
Critical Theory, Critical Race Representations: Counterstory as Literary Intervention

Aja Y. Martinez

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Aja Y. Martinez (she/her) is Associate Professor of English at University of North Texas. Dr. Martinez is author of the multi-award-winning book *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* and is co-author, with Dr. Robert O. Smith (UNT History), of several forthcoming titles on the storied histories of CRT.



Robert O. Smith (Chickasaw) is Assistant Professor of History at the University of North Texas, specializing in religious history, Indigenous studies, and critical race studies. Smith, an enrolled citizen of the Chickasaw Nation, is the author of *More Desired than Our Own Salvation: The Roots of Christian Zionism* (Oxford, 2013) and editor, with Göran

Gunner, of *Comprehending Christian Zionism: Perspectives in Comparison* (Fortress, 2014).

We wrote this course design in May 2023 in the great state of Texas. At that point, Texas educators like us were two months into what had proven a harrowing conclusion to our spring semester. Near the beginning of March 2023, we were informed the state legislature would soon present several bills^[1] aimed at Texas state public institutions of higher education—bills that mimicked and echoed many of the other anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) bills already instituted within our K–12 systems. With higher education now in the legislature’s crosshairs, tenure was under threat; these proposed bans on DEI and CRT included provisions for denying/stripping tenure or outright dismissing professors ensnared in student and public complaints. This is the context in which we have built and taught our course: Critical Theory, Critical Race Representations: Counterstory as Literary Intervention.

This course was prompted by two visits the previous year to CRT founder Derrick Bell’s papers, archived at New York University. This archival adventure presented so much content, and so many unexpected forks in our research path, that we didn’t take a break during winter break—we wrote until we completed a book proposal and a couple of sample chapters for a new project on the storied history of CRT. Our work with Bell’s historic papers has provided a pathway for us to connect with other CRT founders such as Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, who have proven to be invaluable friends and mentors in our development process of this new project. Conversation with them also contributed significantly to the construction of this course, which teaches the content of this developing book. With the combined foundation of Bell’s archival

documents, Delgado and Stefancic’s oral histories, and the rich and sprawling literatures throughout the over five decades CRT scholars have been writing and speaking, we had everything we needed to craft a course that instructed students on a storied history of CRT, a history humanized with stories—the many *interwoven stories*—of CRT’s founding and development through the people and their relationships that breathed life into this movement.

The premise we are working from within our books (forthcoming with University of California Press and New York University Press) and this course is that there is a real need, now more than ever, to tell a new story about the founding and development of Critical Race Theory. While the course presents a history of this movement within our contemporary moment of culture-war attack, it is also a chronicle of the human experiences, relationships, and interconnections that give the movement its spirit and resolve. Through this history, students learn how CRT’s founders came together, what they created, and why. Much of what is already known and generally taught about CRT from the movement’s own perspective is couched in academic discourse that boils CRT down to key figures, key dates, and theorized tenets. While this approach has provided important insights for scholarship, the academic style of much CRT writing and teaching has often presented more of a barrier than an invitation for other audiences who might benefit from accessing the rich insights of CRT. In this current moment, academic concepts have (often spuriously) been weaponized to instill fear and disinformation.

This course humanizes CRT, a movement that has been flattened and demonized by opponents at every turn. We have visited the archives. We have read deeply in sources not often referenced. We have engaged in conversation with many CRT founders.

Through this effort, we have gathered the strands of people's stories in order to weave the tapestry of CRT's founding history. The idea that eventually became CRT was always about people and their relationships. As we progress through the course, learners engage stories of how the people who informed CRT's founding period cared for one another as they navigated the intersecting injustices of US institutions, all while encountering the same broken record of resistance to CRT work and ideas. Through these stories, this course trace timelines and characters unknown or previously unassociated with CRT, lifting up the hidden figures foundational to CRT. In all, this course demonstrates how immensely human CRT is, with a beating central heart dependent on story and a storytelling tradition.

