

# The Responsibility of Privilege: A Critical Race Counterstory Conversation

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**Abstract:** *This work takes the approach of a critical race counterstory conversation and is most ardently concerned with the issue of centralized privilege in our academic spaces. In this essay the author asks the audience to consider aspects of privilege we have access to, what measures we can take within the institution to make space and not just take space, and how we can apply this work, whether that be work in the classroom, office hours, department meetings, or in interpersonal conversations toward the agency of those at the margins. The author challenges the audience to move beyond the fallacious notion that comfort in situations of social injustice should be guaranteed and urges her readership to lift their voices in this socio-political moment toward a movement that makes our efforts known as accomplices in the struggle.*

**Keywords:** *Rhetoric, Critical Race Theory, Feminism, Counterstory, Access, Privilege, Allyship*

## Contextualizing CRT and Counterstory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) counterstory functions as a method for marginalized people to intervene in research methods that would form “majoritarian” stories based on ignorance and assumptions about minoritized peoples. Through the formation of counterstories or those stories that document the persistence of racism and other forms of subordination told “from the perspectives of those injured and victimized by its legacy” (Yosso 10), voices from the margins become the voices of authority in the researching and relating of our own experiences.

As a theoretical framework, CRT made way for the emergence of critical race counterstory, a methodology utilized in scholarly publications, particularly in Derrick Bell’s landmark allegorical chronicles of Geneva Crenshaw (*And We Are Not Saved* 1987; *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* 1992), and Richard Delgado’s narrative dialogue Rodrigo chronicles (*The Rodrigo Chronicles* 1995). Delgado theorized counterstory as a methodology in his article “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative” and defines a variety of counterstory forms and styles including but not limited to chronicles, narratives,

allegories, parables, pungent tales, and dialogues (2413 & 2438). Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) scholars Dolores Delgado Bernal, Daniel Solórzano, and Tara J. Yosso further theorized and extended critical race counterstory as a necessary and legitimate method of critical inquiry for marginalized scholars, particularly those from cultures where the oral tradition is valued.

Solórzano and Yosso assert that “majoritarian” stories are generated from a legacy of racial privilege and are stories in which racial privilege seems “natural” (27). These stories privilege Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference. A majoritarian story distorts and silences the experiences of people of color and others distanced from the norms such stories reproduce. A standardized majoritarian methodology relies on stock stereotypes that covertly and overtly link people of color, women of color, and poverty with “bad,” while emphasizing that White, middle and/or upper-class people embody all that is “good” (Solórzano and Yosso 29). Whites can and do tell counterstories, and people of color, in contrast, can and do tell majoritarian stories (Bonilla-Silva 151; Martínez, “The American Way” 586). The keepers and tellers of either majoritarian (stock) stories or counterstories reveal the social location of the storyteller as dominant or non-dominant, and these locations are always racialized, classed, and gendered. For example, Ward Connerly is African-American, from a working-class background, male, and a prominent politician and academic. From his racialized position, Connerly is a minority, but he speaks and represents himself from dominant gendered and classed locations. From the position of an upper-class male, Connerly crafts stock stories to argue against affirmative action and to deny racial inequities. Alternatively, scholars such as Frankie Condon narrativize embodied whiteness and individual responsibility as a white ally. Although Condon is white, she is also a woman who speaks from a non-dominant social location, while as a white ally, she uses her dominant racialized location to craft critical race narratives that disrupt “discourses of transcendence” often responsible for leading audiences of white anti-racists to believe they are somehow “absolved from the responsibility of doing whiteness” (13).

As a rhetorical method, critical race counterstory is a theoretically grounded research approach that draws on an interdisciplinary approach with roots in ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, the humanities, and the law. According to LatCrit scholar Dolores Delgado Bernal, a critical race methodology challenges White privilege, rejects notions of “neutral” research or “objective” research, and exposes research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color (see also Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed*). Importantly, this methodology recognizes that experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that

is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices. A critical race methodology includes a range of methods such as storytelling, family histories, biographies, *cuentos*, *testimonios*, and counterstory. Counterstory, then, functions as a method to empower the marginalized through the formation of stories with which to intervene in the erasures accomplished in “majoritarian” stories or “master narratives.”

In all, and as this essay demonstrates, it is crucial to use a theory and a methodology that counters theories and methodologies that seek to dismiss or decenter racism and those whose lives are daily affected by it. Counterstory, then, is a method of telling stories of those people whose experiences are not often told. This methodology, as informed by CRT, serves to expose, analyze, and challenge majoritarian stories of racialized privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance.

