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Review: Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication edited by Frankie Condon & Vershawn Ashanti Young

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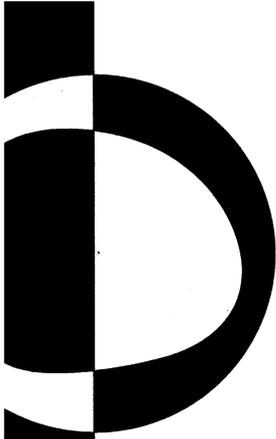
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Natasha Tinsley

**Review: *Performing Antiracist
Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and
Communication***

**edited by Frankie Condon &
Vershawn Ashanti Young**

Being an African American woman for almost 40 years, a secondary education teacher for three years, and a three-time college student, I am well versed in the micro aggressions that plague students in education, which is why I feel it's important to always be aware of new information meant to combat the systems of oppression found in learning environments. Through my research, I realize what is needed is a way to help individuals see and acknowledge discriminatory practices in the educational field, especially when it comes to writing and the writing process. Culture, nationality, beliefs, biases, and stereotypes are not like layers of clothing that one can check at the door and pick up later. We have all been exposed to the unfair dynamics that form the race relations in society, and we carry those understandings with us everywhere we go, even if we are not completely aware of them. However, awakening this awareness is prevalent to promote a beneficial learning environment for students both in the classroom and in the writing center. This is why

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I feel *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication* edited by Frankie Condon & Vershawn Ashanti Young (2017) is going to be a useful addition to writing center studies.

Writing centers encounter a variety of students from many different races and nationalities, as well as countless other categories and categories within those categories. So, just like any teacher, writing center tutors have the potential to face a melting pot of students, each one carrying their own understanding about themselves and writing. Writing centers have conducted numerous case studies and research projects that focus on race, yet the practices in the writing center have not changed. I feel what is needed is for writing center tutors and staff to exercise a concept that Condon & Young's book refers to as "the willingness to be disturbed" (p. 19). This concept relates to an understanding that every individual who lives in our society contributes to the systems of racism and oppression, whether intentionally or through happenstance. Writing center tutors and staff seem to see themselves as working in a place where students come to find understanding and support. As such, it's reasonable to assume these individuals do not see themselves as oppressive people. Unfortunately, they may not realize how their biases have colored their way of thinking about students and student work. While this book focuses primarily on classroom pedagogy, the information presented can help writing center tutors and directors see how a willingness to be disturbed is a necessary practice to help create policies and procedures to improve collaborative skills, which will result in better client assistance.

The greatest strength of the book is the range of perspectives found throughout. While each chapter always circles back to the willingness to be disturbed, there is a refreshing difference in the approach each author, or set of authors, takes. Each piece outlines the struggle of real people as they moved away from the understandings they have always held about themselves and their environment to a recognition of inequality, discrimination, and the role they played in maintaining such matters. All these authors explain the difficulties associated with allowing oneself to be disturbed and the constant struggle to continue to progress.

The important thing to remember is that this book is not suggesting people are inherently racist, disrespectful, or oppressive. It is arguing that because we live in an environment that is structured around race and racial hierarchies, anything we say or do affects that structure, even our physical bodies. We can do nothing and still exhibit some racial concept or bias because the ideas are already engraved in people's minds as a result of the domineering ideas established before we were even a

thought in someone's mind. What is meant by the willingness to be disturbed is the ability to accept that you have been raised in a society that fosters racist ideologies and beliefs. And while it may not be your fault, you could be contributing to and inviting these atrocities into your classroom or collaborative space. The contributors to the book use well-structured essays and thoughtful interpretations to call on educational professionals to evaluate themselves and their teaching habits to determine if they are fostering any of these destructive concepts. The chapter descriptions that follow are examples of the well laid out arguments in the book, as well as suggestions for how this book can contribute to writing center studies and improvement.

In "Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable," Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, Beth Godbee, & Neil Simpkins (2017) outline the need for a different frame of mind in relation to racism studies in writing center discourse. They break down what is wrong with the traditional reliance on such tools as the "confessional narrative" and explain how these ideas leave people trapped in this belief that racism is something that is solely the defect of an individual and not as the result of the oppressive environment we all live in. These beliefs assume that racism is always intentional and cannot exist unless the person is deliberately projecting such concepts. Through a successful linear progression from subtitle to subtitle, the chapter offers ways to embrace one's role in the larger system of oppression, as well as strategies to help combat that role and produce a more welcoming atmosphere for all people.

