

Experimental Article

You Will Not Take Us: A Counterstory

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ABSTRACT: In this piece, we share our experiences as we navigate the whiteness of academia. Each of us has taken different pathways to get where we are today as gears within the academic machine. We wrote dangerously to aid our processes of unlearning and (re)learning to disrupt mechanisms of this cruel (white) apparatus. As counterstories do, we hope to be able to help others reflect and determine ways to act against an institution promoting assimilation and erasure of historically and contemporarily excluded populations. Our counterstory centers around the memories of a mathematics education doctoral student, Lily. Her story is presented in a back-and-forth between time periods and gives the reader an opportunity to have their own unique experience with the reading. Instead of a discussion and conclusion, we provide the reader the opportunity to stop or listen to our discussion, available online.

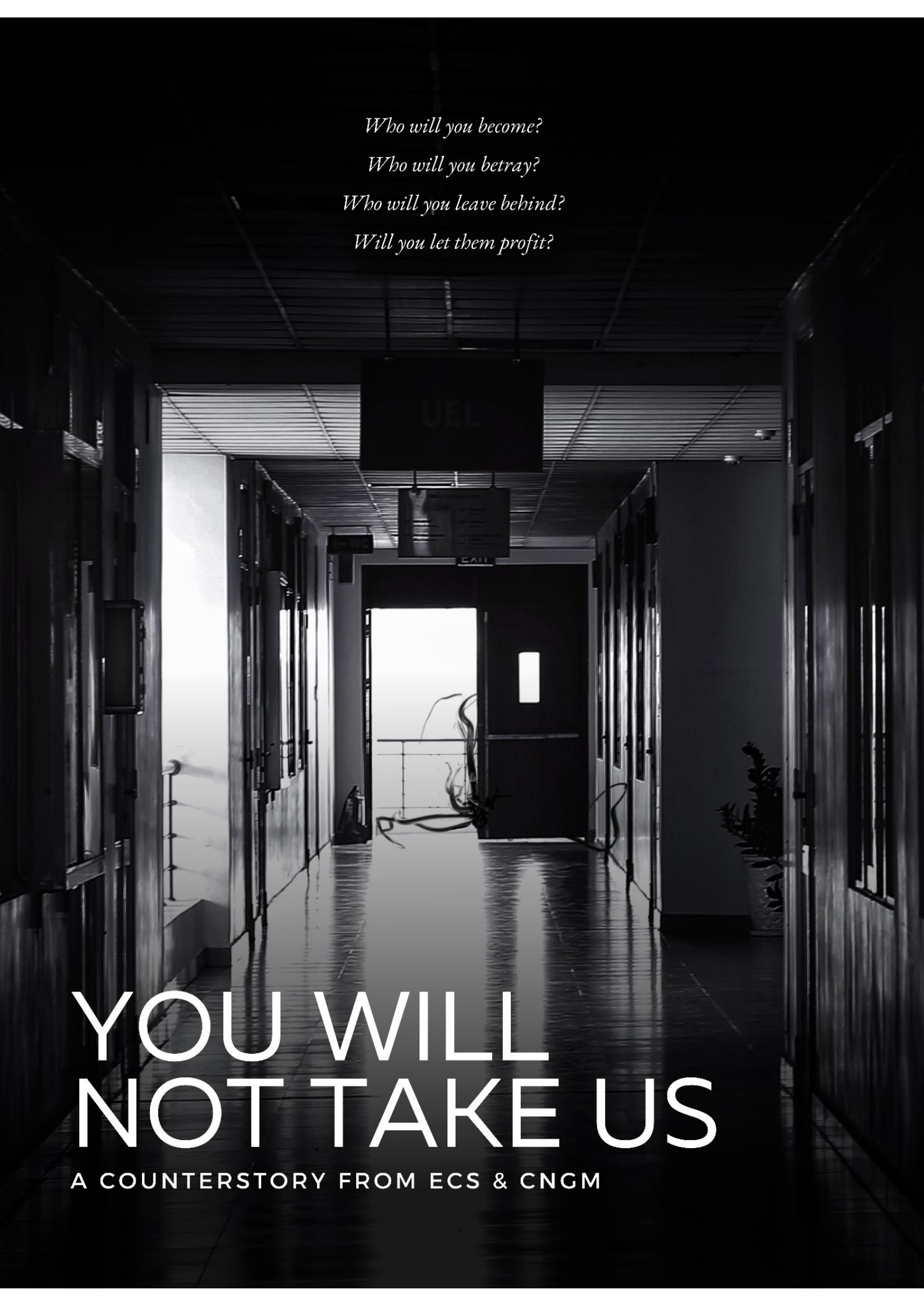
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*Who will you become?
Who will you betray?
Who will you leave behind?
Will you let them profit?*

