morales, 2021). Through this relational process, participants and researchers theorized together about their lived experiences and relationships to larger systems of oppression⁴.

⁴ Reciprocal dialogue is an intentional methodological practice within Chicana feminist methodologies that positions participants as co-theorists rather than solely as research participants. Instead of extracting knowledge through one-sided interviews, researchers engage in mutual storytelling and respond to participants' questions to foster relational accountability and collaboratively theorize lived experiences and systems of oppression (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Flores & Morales, 2021; see also Pérez Huber, 2021, on collaborative knowledge production through testimonios).

To prepare for the first round of pláticas, I reviewed participants' testimonios to identify the primary tensions they described when navigating their academic and home identities. After discussing these emerging themes with my advisor, we identified three broad tensions that shaped the pláticas: *double standards and expectations to be exceptional, pressure to be a good Latina daughter, and lack of support when navigating challenges at home and/or school*. I developed separate plática protocols for each topic and sought feedback from my advisor and two Latina faculty members on my dissertation committee whose scholarship focuses on identity and first-generation Latina experiences. Participants were grouped according to the tensions reflected in their testimonios and were given the opportunity to request placement in a different group. No participants chose to be regrouped.

In Spring 2025, I facilitated six pláticas that ranged from one to three participants due to scheduling constraints. Two were conducted virtually to accommodate participant schedules. While I entered each plática with pre-identified topics and guiding questions, participants were encouraged to move conversations toward issues that felt most salient to their experiences. For example, during a discussion focused on expectations surrounding the “good Latina daughter,” participants shifted the conversation toward advisor-advisee relationships and how expectations of obedience and compliance mirrored familial dynamics. This flexibility created opportunities to explore how tensions varied across participants' conocimiento stages and social identities, including experiences as eldest daughters, queer students, and undocumented students.

Each plática included two reflective activities. First, participants were asked to identify the social spaces they navigated as first-generation Latina graduate students and any expectations, tensions, or conflicts that emerged across those spaces. Second, participants were introduced to the seven stages of *conocimiento* and asked to identify the stage that best reflected their current experience. Participants then shared their reasoning with the group and discussed what it felt like to inhabit that stage. Through this process, participants moved beyond individual reflection and engaged in collective sensemaking, allowing for deeper theorization of the shared and divergent ways first-generation Latina graduate students navigated contradictions throughout their *conocimiento* journeys.

To further align with CRNM's commitment to relational reciprocity and collaborative knowledge production, I facilitated a second and final plática in Spring 2026 after conducting preliminary analyses of the testimonios and first round pláticas. The purpose of this session was to invite participants into the analytic process by discussing my initial interpretations and creating opportunities for feedback and refinement. Four participants provided feedback through a Google Form, two participated in the virtual plática, and one participant indicated they had no feedback and trusted my interpretation of their story. Participants received an additional \$50 compensation for participating in this final stage of collaborative analysis.

Analytic Procedure

Drawing from Pérez Huber's work on testimonios of undocumented Latinx students (2021), I analyzed the data using three distinct but interrelated phases. These

stages include a preliminary data analysis stage of the testimonios and first plática, a collaborative data analysis stage for the second plática, and final data analysis stage where I will revisit all data, including participants' feedback. Pérez Huber (2021) stresses that these three phases "build from each other in a continuous process to arrive at a final set of findings" (p.190),

Preliminary Data Analysis

In this stage, I used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to identify, analyze and interpret patterns at each level of data collection (Clarke & Braun, 2017). RTA allowed me to systematically examine the data to draw meaningful interpretations of participants' experiences while also engaging with reflexivity throughout the analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). RTA helped me develop themes across the testimonios and first plática in order to draw connections and distinctions across participants' stories. The RTA process included six stages: data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes and producing the final report. Braun and Clarke (2006) make it clear that this is a cyclical process and also adaptive. While they offer a step-by-step guide, they also explain that researchers may or may not engage with the method in the particular order they give, but must engage in deep reflexivity when conducting RTA, which I made sure to do at each step.

The first step was data familiarization, which involved reading and re-reading transcripts, listening to audio recordings, and documenting my initial impressions. For the testimonios, I noted common tensions participants described as they navigated

graduate school and identified potential groupings of participants based on their shared experiences and identities. The second step involved generating initial codes from these impressions. My coding process began inductively, privileging participants' own language and meanings rather than imposing a predetermined framework onto the data. I coded for identities that felt most salient to participants, the cultural expectations associated with those identities, and the psychological conflicts that followed. These impressions and codes helped me to identify the groupings for the first *pláticas*, which were centered on my interpretations of the central tight spaces that participants described.

After documenting my observations in a Google Sheet, I received two rounds of feedback from my advisor, who posed reflection questions that helped refine and solidify the participant groupings. For example, she encouraged me to clarify the role of control in participants' experiences and consider how it differed across the tensions of being a "good Latina daughter" and being expected to be exceptional. By tracing participants' feelings of control to broader sexist and gendered expectations that shaped ideas about the "good Latina daughter," I identified these experiences as more closely aligned with this grouping. Although these expectations often surfaced within family relationships, they reflected broader societal norms rather than originating within families themselves. She also encouraged me to check in with participants about these groupings to ensure they accurately reflected their experiences and to provide an opportunity for participants to request a different group or identify important aspects of their experiences that may have been overlooked. No

participants requested to be moved or suggested changes to the groupings. Together, these reflection questions and participant feedback were instrumental in helping me refine and finalize the participant groupings.

In stage three, searching for themes, I incorporated a more deductive approach by drawing on *conocimiento* as an interpretive framework. This occurred after gathering all *plática* data. At this stage, I revisited all *testimonios* and *pláticas* and impressions along with two undergraduate research assistants, both who identified as Asian American and first-generation to college, and one who identified as a woman and one who identified as queer. Occupying both insider and outsider positions in relation to participants' experiences, they brought perspectives that resonated with themes of marginalization in higher education while also helping identify assumptions that I might have overlooked. Drawing from these impressions, I engaged in another round of coding, this time focusing on participants' *conocimiento* journeys and how these shaped their responses to tension and contradiction. For example, I identified *sustos* described in participants' *testimonios* and examined how these experiences related to their self-placement within *conocimiento* stages during the *pláticas*. Connecting *sustos* to participants' *conocimiento* journeys helped me better understand how they interpreted tensions and made meaning of them over time.

I then shifted my attention to how participants understood and interpreted shared tensions across their academic and home worlds. Specifically, I examined the significance participants attributed to these tensions, the emotional and psychological toll they described, and what they believed they needed to show up fully within both

spaces. I also attended to the cultural strengths, knowledge, and relationships participants drew upon as they navigated these tensions. As I reviewed codes across both data sources, I looked for patterns in how participants understood the structures of power that fostered these tensions and how they drew on their nepantlera consciousness to challenge, negotiate, or resist them. I paid particular attention to discussions of sustos, "blow ups," and other transformative moments that altered how participants understood themselves, their relationships, and their environments. Together, these patterns informed the preliminary themes I developed.

Next, during the fourth step, I reviewed the preliminary themes against the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure they accurately represented participants' experiences. I also engaged in ongoing discussions with my advisor. She reviewed my developing interpretations and provided critical feedback on my interpretations by posing critical reflective questions about the analysis. This process of investigator triangulation strengthened the trustworthiness of the analysis by challenging my assumptions and helping ensure that themes remained grounded in the data (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009). This step allowed me to construct a thematic map for my analysis.

In the fifth step, I continued to refine my themes but also named them and offered clear definitions that spoke to the overall story I was observing. Finally, in the sixth and final step, I produced a preliminary set of themes that related back to the research questions and contained a clear set of examples that felt representative of the participants experiences. But to incorporate collective sensemaking, I shared these

initial themes and asked for participant feedback and reflections. Participant feedback then informed the final write up of the results in this paper.

Collaborative Data Analysis

This stage occurred during the second plática which was held virtually. Combing back to steps four and five of RTA, I produced a preliminary set of themes that related back to the research questions and contained a clear set of examples that felt representative of the participants' experiences. But to incorporate collective sensemaking, I shared these initial themes and asked for participant feedback and reflections. From there, I invited pláticadoras to have a conversation with me on the representative thematic categories that prompted their own analysis and theorizing of the data. I had guiding questions to prompt conversations, such as "When reading the themes, did they feel reflective of your experiences so far in graduate school?" However, using my and the pláticadoras' cultural intuition, I was open to letting the conversation go where it needed to go (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Delgado Bernal, 1998).

