

Episode 82: Aja Y. Martinez

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

If you haven't done so already, please subscribe and follow the podcast on whatever platform you're listening on. We're also online at pedagoguepodcast.com. That's pedagoguepodcast.com. You can read more about our contributors and access transcripts for every episode on the site.

In this episode, I talk with Aja Y. Martinez about grad school, her first experience teaching writing, counterstory as theory and methodology, and national conversations on critical race theory.

Aja Y. Martinez is Assistant Professor of English at University of North Texas. Her scholarship, published nationally and internationally, makes a compelling case for counterstory as methodology in rhetoric and writing studies through the well-established framework of critical race theory (CRT). Her book, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* has been named one of the 20 Best New Rhetoric Books to Read in 2021 by BookAuthority and is nominated for the 2021 Teaching Literature Book Award. Her writing has appeared in *College English*, *Composition Studies*, *Peitho*, and *Rhetoric Review*.

Aja, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: How about we start with your story? How did you get interested in setting rhetoric and composition and teaching writing?

AYM: I think it's a pretty funny story. I was an undergraduate student at the University of Arizona, thought at one point that I was going to become a lawyer, which is really interesting with that connection with legal studies and critical race theory that I can get into a bit more later. I was pursuing a degree in anthropology, just a nice, easy social science I thought to segue nicely into maybe a law degree. Through the course of the anthropology degree, I ended up in some pretty amazing mentorship and even field work experiences with an anthropologist named Richard Stoffle and got convinced to start applying to grad programs in anthropology around that time. But I was still thinking at the back of my mind I was maybe going to be a lawyer. I got the advice of a family friend lawyer that English was the good other degree to pick up to prepare for law school. I decided to double major kind of last minute, which added a whole other year to my undergraduate studies.

In that process of that additional degree, met Roxanne Mountford and Ed White, my undergraduate teachers in the rhetoric courses. I just didn't understand were rhetoric and writing courses at the time. I just thought, "Oh, this is just English. This is part of what I'm doing as my core courses." Sometime in Roxanne's course, I was introduced to rhetorical criticism, particularly narrative criticism. That was the first moment that I realized, "Oh, all these stories within my family that have been really important to me can be part of what I study in this field."

I don't know that I would have articulated it that clearly back then, but I was starting to get that inkling that “Oh, okay, I can do something.” Roxanne was like, “Yes, absolutely you can.”

By the time I was truly applying for graduate programs that I thought was going to be in anthropology, I approached Roxanne for a letter of recommendation. She made pretty clear to me that she would gladly write one for me, she thought I was a great student, but on the contingency that I would also apply to rhetoric and writing studies programs. I was like, “Why? What would I do in rhetoric and writing studies? I just don't...” She said, “No, as long as you apply to both, I'll gladly write you that letter.” I always tease her and say, “Oh, she strong-armed me into the field because I had no plans to at that point.”

So I did. I followed her advice, applied to programs in both disciplines. By that point, I was a single mom. It boiled down to money. The most money I was being offered, the most in terms of salary, benefits, tuition waivers, was in rhetoric and writing studies because we teach in rhetoric and writing studies. That's not a guarantee in anthropology programs. That economic consideration was convincing, especially because that kept me in Tucson where my family and foundation and support were. That was by and large how I ended up in this field. It was kind of Roxanne Mountford blackmailed me.

SW: Thinking back, what was it like stepping foot in the writing classroom for the first time as a teacher? What were you thinking? How were you feeling in that moment?

AYM: Just completely intimidated. By that point, so what I ultimately entered was an MA to PhD program. I was 22 years old and had been in undergrad myself a couple months earlier. Now I'm in front of this classroom as the professor to these new first-year students, having had about what amounted to, I would say, two weeks of orientation and training. I didn't know what I was doing. I barely knew, as we just discussed, what my field was, let alone what I was doing in that classroom. I would say it took me a good year and half, about three solid semesters of failing, I would say, before I finally got my footing and felt like I was developing an identity as a teacher.

It's not for lack of wanting to have that identity because my mom tells a story that I was, I don't know, pretty young but was already playing teacher. I never played house. I never played wife or any of that. I always played teacher and my little brother was one of my students with my stuffed animals and he had to raise his hand. It was very, you know...I guess, I had that inclination from a young age, the actual getting in front of students and being the responsible party. What I do remember though is that I...that was around the year that the film *Crash* came out and won the Academy Award. I was really moved by that film in the sense that it was touching on issues of race that I hadn't seen other films do as effectively. I know there's critiques of the film and there's things that could have been done better, but at the time, with the critical lens I had, it was effective.

