

# COUNTERSTORIES FROM THE WRITING CENTER

EDITED BY  
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AND FRANKIE CONDON

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## INTRODUCTION

Wonderful Faison and Frankie Condon

We met by happenstance one afternoon in a bar in Portland, Oregon. Both of us were attending the Conference on College Composition and Communication and Frankie was having a drink and heart-to-heart conversation with one of the authors in this collection. Wonderful was sitting at the next table. Of our meeting, Wonderful writes,

I remember you discussing something that had to do with racism in the academy and in the writing center and my ears perked. I will be honest: I didn't know who you or Romeo were. I just wanted to know, as I sat at the table drinking my whiskey, who these thoughtful people were talking so eloquently and so truthfully about the university, the writing center, and how the writing center reproduces systemic injustice, and more specifically, systemic racism. I had to chime in, give my two cents, drop the mic if you will I introduced myself, "Hi, I'm Wonderful. Sorry to interrupt. Y'all just said some things that spoke to my heart and I had to say somethin bout that." You, very graciously, said, "I know you. I've heard of you," to which I could only reply, "Oh God, what lies have people been tellin you about me?" We exchanged numbers and over the course of mentorship, conversation, and you providing feedback on articles I intended to publish, we formed a bond of both friendship and scholarship. We wanted to write together and speak truth to power. And so, the journey to this book began, but the journey of our friendship began at that restaurant with me as an eavesdropper, listening, waiting, praying for a moment to jump in and say something to the fair faced [presumed white] woman who actually seemed to be LISTENING to a Brown man. There is comfort, my friend, in those who listen, value, and are active participants in change. There is comfort, my friend, in you.

In the years since our first meeting, we have talked by telephone frequently and texted—often daily—slowly and tenderly forming a bond of friendship, camaraderie, and alliance. We have shared our writing with one another, but also shared the everyday joys and struggles of our lives in the academy and beyond. In some sense, we have defied those historical conditions that agitate against sustained friendship—against trust—between women of colour and white women. We have learned again and anew how powerfully those conditions wind through our

relations such that the crafting of such a friendship and of the care, compassion, and loyalty that compose it must always be an ongoing process. We must learn from one another, about one another, and for one another even as we acknowledge and resist the ways and degrees to which racism and white supremacy insert themselves between us. Of such friendships, Frankie writes,

As we began to correspond with one another after the day we met, you were bold—in the best sense. You asked me to read and respond to your work. You asked me good, hard questions about why I think the way I do and do the work I try to do. You called me into—continue to call me into—a critical self-reflection that is not self-serving so much as it is necessary to the creation of enduring friendship. As we have talked and written to one another, I, too, have leaned on you—asking your advice, running ideas past you, trusting your judgement when mine seems inadequate to some occasion or other. There is, I mean to say, reciprocity between us; we are learning to need one another not in any burdensome sense, but as friends and, as Neisha-Anne Green would say, as accomplices in the labour for social justice that each of us can do from where we stand in the world and in our fields.

Years ago, Dr. Vershawn Young and Frankie were leading an anti-racism workshop at a university in the Midwest. They had asked the participants to get into small groups to address a query. One of the groups was composed of four young white women. After some time, one of them beckoned to Frankie to join them. There was some hemming and hawing and then, finally, one of the group members asked her, “Dr. Condon, what did you do to make Dr. Vay want to be friends with you?” She smiled at the question. After the workshop, Frankie told Dr. Vay what the group had asked—and laughed at the memory. Responding to her laughter, Dr. Vay said, “but that’s a really good question to be asking and for you to be answering.” Frankie has forgotten exactly what she said in response to the women who asked. But she thinks she said that she tries to tell the truth about racism and white supremacy as best she can discern it from where she stands. Not to affirm that truth as all that needs to be known but rather to recognize both her ability to see and what she fails to see as already interwoven with the lived experience of racism, white supremacy, and white privilege that conditions and constrains the lives of peoples of colour. She says she probably wasn’t that eloquent, though, as she was, she admits, surprised and taken aback by the question.