Within this course-design portfolio, we present the following:

- Course Syllabus
- Course Reading Schedule
- Assignment Sheet: Critical Analysis
- Assignment Sheet: Seminar Project

- Student Examples: Critical Analysis
 - Emily Bailey
 - Cat Blackwell
 - Nicholas Durham
 - Grace Leuschen
 - V. Manuel Muñiz
 - Mari Newman
 - Eva Thor
- Student Examples: Counterstory Seminar Project
 - Josephine Collins
 - Natali Coronado
 - Kaley Johnson
 - Samantha Pray
 - McKenzie Shoemaker
 - Alaia Snell
 - Sam Thiersch

In all, this course, as pedagogical representation of our developing research into the humanized and storied history of CRT, demonstrates that learners at the undergraduate level can indeed engage and comprehend an accurate representation of this academic field and movement. As the student projects illustrate, when learners are presented the story of CRT—content beyond merely extracted key terms, facts, definitions, and dates—they are able to develop a better understanding that nullifies rampant disinformation while fleshing out what CRT is and what it can be.

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Critical Theory, Critical Race Representations: Counterstory as Literary Intervention

INSTRUCTOR CONTACT

Name: Dr. Aja Y. Martinez, she/her

Email: aja.martinez@unt.edu

[See Dr. Martinez's faculty page \(links to an external site\).](#)

Catalog Description: 3 hours. Specialized, focused study of a particular topic, theme, figure, practice and/or theory within the fields of literary studies, rhetoric and writing studies.

Prerequisite(s): none

Core Category: English Composition and Rhetoric

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In our fraught political moment scholars from the Humanities—English Studies, and Rhetoric and Writing Studies, particularly, have the tools to recognize the most recent attack on Critical Race

Theory (CRT), for the marketing and branding exercise that it is. As scholars of rhetoric, we know it is insufficient to point out facts concerning how the opposition is getting it wrong. Their story about what CRT is (lies and inaccuracies that they are) has already been more persuasive. As rhetoricians we know how this works. In this fraught political moment, we know that we must fight story with story. More to the point, we must fight tall tales, myths, and pre-suppositions with the truth only stories can reveal.

Through their stories, legal storytelling exemplars such as Richard Delgado, Patricia J. Williams, and Derrick A. Bell tell us, but also their field and any other field or person who has read their work that *story* is how to do this work—story is the way. Telling stories is how we invite a multiplicity of audiences into the conversation, how we build opportunities for points of access to the content, be it the Constitution, theory, legal precedent, etc. The rhetoric of story in turn informs how we as teachers of writing *teach* people to write their stories, inclusive of all the methodological considerations our fields within English studies (Literature and Creative Writing

inclusive) contribute to concepts such as worldbuilding, dialogue, character development, style, diction, etc. We have the tools, the equipment, the training, the lens, to engage this conversation on counterstory, the counterstories that will counter the stories the racist, radical right would weave and tell to disinform the public about CRT.

In the past two and half years of this mainstream and hot-button national fight, the urgency of storytelling through the methodology of counterstory has been underutilized by those seeking to defend and promote Critical Race Theory. In this course we will study how scholars in the Humanities—scholars of Rhetoric and Writing Studies in particular—can heed the call for collaboration issued by CRT founders and legal storytelling exemplars Delgado, Williams, and Bell. We will think through ways artists and activists are working to take back the narrative from those who would promote distortion and disinformation. We will explore the ways counterstory-tellers in the Humanities are extending the storytelling legacy of CRT, writing their own stories so others can be told.

REQUIRED MATERIALS

Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 4th ed. New York UP, 2023.

Martinez, Aja Y. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. NCTE, 2020.

Williams, Patricia *Giving a Damn: Racism, Romance and Gone with the Wind*. Harper Collins, 2021.