I knew I wanted to work that film into my classroom somehow. This is where I'm saying I failed a lot because I didn't know how to do it. I didn't have the tools to do that, I guess, in a smooth and even compassionate way with my students that accounted for all the things I feel like I

account for now, like my own embodiment in that classroom as a brown woman and also for the intense whiteness of my students. It was tough. It was scary. I didn't know what I was doing. I don't feel like I knew what I was doing, like I said, about three semesters. I just felt very young and very not separate from my students in terms of age or even knowledge base.

SW: Now Aja, of course, now I'm thinking about how you are an established teacher and such an important voice in our field. Your teaching and research interest include the rhetorics of race within western and non-Euro western context. Can you talk more about this work and how you invite students to consider these different knowledges and meaning-making practices?

AYM: What it's always boiled down to me is just thinking broadly about what the text is and what constitutes literacies. That's why so many scholars from interdisciplinarity has always been important in my space for a teacher but also a researcher because I feel like these other disciplines and knowledges make it easier for students to see "Oh, okay, so this is how they think of a text in media studies versus in literacy or in sociology." They get called different things, right? Artifacts, texts or whatever. Even just knowing that, that the terminology changes depending on the discipline, but that what we're talking about centrally is this thing that we're going to analyze and that it isn't, especially in humanities and English studies, always a book that has been written and published by somebody important that we all have to worship. It can be something...there is meaning-making happening on all these different types of text.

Just recognizing that is a really good starting point because then that expands what's possible in terms of who has created a text and who has communicative practices. It doesn't get confined to whatever that Euro-western tradition has been that we've been learning for most of our educations. That's the other thing, I think, that's important to have, is conversations with any level of student really, from the first-year students to graduate students, is that what we've been taught as the canon can be challenged. We can even go back into what is considered the canon, insert ourselves in certain ways, and account for all the things that are important to rhetoricians like context, right? In which time and space were these documents being created? That needs to be definitely dealt with.

We can't forget that part because I think we can be critical of what was being said in those times and spaces, but if we're not accounting for context, we're going to miss some things. We're going to miss why something was being said the way it was. I think that my teaching practice, especially what counterstory has allowed for, has made pathways for me to help students see that you can insert yourself into these other conversations in ways that maybe felt prohibitive because of who you are, whatever your identities are, whatever context you're existing in now, or because your people and their stories aren't being represented and never have been.

SW: Your book, Counterstory: The Writing and Rhetoric of Critical Race Theory, invites teachers to consider counterstory as a methodology. You write, "It's high time that the gatekeepers of this profession get out of the way so we as counterstorytellers can get on with the business of writing and sharing our stories without having to repeatedly rationalize the

legitimacy of our theoretical and methodological choices.” Do you mind talking more about counterstory and the affordances of counterstory as a theoretical framework and methodology and what this does or provides writing teachers and composition studies at large?

AYM: I think what the problem that academia, I would say, has had with story and storytelling forever, as long as people of color and others with marginalized identities have been offering these stories, the problem has been that it gets reduced to things like genre and then easily dismissed for that reason that this is not research, this is not a way about going into the research, there's nothing that theoretically frames what this is. That accusation has always existed. It's never been true, as other scholars before me have so aptly, I think, demonstrated. I'm not the first one to make this claim, not even in our field let alone in other fields. I think the power of what I've been able to research and I think present through this counterstory work is that critical race theory in particular, so that's the framework on which I'm hinging my approach to storytelling is very much informed by tenets. These tenets are theoretical frameworks that can be applied to the analysis of counterstories. That's the starting point.

As far as teaching goes, you can do that in the classroom with any number of things. I just taught a literature graduate seminar last semester with that framework. We weren't reading counterstories by critical race theorists. We were reading literature by novelists like Octavia Butler and others and applying that framework to analyze it as an example of what counterstory could be, right? It could be used in that way with students and learners. Counterstory itself is the method and methodology. It was important to me to repeat and to keep repeating that this is not just genre. It is genre, and there are genres within that I can demonstrate and show you all that the different exemplars have done, but it is method and it's methodology. It's the way about which we do this critical race theory work and here is what it's related back to.

I always tell audiences, “Go back to those tenets.” Because those tenets are what are going to be the barometer for you about whether or not you're doing counterstory, whether or not you're even doing critical race theory for that matter. It's just, I think, important to say that and to say it again and to say it until people understand it, which I think maybe the book has finally done because that's the kind of feedback I've been getting. It's not just genre. There's nothing wrong with genre, but don't reduce it to just that because I've seen it too often reduced to that so as to dismiss it from the academic circles of what counts as scholarship, what counts as a way to do research, what counts as something to teach in a methods course.

