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**Title**

Counterstory of an Undergraduate Latina Single Mother at a Research University

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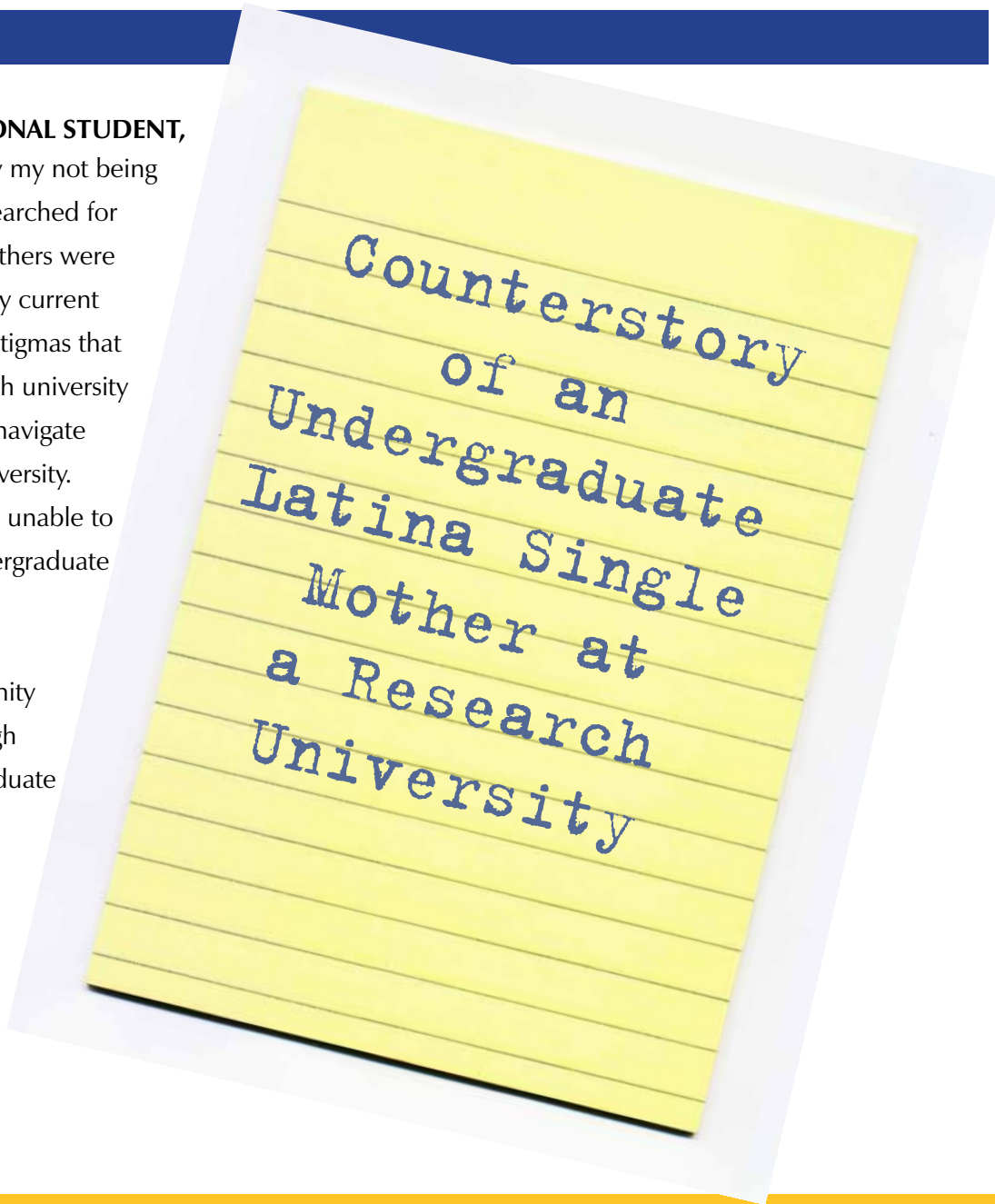
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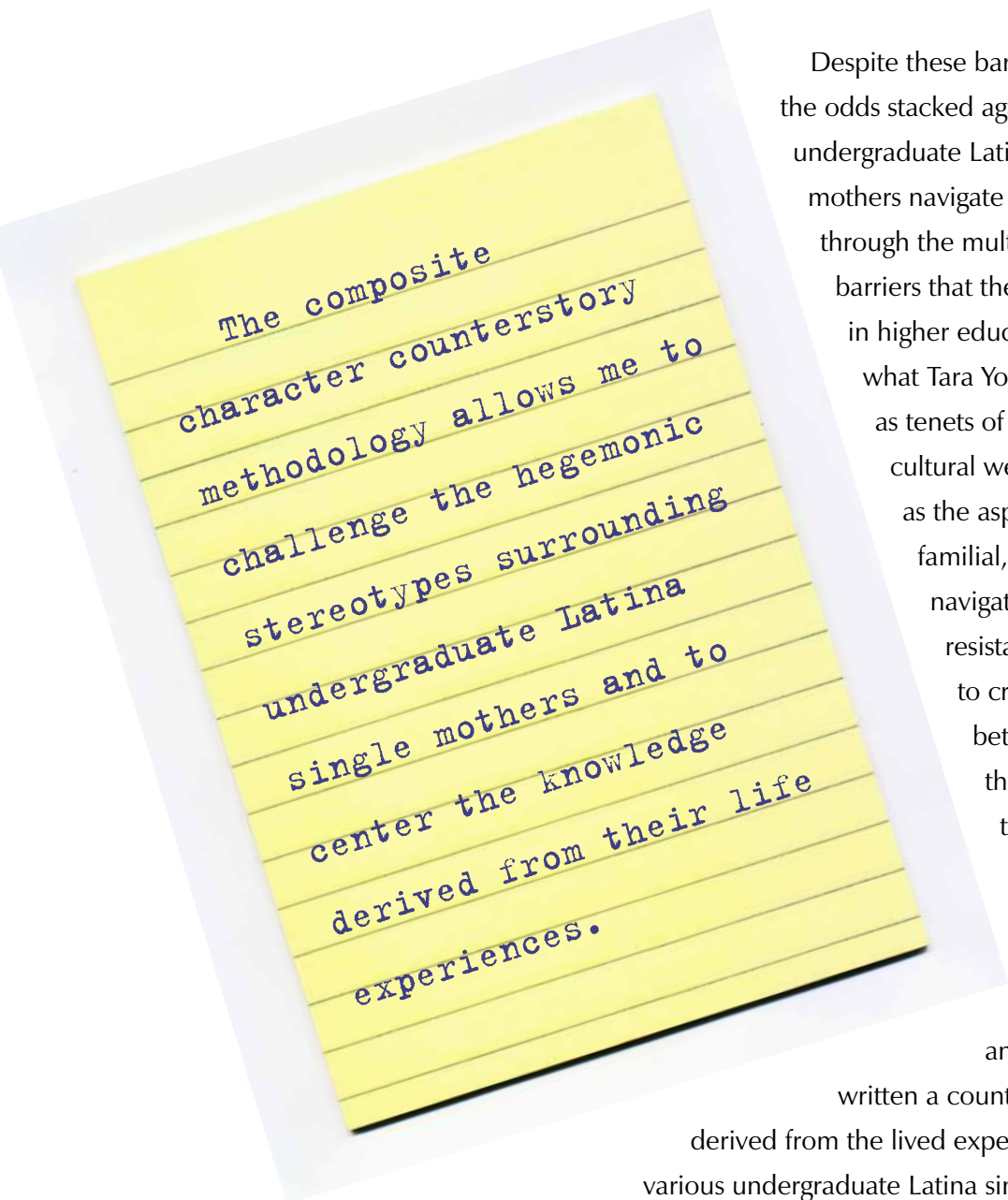
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**U**PON MY ARRIVAL AT UCLA AS A NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT, I experienced transfer shock that was aggravated by my not being able to find a community of parenting students. I searched for literature that discussed how other undergraduate single mothers were able to navigate the academy but found none. This led to my current research project. My research looks at the obstacles and/or stigmas that undergraduate Latina single mothers experience at a research university and the navigational strategies that they employ in order to navigate their way through the educational pipeline at a research university.

