

Emerging through Critical Race Theory Counter-storytelling in a Rhetoric and Composition Graduate Studies Context

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Introduction: Critical Race Theory Counter-storytelling

Critical Race Theory (CRT) counterstory has emerged within and across education studies, educational equity, higher education studies, and Latin@ and Chican@ Studies (Delgado, 1989; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; 2002; Yosso, 2005; Yosso, Villalpando, Bernal, & Solórzano, 2001;). Additionally, scholars within the field of Rhetoric and Composition (Rhet-Comp)(Martinez, 2013; 2014; 2016; 2018; Pimentel, 2014; 2015) have explored the intricacies of CRT counter-storytelling in the form of *cuentos*, *testimonios*, narratives (autobiographical, biographical, and composite), personal experience, and parables, among other forms, as valid research and theoretical inquiry.

Martinez (2016) frames CRT counterstory as “a method of telling stories by people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 214). Martinez (2016) explains that counterstory as methodology thus “serves to expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (p. 214). Stock stories, as Delgado (1989) explains, are built by people who navigate dominant positions and select, among a variety of available facts, a picture that is useful to their own positionality and interests. CRT counterstories are significant in that they not only reveal the untold stories of racism, inequity, and injustice as they are mobilized upon people of color, but become increasingly exigent in documenting the stamina of such forces as they infiltrate certain spaces like graduate studies in Rhet-Comp.

Some of the articles within this very symposium contain aspects of counter-storytelling through the use of the “I” (Fischer, Rosche, & McCool, 2020; Sales, 2020). Sherwin Kawahakui Ranchez Sales (2020), for example, examines the larger context of belonging that directly connects to feeling like an imposter. Fischer, Rosche, and McCool’s (2020) article on oppressive patriarchy within graduate studies in Rhet-Comp emphasize the “I” to relay lived experiences in ways “that other kinds of research cannot” (“Introduction”). My contribution also shares this notion of institutional belonging through the narrative and the theoretical.

Additionally, CRT counter-storytelling matters for the state of graduate studies as the field continues to explore how to confront racism, white language supremacy,

and the varying degrees of microaggressions that we know exist and that continue to seep through the discipline (Inoue, 2019). It also matters as the field seeks to expand its own frameworks professionally, ontologically, and pedagogically for including and supporting marginalized graduate students. It's also important considering the discursive space of the WPA-Listserv—a digital space that erupted in a racist attack in the Spring of 2019. How can we imagine, as a field, ways to counter these forces within graduate studies, as the stories, lived experiences, and contributions from marginalized graduate students come to the forefront?

A CRT Counterstory in English Graduate Studies

One of my CRT counterstories highlights a specific writing class I took at the very beginning of my graduate school journey. There were a number of poems and essays on the syllabus, and the most notable, to me, was Morábito's (2010) poem "Oil," written in English. Before class, I also decided to read the same poem by Morábito, "El Aceite," in Spanish, to find interesting points of analysis and understanding, especially within, but also between the two languages. I was relying on my linguistic heritage to help me engage with the text.

As my peers began to discuss the poem, some shared their confusion for what it could be about. When I looked it up in Spanish earlier, I learned that the poem was situated in a book of twelve poems called *Caja de Herramientas*. Each poem focuses on a small tool or item that is seemingly insignificant (e.g. screw, water, sponge, dishrag, hammer), which could be a nod at observing objects that reveal the details of life, including how our lives are shaped by the micro and seemingly ordinary. I read two other poems ("El Trapo" and "El Martillo") for greater context. I shared with my peers that upon reading three of Morábito's poems in Spanish, I found myself wondering more about the contextual situatedness of the poem within a larger work titled *Toolbox*. I was also wondering about the similarities and differences between the original and the translation of the book and what the poem might say to readers in both Spanish and English. After a few seconds of silence and with the sound of crickets outside, one of my white peers quickly changed the subject.

What about This CRT Counterstory?

I tell this story to connect a personal experience in graduate studies with a larger (though very subtle) force of power and privilege that is often at work within the classroom. This matters as we continue to work toward pedagogical frameworks of inclusivity and making sure that the voices and experiences of graduate students who already find themselves on the margins are supported and heard. My story is one example that could have been taken up by the teacher with a few

pedagogical moves such as, *Hmm, say more about that*, or, *Let's linger there for a moment*.

