

The Catharsis for Poison: A Counterstory Retrospective on *Composition Studies*' 50th Anniversary

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It was Memorial Day weekend 2010 in Central Texas. Temperature highs hovered around 95°F, which shouldn't be a big deal for a girl from southern Arizona where summer temperatures soar easily into the 100s. However, in southern Arizona it's "a dry heat" and in the hill country of central Texas—well, there's visible water, palpable humidity. In both locales, central air is a necessity. My daughter Olivia (eight years old at the time) and I had just arrived in Kyle, Texas, to stay in the home of my hosts/mentors, Drs. Octavio and Charise Pimentel. I had secured a summer pre-doctoral fellowship through Octavio and Charise's institution, Texas State University, and I was looking forward to making good headway that summer on my dissertation. However, during the first weekend in Texas, the air conditioning in the Pimentel home stopped working, and the sweltering humidity and heat quickly overwhelmed the entire house. Because it was a holiday weekend, our prospects of getting the air conditioning repaired were slim to none, and we were informed that the soonest an HVAC technician could come out to repair the unit was the Tuesday following the holiday. Ugh. So there we were, facing three whole sleepless sweaty nights, tossing and turning, unable to comfortably drift off to sleep, and it was within this extreme discomfort that my first counterstory was birthed.

3AM. Two nights into this heat filled misery, I gave up on the hope of any sort of restful slumber and decided to instead do what I was in fact there in Texas to do: write. By this point in my career as a graduate student at University of Arizona's Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English (RCTE) program, I had experienced the insult of being evaluated in my first year of study and being asked to "take the masters and go" (Martinez "A Plea" 43). By this point, I had experienced the various erasures and assaults on my humanity that people of color endure in predominantly and historically white graduate programs. But I had also experienced the hope and joy of witnessing the hiring processes that brought in the first faculty of color in the program's history. By this point I was being mentored by Adela C. Licona, who introduced me to the race critical work of a variety of scholars including critical race theorists like Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Patricia Williams (Martinez *Counterstory* xvi). By this point I had declared my intent to pursue a dissertation project that centralized the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and zeroed in

on its espoused methodology: counterstory. However, by this point I had only studied the counterstories of others; I had yet to compose my own.

So, there I was, at 3AM in humid and hot central Texas, unable to sleep, but perfectly able to think and think and think about my looming doctoral project. And within this thought cycling (undoubtedly informed by my context-specific physical miseries) all the various indignities I had endured within my graduate program experience wove and swirled through my mind and body, feeling evermore like poison that required an immediate outlet. Thus, the only seemingly available catharsis in that moment was to compose, and the outburst of counterstory that poured from my discontented carcass onto the cued-up MS Word document was the first draft, the verifiable word vomit version, of what would eventually be honed and shaped into: “A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Dialogues Concerning Alejandra’s ‘Fit’ in the Academy.”

Looking back, twelve years beyond this initial attempt at a counterstory of my own composition, but also ten years beyond its defense as part of my dissertation, and eight years beyond its eventual publication in a field-specific academic journal, I find myself nostalgically reflective (even a bit misty-eyed) on my counterstory journey. When presently asked by audiences to comment on my decision to go the counterstory route, I am adamant in my assertion that for much of my career as a CRT scholar and counterstoryteller, I have mostly dwelled within the identity category of counterstory “student.” The first counterstories I told as part of my dissertation, inclusive of “A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory,” were hunches I was pursuing in a greater quest to fully investigate and understand why the counterstories of exemplars such as Bell, Delgado, and Williams are rhetorically effective as a race critical methodology. However, another line of inquiry I was also pursuing was an interrogation of how this methodology could serve as a contribution to the field of rhetoric and writing studies in a quest to deal as productively as they can with race and racism (Gilyard qtd. on *Counterstory* back cover). I was attempting a contribution. But I knew in those initial years of honing my craft as a counterstoryteller that the only way I could fully wrap my mind around the effectiveness and potential contribution of counterstory as methodology would require I compose counterstories of my own.

As I embarked on this composing process and inquiry, I was met with critique and stubborn resistance (Martinez *Counterstory* 20-21). While dissertating, I experienced nothing short of dismissal of my counterstory project. While engaged in discussion with a professor of Education, they were quick to inform me “the field of Education has moved beyond counterstory.”

“Counterstory,” they declared, “was just formless ranting by disgruntled people of color.”

“Counterstory,” they concluded, “was over.”

The encounter described above was only one among many instances in which my work was met with skepticism, opposition, and in some cases outright disdain. However, this particular encounter was a turning point for me and my project. I knew this Education scholar was wrong, but in the moment, I hadn't developed the vocabulary or knowledgebase in CRT to refute their claims. I had to do more research, I had to stay the path as a student of CRT and counterstory. And as my project took shape through the process of my dissertation, I began to realize that what was missing from the interdisciplinary CRT discussion concerning the methodology of counterstory was a direct and targeted intervention from the humanities, particularly from scholars who are experts in rhetoric and writing studies. What counterstory needed was for the field of rhetoric and writing studies to make a case for counterstory in ways we can uniquely accomplish, due to our field-specific focus on rhetorical effectiveness, pedagogical viability, and writing genre as method. And while field and field-adjacent scholars before me (e.g. Banks; Gutiérrez-Jones; Kynard; Prendergast) have engaged an analysis of and in some cases demonstration of counterstory, I eventually realized there was a gap to fill in terms of establishing counterstory as a research methodology and method through an examination of the counterstory work of CRT exemplars Bell, Delgado, and Williams. But how did I arrive at this conclusion? I wrote counterstories.