SW: How do you center critical race theory in your writing classes? Through what texts or assignments or conversations or materials?

AYM: That's worked for me at a few levels, two in particular where there's been the courses that I've taught that are explicitly like, “This is what critical race theory is. This is its history. These are the key players. These are the methodologies.” I have those version of courses. There are also then the courses that I've, I think, very intentionally asked to teach, especially in my previous job at Syracuse University where we had a standalone rhetoric and writing department with a

doctoral program. There were core courses on basically the histories of writing and rhetoric. Those core courses, there's a lot that can be done with those courses in terms of who gets represented. Those decisions are always political. Those decisions are always based on the training of the faculty, what programs they're coming from, what those political or types of leanings are.

I took a moment to think about, especially when I very explicitly was requesting to teach core courses, a couple things. One is that when I, and this is true for a lot of marginalized people in our field, we end up getting elective courses as the graduate courses that we teach. That results in a few things. That results in not getting to work with all the graduate students at any given time because they're not required courses. That works to further marginalize our subject areas into these elective spaces. They're not central to what is important to be learned as part of this graduate program. When we get to teach these core courses and then me, for instance, when I apply this critical race theory framework to a core course, what I'm thinking about is always those interstitial spaces where those counterstories are happening.

Instead of framing it as a course where we are going to spend a week on African American rhetorics and then move on, I don't feel satisfied with that. I don't think that covers what African American rhetoricians have said, let alone African American rhetoric scholars have said about what is supposedly this umbrella term African American rhetoric. What would a critical race theory approach provide? Well, it provides, I think, that different perspective of, "Okay, so within that umbrella category, there is nuance. There is complexity. There is a lot of different subject areas taken up, such as literacy, such as students' right to their own language, such as actual, I don't know, preachers that have been studied who are African American rhetoricians." There's a lot of different areas that could be covered that not all African American scholars in our field in particular do. They don't do all the same work, so why would you confine and conflate all of what they do to one week's worth of teaching? Why don't we separate, parse out the subject areas?

If we're going to parse out students' rights to their own language, there's a lot of different people from a lot of different subjectivities who have said something about that topic. Let's put all of those folks in there. That'll include some white folks. That'll include some people from the Latinx identities. I mean, that'll be a pretty complex and robust conversation that is thematically focused versus racially identified and focused. Because again, it's doing the same work of reducing identity to just a singular category that we could check the box of and move on from after that week is completed. That's not the first or last time I want my students to hear from those who have done that work who are of that identity category. There's a lot of diversity and complexity. That's kind of what I'm talking about when there's that critical race theory approach to courses. It's first demanding that you get to teach those core courses, but then doing more with those core courses than just kind of a multicultural diversity display, if you will.

SW: Aja, what's been really interesting nationally is the spotlight on critical race theory. I don't know what to call it, but it feels like CRT is talked about as some kind of recent theory or

approach or development, yet this work goes back to the 1970s and 1980s. I don't know, maybe this is more of me self-reflecting than actual question, but I don't quite understand where this national conversation or the presence of critical race theory in mainstream media is coming from. Is it this increase of attention because information is being circulated differently? Is it because of our political climate and culture? Is it because bills are being introduced about it? I mean, I'm just trying to figure it out. I'm interested in your own reflection and, I guess, the nature of these conversations and the way critical race theory is being talked about nationally.

AYM: No, I totally know what you mean. I've gotten this question quite a bit. First off, I am on academia.edu. That's not a plug. I'm just saying this because I got a message there not too long ago from someone who downloaded one of my essays that I have posted. Verbatim, this person said, "This paper is from a 2014 viewpoint," he's commenting, he said, "I thought that CRT was a more recent invention because of current battles over it in primary education curricula." So he was puzzled and surprised that this is not something that just popped up. Once they go ahead and read my scholarship that shows, no, this is definitely a post-civil rights iteration that started in law schools and has been around for quite some time making its way through legal studies, into education, into all the other disciplines that it now exists. Yes, it's been around for a minute.

In terms of context and what has made it...the answer to the "why now," I guess, question would be is that's also something that can be referenced back to, I would say, one of the tenets of critical race theory, which is interest convergence, which was theorized by Derek Bell, one of the founding people of critical race theory. Bell explains it as for any advances that communities of color get, there's always some sort of interest for the white elite that is going to be converged with that. He uses the most, I think, historic and prominent example of Brown vs. The Board of Education, the desegregation of schools.