YOU WILL NOT TAKE US

A COUNTERSTORY FROM ECS & CNGM

Given the endemic nature of racism, the existence of a race neutral organization cannot exist (Bracey & McIntosh, 2020; Ray, 2019). Academic spaces have historically and contemporarily excluded oppressed populations. Professional organizations, higher education institutions, and other professional spaces (i.e., journals) are part of a white institutional complex constructed with the goal of assimilating Scholars of Color and erasing their cultural capital (see Brunsma et al., 2020; Stewart et al., 2023). We have grappled with this recognition that aspects of our humanity were sacrificed to be molded to an academic system never built for us. Yet, we strive to be loved by our institutions even with Ladson-Billing's warning: "It doesn't matter how much you love the university. The university has no capacity to love you back, so stop expecting it to do something it cannot do" (quoted in Arnett, 2019). While we endure to unlearn and (re)learn together in community and through counterstorytelling endeavors (see Gómez Marchant & Cordero-Siy, 2022), we also continue to strive for (white) academic success/tenure. The recognition of this contradictory existence is not new (see Dunn, 2016; Guzman, 2017; Saavedra & Pérez, 2012; Urrieta & Villenas, 2013). In this paper, we tell our stories of the tensions of this contradiction as we reflect on our participation in mathematics education programs. Following Tanck (2021), our goal is not to bind our conversations about assimilation and disconnections to the confines of this document, but instead to spark ideas.

Assimilation and Erasure Through Education

But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. (Thiong'o, 1992, p. 9)

There is an assimilative nature to educational institutions (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999). For Latiné learners, for instance, Gutiérrez (2001) explains how K-12 schools have always been a space for assimilation and erasure (For a history of assimilation and erasure through educational institutions in Texas see San Miguel, 1987):

The American capitalist system was imposed on the Mexican people via white institutions. In the schools, the Mexican children were segregated and denuded of their culture as a prerequisite to learning the Anglo way. The purpose of the educational system is to make Anglo out of all children. Those Chicano children that refused to conform and resist this cultural and psychological genocide are pushed out of the school system. (p. 6–7)

Subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) intentionally whitewashes and devalues the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006) of learners. Educational institutions teach students their cultural capital is of no worth and the more adjacent to white ways of knowing and being one is the more successful they will be.

We have seen how anti-diversity, inclusion, and equity movements are erasing the history and perspectives of People of Color for white people's comfort such as the 2023 legislations proposed in Texas and Florida. There are other guidelines to control and domination such as controlling and limiting language (see San Miguel, 1987). Dual language programs, for example, seen as spaces safe for emergent bilingual learners, are often a way to commodify language resources for the benefit of white people (Cervantes-Soon, 2014). Educational institutions' hidden curriculum is centered on learning who is and who is not human. As Cridland-Hughes and King (2015) wrote, "Through the hidden curriculum, children implicitly learn about race, culture, and gender, which indicate a level of humanity, questioning who are/can be considered human" (p. 99). Institutions of higher education continue the messaging of white adjacent determining who belongs and who does not.

The whitewashing and erasing of histories and cultures feed into higher education. Moore (2008) described institutions of higher education as white institutional spaces reproducing racial hierarchies through the maintenance of norms, procedures, and traditions benefitting and privileging white individuals. White institutional spaces also is “a theoretical explication of organizations and institutions focusing on how advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, and meaning and identity get patterned in terms of a distinction between Whiteness and non-Whiteness” (Embrick & Moore, 2020, p. 1940). A white space remains as such because whiteness is not questioned but instead is embedded in the norms and being in the institution (see Anderson, 2015; Brusma et al., 2020). “An institution *raced White* demands, rewards, and preproduces traits associated with White people while punishing traits associated with non-Whiteness” (Bracey & McIntosh, 2020, p. 1962, emphasis in original).

Mathematics education doctoral programs are not immune. The hidden curriculum instilling messages of racism, ableism, sexism, and who belongs is endemic to academia, and thus endemic to these programs. As early as proseminar course work, doctoral students are asked to engage in primarily white scholars’ work and act white (Bowers, 2019). Course work often does not consider the ethics of our research practices nor the possible violence research can do to a community (see Crespo et al., 2021; de Lissovoy et al., 2013). Our burgeoning work needs to be “clearly connected to prior research to situate it in the larger field of mathematics education research” (Cai et al 2019, p. 118), which is steeped in whiteness (Gutiérrez, 2017; Martin, 2013).

During this process (and into our academic careers), we are indoctrinated into research practices. We are asked to first (Anderson & Christen, 2019) and name something in service of “extending the field’s knowledge because it is based on hypotheses suggested by previous research” (Cai et al 2019, p. 119). To first, at its core, is a colonial power move.

