

Review: *Hope I Join the Band: Narrative, Affiliation, and Antiracist Rhetoric*

Andrea Riley Mukavetz

Condon, Frankie. *I Hope I Join the Band: Narrative, Affiliation, and Antiracist Rhetoric*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2012. Print.

I Hope I Join the Band is a beautiful piece of prose, artfully crafted to show that there will always be more work to do in antiracist movements. Condon bravely opens herself up to her readers and does not try to make herself the hero of her own history or of antiracism activism and scholarship. Instead, she carefully and thoughtfully examines what she believes to work by offering a set of rhetorical strategies built upon the work of critical race scholars, antiracist scholars, queer theorists, and American Indian Studies scholars. She brings these scholars together as her intellectual relatives to build an antiracist theory, methodology, and pedagogy.

In *I Hope I Join the Band: Narrative, Affiliation, and Antiracist Rhetoric*, Condon explores the complexity of beginning and staying with antiracist work from the perspectives of Euro-Americans. Condon situates the discussion primarily within academic cultural communities. In doing so, she ultimately addresses not only the need for antiracist work within academia, but also how it has failed thus far. In fact, it is crucial for raced-white peoples to understand how to “create conditions in which [they] might learn from [their failures] (12).” Furthermore, Condon observes that whites seldom return to learning more about antiracist work, but assume a static state of mastery (12). Condon enacts performative antiracism to provide a set of rhetorical strategies to begin antiracist work and most importantly, continue with it. These strategies are decentering, nuancing or transmemoration, and bearing witness. These

rhetorical strategies “dig into ways of conceiving, thinking, speaking, and acting performatively in antiracist struggles for whites” (12). For Condon, *I Hope I Join the Band* works at the intersections of activism and scholarship—of *praxis* and *poesies*.

In Chapter 1, “Chattering with Angels,” Condon begins building a performative antiracist framework by digging deep into her history, arguing that whites must learn how to draw from their epistemological traditions and craft their own stories. She shows her readers how to do this by situating herself historically, socially, and politically and telling a series of stories that help her reflect on the moments when she was marked as raced white. For example, she shares a memory from her childhood: shopping for groceries with her mother and her adoptive, Ojibwe brother. In this story, she notices how community members marked her brother as “Other” and herself as “normal.” Condon uses this story to come to the following observation

The rules of racial standing, while serving my interests or benefiting me by establishing my status as a white girl—opening up access to social and educational opportunities for me—also broke me into pieces, sliced me away from one whom I loved dearly, passionately, crazily (in the crazy mixed-up way siblings so often do love one another). (31).

For Condon, being marked white obviously relates to her social and educational opportunities (re: privilege). Here, she theorizes how this privilege impacts how she forms relationships and makes meaning. This type of racial marking creates and benefits from hierarchy and separation; it rejects knowledge practices and relationships that acknowledge how we are interconnected. Condon’s critique does not stop there. Instead, she further examines how whiteness, an epistemology, creates and disseminates knowledge based off of tidy boundaries and categories. Drawing from Marilyn Frye and Minnie Bruce Pratt, Condon defines whiteness as “learned ways of knowing and doing characterized by a racialized (white) sense of oneself as best equipped to judge, to preach, and to suffer” (34). Whiteness emphasizes the idea that there is a clear right way to live, to work, and to be. Condon observes that whiteness hinders the ability for white folks to change or to effect change, especially while working with people of color (34). In fact, she

argues that whiteness impedes the collaborative work between whites and non-whites. For example, Condon notices how raced white people use whiteness strategies to depoliticize and simplify the stories of people of color. However, she is careful to show the distinction between drawing upon one’s epistemological traditions and using whiteness to craft narratives from white perspectives. By undoing a whiteness way of knowing, Condon argues that antiracist workers can ask important questions like “[c]an white activists, teachers, and tutors join with colleagues of color in antiracism work?...Can we possibly learn to listen, to recognize and acknowledge, without recentring ourselves, without recentring whiteness, as we attend (34)?” I believe that Condon’s answer would be “yes” to these questions, but she would encourage us to pay careful attention to the types of practices we enact to do antiracist work. Condon is upfront that crafting these stories—as she notes, re-orienting oneself is a troubling and complicated process that never ends. There is no point of mastery, but a constant revisiting and tending to.

In Chapter 2, “Wrestling with Angels,” Condon continues enacting a performative antiracist framework by exploring how racism, isolation, and violence affected her brother’s life and their relationship. Condon uses these stories to develop a set of rhetorical strategies to build an antiracist theory and methodology useful for Euro-Americans who are raced white. Condon begins with decentering,

which demands that we recognize, acknowledge, and account for the fact of racism as a composing force in our socially perceived identities as well as in our lived experience, it requires us to develop new ways of learning from and responding to those moments of failure in our performances on antiracism. (70)

Decentering does not provide a moral landscape, but offers a place to meet and form relations. Through decentering, one can pinpoint how she or he is still complicit to internalized racial oppression or white supremacy. While theorizing awareness and responsibility, Condon provides a complex discussion on how the interconnectedness of love and power is vital to understanding the ethics of decentering and antiracist work. In fact, Condon argues that we need a language to “name” how love and power are interconnected. This language will assist antiracist workers in talking about the relationship between the personal, professional, and

the impact of institutional spaces (72). Drawing from Martin Luther King Jr, Chela Sandoval, and Paul Tillich, Condon examines how power and love both have destructive aspects. For example, in the quotidian, love might convey absolute affirmation where power means to involve abuse. If we re-orient these strategies into an antiracist framework, we can use them ethically, responsibly, and transformatively. Yet, Condon argues, we must be open to flexibility as well as to dissenting and oppositional voices. For Condon, accepting these voices is an example of practicing decentering through an ethics of love and power. Thus, decentering becomes about *how* antiracist workers engage and perform within registers of dialogues.

