A Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), Theatrical Inquiry into Whiteness

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Cynthia Lewis, Advisor

May 2014

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Acknowledgements

I owe some debts here.

To the students in this project: the time devoted here was voluntary. You *chose* to join me on this journey. You took a risk. Kurt Vonnegut wrote that every time we make something our souls grow. We built a difficult and challenging *something*. Our souls grew. Thank you.

To my advisor/mentor Cynthia Lewis: nearly five years ago I found myself in your office. I was searching for answers. Why were my teaching practices getting me in trouble? You listened to my stories with compassion and intelligence. So I enrolled in graduate school. Over the next five years, you challenged me to make sense of my practice and thinking with rigor. Not only were you responsible for my doctoral work, you are one of the reasons I am still involved in education. Thank you.

To my co-adviser/mentor Tim Lensmire: your laughter is obscene and healing. This is the highest compliment I can pay somebody. If you had not appeared in my life when you did, I would not be doing what I am doing. Thank you.

To my committee members: Thom Swiss, Sonja Kuftinec, and Maria Asp. Thom: you helped me understand how to assemble the mess of post-modernity in my writing. Sonja: every time you speak I feel like I am getting smarter. Maria: you have a magical capacity to transform space. Thank you.

To my research assistant Natalie: your presence in this project is another example of the power of *real* teaching and learning. We continued to build

important things long after you were a student in my classroom. This project would not have worked without you. Thank you.

To my dissertation support group: Brian Lozenski and Shannon McManimon: you dialogued with my neurotic ramblings (and writing) with warmth and intelligence for a year. Your work is inspiring. This dissertation would not have been possible without it (or you). All of that said; I never want to see the Purple Onion again. Thank you.

To Gregg Martinson: you recorded hours of footage. You created a documentary that made us famous. Most importantly, you supported me in any number of ways as a colleague and friend during my time at Primdale. Thank you.

To the Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective (Tim, Audrey, Zac, Bryan, Shannon, Mary, Jessie): sitting around Tim and Audrey's table with you is powerful. This dissertation reflects much of the thinking that *we* accomplished over the year. Thank you.

To my wife Katie: you support and love me regardless of the wacky things I try to accomplish. Thank you.

Dedication

For Solomon David Tanner,

I hope this helps.

Table of Contents

Disclaimer 1

Preface 2

Introduction 3

Chapter One: Whiteness 15

Chapter Two: Self-Portrait 55

Chapter Three: How I Got Lost and Stayed That Way 82
(or Methods)

Chapter Four: Design and Implementation 117

Chapter Five: Permission to be Confused 162

Chapter Six: Whiteness *is* Depression 192

Chapter Seven: Critical Disruption is Disruptive 224

Chapter Eight: Blanchekreist 264

Conclusion 285

Works Cited 290

Appendices 297

Appendix A: Student Introductions that are not included in chapter two.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Appendix C: Codes

Appendix D: Project Description (School District)

Appendix E: Project Description (Students)

Appendix F: Pictures of Amara

Disclaimer

I have disguised most references to people and places in this dissertation. Pseudonyms are used for students, parents, and colleagues. The first time I use a pseudonym, I will reference it as such in the footnotes. If it is not referenced, the name is not a pseudonym.

My principal gave me permission to use both their name and the name of our high school. Some students told me they wanted me to use their real names as well. I was honored by the trust my community had in me throughout this project. Disguising names is a way to pay homage to that trust.

Preface

Tim Lensmire told me something that I jotted down in a word document on my laptop during one of our early meetings in his office.

"Our practice is always years ahead of our ability to theorize it." (Personal Communication, March 21st, 2012).

As a high school teacher, it has always been difficult for me to articulate why I do what I do.

"Because it works," doesn't seem to cut it.

Graduate school provided space and time for me to articulate theorizations of my practice. Still, what I actually do as a teacher is years beyond how I am able to describe it.

I have taught high school English and Drama for eleven years. Facilitating The Whiteness Project during 2012-2013 was a profound challenge. Still, it was easier than theorizing why I chose to do what I did.

So I came to this dissertation as a teacher first and a researcher second. The categories blurred. I taught, theorized, taught, and theorized some more.

Tim is probably to blame for my newfound belief that theorization is a never-ending process that grows more and more complicated the more we try to theorize why we do what we do. We are always years behind. Talk about endless, important work.

Thanks a lot you jerk!

I thought finishing my dissertation meant I could relax. Now I know that my work has only just begun.

Introduction

Amara: And you must be new here if you're talking to me. But a word of advice: Don't talk to your teacher about the crazy things you're going to see. Bad things might happen to you. *(She giggles again, but there is sadness)*

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 31).

***

The Whiteness Project

On one hand this is a straightforward story.

In the fall of 2012 a group of mostly white high school students in a first-ring suburban, Midwestern high school researched whiteness.[1] They wrote a play called *Blanchekreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness* that winter and staged it in the spring. I was their teacher. I am white. My roles were to guide their research, facilitate the script writing, and direct their play. Both local and national media outlets critiqued our work but members of the school community mostly supported what we did. The students and I referred to this work as The Whiteness Project.

I could tell this as a linear story. Indeed, my fieldnotes are organized chronologically. An argument could be made for sharing them as is. I have hundreds of pages of writing that documents my trepidations, my concerns, and my analysis of the project as it played out. Storying this report in that way would be easy. It would allow me to author a text that smoothed out tensions and disagreements in favor of my agenda. Doing this would co-opt the students'

[1] I call the high-school Primdale Area High School (PAHS). This is a pseudonym.

work to suit my purposes. Even if I tried to honor their ideas, it would still be *me* telling *our* story.

I am a good storyteller. That is one reason I majored in English and became a high school teacher. I rely on that skill here but I organize this writing so that it will not simply tell *my* story.

