

Stories and Bodies: Reading and Writing White Femininity

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Dedication

To my family.

Abstract

The histories and structures that undergird teachers' positions in schools are deeply entrenched in colonial, racist, patriarchal and classist ways of being. The unique historical and political phenomenon of white women's overwhelming presence in education has harnessed constructions of white femininity (as caring, innocent, and inherently good) to the colonial project of nation building. Tasked to legitimate and uphold hierarchies of power while remaining subservient to them, white women teachers have been disciplined and produced in particular ways. This contradiction lives in our bodies and through our stories.

As a white woman teacher, I use critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2013) to engage with the question: *What dangerous histories live in and through my schooled body?* My study explores three important episodes in my relationship with teaching and learning and attempts to dynamically foreground different concerns (social class, race, and gender) in considering the entanglement of white femininity within them. This work illuminates the importance of stories and bodies in critical anti-racist work and uses stories as tools in intersectional analysis.

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Chapter One – Introduction, Theoretical Framework, and the Study

Introduction

The women who would teach to provide a path to a richer, fuller sense of human possibility and agency must read the shadows of their stories to recover their intentionality. (Grumet, 1988, p. 74)

I have always read the world through story. Because of the nuanced, layered possibilities enabled beyond words, in a deeply felt language of symbols I feel most at home, most myself. My relationship with story has carried me through school, a space in which many of the skills cultivated through my days lived inside of books were rewarded. And in those times when schooling felt like more than I could bear, stories provided ways for me to read beyond, around, and through the struggle. My resistance and passion grew up inside of story.

I don't mean to imply that the books I read as a child were unproblematic or inherently good; instead, my relationship with them was like swimming. Because I learned how to swim when I was so very young, I can't remember a time before water felt inherently safe to me. My muscles were formed in the learning of how to move inside of the water; my breathing through water was ingrained deep beneath conscious thought. There have been times when waves become huge and currents are strong, but I have rarely doubted my ability to swim through them. Like my relationship with books, my bodily knowledge of the water is so deep inside of me that sometimes it's hard for me to imagine how terrifying water can be for one who has not learned how to swim. For many of my students, literacy holds a similar danger. It has been painful for me to realize the

ways in which my own unquestioned loving relationship with literacy may serve to push students underwater.

So, while story has been a friend and helper to me, I have learned that my relationship with it – my relationship with all sorts of things – needs to be constantly examined, questioned, and contextualized in pursuit of humanizing pedagogy. And, while unquestioned reliance on my own singular perspective is unthinkable, the rejection or loss of that perspective is equally inappropriate.

My dissertation is an autoethnographic study that explores three important episodes in my relationship with learning and teaching. It attempts to examine white femininity within structures of patriarchy, classism, and white supremacy. I use my own experiences – as a white woman who has moved across multiple classed identities – as entry points into this inquiry. I am interested in the ways the complicated and contradictory construction of white femininity lives within education, particularly within the role of teacher. I believe that the stories I work with provide rich and meaningfully complicated entry points for examining white femininity. Each of the chapters of this dissertation will introduce and use particular literature to work through different readings of the memories contained within them. Because of that, I do not offer a traditional review of the literature here. I present a theoretical framework that discusses feminist theory and intersectionality; point to scholars and experiences that have been influential on this work; discuss social class in education; and identify the role decolonizing methodologies play in my writing. I then introduce the study, my research question, my process for gathering data and analysis, and a preview of the upcoming chapters.

Theoretical Framework

Teachers' positions are complicated and can be dangerous. In positions of authority – deeply embedded within histories and hierarchies of power – our work, our intentions, and our mistakes cannot be easily disentangled from each other. And yet, the landscape of teacher education and research is filled with attempts to decontextualize and evaluate teacher effectiveness through standardization and assessment (Baker et al., 2010). Positivistic, dichotomizing, and colonial research methods have further exacerbated this tendency and its effects.

I am wary of research that is tidy and clean. I don't trust singular, categorical readings of phenomena. I can feel my posture tighten in response to work that crisply cleaves out complicating context and asserts monolithic readings of phenomena, as I personally resent being read in parts. At the same time, in vibrant contradiction with everything just stated, I have found incredible wisdom and clarity in the foregrounding of particular aspects of identity in particular moments. Stephanie Jones (2009), in exploration of her own classed precarity in schools, writes: "I figured out much later that the most salient piece of one's identity within a particular context is what we learn about most quickly. For me, it has almost always been class, followed distantly by the complexities of gender, race, sexuality, and religion depending on where I was and who I was with" (p. 10). The shifting matrix of identity's movement through contexts necessitates attentiveness towards particular elements at different times. This attentiveness may be honed through a feminist stance.

A Feminist Standpoint. Dismissing a hierarchical competition between forms of oppression, bell hooks (2000a) identifies how feminism can function as a doorway into anti-oppressive work. She writes: “Sexist oppression is of primary importance not because it is the basis of all other oppression, but because it is the practice of domination most people experience, whether their role be that of discriminator or discriminated against, exploiter or exploited” (p. 36). A feminist stance provides an entry point, a point of identification through which individuals might experience and struggle against inequality. Since forms of oppression are linked through structures and institutions of power, hooks believes that feminist work necessarily struggles against all oppression, and that those most knowledgeable of its contours are those most marginalized within it.

Patricia Hill Collins (2013) calls these interlocking oppressions a “matrix of domination,” and Abigail Brooks and Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (2007) state that these “complex interlinkages between race, class, and gender ... inflect each other, and it is only through collectively examining the intricate connections between them that we can fully understand a given individual’s life experience” (p. 19). The examination of one’s own story and individual location can be clarified through its relationship with others. The voices of women of color transformed the feminist movement through exposing its assumptions and projections of a singular and universal *woman’s experience*, thereby limiting the effectiveness of work done in its name. In discussions of gender and sex, race must be central. Kim Crenshaw (1989), in her work with the study of law, challenges a single-axis framework that is “dominant in antidiscrimination law and that is also

reflected in feminist theory and antiracist politics” (p. 139). She discusses how a lack of critical engagement around race limits the potential of feminism for women of color.

The value of feminist theory to women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged. Not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when *white* women speak for and as *women*.... Consequently, feminist theory remains white, and its potential to broaden and deepen its analysis by addressing non-privileged women remains unrealized. (p. 154)

In the context of feminist theory, white women’s uncritical engagement enabled the patriarchal pattern of universalizing to be mapped out from their social location, effectively erasing “Black women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the otherwise privileged members of the group” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

Challenging this single-axis framework, standpoint epistemology argues that “all knowledge is constructed in a specific matrix of physical location, history, culture, and interests, and that these matrices change in configuration from one location to another” (Sprague, 2005, p. 41). Standpoint epistemology elevates marginalized perspectives as the ones most capable of recognizing and challenging hegemonic structures of power. An intersectional approach is necessary and appropriate in deeply conceptualizing anti-sexist work, and attentiveness towards race is important, particularly for those most impacted by it.

Through my interest in white femininity within the white supremacist hetero-patriarchal and classist context of education in the U.S., I have often become overwhelmed by my attempt to hold all of these attunements (to race, gender, sexuality, and social class) simultaneously. I have a deep commitment to the feminist model of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Shields, 2008) and I worry about what is overlooked, what tends to be overlooked, when we don't actively commit ourselves to attending to multiple structures of oppression, particularly those that don't directly impact us or that have become normalized around us.

Intersectionality is the “the mutually constitutive relations among social identities” (Shields, 2008, p. 301). Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of assemblage has been profoundly helpful in helping me conceptualize intersectionality, the way that one's relationship with the world is radically wrapped up – created – and implicated through everything around it. A singular element within the knotty entanglement of interconnected components will never offer a full or whole story. One cannot simply extricate a piece without changing everything. And yet, is it possible to hold everything when doing research? How might one examine a thread of a story while remaining aware of and open to the knotty assemblage pulsing around it?

Even as I have attempted to delineate and discuss gender, race, and class, they evocatively call to each other, exposing elements of their own constructed-ness through attentiveness to the constructed-ness of the others, and how different elements shift in relationships to one another. How can we talk about race without talking about gender? How can we talk about gender or race without talking about class? What danger is there

in foregrounding one over the other? And, to return to the idea of bell hooks, how might we resist a hierarchical model of oppressions while acknowledging the reality of structures at work? How might we skillfully and intelligibly say *something* about something without becoming lost in everything? Michel Foucault (1983) points to the dangerous-ness inherent in everything. He writes:

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger. (p. 231-232)

This notion of danger has helped ground me as I become overwhelmed with all the possibilities I might turn towards. The work, then, becomes attuning oneself to the main danger in given moments, requiring an improvisational and perceptive movement across readings. According to Max Van Manen (1990), doing research phenomenologically requires a posture of inquiry towards our experience of the world. He writes: “Since to know the world is profoundly to be in the world in a certain way, the act of researching – questioning – theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to *become* the world” (p. 5). It is in deep and intentional relationship with one’s connection to the world that one may cultivate a particular attentiveness towards the movement of danger within it.

White Femininity. My relationship with feminist theory, an attunement to the dangers alive in my classroom, and Van Manen’s invitation into a posture of inquiry

towards my experience of the world have all led me to the need for a deep and ongoing examination of white femininity within structures of white supremacy. As a white female teacher, I have experienced many moments in which histories or practices seem to be operating on and through me, springing to life almost effortlessly (Jones, 2013). Before my study of white femininity, I had interpreted these embodied literacies as individual choices or as necessary elements in the process of becoming a teacher. I did not have access to the “hidden curriculum” deeply embedded within education and the ways my own body, as a white woman teacher, has been historically constructed, legitimated, and threatened by white supremacy (Gillborn, 1992). My study of this history has profoundly changed the way I experience the world, opened up the possibility of anti-racist work from within my uniquely racialized and gendered experiences and body, and offered new possibilities for care, resistance, living, and teaching. I’d like to briefly trace some of the ideas and scholars that have been important in this work.

I was introduced to Toni Morrison’s (1992) novels in high school. The worlds that she created, along with the profound theorizing woven up within them, have been very important to me. In college, I took a class entitled: *Black Women’s Literature*. In it, we read nearly all of Morrison and Alice Walker’s novels. We learned a lot *about* race; however, I don’t remember ever explicitly discussing the space we inhabited as being raced, specifically primarily white. Because of that, our reading of Morrison’s theoretical examination of how race is entwined within literature in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* didn’t seem particularly important to me at the time.

Returning to this text in graduate school, though, has been incredibly helpful for thinking about the relationship between race and stories.

I was introduced to Thandeka during my first graduate class in education. In *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America*, the Reverend Thandeka (1999) introduces the notion of white shame and traces the historical construction of whiteness along with its relationship to social class in the U.S. Preceding our class' first discussion of it, Tim Lensmire (the teacher of the class) invited us to be gentle and kind with ourselves and with one another, since many of us hadn't learned how to talk about whiteness. Tim's invitation and Thandeka's attentive and powerful writing named whiteness and opened up a new space for me to grapple with it.

During the summer of 2012, Tim Lensmire agreed to facilitate a self-directed independent study class for a group of doctoral students. Erin Stutelberg, Colleen Clements, Erin Dyke, and myself worked together to learn about feminist methodologies and histories of women in education. In addition to the valuable readings and experiences from that summer, we were able to collectively create a group that continues to inspire, sustain, and push our work and thinking. Two of the texts we read during that time that play a big role in my writing are Madeline Grumet's (1988) *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* and Frigga Haug's *Female Sexualization* (1987). Grumet's book provided a history I did not previously have access to, a beautifully written philosophical examination of teaching, and another example of how to bring one's lived experiences into rigorous academic inquiry. Frigga Haug's collective memory work process (CMW) is a feminist methodology for theorizing lived experiences and the ideologies that are

tangled up in our memories and the ways we remember, including the oppressive ideologies that support heteronormative patriarchy, whiteness, and capitalism. In this process, individual written narratives of memory are collectively imagined, analyzed, and re-imagined in order to make these ideologies tangible, and to create new avenues for understanding, building, and/or changing our practices. My engagement with this methodology has played a fundamental role in my experience in graduate school through the collective work it inspired and has richly influenced this study through CMW's process of working with memory.

My experiences with and commitment to collectivity in learning continued throughout graduate school. In the spring of 2014, Mary Hermes led a queer and feminist research methods class within our department. Erin Dyke, Erin Stutelberg, Colleen Clements, Keitha-Gail Martin-Kerr, Shannon Dahmes, and Jenna Cushing-Leubner, Mary (Fong) Hermes, and I formed the Hayward Collective. Together, we have practiced various forms of collective memory work, studied and enacted feminist and queer methodologies, written, and presented our work. Additionally, Colleen Clements, Erin Stutelberg, and I have continued to take up collective memory through ongoing inquiry and writing about our experiences as white women teachers. These collective experiences have profoundly illuminated and strengthened my relationship with research. My writing and thinking has been deeply influenced through the voices, concerns, perspectives, and wisdom of the women I've had the opportunity to work with in this way. In addition to my colleagues, there are five other writers I'd like to acknowledge for their guidance in my own work.

Audre Lorde (2007) has always nudged my vision beyond that which I thought possible. Her commitment to bringing all of herself to her work has illuminated a way of writing and being that I aspire to. In particular, her collection *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* invites the erotic, anger, poetry, and bodies into a dynamic and integral relationship with theory. bell hooks has been a crucial touchstone in my thinking and studies. I spent the summer before graduate school reading *Ain't I a Woman?* (1982) and I felt as though hooks was cracking open and breaking apart the foundation of my education. Her work continues to disorient, push, and transform my thinking, in the best ways. Sara Ahmed's philosophical engagement with the world has deeply shifted the way I think about bodies, sexuality, race, and phenomenology (2005/2006/2007). Her work has created a beautiful dialogue between phenomenology and feminist/queer theory that vibrantly illuminate elements of my stories I never would have found without her. Katerina Deliovsky's (2010) in-depth and powerful book *White Femininity: Race, Gender, and Power* has been incredibly helpful to me in tracing the particular and complex nuances of white femininity. Likewise, Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) foundational book *White Women: Race Matters* has provided a model for both deep examination of white femininity and a researcher who is willing to critically examine her own positionality. It is with deep gratitude I acknowledge the colleagues, teachers, and scholars that supported me in my journey towards a deeper understanding of white femininity.

Social Class. As I mentioned earlier, Stephanie Jones (2009) believes that the most salient piece of her identity – that which often needed to be foregrounded – was

social class. Vagle and Jones (2012) write: “Even though the particulars of how social class takes shape in societies, schools, classrooms, and pedagogies differ tremendously across context, we assume that social class matters everywhere” (p. 319). For Vagle and Jones, it is through the doorway of social class that a meaningfully complicated analysis may begin. The work of Stephanie Jones and Mark Vagle has played an important role in my studies and in the writing of this dissertation. Throughout graduate school, I had the good fortune to work as an associate and researcher for the CLASSroom Project, a project committed to social class-sensitive pedagogy. Within that role, I co-facilitated workshops for teachers, taught classes to undergraduate students, conducted research, and developed scholarly writing. Because of that, I had the opportunity to recursively attune myself to social class within a group of colleagues committed to this work in a way I’d never before experienced. Several of my memories, indeed, the entire second chapter, owes a debt to this project for building bridges back to memories that had been schooled out of me. Centrally located in Jones & Vagle’s (2013) social class-sensitive pedagogy principles is the need for critical autobiographical work that examines individuals’ locations within “broad social and political contexts,” illuminating social class’s relationship within personal and structural histories (p. 2). My experience with the CLASSroom Project and its commitments to critical autobiographical examinations play a significant role in this project.

Decolonizing Methodologies. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) issues a powerful critique of research methodologies’ relationship with colonial actions and ways of knowing. She writes: “The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst

excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples" (p. 1). In addition to the development – and insidious deployment – of methodologies by the colonial system, the methodologies themselves reify and reproduce similar imperialistic patterns of organization, systems of knowledge, and organization of bodies (p. 68).

Reimagining and practicing decolonizing methodologies offers an entry point into political and educational transformation. "It is time to dismantle, deconstruct, and decolonize Western epistemologies from within, to learn that research is always already moral and political" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008, p. 3). I believe that this dismantling work is intricately connected to individualized explorations of location. Linda Alcoff (2008) writes of the importance of ones' own location in their relationship with truth and meaning making. "Where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says," and as one is unable to move beyond or outside of ones own location or experience, the location that one speaks from "has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one's speech" (p. 485). I am interested in radically denaturalizing and exploring some of my own shifting locations in this work. Feminist theory, a critical examination of white femininity, and attentiveness to the complexities of social class can serve to support a decolonizing approach to research.

The Study

This dissertation is a critical autoethnographic study that focuses on three periods in my education. It feels appropriate to turn to story in the writing of my dissertation,

which is at the heart of literacy to me. It also feels like a meaningful way to respond to epistemological and ontological concerns that have arisen in my engagement with research. Teacher identity work often points towards the manner in which unexamined assumptions get lived out through one's pedagogy, irrespective of intent or desire (Jones & Vagle, 2013). If teachers do not grapple with their positionality or cultivate a living reflexivity that is particularly attuned to the manners in which they are living out stories, histories, and violence, they stand to alienate and injure the students they hope to teach. This reflexivity is not a simple thing; there is no one *right way*. Instead, the process of attunement is ongoing and complex. This study seeks to explore and develop meaningful ways to do this through engagement with story and memory, and to consider what the contradictions inherent within them might illuminate.

In my own experiences in education, the movement across contexts and their embedded hierarchies has been important to me, attuning me to different things, illuminating my previously unrecognized situated-ness through the movement. This movement has been challenging and often painful and is a cornerstone of my pedagogy. I am the teacher I am today because of this travel. Positionality and reflexivity, while connected to theoretical and ethical commitments, are deeply embedded within my teaching and learning because of the work I've had to do to make sense of occasions when the rules changed. Improvisational and continual reflexivity, attunement to how and why I'm interpreting things in the ways that I am, have necessarily developed through my experiences grappling with contradictions in the world around me. In moments in classrooms, listening to students, hearing my own words, I am constantly reading them

through multiple lenses, experiencing layers of possibility and attempting to pay attention to things I can not easily see.

There are three periods from my life that have become particularly critical to me, rich with possibility, and fraught with danger: my experience in high school, my first year of teaching, and my childhood as a young white child in a rural working class community. Each of these three experiences has repeatedly disrupted the sense I made of the world and exposed me in ways I have had to work to reconcile myself with. I have tried to force singular, simplistic, and clarifying readings atop these experiences. I have attempted to read myself out of implication and into clear alignment with a correct or good role or character in the story. These singular readings will not stay put, and have pushed me towards research models that offer complicated, rich, and layered explorations of phenomena.

As I haltingly released the need for resolution or safety, these stories began to feel important to me in a new way. I began to recognize the ways in which they've shaped my teaching, as well as how they reflect larger histories that are working through and on me. Lisa Mazzei & Alecia Youngblood Jackson (2009) describe the generative work enabled through settling down within explorations of contradiction and multiplicity:

We assert that in our zeal as qualitative researchers to gather data and make meaning, or to make easy sense, we often seek that voice which we can easily name, categorize and respond to. We argue that a more fertile practice [...] is to seek the voice that escapes easy classification and that does not make easy sense. It is not a voice that is normative, but one that is transgressive. (p. 4)

In an attempt to pursue this transgressive voice, my research question is: What dangerous histories live in and through my schooled body? The histories and structures that undergird teachers' positions in schools are deeply entrenched in colonial, racist, patriarchal and social-classed ways of being. This work seeks to thoughtfully explore those histories.