After an extensive review of the literature in which I was unable to find works that spoke specifically to the experiences of undergraduate Latina single mothers, I decided to expand my research into ethnography by gathering women's *testimonios* (experiential knowledge) in conjunction with critical race theory, community cultural wealth theory, and Chicana Feminist theory. Although barriers exist for all undergraduate single mothers, undergraduate Latina single mothers' experiences with an "antagonistic institutional climate stemming from negative policies and attitudes towards single mothers and being stigmatized by classmates, professors, and administrators," (Duquaine-Watson, 2007) are compounded by cultural and genetic determinist models that influence institutions of higher education to have lower academic expectations of Latina/o students.



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Despite these barriers and the odds stacked against them, undergraduate Latina single mothers navigate and push through the multitude of barriers that they encounter in higher education using what Tara Yosso describes as tenets of community cultural wealth such as the aspirational, familial, social, navigational, and resistance capital to create a better life for themselves and their children. I have created a composite character and have written a counterstory derived from the lived experiences of various undergraduate Latina single mothers at UCLA. The research and theories of

Dolores Delgado-Bernal, Emma Pérez, Lindsay Pérez Huber, Octavio Villalpando, Daniel Solórzano, and Tara Yosso have all informed my methodology. The composite character counterstory methodology allows me to challenge the hegemonic stereotypes surrounding undergraduate Latina single mothers and to center the knowledge derived from their life experiences. The composite character's name is Juana Soto, and she is a 31-year-old undergraduate Latina single mother at University of the West in California. She lives in university family housing with her two daughters, 7-year-old Esperanza and 4-year-old Gloria.