All additional course readings available as PDF files or links to e-books

COURSE SCHEDULE OVERVIEW

- Week 1: A Case for Counterstory
- Week 2: Interest Convergence and Legal Storytelling: Two Sides of the Same CRT Coin
- Week 3: The Civil Rights Chronicles
- Week 4: CRT's Origins (his)Stories
- Week 5: Critical Analysis Writing Week
- Week 6: Bestselling Bell: A Legal Storytelling for the Masses
- Week 7: Delgado: The Rodrigo Chronicles
- Week 8: Williams: Diary of a Mad Law Professor
- Week 9: Critical Analysis Writing Week
- Week 10: Giving a Damn: Racism, Romance and Gone with the Wind
- Week 11: Against Formalism: Stefancic and Delgado's Storied Past toward a Storied Future
- Week 12: Counterstory Tool Kit: Choose Your Method
- Week 13: Counterstory Project Writing Week

- Week 14: Counterstory Performances/Readings/Presentations
- Week 15: Counterstory Performances/Readings/Presentations
- Week 16: Final Seminar Project Due

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Learning objectives for this course are broad. Discussions responses online will be aimed at modeling these objectives and giving students an opportunity to see them in action; discussions, activities, assignments, and papers represent opportunities for students to practice these objectives and receive feedback that will be useful in improving as scholars. These objectives will be framed around the content of this particular course and reflect the contemporary and ongoing conversations concerning literary studies, rhetorical and writing studies and its applications and implications in relation to legal studies, particularly the academic field of critical race theory. The broad objectives are that students will:

1. Demonstrate proficiency in critical and constructive thought.
2. Demonstrate proficiency in communicating complex ideas through writing.
3. Possess a basic understanding of critical and rhetorical theory and an applicability of rhetorical and literary analysis and criticism.
4. Comprehend basic theories concerning contemporary conceptions of race and racism.
5. Understand application of basic rhetorical concepts for framing discussion/analysis and in problem solving.

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Questions and Quotes (Q&Qs):

This assignment will be due at the beginning of each class period from week 2 through week 11. Each week you will submit one typed question and two typed quotes from the assigned readings. You should pose open-ended questions that generate conversation and cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no." Your question can address a specific reading or a theme running through several readings. Quotes may be anything from the readings that resonate with you. Along with the quote, write a paragraph or two explaining why you find the quote significant. Personal reflections that relate to the readings/discussions are perfectly appropriate for this assignment. **Value: 20%**

Rhetorical Precis (RP): Due five times throughout the semester, you will submit a typed 2-3-page document that rhetorically analyzes a course reading of your choice on your assigned RP group date. Additional details forthcoming. **Value: 25%**

Critical Analysis: Due at the end of week 5 and the end of week 9, you will write a 5-6-page Critical Analysis short essay that will build toward your Counterstory Seminar Project. Each essay will

undergo a writing process in which you will submit a first draft to me and your peers for instructor and peer feedback. **Final drafts will not be accepted without documented submission of first drafts**, and grades are determined based on evidence of significant revision between first and final drafts. **Value: 30%**

Counterstory Seminar Project: At the conclusion of the semester, you will compose a project which will build on your arguments and

writing from your Q&Qs, RPs, Critical Analysis assignments, and other forms of discussion and documentation utilized throughout the course. In this assignment you will weave together references to our course texts, your writing and documenting, and course discussions to form a project that will comprise your final course submission. Additional details forthcoming. **Value: 25%**

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Daily Reading Schedule

Professor: Aja Y. Martinez

WEEK 1 A CASE FOR COUNTERSTORY

Q&Q: #4 due

- Tuesday
Delgado and Stefancic from *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*
"Preface to the Fourth Edition"
"Introduction"
- Thursday
Martinez "A Case for Counterstory"

WEEK 2 INTEREST CONVERGENCE AND LEGAL STORYTELLING: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME CRT COIN

- Tuesday
Martinez "Derrick Bell and Counterstory as Fantasy/Allegory"

