

**Martinez, Aja Y. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. Champaign, IL: Studies in Writing and Rhetoric series, CCCC/NCTE, 2020. 190 pages. ISBN: 978-0814108789. \$35.00 (paperback).**

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Critical race theory (CRT) has become a hot-button issue as of late. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* by Aja Y. Martinez is an award-winning contribution to the conversation surrounding CRT. Martinez's monograph offers a clear and helpful historical overview and explanation of CRT in her argument for counterstory as method and methodology appropriate for Writing Studies teaching and research. This review of her monograph aims to elucidate the work's value to K-16 writing activist-teacher-researchers. With its contributions to teaching as well as critical conversations and commitments in Education and Writing Studies, the book actualizes professional statements already reviewed in *JTW*; it can help teachers of writing actualize those statements in their pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and conversations with families and colleagues.

## Overview

Martinez defines counterstory as methodology and method. As a methodology with interdisciplinary roots, counterstory is a "theoretically grounded research approach [...] that functions through methods that empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies" (Martinez 3). As a method, counterstory "[gathers] and [shapes] data into counterstory contexts and characters," which means contexts and characters informed by CRT (Martinez 3). And this is what differentiates counterstory from story: it is informed by the tenets of CRT, which Martinez reviews in detail in the introduction of her monograph. Then, in chapters two through five, Martinez delves into four counterstory methods/ genres,

discusses exemplars of these modes, *and* provides examples of each. Counterstory methods—narrated dialogue explored in Chapter 2, fantasy/ allegory explored in Chapter 3, autobiographic reflection explored in Chapter 4, and dialogic epistolary explored in Chapter 5—are qualitative and person-based; they share narratives that “[center] experiential knowledge so as to better elucidate lived reality from (intersectional) rather than about (essentialist) people of color” (Martinez 14). These narratives are informed by the tenets of CRT and contribute to enhanced understandings of how laws, policies, and procedures operate materially with the goal to expose and eliminate (racial) oppression (Martinez 16). Thus, Martinez’s monograph helps readers understand CRT, and counterstory specifically, as a rejection of “‘neutral’ research or ‘objective’ research” and the recognition of the “experiential knowledge of people of color [as] legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices” (Martinez 3). For writing activist-teacher-researchers at all levels, Martinez’s explanations, analyses of exemplars, and original examples provide important methods for conducting anti-oppression research and ideas for elevating and composing personal social justice narratives with our students.

## Counterstory and the Teaching of Writing

For teachers of writing at all levels, CRT and counterstory offer a pedagogy for “social transformation” (Martinez 113). Martinez dedicates chapter five to delineating the pedagogical implications of counterstory, showcasing how CRT can serve as a heuristic to help teachers and students alike recognize the prevalence of racism in American society and education in particular (112-113). Chapter 5 of *Counterstory* uses a counterstory as epistolary between Martinez’s composite character Alejandra and her mentor to demonstrate how educators can incorporate more ways of knowing into their curricula that center the knowledge held and created by historically and currently marginalized folks. As a writing instructor, I appreciate how Martinez’s entire monograph but especially her

“pedagogy chapter” (114) and appendices productively challenge and even dismantle common uninterrogated assumptions about writing curricula and college writing, making them crucial reading material for K-16 writing educators; she argues that “Whether presented as primary texts within class [appendices A and B] or applied as a framework by teachers to transform curriculum [appendices C and D], counterstories teach us that ‘construction of another world—a socially and racially just world—is possible’” (Martinez 114, citing Yosso 14-15). And isn’t that the message we want to share with students? In this concluding chapter, Martinez calls on us as educators “to embrace our identities as students,” capable and open to learning in service of reframing, revising, and transforming writing education with critical race theory and counterstory (118).

To help us in that work, Dr. Martinez has many freely available YouTube videos and articles that can be used to supplement the important lessons her monograph forwards and that enact her commitment to accessibility in CRT. I am pleased to highlight two of those resources here, which I hope you, your students, and your colleagues will find useful:

- The first is Dr. Martinez’s presentation for Montclair University’s College of Education and Human Services from May 2021, *Counterstory in Education: Critical Race Theory’s Pedagogy for Social Transformation*. Here, Dr. Martinez explains the tenets of CRT and how the theoretical framework can be used as a heuristic for educators. She explains how her own pedagogy centers CRT through close readings and analyses of CRT counterstory exemplars and even makes the case for all the chapters of her monograph as pedagogy chapters (rather than just the explicitly named pedagogy chapter, Chapter 5). Martinez asks viewers/listeners to consider how CRT and counterstory as a frame can change the way we build courses, especially courses in core curricula where majoritarian narratives have the potential to take root and/or be unquestioningly reinforced.