## A Counterstory

Fall semester 2016 was the toughest teaching semester I've experienced in my career. Aside from the socio-political contextual difficulties associated with the election, I also signed myself up for a few daunting things: a new position as faculty at Syracuse University, an hour-long commute from my home in Binghamton to Syracuse to go with it, and my daughter very rudely decided to stop being my baby and turned—in what seems overnight—into a teenager and a freshman in high school. Needless to say, I began the 2016 academic year with A LOT on my plate. Now, as is the case with any new job, there is bureaucratic hoop after hoop to jump through as your employment at a new institution becomes legitimate. And as is the case when you're human, there is probably a hoop or two you'll forget or overlook in the whirl of getting started. So, this beginning narrative is going to cover a few themes that will serve as themes through the course of this essay: first, the concept of being human, second, the concept of the institutional academic space, and third, a resounding theme for this essay: access.



This is Syracuse University (see Fig. 1), and, look at it. Who are we kidding? It looks like Hogwarts. If you read the rhetorical message of this space, from the architecture, to the layout of this campus, I think a message of prestige, tradition, and a sense of exclusivity is very purposely communicated, and this rhetorical message is not one of access for all humans to these said institutional academic spaces.

In the flurry of the new job whirlwind of orientations, welcome events, and general newness, I forgot to fill out my I-9. For those unfamiliar with the contextual specifics of this government form, it is the paperwork required of all legally documented workers in this country, and it is the direct result of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. This act requires that employers mandate all newly hired employees present what is termed “facially valid” documentation verifying the employee’s identity and legal authorization to work in the United States (“Statutes and Regulations”).

If you didn’t know the intricate details about this form, or that it was instituted with and is tied to Reagan-era immigration reform in this country, don’t feel bad—it’s just not something you’ve had to think about. And admittedly, the details associated with this form weren’t part of my own awareness until this form became a problem of access for me—which is pretty much how privilege and oppression works, isn’t it? Whereas privilege is the stuff we generally don’t think about—because with privilege access is open, the world is open (see Fig. 2)—



*Fig. 2: Julie Andrews atop a hill in “The Sound of Music.”*

oppressive structures present themselves as barriers—barriers to the access you didn’t know you were barred from until the bars are figuratively (see Fig. 3) and sometimes literally (see Fig. 4) blocking your way.



*Fig. 5: Words to Block Access*



*Fig. 4: Bars to Block Access.*

These oppressive barriers remind me of one of the more poignant moments in Stokely Carmichael's 1966 speech on Black Power at Berkeley, that I think is worth reviewing as we think together about issues of access. Carmichael states:



*Fig. 5: Stokely Carmichael*

Now, then, in order to understand white supremacy we must dismiss the fallacious notion that white people can give anybody their freedom. No man can give anybody his freedom. A man is born free. You may enslave a man after he is born free, and that is in fact what this country does. It enslaves black people after they're born, so that the

only acts that white people can do is to stop denying black people their freedom; that is, they must stop denying freedom. They never give it to anyone.

Now we want to take that to its logical extension, so that we could understand, then, what its relevancy would be in terms of new civil rights bills. I maintain that every civil rights bill in this country was passed for white people, not for black people. For example, I am black. I know that. I also know that while I am black I am a human being, and therefore I have the right to go into any public place. White people didn't know that. Every time I tried to go into a place they stopped me. So some boys had to write a bill to tell that white man, "He's a human being; don't stop him." That bill was for that white man, not for me. I knew it all the time. I knew it all the time. (Carmichael para 7-8)

In the pile of paper work we're usually required to fill out when beginning a new job, I never really paid the I-9 much mind, in fact because of the "9" in its name, I admittedly didn't distinguish it much from the W-9—what a silly, uninformed, and privileged mistake. Thus, within my first week on campus, Human (emphasis on our key concept human here) Resources called this form to my attention with the following email (see Fig. 6):



Fig. 6: An ominous message.

Because I indicate in the title of this essay that this work is meant to elicit a conversation, let's think together about the composition and rhetorical message of an email such as the one above. As a reminder, I was within my first week on campus, orienting and preparing to start this job, as can be noted by the date of August 25, 2016 above. I think another important detail to note is

the time of this email: 4:38PM. Admittedly, I am the kind of person who has my email linked to my phone, and I suppose I should also admit I am the sort of person who has my phone in hand during most waking hours of the day. Thus, I received this email, in all its bold font glory pretty much as soon as it was sent. And I assume it can be inferred that I reacted like the image below (see Fig. 7) when reading language such as “[W]e are required to temporarily suspend your employment, effective immediately.”



*Fig. 7: An original emoji.*

It was a new job, it was a form I had overlooked (in an admittedly privileged way, which I'll get into further in a minute), and, here's the real kicker: As I noted, the email was sent at 4:38PM, and come to find out, Syracuse HR closed at 4:30 that day. And as already mentioned, there was my hour-long commute, so add distance as salt to this increasing wound. So yes, Macaulay Culkin's shocked and yelling face from "Home Alone" accurately captures how I felt in that moment. Luckily this all occurred on a Thursday, so I still had the opportunity to drive back up the next day to right this apparent wrong.