Q&Q: #1 due

- Thursday
Bell "Brown vs Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma"

Q&Q: #2 due

WEEK 3 THE CIVIL RIGHTS CHRONICLES

- Tuesday
Bell "Foreword: The Civil Rights Chronicles" pg. 4-43

Q&Q: #3 due

- Thursday
Bell "Foreword: The Civil Rights Chronicles" pg. 43-83

WEEK 4 CRT'S ORIGINS (HIS)STORIES

- Tuesday
Crenshaw "The First Decade: Critical Reflections, or 'A Foot in the Closing Door'"

Delgado and Stefancic "Rodrigo's Reappraisal"

Q&Q: #5 due

- Thursday
Delgado "Liberal McCarthyism and the Origins of Critical Race Theory"

Q&Q: #6 due

WEEK 5 CRITICAL ANALYSIS WRITING WEEK

- Tuesday
****Due for in-class peer feedback: A draft of your Critical Analysis 1 assignment****

- Thursday
****Due to BB no later than 11:59PM: Final draft of your Critical Analysis 1 assignment****

WEEK 6 BESTSELLING BELL: A LEGAL STORYTELLING FOR THE MASSES

- Tuesday
Bell "The Real Status of Blacks Today: Chronicle of the Constitutional Contradiction"

Q&Q: #7 due

RP Group 1

- Thursday
Bell "The Space Traders"

Q&Q: #8 due

RP Group 2

WEEK 7 DELGADO: CHRONICLES AND DIARIES

- Tuesday
Martinez "Richard Delgado and Counterstory as Narrated Dialogue"

Delgado "Rodrigo's Chronicle"

Q&Q: #9 due

RP Group 1

- Thursday
Delgado "Metamorphosis: A Minority Professor's Life"

Delgado "Groundhog Law"

Q&Q: #10 due

RP Group 2

WEEK 8 WILLIAMS: DIARY OF A MAD LAW PROFESSOR

- Tuesday
Martinez "Patricia Williams and Counterstory as Autobiographic Reflection"

Williams "A Brief Comment, with Footnotes, on the Civil Rights Chronicles"

Q&Q: #11 due

RP Group 1

- Thursday
Williams "On Being the Object of Property"

Williams "Alchemical Notes: Reconstructing Ideals from Deconstructed Rights"

Q&Q: #12 due

RP Group 2

WEEK 9 CRITICAL ANALYSIS WRITING WEEK

- Tuesday
Due for in-class peer feedback: A draft of your Critical Analysis 2 assignment

- Thursday
Due to BB no later than 11:59PM: Final draft of your Critical Analysis 2 assignment

WEEK 10 GIVING A DAMN: RACISM, ROMANCE AND GONE WITH THE WIND

- Tuesday
Williams *Giving a Damn: Racism, Romance and Gone with the Wind*, chapters 1-5

Q&Q: #13 due

RP Group 1

- Thursday
Williams *Giving a Damn: Racism, Romance and Gone with the Wind*, chapters 6-9

Q&Q: #14 due

RP Group 2

WEEK 11 AGAINST FORMALISM: A STORIED PAST TOWARD A STORIED FUTURE

- Tuesday
Stefancic and Delgado "Panthers and Pinstripes"

Q&Q: #15 due

RP Group 1

- Thursday
Delgado "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative"

Q&Q: #16 due

RP Group 2

WEEK 12 COUNTERSTORY TOOL KIT: CHOOSE YOUR METHOD

- Tuesday and Thursday (Choose **one** counterstory from each of the provided genres: Fantasy/Allegory, Dialogue, and Vignette)

Fantasy/Allegory:

Martinez "The Politics of Historiography, Act II"

Martinez "An Allegory About Immortality"

Martinez "On Cucuys in Bird's Feathers: A Counterstory as Parable"

Dialogue:

Martinez "On Storytelling and Perspective, or, The Road Trip"

