
How Alice Walker Shaped Derrick Bell's Counterstory

Eva Thor

Course Design: Critical Analyses

Professor: Dr. Aja Martinez



Eva Thor is an Undergraduate at the University of North Texas pursuing an English major with a focus on Writing and Rhetoric. She is also working toward a certificate in legal studies, a political science minor, and a psychology minor. Eva has always felt a deep connection to learning - particularly to the language arts. It is through this passion

that she decided to join various honor societies such as UNT's Honors College, the National Society of Leadership and Success, and Sigma Tau Delta. She is a founding member and two-time officer of a creative writing workshop and book club at UNT named Pen & Paper. Though the future is forever changing, Eva currently intends to pursue a career in either law, library sciences, or the study of rhetoric. Between semesters, Eva volunteers at the Abandoned Animal Rescue in her hometown, helping to ensure that its small dogs are fed, walked, and given the attention they need.

At the convergence point of creative writing and dense research lies the art of counterstory. Counterstory is a fictitious story told in opposition to a dominant narrative. The dominant narrative generally focuses on the middle-class white male perspective. Counterstory is commonly used by minority communities to share their stories, experiences, and overall knowledge over a variety of subjects, such as history or law. It is not limited to writing, and can be explored through nearly any medium from paintings to songs. Within the past 60 years, it has been used by scholars as a method of presenting their research in a more easily understood and accessible way.

Counterstory lives in the heart of critical race theory (CRT) studies. It was popularized in this field by Derrick Bell in the 1980s through works such as his 1987 book *And We Are Not Saved*. Many of his stories follow the composite character, Geneva Crenshaw. She is a Black civil rights lawyer, inspired by many of the women in Bell's life. She experiences fantastical scenarios, such as traveling back in time to speak to the founding fathers and revealing

that their racist ideologies were purposefully written into the U.S. Constitution.

It was recently discovered by Aja Y. Martinez and Robert O. Smith that Bell was writing stories even earlier than the late 1980s. The piece – determined to have been written around 1979 because of a letter – is titled “Dependent Status” and explores the point of view of a Black professor at a law school who is writing a book “relating the role of civil rights law in American racism, and arguing that even the pro-civil rights laws and court decisions serve the ends of racism more than they help blacks” (“Dependent Status” with revisions 9). This story contains some of the ideas that Bell explored in his published works, which serve as key sources of research for CRT in modern times. “Dependent Status” may be one of his earliest attempts at written counterstory.¹ However, there was something else Martinez and Smith discovered that is even more fascinating. She discovered that there was a back-to-back revising and editing interaction between Derrick Bell and acclaimed writer and activist Alice Walker. Walker is known from her popular works such as *The Color Purple*, and her involvement in the Civil Rights and Feminist movements. While scholars know they interacted because they were friends and neighbors, there has not been any proof that they exchanged ideas and critiques of their works until now. Given her help in his drafting “Dependent Status,” she may have been an inspiration for – or even edited – his future works. This leaves scholars to ponder the following: how much has Alice Walker influenced Derrick Bell's work in crafting his famous counterstories? Answering this question may provide more insight into Bell's works as a whole and, because of this, how peoples' understandings of critical race theory may have been shaped throughout the past century.

THE CONTEXT OF CRT

Critical race theory was coined in the late 1980s by Kimberlé Crenshaw. It is a term used both as an academic study and a movement. The academic field focuses on researching how areas such as law, social movements, and media are shaped by

¹ It should be noted that Bell taught at Harvard Law School through counterstory, hence the specification of written counterstory.

race. It is generally studied in fields such as law, sociology, and rhetoric. As described by many academics, CRT contains the following tenets: permanence of race and racism, a commitment to challenging dominant ideologies, interest convergence, race as a social construct, intersectionality and anti-essentialism, interdisciplinary thought, centrality of experiences from those of color and/or unique voices of color, commitment to social justice, and accessibility.² Scholars of CRT argue these tenets play a role in the social conception of race as shaped by law, media, etc. – as well as how social conceptions of race are shaped by it in return.

The movement, on the other hand, consists of the application of the tenets with regard to activism with the goal of bringing awareness to the effects of racism and encouraging others to be critical of those effects. There are a great number of people involved with CRT, though its most prominent figures include, but are not limited to, the following: Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Patricia J. Williams, and Cheryl Harris. It is rooted in the works of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and others. Derrick Bell, in particular, is wildly credited as the “godfather of critical race theory” due to his work as an author and lawyer (Fortin). As a young man, Bell was highly involved with the Civil Rights Movement. During that time, he was a civil rights lawyer working as a clerk for Thurgood Marshall and an associate of Constance Baker Motley. The connections he built there would shape his voice as a writer and lawyer forever.

ALICE WALKER'S INFLUENCE

Alice Walker, first and foremost, guided Derrick Bell's counterstories through her edits on his unpublished piece “Dependent Status.” There are two documents that are of importance in analyzing how she did so: the notes on his draft and its accompanying letter.