Recently Juana's political science teacher required her students to attend a lecture on campus. A five-page response paper about the lecture would be worth 10 percent of their class grade, making attendance at the lecture mandatory. The challenge for Juana was that the lecture was at 6 pm. This meant that she had to skip her afternoon political science class so that she would have enough time to take the bus back home, get her car, pick up her daughters from childcare, drive them out to her mother's home in Koreatown, and drive

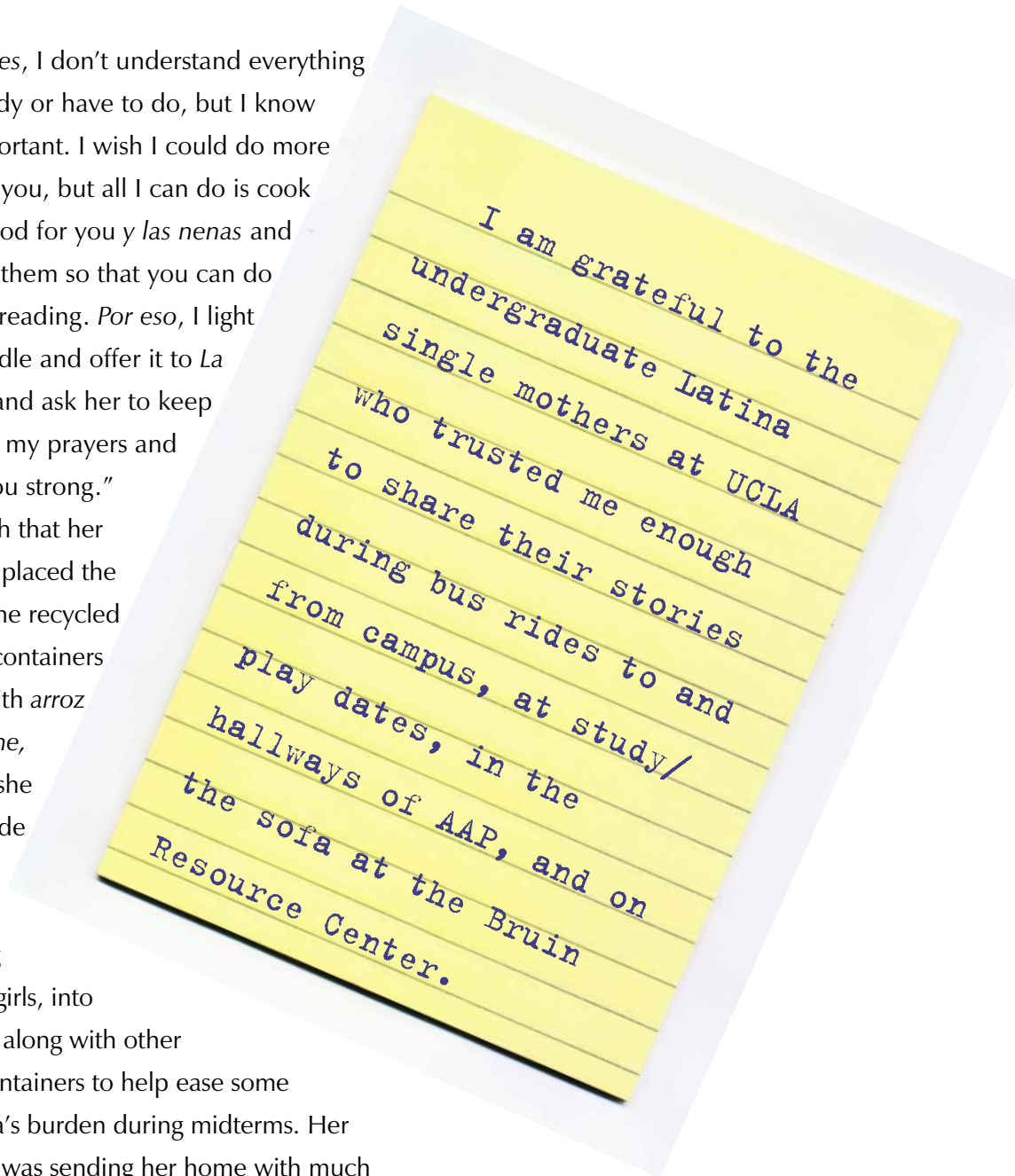
back to campus in order to attend the lecture. The lecture was over shortly after 8 pm, when she then had to drive back downtown to pick up her girls. As she drove back to her mother's home, Juana counted her blessings that not only had she been able to find childcare so that she didn't have to miss the lecture but more importantly that her girls were in a safe space. This allowed her to focus on the lecturer and take notes.