It’s a mark of hubris of not realizing every knowledge is partial, constructed within a regime of imperceptibility. It is a proclamation of power to make property in someone’s home, to put your own name on otherwise shared or common knowledge. It’s a proclamation of the privilege to not see others, cite others, or acknowledge others. Firsting is about the power to discard. (Liboiron, 2021, p. 8)

Moreover, to do this naming, we are asked to make the findings or data “take the form of comparing theoretically grounded predictions to actual results and then refining or extending the theoretical framework to support revised hypotheses that align with what was actually observed” (Cai et al, 2019, p. 222). We are taught to use historical, white, frameworks to interpret data. This forces us to perform a privileged act that “enables [us] to protect an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work” (hooks, 1991).

Consequently, these lessons devolve into dominant narratives of individualism and meritocracy, aspects of whiteness (DiAngelo, 2010), through dissertation work. For example, “a good dissertation is a done dissertation” centers not the growth or development of the individual but puts the value of the individual onto a product. With these discourses, our programs become more and more designed towards the completion of said product regardless of the learners’ well-being. This can result in normalizing the dehumanization of graduate collaborators because it is about the product, not the human. Kilpatrick (in Herbst, 2015) argued differently in that dissertations are “an exercise in the development in the student’s competence as—and experience as—a scholar in our field... [The dissertation is] a project that a student undertakes in order to develop that student” (p. 35). Kilpatrick warns of the dangers of focusing too heavily on the production over the humanity of the individual.

Reys (2017) suggested for mathematics education doctoral programs to be successful they must “[keep] informed and then deciding what knowledge needs to be *assimilated* and passed along

to the next generation of doctoral students in mathematics education is an ongoing challenge for everyone involved in running a doctoral program” (2017, p. 944, emphasis added). This frames mathematics education research as a mostly static body of knowledge researchers must assimilate into without questioning the politics of knowledge. For example, Mousley (2015) recounted, she and her professional group “felt that we had to adapt paper titles and abstracts to reflect the focus on individual cognition in order to have papers accepted for presentation at the [psychology of mathematics education] conference” (p. 154). As researchers in mathematics education, we need to neglect the illusion of neutrality from the politics of the academy. It is through doctoral programs that our experiences are invaded. Academia forces “those who are invaded to come to see their reality with the outlook of the invaders rather than their own” (Freire, 2018, p. 153). When early career scholars introduce ways of being and thinking that do not fall into the white, majoritarian narrative, they are disavowed because mathematics education research sees nothing but itself (Pais, 2017) and thus continues the pervasive whiteness in mathematics education research (Martin, 2013).

This paper is one of the first steps in finding ourselves, our histories, and our culture that has slowly been taken from us during our formation as mathematics education scholars. We write to heal from this process by reflecting on our journeys and asking ourselves: (1) Who will you become? (2) Who will you betray? (3) Who will you leave behind? (4) Will you let them profit? These questions guided our conversations and storytelling.

Counterstorytelling

Storytelling is a healing act. It is how we teach others to resist, persist, and flourish. It is how we help others see things they could not see before (Delgado, 1989). We use counterstorytelling to create a space where we can challenge norms and construct new realities. Our testimonios are embedded in this work. And as a counterstory, our goal is to challenge majoritarian or dominant stories (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1989, 1992; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), to demonstrate the value of the experiential knowledge of Scholars of Color, and to work towards a commitment to social justice. Moreover, counterstories help in building community by stressing the humanity in educational research normally erased (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2006). We hope to continue and strengthen “traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (Yosso, 2006, p. 10).

Counterstorytelling, or the narrative approach, is a central tenet in critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Derrick Bell (1987, 1992, 2004) and Richard Delgado (1989, 1995) provide powerful arguments for constructing counterstories to disrupt majoritarian storylines. Specifically, Delgado (1989) emphasized the destructive functions of counterstories:

But stories and counterstories can serve an equally important destructive function. They can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power. They are the other half—the destructive half—of the creative dialectic. (p. 2415)

Majoritarian narratives maintain and perpetuate a social hierarchy that privileges white, cisgender, male, and middle/upper class as the norm (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Delgado (1995) described counterstorytelling as being “one that mocks, jars, displaces, or attacks some majoritarian tale or narrative” (p. 194). Thereby, counterstorytelling is an approach to challenge dominant storylines seen as natural, regular, and normal ways of being and knowing the world (see Delgado, 1995; Martinez, 2020; Yosso, 2006). Counterstory is a methodology centering experiential knowledge

through stories of those who have been assimilated or identities erased by majoritarian narratives. “Counterstory as methodology thus serves to expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (Martinez, 2014, p. 38). Through counterstories the experiential knowledge of oppressed populations can be pushed to the forefront to demonstrate resistance to assimilation and erasure.

