
Flesh, Blood, and Counterstory

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Course Design: Counterstory

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owner. She is a member of the KERA Community Advisory Board and loves to frequent her local library. She hopes to continue writing and learning and spends her time doing both when she can. She is an avid consumer of information and media, in all its forms, usually all at once. This is her first counterstory.

Preface: What is Counterstory?

Counterstory is, firstly, a challenge. It is a challenge to the dominant narrative, and by extension, the dominant culture—both of which are filtered through the pervasive assumed default understanding of social systems. However, there is intrinsicity to the secondary word within this neologism. *Story*. Story is our most antique, uniquely effective means of information sharing. Language and communication are the foundation of community, both internally and externally. Counterstory is a voluntary extension of anecdotal information or statistic, stories shared individually but applicable to many. It functions as a means of dissemination of information with multiplicity of perspective. Counterstory stands to function as a way to foster understanding, empathy, and validation of experience. As a method of rhetoric, it provides witness to events that would most typically be directly countered, unintentionally or otherwise, by absence of witness. “Whites are, in fact, often taken by surprise when confronted with alternative scenarios and interpretations of experience” (L.A. Bell 5). Counterstory is an approach to combating the feeling of separation via diaspora. The distribution of information via story works against the isolating distribution of encounters within the dominant culture. Yes, it states to the dominant culture “we are here”—yet it can be argued that its most important function is to serve as a reminder—“*you* are not *alone*.” Put most precisely, Lee Ann Bell states in “Telling Tales:

What stories can teach us about racism” (2003), “The hidden transcripts or counter-narratives of subordinated groups serve to confirm their experiences and bear witness to their lived reality in the face of a dominant culture that distorts, stereotypes, and marginalizes that identity” (6). The nature of counterstory, stories, language to generalize, though transforming at times, is by its nature predicated upon the permanence and timelessness, the undeath, of the concept.

AN INTRODUCTION

My counterstory is fantasy/allegory. I think the tools of fantasy, often given to us by the dominant narrative, make for fantastic representations of dominant narratives from which they often spring. Vampires, my chosen fantastical allegorical figures, are interesting. As a horror creature they make an argument for race and class, their immortality marking them as a permanent fixture of society. There is transformation, of course, and accumulation of wealth through generation—there is no such thing as a poor vampire. Horror reflects the real fears of the time it is most popular in. Vampire history through the ages strikes me. Old World (by which I mean European) vampires of past literature are most commonly representative allegory for serfdom. As resource-sucking (I mean blood!) wealthy merchants demand tribute from common-folk, and ultimate control, they terrorize the town they lord over, and are a manifestation, consciously or unconsciously, of real terrors. New World vampires reflect similar sentiments— particularly the old southern vampire, popular in contemporary literature. Patricia Williams speaks about the romanticization of the “lost South” in *Giving A Damn: Racism, Romance, and Gone With the Wind*. New World, Euro-American vampires are afflicted by flurries of romanticization. There is the “lost soldier,” unequivocally popular in contemporary literature for the romantic mourning of the youth and splendor of a Southern boy. The wandering soldier is honorable, fighting for his “rights,” only to be corrupted, not by his desire to own another human being, but because he’s been cruelly turned into an immortal being, forever wandering. There is also the “gentleman slave-owner,” a sensitive poet, a dandy in full regalia, who is conveniently excused for his actions in tormenting

human beings. What need is there for these vampires to apologize for the past? Flagrant violations of humanity are traded in for a shot at kissing a barely-17-year-old girl. Contemporary ideations of the Southern gothic efficiently forget the “decay” of Southern decadence, and the macabre of the death of the “Old South.” I suppose this is fitting, as our vampires refuse to decay. This story is about a plantation wedding.

The Cast

Mina: Mina values herself as a liberal. She voted for Obama. She is uncomfortable at the idea of her sister, Liz, choosing a plantation as a wedding venue. Still, she wants to be there for her sister, and she looked at the reviews online and the views were incredible, just like Liz has said. Mina knows the value of an individual is based on the capital they produce.

