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R E V I E W

Counterstories from the Writing Center by Wonderful Faison and Frankie Condon*Alexandria Hanson (Syracuse University)*

Abstract *Counterstories from the Writing Center* is a book that centers the perspectives and experiences of peoples of color in writing centers as tutors, administrators, and students. The book aims to educate all readers, but specifically “white, straight, cis-gendered women (WSCGW)” (p. 5), whose presence has permeated writing center scholarship and work, about how writing centers often engage in representational change or practice, applying Band-Aid solutions that fail to enact social justice and antiracist practices. The goal of the book is to get readers to exercise a certain level of humility, to reflect on and accept responsibility, in order to enact genuine and true change that begins to address and resolve issues of racism in writing centers.

Keywords counterstory, review

Counterstories from the Writing Center is a book that centers the perspectives and experiences of peoples of color in writing centers as tutors, administrators, and students. The book aims to educate all readers, but specifically “white, straight, cis-gendered women (WSCGW)” (p. 5), whose presence has permeated writing center scholarship and work, about how writing centers often engage in representational change or practice, applying Band-Aid solutions that fail to enact social justice and antiracist practices. In their introduction, editors Wonderful Faison and Frankie Condon instruct readers to “listen and choose to be touched, changed even, by the stories of those whose working lives in writing centres have been conditioned by their lived experiences of racism” (p. 9). In other words, the goal of the book is to get readers to exercise a certain level of humility, to reflect on and accept responsibility, in order to enact genuine and true change that begins to address and resolve issues of racism in writing centers.

In working toward this goal, the chapters are organized into three sections: Section One: “Calling Out/Calling In”; Section Two: “Counterstories from the Writing Center”; and Section Three: “Essaying White Anti-Racism.”

Even though chapters are divided into distinct sections, they are interconnected in how they emphasize listening and centering the voices and lived experiences of peoples of color, educating readers about what it means to act as an accomplice versus an ally, and engaging in consciousness raising about what it takes to do antiracist work. The authors’ use of counterstory also unifies the edited collection while making it unique. Counterstory is used as a method and methodology to “surface, name, interrogate and dismantle the workings of racism in the daily life of the writing centre” (p. 8). Contributors draw on this approach from critical race theory (CRT) to center their lived experiences as a means of calling readers out and in.

The title of the first section fits its function, as contributors ask readers to “engage critically with/against the whitely self” (p. 11), and then show readers what this looks like. The opening chapter from Neisha-Anne S. Green draws on the work of Cornel West, asking readers: “What is it inside of you that needs to die in order for you to unlearn slavery and racism so that we may get on with the actions of fixing this problem?” (p. 22). Green offers additional questions for critical reflection, asserting that only after doing this work is someone

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able to move beyond the role of accomplice into “prophetic anti-racist activism” (p. 22). Like Green, the chapter that follows from editor Frankie Condon emphasizes the value of critical reflection. Condon uses a letter to call out and call in white women, recognizing how their anger about the failure of white women in writing centers is unproductive and performative, becoming an excuse for not taking responsibility for white supremacy and racism in writing centers. Shifting slightly, Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison stresses rethinking the antiracist/racist binary and moving toward an understanding of racism as a continuum. Such a shift requires well-meaning white women (WMWW) to recognize how silent racism and a bystander stance privilege their comfort and safety at the expense of violence against peoples of color. Like Green and Condon, Morrison asserts that awareness is inadequate; white women need to confront, acknowledge, and deal with their own racism (p. 42). Closing Section One, Anna K. Treviño and Moira Ozias not only invite readers to listen, they demonstrate what this listening looks like. Treviño draws on testimonio, counterstory, and narrative to share her educational experiences as a (Ch)Xicana in predominately white spaces with an emphasis on linguistic racism. Within this chapter, Ozias demonstrates listening to Treviño’s experiences through the footnotes where Ozias grapples with the differences between her educational experiences as a white woman and those of Treviño. Ozias asks readers (specifically, white readers) to consider how they can decenter themselves and take responsibility for their role in “white supremacy, violence, and domination” (p. 51).

Section Two spotlights the “race talk in writing centres that silences, suppresses, that actively harms tutors and administrators of colour” (p. 12), and it provides readers with an opportunity to practice the types of listening demonstrated in Section One. Romeo García and Douglas S. Kern begin the section by unpacking how white benevolence, which is also a “deceptive benevolence” (p. 62), is counterproductive to the antiracist and social justice turn that has recently become commonplace in writing center scholarship and practice. Using stories from the perspectives of a writing

center director and tutor at a PWI, the chapter emphasizes the danger in the phrase, “We don’t have that problem here,” and asks the audience to consider the danger in conflating listening with action, as the former is seemingly ineffective without the latter (p. 75). Continuing this thread related to white benevolence, Wonderful Faison, Romeo García, and Anna K. Treviño point to the danger of viewing the impulse to help as always a good thing, rather than a tool for gatekeeping that determines what epistemologies are valid in academia. Faison, García, and Treviño call on readers to expand their understanding of what counts as accepted epistemologies, and to move from white benevolence to collaborative benevolence by making space for lived experiences and pushing to expand understandings of academic discourse (p. 92). In the last chapter in this section Ceballos, Faison, and Olivas share their experiences and feelings due to a lack of allyship from center directors and tutor colleagues, individuals who engaged in “spiritual bypassing,” a term from Rachel Elizabeth Cargle (2019), which describes prioritizing kindness and helping over acknowledging and addressing the racial harm and trauma committed against peoples of color (p. 104). Such spiritual bypassing protects the safety and comfort of white privilege at the expense of the humanity of peoples of color.

