

Transcript for S2, Episode 5: Interview with Aja Y. Martinez

Run Time: 01:10:16

Cue music: "RSPN" by Blank and Kytt

BL: B. López (host, co-executive producer)

BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer)

YR: Yanira Rodríguez (guest host)

AM: Aja Martinez (guest)

BL: Welcome to *This Rhetorical Life*, a podcast about radical pedagogy, counterstories of rhetoric and composition, and the rhetoricity of our personal and political lives. We're your hosts B. López...

BK: ...and Ben Kuebrich.

BL: B. is a queer PhD student of color, an archival enthusiast, and a cat dad above all else.

BK: Ben is an organizer and a teacher of journalism and writing. Join us here every month as we talk with educators, scholars, and activists about their research, their classroom interventions, and their struggles for a more just world.

BL: Hey y'all, I'm so excited that Yanira and I get the chance to interview Dr. Aja Martinez, who is an Assistant Professor of Writing and Cultural Rhetoric at Syracuse University, and she'll be starting a position at the University of North Texas in the fall. As a critical race theorist, her scholarship, published nationally and internationally, focuses on rhetorics of racism and its effects on marginalized peoples and in institutional spaces.

Her efforts as a teacher scholar strive toward increasing access, retention and participation of diverse groups in higher education. Her writing has appeared in *College English*, *Composition Studies*, *Peitho*, and *Rhetoric Review*, among many other publications. Aja is one of the main reasons I came to Syracuse University and since I got here she has believed in me and my success. Being a part of a predominantly white institution, especially one like SU, where numerous racist, anti-Semitic, sexist, and anti-queer incidents have occurred, it's difficult to say the least. But having mentors like Aja makes all the difference because, as a woman of color, she offers unconditional support, and that kind of support is support I definitely don't take for granted. I know that I will survive this institution because not only is her work admirable, but she actively practices what she writes about. We are so excited to talk more about her counterstory work and the way she navigates the field of rhetoric and composition.

YR: Hi everyone, this is Yanira Rodríguez. I was really psyched about doing this podcast with B and with Dr. Martinez. Dr. Martinez is the educator I'd been waiting for my entire graduate career. And what I mean by that is her teaching and scholarship is grounded in the material ways many of us conceive of as the purpose of our education. And it feels crucial at this political continuum that

we're explicit about our exigencies for doing literacy, composition and rhetoric work and for remaining in the academy in general.

Oftentimes our reasons for doing this work are assumed for us whether through bootstrap narratives that presumed we just want tools to assimilate into a capitalist status quo or that assume that what marginalized students need is to be empowered by a benevolent white sponsor. As Carmen Kynard argued in *Vernacular Insurrections*, this understanding of our reasons for doing this work is ungrounded from the history that informs our entry into higher education. And it's also in ungrounded from the fights many of us have had to engage in to remain here and do the work we came to do on our own political embodied terms. Through her book *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, Dr. Martinez grounds us once again in that history and gives us powerful feminist tools for our continued fight.

BL: Just to start off, Aja, for folks who haven't experienced your work too much—I think everyone should—I just wanted us to start us off with what led you to do counterstory work?

AM: Yeah. Well first of all, thank you both for having me and I'm so excited to have the opportunity to talk about counterstory because I'm so knee deep in it right now. I'm on research leave and finishing my book that is all about being as thorough as possible to present the field with like a comprehensive history and kind of breakdown for both pedagogical and writing reasons of what counterstory is. So this is going to be really helpful. But to your question, what led me to it? I mean this book, but then all the essays that have been in between the book and my start with it has been, I don't know, ever since I took, um, other Adela Licona's grad seminar when she was hired in my second year of grad school. That was when I first became aware of the critical race theorists and that counter story was out there.

And so that was, geez, what year was that? I think 2007. So it's been, it's been awhile. It's been 12 years of learning and practicing and trying to hone my own craft when it comes to what counter story is mostly because it gave me voice for sure in terms of a way to express what I was feeling at grad school and experiencing. But it also gave me a methodology to frame it in ways that I felt were respectful of the experience of myself and people like me. because I wasn't finding that in other classes or other, just research methods that were presented to me as options. They just weren't touching me in that way. So that's how I started.

BL: That's awesome.

YR: I mean it, it's meant so much to me to find your work. And it's, it's so wild to me. You've been at this for 12 years. Right. And this work doesn't really make it into our graduate classrooms. I could say that from my experiences. Maybe now it is. because you're at Syracuse. And you know, and I've heard you mentioned that despite like CRT developing almost, you know, more like almost 40 years ago and you've been at it in the field for at least 12 years, you've mentioned that you find yourself continuously needing to explain what counterstory is and why it matters. So can you speak to some of those experiences when trying to publish a counter story, your counter stories and how has the work been received by colleagues and publishers?

AM: Yeah, totally. And again, this is a really great question for me because my first chapter of the book starts with a few excerpts from different reader reviews I've received from the top journals,

you know, in our field at least. And from the rhetorical standpoint, it's really interesting to see how much in common these individual reviews from different journals all have in terms of the word choice and the asks that they make of me, right? Like they're all saying the exact same thing. So it's across board, I guess requests for justification of the work, but also requests for a more familiar analytic on the part of these readers and the journals that they're representing.

And what's interesting about it, speaking back to what you said, Yanira, this like 40 plus year career or existence of critical race theory is that if you read back to even one of the founding members, Derek Bell, and some of the criticisms that he discusses in a particular speech that's called "Who's Afraid of Critical Race Theory," it's like he's, he's speaking what my life is right now in my field, but what was his life in legal studies, which is his advice is don't seek to justify the work speaks for itself. And it's taken me a really long time to get to that point because me latching onto critical race theory and counterstory in particular was out of kind of a desperation and a need for something to voice what I was experiencing that these other research methods weren't accurately covering. But then to get the pushback, all the way from the beginning, I mean this started when I was in grad school and has not let up all the way to this point. But his advice is that that's good because paradigm change is stubborn and resistant and so you're always going to receive that if you're really pushing against something, you know, that's going to happen.