Furthermore, Yosso (2005) talks about the cultural wealth model as a framework to understand how students of color access and experience college from a strengths-based perspective. In this symposium, Sales (2020) also references Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model in terms of aspirational capital. Another form that Yosso (2005) mentions is linguistic capital which alludes to the language and communication skills that students bring to the college space. In terms of my specific counterstory, I also can't help but wonder that if a white peer of mine had shared the exact same knowledge of having come across the work in another language and reading a few more poems for greater context and working across two languages for greater meaning, the response may have been quite different.

This is only speculation, of course, but this is where the workings of educational access, privilege, and belonging that Martinez (2018), Ahmed (2012), and Yosso (2005) allude to in their work become important. Whose epistemologies and cultural wealth is valued or authorized within the educational space or even the class conversation? This matters for graduate studies in Rhet-Comp if we are to seek out ways of resisting such notions by ensuring that contributions of marginalized graduate students be accounted for within spaces of learning.

The Traditions of CRT Counterstory

Solorzano and Yosso (2001) ask a similar question about understanding the state of graduate education as experienced by Chicana and Chicano students. Their answer is developed through CRT and the traditions of counterstory, since the practice of storytelling has "a rich and continuing tradition in African-American (Berkeley Art Center, 1982; Bell, 1987, 1992, 1996; Lawrence, 1992), Chicana/o (Paredes, 1977; Delgado, 1989, 1995a, 1996; Olivas, 1990), and Native American (Deloria, 1969; Williams, 1997b) communities" (p. 475). For oppressed groups, stories have often been linked to survival and resistance (Delgado, 1989).

CRT counterstory, then, is significant as it brings with it a history and practice of documenting the perpetual workings of racism within the institutional spaces of education (Delgado, 1989; Martinez, 2016; 2018; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005; Yosso, Villalpando, Bernal, & Solórzano, 2001). While I argue that marginalized graduate students in the field can be a part of this important practice (even in the context of risk through the documentation of one's own narrative), I also argue that because of the situatedness of CRT within storytelling traditions, counter-storytelling can function to expose and resist the persistence of racism (Yosso, 2005) as it springs up in a variety of ways within graduate studies in rhetoric and composition.

Yosso (2005) leans on Anzaldúa (1987) and Ikemoto (1997) to emphasize that counter-storytelling is not so much about reacting to the stories of racial privilege, as this can function to keep a clear focus on majoritarian stories. Nor is the key focus to prove that racism exists. We know (or should know) that it does. It is, rather, a way of documenting racism and the ways in which it endures and is significant within spaces of education, and in particular, the space of graduate studies in Rhet-Comp. This is why CRT counterstories are often organized through narrative and critical reflection with specific traditions of *testimonios* and witnessing. As Yosso (2005) states,

So while counterstories challenge mainstream society's denial of the ongoing significance of race and racism, they do so by offering a critical reflection on the lived experiences and histories of People of Color. In its multiple forms, counterstorytelling can strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance. (p. 10)

This matters to graduate studies in that as students in Rhet-Comp engage in this practice, the field might not only consider what majoritarian stories have historically been, but how they are operated and mobilized by institutional entities possessing both power and privilege.

Conclusion

CRT counter-storytelling can leave room for students to witness, examine, and interrogate the ways in which their experiences in graduate studies are shaped by the larger discourses of power and privilege, and, in turn, expose and resist those discourses, including the ways in which they are mobilized and framed as majoritarian. CRT counterstory asks the reader to engage with it as a disruptive mode of *storying* (I'm intentional about using the word story as one of action), one that invites storytelling, *testimonio*, and critical reflection that stems from the self for wider cultural, social, and political connections. This kind of praxis can position the writer, in this case the graduate student scholar, in a space of storytelling and can advance crucial conversations that wish to re-center the objectives of social justice advocacy and inclusivity. Readers are also challenged to re-think their positions and stances when addressing such issues, because of a counterstory that complicates the issue personally, narratively, and analytically. "And for the person of color, it does more," Villanueva (2004) says when writing about *memoria*. "The narrative of the person of color validates. It resonates. It awakens, particularly for those of us who are in institutions where our numbers are few" (p. 15).

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