(Critical) Autoethnography. Autoethnography is a form of ethnographic research that foregrounds the experience of the researcher, or as Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997) describes it: “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context” (p. 9). Tessa Muncey (2010) describes autoethnography as “a research approach that privileges the individual. It is an artistically constructed piece of prose, poetry, music or piece of art work that attempts to portray an individual experience in a way that evokes the imagination of the reader, viewer or listener” (p. 2). As a research orientation, it offers unique possibility and has a myriad of forms. I am particularly interested in this methodology for its capacity to hold and examine the relationships between researcher and researched and the connection between study and creation. I believe it also offers unique tools for examining race and doing critical work.

Colette Granger (2011) asserts that autoethnography, “contests the modernist ideas that researcher and subject, or object, of research are distinct from one another in an absolute sense, as well as the notion that interpretation is a neutral exercise producing transparent knowledge and objective truth” (p. 33). The vivid entanglement and interdependence I've written about earlier may be meaningfully taken up and practiced in a model that radically implicates the researcher and exposes the partiality and

positionality operating throughout the entire process. The complicated and complicating assemblage of my experience and memory may be significantly taken up through creativity and contradiction. David Butz & Kathryn Bessio (2009) identify autoethnography as providing a mode of reflexivity that can meaningfully disrupt and examine the particular work and logic undergirding the production of a coherent identity. Furthermore, the subjectivity and partiality of the researcher is central, productively disrupting notions of authority or objectivity.

In addition to the dissolution of the binary of researcher/researched, the binary of art/science is also productively confronted by this methodology. Autoethnography has been critiqued for not being scientific enough. It has also been challenged for being insufficiently artful or creative. Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Arthur Bochner (2011) believe that the preponderance of these critiques point more towards the disruption of category than an actual problem with autoethnography. They write: “These criticisms erroneously position art and science at odds with each other, a condition that autoethnography seeks to correct.” They believe that this methodology serves to reconcile a division between science and art.

In *Autoethnography as Lighthouse: Illuminating Race, Research, and the Politics of Schooling*, Stephen Hancock and Ayana Allen (2015) identify autoethnography as a valuable methodology for examining race. They use the metaphor of a lighthouse to demonstrate how the methodology may guide or illuminate pathways into nuanced examinations of race for both writers and readers. They write:

While the lighthouse is purposed to guide boats to safe entry into harbors, autoethnography has a tendency to provide the author and reader safe passage into personal and often painful spaces. It is the capacity of autoethnography that can illuminate the darkness of racism in an effort to dismantle the sociohistorical scaffolds that support racial oppression. (p. 8)

They identify this methodology as offering unique access to critical examinations of race.

Jennifer E. Potter (2015) believes that the critical possibilities of autoethnography may be further amplified through a more explicit naming. In *The Whiteness of Silence: A Critical Autoethnographic Tale of a Strategic Rhetoric*, she writes:

At first glance, adding the term “critical” to autoethnography may seem redundant. The addition is a crucial one, though, as it connotes an explicit focus on how power intersects with one’s personal experience and the structural forces that helped to create those experiences. Naming an autoethnographic project “critical” does something else, as well. In the spirit of critical theory, a critical autoethnography attempts to do more than just reveal how one fits into the power structure – it attempts to deconstruct the very power structure that gets exposed.

(p. 1436)

I believe that this important addition appropriately characterizes the work that I’ve engaged in. Autoethnography radically implicates the researcher, interrupting colonial research models that study other people or things while distancing the researcher from that which is being examined. This methodology illuminates the artistic and creative

endeavor of research. It also opens up unique possibilities for examinations of critical work around race.

The Creation of Empirical Materials. There are six different memories or stories that serve as the empirical material for this study. These narratives were created and collected in the following ways: First, the two experiences I discuss in Chapter Two grew out of a writing prompt we typically incorporate into the CLASSroom Project Workshops: *Write about a time when social class mattered.* Both of the experiences I wrote about launched themselves back into my consciousness through that prompt during various workshops and demanded that I pay attention to them. I wrote one version of the “Clutching the Vacuum” story and multiple versions of the story “Standing in the Hallway.” I focus my analysis primarily around one version of “Standing in the Hallway” and occasionally cite or refer to other versions in my discussion. Both of these stories are written in first person.

Next, Chapter Three is built around the single recounting of my first experience of teaching. This piece of writing grew out of a prompt developed by my writing collective (made up of myself, Erin Stutelberg, and Colleen Clements). Interested in using collective memory work to further examine our roles as white women teachers, we collaboratively developed the prompt: *Write about a moment related to teaching when you became aware of your precarious, vulnerable, and undeniable white body.* This memory was written in present tense and in third-person, according to Haug’s methodology (1987). My own analysis of this memory pays close attention to language

and imagery within the text of the memory itself. It also builds upon work that was done with Erin and Colleen.

Finally, Chapter Four works with three vignettes connected to my childhood. Vignette one, “A Girl,” describes the landscape framing my childhood. The second vignette, “Singing,” describes a performance I was a part of, and the third one, “Shame,” recounts a shameful experience I had upon discovering a picture from the performance many years later. The first memory is written in third person; the other two are written in first person. The vignettes in this chapter were originally written as a single piece of writing that was going to be included in Chapter Three. However, as the writing progressed, it became clear that I needed to expand the way I was working with this experience and that it needed its own chapter. The experience of shame (which eventually became vignette #3) was a lens through which I was viewing the story from my childhood (vignette #2). It became necessary to separate the two and open up more access to the performance itself. Vignette #1 grew out of a free write I was using to help me transition into my analysis of the chapter.

In the crafting of these empirical materials, I’ve invited the memories to flow as vividly as possible through my memory and body. In my previous writing with the collective memory work process, I was often surprised by how quickly and vibrantly details arrived, details that I couldn’t possibly have access to. I chose to trust my remembering, not as a factual recounting, but as the most honest and true way to share the memory as it lives in me now. For example, in Chapter Two I describe the “muscles in my calves soften[ing] and [how] the skin of my forehead relaxed” during an

experience in high school. I don't actually remember the feeling of my calves or forehead during the drive I'm describing. However, desiring to convey the feeling of familiarity I experienced on that drive, as I was writing and remembering, I could feel the sensation of familiarity in my calves and forehead. Embodied inquiry in relationship with the writing process became a part of the memory and is entangled with my empirical materials. I do not present these stories as factual representations of what really happened. I present them as creative constructions of my memories and experiences.

I have worked to respect the memories and stories as they revealed themselves through the writing. While challenging, I worked to resist the urge to begin analysis before the memory or story had become a recognizable entity. It felt important for those pieces of writing to develop their own coherence or stability before the analysis process began. Minor revisions to the stories have been made since for clarity and consistency.

The Writing. It is one thing to say that hierarchies and power move, or that the most important or most dangerous things change in different contexts. And it is something else to have the theoretical agility to foreground different concerns in different moments, while retaining a sense of structure and clarity. That is what I attempted to do through my work with my empirical materials. Before I developed the three central chapters of this study, I had anticipated foregrounding particular elements in relationship to the different stories, namely social class, race, and colonialism. However, once I began working with the memories, I slowly released my plan and began focusing in on the themes and elements that became most necessary through my writing. I outline the chapters below.

In Chapter 2 – Clutching the Vacuum, I explore two different memories from high school, a period of profound disorientation due to my movement across social classed educational experiences. In my analysis, I consider these experiences' relationships with elite femininity, goodness and social justice, and queer phenomenology. I trace the ways that my education was building me into a good middle-class white woman and the dangers that transformation presented to my family and myself. Chapter 3 – The First Night of Class: Unspeakable Whiteness and Playing Pretend #1 presents a history of white women in schools. I share a memory from my first night of teaching as a white woman teacher to Indigenous students. This memory presents a vivid struggle within my body to perform an authoritative role of teacher and to sustain a silencing of whiteness. I explore this memory through its relationship with silence, disembodiment, and the notion of contingent fullness. In Chapter 4 – Performing a Native *Other*: Playing Pretend #2, because of its relationship to my teaching experience in the previous chapter, I consider how fictional and contradictory representations of Native people connect to the development of white racial identity in rural communities. I explore this history through three vignettes from my life – A Childhood, Singing, and Shame. Finally, in Chapter 5: Conclusion: Reflections and Possibilities, I reflect on the relationships that developed through the writing and how this work has impacted my teaching and research.

Conclusion

A deep desire to meaningfully question and honor my stories, while intentionally focusing in on the most dangerous thing in different moments, has led me to this project. This autoethnographic work has grown out of the research question: What dangerous

histories live in and through my schooled body? This critical work is an effort in recovery and resistance, for hegemony and normalization came at a great cost. Ruth Frankenberg (1993) writes:

Besides the work of critically analyzing that normative-residual space that I am calling “white cultural practice,” white American women may also want to learn more about the histories that lie behind that normativity, the multiple currents that came together to make the normative space that white Americans now inhabit, and the processes of assimilation, loss, and forgetting that took place along the way. (p. 234)

This work seeks to learn from these histories and to respond to Grumet’s (1988) invitation to “read the shadows” of my stories (p. 74). Colette Granger (2011) describes how our stories can serve to connect others to their own. She writes that, “sometimes one person’s remembered story, or interpretation of that story, can inform and even nourish another’s memory, story, or interpretation, even if on their surfaces they are quite distinct” (p. 10). I hope, dear reader, that my stories and my work to learn and unlearn from them can serve to connect you with your own, to open new ways of reading and remembering, and create a space of connection, solidarity, and possibility together.

Chapter Two – Hallways: Social Class and School

Freshman Year – Clutching the Vacuum

People often judge others (and themselves), and are judged by others, based on perceived social class and economic status. These judgments might be based on where someone lives, what someone does for a living, how someone talks, what that person wears, where she or he goes to school, etc. One is not “born” with the classist sensibilities necessary to position folks into hierarchical slots, but we are all immersed in hierarchical discourses from the time we are young, and most of us unwittingly engage those discourses to make sense of ourselves and others we see in the world. (Jones & Vagle 2013, p. 4)

I am covered with a light layer of chalk. As I sweep my dampened rag across the blackboard, I stir up excess and feel it softly raining down onto my bangs and nose, onto the shoulders of my shirt; it gently covers my hands. I experiment with my movement across the board. Some days, I start in the middle and work the dark, wet streaks of cleanliness outward towards the periphery. Other days I clean in segments: left to right, top to bottom, in clockwise quadrants. I find discreet delight in the myriad of possibilities, in the darkness I unearth beneath the palimpsest of markings.

It is quiet, and I am alone. I typically clean classrooms after school lets out. The high school empties out so quickly after the final bell; I can slowly let out the breath I've been holding all day, finally alone. I empty the trash, wipe down the desks, vacuum, and clean blackboards. There is a methodical rhythm to the work and I do it well. I like being left alone to do the work. I like to feel the space shift through my attentiveness to it. I like

the way my mind is able to move and settle through the deliberate movements of my body. I appreciate the clarity and straight-forwardness of the work; it makes sense to me. I understand it.

I have always taken some pride in this type of work. At home, the oldest of five children, I have been responsible for some of the cleaning and cooking since I was young. I liked to surprise my aunts and grandmothers with how seriously I took this responsibility, the tiny details I remembered to take care of. There was a deep sense of ownership tied up in my chores, an ownership that I experience in my responsibility for these classrooms. There is also something in this work that connects me to my family, to the small working class farming town we lived in before moving to the city, to a way of showing love and care that's expressed through the soreness of muscles, the hard physical work of bodies.

This understanding of my work in the classrooms contrasts sharply with the experience I am having during my days in school. I'm a freshman, and I've just entered into a private, Catholic high school known for its academic rigor. No one in my family has ever gone to a school like this, and – while we have largely been an academically successful family – I know I am alone in a new way here. It's an expensive school. I don't know exactly what that means; I'm just told – by all sorts of people in all sorts of ways – how lucky I am to be here, to be smart enough to earn the scholarships that let me be here, to have gotten this opportunity. I can feel the heavy and opaque responsibility of this luck. I also feel the distance and loneliness tucked up inside of it; it's harder to express this struggle – the meritocratic narrative runs so deep.

The expectations of this school are not so clear to me. I can do the academic work; I can do that. I don't feel in danger of failing out of school. While I have to work hard, especially since it's my academic performance that's allowing me to be here, I feel capable of performing in my classes and of earning decent grades. It's everything else that confuses me.

Tied up inside this space, there is a danger that I cannot see so clearly. There are so many moments – in conversations, in engaging with my classmates, in the subtle shift of expression, bodies and tonal inflection – in which I cannot sense the edges, the rules, the full contour of expectations here. I sense that I am doing things wrong and it's causing me to distrust the spontaneous and intuitive knowings of my body, to soften my laugh, to look around a bit more before I engage. These solitary moments I spend cleaning classrooms offer respite from this constant vigilance over myself. I can settle into the ease of my body's knowledge, relax into the simplicity of labor.

The inky blackness of the blackboard shines fiercely in the fading afternoon sun as I unhook the ancient and thickly coiled cord from its hook on the side of the vacuum. I walk the mass of cords towards the outlet at the front of the room, gently shaking apart the knots that have formed as I press the dusty black plug into the wall. Just then, a door slams down the hall, and even before I recognize the boys' laughter cascading towards me, my body reacts to it. My shoulders pull forward and lock themselves into place. The quiet and peace that has settled in me is sucked out of my body, replaced with a sense of panic that fills my legs with energy and wrenches the moisture from my mouth. I brace myself completely.

There is no danger here. No one is threatening me. No one has even seen me. Still, my body understands the precarity of my presence in this space in a way that I don't have words for. There is danger in being associated with this work *here*. Being seen doing this work – associated with this work – marks me. I do not belong here. Despite my scholarship, despite my academic performance, this work – the more tangible mechanism enabling me to be here – is the thing that threatens my ability to *really* be here, to be perceived as belonging and deserving full access to this space.

I am instantly filled with guilt. I feel the ethos of the school chastising me: we respect all people; we respect all work. And yet, the sentiment of “respect for all” is expressed by those who have never known this danger of association. I am flooded with shame. My body knows on some level that as I brace myself against the danger of being linked with this work, my family's way of being in the world is being disciplined out of me. This space is becoming a part of me, is operating on me, and it is teaching me to fear and reject myself.

Despite the panic in my body, the roiling waves of guilt and shame moving through me, I clutch the vacuum's dusty grip and flip its switch. Instantly, its brazen howl fills the room and I begin to clean. I force a facade of nonchalance atop my body and begin my methodical progression through the room. As the effortless ease and eyes of the boys' soccer team pass by my door, I compel their presence into the periphery of my vision. Long after they've passed, long after the carpet is clean, I continue with the movement, my muscles shuddering beneath the strain.

Introduction

A deep and embodied examination of social class in education has radically influenced my teaching, research, and life. The importance of foregrounding and using my own story cannot be overstated. Locating myself – seeing myself as deeply implicated and entangled in complicated ways – with social class in the U.S. has helped me more dynamically and intuitively recognize and respond to classed discourses and histories operating on/through me, my pedagogy, my students, and the spaces surrounding us.

Social class plays a profound role in the history, development, ideology, and structures of education. (Bernstein, 1960; Willis, 1977; Apple, 2013; Anyon, 1980; Lareau, 1987; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Vagle & Jones, 2012). The idea of upward mobility as unquestioned and necessarily good is deeply embedded within U.S. educational structures. An awareness around social class may be enhanced through Pierre Bourdieu's (1992) concept of habitus, the manner in which cultural sensibilities, tastes, and values are dialectically cultivated and reflected through the spaces, activities, and expressions of everyday life. Bourdieu describes habitus as:

[s]ystems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (p. 53)

Through socialization within it, habitus helps to organize and create embodied structural expressions of viewpoints, which tend to align with shared commitments and beliefs, can be transferred, and retain great strength through their adaptability and endurance.

Hovering beneath the invisible rigidity of ideology – while still informing and reinforcing it – habitus is the embedded-ness of organizing belief systems across spaces and systems.

Intricately connected to this concept is Bourdieu's conceptualization of capital. Extending the idea of capital beyond that of material goods, capital can also be seen as symbolic; cultural, economic and social capitals may be read as "institutionally recognized and legitimated" authorities (Carrington & Luke, 1997, p. 102). Transferrable, cultural capital "provides the means for a non-economic form of domination and hierarchy, as classes distinguish themselves through taste" (Gaventa 2003, p. 6). The power of social class – while not always explicit – may be meaningfully read through close attention to habitus and capital.

hooks (2000b) points out that the idea of social class can feel dangerous or overwhelming to identify due to its complexity. She writes: "At the end of the day the threat of class warfare, of class struggle, is just too dangerous to face. The neat binary categories of white and black or white and female are not there when it comes to class" (p. 6). This danger and ensuing silences surrounding examinations of class have served to limit recognition of the contradictory and complicated relationships between social class, race, and gender¹. Anti-racist and feminist work is in need of critical and thoughtful work around class.

The experience with which I began this chapter had been lost to me prior to a "The Other Side of Poverty" workshop I co-facilitated several years ago. As part of the

¹ Many theorists have thoughtfully and productively examined the relationships between social class and race (Thandeka, 1999; Roediger, 1999; hooks, 2000b). While this chapter attempts to foreground social class, I will be examining its racial implications more directly in chapter 3.

interactive workshop, we invited teachers, administrators, and graduate students to respond to the prompt: *Write about a time when social class mattered*. Instantly, I was back in that classroom, back in high school, viscerally experiencing the heaviness of responsibility and danger surrounding me. This is an important story, one that has implications for my teaching, beliefs about work, and hierarchies unconsciously and consciously operating on and through me.

Working towards social class-sensitive pedagogy has required ongoing critical and theoretical work with my own stories; this engagement has helped me to perceive pressures and influences that I could not clearly recognize or articulate while a student. This work/commitment/stance has helped me to recognize histories entangled with my experiences of being schooled and classed. In the second portion of this chapter, I will introduce an experience that took place three years after my experience in the classroom. In this memory, the dangers have changed. I shall then discuss elite femininity, the history and foundation of social work in the U.S., and notions of space and orientation to help me think through my story.