In line with a plática methodology, I centered their collaborative theorizing and sharing of insights. The goal of this space was not to arrive at a consensus on how to analyze the data, but rather to provide a fuller and more diverse way of seeing the data and new ways of theorizing I could not have done on my own (Kruger & Casey, 2000; Pérez, 2021). For example, the two participants shared that since the initial data collection, they have moved on to new stages in conocimiento, further supporting that first-generation Latina graduate students do not stay stagnant when met with tensions,

but rather reflectively resist these tensions in ways that meet their needs. Participant feedback then informed the final write up of the results in this paper.

Final Data Analysis

Pérez Huber (2021) and Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that there is flexibility in how this final stage is conducted. I chose to approach this stage by braiding together my own theorizing, that of the participants, and the *conocimiento* framework. Returning again to steps four and five of RTA, I reviewed and refined the themes using a set of reflective questions my advisor and I developed to better understand how *conocimiento* was unfolding in participants' lives. These questions included: "What is the narrative that participants are rewriting? What hold does that narrative have on them, and what do they draw from their *nepantlera* consciousness to make sense of that hold and rewrite the narrative?" From these questions, I interpreted five initial themes. However, after further conversation with my advisor and returning to the literature, we agreed that one theme—Realizing that there is no give between expectations at home or at school—functioned more as a summary of participants' experiences across the themes rather than a distinct theme itself. I then brought together these refined themes with participants' own theorizing to develop the final thematic structure. The four final themes illustrate how first-generation Latina graduate students engaged their *conocimiento* to navigate and resist the tight spaces that emerged between their academic and home worlds. In completing the cycle of RTA, this paper serves as the final report which is step six.

Results

Every nepantlera encountered a tight space between her academic and home world. Yet, what these results demonstrate is that resistance was not uniform but rather informed by their *conocimiento* journey, and the ability to act depended on the support available to them and the types of tensions they faced related to their social identities. Even then, what all nepantleras had in common was a need for a space to explore their evolving identities that did not constrain their growth but instead allowed them to challenge inherited expectations and in doing so reimagine their relationships to themselves, their families, their work, and academia.

Nepantleras Negotiating Separation and Connection to Sustain Oneself

For many nepantleras, family was a central motivation for pursuing higher education, yet graduate school simultaneously created distance from the very people who inspired and encouraged these educational journeys. Characterizing their tight space, participants described feeling pulled between maintaining relationships with family and community while also navigating academic expectations that demanded constant productivity and focus. For example, Celeste, a sixth-year graduate student, and Estrella and Elizabeth, both in their second year, all kept their academic and home worlds separate, but internalized this separation differently. Celeste and Estrella kept these worlds separate to remain connected to family, while Elizabeth wanted distance from heavy familial expectations. The nepantlera consciousness of these women allowed them to work through tensions in their negotiations between separation and connection.

In her testimonio, Celeste highlighted her father as one of her biggest cheerleaders in pursuing college and graduate school, often sharing his regrets about not being able to finish school when he was younger because he needed to care for his siblings. Celeste wanted to make her father proud and honor his sacrifices. Yet, graduate school disrupted the “bubble” she grew up in as she began existing within what felt like “two very different spaces.” Celeste explained that “when I’m at home, I never talked about school,” especially after noticing that her academic success sometimes made family members feel “less than.” Celeste engaged her nepantlera consciousness to decide how to best navigate this tension, which for her was to maintain “a slight distance” as a way to both stay close to her family and “pause time” as she finished graduate school.

In her plática, Celeste connected this tension to the *conocimiento* stage of *el arretrato*, describing herself as someone who has “never been good with transition stages.” As a first-generation student, she experienced fear, uncertainty, and pressure to navigate unfamiliar spaces alone at each educational transition. While graduate school expanded Celeste’s perspectives and sense of self, it also intensified feelings of instability as she struggled to reconcile the growing distance between her academic and home worlds. While coming to terms with nearing the end of graduate school, Celeste was vulnerable with the group and admitted that although she often appeared confident when discussing her future, “the truth is, is I’m terrified and I don’t actually know and I don’t wanna fail.” Existing within *el arretrato* reflected not only Celeste’s *susto* of academic transition, but also uncertainty around who she was becoming as

she moved further away from the familiarity of home and toward deeper involvement in academic spaces that continued reshaping her relationships and sense of self.

Like Celeste, Estrella also separated her worlds and was careful about what parts of herself could cross over. Yet, for Estrella, this separation stemmed less from emotional distance from family and more from struggling to build trust and community within a department that did not fully reflect or support her values, leaving Estrella protective of the time she set aside for family. Estrella tied these tensions during her plática to existing between the Coyolxauhqui state and the blow up. She described the state as a “re-envisioning [of] relationships”, especially as the community of support she had as an undergraduate student was now “gone.” Estrella now had to make “sense of like where [she] fit in in grad school”. This need for community is why the blow up stage also resonated with Estrella, she explained that while she struggled to find her fit in graduate school, she was not willing to “fully change myself or my values.”

In her testimonio, Estrella described how her family, particularly her mother, had been incredibly supportive of her educational goals. This support was her reason for intentionally choosing a graduate program only a short distance from home; she wanted to visit family whenever and to support them as the eldest daughter. Estrella resisted the expectation that academic success required complete separation from family. Yet, Estrella became increasingly aware that some members of her department viewed these commitments to family as conflicting with scholarly dedication. Estrella explained that although faculty “aren't saying it explicitly,” their

reactions often sent the message that she needed to “put time into this.” Unlike Celeste, who experienced the separation between worlds as emotionally painful, Estrella compartmentalized these spaces to remain present. As she explained, “when I’m home, I can just focus on certain things,” while at school she could “put on my school cap.” In this way, Estrella’s nepantlera consciousness helped her navigate academic spaces without surrendering her familial priorities.

In response to growing separation between home and school contexts, Celeste and Estrella described hoping to preserve and stay present within family relationships. They explained how these relationships rooted in familial capital were vital to their educational journeys, even if challenges arose in maintaining them. Elizabeth’s story, in contrast, displays how keeping distance from family could also be necessary. At the beginning of her testimonio, Elizabeth shared about the loss of her mother, one of her biggest supporters who she later realized had protected her from certain gendered expectations. After her mother’s passing, extended family members increasingly expected Elizabeth to return home, care for her father, and eventually start a family of her own. Eventually realizing that these pressures were “not healthy”, Elizabeth decided to create distance even though she felt guilty for this decision.

To make sense of this experience, Elizabeth found support within her lab environment. She explained that her PI openly acknowledged that “there's gonna be times when you choose between family and lab” and emphasized that she would rather “work with you to finish your PhD” than force Elizabeth to abandon it due to lack of support. Elizabeth also expressed feeling empowered by having a PI who

would advocate for her within the department, where Elizabeth felt like a “token Latina” especially as she spoke openly about political and social issues. She shared that because her PI would “back [her] up,” she now walked “with a little more confidence.” Unlike at home, where Elizabeth often felt solely responsible, she drew on her social capital to cultivate relationships in graduate school that allowed responsibility to be shared.

During her *plática* with Estrella, Elizabeth placed herself between the Coatlicue state and the call to action. She shared how she actively struggled to make sense of competing home-school expectations and recognized that “something needs to change.” Different from Celeste and Estrella, Elizabeth stressed feeling caught between conflicting versions of herself that she did not yet know how to “reconcile”. She identified these different versions as “the me I am with my family, and like at home, and the expectations I have there,” which often “clash very much...with [who I am] in academic circles.” Existing between Coatlicue and the call to action reflected how Elizabeth was confronting the loneliness and fragmentation created by these competing worlds and revealed how her *nepantlera* consciousness allowed her to critically question how she wanted to reconstruct these relationships moving forward.

Together, the experiences of Celeste, Estrella, and Elizabeth reveal that the borders between home and academic worlds were not fixed, but messy and constantly negotiated as they moved through *conocimiento*. Demonstrating their everyday acts of resistance, these *nepantleras* actively decided what to carry and what to resist across these spaces. They used their *nepantlera* consciousness to ask themselves what

forms of connection felt sustainable. For Celeste, this meant compartmentalizing parts of herself while still holding connection to family. For Estrella, it involved intentionally creating boundaries that allowed her to access familial support as she developed new connections within her department. For Elizabeth, it meant creating distance from harmful expectations and leaning on new forms of support in her lab. Journeying through *conocimiento* revealed that while separation can be a critical strategy for many *nepantleras* responding to home-school cultural mismatches, their ways of navigating this decision were shaped by their evolving understanding of what changes needed to be made in order to sustain themselves.