During 2012-2013, I used methods of critical ethnography to document a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), theatrical inquiry into whiteness in a public high school. As a teacher-researcher, I spent the year questioning my practice, disrupting my students' social scripts, and trying to make visible how practices of white supremacy inform teaching and learning. Specifically, I tried to understand how whiteness informed *my* teaching and *my* students' learning. Telling a simple story from my point of view would be a disservice to the work that the students did to question *their* white identity and its relationship with white supremacy. YPAR work privileges the collective agenda over the individual. Critical work troubles commonsense assumptions of linearity in order to expose tensions and reveal power dynamics. I take care to honor those agendas in documenting The Whiteness Project.

Critical research that disturbs the straightforward is served by messiness. John Law (2006) described the current need for this sort of messiness in our research as follows.

> Realities are not flat. They are not consistent, coherent and definite. Our research methods necessarily fail. Aporias are ubiquitous. But it is time to move on from the long rearguard action which insists that reality is

definite and singular. The long rearguard action conducted in many locations including what counts as good social science method. 'There is more in heaven and earth, Horatio, than is dreamed of in your philosophy.' We need new philosophies new disciplines of research. We need to understand that our methods are always more or less unruly assemblages (p. 14).

Law insisted that reality is not flat, not straightforward. Stories represent reality. So does research. There are myriad ways to represent and interpret the work that my students and I did during the 2012-2013 school year. Just as the frenetic Hamlet told his rational friend Horatio in the Shakespearean play that Law referenced, our approaches to research have not yet unearthed a unified, conclusive understanding of reality or truth. Instead, different perspectives and approaches challenge each other in messy ways. We need to make room for the messiness that comes in allowing tensions to be made visible. This is particularly true of educational research.

So that was how The Whiteness Project operated. My story was different than my student Victoria's[2] story which was different than my research assistant Natalie's story which was different than my administrators' story and will be different from *your* story and so on. Multiple perspectives should be allowed to challenge each other in order for something complicated and messy to emerge. This mess is best represented by a polyphonic amalgam of voices. Indeed, educational research has recently taken seriously Bahktin's (1981) notion that

[2] Pseudonym

ideological utterances are in constant dialogue with social context. By including multiple voices, I am showing how this project constructed and was constructed by multiple perspectives. So I used the data that the school community and I generated throughout the year to make this writing a duplicitous conduit. I tried to disturb the primacy of my singular interpretation. I favored the tension, contradiction, and negotiation of a dialogic representation. By refusing to smooth this story out, the reader will have the chance to struggle with implications for thinking and practice in their localized contexts. In this way, their interpretation might lead to Law's new knowledge and practices. This is not a checklist for how to conduct critical whiteness pedagogy. Instead, I created a polyphonic, unruly assemblage that accounts for how a group of mostly white people worked to understand their own whiteness and subsequent white supremacy in schools. I wrote with the hope that the reader will use their interpretation of this teaching project in their practice and thinking. This was extremely difficult, messy work.

Messiness is different than sloppiness. Messiness makes room for competing ideologies to appear congruently. A commitment to this mode of representation requires great care and discipline from the writer. The mess must be packaged cautiously in order to both make sense to the reader *and* challenge them.

Lather (2007) described the necessity for challenging research to afford the research the opportunity for "getting lost." For her, "…*Getting Lost* delineates the openendedness of practical action as a structure of praxis and ethics without

foundations in a context of demands for practices with more to answer to in terms of the complexities of language and the world" (p. 3). Lather's claim take's Law's work further. Her emphasis on finding a way to make the act of research more ethical sees the assemblage as a necessary part of troubling the researchers assumptions. Rather than assuming a flat context of linear practice or language, I took up Lather's challenge to lose myself in my teaching and my research. This honors the complications of living out both of those things. I represent The Whiteness Project with messiness to evoke the complexity that Lather described. Indeed, I don't know how else to conjure the convolution that came from trying to implement teaching and learning that disrupts white supremacy. In many ways I did *not* know what I was doing during the year. Examining my own whiteness was difficult. Helping students think about their own whiteness (or lack thereof) was even harder. I figured it out as I went with an improvisational commitment to Lather's opendedness of practical action as praxis. I was lost as both a teacher and a researcher. Sometimes I responded to the lack of landmarks in generative ways. Other times I made mistakes. Getting lost is an honest way to describe the practice of teaching. It is an honest way to describe educational research.

Research in education can be sanitized coherent until rendered meaningless. Assertions run the risk of turning into standardized policies divorced from the incoherent realities they mean to respond to. *This research* values description and nuance. The people here were complicated living and breathing beings. And they were often confused. *I* was often confused.

Conducting this teacher-research *felt* like Lather's complicated notion of getting lost.

Anderson & Scott (2012) argued the importance of critical ethnography as a methodology towards research that embraces complexity and messiness in both method and report. For them, this approach is particularly necessary in the increasingly standardized and post-positivistic understanding of research in education.

> In short, something complicated is happening here and high stakes are involved… …in improving the quality of practice, complexity and the messiness of practice-in-context cannot be fantasized away. To try to do so yields impoverishment rather than improvement. That loss is being borne by the children, teachers, and administrators in our schools (p. 679).

This is a powerful description of my purpose in representing The Whiteness Project. Something complicated happened in my work as a teacher-researcher and it is important not to lose that complexity and messiness by over-theorizing it in order to fantasize a tidy research report. Presenting this project as a messy practice of critical pedagogy through a careful but messy piece of writing is important for me to share what I understand as the honest limitations and potential of conducting anti-racist, whiteness work in schools.

So that was my charge. Rather than telling a straightforward version of this story, I take heed of both Law and Lather's approach to research and disturb flat realities to trouble the limits of my own interpretation that comes from how

we story our reality. This writing is a representative vehicle that lets the reader experience the confusion, the messiness, and the promise of a critical teaching and learning that centered whiteness as a site of inquiry. This work holds great promise for how white people might participate in a pedagogy that works to take apart oppressive systems of white supremacy and remake a more democratic reality.