Tying in the concept of being human, in my body that is societally raced, gendered, aged, etc., and when thinking about access for this body in academic spaces that look like Syracuse University (see Fig. 1), I believed—and my use of the past tense here is intentional—I believed that on the days I want to be treated like the PhD and professor that I am, I needed to “dress the part.” As



the old adage says “dress for the job you want...” right? But before I proceed further in this story, I’d like my audience to consider if this adage can be applied equally to all humans occupying the intersections that our bodies represent, especially in spaces that are marked explicitly or implicitly as traditionally accessible for whites, males, for able bodied, and cisgender folk? Yes, this adds dimension to the thought of “dressing the part” when other factors of outward appearance beyond clothes matter in our societal context as well. And this is where the story really begins. It begins with my optimism that clothing choices will protect me—but I think while we’re on the topic of logics associated with clothing choice and public reception/perception, we have to acknowledge the advice given to women in this society that would associate clothing choice with the probability of rape or sexual assault, and I think there has been some very effective discussion within the context of social media spaces<sup>11</sup> concerning rape culture that have done well to debunk the erroneous logics implicit in this “dress the part” advice (see Fig. 8 and 9).

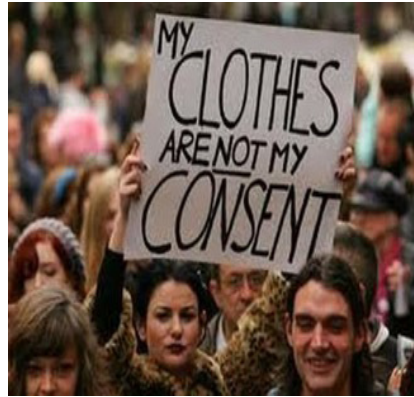


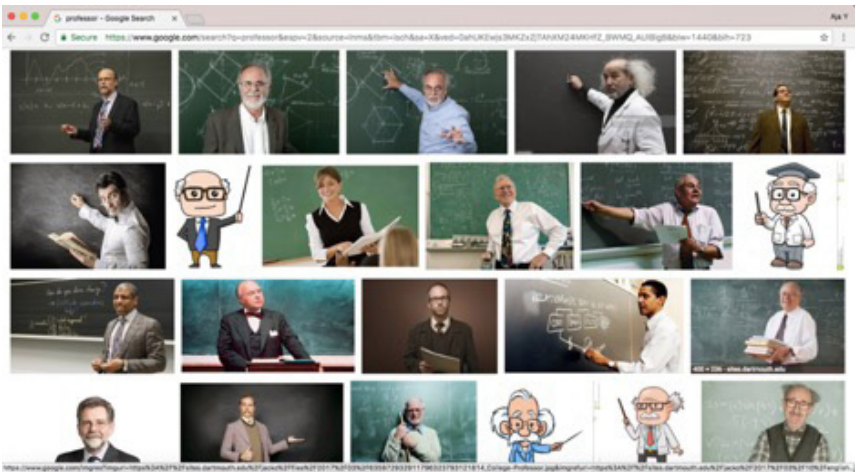
Fig. 8: “Don’t tell me how to dress, tell them NOT TO RAPE.” Fig. 9: “My Clothes are not my consent.”

But, for what was probably the last time in my life, I still attempted to “dress the part,” fully conscious that I am not what folk expect to see when they think of (in a very raced, classed, and gendered way) what a professor looks like. Just Google the word “professor” (see Fig. 10).

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1 For more information, see social media pages such as: <https://www.facebook.com/DontTellMeWhatToWearTellThemNotToRape/>





*Fig. 10: I can't locate myself in this lineup.*

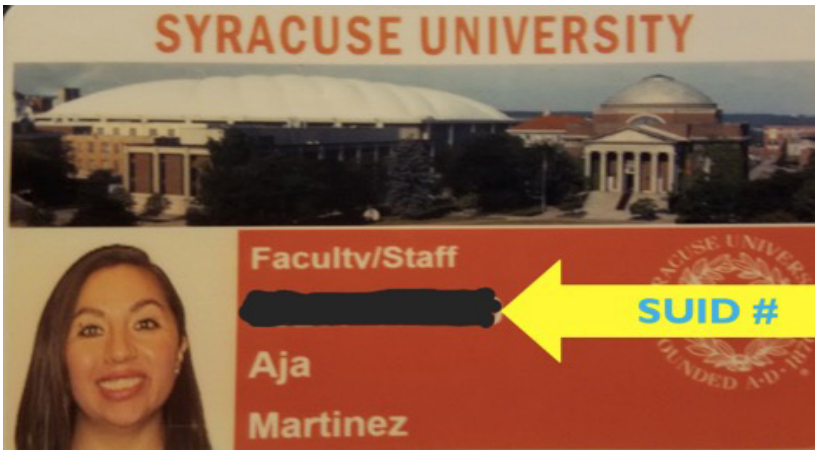
Thus, in my attempt to “look” like a professor that day, I took precaution in the selection of my clothing, I drove the hour to campus in the morning, allowing myself plenty of time for possible delays, and I checked and then double-checked that I had my necessary documents of verification for the I-9 on my person: my school assigned ID and my passport. Upon driving to the site of Syracuse’s Human Resources building, I walked into the office and was reassured to hear a person already at the desk asking for his own overlooked I-9 to complete. And I say reassured, because although I was dressed the part, although this job is the second in my career as a professor, although I made it through the years of what was essentially hazing to obtain a doctorate and I have the letters after my name to prove it, I still suffer an acute case of imposter syndrome, not an uncommon affliction to those of us whose bodies are in spaces not traditionally constructed for us. So, relief and reassurance is what I felt when I saw and heard a white male requesting the very form I was there to fill. Relief that I was in the right location, relief that I wasn’t the only one who made this oversight, and reassured all would be well. When it was my turn to be greeted by the Human Resources employee at the front desk, I approached with a smile and requested the form.