- The second is Dr. Martinez’s 2018 article from *Peitho Journal*, “The Responsibility of Privilege: A Critical Race Counterstory Conversation.” This piece examines centralized privilege in academic spaces with the goal to help readers think about how stakeholders can make space rather than take space in academic institutions. Martinez encourages readers to not shy away from discomfort as they use their privilege to act as accomplices to folks who are marginalized. The essay, complete with a review of CRT and counterstory, a counterstory example by Dr. Martinez, accompanying images, and real-world social justice examples of access and privilege, provides a clear and cogent argument for how CRT and counterstory can be used to critically reflect and take action in matters of intersectional social justice. In my estimation, it is appropriate reading and discussion material for educator professional development and the classroom.

## Counterstory and Engaging in Critical Conversations

Embracing our identities as students is important for engaging in critical conversations about the interventions CRT and counterstory offer with administrators, colleagues, students, and families. Recent discussions in the media, academia, and even legislation have made CRT sound like a bad word, especially in K-16 contexts. Misunderstandings and exaggerations of what critical race theory is have led to a proliferation of anti-CRT legislation at the local, state, and federal levels (Ray and Gibbons; Sawchuk; Alexander). Given the controversy surrounding CRT in society, let alone education, it can feel daunting to broach the topic with others, especially in the context of institution- and classroom-level pedagogical decisions. Martinez also provides insights for such conversations and interventions in *Counterstory*. These critical conversations with our supervisors, colleagues, and the students and communities we serve can begin with the encouragement to

remain open to learning and open to enacting social transformation through education. Furthermore, not only does Martinez break down the tenets of CRT into eight lucid tenets in her monograph, but she also advances a ninth tenet as her own contribution to the lineage and understanding of CRT and counterstory: accessibility. She argues that counterstories should always envision a multitude of audiences “beyond the ivory tower” (Martinez 18). With accessible examples of what a critical race theory lens reveals in counterstories (like those included in *Counterstory*), it can be easier to explain and advocate for “the contribution of other(ed) perspectives” that speak back to “dominant ideology and its influences on the institution, the society, and the very humanity of people of color, a humanity too often denied” (Martinez 26). As such, *Counterstory* can also help writing teachers discuss and advocate for important interventions in our writing curricula that affirm our students’ humanity.

## Counterstory and Actualizing Critical Commitments

What are these important curricular interventions? Well, let’s take a look at Renea C. Frey’s review of “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!” and “CWPA Statement on Racial Injustice” in the previous issue of *Journal of Teaching Writing* to start. Frey’s helpful review cites the rising racial unrest of Summer 2020 that clarified the “deeply racist foundations of American cultural, political, and economic structures” as an impetus for professional organizations to clearly articulate their “stances and reactions to racist practices” (1). The two statements by NCTE/ CCCC and CWPA explain how writing educators’ pedagogical choices can either fuel or dismantle racism in the form of white language supremacy; in their demands and recommendations, these statements acknowledge and push against the racism embedded in writing program, classroom, and assessment policies and procedures (Frey 4). Thus, critical race theory can inform how we, as teachers of writing, “talk about language and writing, how we discuss texts, how we grade assignments, and even

how we interact with students, parents, and colleagues” (Frey 2) in ways that decenter whiteness and instead center how racism operates in our daily lives. Given the disensus around CRT but its importance for developing equitable educational policies at the classroom level and beyond, it’s important that writing educators develop a deeper understanding of critical race theory and its applications to Writing Studies research, teaching, and critical conversations. *Counterstory* can help writing teachers develop that deeper understanding; in my estimation, it is *for* teachers of writing who are interested in more ways to “work to dismantle the ideology of white supremacy that is entwined in our institutions within the very discourse practices we teach” (Frey 8).

## Conclusion

I was initially drawn to Martinez’s work because I saw a bit of myself in her—a Latina in Composition and Rhetoric—and I wanted to work with narrative, which Martinez does in important anti-oppressive ways. In my opinion, Dr. Aja Martinez accomplishes her “task to write [her] way into the academy through a tracing of a revisionist history of rhetoric and writing studies with critical race theory and counterstory as [her] guiding forces” (4) with *Counterstory*. I read myself and my family members in her stories. And that’s important because representation matters (Martinez 27). Somehow, some way, I felt more confident that I could do graduate school and get a job in academia afterwards because she had. Thank you for that, Dr. Martinez.

However, I highlight her work here in *JTW* not only for other Latinas in education and writing studies, but for all writing educators because CRT and counterstory are important interventions to speak back to unquestioned norms that mask bias and racism in Writing Studies and writing education. Martinez’s monograph provides important and clear explanations of CRT and counterstory, helpful analyses of examples, and detailed pedagogical applications for the theory, methodology, and method. For teachers who want to identify and mitigate their own biases as well as those inherent in

our classroom and institutional policies, procedures, and curricula, *Counterstory* is essential reading; counterstory, as method, “[tells] stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” and, as methodology informed by CRT, “expose[s], analyze[s], and challenge[s] majoritarian stories of racialized privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival, resistance, and justice” (26). This book can help teachers of writing understand, explain, and enact the important demands and recommendations in “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!” and “CWPA Statement on Racial Injustice” in meaningful ways. To paraphrase Martinez (27), the book can help teachers, students, researchers, and practitioners of writing develop a (race) consciousness that can enhance our pedagogies, writing programs, and institutions.

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