That is what I tried to do during the school year.

***

Uma: *(Breaks down, to Sam)* What have I done?

Sam: We did what was best for our family.

Uma: Did we?

Sam: Uma! Look at me! We did what we could. We were drowning in our mortgage and debt and we were both losing our jobs. We did the only thing that we could.

Uma: But we destroyed Cecilia's life! She had such good friends.

Sam: She'll be fine.

Uma: I hope so.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 7)

***

How This Writing Works

Uma asks her husband what she has done in the first scene of the play. My students named her husband Sam. That is my name. I have always been a

relational teacher. That the students would use my name as the father of their fictional family is indicative of our strong connection.

Sam replies by telling her that they did what was best for their family. Even though they destroyed their daughter Ceclia's life by moving her into the new town of Blanchekreist, she would be fine. It would be good for her. Like the character Sam, *I* believed that my students would be fine. Making sense of whiteness through theatre and research would move them to new understandings of themselves. Parts might be lost or blurred but they would be okay.

Like Cecilia and my students, the reader will experience a similar blur. This writing is organized so to foster practices of critical literacy. According to Shor (1992), critical literacy requires a questioning of power dynamics that underlie cultural, social, and historical discourse in textual formations. So by including student writing, fieldnotes, emails, and transcripts alongside my writing, I am creating a vehicle that allows the reader to critically examine these representations as competing textual representations of what *really* happened during the year (with the critical assumption that there is never a singular way to interpret an event). Competing voices are honored by approaching qualitative research as an assemblage.

The purpose of this writing will be to outline the promise and limitation of what I describe as a deployment of critical whiteness pedagogy. I show how this pedagogy in concert with practices of YPAR and theatre created spaces for students in a 9-12th grade public high school to acknowledge and negotiate their

own varying degrees of whiteness. Centering whiteness as a subject of analysis made possible deep transformation for the participants in this project. Those transformations did not happen with consensus or in the same way. They were varied, local, and complicated. Victoria's theorization of whiteness as being synonymous to depression in chapter six was far different than Lauren's[3] permission she gave herself to be confused in chapter five. By asking the students (and the participating adults) to wrestle with the complicated formation of systematic whiteness instead of simply confessing their white privilege, I attempted a complex, nuanced pedagogical mobilization. This created conditions for students to understand and subvert organizing logics of race and whiteness. I argue that the complicated conditions of white supremacy in relation to the byproduct that is the result of what happens to people when they are whited requires careful pedagogy in order to be acknowledged, understood, deconstructed, and transformed. Whitening has deep consequences for white people that need to be taken account in anti-racist pedagogy. The transformation that can come from such a pedagogy is necessary in order to create what Ellison (1953/1995) imagined as an American identity capable of fulfilling the promise of democracy.

So this writing is my ethical, reflexive attempt to communicate the messy tensions in The Whiteness Project and my place within it. I avoid smoothing out the edges. The script that the student script-writing collective wrote is excerpted throughout. My interpretation of their script is the final chapter. I choose

[3] Pseudonym

relevant fragments of the script to show the reader how the play theorized the very things I write about.

Chapter one articulates my interpretation of critical whiteness pedagogy. I theorize whiteness by reading Thandeka (1999) in relation to critical race scholars in order to ague that whiteness both privileges *and* harms white people. From there, I move to an examination of how whiteness informs schooling. Next, I examine deployments of anti-racist pedagogy with white high school students. I use this work to describe my theoretical interpretation of critical whiteness pedagogy. This framework inspired both my teaching and research practices that are described in subsequent chapters.

Chapter two introduces the participants. It begins with a reflexive interpretation of my own whiteness. It relies on practices of autoethnographic self-study to describe my history as a teacher, my positionality as a researcher, and the racial experiences that led me to imagine The Whiteness Project. My research assistant Natalie is introduced along with some of the students involved in the project. I asked them to create brief descriptions of who they were during the projects. Having students introduce themselves interrupts the way that traditional educational research can co-opt their voices to suit the research agenda.

Chapter three describes the improvisational, critical ethnographic research methods I used to document this project. It outlines my research questions, my data collection methods, and my process of analysis. I finish with a reflexive statement about my approach to educational research.

Chapter four conjures the pedagogical design of the project by relying on vignettes and primary documents to represent the project. I render events in The Whiteness Project to show the tension that came from blending elements of YPAR with my own teaching practices. This entailed a commitment to complicated dissensus over smoothed over consensus. I depict my struggle to facilitate a collective process that asked students to come to their own questions, conclusions, and actions regarding whiteness and systematic white supremacy.

Chapter five argues for a critical whiteness pedagogy that fosters permission in white people to experience generative confusion in order to undermine white supremacy. In April, my student Lauren spoke at a presentation in which she told the audience that she had given herself permission to be confused. I use two vignettes to trace the way I used critical whiteness pedagogy to work with Lauren's (and my own) generative confusion. I show the tensions that came from the permission we gave ourselves to center whiteness, to resist normalizing discourse, and to sit in the confusion that comes from critically investigating social reality. A commitment to critical whiteness pedagogy that relied on practices of YPAR in concert with theatrical playbuilding created conditions for me to value complicated, openended inquiry rather than overly prescriptive learning outcomes often associated with white privilege pedagogy.

Chapter six presents my work with Victoria. She powerfully theorized whiteness in relationship to her depression. My relational teaching rooted in my interpretation of critical whiteness, YPAR, and playbuilding pedagogy was

conducive to Victoria's inquiry and subsequent transformation. I represent the confusing, important, messy way that Victoria and I engaged in a dialogic, embodied, critical investigation of whiteness. I suggest that the same permission for confusion that I theorized in chapter five provided Victoria a space to engage whiteness in relationship to her depression in order to transform the way that she understood and coped with both things.