Senior Year – Standing in the Hallway²

I am standing in a high school hallway. My feet are rooted. My body a stone. Students' bodies flow like smooth water around me, around our awkwardly, tightly clustered group. Within our group, my classmates' bodies are saying: "This is scary. This

² Desiring to preserve coherence in this presentation of this story while offering access to some of its other iterations, I include footnotes throughout that pose questions and connect with or cite other versions of this story. I recommend reading through the entire story twice, once without stopping to attend to these comments, and once attuned to that conversation.

is strange. We shouldn't be on the *inside* of this place.” Their fear is becoming my fear, or at least amplifying it.³ It is from the inside of this uncomfortable pod, I recognize the familiar bodies of my friends strolling down the hallway of their school. We see each other and smile.⁴

During my senior year in high school, I was excited to take an elective course on Social Justice with a few of my favorite teachers. We studied configurations of power, examining the ways that race, gender, and class, are built into societal structures. As part of the curriculum, we took several field trips, traveling to a men's prison, a women's prison, a school that represented education at its finest, and a school that presumably did not. The contrast between the two schools did not need to be explicitly named: the good/bad dichotomy was already strongly established. I do know that our trip to the

³ Another version of this story presents a more explicit articulation of fear. “My way is becoming indistinguishable from their way. I want to remember, to know, who I am. To remember my family. To remember my old friends. To feel my thoughts and body as my own again. When I see the friends I've grown up with, my friends that are students at John Adams, there is still this separation between us. Is it language, clothing, school, or something else? I see our bodies facing one another. I feel myself through their gazes, changing, becoming someone I don't recognize. I feel them through my own eyes. Our bodies – there used to never be any space between them – no gazes, no judgment, no distance. We were just us – friends. And now, what is this distance? Why can't we see each other as ourselves, as who we are? What has changed?”

⁴ How does this reading resolve conflicts and anxieties that appear in my previous writings? These friendships were not simply good feeling-ed things, and the image of the smile seems to diminish the conflict. To illustrate the dramatic difference in readings, I include this excerpt from another version of this story: “I walk down the hallway of the school, in the space between two worlds – two ways – two communities. I know I had to perform in very specific, careful ways. The stakes are high. I am an insider in both groups, but there is a very real danger of losing my position in both. I am able to recognize both groups' fears, the stereotypes I need to protect myself from enacting, and the lenses they are each peering through to see the other, the other I recognize in myself, but need to hide or present in very deliberate ways. I am in a great deal of danger in this moment.”

“bad” school felt particularly dangerous to me, not because of what we might encounter there, but because of what might get exposed about me, how it could further mark me as an outsider in the educational space I currently resided within.

John Adams High School, located in a lower income, more racially diverse area of the city, was known for being a bad school. Like most “commonsense” narratives, I don’t remember a clear explanation as to why this was. I knew my parents didn’t want me to go there. I could feel a shift in tone and posture when people spoke about it; I knew I didn’t want to be associated with those furrowed brows and murmurs of disgust.⁵ I think most explicit judgments were articulated in terms of violence, violence and poor academics; however, there was often something more smoldering beneath the surface.

John Adams is the school I *should* have gone to. I lived less than a mile from it. Nearly all my friends from my neighborhood were enrolled here. I could feel my body relax as our school van turned onto my familiar streets and moved through the geography of my home.⁶ I knew how to *be* here. Looking down these streets, I knew how the

⁵ Across all versions of the stories associated with this chapter, the danger of association arises and is connected to social class and race. In the classroom story, the association with working class work and workers’ bodies endangered me. From another piece of writing, being associated with my neighborhood was a source of shame: “I overheard a classmate whisper to another: “Are we in the ghetto?” My face flushed, so personally ashamed of the association.” In this piece, the association is far subtler, in others’ embodied and emotional response to a place that I am seeking to distance myself from. In each story’s articulation of danger, I express feeling personally threatened by working class bodies and bodies of color.

⁶ This embodied response strikingly mirrors that in the first story. In my experience in the classroom, in the wake of the panic of being seen vacuuming, “I force a facade of nonchalance atop my body and begin my methodical progression through the room... compel their presence into the periphery of my vision.” In this moment, I once again must guard myself against my embodied experience/response and forcefully execute a

neighborhood flowed out beyond them. I understand the rhythm of this area, what to pay attention to, and how to move. And yet, I wasn't supposed to. I could feel that too, even as the muscles in my calves softened and the skin of my forehead relaxed.

Four years before, I had earned an academic scholarship to the prestigious and elite private high school I now attended: St. Ambrose. My entry into this private school had been a source of relief and a point of pride for my family. Work-study, grants, and a scholarship allowed me access to this upper-middle class, primarily white space. It had been a complicated struggle, an isolating one, as strands of familiar and familial funds of knowledge were methodically disentangled from me. Over the past four years, I have learned how to be a good student there. I learned how to perform the part, how to not mark myself too much as an outsider. As part of that learning, I learned about social justice. I learned how to help others. This commitment/stance/orientation was deeply embedded within the ethos of the school and explicitly implanted into the curriculum.

This commitment was not new to me. My family's beliefs and the religious principles that framed my childhood had always emphasized the importance of kindness and respect; we were taught to help people that needed help and that this was a desirable way of being in the world. However, within my high school - within this precarious and privileged space I felt unable to authentically or fully inhabit - social justice became a form of currency that I needed to possess in a different way. It legitimated me. It offered legibility and justification. As a scholarship recipient within a space I could not fully

false representation. My mind and body are perceived to contradict and threaten one another.

inhabit, my performance of social justice further bolstered the academic and intellectual mechanisms granting me access through its integration in education.

In our work, in our service, we were typically sent to locations outside of *our* communities, out *there*, over *there*, with *them*, ostensibly with people that were *not us*. While we studied and discussed the concept of race, I don't recall explicit conversations around the overwhelming whiteness of our group or that the spaces we visited were consistently filled with bodies of color. While we discussed social class theoretically, I don't remember any open conversations about the manifestations of social class in our school, how it may be influencing our reading of interactions and structures, or even that *we* may not all share the same experiences. It felt as though the work itself prevented us from having to have *those* conversations.

Oftentimes, there were physical distances between our school and the locations of our service and social justice work; our work required us to travel outside of *our* space.⁷ In contrast to the "good school" that we visited just minutes down the road from our own, we travelled a significant distance to arrive at the men and women's prisons. Inside of these places, I had been able to maintain the distance that was required and expected of me. I could perform social justice nearly effortlessly in those spaces. It was clear, an

⁷ The movement across/through space was a central feature in another piece of writing. In another version, I wrote: "This shift in spatial knowledge worked to delineate my social, embodied and institutional capitals from those of my family. All of my siblings attended the same public high school where my father was a teacher; the public school culture, the geographical location surrounding it, and the extending social communities my families shared were completely foreign to me. This division – grounded in material and geographical realities – translated into particular divisions of claimed or projected cultural capital within my family. I became the holder of 'political correctness,' of language, or a particular kind of theoretical intelligence; it was a source of both pride and ridicule."

embodied literacy within me, the way I was to experience distance through my body, how I was to encounter these places and the people within them as *outside* of myself, conceptually, objectively. I was a good person doing good. And I had a bubble of space around my body, protecting me; indeed the work itself insulated me in a way. However, at John Adams High School, there was no distance. My body knew this space as a kind of home. My body knew my friends and relaxed in their presence, even as I understood I wasn't supposed to.

Analysis

The ideal normalized middle-class feminine subject is one who is confident and highly self-determined, as well as capable of helping others. (Allan & Charles; 2014, p. 336)

Elite Femininity. In Alexandra Allan and Claire Charles' (2014) study of elite schoolgirls in the UK and Australia, particular individuals and communities outside of the elite educational spaces played important roles in the production of young elite feminine subjectivity. Interestingly, this subjectivity also plays a role in the development of other subject identities: "It has been argued that images of the successful and/or failed neoliberal subject often gather around the figure of the feminine, and particularly the young woman" (p. 335). A depiction of elite femininity serves to facilitate representations of class difference and is enabled through the invocation of failed neoliberal femininity as represented by white working-class women. Ridicule and disgust are some of the frameworks previous studies have used to examine how class becomes "emotionally mediated and constituted" through the scorn of working class women (p.

336). In the context of Allan and Charles' study, however, the disdain directed towards white working class women was operating more subtly. In contrast to the blatant and contemptuous depictions of working class femininity circulating in the popular culture, the schools silently invoked this "failed other" through an interpellation of texts that delicately and consistently kept this judgment operating to resource the construction of middle-class girlhood. This unspoken yet consistent derision of working class women was so insidiously entwined within and through the construction of middle-class girlhood (as a symbol of dis-identification) that the figure of girlhood itself functioned to produce judgment, albeit unobtrusively.

A second group that was used in resourcing the middle class self was "non-white 'good' others." Intricately tied up with the schools' commitments to social justice, there existed a "discernible instrumentalist discourse about how global social service for non-white or needy 'others' can help resource the mobile, cosmopolitan 'can-do' girl subject of neoliberalism" (p. 346). The necessary (for accessing the middle-class) characteristics of mobility, social service, and a commitment to social justice were accessed (or produced) through this interaction. Akin to the school's relationship with working class women, its representation of "good others" was also subtle and significant. Silently inferred in the school's advertisements aimed towards parents was "the (sometimes ethnic) other" who was "stuck in place," highlighting the school's potential for resourcing a middle-class self (p. 346). Accessing middle-class characteristics – resourcing the self – necessitated both real and imagined contact with "others." The

racialized and classed dynamics at play were veiled by social justice commitments and imagined and presented as good and benevolent.

This study helps to illuminate some of the dynamics operating in my own stories, the discomfort and intuitive knowings I felt compelled to silence. Indeed, the silence itself is operating in powerful ways. As a young female student in an elite educational space, I was being inducted into middle-class habitus; I was being offered access to middle-class cultural and social capital. I was resourcing the self through both real and imagined contact with “others.” An understanding of this acquisition is apparent in my second story when I write:

Social justice became a form of currency that I needed to possess in a different way. It legitimated me. It offered legibility and justification. As a scholarship recipient within a space I could not fully inhabit, my performance of social justice further bolstered the academic and intellectual mechanisms granting me access through its integration in education.

The legibility enabled through this type of work – middle-class social capital of social justice – was particularly important for me as someone whose presence felt insecure. However, this desirable legibility and capital made different demands of me than of most of my classmates.

The creation of a normalized female subjectivity tied up in my performance as a good student required an othering of my family, my community, and parts of myself. In my initial story in the classroom, it is interesting that I specifically invoke the women in my family while discussing my understanding of work: “I liked to surprise my aunts and

grandmothers with how seriously I took this responsibility, the tiny details I remembered to take care of.” In some way, gendered work and bodies are particularly threatened by the space I am in, and I recognize a connection between my experience and the contempt of working class women Allan and Charles discuss, a contempt that silently implicates me as I’m being created through opposition to it.

In both stories, the spaces I identify with – spaces that help me orient myself to the world – become liabilities in the acquisition of middle class social capital. The small working-class town that represents my family, to a “way of showing love and care that’s expressed through the soreness of muscles, the hard physical work of bodies” and the familiar and relaxing “geography of my home” located in a “lower income, more racially diverse area of the city” become harnessed to this enactment of social justice. Both spaces are representative of the working class and racialized others I am tasked with using to resource myself. In my first story, I acknowledge the awareness of the pain of separation: “My body knows on some level that as I brace myself against the danger of being linked with this work, my family’s way of being in the world is being disciplined out of me.” Beyond separation, however, my family, home, friends, and ways of being in the world also become the means for the creation of a middle class female identity that is marked as “good.” I am not supposed to simply love and accept my family; I’m supposed to use them to resource my new self.

Goodness & Social Justice. In their book *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell & Pat Griffin (2007) define social justice education as:

An interdisciplinary conceptual framework for analyzing multiple forms of oppression and *a set of interactive, experiential pedagogical principles* to help learners understand the meaning of social difference and oppression both in the social system and in their personal lives. The goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (p. 2)

Excited by the interest in this type of education, they also “worry about social justice education becoming a buzz term, used uncritically and lacking the analytic perspective and personal engagement that [they] believe are its indispensable features” (p. xvii). I enter into this examination as someone who has very much been formed by the commitments of social justice; indeed, its language and aspirations frame and circulate through my teaching and learning. And yet, as my shared stories and Allan and Charles’ study have illustrated, social justice education can also function to preserve the very structures of oppression it claims to interrupt.

An exploration of the historical and social foundations of social justice as a movement can serve to illuminate its investment in white middle-class identity development, and how this process becomes mediated through the feminine body. In *The Altruistic Imagination: A History of Social Work and Social Policy in the United States*, John H. Ehrenreich (2014) traces the origins of American social policy within the Progressive Era. He states that: “the crisis created by the rapid industrialization of the

United States in the last decades of the nineteenth century required an extensive reorganization of working-class life if capitalism was to survive” (p. 32). Throughout this period of incredible industrialization, vast populations of rural people (from both the U.S. and abroad) flooded into U.S. cities. During this period of growth, financial and governmental power became more and more concentrated within corporations and individuals. For a majority of Americans, however, it was a time of deplorable working conditions, extreme poverty, and chaos. Attempts by the working class to advocate for themselves “were met with violence, court injunctions, and contempt” (p. 24). It was not until the years leading up to 1900 that a majority of the middle class felt compelled to address the turmoil that had characterized the lives of working people for the past two decades.

The middle class’s concern for social change was directly tied to the threat of working class-led social movements. Ehrenreich writes about the social reform leading up to social justice movements and social work programs, and contradictorily named “progressivism.”

The middle-class reformers-to-be felt they had to restore justice and morality to an increasingly unjust and immoral society. But they themselves benefited, materially at least, from the industrial system. And although they may have sympathized with the poor, for the most part they did not *like* the poor and certainly did not want to live like, or with, them. (p. 27-28)

Progressivism became a marker of the new American middle class and was developed through its opposition and response to movements by the working class. “The working-

class and farmer movements that characterized this period were *causes* of progressivism, part of the *crisis*; they were not progressivism, nor were the social reforms of the period a direct response to their demands” (p. 28). Progressivism was created – not in response to the real needs of a society in crisis, but – in response to the danger of the working class’s movements for power. Progressivism became a “middle-class movement occurring in response to this crisis, a counter to these movements that threatened to transform American society in more fundamental ways” (p. 28). Progressivism, a movement often depicted as altruistic and kind, was developed to control the transformative potential of the working class.

Michael Reisch (2007) points out the ways that the social justice movement has consistently and historically attended to different things than movements endeavoring to fight against structures of oppression (such as movements led by people of color, women, working class folks, the GLBTQ community, and the disability community). He writes that: “part of the struggle of each group has been a struggle to modify universal definitions of social justice, based on hegemonic values, to fit their particular historical circumstances and aspirations” (p. 70). The very definitions and commitments enabling the possibility of “universal” readings of power and oppression grew directly out of the middle class white spaces social justice was formed within. Because of the naturalized, universalizing, and homogenizing effect of social justice, its language and vision can actually make it more challenging for marginalized and oppressed groups to advocate for themselves.

A more focused examination of middle class investment in the creation of social justice further illuminates the conflict and danger I experienced in high school, in being associated with working class work and bodies, and during my identification with the site of our social justice field trip. Describing my high school experience, I wrote: “It had been a complicated struggle, an isolating one, as strands of familiar and familial funds of knowledge were methodically disentangled from me.” The violence operating through the benevolence of progressivism required other bodies to make itself legible. During my experience in the hallway, I could no longer deny that one of those bodies was mine.

Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Backgrounds, and Space. In Sara Ahmed’s (2006) work to place phenomenology in conversation with queer studies, she explores the ways that objects, (sexual) orientations, and orientalism enable particular bodies to exist more effortlessly in particular spaces. I’ll be using her discussion of objects, backgrounds, and space to help me examine how social class was operating on and through me in my stories.

Objects. Objects surround us in our everyday life. The presence, use, familiarity, and histories of these objects are not neutral. Our relationship with objects, their presence (or arrivals), and the ways we take them up are imbued with our histories, our locations, and our perceptions of them. Ahmed writes that “the approach is not simply about the arrival of an object; it is also how we turn toward that object” (p. 2). Phenomenology claims that consciousness is intentional; it is directed towards objects. However, consciousness is also shaped - or *turned* - towards particular things, in particular ways. These objects we turn towards then, are also perceived differently depending on our

location in relationship to them. This consciousness is “embodied, situated, and sensitive” (p. 27). My perception of an object is intimately interwoven with my posture towards it. In addition to one’s physical orientation, one’s orientation towards - and subsequent relationship - with an object is also profoundly shaped by one’s intellectual or emotional stance towards that object. Liking, trusting, or disliking something changes the engagement I have with an object, and what I am able to see in it. Husserl (1969) referred to this layered orientation as “twofold directedness” (p. 122). I am directed towards an object – standing in front of it – *and* I take direction towards it; I like it or I don’t.

Let’s consider, for a moment, the front of the classroom as a phenomenological object. Those who have this object in their proximity, within an educational paradigm that associates this space with the authority of a teacher, have been *turned* in a very particular manner. Many classrooms are set up in a way that physically orient student bodies towards this space. Considering Husserl’s notion of twofold directedness, students and teachers have also been *turned* towards this space in others ways, ways that challenge or reinforce the authority and power of a teacher. And then, as a teacher, one steps into this space, into this object of histories and power, and experiences the embodied and emotional *turning* that this object – now identified with their own body – commands. This turning, this repetitive orientation, brings teachers’ and students’ bodies into a complicated and provocative relationship with the front of the classroom.

In connection to one’s orientation towards objects, the given-ness of those objects, their partiality (and ensuing readings), and their relationship with bodies becomes important. Sokolowski (2000) writes that, in our perception of an object, out of

myriad of impressions and experiences, we have that object “given to us, and the identity of the object is intended and given” (p. 20). This “given” meaning is often invisibly and profoundly connected to the history that has shaped its arrival, and significantly shapes how we interact with it, and the assumptions that get fused with the object. Through my experience and history, I have a particular orientation towards objects, patterns of tending towards things that change the way an object gets perceived or related to.

For example, when I encounter a desk, I expect there to be four legs. I orient myself towards it in relation to the action of writing or study, based on my personal experiences of repeatedly tending towards desks in this way. I don’t orient myself to it as a cleaner or builder or repairer of desks. I encounter it; I orient myself to it, as a writer or student or teacher. The manner in which I move towards a desk – orient myself to it – is shaped by a history of tending towards this object in this way. *And*, this way of tending towards this object with this orientation was given to me.

In Husserl’s analysis of his desk, he repeatedly moves around it, physically attempting to diminish the partiality of his perception. The entire table is unavailable to him, so he must work or move to “fill in the blanks,” to see if the missing pieces match his expectations. This “reading for confirmation,” or the “conjuring of a behind” opens up another way of relating Husserl’s table to the history of objects. Ahmed writes: “I want to relate what is ‘missed’ when we ‘miss’ the table to the spectrality of history, what we miss may be behind the table in another sense: what is behind the table is what must have already taken place for the table to arrive” (p. 36-37). This notion of the “background” of the table offers us a doorway into considering the conditions that enable

the emergence of objects, the inscribed trajectories of meanings, and the “stickiness” of things themselves (p. 40). Arjun Appadurai (1994) writes that: “we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories: (p. 77). If Husserl looks only at his desk, as separate from its histories, the labors that formed it, and the particular forms that may be extended through it, the object itself may be effectively erased (Ahmed, 2006, p. 41).