Martinez "A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Stock Story versus Counterstory Dialogues Concerning Alejandra's 'Fit' in the Academy"

Vignette:

Martinez "Quisieron enterrarnos, pero se les olvido que somos semillas" A Counterstory Afterword in Vignettes"

Martinez "Alejandra Writes a Book"

Martinez "Diary of a Mad Border Crosser"

WEEK 13 COUNTERSTORY PROJECT WRITING WEEK

- Tuesday

****Due for in-class peer feedback: Brainstorms/Outlines/ Proposal for Counterstory Projects****

- Thursday

****Due for in-class peer feedback: Draft 1 Counterstory Projects****

WEEK 14 & 15 COUNTERSTORY PERFORMANCES/ READINGS/PRESENTATIONS

WEEK 16 FINALS WEEK

- Thursday

Due: Final Seminar Project Due to Canvas, no later than 11:59PM

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Critical Analysis Essay: Contextualizing Concepts Professor Martinez

In this essay, your goal is to figure out how key issues/concepts covered to this point in the semester can frame, interact with, and be in discussion with the development of CRT as an academic field and/or social movement. How does the key issue/concept you've chosen work toward explaining or better understanding this aspect of CRT's history? Your basic task is to identify and define the key issue/concept and explain how this key issue/concept interacts with CRT as an academic field and/or social movement.

Your starting place will be with the selection key issue/concept as put forth by any of the texts we have surveyed in class to this point in the semester (rely on the pre-writing you've done in Q&Qs and RPs here, particularly the good questions you've already asked!):

- Counterstory
- The Tenets of CRT
- Brown vs Board of Education
- Interest Convergence
- Black and African American Literary Traditions

- 3rd Wave Feminism
- Intersections of Race/Class/Gender
- Blaxploitation and Cultural-Media Artifacts
- The Constitutional Contradiction
- Liberal McCarthyism
- Origin Stories and Contending Histories

After choosing your key issue/concept, continue your process of critical analysis with these steps (this is the pre-writing/drafting part of the assignment):

1. Construct a brief and contextualizing review of your chosen key issue/concept.
2. Place your selected key issue/concept in conversation with CRT as an academic field or social movement and conduct an analysis that seeks to understand this key issue/concept in relation to CRT.
3. Formulate a research question for which the analysis you have just completed is the answer. Remember to avoid

being too broad or generic with your question, do not ask a yes-or-no question.

4. Write the essay.

After you have selected and analyzed your selected key issue/concept you will be ready to begin your essay that includes five major components (not necessarily in this order—also avoid confusing these five components with five distinct paragraphs, as it may take several paragraphs to cover each component):

1. An introduction, in which you discuss the research question and introduce your chosen key issue/concept and discuss its significance.
2. A more detailed description of your chosen key issue/concept (provide author names, context, main argument, etc. You can rely on your Q&Qs to complete this part of the assignment.)

3. A description of CRT and its context (key figures, era, place, etc.).
4. A critical analysis of CRT with your chosen key issue/concept as the framework.
5. A discussion of the contribution your analysis makes toward better understanding how this key issue/concept helps us better discuss or understand CRT, or how CRT helps us better understand this key issue/concept.

Assignment Parameters:

- 5-6 pages or 1,500-2000 words, double-spaced.
- MLA format, including in-text citations and a Works Cited page.
- Draft 1 due Tuesday for in-class peer review.
- Revised final draft due Thursday.

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Seminar Project:

The Craft of Counterstory/Crafting Counterstory

25% of total grade

The goal of your seminar project is to account for the skills you have acquired throughout the semester concerning the craft of counterstory and application for analysis of a tenet-informed critical race theory framework. You will apply these skills toward either the analysis of a counterstory text or crafting a counterstory of your own.