Chapter seven interprets the community response to the project that occurred the week before our performances. It examines how the project was disturbed by the very critical disruption it was trying to create. I use vignette, transcripts, emails, and fieldnotes to illustrate how Thandeka's notion of white shame fueled a public critique of The Whiteness Project. Furthermore, I show how I worked to garner political support during the year in order to protect my teaching position. Finally, I point out that participants may have enjoyed the controversy stirred up by the attention at the *expense* of anti-racist, whiteness work.

Chapter eight finishes with my interpretation of the students' script. I both summarize the story and claim that the script worked as a localized, allegorical telling of white identity that is the byproduct of white supremacy.

I challenged myself to separate my research and teaching interests during the year. That was an impossible task. At the beginning of the year I was careful to keep my data generation separate from my teaching. As the year went on, these things converged. I was writing about what I was struggling with as a teacher. I was teaching about what I was struggling with as a researcher. So

those two things blur throughout this writing. This is as much a report of my teaching as it is an account of my research. This makes for a complex study.

It is risky to embrace complexity. I try to assemble the mess and confusion of the project in careful ways to make as accurate account as I can of critical teaching and research.

***

Jimmy: That's just a risk we're going to have to take. Are you with me? (Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 52).

Chapter One: Whiteness

This chapter articulates the theoretical approach this project took to understanding white identity, white supremacy, and the relationship those things have with school and pedagogy. I do this to show the difficulty and importance of building and deploying a critical whiteness pedagogy that acknowledges the byproduct of Thandeka's (1999) white shame. First, I rely on Thandeka in conversation with critical race scholars to theorize whiteness as a force that both privileges *and* harms white people. Next, I examine how

whiteness standardizes schooling practices. Finally, I describe the interpretation of critical whiteness pedagogy that informed my teaching and research in The Whiteness Project.

I argue that anti-racist educators need to take into account two notions in working with white students. First, they need consider the ideological complexity of what Mills (1997) described as America's racial contract. This complexity stems from a history of white supremacy that structures American reality. This includes schools. Next, they should be mindful of the psychic byproduct that comes from white people being normalized into this contract. Taking care to layer local interpretations of these difficult concepts into pedagogy can create the conditions for white people to conduct transformative work with generative, anti-racist possibilities.

***

Bedford: *(Getting up*) Great. Leon, you woke Sonja. *(To Sonja.)* Having trouble sleeping, darling?

Sonja: I had a nightmare.

Bedford: *(They both sit on the couch)* What was your dream about?

Sonja: It was an okay dream up until the end. I was really hungry, so I decided that I'd make mom's strawberry cake.

Leon: *(Mockingly)* Wow. That sounds terrifying!

Bedford: *(Glares at Leon.)* Go on, Sonja.

Sonja: Anyways, as I put strawberries on the cake, they came to life. And as I added more strawberries, they began fighting over which ones tasted the best.

Eventually, one group of strawberries decided to push the other strawberries off. Suddenly, I was on the cake and all of the strawberries were huge and they turned to me. I wasn't a strawberry, and I didn't taste like either group of strawberries, so then they all turned on me. They chased me to the end of the cake and I jumped off and the cake was really high up and I kept falling and falling.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 27).

Towards a Pedagogical Dismantling of Race

Wright (1945/1998) claimed at the end of his novel *Black Boy* that both white people and black people will be destroyed by the social conditions created by what Mills (1997) described as America's racial contract. Wright did this as follows.

> Yes, the whites were as miserable as their black victims, I thought. If this country can't find its way to a human path, if it can't inform conduct with a deep sense of life, then all of us, black as well as white, are going down the same drain… (p. 383).

This is a troubling prophecy about the future of America if we do not figure out how to transform contemporary racial configurations.

Mills used the notion of a social contract to describe how Americans participate in a white supremacist society. He described this contract as follows. "…white supremacy, both local and global, exists and has existed for many years… ….(it) should be though of as itself a political system… (it) can illuminatingly be theorized as based on a "contract" between whites, a Racial

Contract" (p. 7). In such a contract, race undergirds a political, economic, and social reality.

Casey, McManimon, Lozenski, & Lensmire (2013) defined race as "…a construct used to distinguish and subordinate certain groups of humans from others" (p. 274) Specifically of white people, they wrote that "…Europeans devised ways of classifying people based on geography, physical features, and culture, naming themselves as the highest example of humanity and giving birth to whiteness as a racial system. . ." (p. 274). According to this definition, race is not a biological truth. Rather, it is a construct with deeply embedded assumptions that create problematic, oppressive social conditions that work to favor whiteness. Indeed, Casey, McManinom, Lozenski, & Lensmire argued "…Oppression due to the construct of race is both based on and results in economic processes, ideologies, and lived experiences and opportunities" (p. 274). Race is a construct at the intersection of material and ideological assumptions that is organized to grant power to some and oppress others. This is white supremacy. A commitment to anti-racist work requires a complex understanding of the organizing construct, symptoms, and result of race.

Educational theorist such as Dewey (1916/2011), Counts (1932), Chomsky (2002) and Freire (1968/1993) suggested that education affords a space to transform socially constructed reality. My work here is about understanding how white people can participate in a pedagogy that disrupts the social construct of white supremacy. Whiteness is complicated because it is both a mechanism that protects the organizing logics of race as well as a category of

identification. A pedagogy that responds to Richard Wright's prophecy at the end of his novel *Black Boy* needs to be equally complex. Wright suggested our only hope as Americans was to find what he called a more human path. Pedagogy is a place to experiment and explore what such a path might look like. It is a place to take action against racism.