It is interesting how the relationship between object and body can so easily dismiss or diminish their mutual orientations, the extent to which these orientations enable or disable action. Often, a failed orientation illuminates the intended action and the extent to which body and object don't line up. Ahmed uses the example of a hammer that doesn't do what it needs to do. This failure to hammer the nail makes explicit hammering the nail as its intended action. However, the relationship between body and hammer can be diminished through inscribing failure onto the object itself: “This hammer doesn't work.” This hides the extent to which one's approach or orientation towards the tool impacts the work they're able to do together: “The hammer is too heavy *for me*” (p. 50). “The failure of the work is not, then, “in” the thing or “in” the person but rather about whether the person and the thing face each other *in the right way*” (p. 51).

Again, if we return to the front of the classroom as an object of inquiry, as a space which confers and communicates the authority of teachers in particular ways, how has this object been orientated towards and through particular bodies in ways that allow them to face each other *in the right way*, or not? How do the mutual orientations between bodies and objects, and the histories that are carried forward through them, get read as a

singular failure on the part of one piece of this complex interaction? How might this conceptualization meaningfully complicate superficial or monolithic readings of the achievement gap?

While Ahmed is specifically discussing material objects here, how might the social justice be further illuminated through considering it in this way? Or, if we consider my high school, St. Ambrose, as a phenomenological object/space that is tied up with the history of social work and “help” in particular ways how was the disciplining of my body also about turning my body in a different direction? If the acquisition of the capital of a middle class self required the othering of or forceful dis-identification with working class bodies, how was I being *turned* against myself? How did the orientation being demanded of me require a naturalized violence and contempt that appeared natural in the bodies of my classmates whose bodies had previously been *turned*?

Background. Ahmed imagines herself within Husserl’s writing room, and focuses her analysis on his writing desk, the location and focus of a significant amount of his work. His study, this “masculine domain at the front of the house” enables and requires particular focuses, certain objects to become *background*, and this viewpoint - this foundational location from which philosophy becomes learned and enacted - gets written into, and extended out from, the philosopher’s desk. While Husserl’s close examination and writings about his desk strive to put the familiar world to the side – indeed, his work on bracketing⁸ attempts to enact this – the ability, time, space, and means necessary for

⁸ “Bracketing” was a fundamental element in early phenomenology. The practice attempted to suspend interpretation while focusing solely in on the phenomenon being analyzed. Ahmed challenges bracketing in that it re-affirms the notion of a transcendent,

this inquiry to occur is significant. In fact, his work in many ways depends on the relegation of particular labors and material realities to the *background* in his inquiry for a universalizing reading of an object to even be imaginable. Ahmed points towards the perception of particular objects in illuminating one's posture or direction. She writes, "The objects we direct our attention toward reveal the direction we have taken in life. Other objects, and indeed spaces, are relegated to the background; they are only ever co-perceived" (p. 32). Attentiveness towards objects relegated to the background offers a great deal of information about the directions and postures being sustained.

Behind Husserl is the feminine space, the space of the familiar, and materials and labor enabling him to do his work. The masculine posture that imagines bracketing to be possible, and that submerges the subject beneath the sign of the universal, threatens to conceal the many labors enabling philosophy to exist. Instead of imagining we can bracket out the familiar and begin from a transcendent place, Ahmed proposes that we work to recognize and explore the histories and postures that enable such a thought as possible, and what is lost in the process: "Rather than the familiar being posited as that which must be suspended in order to see, we might consider what 'it' is that we 'overlook' when we reside within the familiar" (p. 34). In my experience at John Adam's High School, the silenced others (as identified in Allan and Charles' study) became necessary background for our social justice work to take place. Our work relied on the presence and locations of others to visit, help, and study. We could also consider the

universalizing subject that is capable of moving outside of "the contingent world of social matter" (p. 33).

development of classed identities – the resourcing of selves through problematic engagement with others – as a necessary background in our visit to John Adam’s.

Space. An analysis of a body’s relationship to the world around it is further complicated by its “submerged” state within that world. Bodies “become the space they inhabit” (p. 53). And this interworld is shaped through repetition. Ahmed writes, “what bodies ‘tend to do’ are effects of histories rather than being originary” (p. 56). These tendencies, which reflect the repetition of particular bodies being shaped to face particular objects, are anything but neutral. As the body is oriented in particular ways towards particular objects, these histories of tending towards things, of objects and bodies working together towards actions, get inscribed into the spaces that surround them. “If spaces extend bodies, then we could say that spaces also extend the shape of the bodies that “tend” to inhabit them” (p. 58). Without exploring the historical and dynamic ways that bodies and spaces interact, the ease or challenge with which bodies inhabit spaces may become naturalized as properties within the bodies themselves. I’d like to use this idea of becoming the space to explore a shift that occurs between my two stories and its relationship to the space of St. Ambrose. In the first story, my body feels endangered by the space of the school surrounding me. “I do not belong here.” As I attempt to understand the rules and expectations, I am aware of the precarity of my location. I write:

Despite my scholarship, despite my academic performance, this work – the more tangible mechanism enabling me to be here – is the thing that threatens my ability to *really* be here, to be perceived as belonging or deserving full access to this space.

I identify myself as an outsider within the middle class habitus of my high school. By the second story, however, this relationship with space has significantly changed. In the hallway of John Adams,

I am standing in a high school hallway. My feet are rooted. My body a stone.

Students' bodies flow like smooth water around me, around our awkwardly, tightly clustered group. Within our group, my classmates' bodies are saying:

“This is scary. This is strange. We shouldn't be on the *inside* of this place.” Their fear is becoming my fear, or at least amplifying it.

It is from the inside of an “uncomfortable pod” I encounter my “old” friends. Despite being outside of *our* school, the middle class capital and characteristics tied up with it have become a part of me. I have become the space that had endangered me three years earlier. In this moment in the hallway, I am not really in danger of being associated with my neighborhood any longer. I am now primarily in danger of being associated with my high school by my friends at John Adams. I describe the experience of being an insider as fearful and awkward. I am now, not only able to “sense the edges, the rules, the full contour of expectations” that eluded me in my first story, I am able to understand the expression and language of my middle class classmates' bodies, and our fears have become linked. My body has become a middle class body and is able to inhabit or extend into this space with an ease I want to deny.⁹ In my first story, my body understood that it

⁹ I acknowledge that this is an incredibly oversimplified reading of bodies and social class; however, I offer this identification in this way to highlight the transition that has occurred within me, not to encourage an essentialized reading of bodies or social class.

was in danger. By the second story, the danger is inside of me – it has become a part of me – and I perceive the danger it presents to those around me in this space.

Conclusion

In conversations around social class, I have found that many people desire clear answers and explanations. Many workshop participants and students have presented discrete pieces of information about their lives and then asked me: “So, what am I? Working class or middle class?” I have absolutely no interest in placing tidy answers atop the complexity of our stories. Instead, I seek to honestly and hopefully engage with the contradictions and struggles entangled with and worked out through our lives.

Entering into this examination of social class through my own story is helping me to recognize and more deliberately name commitments that live in my teaching while simultaneously and critically engaging with their dangerous histories and their consequences. Each story I’ve returned to and worked with in this way has attuned me to new dynamics in my classrooms and opened up a little bit more space for me to be with them intentionally. For example, I pay much closer attention to how I discuss and respond to work. When my students talk about their jobs, I ask different questions than I used to and I pay attention to the judgments, hierarchies, and beliefs circulating through our words and bodies. I work to name, interrupt, complicate, and play with social class in my classes.

In regards to the history of progressivism and its inception as a middle class project to control and manage poor people and communities of color, I am paying much closer attention to my motivations and strategies for helping people. So much of my

thinking about the world was formed within and through this way of being that I know I cannot simply step outside of it. Besides, my commitments to social justice (that are fundamentally tangled up in the history of progressivism) have also galvanized, clarified, and strengthened my teaching in important ways I don't want to release. Through holding these stories together and considering the multiple currents of classed ways of being in the world that resonate in my body, I have unearthed new ways of thinking about help. The work of these stories is helping me more meaningfully hold the contradictory tensions of my ways of being in the world. I am creating different relationships with histories and ideas that don't demand vilification or annihilation.

Thinking about these memories through queer phenomenology has shifted the way I think about culturally responsive pedagogy and diversity initiatives in schools (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition to the ways students are required to disconnect from the knowledge, languages, and values of their families, how does the construction of middle class and white identities (built into many of the structures of schooling) require a turning against oneself and one's family? How might considering the relationship between bodies and the spaces they inhabit – their mutual orientations – help us imagine school spaces in which all bodies can be feeling, dynamic, and expansive and more meaningfully and critically consider what school spaces are doing to students' bodies?

In the reverberations of this writing, I am deeply concerned with the notions of goodness and help in education. I am also intensely aware of how my legibility as a white woman teacher and researcher committed to social justice intersects with those notions. While everything has not been resolved through this chapter, I am grateful to my stories

in turning me towards a new relationship with aspects of social class that are important to me, because there is a part of me still clutching that vacuum. And part of me – of my legibility as a white woman teacher committed to anti-racist and anti-classist education – is continually faced with an impossible decision in the hallway, tasked with choosing between communities, both of which I am a part.

Chapter Three - The First Night of Class:

Unspeakable Whiteness and Playing Pretend #1

White Women in Schools

The unique historical and political phenomenon of white women's overwhelming presence in education has been enabled through a complicated and dangerous history in education, one that has harnessed complex constructions of white femininity (as caring, innocent, and inherently good) to the colonial project of nation-building and subject-within-it identity construction. In this chapter, I will trace some of that history and its relationship with this contradictory construction of femininity. I will then share a memory from my first experience teaching. Through and with this memory, we'll explore silence and bodies' relationships with white femininity. Erica Meiners (2010) asserts the particular role that whiteness plays in the presentation of control as mediating civility: "Empire building had always required control of institutional education, and white women, historically, have functioned to mask the Racial Contract in education" (p. 46). The Racial Contract¹⁰ Meiners alludes to here is maintained through a particular kind of silence, the cloaking of white supremacy beneath a veil of "commonsense" or taken for granted assumptions about structures of power (p. 44). The overrepresentation of white women within the field of education, not only works to secure "an epistemology of ignorance," it is also the "result of an expressed logic or a system" (p. 45). White women have played a crucial role in the civilizing enterprise of nation building.

¹⁰ In *The Racial Contract*, Charles W. Mills (1997) examines global white supremacy as a political system and its patterns of violence, racialization, exploitation, and philosophy.

During the early part of the 20th century, the United States' structures of power were shifting. The ending of slavery, Reconstruction, the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and the massive influx of immigrant communities into urban centers required profoundly new systems of infrastructure and support. It was during this pivotal period in American history that white women teachers began flooding into classrooms, making up 86% of the U.S. teaching force by 1920 (Tyack, 1974, p. 61). These teachers served an economic purpose. Growing populations required more teachers, and women (who were paid significantly less than their male counterparts) met this need.

In addition to the economic role white women teachers played, their presence shifted and aligned with the restructuring of a national ethos. Through strategically harnessing the notion of women's assumed inherent morality while exploiting them as a cheap labor source, education deepened the complex and contradictory image of a white woman: "The ideal teacher was one who could control the children and be controlled by her superiors" (Grumet, 1988, p. 43). This contradiction became naturalized within the profession of teaching. Thus, white women played unique roles within hierarchical structures of control, functioned as the eyes of the state, and were conceived and situated as mothers of the state.

The presence of women in schools did not shift its patriarchal commitments. An explicit hierarchy was firmly embedded within the structure of schooling which positioned female teachers as malleable by their superiors, while simultaneously able to control students. David Tyack (1974), in his historical text on the U.S education system, writes that:

Hierarchical organization of schools and the male chauvinism of the larger society fit as hand to glove. The system required subordination; women were generally subordinate to men; the employment of women as teachers thus augmented the authority of the largely male administrative leaderships. (p. 60)

Women's positioning within the structures of education heightened the power and legitimacy of those organizations, while reifying the gender dynamics of power within the culture.

In addition to the hierarchical structuring of women within schooling, women also served as crucial tools within a structure of surveillance, maintaining adherence to the status quo. Meiners (2010) writes:

The role of teaching (and social work) was to execute class-based surveillance and monitoring. Female social workers and teachers were not trusted to create the template for this surveillance, but they were viewed as cheap, malleable, and relatively unthreatening mechanisms to execute this work...These professions are intimately linked to the economy and to the political needs of the nation-state. (p. 47)

Situated as the eyes of the state, women's bodies were harnessed to meet the controlling and capitalist needs of the state. While they clearly exerted power over their students and represented the power of the state, they did not play a significant role in the development or administration of that power.

In addition, women's positioning within schools enabled the discourse or notion of the state as family to circulate and gain power, de-legitimizing the power and

autonomy of individual families in sacrifice to that of the state. In her book *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching*, Madeleine Grumet (1988) writes that:

If at least some of the motives that we bring into our work as educators can be understood and acknowledged as issuing from our genderization and reproductive projects, then the argument that the school has a dynamic function in mediating the public and domestic oppositions in our culture is persuasive, inviting those who care for children in homes and schools to be the very agents of this transformation. (p. xiv-xv)

Recognition and exploration of the gendered nature of schooling may enable more engaged and dynamic possibilities for change by women teachers. Asserting that there are “motives that support public schooling that are generated in the sexual/gender system of the family,” Grumet draws attention to the complex relationships moderating these spaces which play a profound role in the creation of national subjects and the propagation of the status quo (p. xiv).

School was imagined as a kind of new domestic space that might employ the feminine “self-sacrifice, purity, and domesticity into moral superiority that could be dispensed in schools” (Grumet, 1988, p. 40). This familial conceptualization of national morality enabled a pathologizing and control of particular groups of people. “Working-class, farming, and immigrant children became, by definition, unfit to participate in the national ethos of self-discipline and productivity without the ministrations of the school” (p. 39). Rather than questioning the shifting of class structures and the radical transformation of the nation, the structure of education transferred “the onus of poverty

and disorganization onto the character of the poor” (p. 39). The poor were not simply poor; their moral character became linked to their economic situation, and this moral failure was taken up as the responsibility of the state.

Gender played a key role in the construction of schooling’s morality. Catharine Beecher - the founder of the Central Committee for Promoting National Education - actively promoted the exploitation of femininity in the construction of a national ethos of education. Kathryn Sklar, in her study of Beecher, identifies how she:

was among the first to engage in the contradictory task of both nationalizing and personalizing the American domestic environment. Like others so engaged, she found the key to her task in gender roles. The dichotomies of masculine and feminine identity could be orchestrated to agree with both a standardized cultural score and a specialized personal calling. Womanhood could be designed to engage all one’s creative energies, yet simultaneously to smooth the edges of one’s regional, lineage, or class identities [. . .]. In a nation tentatively evolving new democratic forms, gender roles were an effective way to channel the explosive potential of nineteenth-century social change and bring it at least partially under the control of a national elite. (as cited in Grumet, 1988, p. 41)

Through Beecher, we catch a glimpse of how white women teachers were positioned and implicated in the construction of a national subject, and the ways in which gender was mobilized to control change and minimize unique and divergent identities. The contradictory needs of a country anxious to control and manage its unpredictable and changing peoples was mapped onto femininity without disrupting its democratic

sensibilities. Through white women's roles, an unruly nation was ushered into individual relationships with the nation.

The contradictions inherent in situating women, who were to “exert moral pressure on a society in whose operations she had little part,” are striking (Grumet, 1993, 43). And yet, the legacy of this image of the ideal woman and mother (nearly always expressed through the bodies of white women) still plays a vivid role in the way teaching is imagined and enacted. The role of women in education is a complicated one, mediating the movement across public and private spaces, legitimating and bolstering hierarchies of power and control, being positioned as holders of morality and maternal care, and requiring an enactment of malleability that enables the patriarchal structure of education to remain fixed and upheld through the bodies of women.

A Memory

Angela¹¹ sits at the head of the circle. Her seat feels higher than those of the students around her, vaulted, conspicuous and excessive. She hunches down, subtly, internally. “I can do this,” she wills, shoulders lift, smile in the back of her cheeks. “Who the fuck do you think you are?” the thought jabs, over and over. Her shoulders tighten,

¹¹ This memory was written as part of a collective memory work project with colleagues Erin Stutelberg and Colleen Clements. Our collective engagement around this memory significantly supported the work I was able to do with it. While this piece of writing was individually crafted, our collective engagement strengthened my thinking. This piece was written in response to the prompt: *Write about a moment related to teaching when you became aware of your precarious, vulnerable, and undeniable white body.* Within Haug's (1987) collective, it is a standard practice in the methodology to write and discuss our texts in third-person. I adhere to that practice here and in much of the subsequent analysis.

pulse. Her breath gets thin. She can feel the fear in her forehead, and is sure all the students can read the terror in her face.

Am I supposed to be talking now? Should I be smiling more? What do teachers talk about, during the minutes before class starts? Why is it so quiet? Did it just get even quieter? How can I teach writing? I don't know anything. I'm younger than almost everyone in this room. I'm white. I don't know what I'm doing. Who the hell do I think I am?

She forces these thoughts down inside her. She is terrified of her students' eyes, of what it means if they see her. Her authority – the power she is tasked to hold now – is paper-thin. She feels its precarity more than anything else. It eclipses her students, the room, her own body.

You're doing exactly the opposite of what you want to do. Everything you've written, all the things you've studied. You can't do this. You can't sit here as the authority in this space.

She looks down at the thick packets of readings stacked within sensible folders. Two-sided printing. Stapled. In order. Notes. Handouts. An alphabetized class list. The syllabus for the class, the first she's ever written. The friends she's been staying with laugh at her. Both teachers, they tell her to stop researching, to stop planning every single thing. "You can't plan for every possibility," they'd say. "You need to get to know your students. Most of teaching happens when you're in the moment, and you can never see what's coming before you're in it. Planning too much can cut you off from the chance to fully *be* in those moments."

She doesn't want to fully *be* anywhere right now. She wants to know the answer. She wants to know how to smile professionally. She wants to say the right thing in the right way. She wants her students to believe that she can teach them something, that she is a teacher. She is hollow. All the words and papers and rules feel like something solid she can step inside of, embody, carry. She hates them, and she puts them on.

The smile on her face, the encouraging teacher smile she wants to wear, to express support and kindness – it must be learned. It cannot simply come from inside her. The culture of this space, the wisdom of the 5 clans that structure the organization of learning. It must be learned. From the outside in, she must re-make herself again. She must build her body into a teacher's body, and she hates this. She must protect her students from her.

She leans forward, her voice barely recognizable to her. "Welcome to our class. My name is Angela, and I'm so happy to be working with you this semester." She begins passing out the packets of readings.

After class, she drives the long ride home beside a huge moon. Her body's on fire; adrenaline and terror course through her. She opens the window and screams out into the dark, cold air. She's never heard a sound like this. She keeps screaming, her throat raw and furious, until she drives back into the city, shuts the window, and goes to sleep.