In some sense, the collection we offer to you here is driven by what we imagine was the animating sense of both need and desire beneath the question posed to Frankie on that day. What, we continue to wonder,

are the necessary conditions—the shifts in consciousness, commitment, understanding, and care required of raced-white peoples working in writing centres today—cis-gendered, trans, heterosexual, queer, all—if they are to act, really act, as the accomplices of peoples of colour in the struggle for social justice from within and beyond their institutional sites? This book, however, is predicated particularly on our collective recognition of the dominant role white, straight, cis-gendered women (SCG) have played in writing centre administration as well as in the field of writing centre studies. Our concern is not with individual white women in writing centres but with the social, political, and cultural capital that is the historical birthright of white SCG women, generally, in nations (Canada and the United States) “stamped from the beginning” by white supremacy as well as by racism (Kendi). Our concern—and the concern of the writers whose work is collected in this volume—is the ways in which this legacy has been made manifest in writing centre scholarship, practice, tutor education, and writing centre design and management. And we are most particularly concerned with the lived experiences of tutors, scholars, and directors of colour in writing centre spaces that are also stamped from the beginning.

The essays collected in this volume test, defy, and often overflow the bounds of traditional academic discourse. This is not accidental—not a matter of mistakes made by writers—but rather a purposeful, political choice. Corder (1995) writes, in his pivotal essay, “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love,” that we are all narrators making sense of our lives and of our relations through the stories we tell. Corder notes that our narratives often fit seamlessly with one another or we order our lives in order that we may spend them with those whose stories neither trouble nor challenge our own. But sometimes, he writes, we encounter stories that so destabilize the meanings we have narrated for our own lives that we struggle to account for them. In such cases, Corder argues, we may refuse to hear these othered, these *counterstories*; sometimes, he says, we go to war with one another in order to silence them; sometimes they drive us to madness. But sometimes, Corder suggests, we may choose to listen, may yield to the trouble, the challenge, and allow ourselves to be changed, our narratives to be transformed in the yielding.

Wonderful writes:

But what all can a book do? White people love books so much, as if they provide some divine knowledge or knowledges they lack. I find, white people do know about racism and white supremacy and yet, they do not care. I find white people refuse to listen, to hear, and thus are willfully ignorant of the fact of racism in all of our lives. People of Color have said

this before. People of Color have rung the bell many times about the injustices both within and outside the academy and yet, we are asked repeatedly to reproduce, to regurgitate the words of my academic ancestors and answer “how does racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, etc. exist in the academy?” And that reproduction, that regurgitation, that vomiting up of what white folks have refused to hear again and again is considered new and transcendent—for about five minutes . . . till they forget again. This is not knowledge and the message is not new. This is the same beating of the same drum. This is the same broken record, scratched cd, the Pandora song that cannot be skipped. Scholars of color could be extraordinary contributors to the field of writing center studies, no doubt, if only we were not asked to repeat ourselves over and over again. And writing center scholarship and practice might actually change if only we focused less on pushing the field forward and more on pushing ourselves, our writing centers, our people, and our society in uncompromising and uncomfortable ways towards justice, truth, and yes, freedom.

In his study of colourblind racism, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism & the Persistence of Racial Inequality in Contemporary America*, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) notes that “storytelling often represents the most ideological moments” (p. 75). Frequently, Bonilla-Silva writes, we craft our stories, narrate our lives as if “there was *only one way* of telling them” and as if understanding them were a matter of common sense (p. 75). We narrate our lives, in other words, absent awareness of the ways our stories are ideologically infused and, for the purposes of this book, saturated with dominant racial ideology. Bonilla-Silva writes that “ideologies are about ‘meaning in the service of power.’ They are expressions at the symbolic level of the fact of dominance” (p. 25). “The ideologies of the powerful,” he notes, “are central in the production and reinforcement of the status quo” (pp. 25–26). Bonilla-Silva (2003) argues further that racial ideology provides us with particular frames that are its “set paths for interpreting information” as well as with a particular style (p. 26). “The style of an ideology,” he writes, “refers to its peculiar *linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies (or race talk)*” (p. 53). Race talk, Bonilla Silva suggests, enables narrators to craft the connective tissue between “frames and storylines” that compose the racialized stories we tell, however unconsciously and however much we have learned to tell and interpret them as common sense (p. 53).