Current conceptions of ant-racist, whiteness pedagogy are problematically simple. They are steeped in the idea of white privilege from McIntosh's (1988) foundational work. This approach often gets in the way of white people taking action on racism. Lensmire et al. (2013) argued that "…McIntosh acts as a synecdoche (stands in) for all the anti-racist work to be done in teacher education and that this limits our understanding and possibilities for action (p. 410). They suggested that coercing white people to confess their privilege does not lead to anti-racist or critical action. Indeed, pushing white people to give up their privilege in order so that non-white folks can increase theirs does not challenge the social or economic orders that create the specific material and racial conditions of white supremacy. My work as a teacher-researcher is about taking seriously Lensmire et al.'s call for a more complex pedagogical treatment in working with white people on race, white supremacy, and anti-racist action.

As Rick Ayers and William Ayers (2011) argued, "School is structured so resolutely around getting right answers that the problem of getting the right questions—and examining who gets to ask those questions and why, and who benefits from and gains power by framing and privileging certain questions and

ignoring others—is left impenetrable and opaque" (p. 2). White privilege pedagogy resonates in education because it is about white people getting the right answer. If they admit they have privilege they are right. If they don't, they are wrong. Answering that question in the right way does not dismantle the organizing logics of racial constructs.

So I approached anti-racist, critical whiteness pedagogy looking for different ways to ask my question. What action can white people take to intervene on racism?

***

Roman: You call what you have, privilege?

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 79).

***

Asking Different Questions

In a 1998 interview, Charlie Rose asked Toni Morrison what people should do about racism. Rose was white, Morrison black. Morrison had this to say.

> "TM: I tell you, that is the wrong question.
>
> CR: Okay, what is the right question?
>
> TM: How do you feel? Not you, Charlie Rose, but don't you understand that the people who do this thing, who practice racism, are bereft, there is something distorted about the psyche. It's a huge waste and it's a corruption and a distortion. It's like it is a profound neurosis that nobody examines for what it is. It feels crazy, it is crazy and it leaves, it has just as

much of a deleterious effect on white people and possibly, equal as it does black people… …And my feeling is that white people have a very, serious problem. And they should start thinking about what they can do about it. Take me out of it."

Rose's question has been posed countless times in America's history. It has often been asked of black people as though they have an answer that white people don't. Morrison turned the question back on Rose. She asked him how *he* felt. She clarified that she wasn't asking Rose personally when she said, "not you, Charlie Rose." She was turning the question back to white people in general. The question Rose posed to Morrison is similar to the questions currently being asked of the achievement data that is being produced by American schools. What should we do about racism? Instead of asking why nonwhite students are not succeeding, perhaps we should ask how conditions of white supremacy are creating a system that disenfranchises people based on racial categories..

This short interview with Charlie Rose became central to how I understood my responsibility as white person working to understand whiteness. My job was not simply to understand the experience of people of color so that they could teach me not to be racist. Rather, it was to investigate what it meant to identify as white and how that identification included me in conditions created by America's racial contract. Three important things to note in Morrison's complicated response to Rose's question are; 1) white people are participants in a racial system, 2) whiteness must be allowed to a hold a subject

position in order to be critiqued, 3) participating in white supremacy causes harm to white people.

First, Morrison told Rose that he was starting with the wrong question in order to argue that white people participate in racial systems. Racism was not simply about the black experience in America. White people need to understand that the question Rose asked is as much about them as it is people of color. Black people do not have the solution to systematic racial logics simply because they have been oppressed by them. It is necessary to inquire into race in a way that includes white identity in the question being asked in order to disturb systematic racism.

Next, Morrison implied that whiteness needed to hold a subject position in order to be critiqued. She told Rose that white people have a serious problem that *they* need to figure out. By doing so, she was opening space for white people to begin taking action on their own in order to make sense of their participation in racial systems. Furthermore, her statement at the end of this excerpt is a direct plea to stop making race in America solely about people of color. For Morrison, white people must stop deflecting their understanding of race. As long as they do so, contemporary, organizing racial logics that come from a history of white supremacy go unchallenged.

Finally, Morrison likened practicing racism or participating in logics of white supremacy to a distortion of the psyche or a profound neurosis. I want to highlight the word psyche here as that will be a cornerstone in terms of how I try

to articulate what Morrison described to Rose as the deleterious effect that participating in white identity has for *white* people.

Her choice of the word psyche is particular. According to Merriam-Webster online, psyche is "the soul, mind, or personality of a person or group" (Retrieved 2/13/14). Though the term psyche has been co-opted by traditional, positivistic psychological research, it has roots in Greek as "life" in the sense of "breath." Other derived meanings associated with the word include "spirit," "ghost," and "conscious personality" (Wikipedia, Retrieved 2/13/14).

Choosing the word psyche echoes a distortion at the level of spirit, consciousness, and being. In this way, the word psyche denotes the very way we exist in the world. Taking the cue from Morrison, participation in white supremacy as a white person could be thought of as symptomatic to a psychic virus.

***

Marvin: That's because a long time ago, a new family came, and people here got very sick with a mysterious virus.

Jimmy: What did the virus do?

Marvin: It made the people blind.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 31).

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Whiteness is a *White Problem*

Historically, white identity has attempted to render itself invisible in America. Whiteness has been structured as the norm and therefore has worked

to create a sort of blindness to its very construction as a category that denotes race.

Morrison's response suggests that we need to make whiteness visible as a psychic problem for white people. This echoes Ellison's (1953/1995) plea nearly fifty years earlier.

Ellison (1953/1995) finished his essay on Twentieth Century Fiction by assuring his reader that it was "…meant as no plea for white writers to define Negro humanity, but to recognize the broader aspects of their own" (pp. 98-99). To undermine the way that contemporary racial constructs structure reality and dehumanize participants, it is essential that whites begin to understand the harm that whiteness does to *their* psyche. In order for whites to take up Ellison's plea to recognize the broader aspects of their humanity, they need to take up Morrison's charge to make sense of their serious problem. Doing so is essential in articulating the purpose of a pedagogy that gives white people space to understand their identity and participation in white supremacy in order to take anti-racist action.