However, the HR employee, a middle-aged white woman, did not return my smile. If anything, my smile was met with a puzzled look from her before she asked: “Are you employed here?”

Now it was my turn to look puzzled, because her question threw me. I paused before I could construct an answer, and stuttering a bit I said: “I—yes—I...” and then I was finally able to eject “yes, I’m faculty.”

This Human Resources worker leaned back a bit in her chair for a full appraisal of me, and I felt my brows furrow into a frown that made its way to my mouth as I began to say in a barely discernable whisper “do I need to produce my school ID?” but she spoke over me and with a dismissive hand gesture she said “Okay here’s the form and a pen—fill it out over there” and she waved me away toward the waiting area chairs.

I took the form from her and did as directed, seating myself away from the desk, away from this confusing interaction, and filled out the form completely. When finished, I re-approached the HR worker’s desk, handed her my completed form, with the accompanying required passport as evidence of my legal status to work in this country. She took the form without a word, passed her eyes over it briefly and I hovered midway between the desk and the waiting area, not sure where to place my body in this increasingly hostile feeling space. And then I watched her eyes narrow to a point on the form from which she looked up, lips pursed and asked me: “Is this your SUID number?”



*Fig. 11: My face and the number it has been assigned.*

Again, she stunned me. And, flustered, but now accompanied with a growing spark of anger in my gut, I reached for my school assigned ID card, a photo ID card that displays my face directly next to my school assigned identification number (see Fig. 11) and offered it to her directly, saying “The number is here, right next to the picture of my face.” At the same moment I resolved she was messing with me, she realized I was on to her and eyes widened, she waved my card away saying, “No it’s fine, I believe you, here, you can take your passport, I’ll put the paper in your file, have a nice day.”

I left the office, searching my mind for any plausible excuse for her behavior, “It’s Friday, maybe she’s tired. Maybe she had a bad week. Maybe there are problems at home,” but then I remembered the smile she had for the man before me. Then I remembered this is the form employees fill out to prove citizenship and/or legal status to work in this country. Then I remembered we were about to vote on a presidential candidate who described Mexican immigrants as rapists and drug dealers. Then I remembered my “dressing the part” did not mask or disguise my own Mexican-ness to this HR worker. And I remembered my context: Syracuse University, a private, predominantly and historically white institution. A space where my existence is of “reasonable suspicion” (see Fig. 12).

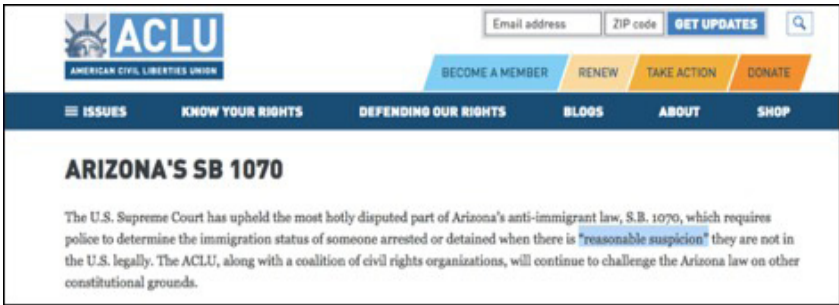


Fig. 12: I am from Arizona. I know what it feels like to be treated “reasonably suspicious” and denied access to certain spaces.