Thus, critical race theorists have long theorized the significance of counter-narrative—of counterstory—to the project of intervening, interrogating, and disrupting the rules of racial standing under white supremacy. Critical race theorists have recognized the conjoinment of racial order (the rules of racial standing), race talk, and even the most implicit practices of white supremacy and racism within predominantly

white institutions and the systems of which they are a part (the legal system, for example, and the criminal justice system) (Bell 1992, Williams 1992, Delgado 1989, for example). Counterstory, they argue, performs a kind of double-duty. First, counterstory exposes the everyday erasures, exclusions, and repression of narratives of People of Colour's lived experience—narratives that trouble, challenge, and destabilize “meaning in the service of power,” its frames, its style, or rhetoric. Second, counterstory enables the interrogation and disruption of the everyday practice of racism and white supremacy. Counterstory insists on the legibility and intelligibility of that which has been treated as illegible and unintelligible under the aegis of white supremacist discourse: the racial Other, her lived experience, her resistance, refusal, survival, her brilliance—and the languages, discourses, genres in which she speaks her being. In his book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, Derrick Bell (1992) notes that counterstory affirms and uplifts Peoples of Colour as they hear the truth of their lived experience under racism named. But Bell argues also that the creative truth-telling that constitutes counterstory is, in fact, designed to “harass” white people: to unsettle the commonplace nature of racism and white supremacy that sustains both their comfort and their privilege.

In the field of writing studies, Aja Martinez's work on counterstory deeply informs our understanding of the significance of the genre to the work of anti-racism in writing centre contexts. In the first chapter of her book, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, Martinez (2020) traces the genealogy of critical race theory (CRT) and the relationship of counterstory to that discipline. “Counterstory,” writes Martinez, “is both method and methodology—it is a method for telling stories of those people whose experiences are not often told, and, as informed by CRT, this methodology serves to expose, analyze, and challenge majoritarian stories of racialized privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival, resistance, and justice” (p. 26). Connecting both CRT and counterstory to the field of writing studies, Martinez (2020) writes, “CRT provides scholars in rhetoric and writing studies . . . an ability to bring to the foreground the workings of racism in the daily lives of all people, and it further illustrates that we all function within the hegemony of systems of domination and subordination, advantage and disadvantage, structured according to racial categories” (p. 27). Martinez argues that writing studies scholars and teachers—and, we think, by extension, writing centre scholars and practitioners—have a moral and political as well as pedagogical responsibility to contend with and resist theories and methods in our

field(s) “that dismiss or decenter racism, and those whose lives are daily affected by it” (p. 26). Martinez (2020) clarifies for those who are new to counterstory, that “counterstory as methodology is the verb, the process, the critical race theory–informed justification for the work (Delgado Bernal et al. 364); whereas counterstory as method is the noun, the genre, the research tool” (p. 2). We take as a grounding principle for this book that CRT (critical race theory) and counterstory are powerful means of surfacing, naming, interrogating, and dismantling the workings of racism in the daily life of the writing centre.

Drawing together the threads of narrative and discourse theory from the fields of rhetoric, sociology, and critical race theory, this book is anchored in our collective critique of the continued domination of writing centre studies and its undergirding racial narratives by white, straight, cis-gendered women—whether or not, as individuals, they/we *intend* by our scholarship or pedagogical practice to reproduce a racial status quo. We believe that dominant writing centre theory continues to be cast in *whitely* discourse (frames and style, as Bonilla-Silva employs the term) and thus continues to promote one-with-one pedagogies that are both animated by *whiteness* and promote *whiteness* as the enabling condition for academic discourse. Drawing on Frye and, following from Frye, Condon’s theorization of the term, we understand *whiteness* as an epistemological cum rhetorical positioning that advances the position of speakers possessing the social capital and power accrued under conditions of white supremacy. The *whitely* speaker is the arbiter of value who may justifiably enact “a staggering faith in their own rightness and goodness,” as well as in the rightness and goodness of those social interests their adjudication, martyrdom, and ministry represent, insisting that they will not be moved and the interests they represent will not be changed unless and until “the moves [toward change] are made in appropriate ways” (Frye, 1992, pp. 90–91; Condon, 2017, pp. 34–36). We understand that *whiteness* is not associated necessarily with the race with which any speaker may identify. The writers in this volume recognize, however, the particular position of empowerment many raced-white women have held in the field of writing centre studies—both as scholars of note and as ranking administrators.