Counterstory methodology has helped illuminate how the whiteness of the academy operates. Gonzalez (2022, 2023), Gómez Marchant and Cordero-Siy (2022), Bracey and McIntosh (2020), and Martinez (2014, 2020b) have all used the narrative approach to emphasize the experiences of those learning to navigate and be within academic institutions. Each counterstory helps in reflecting and thinking through how whiteness can be disrupted within the institution through flourishing, resistance, and perseverance. We agree with Gonzalez’s (2022) argument that counterstories, particularly composite counterstories, are more accessible to those we seek to aid in transforming the system; consequently, disrupting the whiteness of academic writing (see also Yoo, 2017; 2019). The narrative approach to counterstories, however, should not be seen merely as fictionalized self-indulgent tales of the experiences of Scholars of Color (see Gonzalez, 2022, 2023; Martinez, 2020a). Instead, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argue, “the ‘composite’ characters we develop are grounded in real-life experiences and actual empirical data and are contextualized in social situations that are also grounded in real life, not fiction” (p. 36). Counterstories provide opportunities for reflection, questioning, and developing points of action on how the system operates to erase and assimilate.

Counterstories are not new in mathematics education (e.g., Guzman, 2017). We join the chorus of doctoral students who long for a space without relinquishing and forgetting our core identities (Baucom, 2019). We believe in the power of research to transform and the power of theory to liberate. The academic machine, however, lures us into thinking of a static view of research and success. We wrote this counterstory with our families and communities in our sights, not academia. Years after we graduated, we begin to remember them. Academia will not take them away from us again. It will not take them. It will not take us.

Positionality and Reciprocity

Writing (and research) is an act of power on the reader; that, we, as the authors, have mined something new and precious, and you, reader, are gifted with our work. It is creating and saying:

I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It’s an aggressive, even a hostile act... there’s no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer’s sensibility on the reader’s most private space. (Didion, 2021, p. 37)

In a sense, publications are land titles in that we first this land by taking, naming and attributing (Anderson & Christen, 2019; Liboiron, 2021). We then gain control over this area of work and begin to profit. The number of readers is then aggregated into downloads, citations, or impact factors which are used for promotion or tenure. Although this is the inescapable interpretation by the academy, we wrote this piece with a commitment to each other’s wellbeing and to the reader who feels lost and forgotten in the academy.

We structured and wrote this paper fully acknowledging we are machines within the academicwritingmachine (Henderson et al., 2016). We do not need, however, to be machines that look and function like this machine. By being different, by “experimenting with being otherwise, [we] connect in ways that permit us to be in the world, not acting on the world” (Henderson et al.,

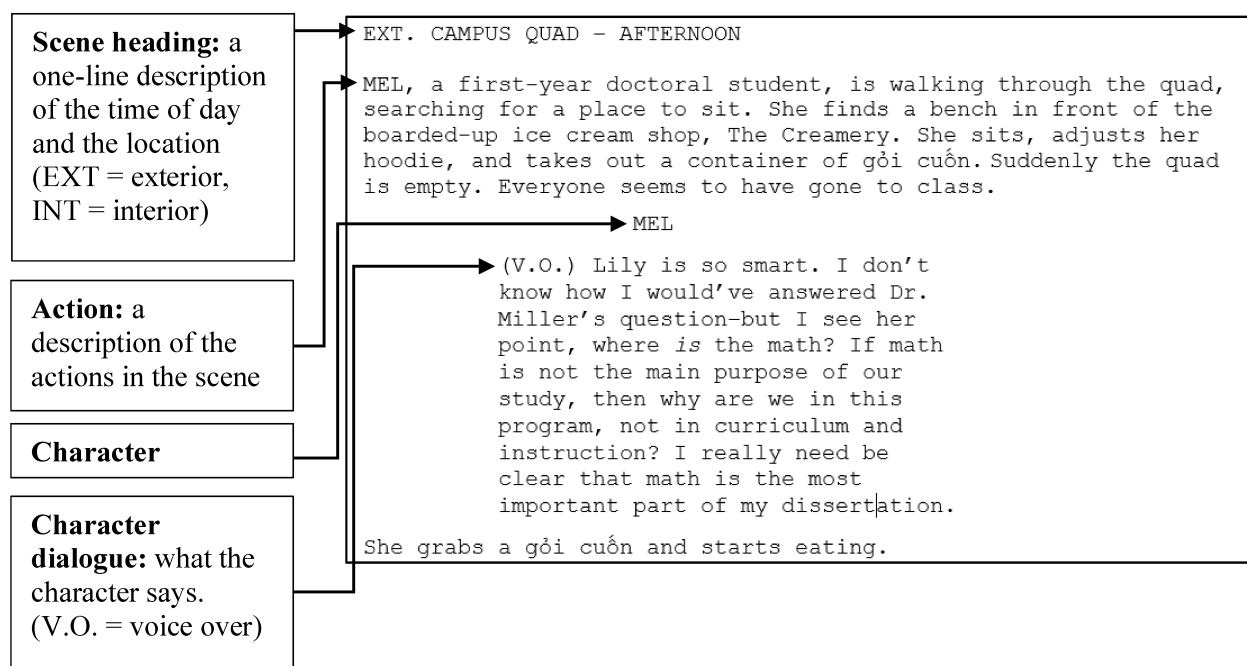
2016, p. 16). We hope to provide you with more agency than traditional scholarly writing. We invite you to be the one to construct the barriers of our writing; to construct your own territory with the counterstory. “Territories are not fixed for all time, but are always being made and unmade, reterritorializing, and deterritorializing” (Wise, 2005). We invite you to assemble our counterstory into something that looks more like you, and not like us.