Nepantleras Questioning the “Good Latina Daughter” Expectation to Embrace an Authentic Self

As first-generation Latina graduate students, participants described the expectation to be self-sufficient, ambitious, and capable within educational spaces. Yet, the skills they gained in graduate school, such as voicing opinions, setting boundaries, questioning dominant beliefs, and making independent life decisions, often became sources of tension within the home. Participants noted how practicing this independence at home conflicted with being a “good Latina daughter”, particularly around how these *nepantleras* lived their sexuality and gender expression and navigated gender roles. This contradiction created tight spaces as participants navigated the tension between honoring familial relationships and remaining authentic to themselves.

Sol, a second-year graduate student who identifies as queer, felt a strong tension between sustaining family ties, particularly with their father, and refusing to abandon parts of themselves to preserve that relationship. Growing up in a conservative household with a machista [*sexist*] father, Sol explained that challenging his authority was largely unacceptable. Although education was highly valued by both of their parents, that support was conditional and shaped by their father's desire to maintain control over what kinds of knowledge and futures were acceptable for his children. In their testimonio, Sol recalled that their father was adamant that "he didn't want us to become teachers" because teachers often exposed Sol and their siblings to opportunities and guidance outside of his authority. Yet, Sol was drawn to higher education because it became a form of "refuge" from the constraints they experienced at home and offered a sense of freedom and autonomy they longed for. As a reflection of their tight space, Sol recognized that pursuing a life aligned with their own values also meant being perceived as "doing all these things that are wrong" in the eyes of their parents.

These conflicts became more pronounced once Sol came out to their parents. Their queerness challenged the cultural and gendered expectations that shaped what it meant to be a "good Latina daughter" within their household. In their plática, Sol recounted this experience as:

"[A] few years ago I came out to my parents ... and really the way that I did it, and this was kind of very rebellious of me, because I was like, if you don't like this, just tell me so I can never talk to you again [laughs]. Like, it was very cutthroat. Yeah. I was like, look, I'm gonna tell you something. I don't need your approval. I've worked my way up to accepting myself and I actually don't care if you think that this is bad because I don't care.

Although Sol framed their directness as not needing their parents' approval, their reflections also revealed an enduring sense of emotional pain and longing, describing how "internally [laugh] and emotionally, I'm like, I wish you loved me." They described feeling caught in a tight space between preserving their relationship with their parents and refusing to compromise who they are. Coming out ultimately led to a rupture in Sol's relationship with their father. Further in the plática, Sol shared an interaction with their father that occurred after coming out, "I had a partner at the time and he started saying like, really homophobic things to me," which prompted them to step back from the relationship with their father in order to protect themselves emotionally. Although Sol was no longer on speaking terms with their father, they still expressed a desire to repair the relationship, but only by holding the boundary of not compromising who they were. This tension is why Sol places themselves in the "blow up" stage of *conocimiento*. Embracing their *nepantlera* consciousness, and now in a new relationship, Sol made the decision to "call in my father and have like this really uncomfortable conversation" but without compromising their values and identity. While Sol remained hopeful that reconciliation might be possible, they also anticipated that this confrontation could create more permanent distance between Sol and their father. Still, Sol felt more at peace with this decision, knowing they tried to salvage the relationship.

Although Sol's story demonstrates the tensions that emerged through direct confrontation with familial expectations, Frida's experience illustrates how participants also navigated these tight spaces by separating their home and academic

worlds and concealing certain parts of themselves from family. Frida, a third-year graduate student and eldest daughter, described growing up with strong encouragement from her parents to pursue higher education. However, this encouragement was also accompanied by intense pressure to succeed as a reflection of her parents' sacrifices and hard work and be a role model to her younger sister. As the eldest daughter, Frida explained in her testimonio, "My parents are very much like...we came to the U.S. and we worked hard...now you have to put in the work...You owe it to us to succeed and go to college and do all of these great things and blah, blah, blah." Frida described this expectation as causing deep stress and as "kind of traumatic", because since a young age she felt she needed "to prove to my parents, I'm this great daughter" which left little room for mistakes.

Yet, while the pressure to succeed academically was intense, leaving home to pursue a PhD did provide Frida with a sense of independence and freedom. Away from home, Frida was able to explore her sexuality more openly and build a different kind of relationship with her current partner. During her *plática*, Frida reflected on her romantic relationship and shared, "I don't really feel like there are too many expectations... just be a good partner, be respectful... [in the relationship] I feel at peace. I feel like myself. I'm relaxed, I feel loved." For Frida, this relationship offered emotional safety and a sense of authenticity that contrasted sharply with the pressure to be the "good Latina daughter" at home.

Similar to Sol, Frida's queer identity complicated what it meant to fulfill familial expectations surrounding gender and romantic relationships. However, unlike

Sol, who openly confronted these tensions with their parents, Frida navigated them more quietly by withholding parts of herself from her family. This echoes Frida's self-placement in the call stage, wherein she confided feeling stuck and unable to act due to balancing various responsibilities that leave little room for personal challenges. Frida had not shared that she was in a relationship with a woman because her father only accepted heterosexual relationships and her parents were strict about dating. She remarked that "they don't think I've ever had any relationship or have ever kissed anyone... I'm an angel." For Frida, managing the "good Latina daughter" expectation meant compartmentalizing different parts of herself in order to preserve the image her parents held of her while also protecting herself from additional stress and conflict.

Nova's experience further highlights the different ways participants engaged their nepantlera consciousness when confronting notions of what it means to be a "good Latina daughter". Whereas Sol confronted familial expectations directly and Frida navigated them through concealment and compartmentalization, Nova, an eighth-year graduate student, challenged the expectation that preserving family relationships should come at the expense of her emotional well-being. Similar to Sol and Frida, Nova described growing up in a traditional household with a machista father. However, within her family, she was often labeled the "rebellious one" because she openly pushed against traditional values and expectations placed on her. This resistance frequently came with criticism and emotional harm, as Nova recalled being judged and put down for making choices that reflected her own sense of self. For example, in her testimonio, Nova expressed feeling confident and excited about

cutting her hair short. Anticipating her mother's disapproval, Nova asked her not to comment on her hair when they saw each other. However, when Nova arrived home, she recalled, "I walked through the door. My mom was just like, um, ay pelona [*bald woman*]." The comment deeply hurt Nova because it reinforced her mother's disapproval of her appearance and deviation from traditional expectations of femininity. While seemingly small, moments like these accumulated over time and reinforced the message that expressing herself authentically would often be met with criticism instead of acceptance.

These tensions intensified as Nova became more open with her parents about her personal life. Nova described a significant "blow up" that occurred after telling her parents she was living with her then partner. Knowing that her conservative parents disapproved of unmarried women living with men, Nova anticipated a negative response, but not the severity of the reaction she received. After disclosing the relationship, Nova recalled her mother "berating me the whole time I'm going to hell," after which her parents stopped speaking to her for an entire year. Later, when Nova returned home to pick up an item from their home, her mother and brother pressured her to repair the relationship with her father. However, when she attempted to initiate a conversation, her father responded by insulting her and telling her he could never accept her.

For Nova, this moment marked a shift in how she understood the costs of being a "good daughter" and her responsibility within the parent-child relationship. Instead of continuing to prioritize familial approval at the expense of herself, Nova

began redefining what familial responsibility, care, and accountability meant on her own terms. In a plática with Sol, Nova further reflected on why the “good daughter” narrative no longer held power over her:

“it doesn't matter as much to me the role of being a good daughter... their ideal version of being a good daughter is somebody who just kind of does what they want them to... in my perspective, being a good daughter is somebody who is a good person. Somebody who's selfless, but not to their own detriment. Somebody... who's independent and able to take care of themselves and help others to the possibility that they can, to the ability that they can.”

In their plática, both Sol and Nova emphasized the need for reciprocal accountability within parent-child relationships and rejected the expectation that they should continue performing the role of the “good daughter” without this reciprocity.

However, Nova explained how she hoped to become a safe space for her transgender sibling, who had not yet come out to their parents. Nova expressed being willing to openly defy the “good Latina daughter” norm by potentially placing herself in the “blow up” stage again and newly declaring to her parents that she is bisexual. Nova viewed this as a buffer for her sibling against restrictive norms placed on daughters.

