

Book Review

Martinez, A. J. (2020). *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. Conference on College Composition and Communication of the National Council of Teachers of English. (201 pp., paperback \$34.99)

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In a time when Critical Race Theory (CRT) is demonized, challenged, and even forbidden in both K-12 and higher education contexts, it is important for communication center scholars and practitioners to not only be knowledgeable about this intellectual approach, but also to consider how our own practices might be embedded in and reinforce systemic racism. One way to break patterns of injustice is to first become educated about approaches such as CRT, understanding it not as a means of division, but instead as a movement of “activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 1).

Grounded in CRT, Aja Y. Martinez’s *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* provides one such accessible introduction. *Counterstory* compellingly weaves together foundational CRT literature and Martinez’s own stories to argue for counterstory: “a methodology that functions through methods that empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies” (p. 3). Such an approach “rejects notions of ‘neutral’ research or ‘objective’ research and exposes research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of

color” (p. 3). The book is organized into five chapters which provide a concise and relevant overview of CRT, and which demonstrate how counterstory, as a methodology and method, can disrupt such standardized majoritarian methodologies.

Chapter 1: A Case for Counterstory defines and centers counterstory within CRT. Martinez provides a valuable historical overview of CRT and its extension to other disciplines; this is especially beneficial for readers who are novices to CRT. Drawing from prominent scholars, Martinez outlines the major tenets of CRT: “1) Permanence of race and racism; 2) Challenge to dominant ideologies; 3) Interest in convergence; 4) Race as social construct; 5) Intersectionality and antiessentialism; 6) Interdisciplinarity; 7) Centrality of experiential knowledge; 8) Commitment to social justice” (p. 9).

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 connect counterstory to CRT scholars Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell, and Patricia J. Williams. The three chapters follow a similar format, first offering background about each of the CRT scholars and then explaining how they have engaged in counterstory. Martinez then uses her protagonist, Alejandra, to demonstrate counterstory in action by providing examples of narrated dialogue, allegory/fantasy, and autobiographic reflection,

demonstrating an intriguing interweaving of the author's personal stories and research. Martinez connects counterstory to larger pedagogical purposes, stating that, "counterstory as narrated dialogue involves themes intended to assist learning subjects (i.e., students) in imagining and describing their experience" (p. 35). Using counterstory as allegory/fantasy, Martinez offers an engaging conversation between Alejandra and the Octalog (a gathering of eight prominent scholars of rhetorical history) about the current state of rhetoric and writing studies and the role of CRT and counterstory as it is tied to power, credibility, and social justice; in doing so, counterstory allows readers to engage with racism in a way that is "less threatening and confrontational" (p. 57) while "render[ing] visible invisible forms of racism" (p. 60).

Chapter 5: Counterstory in Education: Pedagogical Implications for CRT Methodology reiterates how CRT is largely pedagogical with an emphasis on social change. Given that "a primary CRT concern has always been a critique of education that moves toward social transformation" (p. 111), Martinez asks her audience to consider "How does CRT and counterstory as frame change the way we build courses? What becomes different?" (p. 116). Her final counterstory, an email exchange examining the "master narrative curricula" (p. 118) and CRT in pedagogical contexts, once again uniquely weaves together research and Martinez's own experience.

Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory offers an accessible introduction to CRT and counterstory. Martinez demonstrates how counterstory can be a powerful and effective way to "challenge majoritarian stories of racialized privilege and can help to strengthen

traditions of social, political, and cultural survival, resistance, and justice" (p. 26), and serve as a pedagogical opportunity to help students "creatively enter into imagined conversations with assigned authors" (p. 64).

Counterstory is relevant for communication center scholars and practitioners. The implications for communication centers are clear as *Counterstory* challenges readers to question how we value knowledge and research and how our ways of construing meaning are limited by our epistemological and ontological approaches. The book challenges our understanding of what is considered worthy of publication, how we teach academic writing to students, and whose stories are not being told. Such work compels readers to consider how writing center research and practice reinforce such inequitable systems of power.

Even with its value for communication centers, *Counterstory* seems most relevant for students and instructors of graduate-level rhetoric and composition courses. Given the syllabi provided in the Appendices, Martinez connects research and practice to help instructors reconsider their course readings and how they might include more diverse voices and experiences within their syllabi.

Despite the compelling counterstories and valuable historical context of CRT, novice researchers might be left wondering how counterstory aligns with or intentionally deviates from other methodological, epistemological, and ontological approaches. Scholars who want to use counterstory as a method in their own research might also find lacking principles and practices for constructing counterstories or using counterstory as a methodology and

method. Martinez does not position the book as a 'how to guide,' but instead, centers on building an argument for counterstory's legitimacy.

Patel (2016) reminds us of "the pervasive lie that there can be any knowledge or pursuit of knowledge devoid of context, power, and material impact" (p. x). Reading *Counterstory* is a reminder that context is significant and challenges us to consider how we and our communication centers uphold exclusionary ways of being in the academy. If writing center scholarship does indeed "[hold] mighty potential to change the world" (Greenfield, 2019, p. 13), communication center administrators and practitioners have a responsibility to understand counterstory as a way of enacting change.

Audre Lorde (1984) writes, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 1); counterstory offers a way to combat this new racism (Villanueva, 2006) and to take up this "central and pressing" (Condon, 2007, p. 19) anti-racist work. We can start by critically examining the role that CRT and counterstory can play in our research, syllabi, and how we encourage students to construct knowledge from lived experience. Aja Y. Martinez's book is a valuable tool to help us on this journey.

References

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