Participation in systems of white supremacy has complicated implications for the white self. Chiefly amongst them is the loose ground upon which this "whited" self is situated. What can be granted can be taken away. Whiteness becomes contingent on competitive performance. Inclusion in whiteness is conditional.

Due to this inclusion through performance, whites isolate themselves and enter an endless competition for resources, power, and inclusion into a reality

that is temporary in nature. There is no inherent acceptance in such a system, no unconditional culture. This is white diaspora.

White identity stems from a racialized construct of self and other. This idea undergirded the sinister exploitation of nonwhites through colonization and imperialism during European expansion. This idea caused unfathomable devastation for nonwhite cultures. So too did it decimate those that accepted a "whited" self. The white self is predicated on a splintered and dehumanized identity.

White participants in white supremacy have had access to resources, power, and privilege due to racial constructs. This material reality comes at a psychic cost. So while it is essential to mark the exploitation of resources, capital, and the genocide explicit in European colonization, it is also necessary to understand how the whited self is dominated by such logic. This needs to happen in order for all of *us* to throw off the shackles of a system of white supremacy, a racialized social reality that continues to normalize and defend itself in new and devious ways. It is far too late in the game to blame individuals of isolated racism. White supremacy and identity are the byproducts of a systematic epidemic.

According to McKnight & Chandler, race exists as an organizing collective construct. It is impossible to avoid participation in the meanings it makes.

> Race, as an organizing construct, operates in this way. It is socially constructed, it does not have a rational basis of existing (other than to organize society based on skin pigment), and exists because of its

> antecedent history(s) gives meaning to the present—a meaning which is collective and individual in nature (p. 78).

Collective and individual meaning continues to be made of race. This is a socially built narrative that has no rational basis. Accepting that race is an irrational construct, it is important to dig into the irrational psyche that forms and is formed by such a system.

Nuancing the psyche in order to unearth the complexity of the white identity is more generative and transformative than demanding contrition or guilt from white people. Accusing individual white people of racism and forcing an admission of guilt does not dismantle the reality McKnight and Chandler described. This destructive racial construct crystallized into a historical and social force that continues to subjugate people of all hues or tints to a discursive reality that dominates both oppressed and oppressor, undermines democratic principles, and is essentially destructive.

Whiteness stems from a destabilized sense of self. Morrison's serious problem takes better shape in the work of Thandeka (1999). Thandeka approached whiteness with a psychological framework in mind. She used her research in order to make the following claim.

> In sum, our primer of psychological concepts allows us to examine the structure of a Euro-American's white racial identity as an impaired sense of a core self, an inability to relate to others with self-integrity. This impairment is the result of episodes in which a person's difference from a white ideal was attacked by her or his own caretaker(s). The white self-

> image that emerges from this process will include the emotional fallout from the self-annihilating process that created it: the breakup of one's own sense of coherency, efficacy, and agency as a personal center of activity. Whenever the content of this white racial image is exposed, white self-consciousness can feel shame – and rage (p. 26).

Thandeka traced Morrison's distortion of the psyche to Euro-American's impaired sense of a core self. She argued that this came about due to the relationship between self and caretaker(s). Early on in their development, the white child is forced to conform to an ideal that delegitimizes anything in them that is different from that normalized construct. For Thandeka, it is after this moment of cognitive dissonance that the white self is created in the individual. In being created, this whiteness destroys or masks the original self. When this racial image or sign is made visible to the whited self, Thandeka suggested that the result was shame and rage. According to Thandeka, this process strips the white self of the ability to relate to others with integrity, resulting in the subsequent isolation and dehumanization of the self. Thandeka likened this to how a nuclear core fragments due to a flaw in its caretaking environment. For Thandeka, the seething energy that is the result of such a meltdown transforms into emotional rage against persons who have been othered. In her words, "Such rage can flow from the release of ancient feelings of fury against the persons who originally assaulted the self for being different – one's own caretakers – now directed towards persons who have been racialized as "different" (p. 128). Understanding whiteness as a failed self displaced onto the racialized other

allowed Thandeka to point towards how whiteness continues to construct a neocolonial, racial reality long after the disintegration of the material, European project of colonization.

Thandeka suggested that systems of white supremacy reproduce themselves because of the difficulties whites have of coping with the wound that is central to their identity. This leads to the invisibility of white shame. It even explains how class divisions operate in whites. She posed this as follows.

> This theory has two immediate uses. First, we can explain the invisibility of white shame as a major race problem in white America. This problem is not seen because the original source of the problem is overlooked: abuse against Euro-Americans for being different from their caretakers' expectations, desires, and needs… …Second, our primer can help us identify a self-compromising element in the drive by Euro-American, middle-class wage earners to eliminate the difference between themselves and their (class) superiors: the fear of appearing different from their upper-class assailants." (p. 128)

According to Thandeka, failure to understand white shame in reference to the white's mistrust of or split with their caretakers allows the source of their racial reality to escape critique. It is difficult for participants in such an order to dismantle racial inequity without first understanding how whiteness is constructed and shaped by the very system it is upholding. Furthermore, this perpetual psychological machine forces white people to work towards the elimination of difference between themselves and whites that are in positions of

power. Thus, even when class divides would suggest alliances across color lines, poorer whites often politically align themselves with those whites with power in order to avoid appearing different from those who stand in as their caretakers. In Thandeka's words, "To learn to be a racist, this "whited" self had to split off its own class interests from its racial identity" (p. 84). This allows a system of white supremacy to perpetually reconfigure itself regardless of economic logic. This system becomes even less easy to trace because of its formation from a splintered self.