These nepantleras are challenging and rewriting the expectations of being a “good Latina daughter.” The emphasis on *being* is significant because, for much of their lives, this expectation shaped their decisions, actions, thoughts, relationships, and even the parts of themselves they felt forced to hide. This assumption never allowed the participants to see themselves as good daughters just by being their authentic self, rather they had to chase a mold that cut out vital parts of themselves. Through the different stages of *conocimiento*, participants began critically evaluating

the costs of being a “good daughter”. While Frida identified with “the call,” as she navigated the emotional labor of compartmentalizing herself to maintain peace across both worlds, Sol and Nova, both in the “blow up” stage, drew on their nepantlera consciousness to directly challenge familial expectations, even at the risk of rupturing relationships.

Though in distinct *conocimiento* stages, each nepantlera’s resistance was anchored in creating openings to live more authentically outside of restrictive gendered norms. In each of their stories, the nepantleras drew from their community cultural wealth, particularly their resistant, navigational, and familial capital, such as the confidence and independence gained in higher education to push back against harmful gendered and sexist expectations. For Sol, resistance meant refusing the expectation that holding onto familial relationships required self-erasure or compliance with heteronormative expectations. For Frida, resistance emerged more quietly through creating space to explore her sexuality, cultivate affirming relationships, and selectively withhold information from family in ways that protected her emotional well-being at least until she finished graduate school. For Nova, resistance involved rejecting the expectation altogether, as it only created emotional harm in her life. Instead, she called for redefining familial care as prioritizing boundaries and reciprocal accountability. These acts reflect how these nepantleras leveraged their community cultural wealth and consciousness to begin redefining what it meant to be daughters on their own terms, creating openings to embrace

identities and ways of being that prioritized their emotional well-being and respected their authentic selves.

Nepantleras Rejecting Hyper-Individualism as a Call for Community Care and Accountability

Nepantleras entered graduate school believing this space would provide the mentorship and sense of community needed to foster their intellectual curiosity. Instead, many encountered departments and advisors that felt emotionally distant and offered little support. Although participants had long relied on their resourcefulness and independence to access educational opportunities as first-generation students, graduate school introduced new hurdles that were difficult to navigate, such as learning to network, publish, apply for fellowships, complete program milestones, and balance familial obligations. Without mentorship or community participants expressed feeling overwhelmed and isolated, which fostered a sense of uncertainty about how to move through their programs.

As the first in their families to attend college, both Tara, a third-year international graduate student, and Mimi, a fifth-year graduate student, described how they became highly independent and resourceful throughout their educational pathways and often relied on their navigational and social capital to succeed in make it through their academic journeys. And yet, their experiences in a PhD program in STEM revealed how their tight spaces were shaped by the combination of hyper-individualistic academic norms, productivity expectations, and limited institutional support. These tight spaces left them to navigate ambiguity and inaccessible systems

alone while also internalizing institutional failures as personal shortcomings. For Tara, this tight space emerged through a departmental culture that expected high productivity from students. This expectation was difficult to meet when, as Tara explained, “sometimes you are not going to have results maybe until your fourth year” due to the tediousness of her research. So, while Tara understood intellectually that “things are going to fail during the first years,” having the heavy expectation to produce results to prove “you are working hard” left her questioning if she belonged in a PhD program when she could not meet expectations to produce results quickly. The lack of emotional support to process this self-doubt further fueled her anxiety about continuing in the program. Similarly, Mimi’s tight space emerged through navigating issues of inaccessibility alone. Despite her advisor knowing about her learning disability, Mimi was still expected to complete her comprehensive exams in an oral format even though “my brain doesn't operate that way,” and after failing, she was left without meaningful guidance on how to move forward. Mimi explained that she initially did not even consider requesting accommodations because she had internalized the expectation that “this is what's gonna happen,” revealing a default response to adapt herself.

In their plática, Tara and Mimi reflected on how a lack of support and community in graduate school was impactful to their *conocimiento* process. Tara explained that her current placement in the “blow up” stage came after realizing the emotional and physical toll graduate school was taking on her wellbeing. Balancing coursework, teaching, research expectations and her home life, “impact[ed] my

health... like a lot,” prompting Tara to take a step back and unpack how she was managing these various expectations and search for ways to “bridge the gaps between those different spaces.” Utilizing her nepantlera consciousness, one way Tara decided to bridge her worlds was through mentorship, which became both a source of connection and a way to challenge the isolating and hyper-individualistic culture she experienced in academia. Through mentoring undergraduate students in her lab and teaching high school students in rural areas in Latin America as part of her PhD’s educational component, Tara created opportunities for community engagement that felt personally and culturally meaningful in her graduate training.

Like Tara, Mimi’s reflections reveal how the pressures and isolation of graduate school led her to assess the ways academia had narrowed her sense of self and belonging. However, whereas Tara’s “blow up” stage centered on recognizing the unsustainable nature of balancing competing academic demands without support, Mimi connected more strongly with the Coyolxauhqui state, describing herself as existing within a period of fragmentation and reconstruction as she approached the end of her PhD program. She describes the tension she is experiencing as:

I feel like I'm having like an identity crisis [laugh] because ... I've been so dedicated... I'm just a grad student [laugh] and I'm just a researcher and this is like my identity and I like, kind of forgot what I am like outside of this, which I've been doing a lot of reflection on ... I'm trying to remember who I was [laugh] before all of this, you know? ... Now I'm feeling like this shift of like ... I'm also like a wife and a friend and like all of these other things. ...I can be all of these things at the same time. I don't have to be like... in this box.

After years of trying to survive in an environment that offered little support and guidance, Mimi explained that she had become so consumed by graduate school that

she was now trying to understand who she was beyond it. Similar to Tara, Mimi described how mentoring emerged as one way she began piecing together a more meaningful and community-oriented sense of self within academia.

Different from Tara and Mimi, Jennifer, a fourth-year graduate student and only mother of the group, more directly challenged the hierarchical relationships that normalized struggling without support and holding up academia over other identities and responsibilities. In her plática, Jennifer reflected on how advisor relationships often mirrored familial dynamics in which authority and care were treated as transactional rather than reciprocal. Comparing advisors to parents who expect obedience because they “fed you,” Jennifer explained that some advisors operate from the assumption that “I brought you into this program, so you gotta deal with me... as is.” As she reflected on these dynamics, Jennifer remarked that within these relationships “there's no reciprocity... no accountability.” When recalling how she balanced family and graduate school expectations, Jennifer explained that “my family's always going to be priority, so it's not a competition of who's gonna win... my family's always gonna win.”

Jennifer connected these realizations to both the shifting realities and Coyolxauhqui stages of *conocimiento*. Instead of viewing these stages as separate or linear, Jennifer described them as intertwined moments of realization and action, explaining that “I have this shift in how I see things... so I'm doing something about it.” For Jennifer, the shifting realities state represented a transformation in how she understood academic power dynamics and mentorship, while the Coyolxauhqui state

reflected the active process of reconstructing and rewriting those expectations through her responses and actions. She explained that these stages felt “embedded” within one another because “when something explodes... you react,” emphasizing that navigating graduate school was possibly “much...messier” than a cyclical progression through *conocimiento*. Rejecting the internalization of unsupported struggle as an individual failing, Jennifer used her *nepantlera* consciousness to question academic norms to reimagine more reciprocal and accountable forms of mentorship and community within academia.

This group’s everyday forms of resistance highlighted an important rupture within their *conocimiento* process. As first-generation Latina students, independence and resilience were necessary for them to access higher education opportunities in the first place. Yet, graduate school revealed the limitations of relying solely on these strengths within academic environments. Being led by their *nepantlera* consciousness, participants practiced everyday forms of resistance by mobilizing social and navigational forms of cultural wealth. They sought out mentorship opportunities, created community-oriented spaces, prioritized relationships beyond academia, and questioned academic norms that normalized isolation and struggle. They challenged the expectation that successful graduate students should confront these spaces alone and instead reimaged forms of support and care grounded in community and accountability.

Nepantleras Redefining Their Worth Outside of Academic Versions of Success

For all nepantleras, placing a strong value on their academic identity was essential in helping them reach graduate school. However, as the previous group of nepantleras testified, being recognized as a legitimate academic often required meeting intense demands and compromising parts of themselves, only to still not be fully accepted or supported within academic spaces. This contradiction positioned nepantleras in a tight space where in trying to meet academia's demands meant potentially harmful consequences to their mental, physical or emotional health. Yet, deviating from these expectations risked forfeiting the success they had worked so hard to attain. Drawing on their nepantlera consciousness, participants responded to these tight spaces by questioning the centrality academia occupied in their lives and whether the versions of success upheld within graduate school aligned with the futures they envisioned for themselves. For many participants, the road to de-centering academia began with a *susto* so significant it shook their core beliefs about hard work, success, and belonging. To chronicle how this progression through *conocimiento* can unfold, I focus on Lupe, Luna, and Miso's stories of redefining their value and worth within academia even at the cost of "traditional" success.