These memories are meant to address our stories of the residue of academia’s push to distance and assimilate us from our communities as early mathematics education researchers. Lily’s counterstory was constructed through various meetings where we openly shared our experiences in our graduate program. We worked through many moments of coalescence and divergence; openly sharing new insights to each other and letting ourselves be vulnerable. We gave each other our stories with trust they will not be used for harm. Our stories are now weaved together with the literature for you. Please handle with care.

Because we wrote this in a genre not usually found in mathematics education journals, we highlight some ways we would like you to engage in the piece that will feel different from what is expected and fits the genre of the academy.

The Piece is a Screenplay

We write the piece in the form of a screenplay because we wanted to encourage the reader to imagine and (re)create the scenarios described. With this genre, there are particular conventions that we use that do not normally used in mathematics education literature (see below).



The Piece is Not Linear

We follow a Deleuzeguattraian approach where we write a “world of intersecting lines...a space filled with tension, potentiality and the in between,...it is not meant to bound the concept but rather to spark thought” (Tanck, 2021, p. 20). Although we articulate and discuss thoughts, we do not intend for them to be resolved (Roby & Cook, 2019). The structure of this paper is a screenplay depicting 6 of Lily’s (the central character) memories. We do not retrieve memories in sequence; thus, we did not structure the screenplay chronologically. Instead, you may visit the memories in any order and as many times as you want with the hyperlinks. Not all memories need

to be visited either. You, as the reader, can determine your own experience. You can engage with each memory as little or as much as you want.

The Piece Has No Citations

We refrain from including citations in the piece, even though some ideas are inspired by other people's writings. We are inspired by Sanchez (2022), who wrote in his dissertation:

This project will have limited citations... My goal is not to ignore those who came before me; I have a great deal of respect for them and have learned a great deal... My choosing to have limited citations is not done out of ignorance or disrespect, it is my way of not accepting the rules of the masters. I intend to challenge the rules that have been set up for us, to create something fluid that centers youth and my community as experts. (p. 16)

We do not include citations as a commitment to ourselves and our communities as generators of knowledge without situating or validating this knowledge within the whiteness brought upon by academia. Many, if not all, of those whose work we are inspired by have already been cited up to this point.

A Distant Commentary

Similar to mainstream academic journal articles, we analyze and discuss the piece; however, we will not write it out. We also chose to call it a *commentary* instead of analysis. The idea of analysis assumes the data, or the piece, has meaning or importance once we, the authors have analyzed it. We want *your* interpretation and emotions to be the main takeaway not ours. We do not want to dictate what one is supposed to get from these stories. So, we provide you, as the reader, a choice. You can end your reading at the end of the piece or hear our conversation on [SoundCloud](#).

Below you will find a list of memories based on locations. This is where you can select where to go and where you will return to after each memory. As stated, these are not meant to be read in the order listed. Feel free to explore and play. We only ask for you to exit your reading with the memory *A Well-Lit Room*.

INT. A HOTEL LOBBY - NIGHT

INT. SCHOOL OFFICE - NIGHT

EXT. SUBWAY CAR - NIGHT

INT. AUDITORIUM - DAY

EXT. CAMPUS QUAD - AFTERNOON

INT. A WELL-LIT ROOM - DAY

INT. A HOTEL LOBBY - NIGHT

A small crowd is seated at the hotel bar, listening to a MAN, glass of red wine in hand. She finishes her speech.

MAN

...and congratulations to the
new cohort of fellows! Cheers!

The crowd raises their glasses and they begin to break off as the noises of the crowd grows. ENRIQUE and JOSEFINA are at a small bar table. A phone rings and Josefina answers it while Enrique takes a sip of wine.

JOSEFINA

(on the phone) Yeah, we'll meet
you in the lobby. Enrique's
already here. (beat) Okay. See
ya.

(to Enrique) That was Nancy.
She's on her way down.

ENRIQUE

Good. Oh, by the way, have you
met anyone in the cohort ahead
of us?

JOSEFINA

Not all of them but my friend
Lily is in that cohort.

