

Book Review: CounterStories from the Writing Center

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As a resident of Minneapolis, Minnesota, home of George Floyd and the tragedy of his murder, I am consistently looking for resources to engage with tutors on discussions of race and identity. *CounterStories from the Writing Center*, edited by Wonderful Faison and Frankie Condon, provides an invaluable resource for tutors, students, administrators, faculty, and the like to learn from and reflect upon. Pedagogical collections in writing centers stress the importance of challenging and transforming structures that perpetuate whiteness as the standard (Denny et.al., 2018; Greenfield, 2019; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011). Transitioning away from a paradigm of “white benevolence” to a collaborative approach, as Wonderful Faison advocates, requires recognizing and admitting these inherent defaults, an acknowledgment that is crucial to dismantling them. Faison explains that “for those who have gained access to what they want and what they desire through these societal acts, helping reshape norms, standards, and even acts of resistance, [white people] must and should give back to the society of which we all benefit” (92). Through introspection, well-defined viewpoints, and a comprehensive grasp of oppressive structures, staff in writing centers can proficiently advance the creation of anti-racist communities by employing their individualized teaching techniques to involve advocates outside the confines of the writing center: students, faculty, and administration.

CounterStories from the Writing Center stands as a compelling and timely contribution to the field of writing center studies. The book aims to educate all readers, but specifically “white, straight, cis-gendered women” (5). I am a cis white woman who directs the

writing center at a university with an exceptionally diverse student body. We are a small private liberal arts college in the Midwest with a very small writing center that serves a vast array of students from a myriad of backgrounds and identities. Our population consists of 58% students of color and is located in one of the most racially diverse neighborhoods in the state, housing the largest population of Somali immigrants in the country. And yet, despite this population and my efforts, my staff predominantly consists of white women. I have asked myself and my staff and others why this might be the case to no avail. It is in reading this text that I began to understand and to reflect on the discussions I must have with my staff, the insistences I must make to administrators, and the efforts I must make moving forward to change the perception of the writing center, both those who work within and those for whom it serves. In tutor training, I plan to ask my student to read the narratives found in *CounterStories* to practice the important act of listening to marginalized voices and critically engaging with white supremacy in writing center tutoring.

The core focus of *CounterStories* is to amplify the voices and experiences of people of color within writing centers—encompassing tutors, administrators, and students—and to initiate a fresh dialogue surrounding power dynamics, diversity, and social identity. Anchored by counterstories—“stories that so destabilize the meanings we have narrated for our own lives that we struggle to account for them” (5)—the book’s central strength lies in its vivid portrayal of marginalized perspectives. In doing so, *CounterStories from the Writing Center* serves as one response to the call for stories and pedagogies that “may disrupt the antiracism failures in writing studies” (68) echoed in Clarissa J. Walker’s “Story Culture Live: Black American Story Spaces as Actionable Antiracism Work,” in which Walker advocates for amplifying and honoring Black American storytellers to realize the impact these narratives may have on dominant cultural understandings of language.

CounterStories is divided into three sections. Section One, titled “Calling Out/Calling In,” establishes the context of the collection by presenting three different narrative accounts and critical

interventions addressing white supremacy and whiteness in writing center studies and practice. These essays in Section One simultaneously challenge and engage readers, urging them to pay attention, demonstrating how to listen, respond, and critically engage with the concept of whiteness. The first chapter in this section, authored by Green, titled “Prophetic Anti-Racist Activism: ‘Black Prophetic Fire’ REIGNITED,” invites readers to reflect on the limitations of allyship and offers the concept of accompliceship as an alternative. Green shares her experiences as a woman of color in a predominantly white writing center studies field and highlights her commitment to advocating for change. Following this, Condon explores how white women’s performance in writing centers perpetuates the field’s inertia, acknowledging her own complicity. Chapter 3, “Beyond the Binary: Revealing a Continuum of Racism in Writing Center Theory and Practice” by Talisha Haltiwanger-Morrison, discusses the prevalence of white women’s advocacy for anti-racist pedagogy in the field but argues that even well-intentioned white women often unintentionally perpetuate racism. She calls for a shift from binary racist/non-racist thinking to a continuum approach to combat racism effectively. Chapter 4, co-authored by Anna K. Treviño and Moira Ozias, reflects on these themes through a conversation between the two writers. Treviño invites readers to navigate her coming-of-age story, reflecting on the white gaze and the collective impact of white supremacy. In response, Ozias models how to engage in deep reflection and thought about one’s involvement in racism and white supremacy. This chapter demonstrates the listening that the editors advocate for in their introduction, discouraging readers from only thinking about how to solve the problem.