And so it makes me feel like reading his words now 12 years into it that he wrote back when he was, you know however knee deep into it is just bolstering. I'm like: okay, I'm doing it, I'm on the right path. I'm in good company. I'm doing the work the way it's supposed to be done. Like Carmen talks about right, it's doing the work, it's not the job. But on the job when it comes to, yeah, these reader reviews for the major journals—I mean they publish me. At the end of the day they publish me. But what they've been continually asking to the point where it's *ad nauseam* for myself is for me to frame the counter stories, which I just want to jump into because we all know there's word counts when it comes to journal articles and I don't want to take up space anymore explaining in almost what to me is a repetitive sense what it is, you know like telling people not just what counterstory is but what critical race theory is. And I got a really funny reader review for the essay that ended up coming out and *Peitho* last year—so one of the ones we're going to talk about—where one of the readers was doing the same old song and dance like: We don't know what this is. Can you frame it, explain it? But the other reader who I guess was more familiar with my work was like, we know what this is, can you stop telling us, like we get it. This is your work and so I'm like: Which reader review privilege in this case? Because I feel that reader, you know, like that was reviewer two. But I agreed in that instance. It was just like, yeah, I'm sick of it too. I don't want to have to explain it anymore. And not even just for myself. I want it to be accepted enough in the ways that it kind of is actually in the field of education to the point where scholars beyond myself who wants to engage counterstory don't have to do that process either where they can just jump into it and don't have, not just the story because the legitimacy and the accuracy and the truth right of the story gets questioned. But the methodology of it and it being method driven and theory driven gets questioned as well. And so that's my goal and hopefully the book will accomplish that because that's kind of how that first chapter ends. It's saying like, here it is, it's laid out. Stop asking us what it is now you know.

BL: Wow. Um, and hearing that I'm wondering like, that makes me think about the way that people are like pushed out of spaces and also like, I don't know, weeded out of classes and stuff like that. I heard that a lot in undergrad. Like you take this class and if you don't, if you don't make it, you know, you drop and then you change your major or something like that. I don't know. So hearing that, just hearing that at that level of hearing these things from like different journals, that's a trip

that I feel like that sounds very similar to those things that I've heard and like being pushed out in these ways. I'm wondering if y'all see parallels in that too or...

AM: Yeah, I would say so because it can be very discouraging, especially when you're receiving it about your work from people who are not your professors who you want to believe have some investment in you, right? When it's from external sources like people maybe on a hiring committee if it's a job or from a journal who don't know you, maybe really don't know you because you know, sometimes reader reviews are double-blind, they don't have that same level of investment in you as a person. They're just looking at the work and judging in that way. So yeah, it can be very discouraging to get back a review and revise and resubmit is pretty common. I've talked about this with grad students before. It's actually usually an encouraging thing, but it depends on what the comments are read of the comments are. If the comments are just that like this isn't real research, which I've received.

I received that in person from colleagues, but I've also received that, you know, in certain words and reader reviews. Yeah I could see where that would really feel like a push out move. Where I've been helped is that I've had people in the field who have supported my work almost from day one. Like I'm working particularly with Victor Villanueva on the development of my manuscript cause he has been the longest standing support of my work. I just realized that we've been working on my scholarship for 11 years. He was the first person to believe in it and publish it back in 2009, which I submitted in 2008. Right? So that was my first publication, the special issue that him and Damian Baca did on Latino Rhetorics, or I forget what the title actually was of the special issue, but he believed in my work back then. You know he saw something and has been working with me ever since to the point where my manuscript is now under development with him. People like him to co-sign, right and to support it. But then also others who are doing the work like Frankie Condon has been engaging narrative in those ways. Keith Gilyard, Adam Banks, Carmen Kynard, Angela Haas, they're all engaged in critical race theory in different ways. So I don't have to explain to some of these major scholars who Derek Bell is and what his importance was and what, you know, the other aspects of critical race theory is. And so it has been helpful that there are those few heavy hitters in the field who get it. And that's bolstering for me. But back to the pushout thing: Yeah, I think if you don't have that kind of support in the form of mentorship or just like heavy hitters who can vouch for you and the, I don't know, just the legitimacy I guess in that way of your project. Yeah, it would be very defeating and I think I would've given up a long time ago if I didn't have that.

YR: Yeah, I mean it has me thinking about like, you know, it could be really interesting to think about what are the mechanisms at every stage and what do they look like, right? Like, you know, we know we know K through 12 we have a sense of K through twelve of how it happens. But at the graduate level, what does it look like? And even, you know, junior faculty, you know, and even tenured faculty, what are these mechanisms? And they're, and they're not always like, once you're tenured, it's not that you're going to leave. It's like that you become alienated, right? These messages that your work doesn't have significance and impact. So that's very, you know, to hear it...

AM: Well that's exactly it. I was lucky enough, and this was like a stumbling in the dark kind of thing, but I was lucky enough to send my first shot at publication to Victor and to his special issue. Whereas I think if I had tried just *College English* without that added layer of a Victor Villanueva of being the guest editor at that point, who knows what would've happened. I'm assuming... Well, I know it would've happened. John Schilb, I think is his name. He was the actual editor of college English at the time and he wanted to reject my piece and Victor fought for it because John said that I was just doing some sort of like book review of Bonilla Silva and he didn't like it, you know, he

didn't think the style was appropriate, and it was Victor who made the case for me and made sure that it made it into that issue. So I do know that narrative. I have that story. So that is what would have happened to my writing and if that had been my story. I know that story too. I've seen it happen to graduate students who are told, in sometimes very violent terms, that their work isn't worth a shit and they're not going to get published. And they stopped publishing. It is a push out mechanism. I got really lucky. I got really lucky that my confidence wasn't destroyed on that first pass. So if anything, it was just bolstered to the point where I've gone forward submitting things since that point on because I feel confident and have been given that confidence.

YR: And for the record, can I just say that we are because you are. You know, like, right? And I mean, I don't want to speak for you B, but like that... You know that you got lucky, but this has meant so much that you exist and your scholarship exists has meant so much because like you... The way you're speaking about Derek Bell, seeing your, what's happening to you right now, mirrored like when I read your work, I'm like: Oh my goodness. You know, someone's put words to these experiences that I haven't been able to know how to write about because the field doesn't even give you tools to write about it. Right, and so...