Pursuing Condon’s application of the term “*whiteness*” to the teaching and tutoring of writing, we argue that despite the important contributions of prior writing center scholarship to the field’s understanding and address of social justice, equality, and equity, generally speaking, the field’s shared sense of best practices for the tutoring of writing continues to be underwritten by implicit and explicit beliefs associated with a

particularly raced and gendered (WSCG) benevolence or *noblesse oblige* (2018; 2019). Thus, the writing centre participates in the institutionalized practice of cannibalizing the cultures and languages of Othered bodies; enforcing the assimilation of student writers and tutors of color into whitely discourses and the epistemological spaces in which those discourses are legitimated and reproduced. Whitely writing centres, we think, participate in the academy's racial project of defining and containing racial Otherness within acceptable, normative limits, thus preserving white advantage and privilege.

To be clear, we are particularly admiring of recent writing center scholarship that contends with inequities in the writing center that are the effects of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and ethnocentrism, especially *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*, a book addressing identity matters in the writing center from an intersectional standpoint that embraces narrative not as distinct from theorization but integral to the knowledge-making endeavor. We admire Greenfield's recent book, *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Political Engagement*, not only for what she says but also for the wellsprings of hope her work taps. This book, however, concerns itself with the ways and degrees to which, despite this growing focus by writing center scholars on social justice matters, writing centers, in the main and on the ground, remain institutional sites dedicated to assimilationism and the preservation and reproduction of a status quo within and beyond the academy that privileges not merely whiteness, but idealized white, straight, cis-gendered womanhood as well. *CounterStories from the Writing Center* is not intended as a tutoring guide (although we believe tutors should read it). Nor is *CounterStories* intended to teach writing centre directors how to manage anti-racist writing centres (although we believe our book will help directors discern how to begin and sustain that work). Instead, *CounterStories* demands that tutors, directors, and scholars step back from that whitely impulse to take charge in fixing all the things. We ask that tutors, directors, and writers first listen and choose to be touched, changed even, by the stories of those whose working lives in writing centres have been conditioned by their lived experience of racism. Only then, we believe, can acknowledgement, address, or redress reasonably be attempted. In service of aiding WSCG readers in learning to recognize and resist their own internalized white supremacy and its attending discourse, whiteness, *CounterStories* includes both co- and single-authored essays by a diverse group of white women narrating in a variety of ways and at a variety of stages their own attempts to contend with race and racism within and beyond the writing centre. *CounterStories*

is predicated on our collective conviction that if multiracial affiliative relations, accomplice relations are possible—if there is to be friendship, camaraderie, across racial lines as we live and work together in our writing centres, all of us have some hard work to do.

*CounterStories* is edgy and we have not attempted to smooth or disguise its edges. Its authors tell stories that hurt to hear and tell them without so much mediation of feeling as is common in more traditional academic texts. They/we are annoyed, frustrated, sad, cynical, enraged as we seek to make visible, articulable, and powerful the lived experiences and living knowledges of those who have been made liminal or constrained within liminality by both explicit and implicit racial orders within the field as well as in the institutions in which we labour. We know that despite a general distrust of conflict, writing centre folks will have to contend with the righteous anger of peoples of colour produced by years of failure on the part of predominantly white systems, institutions, and raced-white peoples to claim and make actionable their commitments to racial justice by dismantling not only the outward signs, but also and more important, the foundations of white supremacy and racism that unequally and unfairly distribute political, social, and economic advantage along racial lines.