The book’s final section features chapters by white writing center scholars and directors as they explore how racism and white supremacy have manifested in their centers, as well as how “their lives, their identifications, and performances of self have been shaped by them” (p. 13). In opening the section, Nicole I. Caswell writes about resisting “normative emotional labor and affective economy narratives,” which are often used as a shield for white women directors. Caswell calls on these women to continually “listen, reflect, and act” (p. 118), ending her chapter with seven specific ways white women writing center directors can engage in these practices. Like Caswell, in her chapter, Jill Reglin shares with readers her process of listening, reflecting on, and being attentive to the experiences shared by her colleagues and students of color, which enabled her to observe interactions differently and develop a new

awareness of how racism is enacted in various contexts. The last chapter, written by Dianna Baldwin and Trixie G. Smith in their positions as writing center directors, offers readers an understanding of what it means to be “an activist ally” (p. 136). Recognizing allyship as an intersectional and fluid identity, Baldwin and Smith emphasize how activist allyship is not about observation but instead should “always lead to action” (p. 136). They describe what activist allyship looks like in practice by providing examples of how they decorate their space, recruit and work to retain tutors, as well as engage in tense conversations with tutors.

Despite the necessity of this book, some readers may see the absence of practical takeaways and strategies as a limitation. Often, writing center stakeholders turn to these types of texts hoping for practices and strategies they can implement within their centers and tutoring sessions (a “whitely impulse” described by Faison and Condon); they are looking for ways to fix problems in their centers, but this collection is not a guide on how to make an antiracist or socially just writing center, and readers who have this expectation will be disappointed. Instead, readers should engage with this collection as an opportunity to learn and reflect.

This book is necessary reading for all writing center directors, scholars, and tutors. As a WSCGW, assistant writing center director at a PWI, I plan to incorporate excerpts from the collection into writing center tutor training to help tutors better understand not only how they can support student writers but also one another in the center. I anticipate difficult but productive conversations to inform action around how we can listen, validate, and respond to the experiences of peoples of color in the writing center, something that many tutors at a PWI find unfamiliar. Fortunately, this book

offers substantial fodder for ongoing conversations around how to best listen, reflect, and take action. In reading *Counterstories from the Writing Center*, I felt that the ongoing piece is integral. Those in positions of power within writing centers need to prioritize discussing what epistemologies are valued in the center and how those values are communicated, in the same way that conversations around tutoring strategies and practices are regularly revisited. As someone in an administrative position focused on supporting multilingual writers, I found the chapters attentive to linguistic diversity especially valuable in their potential to honestly and unapologetically educate others. These chapters demonstrate the impact of linguistic racism, while also emphasizing the unique skills and experiences of linguistically diverse students, experiences that are often dismissed or ignored. Illuminating such epistemologies can help students and faculty recognize what is lost when we fail to critically engage with academic discourses and consider who is included and who is excluded in what discourses are privileged.

This book would also be valuable reading for WPAs more generally, and even faculty within and beyond writing studies and rhetoric who regularly encourage and/or require their students to visit writing centers at their campuses. By making visible the experiences of students in the writing center, this book can show stakeholders across contexts how seemingly benevolent practices can cause harm. It is inevitable that from the first pages of Aja Y. Martinez’s foreword to the last of Frankie Condon and Wonderful Faison’s afterword, readers in a range of positions will find themselves pausing to reflect back on their own actions and experiences, as they see majoritarian narratives dismantled through these counterstories.

The Assembly

The International Writing Centers Association, an Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English, was founded in 1983 to foster communication among writing centers and to provide a forum for concerns. IWCA members include directors and staffs of writing centers at universities, two-year colleges, and K-12 schools, and the organization is governed by an Executive Board that comprises representatives from the regional writing center organizations in the US and abroad. For information about the International Writing Centers Association visit the IWCA website at writingcenters.org.

Officers

Sherry Wynn Perdue <i>President</i> Oakland University	Holly Ryan <i>Treasurer</i> Penn State, Berks
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Awards

The IWCA offers the Muriel Harris Outstanding Service Award and the Outstanding Scholarship Award for articles and books/major works. In addition, the organization supports research endeavors with grants for professionals and graduate students whose research focuses on writing centers. Further information is available at writingcenters.org. Listed below are all recipients to date of the Muriel Harris Outstanding Service Award and the IWCA Outstanding Scholarship Award.

Muriel Harris Outstanding Service Award

1984	Muriel Harris	2006	Albert DeCiccio
1987	Joyce Kinkead	2010	Leigh Ryan
1991	Jeanette Harris	2014	Clint Gardner
1994	Lady Falls Brown	2016	Paula Gillespie & Bradley Hughes
1997	Byron Stay	2018	Michele Eodice
2000	Jeanne Simpson	2020	Jon Olson
2003	Pamela Childers		

IWCA Outstanding Scholarship Award Recipients

1985	North, S. M. (1984). The idea of a writing center. <i>College English</i> , 46(5), 433-46.
	McAndrew, D. A., & Reigstad, T. J. (1984). <i>Training tutors for writing conferences</i> . NCTE.
1987	Lotto, E. (1985). The writer's subject is sometimes a fiction. <i>Writing Center Journal</i> , 5/6(2/1), 15-21.
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