Lupe, a first-year graduate student and eldest daughter, described herself as existing within *el arrebatado* while experiencing her first major *susto* in graduate school. In her testimonio, Lupe explained that she had always believed that putting her head down and working twice as hard as her white peers would be enough to succeed. Yet, by the time she participated in the *pláticas*, this belief had been disrupted after she was unable to secure a lab placement during her first year in her STEM graduate

program. This experience forced Lupe to confront the realization that following the rules, such as having “good grades” and not being a “troublemaker”, was not enough. As Lupe moved through repeated meetings defending why she deserved to pursue a PhD, she began questioning why, out of her entire cohort, the only first-generation Latina had “to keep proving myself [to faculty] ... that I am worthy of their time and I'm worthy of being here.” One white professor, for example, suggested that she transition into a master’s program because it would be “better suited” for her goals. Although Lupe initially responded in shock, telling him, “I didn't know, you're right. That is a good point,” her nepantlera consciousness simultaneously signaled that something about this interaction felt wrong. Revisiting this experience, Lupe described feeling “angry and betrayed” after spending her life trying to “do what is expected... I go above and beyond.”

Luna, a fifth-year graduate student, and Miso, a sixth-year graduate student, provided examples of how nepantleras transformed these sustos, like the one Lupe experienced, into opportunities to reimagine their relationships to academia. In their separate pláticas, both Luna and Miso saw themselves within shifting realities, although Luna described herself as existing between the blow up and shifting realities. Luna entered graduate school believing her campus and department supported radical and progressive ideas and would therefore feel different from other academic institutions she had encountered. She details her realization that these commitments did not reflect the actual workings of her department, particularly in how faculty carried themselves:

I had a lot of faculty that I admired, and I was like, you're just faculty...I always tell students, now, I'm like, don't meet your heroes... this person [seems] so radical and cool and then you meet them and you're like, you're really mean. Like, you're just unkind and you don't practice what you preach...that was like difficult for me.

She explains that “this is an institution at the end of the day” and that even spaces that presented themselves as progressive or radical could still reproduce exclusionary dynamics and hierarchies. Alongside this disillusionment, Luna recalled moments when peers made assumptions about social class and first-generation students without realizing she “was the one person who's first-gen [in the group],” while other experiences more directly targeted her appearance and class background. Growing up as a low-income Latina, Luna explained that her mother always encouraged her to dress professionally because if she “dress[ed] that way...nobody could fuck with me.” Luna intentionally dressed professionally during her first years of graduate school to avoid being singled out as not belonging. Even then, an older white woman who was a graduate student mocked her appearance. These experiences made Luna realize that no matter how meticulously she presented herself, others would still search for ways to position her as an outsider, which contributed to her blow up.

A vital turning point for Luna and her growing nepantlera consciousness was access to therapy, which gave her space to critically interrogate these experiences and develop strategies for discerning when “comments are okay to internalize” and when to simply “say thank you and then I put it in the trash...thank you for your feedback. You're an idiot but thank you.” Engaging her nepantlera consciousness allowed Luna to reinterpret these experiences without centering her worth around the judgments of

others or the expectations of academia. Instead, this shift in perspective helped Luna move into shifting realities, where she came “to terms with just being like, it's just a degree and it's just a place.” Luna began redefining success around her own goals, particularly solidifying her commitment to teaching and supporting marginalized students.

Miso similarly described moving into shifting realities only after she began questioning the expectation that she needed to be exceptional in order to justify her presence within academia. As an undocumented Latina, Miso explained, “I know that I'm not wanted here [in the graduate program],” based on her various challenges in graduate school such as being mistakenly labeled an international student and being excluded from certain fellowships because of her legal status which reinforced the feeling that “the system is set up for me to fail.” Even then, early in Miso’s graduate career she strove to prove her worth by being “perfect” to hopefully not “fall into the stereotypes that [academic systems] placed” onto Latina women and undocumented students. In their plática together, Lupe and Miso both expressed the intense burnout that emerged from “many years of like breakdowns and...tying [our] worth to [our] academic achievements.”

In her testimonio, Miso goes deeper into the physical, mental, and emotional costs of the pressure to prove herself. She details her struggle with severe anxiety, depression, insomnia and panic attacks that disrupted her daily life and sense of stability. Miso eventually sought therapy and medication to ease the physical and mental challenges she experienced. Like Luna, therapy supported Miso’s growing

nepantlera consciousness, by offering space to critically reframe these experiences, including helping her to challenge internalized pressures to be “exceptional” at all times. For example, with new tools and perspectives, Miso began to recognize instances in her life where marginalized students were made to feel that only by being exceptional could they be accepted into academia, whereas white peers could get by being “mediocre” in comparison. Miso’s shifting realities and nepantlera consciousness allowed her to develop a new perspective about who gets to define her worth. Miso began grounding the value of her academic work in its ability to support and create change for Latinx communities rather than in institutional approval. Although their experiences differed, Lupe, Luna, and Miso each encountered moments that led them to question why they continually needed to prove their worth within academic spaces. Their stories illustrate how epistemological racism (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002) can shape graduate school experiences by positioning some students' competence and belonging as perpetually in need of validation. Rather than accepting these messages as truth, however, participants began redefining success and worth on their own terms. By grounding their futures in commitments to their communities, well-being, and the impact of their work, they drew on their aspirational capital to resist dominant academic definitions of success.

Through various sustos, the nepantlera consciousness of these women deepened as they began critically questioning dominant academic beliefs that normalized the discrimination and stereotypes they faced. For Lupe, who was only beginning her first year in graduate school, her susto disrupted long-held beliefs that

hard work alone would protect her within academia, leaving her still actively grappling with the painful awareness that institutional belonging was not equally extended to everyone. In contrast, Luna and Miso's placements within the blow up and shifting realities reflected the hindsight that came from spending several years confronting these tensions within graduate school. Through therapy, both women began loosening academia's hold over their self-worth and redefining success and value on their own terms.

General Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how first-generation Latina graduate students experienced and responded to contradictory messages, expectations, and tensions across their home and academic worlds through a *conocimiento* framework. By drawing on *testimonios* and *pláticas*, this study explored how participants made meaning of these tensions and how their developing *nepantlera* consciousness informed their responses. Every *nepantlera* encountered tight spaces across these worlds, shaped by cultural and gendered expectations embedded in systems of oppression that constrained participants from living authentically (Valle & Covarrubias, 2024b). Similar to the doctoral students in Ramos and Torres-Fernández's (2020) study, participants described experiencing emotional, physical, mental, and psychological discomfort as they navigated competing expectations about who they should be and what they should value. However, the findings demonstrate that these tensions were not experienced or navigated uniformly. Rather, participants'

responses were shaped by their *conocimiento* journeys, their unique positionalities, and the support available to them.

Building on prior work aligned with Borderlands theory (Anzaldúa, 1987, 2002) my research demonstrates how experiences of discomfort became opportunities for reflection and resistance. Through a *conocimiento* lens, these moments of discomfort can be understood as *sustos* that unsettled participants' existing understandings of themselves and of their relationships to others. These *sustos* ushered them into *nepantla*. Yet, instead of being stuck within these contradictions, participants engaged their *nepantlera* consciousness to critically reflect about the sources of their discomfort and the dominant beliefs shaping their experiences, often resulting in blow ups. In doing so, they began to make meaning of their tensions and imagine alternative ways of being in relation with themselves and with others. Through acts of everyday resistance, participants attempted to enact these alternatives, often drawing from their cultural wealth, within their academic and home worlds.

Importantly, this study highlights that engaging one's *nepantlera* consciousness does not lead to a single, fixed resistance response. As individuals move through *conocimiento*, they develop the ability to critically examine contradictions and respond to them based on their social location within the tight space and their needs. In this way, *conocimiento* was not simply a pathway to resistance but a means of discerning what resistance needed to look like within a particular tight space. Taken together, these findings add to existing resistance

literature by demonstrating that nepantlera consciousness does not produce a singular resistant response. Instead, it equips individuals with the capacity to discern and enact forms of resistance that are responsive to their changing circumstances.