And so, we think that readers of this collection should take offense—not at the ways they are called out by the writers whose work they will encounter here, but at the continuing necessity for such books in our field. When readers feel most inclined to put this book down, to refuse it, we hope they will hear also the ways in which its authors call them in, continuing to hope even as we engage with the evidence that racism is real in the places where we work. If, as a field, we are to move, finally, away from the ongoing cycle of hand-wringing, searching out a person of colour for comfort and advice, finding reasons to ignore the witness of scholars, tutors, and writers of colour, then continuing on in the same old way, all of us, but white, straight, cis-gendered women, in particular, will need to yield to the necessity for both humility and courage that is the enabling condition for changing ourselves, our teaching practices, and our world. We will need to stay for and be moved by the righteous anger of peoples of colour. And beyond *feeling* moved, we will need to *move* ourselves—to get on board or get out of the way.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTERS

*CounterStories* is organized into three sections. Section One, “Calling Out/Calling In,” situates the collection as a whole by offering in

three variations narrative accounts and critical interventions in white supremacy and whiteness as they are enacted in the field of writing centre studies as well as in our writing centres. Each of the three essays in Section One both calls readers out and calls them in, insisting that readers attend and also modeling ways of listening, ways of responding, and ways of engaging critically with/against the whitely self.

Section One begins with Green's chapter, "Prophetic Anti-Racist Activism: 'Black Prophetic Fire' REIGNITED." Green calls readers in as she narrates her dissatisfaction with the term—and the idea—of allyship. Offering as an alternative the idea of accompliceship, Green gives voice both to the pain of being a woman of colour in the predominantly, overwhelmingly white field of writing centre studies and to her determination to be an advocate and an agent for change within and beyond the field. Shifting her focus as she speaks alternately to white readers and to readers of colour, Green reminds us of the importance of the work of anti-racism: that lives are at stake and so is our humanity.

In chapter 2, Condon explores the policing of the raced/gendered performances of white women that, she argues, contributes powerfully to the field's inertia—its failures and its systematic slowness to change even as it accommodates and appropriates calls for change. She acknowledges and gives voice to the anger she feels (has long felt) not only at the field but also and perhaps more so at herself for the ways in which she (and the field) are implicated in whiteness.

In chapter 3, "Beyond the Binary: Revealing a Continuum of Racism in Writing Center Theory and Practice," Haltiwanger-Morrison discusses the burgeoning advocacy for anti-racist pedagogy and practice in writing center studies. She notes, however, that even as the field writ large continues to be dominated by the work of white women, so too does the preponderance of this advocacy. Haltiwanger-Morrison argues that white women working in writing centers—even those who often consider themselves allies—regularly enact racism both directly and indirectly. As she explores the lack of racial awareness among WSCG women writing centre directors, Haltiwanger-Morrison narrates her experience of racism in the world of writing centres. Ultimately, she urges writing center scholars to shift their conceptions and perceptions of racism and its enactments from a binary racist/non-racist, to a continuum in service of a more sustained, enduring individual and collective commitment to anti-racism.

Chapter 4, co-authored by Treviño and Ozias, takes up threads introduced in prior chapters, deepening and extending them. Treviño invites both readers of colour and white readers to "move in and out of

identifying or disidentifying” with her as she narrates her own coming of age story and, in particular, her conflicted relationship to school. Treviño also reflects on her story, on the white gaze that surveils her experience, on the collective survival of white supremacy and racism that her story represents, and on the ways in which the teaching and tutoring of academic writing “center[s] a white audience.” In footnotes that attend Treviño’s critical narrative, Ozias narrates the story of her “listening” to Treviño and models for readers how to “listen.” Ozias leads readers by example into the processes of deep reflection, thinking about our own as well as other white women’s involvement in racism and white supremacy.

Section Two of *CounterStories* even more closely focuses on stories represented as illegible or made unintelligible in predominantly white writing centres, in which racism and white supremacy are denied or ignored. Each chapter in this section offers a differently nuanced account of the frames and styles of race talk in writing centres that silences, suppresses, that actively harms tutors and administrators of colour.