ENRIQUE

Oh, the Georgia student?

JOSEFINA

Yeah, Dr. Vistro's student.
She's over there. She's really
smart. She has, like, 4
presentations here.

Josefina points to a group of people who are arranging themselves for a photo. The crowd is dressed similarly. They are all wearing sunglasses, fedora hats, and long gray trench coats as if they were in a mafia. As the people settle into the picture, red light begins to emit from their bodies, and it continuously grows brighter. Enrique and Josefina lift their hands to their eyes to shield from the brightness.

ENRIQUE

Which one is she?

JOSEFINA

(squinting) I can't quite make her out.

MAFIA

(in unison, chants) Go dawgs!
Sic em! Woof! Woof! Woof!

The chant continues as the bright red light from the group grows stronger and fills the hotel lobby, as if hundreds of spotlights were turned on at the same time. A silhouette of the mafia shows the group merging into a blob, until it shapes itself into a giant bulldog. Some human-like shapes appear to run away from the mass, but they are attached to it. The shapes that are able to escape the blob are reeled back by tentacles.

Josefina and Enrique are now on the floor, trying to escape but the brightness is too much. Their skin begins to turn red and signs of burning emerge on their forearms. They scream in pain as their skin bubbles and holes form in their clothes. A silhouette of a giant bulldog walks towards them and sniffs them. They don't move. The camera pans to the side as the dog begins to consume the bodies on the floor.

Faintly, Josefina's phone rings.

JOSEFINA'S VOICEMAIL

(static) I can't make it to the phone right now. (static)

VOICEMAIL

(V.O.) (static) Dad... (static) going well... call us... love you.

[Return to memories](#)

INT. SCHOOL OFFICE - NIGHT

Scenes of an empty school fade into one another. Throughout the scenes, you can hear a woman speaking indistinctly in the distance. An empty classroom with the lights from the streetlamps shining in. The cafeteria, floors and tabletops are still wet from cleaning. A darkened hallway with one lit room.

Cut to the door of the room. The light from the room forms a yellow bright rectangle, the only thing visible. In the brightness, the silhouette of a WOMAN pacing and talking on the phone.

WOMAN

Hey, I'm glad that lesson went well. (beat). Oh! No worries, that's what coaches are for. (long beat) No, Tommy just picked up the kids and they'll be here in 10. So I'm not staying here for much longer (beat). Oh yeah? (beat) You should! You're smart enough to do the PhD program! I only went there for my master's but, Lily, you should still apply! I can see you leading this large PD in the district with your ideas. Maybe you might even have a book then! The worst they can say is no. And we'll have your back if you want to go back to school. (beat). Yeah. I'll take a look at the requirements and we can talk about it during coaching on Wednesday. (beat) You are most welcome. I'll see you tomorrow. (beat) Bye.

Still only visible as a silhouette, she puts on her coat, puts some things in backpack, half sits on her table and looks at her phone.

WOMAN

(V.O.) Those requirements must be on their website (beat) Is this the submission page?

The phone begins to hum a haunting melody, just like a lullaby, as the camera slowly moves in.

PHONE

(sung) Interested in deepening
your understanding of teaching
and learning in schools and
other contexts? Do you want to
improve student and school
outcomes? Learn how you can make
an impact with a PhD in
Education. Apply by December 12.

The light flickers as the phone continues to hum. She does not flinch, she continues to read. She begins to bob her head and hum the same tune. Small, slimy tentacles emerge from the phone and wrap around her hand and wrist. Her wrist turns white from the blood being cut off. She scrolls faster and faster and her eyes begin to move faster and faster until her eyes turn white. The phone rings. She answers, her eyes return to normal, and the tentacles rush back into her phone.

WOMAN

Hey Tommy. Are you outside?
(beat) Okay.

The fluorescent lights of the office the woman is in and the hallway light up, revealing the features of the hallway, office, and the woman. She grabs her bag, heads out of the office and turns off the lights. Cut to black.

[Return to memories](#)

EXT. SUBWAY CAR - NIGHT

CASS, a young woman, is sitting in a SUBWAY CAR, deep in thought. Scenes of passengers get on and off the train, the view from the train, and Cass playing Vampire Survivors on her phone. She arches her back and rolls her shoulders often, as if she has back pain. Cass throws her phone in her bag in frustration having lost the game. Looking around the train car is now empty except for Cass.

CASS

(V.O.) I can't believe Lily has to do all that work for nothing. Her thesis sounds interesting, though. I knew she was thinking about that in her second grade class because—which kid was it? Ligaya? She didn't know how to help her and I didn't get her the next year. I thought Lily did her best with her, especially with that one lesson we planned at our grade level meeting. Lily's so smart. She's always been a better teacher than me. I couldn't do grad school. I'm not smart enough and need my job. I can't take any more student loans. I can't make the same sacrifices as Lily.