## Agency, Access, and Space

I recount this experience because I think it’s important, while within the context of pointing out bias and discrimination on the part of the HR worker, it is more important to my personhood to reflect meaningfully on privilege. To this point in my life, I enjoyed the privilege of not having to think deeply about what the I-9 was, where it came from, or what it was connected to socio-politically in this country. I had the privilege of my citizenship in this country, a privilege I was born into—not something I worked for or earned, to not worry about how I would work legally in this country. I have enjoyed the privilege of being able to use other documents my citizenship affords me such as a social security number and a U.S. Passport or birth certificate to prove my eligibility. Because my citizenship has been a given and a constant in my life, I have enjoyed the privilege of not really having to know what an I-9 was—until this form became a representative oppressive structure barring my access to employment. And were it not for the context of this country in which laws like

the above SB1070 (see Fig. 12) are the lived reality for those whose bodies are “reasonably suspicious” in spaces not meant for us, then I suppose my privilege tied to my citizenship may have stayed intact, and I would have gone on in my ignorance concerning the I-9. But this is not the context in which brown and black bodies exist in this country, nor in the microcosmic spaces that are our academic institutions, departments, programs, and classrooms.

In this respect, my essay is most ardently concerned with the issue of centralized privilege in our academic spaces. Thinking through this concept of centralized privilege in connection to two particular iterations of it: rights to space and the very privileged assertion of comfort in said spaces. But let’s start with the more macro concept of rights to space with the example of “manspreading” (see Fig. 13).



*Fig. 13: The look and feel of “manspreading.”*

This term caught on in a big way in New York City a few years ago, most likely because of its manifold assertions and examples that can be gleaned on public transportation, particularly the subway trains. As a rhetorician, terms like “manspreading” are very exciting to me, because it demonstrates the power of language to name and form a feminist critique of a very invasive assertion of power in all of the forms it may take. This example is the version that asserts a claim to space through the use of the body, but other forms include claiming space through sound, energy, and even in citation practices as my friend and colleague Adam Banks has pointed out in terms of how

overwhelmingly white the works cited lists are on the essays published in our field's major journals (277). The point is that this privileged claim to space is not specific to gender as much as it is specific to privilege. And we can get real deep and historic concerning how these practices of claiming space by rights of power are very much the norm in this society, beginning with the Doctrine of Discovery<sup>2</sup> and contemporarily asserted in what the #NoDAPL movement has fought to preserve (see Fig. 14).



Fig. 14: A contemporary struggle for access to space.

And through thinking about how claims to space are a practice of privilege, I want to link this conversation back to my opening narrative concerning academic institutional spaces and the ways in which space gets marked and claimed akin to an occupation of space. Within this spatial occupation, “diversity” takes on the form of hospitality (or the lack thereof as evidenced in my opening narrative), in such a way that a woman of color such as myself is viewed as a visitor or guest who is to be “accommodated” (or not) in the house of whiteness that is the institution. Where any assistance I receive must be acquired by insistence, it ceases to be assistance (Ahmed *On Being Included* 62). As evidenced through my related experience, this conditional residency or barring of access altogether for those who embody “diversity” is based on institutional imaginings of “fit.” Helpfully, Sara Ahmed’s work in *On Being*

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2 According to Steve Newcomb “Although the story of Columbus’ ‘discovery’ has taken on mythological proportions in most of the Western world, few people are aware that his act of ‘possession’ was based on a religious doctrine now known in history as the Doctrine of Discovery. Even fewer people realize that today - five centuries later - the United States government still uses this archaic Judeo-Christian doctrine to deny the rights of Native American Indians.” For more on the Doctrine of Discovery and Newcomb’s work see: [http://ili.nativeweb.org/sdrm\\_art.html](http://ili.nativeweb.org/sdrm_art.html)



*Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, relates similarly unsettling experiences of racial profiling that have prompted her to write as an “act of reorientation,” which I and many of my colleagues and friends of color view as a source of solace from these microaggressions that are daily lived experience when you embody a stranger in what should be your home but somehow never is. Thinking about “the stranger,” Ahmed’s work has helped me revisit institutional conversations about race and racism, toward a nuanced focus on the normalized, the standardized, the institution. As Ahmed asserts “some more than others will be at home in institutions that assume certain bodies as their norm” and as POC we “already embody diversity by providing an institution of whiteness with color” (*On Being Included* 3-4). Thus, responsibility for diversity within the institution is unevenly distributed and claims to space are in turn asserted by those in power.

In Ahmed’s discussion of campus space occupation, she introduces the work of Nirmal Puwar who posits the notion of white bodies as “somatic norms.” This concept can be demonstrated through the naming of campus buildings as an act of instituting whiteness, and beyond this, other largely normalized signifiers, such as oil paintings and pictures of white administrators and alumni lining multiple walls of multiple buildings, further demonstrating the institution’s history did not include you (POC) or folks who look like you (see Fig. 15).



Fig. 15: I can't locate myself in this lineup, either.