Liz: Liz is Mina’s sister and the bride of Chris. She doesn’t consider herself a racist. She was raised on the value of hard work. She hates affirmative action. Liz knows all of her family to be hard working Italian immigrants who picked themselves up by the bootstraps after coming over to America.

Chris: Chris is the fiancé of Liz and soon to be brother-in-law of Mina. He comes from an old Virginian family, the Arnoults. He also hates affirmative action, and he hates when people tell him he didn’t work hard for his money, because he did work hard at his father’s law firm, and he knows his family has come from a long line of hard working Americans. To be honest Chris’s family seems like they’re the only people who work these days.

The Arnoults: The Arnoults are a sprawling family of Virginians. They are excited to meet Liz and Mina’s family.

Part I

“I’m not racist you know,” Liz says as she takes another bite of steak.

“I didn’t say you were,” I reply.

“Chris and I just saw it and— well we just had to have the wedding there. The views are breathtaking. Truly one of a kind. There’s even a moat, it’s so secluded. There’s only one bridge in and out.” She sticks another piece of steak into her mouth. “There are no power lines in sight. We aren’t having phones at the wedding. We want everyone to be in the moment. It’ll be like back in the good old days,” Liz sighs, wistfully.

There’s a long pause.

Liz begins again. “Chris has family there, Mina. It’s literally perfect.”

The silence thickens between us. She pushes the remains of the steak around with her fork. Pearls of fat and gristle line the sides of the ultra-rare steak, red fluid gleaming under the dim bulbs in the restaurant. I internally gag.

Okay, I think to myself. Fine. It’s her wedding.

Still silent.

“Mina—” she starts.

I interrupt her. “Alright. Sounds good. Let’s see those pictures.”

Part II

Chris’s family is rich. They are, what you would call, generationally wealthy. The Arnoult wealth is quiet, too. It’s not some flashy Kardashian affair. The Arnoults remain hidden from plain sight. But underneath they have a finger in each pie— and by pie, I mean shares upon shares of stock. They’ve been a permanent fixture in the stock market since it began. I mean, I haven’t met them, of course. This information comes from Google. Liz, my sister, fell head over heels for Chris. They share many values— they believe they both come from hard-working Americans, both who gained wealth by merit, not by affirmative action. I’m vaguely uncomfortable with this notion. Clearly my family isn’t privileged like Chris’s. For example, I don’t have the advantage of being able to intern at my father’s law firm for \$50/hour. And, unlike Liz, I think affirmative action has its benefits. The more jobs, degrees, etc., the better. People should be provided the opportunity to work within the system— this system is designed to work by the people, for the people.

I think about all this as I pull up to the singular bridge in and out of the venue. The wedding venue is remote, beautiful. And Liz was right— not a power line in sight. Crossing the moat, I regard the dark, tall evergreens. I roll down my car’s window, turning down Taylor Swift’s new album. The chirp of life reverberates through my car, the hum.

It falls silent. Completely silent.

A sapping of the heat I had felt from my nerves rolls over me as the forest empties of sound. Sparks of chill prick at my heart.

The forest resumes its speech.

I shudder to myself and roll the window back up, unconsciously going 30 miles an hour, even though the sign says 25.

Part III

The stress and beauty of the wedding washed out any remaining chill from my clothes and bones. Interacting with the Arnoults, some of them Republican politicians, is easy. I’m not one of those

crazy liberals who can't put politics aside when I interact with people—we talked easily, fluidly, about everything and nothing—it reminded me that we all should just be civil with each other. Every single one of Chris's family members shares an affinity for cooking—they were incredibly excited to ask about the reception, about my culinary experiences. Chris told all of our families that Liz was only falling for him because of his cooking.

It's true what they say about rich people, by the way. The ineffable air of wealth follows every Arnoult. There's a flush of vitality in their skin which stems from a lifetime of very little to worry over, athletic clubs, and secretive facials by aestheticians and surgeons with NDAs. Chris shares the same smile as his innumerable brothers and cousins. There's an enviable flash of white teeth shared for and with other Arnoults. It matches the sparkle of a silent confidence, a secret knowledge in their eyes. And even though the wedding clouded over soon after my encounter with the woods it had no chance of rain. I hadn't thought of it, but it actually might have been strategic to require no phones given the quiet nature of the Arnoults. They probably want to keep what their family does under wraps.