Cass looks up at the open subway door and realizes this is her stop. She rushes to exit the car. As the doors close, she notices yellow sticky notes falling behind her as if she was dropping them. On the platform, she catches a reflection of herself in the increasingly speeding subway car. Sticky notes covering her back, like fur.

Horrificed, she bends down and picks up one of the sticky notes. The note is slimy and she sharply shakes it off her hand. She spreads her fingers to see the residue between her fingers. She reaches behind her and rips off a clump of sticky notes.

She yells in pain. The notes are fused to her skin. With each clump she rips off, skin comes along with it. The station fills with the sound of her screams and speeding subway cars that do not stop at the station. After ripping most of the stickies off, she falls to the ground.

In a pool of blood, she reaches for one of the sticky notes. It reads, "You need to develop productive practices." "You need to attend to student thinking." "You need to be more equitable." "You lack mathematical knowledge." "You don't know." "You struggle." Cass, confused and panicked, stares closer.

CASS

What the fuck? Is this Lily's
handwriting?

The camera pans behind Cass. Her back is bloodied, but there is still a group of pink sticky notes that she couldn't reach. It reads "I hope you get home safely." "You got me through my first few years of teaching." "I wish we could hang out more." "Te quiero mucho."

[Return to memories](#)

INT. AUDITORIUM - DAY

REMEDIOS and RAUL are seated in one of the top bleacher seats, watching graduates getting hooded as the ANNOUNCER calls out the names of the graduates. All the guests are seated and quiet as each graduate is hooded by a set of deans on stage.

REMEDIOS

Saan ulit ang party? Is it after this?

RAUL

Doon sa bahay ng adviser ni Lily.

REMEDIOS

I don't think I'm ready to meet all those professors. Dadating din daw yung dean ng college? Diyos ko, how do you even talk to them? Masyado silang matalino. We're not as smart as Lily.

RAUL

I don't know. Baka we can ask them about the hood. Bakit ang mahal? (laughs) What was it? 800 dollars for the whole thing?

REMEDIOS

Hindi! Higit pa sa 1,200 dollars yun! I'm not sure why it's so expensive. Buti na lang, Lily rented hers. Nobody can tell, right?

A young woman walks on the stage after her name is called.

RAUL

Susunod yata si Lily. Siya ba yan? Behind the stage?

ANNOUNCER

Librada Ignacio.

Remedios and Raul stand and cheer. A GLOWING FIGURE walks on stage staring at the deans. It is producing bright red light.

It grows stronger as it walks towards the center of the stage. People's skin begins to burn as they shield their eyes. Remedios and Raul's, however, do not. They cheer at the figure, looking directly at the light. Their skin remains unchanged.

Small, slimy tentacled creatures emerge from underneath the other graduates' robes and octagonal hats. The creatures make their way towards the glowing figure and try to engulf it.

On the stage, the six deans stand up in unison, each in the same robe but different colors. They remove their robes and reveal the creatures fused to their bodies. Some of the tentacles have fused with the limbs of the deans as if they were puppeting them. All the deans' movement is erratic. One of the deans begins to sing a haunting melody in a minor key. The other deans join as a chorus.

Time slows as Remedios cheers louder and Raul wipes away his tears. They begin to emit a soft white glow. They begin to sing a *kundiman*. The glow remains modest and the *kundiman* is soft. The glowing figure averts its gaze from the deans to Remedios and Raul. The figure stops in the middle of the stage as more tentacles rush to grab it. The figure begins to sing along.

GLOWING FIGURE

(sung) Natanim sa puso ko yaong
isang pag-ibig. Na pinakasasamba
sa loob ng dibdib. Sa iyong
luningning laging nasasabik.
Ikaw ang pangarap bituing
marikit.

The tentacled creatures begin to retreat, the deans' song grows more silent. The *kundiman* and Remedios and Raul's glow remain at the same intensity. Remedios and Raul lift their hands. As they do, a graduation hood materializes of the figure. They slowly lower their hands. Simultaneously, the hood falls on the glowing figure's shoulders.

Everything slowly returns to normal. The deans look human again, the tentacles retreat. The auditorium is silent.

The figure's glow disappears, revealing a young woman with long black hair, tied in a ponytail, wrapped in sampaguita.

Return to memories

EXT. CAMPUS QUAD – AFTERNOON

MEL, a first-year doctoral student, is walking through the quad, searching for a place to sit. She finds a bench in front of the boarded-up ice cream shop, The Creamery. She sits, adjusts her hoodie, and takes out a container of gỏi cuốn. Suddenly the quad is empty. Everyone seems to have gone to class.

MEL

(V.O.) Lily is so smart. I don't know how I would've answered Dr. Miller's question-but I see her point, where *is* the math? If math is not the main purpose of our study, then why are we in this program, not in curriculum and instruction? I really need be clear that math is the most important part of my dissertation.