Further, Philomena Essed’s work on cultural cloning helps us better understand reproductions of likeness/whiteness that usually boil down to questions of “fit”. In other words, does this person make me uncomfortable? This notion of “fit” equates to a liberal colorblind iteration of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s “naturalization” trope used to justify oftentimes gendered and racial discrimination in admissions processes and faculty hiring practice. Thus, if reproduction of whiteness is the norm, then diversity—if not instantly viewed as reasonably

suspicious and barred from access—takes on the form of hospitality, in such a way that POC are viewed as visitors or guests in the house of whiteness. And as visitors within institutions, we continually receive the message that the house is not ours, it is not our space, and we are welcome, tolerated, maybe even served, but it is never ours. Shift to those pictures lining the halls and walls (see Fig. 15) and ask, “Whose house is this?” We are but “[t]emporary residents in someone else’s home” (Ahmed *On Being Included* 43). And this residency is always conditional, based on whether POC make good on whatever space or occupation it has been imagined we should occupy, whether or not we are the right kind of minorities. Whether or not we will be the happy minority who furthers, promotes, and contributes to the maintenance of the institution’s “happy diversity,” by way of not posing a threat and not, as W.E.B. DuBois contends, being a problem. And be wary, Ahmed warns, that even the slightest notion of critique from POC will be read as radical, problematic, non-collegial, a threat, “call-out culture,” and makes everyone (white folk) uncomfortable and then our welcome as a guest can and likely will be revoked. How does it feel to be a problem?

## Concepts of Comfort

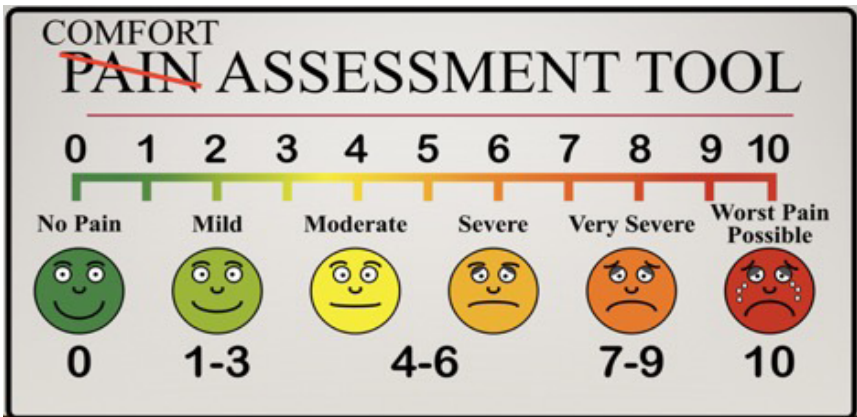


Fig. 16: A scale to present to students in class to introduce and make transparent the concept of comfort.

My previous statement invokes the second concept I want to review, which is the concept of comfort and the very assertion of it as a right for the privileged. I've been engaging anti-racist subject matter and pedagogy my entire career, and I've yet to get through a year in which either my work, my teaching, or just my very presence in the institution as a person of color isn't



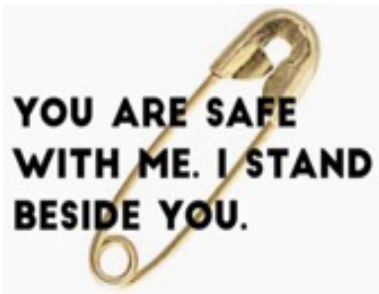
characterized within the confines of “comfort”—or lack thereof—for my white students or colleagues. And by comfort, I am referring to the idea that those within the hierarchies of privilege claim inherent rights to feeling comfortable at all times, especially during moments of cognitive dissonance. Let that idea sink in. Privileged folk feel entitled to the right of comfort when the uncomfortable topic of social injustice due to power hierarchies along race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, are invoked. Once again, Sara Ahmed best describes this concept of comfort when articulating the reception and perception of what she terms the “feminist killjoy.” Ahmed states:

Let’s take this figure of the feminist killjoy seriously. Does the feminist kill other people’s joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy? Does bad feeling enter the room when somebody expresses anger about things, or could anger be the moment when the bad feelings that circulate through objects get brought to the surface in a certain way? (Ahmed “Feminist Killjoys” para. 12)

Let me offer an example of a killjoy moment I’ve recently engaged.

If you wear a hijab, I’ll sit with you on the train.  
If you’re trans, I’ll go to the bathroom with you.  
If you’re a person of color, I’ll stand with you if the cops stop you.  
If you’re a person with disabilities, I’ll hand you my megaphone.  
If you’re an immigrant, I’ll help find you resources.  
If you’re a survivor, I’ll believe you.  
If you’re a refugee, I’ll make sure you’re welcome.  
If you’re a veteran, I’ll take up your fight.  
If you’re LGBTQ, I won’t let anybody tell you you’re broken.  
If you’re a woman, I’ll make sure you get home ok.  
If you’re tired, me too.  
If you need a hug, I’ve got an infinite supply.  
If you need me, I’ll be with you. All I ask is that you be with me, too.