AM: Yeah, that's exactly how I felt. So if that's the continuation of it, if it's a, you know, a passing on of the skill set and the methods and methodology and this is something that helps others be able to do it. Yes, that's exactly what I think Derek Bell and then Delgado and Patricia Williams intended in the first place and hopefully, yeah, that's what I'm able to do for others because that's just a continuation of their legacy, which I'm really honored to be a part of. If they would count me as part of that, I don't know. But you know, that's, that's my hope and I'm glad to hear that because that's what I want. It's like more counter stories. Yes! More people because one of the questions I got from Victor in particular in one of the earlier drafts with the manuscript for the book was is counter story method or methodology? I needed to really parse that out. And I had the opportunity in May to go to the critical race studies and education conference there was at USC this past year. And I met Delores Delgado Bernal who's one of the big counter story people in education. And I got to ask for that exact question because I thought I knew the answer, but I wanted to hear it from her mouth. And she said, "it's both."

And I agree it's both because counter story is by virtue of critical race theory, a theory-bound framework toward a way to do research. But within counterstory there are methods, which are the genres about how to go about it. Right? Those are the tools and the skill set. So it's both. And I spent a good chunk of time in that first chapter explaining that as well to, I think Victor's satisfaction at this point because he's finally okayed that chapter. But it's both. And I think others have spoken about it as such, including Delgado Bernal and others. But that's exactly it Yanira. It's that, that skill set, those tools that I was desperate for because, I didn't have them, I didn't know how I was going to go forward doing research without them. So if it weren't for Adela presenting those at exactly the right time, I don't know. Yeah. I don't know where I'd be right now.

BL: Yeah. It's, it's such a trip too because—I don't know, when I encountered your work, I was really mind blown, completely mind blown and I felt like this, I don't know, like the universe was telling me that it's okay to continue, right, in this doctoral program. And then it's, it's not just, it's not just your work, it's also the ways in which you practice your work and in your mentorship. Right? Like it's, cause I think, I don't know if I can think of specific people who like not only just practice what they preach, I guess. And I, I feel like I've, I'm so lucky to have encountered your work to, to work with you, to meet, like, just to be in the same space with you because it's, it's made all the

difference. Like, it's, you have no idea. Well, I mean I'm sure you, you probably do, but it's affirming to read your work to be around you and to know like: Damn, like this is, she's like actively doing this, right? It's not just writing it and moving on. This is how you mentor this is... So I'm really amazed by you and your work.

AM: Geez, you're going to make me cry. I mean, again, it's been learned behavior I guess. Because I've had, I've had those kinds of mentors in like Adela and definitely in Victor. Jaime Mejía has been really instrumental. And Carmen Kynard, I was just telling her this about this past weekend with her keynote and she gets up there and you know, just tells the audience all about themselves. And when I see her, you know, dressed with her big earrings and her amazing sneakers and just like herself, right? She comes up as her whole self, dressed as she's going to dress and tells this room full of, you know, I guess well-meaning white people, what she needs to say to them. It just, I told her it makes me brave. I think to her and people like her who have mentored me and when I'm feeling scared or feeling like: Oh, is this something that I'm going to, you know, really fight for? I think about those who fought for me and others who have done it, you know, with real risk, real consequence that they could face.

And they're not just writing the work, right? Because we know people who are doing that where they just write the work and they don't live it. And we know what they are as mentors and as teachers and advisors, you know, like they're the people that we warn each other about and try to steer around for that reason because we know that they're not really about *the work*. You know, they're about the job like Carmen would say. And so, I've had those situations come right into my lap. It's like I don't look for these instances. They're just part of the institution, right? Like the institution functions in a way that is violent and pushes people out. And because I've lived these experiences and found a way to write about them, I've really faced crossroads where I've been like: What kind of asshole would I be if I don't act on and use whatever privilege I have in my capacity to support students in particular through these situations that are too familiar, right? Like I've lived them in certain ways where I feel them in an embodied way and, and just can't sit back and do nothing. Because others have, have not done that for me. I'm here because others have stuck their neck out for me. And I've written about this in that *Peitho* piece. But I think that beyond just being an ally who wants to, you know, be an assistant to those who are, you know, minoritized in certain ways, you have to be willing to bear some risk, which takes you more into that accomplice territory, right? Where something could happen to you and things have happened to me as a result. I've faced consequences and probably will continue to do so. But, um, I think the alternative is worse than doing nothing or sticking your head in the sand is worse. I don't see that as the better option.

YR: So I hear, I mean two directions here. The like, loving so much too. You know you like doing the work at the stage that you are, right, reveals like the sort of bankrupt notion of these rhetorics of arrival that somehow you arrived somewhere and, and there's a safe place that you arrive, you know. I mean I've witnessed you take risks right alongside your under, you know, undergrads or graduate students, right. A risk that reveals that there is no place that you arrived, but wanting to talk about and B, I think you had a question around this about contingent belonging...

BL: Yeah, yeah.

YR: So that maybe wanting to hear more about the work as it comes up against contingent belonging or what as a tool that challenges that. I don't know if I'm actually asking you a question, but thinking through that.

BL: Yeah, I think the question that around that it was like, cause I know you mentioned this about conditional residency, right? So I think the question was framed around like what are some ways that academics of color challenge conditional residency?

AM: Yeah, I mean that it exists is definitely, what Sarah Ahmed talks about, right? Like in her *On Being Included*. And I think the metaphor of the home is, is perfect in terms of just the, the visual and environmental rhetorics that you're going to experience at any institution, but definitely at a university where as soon as you walk on campus, all you have to do is look at the names of buildings or the oil paintings on the walls to find out whose home that is, right? Like that's how we mark our spaces in our homes with what we put on our walls and what we gather in that space and who we gather in that space. So, right away the message is pretty clear that, you know, the university did not historically include you, people who looked like you, and maybe has no intention to do so going forward depending on that progression of pictures of like presidents or you know, Confederate heroes in some cases, right? Like all that stuff that you can see visibly on campuses that mark the space. And so I really love that metaphor because for me it ties back to, again, a lot of the stuff I've been thinking about in terms of Derek Bell. One of the tenets of critical race theory, and there's a bunch of them that I've just parsed out recently. There's about eight that I've told a lot about depending on who's talking about it, but one of them is racial permanence and how many people have critiqued him saying that, you know, "You're such a downer. It's such a bummer that talk about race and racism as something that is not ever going to not exist. Right. Cause that's a very progressive liberal model to say that, you know, within civil rights discourse or scholarship that eventually we will arrive. And that's the kind of like you're talking about Yanira, right, where at some point we will be beyond this thing called racism in the United States.