Voices, Bodies, Packets, and Race

In this memory of a young woman's first experience with teaching, authority and power create a violent and threatening conflict within her mind and body. Multiple voices ridicule her, plead with her, and challenge her authority as she attempts to mask and

diminish her physical turmoil with a fictitious presentation of calm professionalism. The story is composed primarily of different voices. Initially, in response to her fear, Angela asserts: “I can do this.” Immediately, this declaration is challenged: “Who the fuck do *you* think you are?” Two italicized sections are woven within the narrative, transitioning from first- to third-person. In the first section, Angela asks herself a series of questions, eventually arriving at the same challenge to authority previously uttered, now internalized and stated in first-person. “Who the hell do *I* think I am?” The reader is also introduced to the voices of friends/teachers who deride Angela’s determined preparations for class. Within the world of the story, however, beyond the internal voices and those of memory, the only perceptible voice is Angela’s as she introduces herself to her class and screams aloud in the car on her way home afterwards. Neither of these moments of expression feels natural or familiar to her. As she welcomes her students to class, her voice is “barely recognizable to her.” As she screams her pain into the night sky, “she’s never heard a sound like this before.”

In addition to the many voices deriding and disorienting Angela, her own body appears to be the site of a profound and tumultuous struggle. She attempts to willfully enlarge herself (lifting her shoulders and producing a smile) while simultaneously shrinking, hunching inward, contracting her shoulders, and constricting her breath. Her physical movements are counterintuitive, working towards oppositional ends as she attempts to mediate her pain, the cacophony of voices, and the perceptions of her students. Indeed, her attention and fear appears to be most vividly directed towards the eyes/gaze of her students. Their perception of her – their belief as to whether she is a real

teacher capable of teaching them *something* – seems the fulcrum upon which success or failure hangs. However, she never entertains the possibility that she may be a good teacher; all of her attention is directed towards faking professionalism enough to trick her students into believing her performance to be authentic.

Central in this performance are the papers, packets, and office materials that receive more description than nearly anything else in the story. Her emptiness, her illegitimate participation within the classroom space, is directly juxtaposed against the purposeful and orderly materials she gathers and deploys. “She looks down at the thick packets of readings stacked within sensible folders. Two-sided printing. Stapled. In order. Notes. Handouts. An alphabetized class list. The syllabus for the class.” These official, legitimizing, and agency-filled objects convey order, organization, clarity, and purpose. While Angela later alludes to the limited power of these materials, describing her authority as being “paper-thin,” she also recognizes the legibility and solidity offered through these markers of academic authority. “All the words and papers and rules feel like something solid she can step inside of, embody, carry.” Her lack (of authority, experience, and preparedness) may assumedly be filled or mediated by the solidity and strength of these educational markers of control.¹²

Within this story, there exists a superficial and dangerous perspective on teaching and learning. Many of the dualisms invoked through the memory (inside/outside,

¹² While Angela’s lack appears to be filled or mediated through the power and legitimacy of these materials, one may also see them functioning to produce the lack. As a (white woman) teacher within a patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist system, how might her emptiness/inability be a prerequisite for the work she’s being tasked to do? Or, how might these tools/materials be creating a kind of requirement for themselves? (Parks, 2009)

empty/full, being/knowing) reflect a banking model of education in which authoritative and capable teachers deposit knowledge into the (ideally) passive vessels of their students. “The more completely she [the teacher] fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). The struggle Angela is embroiled within could be read as part of the overwhelming transformation teachers are expected to undergo in this banking transition from passive/empty student to active/full teacher. For this model to be enacted, an enormous division between teacher and student must be sustained; this would help to explain why Angela never *sees* her students. She expresses that she is “terrified of her students eyes,” and yet those eyes are never actually glimpsed. Contrasted vividly alongside the detailed renderings of her teaching materials, beyond the fear they inspire, Angela’s students are never seen nor heard.

While her struggle and fearfulness may be interpreted as a rather appropriate response to the problematic constructions and expectations for a teacher, this classroom dynamic is further complicated through the indirect racialization of her students, a striking absence in the story. Angela identifies herself as being white while questioning her capacity to teach. “How can I teach writing? I don’t know anything. I’m younger than almost everyone in this room. *I’m white*. I don’t know what I’m doing. Who the hell do I think I am?” Later on, she circuitously racializes the school while identifying how she must learn the “culture of this space, the wisdom of the 5 clans that structure the organization of learning.” However, she never directly identifies the race(s) of her students; we don’t see the students at all. They have been “eclipsed” by the precarity of

Angela's authority. However, perhaps their invisibility is not only a byproduct of the crisis of a new teacher who is unable to see beyond herself. Perhaps the silencing of race is necessarily tied up in the production of teacher. Or perhaps, this silence is serving to preserve the legibility of a white woman who has rarely before been required to experience herself as raced.

In the midst of competing voices, bodily conflict, a hyper-fixation on the power of office materials, an appeal to a banking model of education, and a silenced undercurrent of race, the question remains: Why does Angela remain committed to a violent and forceful enactment of authority that appears to cause her pain and distress? Why does this construction of teacher, a construction that would lead her to want to protect her students from it, appear so inevitable?

Silence, The White Female Body, Contingent Fullness, and Building a Teacher's Body

Your silence will not protect you. (Lorde, 2007, p. 41)

In the fall of 2004, I accepted my first teaching position at Midwestern Tribal College. Transitioning from my master degree's focus on postcolonial and feminist theories in literature, I began teaching. It was beautiful and horrible all at once, and I came face-to-face with a myriad of fears, often amazed at the creativity and innovation with which I responded to them, often horrified by my ignorance. It was a profoundly transformative and pivotal year in my life.

Deeply embedded in the work of that time was the seemingly unspeakable reality of my whiteness. I was a white woman hired to teach Native American Literature to

Native American students at a tribal college. I had spent the last several years of my life studying and grappling with the ways in which colonial structures of power inhabit language and literature, challenging and troubling them. And yet, the vivid and startling reality of my own location and participation within racialized structures and histories of power was deafeningly, forcefully, silent. I felt unable to name the contradiction and struggle I experienced within myself.

I had attended a primarily white high school and college. Within those elite spaces I had felt precariously positioned as the scholarship student whose social capital did not align with that of those surrounding her. In this posture of recipient, I was firmly introduced to the ideas and responsibilities of social justice. In confusingly close proximity to these commitments were the pockets of quiet surrounding them. Inextricably bound up in class, race, religion, femininity, and my own lived experience growing up within a white family, I learned, in deep and embodied ways, that I was not supposed to talk about or acknowledge race. Despite my best intentions – or perhaps, indeed, due to them – I could not acknowledge the extent to which my presence in that space mirrored a colonial history from which I was desperate to extricate myself.

I did not think this clearly about what was happening at the time; however, I felt the unnamed hypocrisy in my body. I felt the hotness in my cheeks, the pounding of my chest, the fear of failure heightened by a fear of exposure. My capacity to do the work I needed to do, my professionalism and authority, felt wrapped up within a particular silence. My own whiteness felt profoundly unspeakable. I'd like to consider my previous

questions – concerning the inevitability of the violence and authority Angela takes up – through their relationship with silence and bodies.

Silence. Within this memory, few words or sounds ever surface. Beneath and before language, we glimpse the significant work required to maintain racial silence and preserve the unmarked-ness of white femininity. In this section, I shall examine the role silence plays within this memory and what it might illuminate for us about the importance of intentionally and explicitly naming race and history in our stories.

In the 1980's, as critiques of white feminist racism were becoming more pronounced, Ruth Frankenberg (1993) experienced a profound sense of contradiction. A lack of productive multiracial feminist dialogue alongside a vivid disconnect between the intentions of white feminists and the accusations of racism directed at them prompted Frankenberg's own exploration of whiteness. Across two different contexts, a white university feminist group of friends and a support network of working-class women of color and white women, Frankenberg "realized for almost the first time in [her] life the gulf of experience and meaning between individuals differentially positioned in relation to systems of domination, and profundity of cultural difference" (p. 4). Through the lived contradiction exposed through the work of Black women writers and activists, Frankenberg began an inquiry into the construction of whiteness for white women, and its naturalization within society. She wondered at how her racialized self, so vivid to those around her and the focus of her subsequent research and work, could remain imperceptible to her.

Frankenberg's experience of the silence surrounding white racialized identity guided her towards an examination of its social construction. Her study explored 30 white women's articulations on whiteness, attempting to "situate in sociocultural terms some patterns in the material contexts in which whiteness is lived" (p. 20). Frankenberg utilized Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986) to help her examine three distinct "discursive repertoires" in the ethnographic data she gathered from her white female participants: essentialist racism, color blindness/color evasiveness/power evasiveness, and race cognizance (p. 14-15). In their chronicling of ideas about race in the U.S., Omi and Winant (1986) identify three periods during which: people of color were constructed as biologically inferior, the focus on "race" transitioned to "ethnicity" which was linked to behavior and notions of assimilation, and class- and nation-based paradigms were foregrounded in understandings of race and racism (p. 14-51).

The discursive repertoires Frankenberg noticed corresponded to the periods Omi and Winant discussed in their work: essentialist racism connected to the idea of the biological inferiority of certain races; the cultural shift towards ethnicity and assimilation linked up with Frankenberg's identification of color and power blind narratives; and a more intersectional approach (which considered nation and social class's relationship with race) linked with the repertoire of race cognizance. However, Frankenberg identified both consistent and contradictory adherence to these conflicting repertoires in the discourse of her participants. In addition to the inconsistent discursive repertoires employed by her participants, many also perceived themselves to be un-raced. Firmly entrenched within a vivid "shared universe of discourses on race," her participants

consistently pointed towards their whiteness as the absence of race (p. 18). Silence, here, represents the umbrella under which these inconsistent and sometimes-oppositional discourses operate and circulate.

In the memory, through the memory itself, we are able to discern silence playing an important role in the classroom, both literally and symbolically. There are very few words spoken aloud. While there are many “voices” conveyed through the writing, presumably representing Angela’s thoughts, the only audible words in the story appear when Angela addresses the class: “Welcome to our class. My name is Angela, and I’m so happy to be working with you this semester.” Along with the literal quiet of voice, there is also a pronounced silence around direct racial recognition.

Judy Katz & Allen Ivey (1977) describe how lack of awareness around one’s white racialized identity limits a full experience of the culture, and the capacity to recognize its situated-ness within larger structures and histories of whiteness: it “provide[s] a barrier that encases white people so that they are unable to experience themselves and their culture as it really is (p. 485). A lack of critical engagement with one’s racialized identity, seeing oneself as un-raced, distances one from anti-racist engagement. Alice McIntyre (1997) writes, “White people’s lack of consciousness about their racial identities has grave consequences in that it not only denies white people the experience of seeing themselves as benefiting from racism, but in doing so, frees them from taking responsibility for eradicating it” (p. 16). While Angela identifies herself as white – therein disrupting the *absence of race* narrative Frankenberg found so prevalent in her participants’ interviews – and recognizes the relationship her identity presents to

the history of colonization, the memory itself is still drenched in the discursive repertoire of color blind-ness.

The race of Angela's students is only implied through reference to the culture of the space they occupy: "The culture of this space, the wisdom of the 5 clans that structure the organization of learning." The reader is then left to string together the pieces of information insinuated here. Angela is white; presumably then, her students are not (because white people don't tend to note their whiteness within groups of white people). If one is familiar with the role of clans within some Indigenous tribal structures, one might infer that the classroom is located within an Indigenous space. The text vividly demonstrates the discourse of color blind-ness through the lengths it goes to *not* directly acknowledge race. The effort of the text's performance is conspicuous, and exposes how difficult it can be to work towards something that discursively struggles against being named. In addition to the visibility of silence in the text, we can learn a great deal about what is at stake through attentiveness to bodies.

The White Female Body. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) writes, "even when the fails to 'make sense,' we continue to employ it" (p. 49). The history of race in the United States is a contradictory and shifting one, intercut in profound ways by class, gender, ability, and sexuality. And yet, the logic undergirding its imagined and material enactments remains consistently responsive to capitalist and colonial configurations and logic. The development of hierarchies of skin tones and the binding of physical characteristics to moral and intellectual capacities worked to scientifically and morally justify ruthless exploitation and murder in the name of progress. A history of colonial

thought, white supremacy and racialization is deeply embedded in American institutions, and yet the systematic ways in which this process occurs can become hidden or normalized.

Omi and Winant (1986) describe race as “the sociohistoric process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed ... [It] is a process of historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized” (p. 55). Exploring the constructed-ness of racialization is critical; however, approaching race solely from this perspective presents “epistemological limits” in its inability to fully represent the material and structural realities of a racialized society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48). The popular tendency of discussing race as culturally constructed *or* material and objective demands fuller, more complicating frameworks that could help us examine how it’s constructed *and* material, and the relationship between them. In other words, we need better ways to complicate our conversations about race, what it is, and what it’s doing. In addition, while there has been a great deal of academic work around race and gender respectively, few have foregrounded the contingent, contradictory, and precarious dynamics at play in the constructions of white femininity within the logics of white supremacy and patriarchy.

A focus on white women’s racialization process within a patriarchal society is particularly important because there is no possibility of women fully inhabiting the location or benefit of whiteness; their woman-ness will not allow it. White women’s bodies are the carriers of whiteness, necessary in its production. They birth white babies, raise children to be white, and reinforce structures of whiteness through positions of

authority (teaching). And yet, their own whiteness is not assured. The precarity of whiteness is one of whiteness' most recognizable features. Kate Davy (1995) explores how whiteness works to control and position race, even micromanaging whiteness itself. She describes how this process “feeds privilege to all whites, so to speak, without letting all white people sit at the table. Those middle-class people of colour invited to sit at the table are bequeathed a status that is always already and only honorary, contingent, itinerant and temporary” (p. 198). This contingency is heightened for white women who – in order to access white privilege – must skillfully execute both whiteness and normalized femininity. Interestingly, though, these performances are often filled with moments of conflict as these “stories” contradict one another for white women. The precarity of this position, and the logic by which one inhabits it, may illuminate meaningful and nuanced contours in the construction of whiteness, and help to animate anti-racist work. White women's locations within heteropatriarchal white supremacy offer valuable entry points into both examinations and disruptions of structural racism, contributing to critical anti-racist work and developing relationships of solidarity.

In this section I will explore the ways Angela responds to her own disembodiment as a white woman teacher of Indigenous students in the memory. Angela's disembodiment has been systematically supported in several ways, including through the banking model of education and through the racial and heteropatriarchal histories of slavery in the United States. After describing some of the ways disembodiment of white women is constructed as a white supremacist, colonial project, I will look at Angela's

desire to rebuild her body, and what danger or protection that rebuilding might present to herself and her students.

As Angela prepares to teach her first class, she “sits at the head of the circle. Her seat feels higher than those of the students around her, vaulted, conspicuous and excessive.” Despite a circle necessarily having no head, she identifies herself occupying that impossible position. The impossibility of her position in the classroom highlights the challenges tied up in both whiteness and teaching. Exacerbating the peculiarity of her role, the position of her body in the classroom is exceedingly conspicuous. She attempts to shrink down. Simultaneously, her authority and legibility as a teacher, hinging on a bodily presentation of authority that she does not have access to nor fully desires to perform, demand she expand and perform authority. “‘I can do this,’ she wills, shoulders lift, smile in the back of her cheeks... Her shoulders tighten, pulse. Her breath gets thin.”

This movement back and forth – between desired retreat and forceful expansion – is painful and is amplified by Angela’s feelings of exposure; she is afraid of being seen by her students. As the italicized section declares: “You can’t sit here as the authority in this space,” Angela’s attention abruptly shifts to the course packets and materials she has prepared, “the thick packets of readings stacked within sensible folders. Two-sided printing. Stapled. In order. Notes. Handouts. An alphabetized class list.” These materials appear to offer a kind of relief to her struggle. They appear to signal clarity of purpose and execution. This moment marks a turning point in the memory. From the moment when Angela aligns herself with the packets until after the class has ended, there is no longer any description of her body from *within* her body. Earlier in the memory, Angela’s

movements originate inside her; she experiences sensations *in* her body. However, after the packets are introduced, the description of Angela's body becomes primarily theoretical and repeatedly asserts her need to remake her body into a teacher's body from the outside in. The authority and legibility of the packets provide a coherence Angela is desperate for. The packets also seem to demand – or at least inspire – a separation from her body, an outside-in manner of relating with herself, and desire for something she does not have authentic access to.

Contingent Fullness. In Paulo Freire's (1970) description of the banking model, teachers are positioned as full of knowledge and students are situated as (ideally) empty. If we complicate this reading of education to account for women teachers, however, banking model education could be seen as demanding (or producing) a particular kind of emptiness in white women teachers, an emptiness that must be filled by institutional authority and knowledge. This emptiness, which leads women to perform a disembodied (or at least distanced from self) performance of authority, grants a contingent fullness – a precarious legibility – to the performer/teacher. For example, despite Angela's commitment to equity and hatred towards oppressive and colonial forms of education, she is unable to disrupt the banking model of education in the ways disruption has previously been imagined within the classrooms of male teachers (Weiler, 1991). She cannot simply decenter her authority as teacher (in the same way that an experienced white male teacher might be able to) because she is not being read or perceived in the same way. As a woman, Angela's ability to be a teacher is contingent upon an authority that is only accessible through her acquiescence to a system that has positioned her as

empty. She is in a double bind. She is precariously positioned as a young and inexperienced woman college teacher, who is not supposed to have this much power. At the same time, she recognizes – albeit in a veiled manner – the danger the colonial entanglement of her whiteness, white woman-ness, and institutional authority present to this Indigenous space.

In her turn toward the packets, Angela identifies herself as empty. All action - speaking, being, and smiling – appears to be possible only through external intervention reflective of a banking model type of learning. This type of learning is exemplified through the packets, which symbolize the contingent fullness of institutional authority and a perspective of learning framed in the language of deficiency and acquisition. Neither Angela nor her students are presented as capable of constructing or possessing their own knowledges. Instead, the packets – the thing imagined capable of educating students in way that is aligned with Angela’s own experiences in school – represent an authority that Angela desires, detests, and does not yet possess. Her conflicted relationship with the packets is further complicated through her desire to cover herself with them.

She wants to know the answer. She wants to know how to smile professionally.

She wants to say the right thing in the right way. ... All the words and papers and rules feel like something solid she can step inside of, embody, carry. *She hates them, and she puts them on...* The smile on her face, the encouraging teacher smile she wants to wear, to express support and kindness – it must be learned.

She does not believe she possesses the knowledge necessary to perform this role. Even her own smile “cannot simply come from inside her.” The “right way” appears to demand she superimpose professionalism atop her own body, she become hollow and empty, and that she build her body into something else. This process of learning how to move her body differently, how to speak, and how to smile is connected to the “words and papers and rules,” which appear to reference the classroom materials. In what ways is this story about Angela attempting to map the legibility of the classroom materials onto her body? How does schooling require teachers to transform their bodies into packets? And if that is what’s being demanded of Angela, is she simply going along with it? The memory alludes to this process in a commonsensical manner. *Of course*, she needs to violently silence all natural urges within her to build herself into something she detests. She identifies that she hates the “words and papers and rules,” and yet she chooses to put them on. Why does she do this?

