

Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory, by Aja Y. Martinez. National Council of Teachers of English, 2020. 201 pp.

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As the inequitable racialized impacts of the global COVID-19 crisis raged on in the heat of midsummer 2020, I settled into Aja Y. Martinez's *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. I was worried about yet another presidential immigration ban, how these continuing mandates affect my status as a Black foreign worker in a temporality burgeoning with publicized xenophobia and anti-Blackness (that were always there, let's be all the way real, just way less lowkey these days). I could not watch the news; I refused to turn on the TV most days: images of Black death, protests, politicians' absurd denials, multinational corporations draping "Black Lives Matter" on repeat, political ads—a combo of "Defund the police? Who will protect you?" alongside "Black lives never mattered to Joe Biden." It remains, however, a privilege to quiet these representations for a minute, to read from a tablet screen with central air humming around me. Race, racialization, as always though, pulsates through this experience, as all else. And, yet, as Martinez rightly demonstrates, the permanence of race and racism—the first of eight, then nine, core tenets of critical race theory (CRT) highlighted in *Counterstory's* introduction—still needs reiterating in the fields of rhetoric and writing studies. One might think that by 2021 these disciplines might have gotten it together well enough that our scholars, teachers, and students would not need a monograph like Martinez's. But here we are. And, yet again, a woman of color is doing the work.

Outlining key methods, principles, affects, and embodiments of CRT for use in rhetoric and writing studies, Martinez highlights the importance of groundbreaking scholarship by three "counterstory exemplars," Richard Delgado, Derrick A. Bell, and Patricia J. Williams, through a mobilization of counterstories via its various genres (2). "Counterstory," as Martinez explains, "is methodology that functions through methods that empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies" (3). Theorizing in practice, Martinez exercises CRT's foundational tenets through her experiences and those of her protagonist, Alejandra Prieto, showing us just how effectively these methods might enact possibilities for social justice work in rhetoric and writing studies—particularly for the racially marginalized. These precepts, culled from CRT and rhetoric and writing scholars, include: "Permanence of race and racism; challenge to dominant ideologies; interest convergence; race as social construct; intersectionality and antiessentialism; interdisciplinarity; centrality

of experiential knowledge and/or unique voices of color; commitment to social justice” (9); to which Martinez adds “accessibility” (18).

Martinez immediately emphasizes *Counterstory*'s exigence. I clapped—I mean literally applauded—while reading the string of epigraphs to its introduction, “A Case for Counterstory.” Excerpted from manuscript reader reviews from leading journals in rhetoric and writing studies, these epigraphs publicly attest to widespread ignorance of scholars in our field who ask for justification for CRT methods that have been around for decades. It's a shame for rhetoric and writing studies. As a Black migrant in a junior faculty job in these fields, I recall my own traumatic reception of similar reviews. Unfortunately, “this isn't research;” “maybe you should submit this to a creative nonfiction journal;” “here's a formula on how you write research essays;” and “do you have IRB approval for this?” all too often greet people of color's storying methods in these disciplines. While some experiences recounted in *Counterstory* at times mirror mine, sometimes they do not. But as endorsement of the strength and necessity of Martinez's work, I compose this review by consciously forwarding a combination of CRT strategies deployed by the monograph—the book review as space and autobiographic reflection as method for counterstory—though the author offers much more.