And Bell's premise of racial permanence has always been like: "No, we won't because until we unravel the way the U S was started, the imperialistic way it was started on the backs of, you know, Africans who were brought over and the erasure and extinction of native peoples. Until that's undone, our version of racism in this United States that's tied to white supremacy, is never going to go anywhere. It's gonna double down. It's gonna be cyclical. It's going to maybe break down certain ways and reform elsewhere, like that weird *Terminator* character, right? The, the cop one, right? So indicative that he's a cop! He just turns into like liquid and reforms elsewhere, and we've seen that. I mean if you look at the different eras of which the United States has existed, it's always reconstituted itself in some other way, in some other era.

And that's part of his other premise, which is interest convergence that any progress, perceived symbolic progress for black people or other people of color will always come with the twin side of it being in the best interest of white people. Right? And so that's why it always reforms itself at the end of the day. And so that's how I, I look at this conditional residency, this idea of the institution as a home space. I don't see it as something that is ever going to actually be our home. I think we carve out spaces or we use the institution in terms of its monies and whatever to do the work that we want to do, the actual real work. Like Carmen again talks about, but that's part of that distinction that she makes between the job and the work, right?

The job is the institution. The job is all these things that aren't going to go away. It's never going to be our home because it was never met. It's too invested in white supremacy. It's too invested. And so, what do we do? Well B, there's strategies that you've done, and Yanira too, within the institution, you know, to make your voice known through activism, to carve out spaces for, you know, BIPOC students. Any of those things that the university can support with the money that, you know, I think

it should be paying for these initiatives. I mean we carve out those spaces but don't ever, I think in my opinion, be fooled into the idea that it's your home or it can be your home. I don't think that that's its mission. And so we do the work that we can with our eyes open to the idea that this is not I think ever going to be a safe space for us, or a place that will be fully welcoming. That's not what it's meant to do. Back to because of those tenets of racial permanence and interest convergence. Right?

And think about that in terms of admissions and hiring for people of color. Where is white interest invested in that and where does it show itself? It shows itself in: We'll let you in, but we'll have no structural things in place for you. Cause that's not in our interest. It's in our interest to look like we value you and your bodies and the perception, you know like, optics of that. But once you're here, you know, sink or swim, as we've seen for so many different generations. Yeah.

Yeah. And that's depressing, right?

YR: And I mean like, do we even want to be part of that house, right? I mean, my house is dope.

AM: Yeah! Yeah, don't try to make a home.

YR: But thinking about that in graduate school because tied to that is also all this surveillance. Like there's this like, you're always being watched for failure.

BL: Damn!

YR: You know, and I remember this moment where I, I dunno what was happening... I mean I do know what was happening though. The freaking world was on fire as far as like all the instance of police brutality, and I remember it was either maybe around Sandra Bland or, a moment where on my social media I posted like "burn it down." Right? But burn it down as a rhetoric that comes out of an abolitionist rhetoric out of, you know, that has this long history, just as long a long symbolic history of the burning down of plantations. Right. Because how else are people going to get free? And I remember a professor writing, like responding to that, like surveilling my accountant and responding to that by saying like, well, if you don't like it, leave. And I was like, "oh wow!" Like this is her house or their house, you know, like, and they could say that.

Meanwhile, there was these like white boys actually going onto campuses with lit tiki torches, right? Reproducing like that imagery of the KKK. And so this like, you know, it became very clear to me that it, it was always sort of dependent on us to prove that we needed to belong somehow by sort of conceding to these like really containment rhetorics of collegiality and... And I guess toward that, you know, thinking about that, this side, this expectation. Have you seen shifts in the logics through counterstories from white colleagues and students as they encounter your work? I mean, because I, I want to know that because it's like the, the shift is always expected of us, and I'm interested in, you know, have there been any shifts that you witnessed? You smile, Aja! So I'm wondering...

AM: There's been like a, an arc I feel. The first kind of reactions I got were like sitting there at my dissertation defense, and I had one white faculty member on my committee because I felt like I needed that perspective just to know what I was going to face. And he performed right up to task in that regard where, you know, one of my chapters, which is ironically the chapter modeled off of Bell's allegories, which I admit, you know, it was my first, it's the hardest genre to write. And I know that from experience personally, but I know it from experience now teaching it and a

counterstory methods class where my students really struggled with it as well. Because allegory is so intricate and it needs to be so, you know, just smart, just so clever, right? Like you have to know how you're using characters and contexts and settings to be able to make it work in a way that reads as, as a Michelle Alexander, who wrote *The New Jim Crow*, she wrote the new forward to Derek Bell's very famous *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* and she wrote in that as a law student when she was reading these allegories of his, she was like, "Why are they so simple an eighth grader could read these," and that's a successful allegory, right? When you think like, wow, anyone could pick this up and read it, but the meaning you're going to derive depends on how smart that teller was. Right? And it's not that easy to write something that is that accessible. It's actually really difficult. It's easier, I think, to write something that no one can read. And then pretend it's like really high theory or something, right?

And so, from the start, and I'll admit that allegory I don't think it was my best work, it was just my attempt for the purposes of the dissertation. But someone decided to publish it. It actually ended up getting published. But that white man on my dissertation committee told me to my face during my defense: Wow, you just write stuff that reads as bad fiction. And I was like, well, it's getting published. So I don't know what to tell you, talk to the editors, right? Cause here I am about to defend my dissertation. There's a sad fiction and it's about to go publish.

YR: Or stop giving us bad realities to write about, right?

AM: Yeah, you know, and I'll hone my craft. I'll get better. I promise you that much. You know? And so that was the start of my journey of criticism, right? And pushed back. But the most recent, and this started even with my campus visit to Syracuse, you know, I got questions from the audience in this regard. But I've not stopped hearing this especially because I just went through a review process.