15% OF GRADE: COUNTERSTORY ANALYSIS

If you choose the analysis route, consider all nine tenets of critical race theory to construct your analytic framework:

- Permanence of Race and Racism
- Challenge to Dominant Ideologies
- Interest Convergence
- Race as Social Construct
- Intersectionality and Anti-Essentialism
- Interdisciplinarity
- Centrality of Experiential Knowledge and/or Unique Voices of Color
- Commitment to Social Justice
- Accessibility

For your artifact of analysis, you will have the option to choose a counterstory text from this course (Bell, Delgado, Delgado & Stefancic, Williams, or Martinez) or you can select a text (any genre is acceptable—written works, visual works, sonic works, etc.) of your own choosing that you believe represents a good artifact of counterstory.

After you have selected your text/artifact, your CRT analysis seminar project must contain the following **THREE** sections:

- **SECTION ONE:** offer a well-grounded description of counterstory. If you were describing and explaining what counterstory is to an unknowing audience, what would you say? Whose work (Bell, Delgado, Williams, Martinez) would you invoke/cite to support this explanation?
- **SECTION TWO:** next, describe—in detail—your chosen counterstory text/artifact. Be sure to discuss the genre of the artifact and include discussion of why this text is of interest to you. Also, introduce your chosen CRT tenets that constitute your analytic framework.
- **SECTION THREE:** The Analysis. Use your SECTION TWO description to analyze to text/artifact, by way of your chosen CRT tenets as a framework.

Assignment Parameters:

- 5-6 pages or 1,500-2000 words, double-spaced.
- MLA format, including in-text citations and a Works Cited page.
- First drafts due for in-class peer feedback Thursday, Week 12
- Presentations Weeks 14 & 15
- Final polished drafts due to Canvas Thursday, Week 16

15% OF GRADE: CRAFTING COUNTERSTORY

If you choose to craft your own counterstory, you will first choose an issue you wish to address (current or historic, domestic, or international), and will gather the researched sources being used to describe, discuss, and disseminate information about this issue. Data can include media sources such as newspaper articles, video clips, music, print advertisement, images, social media postings (i.e., tweets, Snap stories, etc.) and blogs. Data can also include social commentary as viewed through speeches, art, literature, comedy, and other sources that certainly have overlap with the above-named media sources. Keep in mind these data suggestions are by no means exhaustive as there are a variety of researched sources that can apply to the issue you will choose.

After you have selected your issue, your counterstory seminar project must contain the following **THREE** sections:

- **SECTION ONE:** offer a well-grounded description of counterstory. If you were describing and explaining what counterstory is to an unknowing audience, what would you say? Whose work (Bell, Delgado, Williams, Martinez) would you invoke/cite to support this explanation?
- **SECTION TWO:** next, describe—in detail—your chosen counterstory genre(s), context, and characters. Note that your genres of counterstory will vary depending on the issue you have chosen to discuss, so be aware that you can and likely will approach this project with a “mix-methods” approach that combines any elements from the counterstory genres we have explored in class to this point in the semester: **Counterstory as Allegory/Fantasy, Counterstory as Dialogue, Counterstory as Autobiographic Reflection, Counterstory as Book Review, Counterstory as Vignette**
- **SECTION THREE:** The Counterstory. Use your SECTION TWO description to craft a counterstory that delves into the aspects of your chosen issue.

Assignment Parameters:

- Page length/word count varies based on chosen method/genre, double-spaced.
- MLA format, including in-text citations and a Works Cited page.
- First drafts due for in-class peer feedback **Thursday, Week 12**
- Presentations **Weeks 14 & 15**
- Final polished drafts due to Canvas **Thursday, Week 16**

10% OF GRADE: PRESENTATIONS

- There will be 7-10-minute presentations of your seminar projects in-class Weeks 14 & 15
- Use multimedia sites such as WordPress, Tumblr, or programs such as iMovie, Movie Maker, Prezi or Power Point to form a basis to contain your work. I will not grade

down if you are not a good public speaker (as we all have difficulties in this area from time to time) but will grade down if it is obvious you did not take this portion of the assignment seriously.