Across their *conocimiento* journeys, the nepantleras strove to find ways of existing within their home and academic worlds without compromising critical parts of themselves. Rather than accepting the fragmentation demanded by competing expectations, they drew on their nepantlera consciousness to enact forms of resistance that allowed them to remain whole while navigating contradiction. For some participants, remaining whole required renegotiating family relationships and questioning expectations that demanded self-erasure. For others, it involved rejecting academic norms rooted in hyper-individualism and redefining success, care, and belonging on their own terms. Although the strategies differed, each represented an effort to resist pressures that fragmented participants across their academic and home worlds and to create space for more integrated ways of being.

How the nepantleras approached and carried out resistance not only demonstrated how first-generation Latina graduate students responded to tight spaces but also provided insight into how *conocimiento* operated as a dynamic process through which they interpreted and navigated contradiction. Together, these findings offer at least two theoretical contributions to research. First, this study extends Heredia's (2011) application of *conocimiento* with Latina graduate students by showing how first-generation Latina graduate students moved across, revisited, and occupied multiple stages of *conocimiento* as they confronted tensions in both their

academic and home worlds. While Heredia's personal essay documents how *sustos*, *nepantla*, and shifting realities shaped her graduate school experience, the current findings show how these processes unfolded across multiple participants facing contradictions related to family, support, success, community, identity, and self-worth. Importantly, participants' experiences suggest that *conocimiento* is not a linear process, nor do individuals move through its stages in the same way. Participants described entering and revisiting stages of *conocimiento* as new tensions emerged across their worlds. They also described existing between and across stages as they reflected holistically on the various tensions they confronted. As such, attending to participants' movement across stages of *conocimiento* helps explain how first-generation Latina graduate students made sense of contradiction and, in turn, discerned how to respond to tight spaces over time.

Second, Borderlands Theory has been used to understand how marginalized individuals navigate contradiction, fragmentation, and identity negotiation (Anzaldúa, 1987, 2002). Valle and Covarrubias (2024b) utilized Borderlands to document the tight spaces and everyday resistance of undergraduate participants as they navigate cultural mismatches stemming from dominant narratives across home and school contexts. Relatively little work has applied a borderlands framework, and even less so a *conocimiento* lens, to explore the experiences of first-generation Latina graduate students (Burciaga, 2007; Heredia, 2011). Research on graduate student experiences tends to focus on belonging, persistence, and professional socialization (Liu et al., 2022; Rizzolo et al., 2016; Tompkins et al., 2016). A *conocimiento* lens affords the

opportunity to understand nepantleras' sense-making of what it means to belong and persist, as they encounter and process various identity related tension, try to make sense of who they were becoming, and manage competing expectations. Borderlands theory positions contradiction as a central feature of identity development rather than a problem to be resolved. Through concepts such as nepantla, conocimiento, and nepantlera consciousness, belonging and persistence are understood not only as educational outcomes but as processes intertwined with how first-generation Latina graduate students navigate contradiction and identity development.

Implications for Institutional Practice

Graduate programs have an important role to play in reducing the tight spaces first-generation Latina graduate students navigate. Rather than treating these tensions as individual challenges students must overcome on their own, institutions can create structures that acknowledge the relational, cultural, and emotional dimensions of graduate student success.

Participants repeatedly described navigating graduate school with limited emotional, academic, and institutional support. Although many developed strong communities of care by leveraging their cultural wealth through mentoring and informal networks, these supports were often created by students solely rather than intentionally fostered by graduate programs. Departments should invest in mentoring structures, peer-support networks, and opportunities for meaningful community-building that recognize emotional support as equally important to technical and professional training. One example may include creating spaces where graduate

students can partake in collective reflection about the challenges they encounter and share strategies for navigating them while building supportive relationships with peers. Creating these structures may be especially important for first-generation graduate students who are often learning to navigate hidden expectations and institutional norms without the benefit of familial experience in higher education (Gutierrez et al., 2022).

Across participants' experiences, assumptions that successful graduate students should navigate challenges independently were repeatedly challenged. While participants demonstrated tremendous resilience and self-sufficiency in reaching graduate school, they questioned expectations that students should continue to struggle alone once enrolled. Graduate programs can respond to these concerns by reexamining norms that reward independence while overlooking opportunities for mentorship and community care. To support first-generation Latina graduate students, institutions must foster a culture where support-seeking is normalized and where student well-being is viewed as a collective responsibility rather than an individual burden. For example, departments could implement structured mentoring plans that clearly communicate advisor responsibilities and create regular opportunities for students to discuss both their academic progress and overall well-being. Participants' experiences suggest that challenges often became more difficult to navigate when they were unsure where to seek support. Departments could also provide multiple opportunities for mentorship beyond a student's primary advisor, allowing students to

build relationships with faculty, staff, and peers who can offer different forms of guidance and support.

Finally, the results suggest that narrow definitions of success centered on productivity and achievement fail to capture how first-generation Latina graduate students understand and conceptualize success. Through *conocimiento*, many came to value well-being, community engagement, mentorship, and personal growth alongside certain traditional academic markers of success. Graduate programs can support these broader understandings by recognizing and rewarding the often-invisible emotional labor students perform, including mentoring, advocacy, community engagement, and care work. It is also vital to recognize and legitimize the cultural strengths students leverage towards graduate success. In recognizing these strengths, institutions validate a more culturally-sustaining understanding of success that expands traditional institutional definitions and creates greater room for students to pursue academic goals without feeling compelled to sacrifice other important aspects of their lives and identities.

Recommendations for Future Directions

As the first study to apply both *conocimiento* and tight space frameworks to an empirical examination of first-generation Latina graduate student experiences, I gained important insights into the identity development and meaning making of *nepantleras* which led me to new directions for future research. The *nepantleras* consistently described movement through *conocimiento* as occurring not only through internal reflection but also through relationships with mentors, peers, family

members, community members, and therapists that fostered critical reflection, validated their lived experiences, and supported new ways of understanding themselves. Together, these findings suggest that while Anzaldúa (1987, 2002) conceptualizes *conocimiento* as a process of deep internal reflection and transformation, movement through its stages is necessarily tied to relational supports. In previous research, Morales (2017) explored the role of relational support through counterspaces designed for Black and Brown youth and found these spaces created opportunities to collectively engage contradictions and reconstruct dominant narratives that validated participants identities and experiences. Her findings provide key empirical support for conceptualizing *conocimiento* as both an individual and relational process. Building on these findings, future research should examine how different relational contexts, such as mentoring relationships, family networks, institutional and informal counterspaces, and therapeutic spaces interact to form an ecosystem of support for the *conocimiento* process. Specifically, researchers can examine the dynamic systems of support through which first-generation Latina graduate students draw from to face contradiction, utilize different forms of community cultural wealth, and continuously develop their *nepantlera* consciousness. Longitudinal qualitative research that follows students across graduate school could examine how these relationships become more or less central across the stages of *conocimiento*.

Just as lived experiences and disciplinary contexts can shape the *conocimiento* process, so too do the broader institutional environments in which first-generation

Latina graduate students learn and develop. I studied the experiences of first-generation Latina graduate students within a single R1 institution that is dually designated as an HSI and AANAPISI. Although I did not directly examine the role of institutional context, participants frequently described the importance of community, mentorship, and other sources of support that helped them navigate contradiction and resist fragmentation, suggesting that the institutional environment may have shaped their experiences in meaningful ways. Still, I did not specifically ask participants how attending a dual-designated minority-serving R1 institution influenced their experiences of tight spaces, *conocimiento*, or resistance. Future research should directly examine how institutional structures (e.g., resources, values, and policies), access to diverse mentoring and peer networks (e.g., interdisciplinary communities, graduate student affinity groups, and mentorship from university staff), and participation in culturally affirming communities (e.g., writing groups, opportunities to mentor younger students, and *pláticas*) shape first-generation Latina graduate students' movement through *conocimiento* and the development of *nepantlera* consciousness. Such work could advance our understanding of how institutional contexts not only influence the tensions students encounter but also the relational conditions and cultural resources that support their ability to make meaning of those tensions. At the same time, understanding how institutional contexts shape *conocimiento* also requires examining how students with different social identities and lived experiences navigate those environments. Future work is needed which examines how *conocimiento* unfolds across diverse group positionalities and

institutional contexts to better understand both the shared and unique pathways through which marginalized students make meaning of contradiction and develop a nepantlera consciousness.

Extending this work to other group positionalities speaks to a core component of Anzaldúa's (1987, 2002) work is the importance of building bridges across difference to foster solidarity and collective action. As such, it is imperative to understand how *conocimiento* is fostered among other groups that also experience fragmentation between their identities and the social worlds they navigate. While this study focused on first-generation Latina graduate students, many marginalized groups encounter contradictions between cultural values, institutional expectations, and evolving understandings of self. Future research could examine the experiences of graduate students from diverse racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, Latino men may have their own gendered tight spaces. They may experience contradictions related to financial provision, masculinity, emotional expression, or expectations to support family members (Figueroa et al., 2023). Examining these experiences through *conocimiento* could provide insight into both the shared and distinct ways Latinx graduate students navigate contradiction and resistance.