But I think what has shifted is the idea that because I've been more and more published with this work and there's been uptake—you know, students like yourselves and even colleagues and students outside of the institution there's been uptake—is now the feeling that they're being surveilled and the fear that I'm going to not only watch and record but write about it and have the power and platform to publish it. And so that's the kind of feedback I've gotten more recent from certain individuals who are, I don't know if I would say they're afraid, but they definitely have the idea that I'm just out to get them, right, and to report on them and to and that misses the point in my opinion. Because that is not what I'm here to do with counterstory. And I've said this before in response to people who feel like: Oh, you know, I'm going to be personally implicated in your work. It's like if you're reading yourself into the work then that says more about you and your actions than it says about anything that I'm writing that is not based on any one-to-one correspondence I'm having with people. This is about, if you're reading what I'm actually writing, what composite counterstory is, which has been heavily theorized by people like Adrienne Dixon, who's an ed scholar, and Daniella Ann Cook, another education scholar, composite counter story is purposely—and they're citing all the way back to Bell again—purposely made to be based off a braiding together of literatures, other sort of statistic data, and personal experience. Okay. So like, it's not even so much that these people who are feeling personally implicated have reason outside of their own guilt or their own actions. Right, but it's like, do they realize how repetitive and familiar their behaviors are for those of us who study race—that they are doing textbooks shit. They are doing stuff that has been written about for 40 plus years and that's just the critical race theory, you know, part of it because you take it back further to testimonial slave narratives, like all the way back.

This shit is repetitive. It's cyclical, it's familiar, we've seen it, we know it, we study you, we know your actions, you don't see us, but we see you. And we document it. And if you're feeling like that's you that we're talking about, you should be a little bit introspective about that and figure out why you're feeling like that's you.

BL: Louder for those in the back! Dang!

ALL: (Laughs.)

BL: I think I had talked to you about this and about that fear that you kind of alluded to, right? And I think it's really funny. I'm like, yes, like be afraid. Like watch your every move because I think: One, of course that's about them, right, projecting their feelings of like how their actions are being perceived, or all these things. But at the same time, it's kind of funny to enjoy that like temporary, because it is temporary, because they're not going to continue being afraid, right, because of the privileges. So I think it's funny to watch, to kind of witness, that temporary fear because I'm like, we're surveilled all the time, right? We are fearful for not just how our actions are going to be perceived, but we're afraid for our lives and survival. So it's, it's more than that. So that's, that's cute that you're like temporarily afraid and that, you know, that fear, that temporary fear really pops out. And I definitely witnessed it as well in my own experiences and we actually had this conversation, or a similar conversation in composition histories class in talking about, what are the approaches that I guess white scholars in particular take if they want to write about marginalized groups or write experiences that are not theirs?

And I, I guess this has me thinking about that. And like I think the fear that there is around that as well, like: Oh, can I write about that? I'm not really experiencing that, but that's where you're, you know, I think the language around being an accomplice comes up, right? Versus being an ally. And I had written something about like, well, are there other folks doing this? Have you read things about, you know, critical race theory, counter story, have you done your work in and understanding like what it means for you to even want to step up? Like questioning that. I'm wondering like, cause I know you wrote about this, but like I think I just like want to get a tattooed or something because it's there for people to read. But I feel like people are still very afraid. And so what would it look like for folks to be coalitional accomplishes?

AM: Yeah, I mean, yeah, this has come up before. This was actually the first time that I got an opportunity to work with Carmen Kynard we were on a committee together for the best article from Cs of the year. It was one of the, one of those Cs committees. And she was the chair and we were given a set of articles that year that we were supposed to judge, right? We were supposed to adjudicate for the best article and she was the first one to point out and to be very, you know, loud about it that, you know, like one of the articles that was up for consideration was written by a white person who was writing about, you know, minoritized peoples and didn't cite any of the scholarship that's out there by minoritized people who have been writing about this, right? Like just somehow not only got away with writing this but getting it published in this premiere journal, right?

And having it put up now for an award. And so Carmen was the first one to be like, look at this work cited and it's bullshit, right? Like how did this person get to do this? And that was the first instance that I was like: Oh my God, we can do that. Like she modeled that for me. We can push back on things like this that Cs, as a publication, doesn't somehow safeguard scholarship from

critique in this way. It's not just this ultimate platform where once you're in Cs, you know, you're beyond critique, and are definitely not going to be awarded for doing that kind of faulty scholarship. And so what happened though was that this person did end up getting, I would say called in, I don't think it was a call out. There was definitely like care and consideration of this person to try to see if they were about, you know, really being in coalition, let's say with the community they were speaking about.

So this person proceeded to, you know, attend the caucus meeting of, you know, those who called them in and you know did I guess that and joined this caucus in a strange way, but then started asking individual caucus members every time they were about to publish something, if they would please read their work to make sure that they were citing enough of people. Right? And it's like that just, that's the way *not* to do it. Because what are you doing? You're piling labor that you should be doing, right, onto people who gave you as a gift the information of what you should not be doing. And then you are just kind of saying, well here: Did I do it right? Like that's how it came across at least. And so don't do it that way.

But the way that I've seen it done well is when the researcher can really answer why they're doing the work because that's always the question I came up through anthropology and there's a really nasty history in anthropology, you know, of being predatory, right? Especially toward indigenous communities. And what I learned from the research methods that were honed and changed based on indigenous critique in particular was that you go into a community and you make clear how they're your partner first of all in the research, if they choose to be so, and make clear what their part is and what your labor is going to be, but also make clear why you're doing the work. What do you intend to do with it? And I've said this to students before who want to work with, let's say like the Onondaga in Syracuse. If you are a white person going in to do that work, you need to make clear to yourself before you even go into that community. Why are you doing it and what's the sustained thing that you're going to do with that community beyond you getting your doctorate and leaving?

What is it that you're doing that work for and how's it going to contribute, I guess back to the community that you're being extractive of and from. Because if there's none of that on the flip side, then you are just being extractive. You're just using people as like a colonial resource, right? Where you just go and take and let it bolster your cultural capital and leave. Because that's what happens. So I know how to define what not to do and I've seen it done poorly. And I understand even when I approach my own community partnerships, if I'm receiving mistrust on the side of the community partner, it's earned, I think. Maybe not by me personally, but by the record of what scholars do, right? From universities that come into these community spaces and it's my job, not theirs, to I guess build my credibility with them in the ways that, that you should be willing to do as a person that's trying not to be extracted as trying to be coalitional.

YR: I always deeply, so deeply, appreciate just how generously you model. You did this like self-reflective modeling in order to be like, okay, I could be self reflective. So here's a model of like how you can, you know, be self reflective. You know, and I'm like, I've seen it like in Black, women of color, third world feminist scholarship modeling the self reflection that you want to see from white peers. And then I often see that that self reflection abused, like, it ends up turning into this other sort of thing. And you know, it's just so generous to even think because I'm at the place of like no just don't go do that scholarship. There's so much study of whiteness that you could be doing. Like of the self that you could be doing. That's sort of where I'm at with my thinking on some of it because I just haven't seen something... I want to believe in accomplices. I mean, I know there's some good folks that do, but I guess I've never had accomplices that are not grounded in organizing

work. That are like in the spaces of organizing first or like have some sort of jump off point before that is not the academic space. But I'm always interested in seeing how it's playing out, I guess, in the institution.