I continued to write and defend, write and publish, write and teach, write and share with my family and the public: counterstories. During my 2012 dissertation defense at the conclusion of my doctoral studies, a committee member proclaimed one of my Derrick Bell-esque counterstories read as bad fiction. I was subsequently awarded a doctorate for this project. I subsequently managed to land a tenure-track position at Binghamton University with this project. However, at that moment I was unsure about what was next for me and counterstory. Were the counterstories written for the dissertation viable for publication? Did I dare venture to send these counterstories to academic journals? Would I be taken seriously? I have Dr. Adam J. Banks and the inaugural Smitherman/Villanueva Writing Group to thank for the push to publish.

During summer 2013, Dr. Adam Banks organized a summer writing retreat in Lexington, KY, for early career scholars. Over the course of several days, I was in writerly community with Dr. Steven Alvarez, Dr. Tamika Carey, Dr. Rhea Lathan, Dr. Gabi Ríos, Dr. David Green, Dr. Nazera Wright, and Dr. Bill Endres. Most of us were only a year out of graduate school, working on prospective monographs and other publications, and it was to this group I posed the question of my project's viability beyond the dissertation. I tentatively shared the chapter I was most proud of, but not without reservation and doubt. This chapter engaged the Chicana Educational Pipeline and offered a Delgado-esque counterstory in the form of "stock story vs. counterstory" (Martinez "A Plea"

34–39). The stock story involves a committee of white professors gathered to discuss a Chicana student, Alejandra Prieto, who they view as a failure in their graduate program. In this counterstory Alejandra is in conversation with her mother concerning her own experiences of racism and discrimination within the same graduate program. Originally composed during that sweltering air conditioning-less 2010 Memorial Weekend sleepless night, this counterstory was informed by my own personal experiences in the RCTE graduate program, and it represents the poison of that program that I poured out of my bodily lived experience and onto the page. This counterstory mattered to me, very much. And beyond the eyes of my four dissertation committee members, at least one of whom thought my project was “bad fiction,” no other academics had yet read my counterstories—I hadn’t yet worked up the nerve. So, I was beyond relieved when my cohort of fellow scholars responded positively and encouragingly to this great leap of vulnerability I felt I had taken.

Although my Smitherman/Villanueva cohorts heartily agreed my project in counterstory was viable beyond the dissertation and encouraged me to send a revised version to journals, the feedback I received from Dr. Gabriela Raquel Ríos proved vital. Dr. Ríos and I share a similar racial-ethnic background as indigenous Mexican Americans. Upon reading the counterstory involving Alejandra and her mother, Dr. Ríos pointed out that although the stock story amongst the white professors rang true in tone and voice, the voices of Alejandra and her mother rang false—too stifled, too academic, not authentic to Dr. Ríos’ experience of the ways a Mexican American mother and daughter would engage. And Dr. Ríos was 100% correct. In my attempt to act and sound the part of a highly-educated scholar within my dissertation, I missed an element of what has become central to my own counterstory methodology: the tenet of accessibility (Martinez *Counterstory* 18). Where was the voice of these minoritized women, represented on their own terms, relating their own experiences? Dr. Ríos’ astute critique prompted me to engage a writing and revising process that had not ever been taught or modeled for me during my formal education: to write with rather than for or over my community (Martinez *Counterstory* 18). As the acknowledgements of “A Plea” indicates (53), the voices of Mami and Alejandra involved a writing process that quite literally required I sit next to my mom on the living room couch and read through the counterstory dialogue with her, asking for her responses to Alejandra’s prompts. As is also indicated in the acknowledgements of “A Plea,” the voices of the mother-daughter exchange would not/could not be genuine without my mother’s touch (53).

Now that the chapter had been revised into publishable form, there remained the question of where to send it. At CCCC 2013, I attended a panel on publishing and was inspired to hear *Composition Studies*’ then-editor Dr.

Laura Micciche declare her commitment to publishing diverse voices and perspectives. For me, nervous as I was about publishing this risky and deeply personal counterstory, I took Dr. Micciche's words at face value and only ever considered *Composition Studies* as a venue for my first attempt at publishing counterstory. True to her commitments, Dr. Micciche deserves credit for taking my work as a counterstoryteller seriously as she pulled out all the stops to publish "A Plea."

Looking back, eight years beyond the 2014 publication of "A Plea," I offer my sincere gratitude to *Composition Studies* as a platform that made space for the publication of my first counterstory. Had Dr. Micciche and *CS* not supported me at this crucial juncture of my career, I am not sure I would have continued to write and publish the body of work I have amassed ever since—a body of work that amounts to sixteen published counterstories as journal articles and edited collection chapters, and my 2020 book, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. My heartfelt thanks to Kara and Matt for this opportunity to reflect on this journey and to give credit where credit is due to the people who have helped me along the way. Huge congratulations to *Composition Studies* on its 50th anniversary.

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