In Chapter 3, “Angels before Thee,” Condon begins by examining the relationship between performative antiracism (“a labor that undoes the distinctions between personal and institutional work or systematic-change work” (86) and nuancing. Condon argues that nuancing is vital to performative antiracism because it “engages us in the work of recognizing and articulating critically the scope, dimensions, and impacts of existing relationships among and between the local and the global, the individual and the collective” (86). By practicing transmemoration or nuancing, one can remember their own history “without denying or effacing the memories of others and of situating our own and others’ memories within the context of the collective—not just how *I* come to be, but how *we* come to be” (85). It’s here, that Condon seeks to draw out not only the interconnectedness of these strategies, but the interconnectedness of people. Condon recognizes that these practices might appear to be similar to Krista Ratcliff’s rhetorical listening. But, she asserts, these practices are different because the goals are different. Where Ratcliff uses rhetorical listening for “multiracial tolerance and cooperation,” Condon uses nuancing and decentering to offer an account on how race is a social and rhetorical construct and from within that construction, call for negotiation and facilitation of identifications and communications (89). Condon’s insistence on how these practices are different emphasizes that antiracist work is not “multiracial cooperation,” but a reorientation to discourses on affiliation and narrative.

In Chapter 4, “An Open Door for Elijah,” Condon re-tells the story of the prophet Elijah and the story of the open door through an antiracist framework. She shows how these stories of seemingly good intentions use

whiteness strategies to create spaces and places of rhetorical imperialism or nostalgia (manifest manners). She writes, “[m]y point is not that we ought not to narrate or interrogate our lives from this place, but that, left undisturbed, habitual and learned epistemologies and rhetorics of whiteness will reproduce the conditions for their own emergence and reproduction” (122-123). In this section, Condon returns to whiteness to begin a discussion on the implications of raced whiteness—of being “white.” This discussion complicates the predicament of drawing from one’s epistemological traditions and using whiteness strategies to craft stories. Basing her work off of Malea Powell and Gerald Vizenor, Condon explores how survivance, a project created by and for non-white people, teaches her how raced-white people are also imaginary—also embedded within paracolonial discourses; “whites” must learn how to mock the idea of “white” to duck and move around their own complicity in institutional and imperial language. The work of antiracism, then, is to “defigure white as presence-absence...to evacuate the *I* that presupposes an Other” (128). It’s, in this chapter, that Condon’s analysis of whiteness and use of performative antiracism comes together as she examines how language has failed those who seek to stay with antiracist work. Condon argues that there is a certain amount of labor needed to create and sustain a “commodious language,” a language that acknowledges that people need each other to do antiracism work. For Condon, this means working at grassroots levels, being pragmatic, and learning how to organize and strategize within institutional spaces, all the while recognizing that the antiracist work done by raced white people is different than the antiracist and survivance work done by peoples of color. Condon believes that we need both labors to continue and that we need to make space for both of these labors, in order to sustain this work over time (140). Condon argues that the work of antiracism will never succeed, if people

...allow whitely ways of thinking to tame our languages and our rhetorics... We need to spend less time superimposing our unimaginative simulations of Others over and against those with whom we would make relations and more time imagining ourselves as beings capable of wild love that exceeds and transgresses the multiple purposes and meanings of an open door for Elijah. (143)

Condon ends this chapter by encouraging raced-white people to bear witness and to testify. In doing so, antiracist workers do not seek to elevate stories and histories, but rather to “unhinge” the power of universality and authority and to extend these stories beyond an individual and into a historical group. In doing so, we are able to examine how the stories by raced-whites have been suppressed and for what motives.

In the final chapter, “After the Fire, a Still Small Voice,” Condon shares a written correspondence with her friend, Dr. Vershawn A. Young, as a way to draw out further implications of committing to antiracist work. I read these conversations as further evidence on how friendships, care, trust, power, and love affect antiracist work. These public letters present a dialogue between two colleagues who deeply care and respect each other, but have different worldviews and do not always agree with each other. This conversation makes visible the difficult work of dialogue—of making space for dissenting or modifying voices. In this section, Condon’s theoretical concepts are put into practice. Here she reflects on rhetorical strategies like decentering, nuancing, and to bear witness and further negotiates the difficulty of enacting them.

Overall, I find Condon’s project to be successful. I appreciate how she takes the time to show her readers how to build an antiracist framework while drawing attention to the difficulty of doing this work. At times, I got lost in the terminology of Condon’s antiracist framework, especially as she brings together nuancing, transmemoration, and decentering. But, often, this is the consequence of telling stories to understand stories: to use story as methodology. *I Hope I Join the Band* has important contributions to Rhetoric and Composition because it provides us with strategies on how to develop a sustained rhetorical practice. Furthermore, this book seeks to maintain and cultivate disciplinary relationships with Gender studies, Sociology, and Ethnic studies by making visible how a performative antiracist framework must be made across disciplinary and intellectual communities. Lastly, as a mixed Native person, I recognize that I am not directly a part of Condon’s audience, but I felt welcomed and encouraged to listen, examine, and disagree (if I chose to) with Condon and her relations. I appreciate the physical, emotional, and intellectual labor Condon put in to building this framework and I believe that we can learn

from her on how to use performative antiracism to build theory and methodology: to work at the intersections of activism and scholarship.

About the Author

Andrea Riley Mukavetz is Assistant Professor in the Rhetoric and Writing program at Bowling Green State University. She teaches graduate courses in cultural rhetorics and contemporary rhetorical theory. Her research interests are American Indian rhetorics, cultural rhetorics, decolonial historiography, and community-based research. Currently, she is working on a long-term oral history project with a group of urban, native women from Lansing, Michigan.