AM: Yeah, I agree with that. And I think, yeah, the biggest barometer type question you can ask is, why are you doing this work? Why are you doing it? You know, like if they have an answer for that that is beyond themselves and their own gain as scholars or professionals, right? Back to Carmen, like the hustle, right? If it's about the hustle for them, then you know, it is that I would give that advice and don't do it. And Yanira, you're right. There's plenty of introspection to do surrounding whiteness and whiteness's relationship to maybe the community they're interested that can probably fill up many articles and books and dissertations. And so it's like: Start there, and then see where that connects to these communities that you want to study for whatever reason. You know, like think about your whiteness is in relation to that, racism in particular if it's race or literacy or whatever.

YR: I have like maybe a follow up question to that if there's space for it. Because you know, like I said, counterstory has meant so much to me. And it's such an embodied methodology or resistance, right. And it emerges as the need that marginalized communities had to tell these stories to counter dominant narratives. So, you know for some of us, and, well, I am still in the process of even trying to learn how to do it. Right? But if it's something that we wanted to also teach, the big thing for me and Kynard has spoken to this how sometimes we're trying to teach something and it quickly turns into this curricular object, this like de-politicized curricular object that then, you know: Oh, if you're going to counterstory tell then I'm going to, you know, without an attentiveness to embodiment. So I'm thinking how do we do that but also avoid marginalizing the teaching like that it's something that gets taught in spaces over here because we're just trying to teach it to certain students. Or how does it become something that we're teaching but also doesn't turn into a curricular object? And is that possible at a PWI, right?

AM: Yeah, yeah. So the thing that I keep falling back on, again, I don't think that I've outlined well enough in any of the essays, but that is part of the book and the first chapter again particularly is those tenets that have been outlined by the different people who have approached critical race theory. And these tenets are things that I think if they're subscribed to kind of give a rubric for what is counterstory and what is not. Because that's the other question I usually get is, you know, are all marginalized narratives counterstories. Because we have plenty of those. Maybe, you know, but it depends on what they're linked to and that's kind of where the tenets come into play. Because the last tenet that I kind of explore is the one that says, you know, these narratives have to have something to do with a commitment to social justice. Okay. And so if that's not the aim of your narrative, no matter who you are as the speaker, a white person, a person color, whatever. If the commitment to social justice is not central, then you know that's, that's not really—it's a narrative. Sure. But is it counterstory? No. The other tenets, so they outline other things that I think separate counterstory from other types of narratives, like this idea of centralizing experiential knowledge. Like you said, this embodied knowledge of voices of color in their uniqueness. But the hard task of that is also not doing this essentializing of, you know, now you've heard from all Mexican people. But the other thing is that there's a challenge within them to dominant ideology. So is that happening? Right. And so I think there's ways to teach counterstory and to do it as a method, right? To teach an actual methods class and to give people the tools with which to do that. And then to let, I guess the students figure out whether or not they're even capable within their own ideological alignments or their own pursuits. You know, are they about justice? Because if they're not, they're

not going to be able to produce counter stories. They're just not going to be able to do it. And so for me, that's the one thing that keeps me from feeling like, okay, it's going to be commodified in certain ways.

But we have seen that happen in education. Okay. That has been the way it's gone, which is where the critiques of counter story come in, in education. Because the uptake in education has been pretty long-standing to the point where people don't really question critical race theory or counterstory anymore. That's not something that people are looking side eye at like the way they are in our field. Gloria Ladson-Billings has had to come out and kind of define what counterstory is not. And so she has a whole chapter in one of the collections about that that help give people direction, even people of color direction about, you know, like this is not just about ranting, this is not just about: I had a bad experience and I'm going to call people out in this narrative, which you can do. Right? But what differentiates it from counterstory are these other things that the tenets outline. And so, okay, so if people know what those are and they're able to teach those as a framework that becomes methodological for the students who want to write them and the students then are able to incorporate those into how they produce counterstories in whatever genre they pick, whatever makes sense to them: It could be biographical, it can be composite, it can be autobiographical, whatever. That gives actual, you know, I guess benchmarks that have to be met so that we don't have people just taking it up and teaching it as whatever goes and here it is and just stamping the name counterstory on it, which happens. You know, it's even happened in our field. I've attended some panels that say that in their title, and then I just usually think to myself: Oh, okay, well they're calling it that, but I don't know... But I also don't know who's really giving that kind of guidance in our field. So, I guess that's where, where my work, where I answer, as Shirley Wilson Logan says.

YR: That's so super helpful in thinking as I'm trying to write some myself.

AM: It's on its way. I'll share that chapter because I know you're particularly... That chapter is ready to go so I can share it before it's published for sure.

YR: Thank you! (Laughs.)

BL: I know you mentioned this in the beginning that you're working on your book and that's why you're on sabbatical. So I'm sad I don't get to see you as often on campus because your presence is really missed, but I was wondering if you would like to share more details about, about your book. I'm really excited about it and yeah, I guess like a little sneak preview, you know, for our listeners.

AM: Yeah, no, yeah, that's super helpful for me. 'Cause you know, it took me the longest to even understand what the book was going to be and how it was going to be different from my dissertation because when there's so much space between the dissertation and a book project and there's always that kind of push to not just reproduce your dissertation as a book. Like you hear that a lot and whether or not you have to do that, I felt I did because although the topics and the subject matter of critical race theory and counterstory, I knew that was going to be the book.

I knew that there was experience I needed to get under my belt before I was ready to really commit to the book and fully flesh it out. And one of the major experiences, and I'm realizing this as the whole project is coming together is how inherently pedagogical it is. The case for it I'm making for it in terms of pedagogy and how pedagogical counterstory has been from the start because as I'm

reading these histories and these speeches and these interviews with Derek Bell in particular, but also the commentary that's been written about him, he always intended counterstory to be stories that he teaches with. And so he wrote the first initial ones to use in his law classroom to teach his law students. It started with pedagogy, right? Like that's always been its project. And so it's no surprise that the uptake in education was as great as it was. And it's no surprise for me that it's transformed in the ways it has for me into yes, rhetoric, defining a rhetoric of it, but the rhetoric as it applies to pedagogical situations. 'Cause that's where I've found the most experience and success that's helped me with the book is through teaching counterstory and critical race theory.