Section Two, “CounterStories from the Writing Center,” explores various aspects of race talk in writing centers that suppresses and harms tutors and administrators of color through stories that are often marginalized or silenced in predominantly white writing centers. In Chapter 5, “The Stories We Tell and Don’t Tell in the Writing Center,” Romeo García and Douglas S. Kern ask us to resist the urge to cling to the idea that “we don’t have that problem here” in writing centers. They emphasize the need for collective recognition of the writing center’s historical and present ties to colonialism and the

emotional labor required from People of Color to resist tokenization and speak out against racial injustice. Following this, co-authors Garcia, Faison, and Treviño examine the impact of whitely epistemologies on Black and Brown tutors and writers in writing centers in Chapter 6. They explore how epistemologies intersect with race, gender, and class, highlighting the emotional and intellectual labor required for anti-racist work. Chapter 7, authored by Mitzi Ceballos, Faison, and Bernice Olivas, recounts personal stories of encountering racism and the subsequent denial and silencing by white tutors and directors.

Section Three of *CounterStories*, “Essaying White Anti-Racism,” focuses on white writing center scholars and directors grappling with racism and white supremacy in their centers and examining how these issues have shaped their lives and identities. In Chapter 8, “Resisting White, Patriarchal Emotional Labor in the Writing Center,” Nicole I. Caswell explores how power, privilege, and white heteronormativity affect writing centers’ emotional economies. Caswell suggests ways for writing center directors to shift these affective economies towards greater racial justice. Chapter 9, “A Long Path to Semi Woke,” features Jill Reglin’s narrative and self-examination of her own white benevolence in working with a student of color. She discusses her journey to unlearn implicit racism and confront the impacts of not knowing. Chapter 10, authored by Dianna Baldwin and Trixie G. Smith, explores their roles as activist allies in writing centers and questions the feasibility of allyship when they do not share the same positionalities as oppressed peoples. They argue that allyship must be continuously redefined and actively pursued by writing center directors and tutors.

One of the book’s remarkable strengths is its commitment to an intersectional lens. Acknowledging the multi-dimensional nature of identity, the authors skillfully interweave narratives that explore facets such as race, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. The authors employ these counterstories as a powerful tool to challenge conventional narratives, spotlighting the intricate dynamics that underlie writing center interactions. By presenting a diverse array of perspectives, the book dismantles established norms,

revealing the often overlooked power dynamics and underlying systemic issues within writing center environments. This intersectional approach subverts simplistic analyses and challenges the monolithic narratives that have dominated the discourse in our pedagogical and theoretical texts.

Language diversity is another crucial aspect addressed within the book. Recognizing language as a conduit for cultural expression and communication, the authors explore the challenges posed by language barriers and offer insights into fostering effective communication in diverse linguistic contexts, particularly in Treviño and Ozias's "A Need for Writing Coalitions: A (Chi)Xicana's Fotos y Recuerdos –Anticipating (Dis)Identification" and Faison, Garcia, and Treviño's "White Benevolence: Why Supa-save-a-Savage Rhetoric Ain't Getting It." These essays challenge the notion that the language and linguistic practices of the "Colored body" should be refined to fit the white standard (82). This emphasis enhances the book's relevance and applicability within writing centers characterized by linguistic diversity. However, the writers acknowledge that there is much work to be done on this matter. Summing up their perspective in the text's Afterward, Neisha-Anne S. Green and Condon explain that

The Big-D and Small-D discourses, as James Gee might say, are syncretic in the same way the broader social discourses and rhetorical practices of whiteness are: representing predominantly white (and structurally whitely) institutional spaces and whites who function as their keepers as generous, kind, and hospitable in the democratic sense (all inclusive) while at the same time legitimating, enabling, and enforcing inequality in access, opportunity, linguistic supremacy, and discrimination within and beyond both the writing classroom and the writing center. We argue that, as a field, we have known or have had the opportunity to know the truth of this hypocrisy for a very long time (152).

Faison and Condon's edited collection effectively balances personal narratives with theoretical discussions, an intricate fusion that enables readers to emotionally connect with the stories while

equipping them with the analytical tools to critically engage with the material. This approach ensures the book's accessibility to a wide range of readers, including educators, practitioners, and researchers. However, the book's impact transcends its accessibility; it challenges educators and scholars to interrogate their own assumptions and biases. By amplifying marginalized voices, *CounterStories from the Writing Center* impels a reevaluation of pedagogical approaches and practices within writing centers and encourages stakeholders to reflect on their role in perpetuating or dismantling systemic inequalities.

It is important to acknowledge that the book prioritizes theoretical discussions and lived experiences over prescriptive solutions, and the absence of explicit practical strategies may disappoint some readers seeking actionable guidance. Yet the absence of prescriptive solutions underscores the complexity of the issues at hand and the necessity for ongoing reflection and engagement. As the editors explain,

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 centers have been conditioned by their lived experience of racism (9).

In essence, *CounterStories from the Writing Center* is an indispensable read for writing center directors, scholars, and tutors. The book invites readers to embrace humility, engage in critical self-reflection, and undertake genuine efforts to address racism and inequality within writing centers. Its narratives resonate deeply and offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of marginalized individuals. While not a comprehensive guide, this anthology compels stakeholders to listen, reflect, and engage in meaningful action toward building more equitable writing center environments. Ultimately, the book is a powerful catalyst for dialogue, change, and the reimagining of the writing center landscape.

References

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