She grabs a gỏi cuốn and starts eating.

MEL

(V.O.) Lily even knew that fucking reference that he threw out of nowhere. She really studied for her comps. Fucking composed. Literally, glowing. I don't think I could just answer questions for thirty minutes straight. I'd never. That defense just seemed brutal. What do I need to do to go through with that?

Mel reaches into her backpack and pulls out a book, "A Guide to Academia. Getting into and Surviving Grad School, Postdocs, and a Research Job by Prosanta Chakrabarty." The book is shredded with a lot of pages missing from the first half. She opens the book as she eats the last bite.

MEL

(V.O.) "Page 4. You will receive very few pats on the back in academia; the only way you know you are doing a good job is if you notice that fewer people are

complaining. Be warned, academia
is not for the faint of heart."

Mel sighs. She unzips her hoodie, revealing a metal plate for a chest. She grabs the red handle on the plate and turns it. She flinches as the handle moves. She continues to turn and winces. Tears from the pain fall from her eyes. The plate opens to reveal a small furnace in her chest cavity. There is a pile of wood with a small flame emerging from the pile. She pulls out a page of the book and throws it on the fire. She turns the page.

MEL

(V.O.) "Page 58. Nothing matters
more than getting publications
and grants. Try to get them
early and frequently, and the
rest will come easy."

She tears out the page and throws it on the
fire.

MEL

(V.O.) "Page 59. Pick the
smallest thesis committee
possible. This is your parole
board."

Tear. Throw.

MEL

(V.O.) "Page 116. If you fail in
academia, it won't be those
little biases that sink you; it
will be your own lack of skill,
drive, and motivation."

The camera zooms out slowly to high above the quad. Mel is continuously tearing the pages from the book and throwing the pages into the furnace as people walk into the quad. The camera zooms out high above the quad. The crowd walks around Mel as if she were a large obstacle. The sound of the wincing and balling up of the pages is still audible as it fades to black.

[Return to memories](#)

INT. A WELL-LIT ROOM - DAY

LILY, a 35-year old woman, is unpacking boxes in a nondescript room with cinderblock walls. She reaches into one of the boxes and hangs a picture of a group of people in a hotel lobby who look like they are cheering, fists in the air.

She sits in her chair and grabs a pink sticky note and writes "Ask about copier code." She pulls her laptop out of her bag. There are multiple stickers on the laptop, including a big circular sticker that looks like a neon sign with an ice cream cone and "The Creamery" on the circumference.

She opens the laptop and sticks the note to her screen.

The sound of students walking through the hallway fills her room. She closes her laptop, opens a drawer and slowly gathers her things. A haunting song is heard in the background. Lily stops and doesn't move. She slowly sits up straight. Her eyes dart around the room.

The focus changes from Lily to the window. There are small, slimy tentacles clinging to the outside of the window. Lily turns around and looks towards the window.

She stares.

She cracks a smile.

Cut to black.

You can end your reading here or listen to our conversation on [SoundCloud](#). We are grateful for the opportunity to share this space with you and wish you luck on your endeavors. Salamat, kaibigan.

Reflection by Open Reviewer Anairis de la Cruz Benito

The experience of delving into this storytelling deeply resonated with me, providing a validation platform for the complex emotions I grapple with as a person of color pursuing a PhD within a predominantly white academic institution. Emotions that I believed were not acceptable to experience or articulate openly, these emotions were similar to the sentiments shared repeatedly by many of my international colleagues. Despite this shared experience, I was not persuaded that these feelings were justified or that I was permitted to express them. After reading “You Will Not Take Us” I know these feelings are validated. Rather, I realized that what happens is most people of color and anyone else who feels the weight of academic expectations often betray themselves and leave themselves behind to meet the goals of academia, goals that were built assuming all graduate students possess identical academic backgrounds. This fact often leaves international students feeling marginalized and misunderstood.

Therefore, to myself, I need to remember that despite feeling at my lowest when I fail to meet the rigid standards I am expected to meet at my doctoral program, it does not signify that I am inadequate for this academic sphere. I always must keep in mind that I am giving my best effort, and as an Indigenous international doctoral student, my best may not always align with the expectations of the predominantly white academia. I strive not to entirely abandon and compromise my identity, despite the rigid and unyielding objectives of the academic world. “You will not take us” felt like a healing space because the storytelling allowed me to perceive things that were previously beyond my vision, and from this point on, I recognize that there is a place for those emotions that I was hesitant to confront.

You can listen to a conversation with [Anairis, Nico, and Eric here](#).

Acknowledgements and Dedication

Below are the namesakes of the characters in our counterstory: Lily, Cass, Mel, Enrique, Josefina, Remedios, and Raul. We dedicate this to them.



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