Such work would not only expand our understanding of *conocimiento* as a framework for navigating fragmentation but also highlight opportunities for coalition-building across groups experiencing different forms of marginalization (Anzaldúa 1987, 2002). By examining both the commonalities and differences in how

individuals make meaning of contradiction, future research can help identify pathways toward the solidarities and collective forms of resistance that Anzaldúa envisioned. In this way, researchers can move beyond understanding *conocimiento* as an individual journey and further explore its potential as a framework for fostering connection and social transformation across communities.

Conclusion

All *nepantleras*—Celeste, Estrella, Elizabeth, Sol, Frida, Nova, Tara, Mimi, Jennifer, Lupe, Luna, and Miso—experienced shared and unique tensions in the tight spaces across their home and academic worlds. Each confronted these tensions, leaning on their *nepantlera* consciousness to actively reimagine what their relationships to these spaces, and more importantly the people within them, could be. While participants often centered their love for family and the work they do, they fiercely protected their emerging identities and the needs and values they were developing, refusing to fragment themselves further to appease others' expectations. Through these acts of resistance, they laid bridges toward more integrated ways of being that honored both where they came from and who they were becoming, demonstrating that *conocimiento* is not simply a process of surviving contradiction, but of creating possibilities for wholeness in spaces that often demand fragmentation.

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Appendix A

Testimonio Protocol

Thanks for participating in this interview with me. I want to ask you about your experiences in graduate school at UCSC. My goal is to understand what your experiences have been like navigating various roles in your life as a graduate student, the highlights and challenges and how you make sense of your identity as a first-generation Latina woman in grad school.

This interview will be audio recorded. What you say will be kept strictly confidential. After the interview, I will transcribe the audio-recording and identify you with a made-up name. For this interview, **your name will not be identified outside of the research team**. In Winter and Spring quarters, I will host two plática focus groups, where I will invite you along with other interested interviewees to discuss more on these topics and interpretations of data. At this time, others in the group will know that you participated in the study. I will ask that everyone respect that all information be kept between the group.

Today's interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes, depending on how much you have to share. Please feel free to refrain from any questions you are not comfortable answering. I am going to check the recorder every now and then to make sure it is recording and will check the time to be sure we don't keep you past a certain time.

What pseudonym (a name different from your own) would you like to use to be identified as in the transcripts? Would you like me to use that name during the interview?

Before we begin, do you have any questions? *[Pause]*

Ok, I will start the recorder now. *[Start recording]*

Rapport Building

To start, I would like to ask you a little bit about your background and academic journey.

- Can you tell me a little about your family background and how you grew up?
 - *Follow-up:* Would you say your family was religious or spiritual in any way?
- Can you tell me about your academic journey and what led you to pursue a PhD?
 - Why did you choose UCSC?

- *Follow-up:* How did your family respond to you choosing UCSC?
- ***Identity Questions***
- In what ways have the identities of being a first-gen and Latina shaped your graduate school experience, if at all?
 - *Follow-up:* Are there other identities that feel important to your grad experience?

Navigating Expectations and Messages

At school

- How was your transition experience into grad school?
- Did anything surprise you about departmental or academic culture?
 - *Follow up:* Were there certain expectations of you to present yourself in a particular way or act a certain way?
 - *Follow-up:* Where do you think these expectations come from and why?
- In what ways does this culture and these expectations clash or align with your own values and needs as a graduate student?
- In what ways has this experience taken a toll on you physically or mentally, if at all?

At home

- Now let's shift to the home space. Home can mean various things to people, it can be the household or community where you grew up, it can include your life currently with a partner or loved ones, or something else. So for you, when you think of your home space, what comes up for you?
- How has your relationship to people at home changed since starting grad school, if at all?
 - *Follow-up:* Have the roles previously taken on at home changed at all? For example, responsibilities?
 - *Follow-up:* **How do you feel about these changes?**
- Are there expectations outside of grad school that people at home want you to meet?
 - *Follow-up:* Why do you think they have these expectations of you?
- In what ways do these expectations or expected responsibilities impact your ability to show up authentically in this space?
- Have these expectations gotten easier to navigate? If so, why do you think so? And if not, why not?

Both

- What has been your experience with navigating between your home and academic life (including various expectations, tensions, or commonalities) since starting your graduate program?
- Can you think of a **specific example** of when these two parts of your life clashed? Maybe one of the harder times you experienced navigating both spaces.
 - *Follow-up:* What did this tension feel like in your mind, body or even spirit?
 - ***Follow-up: How did you respond to this tension?***
- How have you been able to push back on any competing or demanding expectations across your academic and home lives, if at all? (Kat: pulled in other directions)
- What grounds you or feeds your soul or spirit when faced with these tensions?
 - *Follow-up:* We talked about spirituality in the beginning but has that term changed for you now as a grad student?

Bridging Worlds/Identities

- When you think about your academic and home lives and selves, how would you best characterize how they intersect or not? For example, do you keep them separate, do you try to bridge them, or perhaps both, or perhaps something else altogether?
 - **For those who say Separate:**
 - What does separating your academic and home lives and selves mean to you? What does that look like for you?
 - Can you offer a specific example?
 - Why is it important to you to keep these parts separate?
 - Have you seen this modeled by anyone else?
 - What are some of the **challenges** in separating these parts?
 - What resources or communities do you lean on to navigate these challenges?
 - What role, if any at all, does **spirituality** play for you in keeping these parts separate?
 - **For those who say Bridging:**
 - What does bridging or merging your academic and home lives and selves mean to you? What does that look like for you?
 - Can you offer a specific example?
 - Why is it important to you to bridge these parts?
 - Have you seen this modeled by anyone else?

- What resources, skills, knowledge, or communities do you lean on to bridge?
- What are some of the **challenges** in bridging these parts?
- What resources do you lean on to navigate these challenges?
 - What role, if any at all, does **spirituality** play for you in your bridging?
- **For those who say Both:**
 - What does it mean that you both separate and bridge your academic and home lives and selves? What does that look like for you?
 - Can you offer an example of both.
 - Why is it important to you to shift between these two?
 - Have you seen this modeled by anyone else?
 - What resources, skills, knowledge or communities do you lean on to shift between these two?
 - What are some challenges in shifting between these?
 - What role, if any at all, does **spirituality** play for you in shifting between these realities?
- **For those who say something else altogether:**
 - What does that look like in your life?
 - Can you offer a specific example?
 - Why is this important to you?
 - Have you seen this modeled by anyone else?
 - What are the challenges, if any, that you have experienced and how do you navigate these challenges
- Does one space feel harder to show up authentically, either at home or school? What would it take for you to feel freer to be a more authentic version of yourself in that space?
- What drew you to participate in this study?

Final Questions

- Is there anything I didn't ask you that feels important to bring up or clarify?
- Based on today's conversation, is there a topic you would like us to discuss as part of the plática in winter quarter?

Appendix B

Plática Protocols

Group 1: Unwritten standards, making space for yourself in the midst of heavy expectations

Opening Question & Activity (30 minutes)

Hi everyone, I want to first open up the space and ask that we all introduce ourselves:

- What is your name, pronouns, department, and year in the program?

Part 1: When speaking to you all in fall, one thing that stood out to me is how we all navigate various social spaces and expectations as first-generation Latina graduate students. As an opening activity, I want to invite you all to reflect on *what* these social spaces are and what expectations you navigate in them and any tensions or conflicts between these spaces.

For example, do these spaces bring up different feelings for you, does one space require something from you that others don't and does that create a clash? Feel free to draw a picture, make a table, create a list, or use any means that feels good for you to get down your thoughts.

Let's take about five minutes to do this and come back together to share what we came up with.

- What tensions or differences, if any, did you notice between the spaces you reflected on?
- How do you navigate or approach these tensions or differences? For example, what resources, strategies, assets, or knowledge do you rely on?

Part 2: Gloria Anzaldua's theory of *conocimiento* talks about how we make sense of contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes between the different social worlds we navigate. She stresses that these contradictions and tensions can be painful and difficult moments to experience. But she also says that this difficulty can lead to "aha" moments where we learn to relate to these social worlds and expectations in new ways that don't further fragment us or make us feel torn apart.