Building her Body into a Teacher’s Body. We may read Angela’s decision to rebuild her body as providing a way for her to escape the conflict and struggle she is experiencing and affording legibility and authority in a role she feels incredibly conflicted about. We might also begin to answer the question through considering different perspectives on protection held within the text. Directly following the mandate of Angela “building her body into a teacher’s body,” the text states: “She must protect her students from her.” So, how are we to read this progression of ideas, and what implication do these divergent readings hold? Read chronologically, the teacher’s body *is* the threat, the thing that the students must be protected from. Angela must recreate her

body *and then* protect her students from it. This reading makes sense in relationship to the history of white women previously introduced. If white women have historically been used to legitimate, empower, and shroud white supremacy in schools, if this is the body Angela is building, then it would be appropriate for her to recognize its danger to her students (Meiners, 2010).

However, how would she be able to protect her students from the oppressive power of education if she can't even protect herself? Conversely, what if she is choosing to transform her body *in order to* protect her students? What if her not-yet-rebuilt body is the thing posing the threat, and the building of her body into a teacher's body is actually the act making protection possible? How, then, are we to read this pre-teacher body as a threat? How might her emptiness, the hollowness that requires a cloak of solidity to contain it, endanger her students?

In *Ain't I a Woman*, hooks (1982) declares the inseparability of race and sex. She writes, "the assumption that we can divorce the issue of race from sex, or sex from race, has so clouded the vision of American thinkers and writers on the 'woman' question that most discussions of sexism, sexist oppression, or woman's place in society are distorted, biased, or inaccurate" (p. 12). hooks (1982) explores the relationship between race and gender in the cultural shift that produced white women as the carriers of morality in the 19th century. Prior to this time, white women – all women – had been represented as immoral and irredeemably cursed by sexuality. However, during the period of slavery when slave-owners were sexually and physically exploiting Black women, the misogynistic and hyper-sexualized representations of all women were transferred onto the

bodies of Black women. In opposition to women of color, then, white women became “extolled as the ‘nobler half of humanity’ whose duty was to elevate men’s sentiments and inspire their higher impulses [...] She was depicted as goddess rather than sinner; she was virtuous, pure, innocent, not sexual and worldly” (p. 31). This mythological turn that transformed white women from sinners to saints demanded the sacrifice of their bodies; the possession of virtue eradicated sexual desire.

hooks reads the sentimentality by white men towards white women as a veiled expression of contempt: “Forcing white women to deny their physical beings was as much expression of male hatred of woman as was regarding them as sex objects” (p. 32). This shift in representation did not signal a shift in respect towards white women; it functioned to control the bodies and actions of white women and to justify violence towards the bodies of women of color.

White women were romanticized and mythologized; however this production or story of nobility and superiority was completely contingent upon the performance of a very specific performance of white femininity. Katerina Deliovsky (2010) identifies how the trope of white women functions to preserve and channel privilege to white masculinity. She writes, “[white] women’s race and sexuality are channeled not only towards monogamous marriage to a man, but also to one of the same race. The reason lies in the fact that [white] women are indispensable tools in the ideological and physical reproduction of whiteness” (p. 64). The mythological inherent goodness of white women is contingent upon compulsory heterosexuality and union with a white man. To be legible as a white woman, one must carefully monitor, control, and express one’s body. One

must enforce and perform a kind of disembodiment that preserves the legibility of white women's morality, a legibility that was constructed in relationship with violence directed towards women of color.

White supremacy demands the sacrifice of white women's bodies; it requires them to be controlled in very specific ways that perform an expression of disembodiment. White women's legibility, goodness, and resulting privileges are all contingent upon their presentation of a body that is not real. This process of racialization changes women's relationships with their bodies; it trains them not to openly encounter the sensations and experiences of their bodies. Because of the dangers attached to not performing the disembodiment of white femininity adequately, white women learn to reflexively surveil and regulate themselves. Through racialization, sexualization, and heteronormativity, white women learn deeply how to not listen to and respond to their bodies. How might Angela's desire to rebuild her body be connected to a desire to build a new body that actually *is* a body, to recover a relationship with her physical body that white supremacy has severed? And, how might this reclamation of embodiment be connected to a desire for solidarity with her students of color through resistance against white supremacy?

The intelligibility of white femininity is intricately entwined with patriarchy, white supremacy, and social class. White women's bodies are regulated through their adherence to behaviors related to compulsive heterosexuality, cisgender appearance, middle class-ness, and their union with a white man. The appearance and regulation of bodies and their behaviors are constructed through deficiency. Deliofsky writes:

...women are not necessarily dupes to social and cultural forces at play. They see beyond the falsity of the images; however, being ‘real’ in the context of ‘normative femininity’ invariably means not being ‘enough.’ As such there is a constant tension between conforming to normative femininity and being ‘real.’ (p. 107)

Enacting normative femininities can grant privilege and access; those femininities also require one be empty and body-less. For a white woman seeking legibility and credibility within the heteropatriarchal construct of schooling, this negotiation between legibility – “I am a teacher” – and authentically responding to ones’ desires and beliefs – “I cannot stand before my Indigenous students on their reservation as a white woman in a position of authority” – is constant, profoundly complex, dynamic, and never-ending. This possibility offers yet another way of considering how and why Angela transitions outside her own body in the classroom. Perhaps this act is a strategic one, one that will earn her more access and credibility in her profession, and enable her to meaningfully and critically work with her students from a more stable foundation. She’s building a *white-enough* body to earn enough legibility to stay in this space long enough to learn how to protect and honor her students because she knows she doesn’t yet know how.

In the transition of Angela’s awareness from inside her body to an external and judgmental demand to rebuild her body, white femininity is complicatedly tied up within institutional authority. We might read the demand for bodily transformation in relationship to a banking model of education in which white women – who are supposed to perform fullness, but are simultaneously positioned as empty – take on the institutional

authority to substantiate or legitimate their presence and authority in schools. In other words, Angela must build her body into a packet. In addition, through considering the mandate that Angela “protect her students,” this rebuilding of her body might also be read as an act of submission to white supremacy, an act of resistance that seeks solidarity with her students of color, or the strategic building of a white-enough body that would afford her space and time to learn how to be the kind of teacher she doesn’t yet know how to be.

Conclusion

At the end of this memory, Angela screams out into the night air. “She’s never heard a sound like this. She keeps screaming, her throat raw and furious.” In this moment, she has not only returned to an awareness of her body; the experience and sensations within her body have become the forces initiating and guiding its expression. In sharp contrast to her earlier experience in the classroom, she allows the experience and knowledge in her body to move from the inside out. The self-conscious performance of her role of white woman teacher has finally been eclipsed by her body’s desperate need to grieve histories that no words or disembodied performances will ever be able to heal. This scream and following movement towards rest feel important.

What would it look like for white women teachers to not only acknowledge their bodies, but to turn towards them as sources of wisdom and strength, and to care for them deeply? In this story, if Angela hadn’t needed to work so hard to silence, battle, and rebuild her body, if she hadn’t participated in the turning of herself against herself, might she have actually *seen* the faces and bodies of her students? How might deep care and

attunement of teachers towards their own bodies open up new possibilities for humanizing pedagogy and care for the bodies of their students? Sexism, capitalism, heteronormativity, and racism need bodies. Structures of oppression live in and through bodies. They do violence to bodies. They separate, police, silence, and kill bodies. They do different things to different bodies; however, all of our bodies experience the violence of oppression.¹³ And these histories of violence and fear are carried, experienced, and expressed through our bodies.

Beth Berilla (2016) presents a practice of mindful anti-oppressive pedagogy in her teaching. She describes how – on the morning of November 24, 2014, when white police officer Darren Wilson was not indicted for the murder of African American teenager Michael Brown – mindfulness offered a way for her and her students to be with their emotions and with each other in a different way.

I entered my classroom the following morning heartsick and furious... I felt unprepared to teach that day because my emotions were so raw, but my yoga and meditation practice have taught me that often such vulnerability opens a space for authentic human connection and deeper wisdom. My feminism, meanwhile, has taught me that it is my responsibility as a White anti-racist advocate to confront these issues of institutionalized racism and gendered violence in order to help students learn how to analyze and interrupt them. (p. 1)

¹³ In centralizing and examining the impact of oppression on the bodies of white women, I in no way want to diminish the physical and psychological violence that continually assaults bodies of color in this country.

Berilla opened up space in all her classes that day for students to experience and name what they were experiencing, to name the feelings without judgment or immediate analysis of them. She did so out of a desire for connection and in relationship with her commitment to anti-racism. Her students' bodies and experiences were invited into the room.

I wonder, in my memory, what would have happened if Angela had shared with her students how nervous she was feeling, that this was the first class she had ever taught, or that she was aware of and concerned by her whiteness in this space. What would have happened if she had really seen her students and let them see her? What if she had trusted her own smile?

Chapter Four - Performing a Native *Other*: Playing Pretend #2

Race has, of course, been a characteristic American obsession – and the racial imagination has been at work on many different groups of people, Indians included. But Americans – particularly white Americans – have been similarly fixated on defining themselves as a nation. And we shall see, those national definitions have engaged racialized and gendered Indians in curious and contradictory ways. (P. Deloria, 1998, p. 5)

The experience of my first night of teaching in chapter three is deeply connected to my childhood and my earliest experiences of learning about the world because of my community's relationship with Native Americans. In my first experience of teaching, while my whiteness was denaturalized through my experience of being one of the only white people in the school, it was exposed in a particular way due to the fact that most of my students were Native American. In *Never One Nation: Freaks, Savages, and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture 1850-1877*, Linda Frost (2005) examines how, in the racial imagination of the United States, race has been mobilized and developed differently in relationship to specific regional communities and histories that enabled coherent communities to develop. The idea of citizenship was a precursor and fundamental element in white racial identity.

Matthew Frye Jacobson explores how the notion of citizenship at the beginning of the American Republic was “thoroughly entwined with the idea of ‘whiteness’ ... because what a citizen really was, at bottom, was someone who could help put down a slave rebellion or participate in Indian wars” (as cited in Frost, 2005, p. xii). Citizenship

and racialized whiteness are tied together and deeply invested in what they are not. Building upon the ideas of Benedict Anderson, Frost writes that: “nations are imagined as coherent communities by clearly establishing who *cannot* claim membership to them. In the nineteenth-century United States of America, this imagining depended on a highly racialized discourse, one that assigned a savage otherness to the nation’s nonmembers” (2005, p. x). This racialized discourse and assignment of otherness developed differently in different parts of the country and played a role in how I learned what it meant to be white.

I grew up in a small town in the Great Plains region of the U.S. The most salient and consistent racial “other” was Native American, most notably the Lakota people at Wazí Ahán̄haŋ Oyáŋke¹⁴, whom I learned about as the Sioux of the Pine Ridge Reservation.¹⁵ The Lakota are “iconic in American history, in the American imagination. These are buffalo hunters who lived in tepees. Who were at the battle with General Custer. Nearly everything about the Lakota life is firmly implanted in the way that Americans think about Indians” (“We Shall Remain,” 2009). During my childhood, the invocation and commodification of, identification with, and often-simultaneous ridicule of Native American peoples formed a kind of landscape around me. These patterns were further problematized by the near absence of Native American people in my community. During the time period I’ll be writing about, Native Americans made up approximately

¹⁴ The Lakota term for the Pine Ridge Reservation (Hedges & Sacco, 2014, p. 7).

¹⁵ “From the Eastern Rockies to the grassy prairies of Minnesota, the Great Sioux Nation dominated this region by the late 18th century. The name Sioux originated with the Ojibwa term ‘nadouessioux’ which translates as ‘little snakes’ or ‘enemy.’ However, the Sioux refer to themselves as Lakota (and Dakota or Nakota depending on their dialect), which means friend or ally” (“Lakota History,” para. 1).

1.5% of the population of Chadron (“Census Bureau,” 1980). While cultural representations and references to and about Native Americans surrounded us, I rarely saw Native American people. About forty miles northeast of us, the Pine Ridge Reservation was our neighbor.

Pine Ridge is the one of the poorest and most underdeveloped areas in the U.S.¹⁶ It is the site of the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890 where the “reconstituted Seventh Cavalry avenged Custer’s 1876 defeat by slaughtering around three hundred unarmed Lakota Sioux, mostly women, children, and old people” (Huhndorf, 2001, p. 21). It was the site of the 1973 seventy-one day occupation of Wounded Knee by the American Indian Movement (AIM) and Oglala Sioux protestors opposing the inhumane conditions of Pine Ridge (“We Shall Remain,” 2009). Pine Ridge is geographically isolated, and lacks water, basic plumbing, and fertile land (“Pine Ridge Today,” par. 3). This reservation is one of the most blatant examples of racial injustice in the country.

I grew up down the road from this place, literally surrounded by the sites and monuments of the Indian Wars. As a white child in an overwhelmingly white space within the white supremacy of the U.S., I was already being inducted into a white racial

¹⁶ The Pine Ridge Sioux’s website states that: “Tribal statistics paint a seemingly insurmountable picture. The per capita income in Shannon County, which exists within the reservation, is the third poorest county in the Americas at about \$3,700 per year (U.S. Census Bureau). Unemployment remains around 80%, alcohol abuse is rampant and 30% of the homes lack electricity or indoor plumbing. Nutrition is poor which contributes to diabetes rates that are 514% higher than the national average. Harvard School of Public Health study statistics found that the life expectancy of Lakota men and women living on the Pine Ridge Reservation was the lowest in the Western Hemisphere with the exception of Haiti. The article states, ‘The discrepancies found within the borders of the US are as broad as the gap between the nations with the longest and shortest average lifespans on Earth - people living in South Dakota suffer the same ills as people in developing nations similar to sub-Saharan Africa’” (“Pine Ridge Today,” par. 4-5).

identity (Thandeka, 1999). However, the unique context and history of white racial identity *in this space* relied upon a particularized process of distancing and identification with a Native American representation that was consistent, contradictory, and changing. As a child, I learned to be afraid of the reservation and that it was a place of violence. Without access to the real history of our community, I read this violence onto the bodies of the few Native American people I ever saw and I learned to be afraid of them. At the same time, I was learning a deep respect for and identification with Native American culture. This is the contradiction I am trying to work through in this chapter, because if my legibility as a white woman is constructed through violence to Native people, I want to learn how to better interrupt it. Also, as a teacher of English, I am uniquely positioned to legitimate or interfere with Native American cultural representations, and I want to get smarter about how to disrupt the normalization of violence towards Native American people in literature and film, particularly as a white woman teacher. In this chapter, I present three vignettes; two highlight my childhood, and the third presents a moment from college that meaningfully complicates the other two. I use these memories to begin working with the following questions. How is it that white people learn to simultaneously fear Native Americans and love Native American culture, to identify deeply with the story of a people but have no political responsibility or care towards the people themselves? How is this made possible?

Vignette #1: A Girl

There was once a young girl. She lived in a middle place. It wasn't too big or too small. Just right. In the middle of everything. Lots of space surrounded her and it helped

her make sense of the world and of herself. The earth around her flowed like water and the sky stretched out for miles. The sky told its own stories and could change so fast, she learned never to get too comfortable with it. The calmest, most peaceful days could swirl themselves into a fury in moments. She would never forget the time they had traveled slowly back home through their prairie town following a tornado; the devastation of crushed homes just beside untouched ones. Houses that had stood right next to one another, seemingly protected, seemingly safe. Even as she loved the sky, she learned not to trust it. It could turn in a moment.

Chadron: A History/My History

I was born in Chadron, Nebraska. About 20 miles south of the border of South Dakota and 60 miles east of Wyoming, in the Great Plains region of the U.S., Chadron is a small town in the northwest corner of the state. During the time period of my childhood, the population rested at fewer than 6,000 people (“Census Bureau,” 1980). As a child, this small town felt profoundly important and substantial within the surrounding community. To me, growing up, Chadron was the big college town the “small town” kids would visit. Driving through other small towns in the state, I always looked at them through the “big town” assumptions of Chadron and felt a sense of pride. I identified with this space, this community, and the things that it implied about me. It had big stores, fast-food restaurants, car dealerships, and hotels. It had a library (that was quite dear to me), a public college that both my parents graduated from, two elementary schools, a high school, and a public swimming pool. I lived in Chadron until just before my tenth birthday.

In his book “Geography, Agriculture, Industries of Nebraska,” George Evert Condra (1934), dean and chairman within the department of industry and survey at the University of Nebraska, described Chadron in the following way. “The town, named for Chadron Creek, is located at the edge of the Pine Ridge Region. It has a wide trade area, extending into South Dakota. A state teachers college is located here and also a state park. Chadron is the county seat of Dawes County and was founded in 1885” (p. 299). Condra opens the entire book with a chapter entitled “How the Indians Lived.”

Positioning the reader as being white, Condra describes the “Indian” culture in opposition and comparison with “ours.”

He describes Indians as being not well clad and fanciful, possessing crude tools and crude cooking containers, and employing primitive communication. Condra states that the Indians had no schools: “The boys were trained by the older men to be brave, strong, and efficient warriors, while the women instructed the girls in the duties which they would later have to perform. There were no schools” (p. 8). In addition to ignoring the educational arrangements that are clearly identified in the quote above, Condra diminishes the violence directed towards Native communities through appealing to the protection and education offered through the missions. He writes: “The fur traders were not always just in dealing with the Indians. However, the missions, which had been established at some of the trading posts, did much in defense of the Indian and in furthering his education” (p. 12).¹⁷ Acknowledging violence within a greater suggestion

¹⁷ Sandy Grande (2004) describes American education as a “well-established weapon in the arsenal of American imperialism” (p. 11). Education has played a central role in the “onslaught to ‘civilize’ – to eradicate Native thought, language, culture, and education”

of altruism, Condra goes on to describe the invasion of the country as inevitable. “The Indians saw the endless caravans on the overland trails and became alarmed at the number of white men who were invading their country. They saw this in their own destiny but could offer only feeble resistance” (p. 14). Condra presents this assault through the eyes of Native people, people who were unable to effectively repel the uninterrupted bodies flooding into the country. He invokes inevitability through the notion of destiny in this retelling, a destiny that is described as being seen through the eyes of Native American people; it is “their own” destiny.

Condra’s framing nod to Native American culture is echoed in Chadron’s current Chamber of Commerce page. On its “History of Chadron” page, one sentence acknowledges Native existence: “Native American tribes were the original inhabitants of the area” (2016, par. 2). Stated in past tense, preceding the assumable “real history” of the region, this sentence ritualistically performs both acknowledgement and silencing. In another current-day example, the website for Chadron’s Fur Trade Days – an important regional festival – characterizes the movement of Native people in the following way. It states:

By 1800 some important changes had taken place in the Indian population of the area between the Missouri and North Platte rivers. The Oglala Sioux had crossed

(Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, p. xxi). The education of Native children by a white people has both justified and supported the colonial project. “Alleging Native deficiencies has invested schools with the institutional ‘right’ to ‘civilize’ American Indian students” (Lomawaima & McCarty, p. 18). Much of the education of Native American children continues to control and maintain safety zones, “where dangerously different cultural expressions might be safety domesticated and thus neutralized” (Lomawaima & McCarty, p. xxii).

the Missouri and reached the Black Hills by about 1775 in a great migration westward from the Minnesota country. The Brule Sioux came last, moving up the White River to its headwaters by 1810. In these migrations the southern Tetons displaced the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Crow, who had in turn pushed earlier tribes to the south ... (“The Fur Trade,” 2016, par. 6)

Even Condra’s inevitable white invaders have disappeared in this account, replaced by accounts of innocuous migration patterns.