Whiteness becomes invisible to whites because of a racialization process that splinters the white self. According to Thandeka, whiteness is lost in the consciousness of whites.

> "This entire racialization process makes persons with white identity initially aware of the fact that the racial advantages they have been given can be lost. For many "whites," however, this awareness that their whiteness can be lost cannot be retained in active consciousness but, rather, becomes part of a racial system of white denial: a vanishing point" (p. 86).

Whiteness is conditional. The material or social advantage that comes with it can be lost. The whited self learns this from its caretaker(s) immediately. This means that the very identity that whites are normalized into is always contingent on practice and behavior. Awareness of this instability must be pushed out of the active consciousness in order for the white self to cope with its contradictory nature. In this way, whites learn to make their whiteness invisible in their

psyche, standardizing it if you will, thereby making it extremely difficult for them to question their inclusion in systems of white supremacy. According to Thandeka, this is a harm that is done to children by their own white communities.

Thandeka framed her work as an analysis of the systematic harm done to whites due to the formation of a white identity. She described it as follows.

> …I am interested in the way in which the Euro-American child is socialized into a system of values that holds in contempt differences from the white community's ideals. It is the focus on difference that I want to emphasize because when this difference is denied, we find an injury to one's core sense of self that is hidden from view when our attention turns entirely to the way in which prejudice is learned and transmitted. The Euro-American child learns to feel ashamed of its own differences from its community's white racial values. By focusing on the feelings of shame, we can find our way back to the site of an injury to the child's sense of self: an attack against the child by members of its own white community because the child is not yet white (pp. 17-18).

According to Thandeka, white shame is the product of a process of normalization that is used by white caretaker(s) in their formative interactions with children. It is this racialization that causes "an injury to one's core self," that is "hidden from view." This is how Thandeka articulates whiteness. The Euro-American child experiences shame when they discover difference from a white ideal, white norms. So at the very core of whiteness is a systematic attack on the child in

order to white them into a normalized reality. This attack creates emotional resentment, mistrust, and a deep psychological wound at the very center of white identity and the whited psyche. Thandeka went so far as to attach her argument to the inability of Martin Luther King to subvert institutional racial logic during the Civil Rights Movement.

Thandeka claimed that folks such as Martin Luther King were unable to truly disturb systems of white supremacy because they were not cognizant of the deep harm done to people that had been whited. About King's understanding of whiteness, she wrote the following. "Overlooked in this analysis (King's) was a more original damage to the core sense of self – the experience of feeling diminished by one's own white community" (p. 83). For Thandeka, King's agenda of racial equality was undermined by his failure to take into account that foundational "damage to the core sense of self," enacted on people by white communities. To critique systems of white supremacy, Thandeka's assertion requires us to examine this core harm. Thandeka uses the work of Dr. King to point out the necessity of understanding how whiteness works. In fact, a similar critique could be made of much of the white privilege work that is based on Macintosh (1988). This work takes into account material privilege without examining the tangled roots of whiteness that Thandeka lays out in her analysis. While it is important to understand the material privileges that come with whiteness, the way that society is engineered to unevenly share resources, it is just as important to understand the complicated psyche that develops and is developed by the justifications of such a system. Thandeka's work leads to a

more encompassing way to make sense of and understand white racial identity, thereby making possible a subversion of American racial reality.

Thandeka's work requires us to take into account how our core sense of racial self is formed. She suggested the following.

> This social construction of a "white" requires us to make a distinction between a person's core sense of self before and after its identity is defined as white. Before the white identity is established, this core sense of self is not white. Its personal racial identity is, in effect, nonexistent because the socialization process has not yet been undertaken by its white community of caretakers, legislators, and police force. In other words, a new member of the white community who is self-defined as white has not yet been created. (p. 85)

In order to understand the white psyche, it is essential to understand that a racial identity is not inherent in humans. Rather, this identity is forged by a community of "…caretakers, legislators, and police force." These are all manifestations of power and control who enact a normative process on the identity, thereby bullying it into submission to a dominant logic. So there is a moment before the white self becomes white. After that moment, the white self has been injured in a foundational way that has serious complications. The white self finds it difficult to consciously consider their whiteness, they become infected with shame and rage, and they become participants in a system that is premised on a conditional reality. This white logic becomes a standardized norm deep inside of their psyche. Everything that deviates from it becomes just that, a

deviation. Thus, this splintered identity formation becomes an organizing principle of racial reality for the whited self, a blurred lens through which they understand the world. Understanding this splintered self at the core of white identity, it becomes important to turn back to Morrison's (1995) work about the co-construction of whiteness and blackness.

Morrison suggested that whiteness is co-constructed with blackness. She mentioned this in her interview with Charlie Rose as well as her seminal work, *Playing in the Dark*. In this book, she focused her analysis of race on literary discourse in America. Doing so allowed her to contend the following.

> "As a disabling virus within literary discourse, Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repressions, formations and exercises of power, and mediations on ethics and accountability" (p. 7).

Morrison used the notion of "Africanism" to describe how the othered, black consciousness exists in the consciousness the Eurocentric or white tradition. She described that Eurocentric tradition as the one that was favored by American education. This is a nod to the white supremacy that undergirds American culture and schools. For Morrison, this construction of the black other is a way that Americans both talk about and police "matters of class, sexual license, and repressions, formations, and exercises of power, and mediations on ethics and accountability." They construct a false, Africanist image as a displacement of the things they give up in becoming white.