In chapter 5, “The Stories We Tell and Don’t Tell in the Writing Center,” Garcia and Kern argue that while the turn to social justice and anti-racism work in the writing center should be celebrated, this celebration should be modulated by a collective recognition of the insufficiency of what we have accomplished. Garcia and Kern assert that with regard to social justice and anti-racism, the writing center does not possess what it professes and does not accomplish what it purports to do. This chapter explores the writing center’s overdetermined colonial, ideological, and hierarchical histories and present tenses. Garcia and Kern narrate enactments of white benevolence in the writing centre, its negative effects, and the emotional labor required from People of Color as we/they resist tokenization and, instead, speak out against racial injustice.

The co-authors of chapter 6, “White Benevolence: Why Supra-save-a-Savage Rhetoric Ain’t Getting It,” Garcia, Faison, and Treviño, explore multiple impacts of whitely epistemologies in the writing center on the Black and Brown tutors and writers. Through the use of autoethnography, Treviño nuances how epistemologies are raced, gendered, and classed. Faison articulates the emotional and intellectual labor required of writing center scholars of colour who embark on anti-racist research and pedagogy in predominantly white writing centers. She discusses her experiences with faulty performances of white alliance as well as the frequent absence of white allies when the attention of scholars of colour turns to racism, white supremacy, and their manifestations in writing centre theory, pedagogy, and tutor education. Finally,

Garcia critiques the ways in which the writing centre is rewritten as colonial and explores how we might begin the process of decolonizing the centre by dis-inventing our pedagogical investments in western epistemologies.

In chapter 7, co-authors Ceballos, Faison, and Olivas testify, each telling one of her own stories about encounters with both primary and secondary racism. That is, each writer narrates not only a direct or explicit experience of racism but also and relatedly an attending experience of denial and silencing performed by white tutors and directors. Ceballos, Faison, and Olivas describe that denial and silencing as “spiritual bypassing,” which they define as the practice of “ignoring the racial harm and trauma” of racism on Peoples of Colour.

Section Three features the work of white writing centre scholars and directors who are trying to come to terms with the ways and degrees to which racism and white supremacy manifest and are operative in and through their writing centres, as well as to understand how their lives, their identifications, and performances of self have also been shaped by them.

In chapter 8, “Resisting White, Patriarchal Emotional Labor in the Writing Center,” Caswell explores power, privilege, and white heteronormativity in the writing centre. Caswell argues that the nexus of these forces produces affective economies within writing centres that are both normalized and exploitative. The affective economies of writing centres, Caswell suggests, invite, reject, celebrate, and harm tutors and student writers. While prior writing centre scholarship acknowledges emotional labor, Caswell notes, the way in which emotional labour in the writing centre perpetuates affective economies is driven by white, middle class, patriarchal hegemony. As a countermeasure, Caswell considers how writing center directors might redirect and reframe their own emotional labor to shift the grounds of affective economies in service of more racially just writing centers.

Chapter 9, “A Long Path to *Semi-Woke*,” features Reglin’s narrative and interrogation of her own performance of white benevolence in working with a struggling student of color. As Reglin’s story unfolds, she relates her struggle to unlearn the implicit racism that shaped both her white middle-class subject position and her convictions about the fundamental goodness of her work. Once committed to what she now recognizes as colourblind racism, Reglin describes coming to terms with the concomitance of not knowing and claiming to know that attends colourblind ideology as well as with the impacts of not knowing on the tutors and students with whom she worked.

In chapter 10, “Stories of Activist Allies in the Writing Center,” co-authors Smith and Baldwin explore their evolving roles as allies conducting activist work by situating themselves in their own histories and stories. Together they explore the question of whether or not or how they can be allies if they do not share the same positionalities and marginalities of other oppressed peoples. Finally, they argue that allyship is an identity position that must be continuously made and remade, visibly and meaningfully. Smith and Baldwin argue that writing centre directors and tutors must be brave enough, courageous enough that the risks of allyship seem feasible.

### A FINAL NOTE

Anti-racism requires of all of us, but particularly those of us who occupy privileged subject positions, including whiteness, that we/they stay even as the going gets hard—especially as the going gets hard—even as we are called to recognize, acknowledge, and address our/their implicatedness in systems and structures of oppression. We hope that you will stay, that you will sit with being called out, that you will hear the ways in which we are all calling you in, and that you will recognize yourselves in the critical self-reflection the writers in this volume model for you.

~WONDERFUL AND FRANKIE

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