I know these stories and their ritualistic invocation of Native people drenched in a language of detachment and inevitability, of Manifest Destiny. These stories have formed a kind of foundation in me. Numerous scholars have critiqued stereotypical narratives about Native culture (Huhndorf, 2001; Deloria Jr., 1969; Deloria, 1998), and I will be drawing on some of their work to help me make sense of patterns emerging in my own story. However, rather than simply focusing on these patterns of representation, I’d like to examine the relationship between the stories white people tell about Native American people and the development of white racial identity. I do not offer Condra’s and these website’s words to situate them as authoritative or even true. I present them here to begin to trace a story, the story of white racial identity formation in rural spaces. How do white people come to know themselves as white? What are the histories and stories facilitating that knowledge? How do the stories change to meet the changing demands of nation building and citizenship? And, what role do white women perform in keeping these stories intact?

Vignette #2: Singing

When I was five years old, my dad accepted a position at the college in our town. As part of his position, he organized and ran educational groups during the summer. Elderly, retired folks would travel to Chadron, stay in college dorms, and visit local area attractions. For the next five years, my dad would plan the day-to-day logistics, organize trips, and oversee the groups. My sister, Trisha, and I were able to accompany the groups most days. In the back seat of the large, rented luxury bus, we would settle in for our adventure. The older travelers loved having us along and spoiled us with presents and attention. We felt very important.

We'd visit Mount Rushmore, Fort Robinson, the Badlands, the Museum of the Fur Trade, and the Black Hills. We visited the site of Old Jules, a frontier man whose life was made famous through his daughter's retelling of it (Sandoz, 2005). These places we'd grown up inside of felt newly important, knowing that people had traveled from around the U.S. to visit them. There was a kind of personal affirmation in this attention. It made us proud. It made us feel as though we possessed a special kind of knowledge and capital. It made us proud of where we were in a new way, of who we were because of where we were from.

At the end of each group's week together, we'd have a special dinner at the state park just outside of town. We'd eat delicious buffalo stew and huge pieces of crumbly corn bread covered with melting butter and golden honey. In the soft light of the setting sun, we'd gather around a massive just-lit bonfire. My dad, a musician and singer, would settle down on a log bench and tune his guitar. He would usually be dressed as a fur-trader, in a light blue collared shirt, with fringed pants and a leather bag. My sister and I

would stand next to him, our hands still sticky from dinner, our cheeks flushed, our eyes bright.

Nervously, we prepared to perform in our costumes. Dressed up as “Indian girls,” we’d sing a few songs for the group. Trisha and I wore headbands, fringed dresses, moccasins, and beaded jewelry. The designs had been carefully drawn on, copied from the books we’d checked out from the library with our mom. Trisha’s dress was tan and mine was light blue. We’d made these dresses with our mom, sewed them on our grandmother’s sewing machine. Making them together had been a special project, one we had engaged in with a good deal of seriousness and respect. It had felt really loving to work on these projects with our mom, to create something so beautiful and important. The guests loved our performances. The visitors often said it was the perfect culmination of their experience of the Great Plains.

Whiteness and Native Identity

Scholars have extensively discussed the relationship between African-American racial identity and whiteness (Thandeka, 1999; Morrison, 1992; Lensmire, 2008, 2010, 2011). In addition, other marginalized identities have received significant critical attention for the ways their (mis)representations function to construct and preserve normalized identities (Schippers, 2007; Koshy, 2001; Omi, 2008; Yancey, 2003; Wilkinson, 2015). Within discussions of race, however, the role that Indigenous representation performs in the construction and maintenance of white racial identity is less theorized.

Many have critiqued the extent to which strikingly offensive stereotypes of Native Americans appear to be culturally acceptable, particularly in the context of present-day expectations for political correctness and respect (Rosenstein, 2001; Diamond, Bainbridge, & Hayes, 2009). Brian Cladoosby (2013), President of the National Congress of American Indians, pointed towards this incredible incongruity in his article *Would You Call Me a Redsk*n to My Face?* Concerning the issue of offensive sports mascots, Cladoosby writes: “No racial group would stand for a team name that denigrated their cultural identity, but Native Americans are expected to stand by and accept this treatment just because some don’t see the word as offensive” (para. 3). Kenneth Stern, in a speech at the First Annual Conference on the Elimination of Racist Mascots, echoed this challenge by stating: “Anti-Indian prejudice is the homepage of American bigotry. ... It is an indigenous prejudice that even many minority groups tolerate, because it makes them feel more ‘American’” (as cited in Shanley, 1997, p. 675). Dwanna Robertson argues that the “phenomenon of ‘legitimized racism’” is made possible through its institutional authorization.

Racism against American Indians has been normalized and institutionally legitimated, thereby rendering it invisible. To legitimize is to make legitimate, that is, to justify, reason, or rationalize in accordance with established or accepted patterns and standards. In other words, the institutions that shape social norms – those seen as social authorities – reproduce symbolic racial violence against American Indians ... [A]nti-Indian terminology, imagery, and behavior have

become legitimated to such a degree that other marginalized people accept them as nonracist and readily maintain and participate in them. (2015, p. 115)

Why are consistently offensive representations of Native American culture responded to differently than those of other marginalized groups? What enables offensive and violent portrayals of Native people to endure in the manner that they do?

The racialization of whiteness as a sociohistoric process within a white supremacist society occurs through a complicated and contradictory relationship with an “other.” The discourses and knowledge production that accompanied colonial expansion did epistemic violence through discursively producing an “other” that stands in extreme and complex relationships with the reformulated European selves. Ruth Frankenberg (1993) writes, “one effect of colonial discourse is the production of an unmarked, apparently autonomous white/Western self, in contrast with the marked, Other racial and cultural categories with which the racially and culturally dominant category is coconstructed” (p. 17). Created through a relationship of opposition or negation, whiteness is profoundly invested in an “other” through which its own identity is imagined and constructed.

In the colonial hierarchical constructions of race, this “other” is vividly embodied through Black people. Wellman (1993) writes, “What is crucial to American identity, ... is not that Americans hate black people. Rather the fundamental feature of their identity is that they do not know who they are without black people. Without the black Other, the American [white] Self has no identity” (p. 244). Juxtaposition against what is *not white* enables the category of *white* to become possible. Indeed, fictionalized and consistent

representations of blackness, what Toni Morrison (1992) refers to as *American Africanism*, is what has enabled a coherent American literature to emerge. She writes that the American *Africanist Presence*, an “unsettled and unsettling population” hovering beneath explicit recognition in literature functions to “inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom” (p. 6-7). This metaphorical and literary tendency, while epistemologically constructing a national ethos through the bodies of non-white or Black people, constructs a pattern of evasion that diminishes direct acknowledgement of race. Morrison writes:

Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate. The situation is aggravated by the tremor that breaks into discourse on race. It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. According to this logic, every well-bred instinct argues *against noticing* and forecloses adult discourse. (p. 10)

Colonial structures of racialization and power are actively at work in language. Because of this, paradoxically, speaking can engender a particular silence. Language itself can become a screen disabling direct recognition and critique of what racialization is doing.

Blackness and whiteness do have a vivid dichotomizing relationship that is further amplified through a Manichean framework.¹⁸ In addition, the dehumanizing system of slavery that existed in the U.S. required profound dehumanizing work to rationalize itself.¹⁹ White racial identity in the U.S. is profoundly tied up in the cultural production of blackness. However, I'd like to further Morrison's idea here by suggesting that Native otherness is at least as fundamental to the imagining of America as is blackness. While Morrison states that an *Africanist Presence* is the thing that facilitated a recognizable national literature to develop, an *Indianist Presence* made America imaginable as a coherent nation.²⁰

An *Indianist Presence* was utilized in the fashioning of citizenship, profoundly influenced the racial construction of whiteness, and was transformed to meet different needs during different periods of time. In relationship with Morrison's identification of how race becomes embedded within and cloaked within language, I would argue that – while many stereotypical deployments of Native culture are obviously offensive – an *Indianist Presence* is even more insidiously entrenched and naturalized within the

¹⁸ Katerina Deliovsky (2010) describes the cultural and mythological European tendency to interpret and present good/bad through white/ black imagery. Citing the work of Paul Hoch, Deliovsky writes, “there is a Manichean moral framework that constructs the world as polarized by forces of good and evil, which are symbolized in the oppositions between lightness and darkness and black and white” (p. 25). This Manichaeism is evident in European languages and, despite its fictional basis, this myth was mapped onto the bodies of human beings (p. 25-26).

¹⁹ While slavery was officially abolished in the U.S. in 1865, many assert that reconfigured structures of power enabled many of the practices and influences of slavery to continue (Blackmon, 2009; Alexander, 2011).

²⁰ Following Morrison's *Africanist Presence*, I'll be using the term *Indianist Presence* to refer to the fictionalized and consistent representation of Native peoples in American popular and academic culture.

national ethos of the U.S. It becomes nearly impossible to participate in civic life without effortlessly and unremarkably invoking an *Indianist Presence* through the performances embedded within that participation. Robertson (2015) describes how racism towards Native Americans continues to live in and through national structures of power. “It is striking that philosophers from the Enlightenment era still inform the current US political, legal, and economic systems, keeping alive their racial (racist) discourses about American Indians. ... obscuring centuries of historical injustice and racial exclusion through romanticized political ideas like individualism, equality, and meritocracy” (p. 124). The philosophical underpinnings and configurations of American society have been built upon violence towards Native American people and function to facilitate and legitimate its continuation. Because of its foundational and naturalized role in the creation of a coherent America, an *Indianist Presence* is an incredibly provocative and crucial site of anti-racist and critical whiteness work.

In his book *Playing Indian*, Philip J. Deloria (1998) explores how Indian-ness helped early Euro-Americans negotiate a crisis of identity. Deloria turns to D. H. Lawrence who, in his literary examination of American literature, identifies how the *idea* of Native culture enabled a uniquely American identity to emerge, as well as symbolically embodying the contradiction and struggle at the heart of America. Deloria writes: “Americans had an awkward tendency to define themselves by what they were not. They had failed to produce a positive identity that stood on its own” (p. 3). At the “heart of American ambivalence,” the idea of Native people, what I’m calling an

Indianist Presence, offered a way to grapple with a yearning for freedom alongside the forceful expectations of civility.

Deloria writes, “Savage Indians served Americans as oppositional figures against whom one might imagine a civilized national Self. Coded as freedom, however, wild Indianness proved equally attractive, setting up a ‘have-the-cake-and-eat-it-too’ dialectic of simultaneous desire and repulsion” (p. 3). In addition to this ambivalence – or perhaps related to it – an *Indianist Presence* required a forceful remembering and forgetting. In *The Insistence of the Indian*, Susan Scheckel (1998) writes, “The violence by means of which the nation was forged and defined must be forgotten so that it can be reimagined as ‘family’ history – the history of the nation” (p. 3). The contradiction embedded within this familial logic of violence is only one of the many ways that an *Indianist Presence* has been deployed and transformed to meet the changing needs of a changing nation.

Changing Stories – Examining my Stories

Underneath all the conflicting images of the Indian one fundamental truth emerges – the white man knows that he is an alien and he knows that North American is Indian – and he will never let go of the Indian image because he thinks that by some clever manipulation he can achieve an authenticity that cannot ever be his. (Deloria Jr., 1980, p. xvi)

Shari Huhndorf (2001) points towards the invasion of America as a central orienting cornerstone in the subsequent stories non-Native Americans tell themselves about who they are, *what* they are. She writes, “The conquest of Native America, which took hundreds of years to complete, cannot be dismissed as an anomaly. Rather, it is the

foundational event in American history. As such, it has been built in the nation's narratives, though in distorted and obfuscatory ways" (p. 11). These stories have been used to make sense of, justify, and hide America's foundational violence. The stories have also been used in an attempt to refabricate white and settler identities into something else entirely.

The competing tensions and work of American narratives about Native people are all apparent in the previous vignettes/memories I've shared. In the first story, the young white girl is presented as being in an in-between place.²¹ Echoing the language of a fairy tale, this middle place is presented as fairly unremarkable, save the land around her. It is described as beautiful and helpful; it is also the source of danger. There is agency and energy in the descriptions of the land, with the earth flowing "like water," and the sky "stretching" out. The space surrounding her, her in-between-ness within it, is a source of sense making and identity. However, there is an impending danger that hovers around this scene. The girl knows that she must remain vigilant; because she is aware of how quickly the world can transform itself. "The sky told its own stories and could change so fast, she *learned* never to get too comfortable with it." She remembers the senseless violence of a tornado that had destroyed the homes of people in her community, of the violence that appeared from the sky, the space she had used to make sense of herself and the world. "Even as she loved the sky, she *learned* not to trust it. It could turn in a

²¹ In keeping with the techniques of Collective Memory Work and my patterns of analysis in chapter 3, I will be referring to the *she* and *I* from the first two vignettes of this chapter in the third-person.

moment.” This source of self-understanding, her own white community, this frame for her life, even as she loves it, she has learned that it cannot be trusted.²²

In the second vignette, the land is once more centralized in the identity and world of the girl. However, in this memory, there are other people influencing and affirming her identity’s relationship with the land. Connected with the naming and claiming of the places around her, she recognizes the personalized capital and affirmation these places offer to her and to her community.

We’d visit Mount Rushmore, Fort Robinson, the Badlands, the Museum of the Fur Trade, and the Black Hills. . . . These places we’d grown up inside of felt newly important, knowing that people had traveled from around the U.S. to visit them. There was a kind of *personal affirmation* in this attention. It made us *proud*. It made us feel as through we *possessed a special kind of knowledge and capital*. It made us *proud of where we were from* in a new way, of *who we were because of where we were from* [emphases added].

It is through the reflection of visitors from outside of her community that the girl becomes aware of the uniqueness of her location. This experience of centrality and importance is tied to the young white girl’s identification with and *ownership* of this place and land. The subsequent musical performance, an enactment of an *Indianist Presence* by the young white girls, echoes and affirms the larger performance of ownership being enacted within her white settler community over stolen land.

²² This realization has grown out of a process of learning. The word *learned* is italicized in the last two textual examples presented here, to highlight this recognition’s relationship with education.

As mentioned earlier, the coherence of community or national identities has often relied upon the identification of those who “cannot claim membership to them. ... In the nineteenth-century United States of America, this imagining depended on a highly racialized discourse, one that assigned a savage otherness to the nation’s nonmembers” (Frost, 2005, p. x). While the idea of primitiveness was one of the most consistent characteristics of American representation of racialized others, racialization required malleability in responding to different needs in different parts of the country at different time periods. Frost writes, “While racial understandings reproduce a set of surprisingly durable social beliefs that certain traits are fixed, inherent, and natural based on the race to whom they have been assigned, the actual figures who occupy those racial categories are constantly changing” (p. xii). Because of this, many elements tied up in American racialization are both unstable and disturbingly resilient.

In *Playing Indian and Going Native: Indians in the Cultural Imagination*, Philip J. Deloria (1998) and Sandra M. Huhndorf (2001) (respectively) extensively and skillfully chronicle the ways that cultural representations of Native Americans have changed and remained consistent through U.S. history. A central characteristic in the storytelling of the U.S. is the “white nation’s inability to honestly acknowledge its violent beginnings” (Huhndorf, p. 12). Performances of an *Indianist Presence* are deeply entwined with this failure. As Deloria and Huhndorf explain, the performance of “playing Indian” or “going native” is a crucial American ritual. This performance reenacts the act of conquest while simultaneously and nostalgically mourning a romanticized past.

Ostensibly oppositional, this twofold endeavor facilitates the continual reassertion of the necessity, inevitability, and rightness of the colonial project, while offering redemption – or at least distance – to non-Native people from the violence of colonization. Huhndorf stresses the importance of recognizing the continuity of the colonial project and how “white America has repeatedly enacted rites of conquest to confirm and extend its power over Native America” (p. 15). While most land and resources have been stolen in the past, “cultures and identities have provided newer domains of conquest” (p. 15). Recurring performances of an *Indianist Presence* by white and settler people demonstrate one form of this enacted rite of conquest.

Complicatedly tied up with this reassertion of the colonial project is a deep identification with and love for Native culture. In the second vignette, the girl and her mother believe the Native costumes they’ve created to be loving displays of respect towards a culture they care deeply about. The production of these garments becomes the site of familial tenderness and unity. This pattern of deep identification with and love towards a culture that is not physically present and which is relegated to a space beyond that of the white community is not unique. Indeed, as Huhndorf illustrates in her brilliant reading of *Dances with Wolves*, the story of “going native,” of discovering one’s own authentic identity through the adoption of Indigenous ways, is a long-standing one that serves to redeem white identity while reasserting white supremacy (p. 5).

After the horror and atrocities of the Indian Wars subsided, the stories of Native Americans began to change in the larger culture (Diamond et al., 2009). While the earlier portrayals of savagery and primitiveness remained accessible and deployable, a new story

was being written. White America endeavored to revise the story of Native America as part of *their* past, to craft a history of “collective identity” (Huhndorf, p. 15). This new story “so curiously based on a mythic version of a conquered people – ironically privileged middle-class Anglo-Americans in the controversies over national identity” (p. 15). This story of collectivity and identification served to comfort and soothe the anxiety of those who gained the most from the violent inception of the U.S. (p. 14). The ritual of the girls’ costume-making, the family’s choice and ability to consume and reproduce an *Indianist Presence* from the authoritative and educational books checked out from the library, and to enact their performance within the respected educational program housed by the college, was perfectly in line with the racist logic that identified the surrounding land and culture as an appropriate source of personal capital.

The reassertion and nostalgic identification of an *Indianist Presence* require the absence of Native people for it to make sense. The presence of Native Americans threatens the rightness of colonialism; it also disallows an *Indianist Presence*’s pattern of pivoting to the past, blatantly exposing the fiction that Native people existed only historically. White performances of an *Indianist Presence* work to relegate Native people to exist *only* in the past. In the second vignette, I imagine that the presence of a Native American person would have significantly interrupted the performance or at least significantly denaturalized it. The normalization of the white performance of an *Indianist Presence* was enabled through the absence of Native people and perspectives. The performance both required and affirmed their nonexistence.

White women have played significant roles in the justification for colonial violence and its subsequent neo-colonial rites of conquest. Linda Frost points out how white women's bodies, specifically the protection of their sexuality, was used to justify the use of extreme military force against Native populations, despite little to no evidence of truth. She writes, "the rape of white women consistently emerged as the most common evidence of the Sioux's savagery" and was used to justify the extreme military force directed towards Native people (p. 16). Once again, we see how the story of white women's bodies (as being pure, vulnerable, and in need of protection by the white community), was used to uphold white supremacy and legitimate violence towards bodies of color. This constructed and mobilized threat towards women's physical bodies was metaphorically draped over the land itself. Frost writes, "The Western press drew a portrait of Dakota savagery that linked the vulnerability of the region with the vulnerability of its white women, figures who themselves represented American morality and purity" (p. 16). The feminization of the American landscape (explicitly linked to the weakness and inherent goodness of white women) further strengthened the idea of colonial violence being morally necessary for the creation of the nation.