And so I needed those experiences under my belt before I really knew what I wanted to say about it. And so I did craft a couple courses at Syracuse that explore the more theoretical aspect of it at the graduate level. But then also with undergrads, I was able to teach what is advertised as a creative nonfiction course, but ended up very much like a methods course plus creative nonfiction, which was the counterstory course, just how to write it. And with those two syllabi and those two courses behind me or in the bag, if you will, I have realized how intrinsic the pedagogical experience has been to the whole project. Because what the project does is, it's deeply personal. So it starts with a prologue and ends with an epilogue that talks about what my family have to do with this project.

You know, like how I've always been tied to storytelling and counterstory in particular because I was raised on these. My grandfather who, my main alter ego character out of the Alejandra Prieto is named after, is named for my grandfather who was named Alejandro. And he was dark skinned, so the Prieto as her last name has to do with that, you know, like love and embracing of our dark skin, you know, like not trying to be white or trying to, you know, do that colorism that yes, Mexicans, Chicana people are definitely guilty of. And so that's my character and I've written about her in at least for other publications. And so it's the continuation of her story but also the explanation of her. And so the prologue kind of talks about how she came to be through my grandfather and his stories and what those stories have done for me as a person who of course was going to do a project on counter story. Like there was never any question, now that I think about my grandfather and my family and all those connections. And then chapter one, as I've talked about kind of at length in this interview has to do with: Okay, so you all are out there still saying you don't know what this is. Here it is. Okay, here's its history, here's its tenets, here are the key figures, and here's how I'm going to talk about them in the book, particularly to counter story. Okay. Here's how even links up to rhetoric / composition. And the body chapters two, three, and four, they zero in on the three people I think of as counterstory exemplars, which are of course Derek Bell, Richard Delgado and Patricia J. Williams who have all written extensively in the counterstory form.

There's also been reviewed and criticized extensively for their choice to do this. And so what's really interesting about the first part of each of those chapters is I give some information about who they are and their contributions to counterstory, but also what the pushback has been before going into kind of identifying their unique version that have overlaps for sure, but are specific to them. Like Delgado does a form of kind of narrated dialogue where he's in conversation in almost a Socratic—so that would be familiar to our rhetoric audience—in this Socratic sort of dialogue with a teacher and a student, and they talk to each other, you know, and they come to some sort of understanding about a subject or a book or, you know. And he's done that extensively. Derek Bell does something similar with his dialogues, with usually two people speaking with each other, but he employs also allegory or fantasy and those elements, kind of as he would say to give distance between the audience and the writer to kind of suspend the imagination and to go into this kind of like fantasy realm to then be able to return with the concepts and really think. I guess not to feel as threatened, not as personal and close to it as allegories do, right as fantasy are able to accomplish. And then to come back to the subject, 'cause like I said, he intended them originally as teaching documents. And

so I kind of do that and then with Williams, she writes in a more autobiographic, reflective sort of fashion. So like Yanira, you were talking about this self reflection and being like a black feminist method. Williams embodies that to the T, right? Like this definitely her version of counterstory. And so I talk with each one of those authors individually about what their style is and then I demonstrate it with one of my own counterstories that you know, does my best to attempt their method so people can hear the breakdown about what it is and then see it, through my own version. And then just the fifth chapter kind of closes it out with, you know, so if counter story is about education and pedagogy, what does that look like as a framework on core courses within rhetoric and composition? So, I do have an excerpt from my most recent essay, the *Rhetoric Review* one where it's an email about a rhetoric course. But I've also written a response from V, you know, the professor character where V talks about a graduate level, contemporary rhetorics course and what their thoughts are on core curriculum and how they've approached it and what they're trying to do that incorporates a frame of critical race theory and counterstory to the way they go about with core curriculum. Yeah. So that's the book.

YR: So excited!

BL: Wow!

AM: Yeah, I'm so excited too because I finally feel like it's at the version where I'm proud to give it to people 'cause it took years to get to the point where I'm like: Okay, like this is embarrassing, you know. But Carmen Kynard is going to write the forward, so that's really exciting. And Jaime Mejía is going to write the afterward. So there's some really, you know, important people to my writing and my career. And Víctor has had a hand in the whole process, you know, helping me get to the point where it's, you know, pretty much ready. But there's going to be appendices with syllabi so people will have, you know, all the syllabi I reference in total to build their own courses or take them in whatever directions they want. Because, like I said, I didn't realize how inherently pedagogical the project was until I was able to teach it a little bit.

BL: Wow.

YR: What a gift, what a gift.

BL: Honestly! Same. I can't wait to hold the book. That's... wow.

AM: Me too! I mean I have a final deadline for me 'cause it's drafted, but there were the Bell and the Williams chapters were the ones that were giving me the biggest issue because the counterstory for the Williams chapters, those are done. But the information about her, I want to get that right. And the Derrick Bell chapter is the hardest, because it's Derek Bell, right? He's like this hero to everybody in critical race theory. And I want to get the part about him right and the way he does it. But the counterstory in it, I have the most anxiety about that because—B I think I've shared this with you before—that's a counterstory about the first octalog and it's where my Alejandra character actually travels back in time to 1988 to the first octalog and she gets to engage those original eight and talk about how things have progressed from that original 1980 octalog, but also where her approach with critical race theory and counterstory fits into their versions of, you know, the politics of historiography with rhetoric. So that part I know is going to be probably the most heavily...

YR: That is gorgeous!