He said, that wasn't necessarily just to afford liberation in a sense or achievement for communities of color. We were in the Cold War era. On the global stage, there was this look for democracy that, as far as branding goes, didn't look so good. The former Soviet Union and China were putting on the front pages of their newspapers images of lynchings in the United States, police brutality, stuff that is not dissimilar from what we're living in in this current context. It mirrors, if you will. They were pointing to that and saying, "Is this the democracy that they're selling? Because if it is, we don't want it. This is not what we're going to buy into."

As far as image goes, the US had some image repair branding work to do. I hate to reduce it to that, but it's ironic that, especially from the standpoint of rhetoricians, right, who study this sort of thing, how we're persuaded that I feel like people keep missing that there is a journalist out there named Christopher Rufo who has been very blatant and very honest with all of us about what the strategy is with critical race theory. He has tweeted, he has done interviews with the New Yorker where he has said, I have a quote here, "We have successfully frozen their brand, critical race theory, into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category."

This is not covert. The folks who are anti-CRT are showing us their cards. We're falling for it. Just over and over and over again. It's bamboozling what's happening. A victimization, I would say, of lots and lots of parents out there who just don't know and maybe don't know where to look for the information because they're being fed information from websites like one called CriticalRace.org. I believe that's what it's called. That is, again, from another conservative, extreme right-wing sort of person who has an explanation of what it is. It's wrong. Everything that he's saying it is is completely off in terms of who he even connects or gives credit to as founding critical race theory.

I mean, he's citing Marx. He's citing Kendi. He's citing DiAngelo. People who have all done great work but they are not the key players in critical race theory in terms of what that term actually refers to. This sort of misdirection and misguiding of uninformed people is very strategic but also being...is very blatant. Christopher Rufo has never lied about what his strategy is and what he's doing. I'm still puzzled as to why people are not seeing what he's doing and dismissing it outright for that reason. Then trying to find out from others what it actually is and what it actually entails. Then, if you want to still dismiss it, fine, but at least know what it is that you're against.

SW: You just laid out the strategy, so to speak, that is happening and what is taking place and what is going on. I'm wondering, is there a step that rhetoric and composition and writing teachers should be taking in this moment? What would you encourage the field and us to do as educators?

AYM: Becoming educated on what critical race theory actually is because that is the first misdirection is not being informed about the tenets and the history and what is actually being proposed here. Because the big, I think, scare tactic that's being used is that one, the alignment with Marxism first of all, right? That this is all an invention of Karl Marx, which is not true, and that this is all something that is being used to just brainwash and just totally imbibe all our students in this anti-American ideology that is harmful to our country and our national security. We've seen all of this before. This has happened in other forms of legislation, even in Arizona where I am from, where Ethnic Studies was banned at one point between 2010-2017. It was effectively legislatively banned in the sense of teaching Mexican-American history and literatures.

This is effective in getting things taken out of the classroom that would provide, this is where counterstory comes in again, that complexity of perspective to whatever the master narrative is, that master narrative of America's greatness, of the founding fathers having never been flawed humans, having no complexity themselves. Even silencing, dismissing and barring and banning certain texts such as, at this point, at least in Texas, there's a proposal to get rid of some of MLK's speeches because of the fear that they are promoting a certain sort of anti-American sentiment that students should not be learning. Silencing MLK, the darling of everyone who

would claim they're not racist, right? It's incredible to me that they're willing to go to that length, to that degree.

What will that result in? Those are some pretty heavy consequences for us as a country in terms of whose voices are being heard, what stories are getting told. What can be done in rhetoric and writing studies is to continue teaching our students how to see this ruse for what it is. It's not a covert operation. That's the thing that I keep saying to audiences. We have not been not told the whole time what they're doing, that this is a branding exercise, almost like a sophistic exercise, right? What we've read from his office...this is being used to do just for fun. That's the impression I get from this Rufo guy is that I don't even know that he has any particular stake in this outside of just being effective in this persuasive strategy to brand and categorize under an umbrella term that sounds scary.

Critical race theory has effectively been made this villainous term. Put everything under it that certain white people don't want to do anymore. They don't want to go to diversity trainings. They don't want their children to have to learn about whiteness. They don't want their children to have to learn about how our founding fathers owned slaves and how our country was actually founded, the kind of atrocities that were committed that I guess they think detracts from, again, that ideology of America's greatness. If we can put all that under this brand category and dismiss it all by way of saying that this is going to be detrimental in some way to our society, to our ways of Americans, then the job is done. Just helping students see that, helping students know those tools of rhetorical analysis at its most basic form and learning how to apply those tools to the discourses that are surrounding this controversy, including what Rufo is saying but including what critical race theorists actually have said. Some of it might seem threatening, right? If you're legitimately dismissing it for what it is, at least, again, know what it is that you're taking issue with.

SW: Thanks, Aja. And thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.