Martinez centers Delgado, Bell, and Williams in working through the construction of Prieto in proceeding chapters, while reminding readers of the specific CRT tenets from which each respective chapter draws. The second chapter, for instance, spotlights Delgado's use of counterstory as narrated dialogue by way of a discussion of perspective, racial history, and storytelling between Prieto and her daughter. Situating this kind of dialogue in a longstanding rhetorical tradition—stretching back as far as classical Greek thought—the chapter then deploys counterstory in relation to stock story as a form of critique for minoritized subjects to “offer alternate possibilities” for audiences (35). In conversation, the characters follow Delgado in a back-and-forth book review of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, demonstrating the distinct pedagogical capacities of narrated counterstory dialogue. Chapter three engages Bell's work on counterstory as allegory/fantasy. Again, drawing from a tradition dating back to Plato, but generated through CRT's principal concerns, Martinez here tackles “the politics of historiography” (64). By way of Prieto's teleportation as the character “Self” to a dramatized iteration of the 1988 Octalog at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, we witness imagined conversation between the Chicana scholar of racialized rhetorics and writing and canonized rhetoric and writing scholars James Berlin, Robert Connors, Sharon Crowley, Richard Enos, Susan Jarratt, Nan Johnson, C. Jan Swearingen, Victor Vitanza, and moderator James Murphy.

The subsequent chapter offers autobiographic reflection to make theory accessible in these fields via the foundational work of Black feminist, Williams. Martinez first sketches a genealogy of autobiographical reflection within rhetoric and writing studies, while narratively operationalizing that genealogy through another fantastical dialogue with members of it in an Octalog that this time practices “ancestorship” (87). This conversation features the fictionalized figures of Frankie Condon, Keith Gilyard, Carmen Kynard, Eric Pritchard, Elaine Richardson, Victor Villanueva, Vershawn Ashanti Young, and Martinez as her allegorized self, illustrating the varying potentials for the CRT method within our fields. Martinez then “crosses borders with counterstory” (99) through three vignettes narrating troubling experiences with different authority figures who question the narrator’s presence as a Chicana woman in various U.S. spaces. The second, where a white male security guard effectively “checks the papers” of the protagonist and her father in Arizona, easily jars memories of my own many tense encounters with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) officers. These kinds of confrontations all too often position marginalized subjects, whether in possession of official documents or not, to question our own sense of belonging and existence in the U.S.

Counterstory importantly offers insight into the pedagogical reverberations of CRT methods/methodologies in its fifth chapter, by considering CRT’s quest toward social transformation in research and practice. Offering specific guidelines to educators who might pick up these methods/methodologies in crafting material (112-113), the chapter gives focused attention to what counterstory might do in educational spaces. By means of an email exchange between Prieto and her mentor V, we learn of several instances of racial violence that Prieto encounters in the classroom while teaching about decolonization, which gets us to crucial questions about the orientation of junior faculty to graduate teaching and how instructors of color continue to keep grinding in the face of continuing racial attacks from (often white male) students. Only a few months ago was I forced to begrudgingly and painstakingly explain to my own “Kyles and Connors” (128) that George Floyd did not—in no uncertain terms—ask for his own murder. The chapter’s epistolary dialogue responds to these pressures by delving again into practical, pedagogical heuristics for engaging CRT work. *Counterstory*, as expected, walks the talk by providing material examples for doing so in its appendixes.

And although other paratextual matter like the beautifully written foreword by Carmen Kynard and afterword by Jaime Armin Mejía emphasize the importance of the book’s contributions, Martinez’s epilogue, “Birth Song,” might have left the most lasting impression on me. Martinez’s ode to her daughter Olivia—the latter’s “baby story” of entering the world to an eighteen-year-old, first year college student mother facing the abuse of her father while

navigating “blatant stares” in classrooms, plodding around campus with “feet painfully swollen” (140)—calls attention to the trials and survivals that people, and particularly women, of color aver through storytelling. *Counterstory* thus interrupts the status quo of rhetoric and writing studies theory to drive home the necessity for, and viability of, creative, narrative modes of analysis. It provides a practical trove of pedagogical material—for undergraduate, graduate, domestic, and public classrooms—for imagining more just futures. And yet again, a woman of color is doing the work. In solidarity with her, I call on these fields to incorporate *Counterstory*’s texts and paratexts not only on and into syllabi, practicums, and classrooms but also into frank everyday dialogue about who and what belongs in academic spaces.

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