

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

*Review*

## Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory

Reviewed by Radical Teacher



COUNTERSTORY: THE RHETORIC AND WRITING OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY. BY AJA MARTINEZ. (2020). NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH.

Aja Martinez's 2020 book, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, has been widely reviewed in writing, composition, and rhetoric circles, as it should be. We're reviewing it here not because it needs another review but because we want to share its message and methods with the audience of this journal: radical teachers that work at a wide range of institutions—from universities to prisons to community organizations—who might otherwise never come across this book's many useful insights.

Of course, to start: What is "counterstory?" And why might it be useful to those committed to the theory and practice of antiracist, socialist, and feminist teaching? As Martinez presents it, counterstory is both a methodology emerging from the widely misunderstood field of critical race theory (CRT) and also a new tool in her hands. As she explains, "Counterstory is a methodology that functions through methods that empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies" (3). She uses the concept in an ambitiously dialectical way, navigating theory/practice and teaching/scholarship while weaving together academic debates, sociopolitical critique, intersectional analysis, and autoethnography to produce a racial analysis that functions as a form of pedagogy, a set of creative practices, and an invitation to engage.

Martinez's project draws on and critiques traditional white-dominant modes of rhetorical practice and theory—including liberal ones (which are so often couched in the language of antiracism while reproducing racism's harms)—and she draws inspiration mainly from three CRT exemplars who blow up legal and academic genres: Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell, and Patricia Williams. But she doesn't just *describe* the method: She *enacts* it. Each method she explores—narrated dialogue, allegory/fantasy, autobiographic reflection, letters—is one she uses to deliver her analysis. In other words, when Martinez says counterstory is scholarship, she means it—while also providing usable examples for you (and your students) to mean it, too.

Her clear-eyed analysis, her creative deployment of storytelling to disrupt "master narratives," and her compelling pedagogical accounts make this book required reading for radical teachers who want their students to *do* rather than merely understand CRT. Her methodology accepts no easy assumptions about what allows some forms of writing to be considered "academic" while others are not. In challenging that distinction from the start, she exposes the presumed, habitual, and harmful whiteness of the academy while also injecting the vital creativity of counterstorytelling into a complete reframing of academic



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