AM: It's going to be the most heavily scrutinized by the field because people feel a particular investment in and affinity with the octalog. But the cool thing that I didn't expect, it kinda just happened like serendipitously is that I got asked to be on the newest octalog that's going to be at Cs this year. And I told the editor of *Rhetoric Review* who made that request of me. I said, you know, you have no idea, but I've literally just been writing as if I was part of this conversation. So this is, this is perfect timing, you know, I'm thinking there anyway. But yeah, if Alejandra got to be in the same room with those eight who are like James Berlin, Nan Johnson, all those people, what does she have to say to them? But I love that piece because I think if I do it right, I'm still working on it, if I do it right, it'll model a way, especially in graduate seminars for professors to get their students in conversation with a document like that that's so revered. And to see where they want to make disruptions, where they agree, you know how that interaction can happen in a way that doesn't just I guess presume blind faith in what these original eight, you know these deified eight, mostly 'cause some of them had passed, right? So how to engage it in a way that feels equal, like you're in conversation with them, which we want our students to do anyway. Right? That's what these synthesis documents that we teach them and 100 / 200 level classes are about anyway. So it's really not different from that, but it's just taking something that we know really well and seeing what Alejandra has to say about it.

YR: I could get behind a sci-fi voyage, any day! What!?

ALL: (Laughs.)

AM: Time travel!

AM: And of course inspired completely by Octavia Butler who makes an appearance in one of the counterstories cause she, you know... Stephanie Jones actually is exploring this and I can't wait to see what she does with it, but just seeing, because she was a contemporary of Derek Bell, and I think from his writing there seems to be nods to Butler. Like he was reading her. It definitely seems like he was reading her but hasn't talked about it and I don't know, you know, who knows. Maybe there's some weird politics about that. I have no idea. But Stephanie Jones is exploring that and I want to see what she digs up because I'm interested. I'm curious.

BL: So dope. Wow. The timing of that is a trip like, right. Like traveling back and then this Cs. That's, I'm excited. Hopefully I'll get to record that or something. (Laughs.)

AM: Yeah, for sure. It's one of the big panels and you'll get to hear from, of course more than me, it's an octalog. So there's eight of who are considered the contemporary voices. And lot of them, happily so, are cultural rhetorics folks, you know, that are writing and publishing out there about what cultural rhetorics means. I'm excited that that's kind of a—I don't know if it was intentional, I'm sure it was—but that that's really the focus of this new octalog and that's going to be an interesting conversation. I'm excited.

YR: I might have to go to Cs again.

AM: Yes! I know maybe this is your year.

BL: Let's have a whole squad up there. Front row!

AM: Yeah, that'd be awesome. I would love that. I would feel good about that. Like the way we were for Carmen, we had like a whole cheering section. There were like two rows worth of women of color sitting there just like "wahh!" Dr. E being in the Black church, you know, she was there. It was awesome.

BL: I had just like one other question I was going to ask, the one that I mentioned to you, Aja, if you wanted to talk more about the journal that your co-editing, *Writers, Craft, and Context* and if you wanted to get more information and you had just speak a little bit more about that.

AM: Yeah. Thank you for that. 'Cause I mean the more word we can get out, the better. Yeah, it's co-edited by myself and Michelle Eodice and Sandra Tarabochia. And the great part about that is that there's kind of like three rungs of experience when it comes to investment or interest in journal editing where Michelle is by far the most experienced. She's done the work in other capacities with like the *Writing Center Journal* and other things. And Sandy, you know, is a couple of years ahead of me, already tenured and has a book project under her belt. Also she's worked with Victor Villanueva and *SWR*. And so then there's me who is definitely interested in the process, especially from the perspective of what they would call manuscript development. So for composition studies, I've been able to help, you know, emerging authors get their manuscripts in shape for publication. Ones that the journal doesn't want to reject, but definitely, you know, it's not quite ready as a manuscript for publication and might need some mentorship and guidance. So I've been able to do that. And so that's been my interest in editing. And so Michelle approached me, I guess over a year ago now to see if I had any interest in starting this other journal because we really, in our different approaches, are interested in writing and spaces for writing that are not so vested in the academy as a home, right? Like where the university is where our starting point is, and we all individually do projects with writers that are outside of this institutional space and know how, you know, beautiful the work is, you know, but also how limited the opportunities are to get it out there beyond maybe some of these experiences with community partnerships.

And so in some cases, you know, that's where the work should stay and that's fine, but in some cases, our community partners want a platform for their work. Or some of these scholars who are working with community partners are having trouble finding a place for their work in the more traditional journals that would ask questions like, what's counterstory? Right? Like they just still don't get it. So anyway, we just wanted to see what we could do with that adventure. And we were also really inspired because at the moment the Cs caucuses had just written that statement in response to the Laurie Gries incident at Watson. Right? And we really loved the statement right at the end that talked about how they were interested in, I guess, a vision of equitable representation, right, in scholarship. And that they really wanted to have a condition that was more about speaking with rather than over or for others' communities. So kind of back to what we were talking about originally, right? And so if we were going to create a journal that was a space where people could speak for themselves, which is such a counterstory mission, right? Like people speaking from their own embodied experiences. But that was where I was on board 100%. And so that's what the journal is in intending to do. We're in our first CFP, so we've been definitely receiving submissions and we've made very clear that they do not have to be, you know, these scholarly articles. In fact, we want people to mix it up, send us poetry, which we've already received. Send us, you know, coauthor

things, send us interviews. Right? And so if there are other sort of interview forms that even you from *This Rhetorical Life* think would be a good fit for the journal. We want to publish it, we want multi-voice works, we want, you know, creative nonfiction. We want all of that. So we're on our way with it.

BL: That's awesome, that's so cool.

Well, yeah, thank you so much, um, for talking more about that. We'll definitely continue to spread the word. Thank you, in general for interviewing with us. Y'all are just badasses. I'm really blown away by just engaging in this conversation with y'all. And your answers. Just, I'm just so in awe of you all for real. So thank you for spending this morning with me.

AM: Well same, I feel real motivated to finish this Derrick Bell stuff 'cause I've been able to talk it out. So, thank you for providing a platform and opportunity to talk about my work in this way. It's been really exciting, and I don't know what I would do without collaborations and coalitions with folk like both of you and all the other people I've been able to meet for sure. It just continues the work that I feel was started before us, right? And we're going to continue and it's a good thing. It's a good thing.

YR: Same here y'all. Oh my God. Like I mean that you exist. It means so much to me. I love this sort of intergenerational space. It's so true. You've always embodied what you're writing. And like modeled that for us and I'm just grateful to be sharing with both of you. You're just dope, so I'm just like showered in blessings.

AM: Yay!

BL: That's a great way to put it. Exactly. Showered in blessings.

Cue music: "Bass and Drum" by OLC

BK: This Rhetorical Life is co-edited and produced by B. López and Ben Kuebrich. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter for new episodes each week.