In "A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Stock Story versus Counterstory Dialogues Concerning Alejandra's "Fit" in the Academy," Aja Y. Martinez (2017) has a fascinating argument for the inclusion of the "counterstory" into the conversation about the problems surrounding curricular standards and practices. Counterstory is a way to combat other forms of narrative that dismiss or reject the presence of race and racism in composition and rhetoric. Martinez starts off with a logical and well laid out explanation why Critical Race Theory is a component necessary to include in the field of composition and rhetoric. She later moves into examples of what this counterstory looks like in practice. Essentially, counterstories are fictionalized scenarios and scenes inspired by real concerns and events associated with race and writing. Unfortunately, this chapter is missing the effect these counterstories have on students. While a student does appear and may be based on a real person, the character is still classified as fictional and so cannot provide any meaningful feedback for the counterstory theory. Counterstories can still be useful tools in the writing center as ways for tutors

to analyze and understand how some voices are marginalized and to generate strategies to prevent such practices in their own tutorials.

“Deconstructing Whiteness in the Globalized Classroom” is an especially compelling read. There are many, myself included, who automatically assume that racism is perpetrated by white people. While it is true that whiteness is the catalyst that fuels racism, Dae-Joong Kim & Bobbi Olson (2017) establish that it’s not only white people who perpetuate the idea of whiteness. These authors refer to such behavior as “whiteness,” which they suggest “is not necessarily a product of being white. Whiteness is, rather, an articulation of epistemologies that have been racialized; whiteness as a rhetoric” (p. 123). In other words, we as a society believe that being “white” is the correct way to be and have created characteristics we feel are associated with that concept. As such, there are individuals that will behave in a way that is perceived as “white” in the class, either to eliminate the possibility of someone challenging their authority or to combat challenges that already exist. There are also moments where this whiteness causes professors to single out students for racially motivated reasons, which are not always a benefit to that student. This chapter helps educators and tutors recognize how deep racism is buried in people and that white people are not the “problem.” The blame begins with the systems put in place to create the illusion that being “white” is the way to navigate the world to gain success. These two authors write a very unique back and forth in the piece, where they acknowledge their shortcomings and their intentions to perform better for students. This essay affirms that everyone, whether white, minority, or international, has to be willing to be disturbed. Again, this is another piece where the student voice is missing. There are small moments of discussion about students and some examples specific to student interactions, but nothing from the students themselves. However, the information discussed still has value to the writer center. Directors could potentially create discussion groups, where tutors share moments they were exposed to “whiteness” or behaved in a “whitely” way.

In “Whiteboys”: Contact Zone, Pedagogy, Internalized Racism, and Composition at the University’s Gateway”, Sophie Bell (2017) gives an intelligent and thought-provoking account of her reaction to students writing about their own understanding of race and what it means to be white and the other. She found herself trying to stir students toward “a rejection of assimilation into whiteness” (p. 191). She explains how she had to recognize that the students are responding to the ideologies put in place meant to elevate some and hold back others. She also explains how her students helped her see the effect race still has on the younger

generation. Bell introduces excerpts of her students' writing in which they document their struggles with race and race relations in the world around them. She uses their work to justify an argument that race needs to be addressed in composition classrooms, as students have internalized this belief that what they need to convey "whiteness" in their writing and erase any evidence of who they are as an individual. This chapter introduces a different way of approaching the concept of willingness to be disturbed. Bell has to allow herself to be disturbed by her students' words so she can learn from them and determine ways to better assist them in the classroom. Tutors, too, can learn from this approach, which could help them pay attention to students' words and learn how to better help them in sessions.

The epilogue is a worthy ending to remind people why the work being done needs to happen. Such racist beliefs are not just affecting people's lives, but causing people's deaths. It also shows the work isn't just up to the instructors or the tutors. Students are just as capable of fighting for change, if given an opportunity. Condon & Young want to call on people to "join with students in a multiracial antiracist struggle for justice" because we can "learn from one another as allies who possess the courage to effect change" (p. 230).

I would like to end by first acknowledging Mya Poe, Octavio Pimentel, Charise Pimentel, John Dean, Deatra Sullivan-Morgan, Jessica Parker, Timothy Lensmire, Nathan Snaza, Rebecca Nathan, Susan Leigh Brooks, and Chiara Bacigalupa for their contributions to this book. Overall, I believe every essay, whether it was mentioned or not, conveyed its argument in a logical and coherent manner. The only criticism is the lack of balance between stories from professionals and stories from students. While I understand this kind of change happens with the individual first, it would have been helpful to see the effect such efforts were having on students, since they are one of the main reasons this work is done in the first place. In the end, it's important for all people to recognize the role they play in the system of oppression. The road to change is not easy and there will be moments when people fall off or want to give up; however, we all must be willing to be disturbed if we are going to promote real change and practice inclusion in the classroom and the writing center.

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