*Fig. 17: Ally gesture 1.*



*Fig. 18: Ally gesture 2.*

Within days, maybe even hours of the presidential election in November 2016, gestures such as those above (see Fig. 17 and 18) began to circulate on social media. Before I launch fully into my discussion of these two artifacts, I think it is necessary to note that I engage this critique in a very serious and non-dismissive way. And I ask that my audience stay with me in this critique and example, fully aware that critique is not attack. Let me say that again. Critique

is not attack, and it is not a dismissal. On the contrary, critique is the very genuine effort of engagement in coalitional solidarities, so if coalition and solidarity is your goal, especially if these gestures are those you engage in, then I implore my audience to resist the urge and temptation to react, and instead encourage yourself to engage in this coalitional gesture I make by virtue of raising this critique in the first place. Are we good? Are you with me? Where are we on the scale of comfort (Fig. 16)?

I can recall my shock at the outcome of the 2016 election, but not due to who was named president. No. My shock was at the shock of those on social media who seemed to be in a state of disbelief that something like this could happen. And while I could write a whole other essay about why the outcome of this presidential election was no shock to me, a person who is a rhetorician, a critical race theorist, and a woman of color who grew up in Arizona—the Petri dish of racist and nationalist policy and sentiment in the U.S.—I’ll focus on the after effects of the election that these two above artifacts represent. Circling back to the concept of being a feminist killjoy, I understand what the gestures in Fig. 17 and 18 are meant to enact. People I consider friends and colleagues decided to wear the safety pin (Fig. 18) and/or printed and posted the sign (Fig. 17) to their office doors. And I understand the gesture. However, as already noted, I am a woman of color, Chicax to be particular, who has been navigating spaces not built for or maintained for me, so my feminist killjoy critique cannot be maintained below a boil in response to gestures such as these. In light of this subjectivity and critical lens, it’s important to rhetorically analyze the gesture, the sign (Fig. 17) in particular, is making. I interpret the sign to say, “I am an ally.” Which then begs the question, what is an ally? Let’s think about that for a minute. If you identify as an “ally” in whatever capacity, what does that mean to you? And let me ask a further question, complicate it even more: do you have the right to bestow the title of ally upon yourself? Can you name

yourself an ally? In other words, are you an ally simply because you say you are (Choffel)?

In application of this discussion of allyship to the above artifacts, from a surface level reading, the gestures of the safety pin and the sign are aimed at an allyship of *assistance*. And who, particularly in the sign, is being identified as in need of assistance? Those who are marginalized. Our lack of access, lack of power within societally constructed space is what is accounted for here in the sign. Okay, here's my killjoy moment—if I haven't already been killing joy—what is not accounted for here? What's missing from the sign's list? An accounting for privilege and the responsibility to take on others with that privilege toward the dismantling of the structures instituted and enjoyed by those who occupy these spaces of power within societal hierarchies. Where are the statements such as:

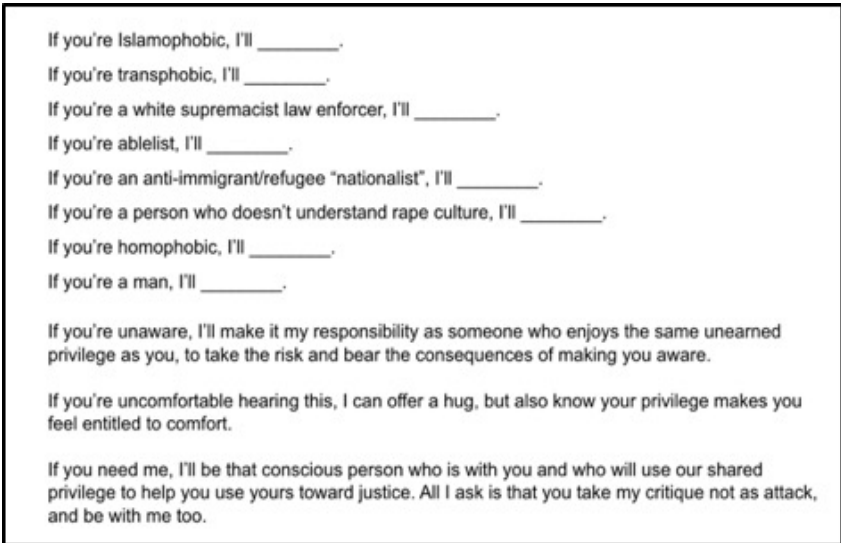


Fig. 19: A counterstory meme: Shifting the gaze of allyship.