After the most beautiful outdoors ceremony, we all headed inside the house, to meet a full, open bar. I hug Liz in her dress, both of us teary-eyed and grinning.

"I'm so happy for you, Liz," I whisper in her ear as I hold her tight.

"And Mina, here I thought you were going to tell me I was right for picking this venue! Everyone, everything is so beautiful and happy, it's wonderful, so wonderful... I'm so happy," she slurs and teeters a little bit, a goofy grin on her face.

I grin back at her.

"It's not like our family owned anybody you know. Grandpa is from Ireland. He says the Irish slavery was way worse—" Liz says.

"You have had way too much champagne, Mrs. *Chris Arnoult*," I laugh.

Chris walks over. "Everything okay? Got enough food, drink?"

"Mina was just talking to me about slavery. She thinks I'm racist just because we wanted our wedding here."

"Whoa! that's not—"

"But I told her this is Chris's FAMILY HOME, and we are going to have this damn wedding here!"

That same chirp of life backs out of the room as everyone looks at Liz. I laugh nervously.

"Too much champagne," I state weakly. I turn to Chris. "Family home..?"

Part IV

I should have guessed that, of course. There is a permanence of Chris's family in Virginia. It's just not really something I thought about. Everything starts to look a little off after Liz says that, though. I look around a little more. "Family" home echoes in my head when I look at the decorative images on the wall. An Arnoult smile looks down at me from each portrait, the portraits glancing knowingly to each other around the room. Things aren't adding up.

"Mina." Chris's voice snaps me back to attention.

I look down at Liz who has fallen down. I'm relieved. I mean, not really relieved about my drunk sister falling, but for a brief moment I had recalled the silence in the woods from earlier. That's why it fell silent.

"Will you help me help your sister upstairs?"

I carry her up with Chris.

"She hit that bar a little harder than I thought she would," Chris laughs.

He stands over her, pushing her hair from her face. We look at each other.

"Mina, I can't tell you how happy I am for your family to be part of mine."

He grins. Those teeth..

"Are you and your family almost ready for dinner?"

"Chris, why does your family all look the exact same as your ancestors' portraits?"

Part V

He shuts the door.

"Mina." He smiles again. Sinister.. "You and your family are going to be so happy about this news. Your family is so wonderful. You *Italians*. So hardworking, bootstrapping. You've paid your dues. You deserve everything you've got. Not like those other.." He trails off. "Do you know what I'm getting at?"

Silence.

He continues. "Mina. I can't be the only one who thinks my family is of the *highest* race of beings ever created. We are the epitome

of uber-mench. Just-just-just– take a *look* at *my* family,” he stutters with excitement, frothing. “Peak athletes, peak brain activity, peak beauty. *SUPERMEN*. You’re *lucky*. Your family is getting incorporated into it.”

“Chris. You haven’t answered my question.”

“I think you know why. Say it out loud.” This time he shares a knowing glance with me.

“Oh, come *on*. What do you want me to say? ‘*I know what you are*.’”

“*My* family has been here, in the U.S., for generations. We owned people. We *own* people now, but that’s just called being a lender and landlord these days. See,” he stops and adjusts Liz’s hair again. “I *am* permanence. I *am* these institutions. I was there when they were redlining the suburbs. I was there when *Brown v. Board* was overturned. And now I’m here, inviting you to be a part of the family. You can become more. You are more. Because,” he sweeps something off of his shoulder, “you white people love to protect us. Me. And now I’m offering to transform your cultural identity to mine.”

I’m taken aback. For the first time I notice the silence again. Complete quiet. There isn’t even a hiss of a breeze.

“Okay,” I say.

He’s struck.

“The system you claim to be– it *works*. It works for people if they just work hard enough. Like my family. And no number of circumstances or trauma kept me from working within it. The system was built by the people, for the people. People should be provided the opportunity to work within the system. Why should I change anything? I will *gladly* stand aside from carnage– if only to be spared from it.”

I walk over to him, where he stands.

A final grin. “Let’s eat.”

Works Cited

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