When she arrived at her mother's apartment to pick-up the girls, they were asleep on the sofa. Her mother was in the kitchen packing up containers of food for Juana to take home with her. As Juana walked past her mother's bedroom toward the kitchen she noticed a flickering light dancing against the bedroom door. Her mother had lit a small white votive candle and placed it next to a small brown clay statue of the Virgin de Guadalupe that sat on the dresser in the corner of the bedroom surrounded by family photos.

When she asked her mother why she had lit the candle her mother responded, "*Mija*, I see how hard you work and struggle so that you can give your babies a better life. Every night I pray and I ask *La Virgencita* to help

you. *Pues*, I don't understand everything you study or have to do, but I know it's important. I wish I could do more to help you, but all I can do is cook extra food for you y *las nenas* and babysit them so that you can do all that reading. *Por eso*, I light the candle and offer it to *La Virgen* and ask her to keep hearing my prayers and keep you strong."

With that her mother placed the last of the recycled yogurt containers filled with *arroz con leche*, which she had made earlier that evening for the girls, into the bag along with other food containers to help ease some of Juana's burden during midterms. Her mother was sending her home with much



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more than food; she was also sending her home with what Yosso and Pérez Huber refer to as community cultural wealth.

During her drive home back to university family housing, Juana reflected on how, with the support of her family, friends, community, academic counselor and certain professors, she had been able to come so far. There had been many times when she had just wanted to quit school and go back to work, but she knew that quitting wasn't an option for her—she had to push ahead. It had taken her four years at the community college and now three years at University of the West, but in just five weeks she would be graduating with her B.A. in Political Science.

When Juana first transferred to University of the West she experienced what researchers Solórzano and Yosso call “transfer shock,” in that she often felt lost navigating such a large university where it seemed as if she was nothing more than a number. Often she was the only Latina in a class and more often than not she was the oldest—a very different reality from what she had experienced at community college—adding to her transfer shock. At University of the West she felt academically

and socially marginalized, which was further compounded by the fact that she was navigating academia as a single mother.

Unfortunately, popular beliefs and cultural-deficit theories say that it is expected for Juana to find academic and social life at research universities challenging—after all she is a Latina and she is a single mother. During her second semester at University of the West, Juana had asked to meet with her chemistry professor outside of his regular office hours, which were from 8 to 9 am. She explained that she had to take her daughter Esperanza to school and then catch the bus to campus where she dropped off her youngest daughter Gloria at campus childcare. When Juana was finally able to meet with her professor, he gave her some unsolicited advice. He told her that “University of the West isn't really the place for undergraduate mothers, let alone single mothers. You should really consider going to a state school. I'm not sure why, but Hispanics seem to do much better at the state schools. Plus, a state school will allow you to be a real mother. ”

At first Juana was stunned. She paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. In that

moment she remembered a quote from Emma Pérez, whose work she had read the previous quarter in her Chicana Feminist course. Emma Pérez stated, “...women need a specific moment of consciousness when they can separate from the law of the father into their own *sitio y lengua*,” (1998, 171). Juana had come too far to allow the professor's comment to push her out of the educational pipeline. Instead of internalizing his comment and/or following his “fatherly” advice, Juana decided to use her *lengua* in the form of words to defend her *sitio*—her space.

Juana exercised her agency and pushed back against the professor's comment. She let out the breath she had been holding in and told him, “The type of training and preparation from University of the West will increase my chances of getting a better-paying job and I have two little girls who are counting on me. I worked just as hard as all of my classmates to get into University of the West and this is where I plan on finishing. Besides, I want to conduct research and there are so few research opportunities at the state university. I have the ability, talent, and skills to be a great scholar and researcher not in spite of being



a Latina single mother, sir, but because I am a Latina single mother.”

I am grateful to the undergraduate Latina single mothers at UCLA who trusted me enough to share their stories during bus rides to and from campus, at study/play dates, in the hallways of AAP, and on the sofa at the Bruin Resource Center. Juana’s story is not fiction in that the experiences described in her counterstory come directly from empirical data collected via the lived experiences of undergraduate Latina single mothers at UCLA. As a Chicana Studies major and a McNair scholar I am privileged to have been exposed to what Gloria Anzaldúa described as “theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries—new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods” (1990, xxv). It is these new theories, such as Chicana Feminism, Critical Race, and Community Cultural Wealth, that allow new developing scholars to examine the “nontraditional” ways in which undergraduate Latina single mothers are getting through the educational pipeline of a research university, not in spite of being Latina single mothers, but because they are Latina single mothers—therein inspiring other parenting students to do the same.

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