And I think what's most important to note is that I have purposely not filled in the blank after the word "I'll" because I don't have the answers for what this work is along the lines of privilege. I do occupy spaces of privilege along some of the lines I draw in this counter-telling of the meme, but as intersectionality would dictate, my approach to facing and countering these privileges with others who maintain the same privileges would be specific to my subjectivities and resulting access to space. For example, I am an educator, and I occupy the space of my classroom where I see it as my responsibility to take on and have

this exact conversation with my students. I have access to the platform of this written and published work, which is also a space in which I take seriously my responsibility to have this conversation—understanding full well that members of my audience may be uncomfortable, knowing full well I'm not comfortable, but also knowing I have the privilege of this space and the responsibility of the subject. Knowing full well in most instances of my subjectivities and navigation of space that I am not comfortable, that I occupy vulnerable subjectivities, and that my broaching these subjects likely has consequences. However, being uncomfortable is my norm, my reality, my standard of being. I've started telling my students, while I will not allow others in this class to threaten your safety, I will not and cannot guarantee your comfort.

## Get Your People



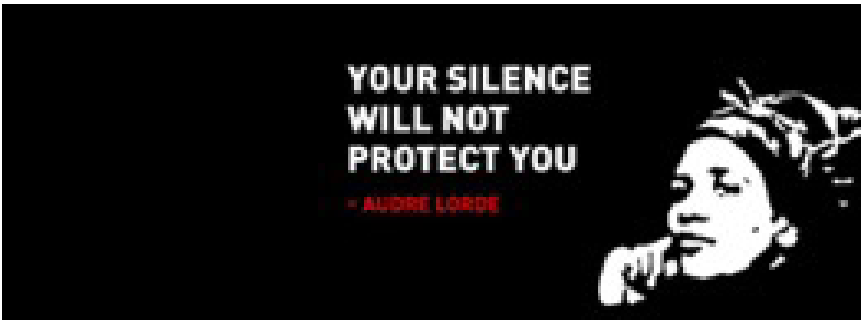
Fig. 20: *Beyond being an ally, there is being an accomplice.*

At the end of the day, I am a counterstory teller, and the work of counterstory seeks to centralize the narratives of the marginalized toward broadening the conversation about the marginalized to instead include the marginalized in coalition, solidarity, and beyond allyship into accomplice territory.

When I posed the question earlier to consider the term "ally" I was leading us toward a conversation about the levels

of comfort, the good feelings, and the general lack of risk associated with allyship as it has been taken up contemporarily. When my students and I discussed the gesture of allyship through the wearing of safety pins, I was sure to acknowledge the gesture, the commencing nature toward justice of this gesture—it's a start for sure, but I was also very serious when I asked my students if they were ready to take on the potential risk and associated consequence of allyship. Because hijab is mentioned first on this list (see Fig. 17), my question to all wearing a pin or to all who identify as allies is about the visceral realities of hate crimes in this country. If you are witness to a person in hijab being beaten and attacked, are you ready and willing, as indicated in your allyship

gesture of wearing a safety pin, to jump into this attack and protect this person with your own body? If you have to think about your answer, then you should also think about what it means to wear the pin. And this is a very specific and able-bodied example, but this is also an example that aims to expound the very real danger, risk, and consequences associated with true allyship—an allyship that ventures into what others have aptly characterized instead as being an accomplice—whereas allies are viewed as those who identify as helpers to the oppressed, accomplices are those who will bear the risk of consequences, and as blogger crunkadelic on the Crunk Feminist Collective said best: “get your people.” So, let’s ask ourselves what aspects of privilege we have access to, what measures can we take within the institution to make space and not just take space, and how can we apply this work, whether that be work in the classroom, office hours, department meetings, or in interpersonal conversations toward the agency of those at the margins? Let’s challenge ourselves to move beyond the fallacious notion that our comfort should be central and guaranteed and let’s raise our voices in this socio-political moment toward a movement that makes our efforts known as accomplices in the struggle, because at the end of the day, as Audre Lorde prophesized: “Your silence will not protect you.”



*Fig. 21: Lorde's poignant words.*

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## About the Author

**Aja Y. Martinez** is Assistant Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Syracuse University. Dr. Martinez conducts research on and teaches a range of courses concerning rhetorics of race and ethnicity, including the rhetorics of race within both Western and non-Euro-Western contexts, and beginning, professional and advanced writing courses. Her single-authored monograph, *Counterstory: The Writing and Rhetoric of Critical Race Theory* (currently under review), presents counterstory as a method by which to actualize critical race theory (CRT) in rhetoric and composition studies research and pedagogy. Dr. Martinez's work argues specifically that counterstory provides opportunities for other(ed) perspectives to contribute to conversations about narrative, dominant ideology, and their intersecting influence on curricular standards and institutional practices. Voices from the margins can become voices of authority through the formation of counterstories—stories that examine, document, and expose the persistence of racial oppression and other forms of subordination. Counterstory serves as a natural extension of inquiry for theorists whose research recognizes and incorporates lived and embodied experiences of marginalized peoples both in the U.S. and abroad. Dr. Martinez's method provides an interdisciplinary understanding of how counterstory functions, while accomplishing a further goal of establishing counterstory as a pedagogically employable method in writing classrooms.