Some of her lengthier notes involve how Bell depicts Black authors. Walker questions if his opinion of individuals she refers to as “Baldwin...Morrison, Jordan” are why his character, Martin, was harsh in his criticisms of Black authors whom he believed wrote to quell white people's racist fears about Black people, providing comfort over reality (“Dependent Status” with marginal feedback 8). Following this she notes, “remember to put the blame where it belongs—not on the victims of John Leonard and the Times” (Dependent Status” with marginal feedback 8). These two notes encouraged Bell to change the section, instead shifting the blame from the Black authors to white readers, who took the works as proof of “the degradation of blacks as their natural (and preferred) condition rather than the predictable result of white racism laid on for generations” (“Dependent Status” with revisions 8). From her edits, Walker reshaped how Bell wrote about Black authors in this piece, and potentially his later works as well. Because of this, Bell was able to build his skills as a creative writer. Moreover, it refined

his depiction of the tenet of anti-essentialism by showcasing that there isn't only one reason behind the Black authors' popularities with white people.

Walker not only checked Bell in his criticisms against Black authors, but also his depiction of the Black community. On page 9, Bell wrote that “my hope was that the little folk would somehow hear about it” (“Dependent Status” 9). She noted how it sounded “condescending” and “petty” (“Dependent Status” with marginal feedback 9). Taking her advice, he changed the line to include Black community leaders and Black academics. Through Walker's perspective, Bell's work became more sympathetic to the Black community. Without her help he would have focused his criticisms toward to the Black community rather than toward those who criticize it, which would have depicted a completely different narrative than his revised version. That is, Martin would have been hypocritical regarding his perception of the Black community when compared with his desire to have the experiences of Black individuals be shared through his book.

One of the only notes repeated by Walker involved Bell's depiction of Black women in his story. When Bell described the character Hannah, she noted, “in short she's high yellow or in any other words not a 'black' black woman. This is important—has stereotype value you might say” (“Dependent Status” with marginal feedback 12). She reacted similarly to the description of Martha Williams, saying, “another non-black colored black woman” (“Dependent Status” with marginal feedback 21). In bringing this up, Walker forced Bell to acknowledge the potential effects of describe Black women in these ways. While he did not change these descriptions in later edits of “Dependent Status,” his description of Geneva in *The Civil Rights Chronicles* is someone who is “as proud of her height as she was of her ebony complexion” (“Forward: The Civil Rights Chronicles” 13). His description of Geneva implies that Bell looked for outside perspective – specifically that of Black women he knows – in order to try and illustrate a more accurate depiction of the Black female experience. He would have learned to do so as a response to Walker's reaction to his Black female characters in “Dependent Status.”

In her letter, Walker suggests Bell read works by Cyrus Colter, noting how his works are about the “black bourgeois life in Chicago;” moreover, she notes it would do Bell well to learn more about this “since so many blacks are now in or aspire to that class” (Walker). She also notes the works of Langston Hughes, a famous black poet. If Bell were to have read these, he would have greater insight to the perspectives “Dependent Status” explores, and the creative writing field. By sharing these sources of information and her personal edits and opinions, she provided Bell with one of the most valuable resources: an interdisciplinary perspective. He was not limited by his focus on legal matters because he had the advice of a well-established creative writer.

² See Martinez's *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, pp. 9-18.

HOW WALKER'S EDITS RELATE TO CRT

This analysis is an attempt at expanding the discussion of Derrick Bell's inspirations to include Alice Walker. Key tenets of CRT, such as the centrality of the minority experience, anti-essentialism, and interdisciplinary thought were explored through their discussions. By influencing how Bell writes about certain topics, Walker has shaped how he depicts these topics – and others – in his works. By changing how he depicts Black authors, Bell gave the protagonist of “Dependent Status” the appearance of being understanding and well informed, albeit still biased. It reframed the statement to be less critical of the authors and more critical of the racist white readers, adding to Bell's anti-essentialist knowledge. After Walker critiqued his descriptions of Black women, Bell learned to ask for the opinions of more Black women when creating Geneva so that she would accurately reflect their experiences. Her edits themselves aid to interdisciplinary thought because her unique perspective as a creative writer gave Bell insight on how to apply his legal knowledge to his counterstories.

When Bell was once asked who Geneva Crenshaw, the protagonist of his later works, was, he responded by noting individuals such as his mother, his wife, and Constance Baker Motley. Given how much he cared about Alice Walker's input, I am inclined to believe she is one of these women. If she is, in fact, one of these women, then Walker's ideas are imbedded into foundations of critical race theory.

Walker, Alice. Letter to Derrick Bell. 14 September 1979. Box 23, Folder 3. Derrick A. Bell, Jr. papers. New York University Archives, New York University Libraries, New York, NY. 17 February 2023.

Works Cited

- Bell, Derrick. “Dependent Status” Clean Draft. 1979. Box 23, Folder 3. Derrick A. Bell, Jr. papers. New York University Archives, New York University Libraries, New York, NY. 17 February 2023.
- . “Dependent Status” with Alice Walker marginal Feedback. 1979. Box 23, Folder 3. Derrick A. Bell, Jr. papers. New York University Archives, New York University Libraries, New York, NY. 17 February 2023.
- . “Dependent Status” with Derrick Bell handwritten Revisions. 1979. Box 23, Folder 3. Derrick A. Bell, Jr. papers. New York University Archives, New York University Libraries, New York, NY. 17 February 2023.
- . “Foreword: The Civil Rights Chronicles.” *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 99, no. 4, 1985, pp. 4–83. 17 February 2023.
- Fortin, Jacey. “Critical Race Theory: A Brief History.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 8 Nov. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-critical-race-theory.html>.
- Martinez, Aja Y. “A Case for Counterstory.” *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, National Council of Teachers of English, 2020, pp. 1–31.