In addition to the ways white women's bodies have been yoked to the story of colonialism, white women are also central in current expressions of neocolonial violence. In "On Medicine Women and White Shame-ans: New Age Native Americanism and Commodity Fetishism as Pop Culture Feminism," Laura E. Donaldson (1999) examines the role that non-Native women play in postmodern neocolonial appropriations of Native culture. She writes:

NANA [New Age Native Americanism or the misappropriation of American Indian traditions as alternative sources of knowledge and spirituality] has emerged as a powerful catalyst feminist transformation as non-Native women increasingly employ Indian traditions to escape the patriarchal biases of monotheistic religions and to become empowered, as well as individuated. (p. 678)

A worldwide phenomenon, this misuse and coopting of Native culture, misrepresented as an expression of feminist ideals, is an individualized, therapeutic, and capitalist re-formation of colonialism (p. 678).

Huhndorf (2001), in her own examination of how New Age fiction by white women writers appropriates and misrepresents Native cultures, emphasizes the danger in universalized readings of womanhood. She discusses the way that captivity narratives, reimagined and constructed by white women, can actually “articulate a form of white dominance while they use gender identification to conceal it” (p. 183). While others have asserted that shared gender identity across race implies an anti-racist stance and that white and Native women’s relationships as women transcend race, Huhndorf vigorously asserts the way unexamined privilege is at work in white women’s fictional encounters with Native people. She writes: “Culture crossing – the ability to journey into another culture for the purposes of redefining oneself and bettering one’s own position – is most certainly a privilege of whiteness” (p. 184). White women gain individualized cultural capital through engagement with New Age neocolonial *American Nativism* in uniquely dangerous and normalized ways.

Vignette #3: Shame

I am a junior in college when I uncover the photo from our performance. Since this picture was taken, things have changed. My family and I, we have moved from the small, rural, and working class town I'd grown up in to a large city in the Midwest. Our move to the big city was incredibly disorienting. It changed everything, about us, about the world, about who we *were* in the world. Beyond this geographical shift and its accompanying culture shocks, there had also been significant movements related to social class. My high school experience was a confusing kind of induction into a middle class habitus that felt profoundly disconnected from my family, a process of distancing. By the time I discover the picture of us, I've made it through high school. I've earned scholarships into a college similar to my high school. I've continued to learn the academic and social rules necessary for me to belong here, to mark my presence as deserving of this place. The feeling of *not belonging* is not as vivid here as it was in high school. My comfort levels have changed. In many ways, it feels natural for me to be here. My body knows this space and how to be inside of it.

One evening, going through a box of old photographs in my apartment, I find the picture from our performance at the state park. My sister and I – dressed in our homemade costumes – beam into the camera, surrounded by love and support. We look so free and happy. I feel like I've been hit in the stomach. The shame – no, the fear – is so great. I want to shred that picture up into a thousand pieces. I want to hide it from my classmates, to be sure that it cannot mark me in the way that it would. It threatens me here. It's such a wrong thing to do, and I didn't know it. My family didn't know it. We were happy, and we should have been ashamed of ourselves. We all should have known

better. I want to hide this evidence of our mistake, of our not knowing, of our lack and ignorance. Instead, I place it in a frame on my dresser, feeling this shame over and over. It feels necessary to do this.

Social Class and White Shame²³

I know that part of the shame I experienced in college was connected to a caring concern for Native people, that part of me felt genuinely troubled that my actions could hurt others. That is not the shame I want to focus on in this portion of my analysis. In this space, I want to pay attention to the fear that inspired a ritualistic shaming of myself; to consider how the context I inhabited, a primarily white and upper/middle class institution of higher education functioned to produce this shame through the fear of being seen as a bad white person and this fear's relationship with confession; to discuss shame's relationship with feeling bad; and to consider the role of shame in white identity formation.

In *Good White People*, Sullivan (2014) says that the story of good white people is made possible through an oppositional relationship with “‘bad’ white people who are considered responsible for any lingering racism in a progressive, liberal society” (p. 3). Tracing the ways that “white liberals and white supremacists are not as different as white liberals [and others] would like to believe,” Sullivan identifies this construction of goodness operating to maintain and justify white class hierarchies (p. 4-5). She discusses how “white middle-class moral goodness” is far more invested in keeping one from looking like a racist (bad white person) than it is in challenging structural racism. In this

²³ I shall be writing this portion of my analysis in first-person. It feels appropriate.

moment in college, I believe that the danger that inspired me to frame the picture was of being marked as a bad white person. The fear of being seen as a bad white person can further intensify patterns within white discussions of race.

Many diversity initiatives produce singular or monolithic readings of whiteness as white privilege and demand individual confession that can actually serve to inhibit structural change (Lensmire et al., 2013). Confession can serve as another source of relief for white people, suggesting that one's work has been done and leaving oppressive structures untouched. It can also serve to "reinscribe privilege and offer redemption from complicity" (Applebaum, 2010, p. 19). While I recognize that the acknowledgement of one's privilege and race can be important and necessary doorways into ongoing critical anti-racist engagement, I am concerned by confession becoming a destination as well as how confession as arrival point connects with Sullivan's self-focused "good white person."

Sara Ahmed (2005), in *The Politics of Bad Feeling*, examines the role of shame in reconciliation work between white and Indigenous people in Australia. She asks the question: "What does it mean to claim an identity through shame?" (p. 72) She asserts that while white shame may be a very appropriate response to wrongdoing and might play a role in reconciliation and action, shame can also work as an *Indianist Presence* has done, to aid in nation building. She identifies that *feeling bad* can enable the nation to *feel better*, and that the experience of shame can complicatedly impact politics as the orientations of collectives are formed towards and against one another. For example, if shame or pain is experienced in relationship to an object or person, the particular pain can

get attributed to that object or person. “I feel bad when I see you. You are bad. You are the source of my pain.” The act of attributing one’s emotional experience (shame, fear, pain) to the thing causing it has profound implications for the shame and confessional actions that characterize much white anti-racist work (Lensmire et al., 2013). National and white discourses of shame can serve to isolate white individuals, cutting them off from sources of solidarity and support, further contribute to segregationist practices, and leave structural racism intact.

In *Learning to be White*, theologian Thandeka (1999) introduces the concept of *white shame*, the “pattern of feelings and behavior” she observed in Euro-Americans who had constructed white racial identities for themselves, in defense of racial victimization in their childhoods (p. 13). One of the patterns she notices - and works to expose through her research - is white people’s inability to acknowledge their whiteness, the “great unsaid” (p. 3). Thandeka developed the Race Game in an attempt to expose white people to their own racialization process. The Race Game had one rule; one “must use the ascriptive term *white* whenever she mentioned the name of one of her Euro-American cohorts” (p. 3). In the wake of profound resistance and fear, Thandeka began interviewing white participants, asking about their earliest memories of white racial identity formation.

Through these interviews, Thandeka developed her theory of white shame, identifying shame as the source and maintainer of silence. She writes:

The Euro-American child, I now believed, is a racial victim of its own white community of parents, caretakers, and peers, who attack it because it does not yet

have a white racial identity. Rather than continue to suffer such attacks, the Euro-American child defends itself by creating a white racial identity for itself. It begins to think and act like its community's idea of a white self. (p. 13)

Thandeka's exploration leads her to a white child; a child that has defensively and fearfully created herself in an image she has learned is loveable within her community. I'd like to propose another layer to Thandeka's reading of the white racialization process, one that considers how social class functions to further silence and solidify this fearful creation of self. What if, like the white racial identity Thandeka says white children defensively create, working class children are required through schooling to protectively create a "good white" racial identity for oneself that begins to think and act like an upper/middle class communities' idea of a good white self? Beyond the fear, violence, and forgetting necessary in the creation of a white self, how does education further threaten working class children? How might considering the creation of a "good white" self – that further separates one from one's white community – help us complicate and deepen conversations about race and help us move far beyond confession and shame?

Conclusion

At the end of my story, in fearful recognition of shame, I chose to place the photographic "evidence" in a position of importance. I write: "I want to hide this evidence of our mistake, of our not knowing, of our lack and ignorance. Instead, I place it in a frame on my dresser, feeling this shame over and over. It feels necessary to do this." Why did I do this? What did the photo provide and why did it seem necessary to continually return to it? Perhaps it was an act of rebellion, a desire to challenge the

seemingly composed landscape of good white people surrounding me, a community that had claimed so much of me already. Perhaps I was afraid that if I didn't remain vigilant, the performances of my childhood would reclaim my heart and mind. Or perhaps I knew somehow that this story, this moment of family care, joy, and expansiveness *and* its connection to a history of violence felt really, really dangerous and important and that I couldn't just let it go. Perhaps part of me knew that I needed to hold the pain of this contradiction near and that it could help me begin the life work of disentangling my singing and stories and imagination from the violence of colonialism.

Conclusion – Reflections and Possibilities

Bodies, Relationships, and Collectivity

The greatest gift one person can give another is such careful listening. It is in hearing with care the detailed specificity of the other that the specificity of each of us is made possible. (Davies, 1993, pg. xv)

... sometimes one person's remembered story, or interpretation of that story, can inform and even nourish another's memory, story, or interpretation, even if on their surfaces they are quite distinct. (Granger, 2011, p. 10)

I am sitting at a corner table in one of the hotel lobbies of our conference, savoring the silence and the space to think. It is early and I am alone. The sky is slowly transitioning from dark grey to lighter grey and I am preparing for a long drive home after this international qualitative research conference. I think back over the past days, filled with ideas, theories, and stories, and I wonder what I'll be taking away from this particular conference experience. Yesterday I shared a bit of my work in a session entitled Autoethnography and Race, and I began my presentation by inviting those in the room to listen to my story through their own. I also invited everyone to pay attention to their bodies, to notice how their bodies experienced my memory, and to work together to create and hold space for that awareness in the room. I experienced a shift in the room in the wake of my invitation. An invitation to collectivity and embodied awareness and the possibility of a subsequent shift in the movement of bodies feel crucially important to my work.

Since the beginning of this project, I have been acutely aware of the dangers surrounding it. I have been concerned by the potential of re-centering whiteness, of contributing to conversations that further marginalize voices that are silenced through research, and of reinscribing a new kind of privilege to white folks engaged in anti-oppressive work (Sullivan, 2006/2014; Applebaum, 2010). I have also been concerned about not being taken as seriously as those conducting more legitimated and traditional types of research, despite my intentional decision to do this work in the way I have. I'd like to identify a few of the experiences that influenced this project, to consider the role of relationships in its creation, discuss its flow of stories, and contemplate some possibilities for its future.

During the first class I took within my graduate program in education, the class in which we read Thandeka (1999) and began to examine the relationship between race and literacy, I wrote a paper about an uncomfortable conversation I'd had about race and used our readings from class to help me make sense of it. Throughout my master's program in English and my experience as an English teacher, I'd had many opportunities to write about my life. Fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and journaling have always been important tools for me in making sense of things, in playful exploration, and in curiosity and wonderment. Likewise, as my master's degree was in literature, I've been trained extensively in the craft of analysis; in the examination of form, theme, language, and voice; and in working with and across literary theories. As in historical practices of research in the social sciences, literary theory asked me to separate myself (or at least imagine and present myself as separate) from the material under examination (Smith,

1999; Grande, 2004). The first person voice in my creative writing stories and journal entries eventually transitioned into an assumedly more legitimate third person perspective that felt safer in school. “I believe that...” became “It is apparent...” and my writing served to methodically disentangle me from its focus. Now, I don’t think that writing in third person is necessarily evil; indeed, this project has illustrated how important it can be to improvisationally and purposefully write with different voices. I offer my experience with academic writing and research here to highlight the disorienting opportunity I was presented with when asked to foreground my own story in my academic work, particularly around a theme I had rarely before had an academic space to explore as it related to my life.

The writing of that paper in my first education class, the act of bringing Thandeka’s work into relationship with an experience that had been haunting me, illuminated a way of writing and working that felt incredibly powerful and important. It also brought together expressions of writing that had been disciplined, schooled into separateness, within me. I was able to write a story using creative innovation and then to seriously examine that story as a text employing strong analytic and critical skills. It seems like such a clear and appropriate practice for learning; however, the experience of foregrounding my story and working with it in this way was profound.

My ensuing experiences with collective memory work, in sharing and examining individual memories as important texts that helped everyone in our group get smarter and understand our own experiences differently, radically shifted the way I think about stories, research, and relationships in learning. The experience of gathering in a circle of

women and placing our memories at its center, one by one; of holding silence, discomfort, anger, and hope, together; of experiencing the deep and embodied ways our memories overlapped and diverged from one another, inspired the possibility of this project. My collectives helped me to imagine what deep and critical engagement with my stories could become and the powerful ways that that engagement could clarify, animate, and sustain my teaching.

The Stories

In preparation for this project, three periods from my life had seemed like important ones to pay attention to. I originally planned on writing about high school, my first year of teaching, and teaching English abroad. They each seemed like important entry points into examinations of white femininity. However, as I wrote chapter three, it became clear that my experience of teaching was deeply entangled with and was being remembered *through* my experience of growing up in Chadron. I chose to use chapter four to instead explore my childhood performance of Indian-ness, and investigate how the rural working class community I grew up in uniquely impacted my experience of whiteness.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I had hoped that working with my stories in this way might develop into an experience of intersectionality and that as I worked across different stories and focused my analysis on the particular elements (race, social class, and gender) that felt most important within them, I might build depth and complexity across the chapters without becoming lost in all simultaneous possibilities. I wanted to search for clarity and insight about elements within my stories without ever considering

them to be extricated from their complicated assemblages of history and power. The process of writing made this disentangling possible and necessary. There was simply no way to hold everything in the writing.

The three central chapters were written separately from one another. They were written in the order they appear here, and once they were written, I put them away. While they inevitably build upon and connect to one another, I did not actively attempt to build a dialogue across them. After the three chapters were written, I read over them, created the introduction, and am finally composing this conclusion.

Privilege

I'd like to examine a few ways that this work is helping me think about a more complex engagement with the notion of privilege. Scholars have identified the need for more complicated and dynamic readings of whiteness beyond those that render whiteness and its associated privilege as a singular thing. Members of the Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective examine how McIntosh's (1998) widely used "invisible knapsack" article has become a stand-in for critical anti-racist engagement, demanding a confession that tends to halt more critical or ongoing examinations of how whiteness does different things to and for different bodies (Lensmire et al.; 2013). Applebaum (2010) discusses how white privilege reproduces itself into new forms of capital and privilege through confession and anti-racist engagement, problematically situating white people as capable of transcending or moving beyond the social conditions they inhabit. Applebaum writes, "being a good white is *part of the problem* rather than *the solution* to systemic racism" (p. 20). In addition to the danger of reproducing yet another form of currency that benefits

white people, singular confessions and flattened representations of whiteness don't have the capacity to support examinations of how white racial identity intersects or corresponds with social class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and ability; they can also forestall investigations into what these other identity constellations might teach us about white racial identity and possibilities for critical anti-racist work.

My work offers an example of what a more complicated examination of whiteness that moves beyond confession might look like. The central story in Chapter Three – Standing in the Hallway was the story around which this entire project was developed. My first year of teaching – and its corresponding crisis of whiteness – has been a central orientation story throughout my teaching career. I have consistently turned towards it to help me make sense of education and of myself as a teacher. However, before working with that story in the ways that Collective Memory Work and this project gave me access to, that turn had been a ritualistically confessional one, a move that acknowledged my race in way that offered a bit of relief from the overwhelming silence and normalization of white supremacy in schools; however, my experience was still housed within a great deal of silence and offered me no support or guidance in how to do teaching in a more intentional way. Indeed, much of the paralysis and fear that pervades that story was kept alive in my teaching through my uncritical and continual engagement with it.

In the writing of these chapters, not only have I been able to deeply and critically work with my stories in a way that moved me beyond instant and indiscriminating judgments of my individual moral failures, my work with my own stories helped me in my analysis of other ones. Indeed, without the critical and clarifying work of my stories, I

never would have accessed other ones. For example, chapter two significantly shifted the way I think about my induction into the social class habitus of high school. Working with my two memories from high school, I was able to identify how the social class danger that felt so threatening to me during my freshman year had become a part of me by the time I was a senior. Through the writing, I was able to trace that transformation and discover an entirely new way of thinking about what was at stake in that moment in the hallway when my two communities came face to face with one another.

Another example of how this project provided me with meaningful opportunities for complicating my examination of whiteness was in the relationship between chapters three and four. As I mentioned earlier, chapter four became a place for me to more directly examine how an *Indianist Presence* was woven up in the formation of white racial identity in the rural working class community I was raised within. In my writing of chapter three, the performance from (what would become) chapter four had haunted me. I felt unable to authentically and appropriately work through how my whiteness was marked as a teacher within an Indigenous community without acknowledging my problematic previous relationship with another Indigenous community. However, as long as that experience existed in its compressed confessional form, I couldn't meaningfully work with it. I needed to disentangle my experiences from childhood with those from teaching and work with them distinctly. Furthermore, within chapter four, I needed to extricate the second and third vignettes from one another, because the overwhelming sense of shame I associated with my performance was actually a kind of knowledge that I learned much later. The shroud of middle-class "good white" confessional shame

wouldn't grant me access to what the performance was actually doing, and so I needed to open up and complicate my reading of the memory by separating the childhood performance from the college experience of shame associated with it.

Writing with and through these memories, creating conversations between them, theory, and history, and strategically untangling my experiences from confessional ossification and the flattened interpretations hoisted atop them have provided me with an experience of what moving beyond confession might look like. This project is helping me to distinguish more intuitively in moments what I should be paying attention to, and it is helping me to move beyond silence and shame into anti-racist action and solidarity in a completely different way. I believe that our stories can be used as intersectional and analytic tools, and that critical engagement with our experience provides at least a doorway into the work of decolonizing our imaginations.

Possibilities

Following our individual conference presentations on autoethnography, our group had a short window of time for discussion. One of the other presenters asked me the question: What are some of the ways that this project has influenced your teaching? It was a challenging question to respond to because I can't identify *any* way that my teaching has not been changed by this work.

I responded that my dissertation writing has opened up more space for me to be with situations, moments, conversations, and students that had previously felt overwhelming and dangerous to my role in the classroom. It has changed the way I think about capital, bodies, social class, race, gender, and cultural representations of people.

It's changed the way I interact with my students, the assignments I create, and how I talk about students with my colleagues and administrators.

As Davies (1993) and Granger's (2011) quotes about relationships in stories point to, I believe that working with and sharing our stories open up new possibilities for care and listening for both ourselves and for others. In my relationships with my students, I listen and respond differently. I am much more attuned to how stories and voices get positioned in our classroom, and I feel clearer and more deliberate in sharing ideas through my experiences in ways that acknowledge the experiences and perspectives of my students and create space for them in our learning together.

Waziyatawin (2008) writes that, in regards to how non-Dakota people might participate in the creation of an oppression-free world, one must, "challenge, re-examine, and reject the racist and colonialist programming to which you have grown accustomed. It also asks that you rethink the values of domination, consumption, and exploitation that have become a part of American society" (p. 14). It is my hope that this project of remembrance, creation, and critical engagement might contribute to the formation of the world Waziyatawin points us towards.

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