There are seven stages in total: El Arrebato, Nepantla, The Coatlicue state, The call, Putting Coyolxauhqui together, The blow up, and Shifting realities. **I also created a handout with descriptions of each state, let's go through them together.**

Take a minute and reflect on the activity you just did and also your general experiences thus far as a first-generation Latina graduate student. Now, circle the stage that you feel best captures where you are now in your life.

- Can you share why you circled that stage? What in particular resonated with you?
- Can you describe a bit of what your psychological, emotional, and/or spiritual experience is of being in the stage you selected?

RQ: 1: Common Tensions

In your testimonios, I noticed some tension around unwritten standards and expectations for what it means to be successful in graduate school as Women of Color. I would like to revisit what these unwritten standards and expectations are for you:

1. What are the standards for excelling in graduate school? And where do these standards come from?
 - . In what ways, if at all, do expectations from family intersect with these standards for excellence? For example, do they align with these same standards, conflict with them, or something else?
2. How much would you say the pressure to meet these standards influences you, your decisions, and your life?
 - . *For example:* How does it influence your personal relationships back home, if at all?
 - What would happen if you didn't meet these standards?

RQ: 2 & 3: Responding to Tight Spaces & Moving Towards a Less Fragmented Self

1. How do you respond to these pressures?

Institutional Support and Future Outlook

2. If these expectations were gone, what could it make room for in your life?
3. Are there any forms of support or changes that need to happen at the institutional level to alleviate these tensions? If so, what would that look like

Final Questions

Are there any final thoughts or questions we would like to ask the group that feels important for the conversation?

Final send off, one thing I hoped this space could bring is a sense of solidarity and community as first-gen Latina graduate students trying to survive academia. Many of you mentioned how isolating and difficult this process can be and the toll it can take on your mind, body and spirit. One important goal out of this whole process is to highlight that we are not alone but share a common, though nuanced, experience. And in documenting this experience, we provide tangible and recommendations to the university about what it means to support us as graduate students.

Group 2: Good daughters, bad scholars, can't I be good at both? Trying to find themselves in the midst of gendered narratives

Opening Question & Activity (30 minutes)

Hi everyone, I want to first open up the space and ask that we all introduce ourselves:

- What is your name, pronouns, department, and year in the program?

Part 1: When speaking to you all in fall, one thing that stood out to me is how we all navigate various social spaces and expectations as first-generation Latina graduate students. As an opening activity, I want to invite you all to reflect on *what* these social spaces are and what expectations you navigate in them and any tensions or conflicts between these spaces.

For example, do these spaces bring up different feelings for you, does one space require something from you that others don't and does that create a clash? Feel free to draw a picture, make a table, create a list, or use any means that feels good for you to get down your thoughts.

Let's take about five minutes to do this and come back together to share what we came up with.

- What tensions or differences, if any, did you notice between the spaces you reflected on?
- How do you navigate or approach these tensions or differences? For example, what resources, strategies, assets, or knowledge do you rely on?

Part 2: Gloria Anzaldua's theory of *conocimiento* talks about how we make sense of contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes between the different social worlds we navigate. She stresses that these contradictions and tensions can be painful and difficult moments to experience. But she also says that this difficulty can lead to

“aha” moments where we learn to relate to these social worlds and expectations in new ways that don't further fragment us or make us feel torn apart.

There are seven stages in total: El Arrebato, Nepantla, The Coatlicue state, The call, Putting Coyolxauhqui together, The blow up, and Shifting realities. **I also created a handout with descriptions of each state, let's go through them together.**

Take a minute and reflect on the activity you just did and also your general experiences thus far as a first-generation Latina graduate student. Now, circle the stage that you feel best captures where you are now in your life.

- Can you share why you circled that stage? What in particular resonated with you?
- Can you describe a bit of what your psychological, emotional, and/or spiritual experience is of being in the stage you selected?

RQ: 1: Common Tensions

In your testimonios, I noticed some tension around gender-based expectations both at home and at school. I would like to revisit what some of these expectations are for you:

1. What does being a “good” Latina daughter mean to you?
 - a. Where do expectations for being a “good” Latina daughter come from?
2. How do these expectations impact your relationship with family members at home?
3. How have any expectations about being a woman or being perceived as a woman impacted you in graduate school, if at all?
 - a. Where do these expectations come from?
4. **RQ: 2 & 3: Responding to Tight Spaces & Moving Towards a Less Fragmented Self**
5. In what ways, if at all, do you make space for how you want to approach life and your own expectations for yourself?
 - a. Is this important for you?
 - b. If so, what do you make space for? And what challenges do you navigate in trying to set your own expectations?
 - c. If not, why might it not be a priority for you right now?
6. **Institutional Support and Future Outlook**
7. If these gender-based expectations were gone, both at home and at school, what could it make room for in your life?

8. Are there any forms of support or changes that need to happen at the institutional level to alleviate the tension you experience in balancing gendered expectations with your own wants and needs? If so, what would that look like?

Final Questions

Are there any final thoughts or questions we would like to ask the group that feels important for the conversation?

Final send off, one thing I hoped this space could bring is a sense of solidarity and community as first-gen Latina graduate students trying to survive academia. Many of you mentioned how isolating and difficult this process can be and the toll it can take on your mind, body and spirit. One important goal out of this whole process is to highlight that we are not alone but share a common, though nuanced, experience. And in documenting this experience, we provide tangible and recommendations to the university about what it means to support us as graduate students.

Group 3: Support not found: Trying to survive grad school without resources or emotional support

Opening Question & Activity (30 minutes)

Hi everyone, I want to first open up the space and ask that we all introduce ourselves:

- What is your name, pronouns, department, and year in the program?

Part 1: When speaking to you all in fall, one thing that stood out to me is how we all navigate various social spaces and expectations as first-generation Latina graduate students. As an opening activity, I want to invite you all to reflect on ***what*** these social spaces are and what expectations you navigate in them and any tensions or conflicts between these spaces.

For example, do these spaces bring up different feelings for you, does one space require something from you that others don't and does that create a clash? Feel free to draw a picture, make a table, create a list, or use any means that feels good for you to get down your thoughts.

Let's take about five minutes to do this and come back together to share what we came up with.

- What tensions or differences, if any, did you notice between the spaces you reflected on?
- How do you navigate or approach these tensions or differences? For example, what resources, strategies, assets, or knowledge do you rely on?

Part 2: Gloria Anzaldua's theory of *conocimiento* talks about how we make sense of contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes between the different social worlds we navigate. She stresses that these contradictions and tensions can be painful and difficult moments to experience. But she also says that this difficulty can lead to "aha" moments where we learn to relate to these social worlds and expectations in new ways that don't further fragment us or make us feel torn apart.

There are seven stages in total: El Arrebato, Nephantla, The Coatlicue state, The call, Putting Coyolxauhqui together, The blow up, and Shifting realities. **I also created a handout with descriptions of each state, let's go through them together.**

Take a minute and reflect on the activity you just did and also your general experiences thus far as a first-generation Latina graduate student. Now, circle the stage that you feel best captures where you are now in your life.

- Can you share why you circled that stage? What in particular resonated with you?
- Can you describe a bit of what your psychological, emotional, and/or spiritual experience is of being in the stage you selected?

RQ: 1: Common Tensions.

1. In your testimonios, I noticed some tension around the lack of sufficient and robust support at UCSC or for some among family:
2. Does this accurately reflect your experience, why or why not?
3. How does this impact your experience in graduate school and at home?

RQ: 2 & 3: Responding to Tight Spaces & Moving Towards a Less Fragmented Self

4. What other sources of support or strategies do you rely on to navigate challenges that arise?
5. What feels meaningful about these support systems or strategies?

Institutional Support and Future Outlook

6. How does your current level of support influence your decision to stay in academia, if at all?
7. How does it influence how you connect with family?
 - a. How do you see these relationships changing, if at all, in the future?
8. Are there any forms of support or changes that need to happen at the institutional level to alleviate tensions related to lack of support? If so, what would that look like?

Final Questions

Are there any final thoughts or questions we would like to ask the group that feels important for the conversation?

Final send off, one thing I hoped this space could bring is a sense of solidarity and community as first-gen Latina graduate students trying to survive academia. Many of you mentioned how isolating and difficult this process can be and the toll it can take on your mind, body and spirit. One important goal out of this whole process is to highlight that we are not alone but share a common, though nuanced, experience. And in documenting this experience, we provide tangible and recommendations to the university about what it means to support us as graduate students.

Appendix C

Conocimiento Handout