Like Mills (1997), Morrison saw race as the central, organizing principle in American social reality. Furthermore, she argued that Africanism, as it is constructed in the white psyche, is a way for whites talk about and repress issues that include economic, sexual, and power dynamics. Therefore, whites use the construction of blacks as a way to organize their reality by way of difference. These are folks who have already constructed Thandeka's white identity. They have already been dealt a severe wound by their white caretakers, and therefore have lost the ability to see matters of whiteness as isolated from blackness or, for Morrison, the Africanist sign. So because whites have a distorted understanding of themselves due to harm at the hands of their caretaker(s), they displace their shame and anger in areas of their psyche or imagination that Morrison described as the Africanist presence, on the racialized other. Whites transcribe their trauma onto this other. So the wounded, white psyche uses its understanding of Africanism in order to co-construct a racial reality that becomes a social reality. Morrison (1995) described this process as follows.

> "Through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette, American Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, 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. 7).

In this excerpt, Morrison connected Africanism to the particularities of the American experience. Doing so makes explicit how Africanism was rendered into

the American racial contract described by Mills, thereby structuring white supremacy and subsequent white identity. So this racial reality that is imposed by the splintered white identity creates space to both make visible and invisible a system of white supremacy. Certain things are historicized or made timeless, organized as civilized or chaos, and normalized as organizing principles of reality in relation to the "range of color on a palette." This is the result of the imposition of a reality on and by the damaged, white psyche. To go back to the original passage of Morrison's I cited, this is the "disabling virus." While Morrison suggested this was a disabling virus in literary discourse, it is also a disabling virus in our social reality and therefore our schools. If the white psyche is damaged in the core ways that Thandeka's work suggests, it is essential that we acknowledge that harm with care in order to understand how it works.

By calling this process a virus, Morrison pointed out that this is not a sustainable, healthy system for any of its participants. Potential, short-term material benefit for elite whites aside, this is not a way of being that is sustainable for a society. In Morrison's interview with Charlie Rose, she asked that whites stop displacing the confusion and shame created by their racialized self onto the racialized other. She argued that they needed to separate their understanding of themselves from their construction of the Africanist presence, the racialzed other. Doing so would allow them to make better sense of their damaged psyche. Rather than simple contrition, the common result of white privilege pedagogy, this approach allows whites to move beyond guilt towards action on a dysfunctional system. This angle allows us to understand the

participants of whites in such a system in a more nuanced way in order to disrupt white supremacy. Of disrupting this sort of system, Luke (2008) wrote this.

> To understand racism requires that we not see it as simply a particular form of ubiquitous human evil, the product of fascist and patriarchal psychopathology, even where this is demonstrably the case. To disrupt and foreclose it, to deter and preclude it – we need to see racism as a practice of power, as an exercise of human judgment and action, an act of "discrimination" - however vulgar, however irrational and rationalised - within social fields where capital, value and worth are evaluated and exchanged (p. 2).

Understanding the complex, psychosocial nuances that undergird white identity as it exists as a practice of power within Luke's "social field" is a way to deeply undermine the psyche that justifies a system that reproduces itself again and again as race continues to determine capital, value, and worth in ways that do severe damage to participants, ways that undermine our democratic potential.

So I argue that this is our challenge as scholars, thinkers, and participants in American racial reality. We need to understand whiteness as it undergirds racial reality in all of its complexities in order to trouble a social contract that is violent, unsustainable, and causes harm to the oppressor as well as the oppressed.

As I stated at the outset, education is a place where social orders can be transformed. So education is the place to take this theoretical discussion about

the ways that white identity is constructed by white supremacy and undermine that process through critical whiteness pedagogy.

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Elementary Teacher: I don't know what kind of school you attended back home, and I don't even want to imagine the type of people you had classes with, but here, in Blanchekreist, we do not talk back to our teachers. Am I clear? (Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 14).

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Whiteness in Schools

Now that I have framed how I have made sense of the nuances of white identity situated by white supremacy by relying heavily on Morrison and Thandeka, I will turn to how racial reality exists in schools. First I will examine how contemporary, neoliberal practices of white supremacy undergird schooling practices. Then I will turn to how teachers are prepared or not prepared to work within or against such a system. Finally, I will examine the deployment of pedagogy in high school classrooms that seeks to make whiteness the subject of inquiry. In doing this, I will argue that whiteness is an organizing principle of reality that normalizes and standardizes practices of white supremacy in schools. I will finish by exploring the idea of a new sort of transformative critical whiteness pedagogy. This is the critical whiteness pedagogy that I deployed in The Whiteness Project.

Weilbacher (2012) makes the connections between the current trend towards common standards and the normalization of white supremacy as a way to make racial reality visible. He described this as follows.

> Current, visible "reform" efforts that draw public attention to newer, higher, and therefore more rigorous educational standards tend to reduce the visibility of the impact of Whiteness, making issues of race less conspicuous to casual observers than they were during the 1960s, a time when race was at the forefront of American society. One possible reason why culturally responsive teaching is not spoken here may be because in some important ways, standardization is Whiteness (p. 2).

Weilbacher argued that culturally responsive teaching is "not spoken here," or is not being deployed in practice because "standardization is Whiteness." So the very frame in which schools are situated is constructed by systems of whiteness. This architecture is rendered invisible by using standards as a way to mask such a system. By eliminating a dialogue about race, replacing it with particular values that direct teaching and learning, whiteness reifies itself. This is a systemic manifestation of the same sort of thing that Thandeka argued happens at the level of the self. It is Weilbacher's claim that standardization is whiteness that explains contemporary, neo-liberal practices of white supremacy in traditional pedagogy and schooling.

White supremacy is normalized in school through institutional, neo-liberal practices. According to Hairston (2013), "…institutional racism is cemented in schools through a hidden curriculum that promotes White middle

and upper-class values and permeates all facets of education and through the use of education as an oppressive tool to minorities" (p. 231). Hairston suggested that the hidden curriculum of schools is "cemented" in practices of white supremacy. Weilbacher argued that whiteness structures school reality. Hairston argued that these standardized practices become a hidden racial curriculum that privileges certain behaviors in relationship to race. He connected these practices with the policies that shape educational contexts.

Hairston suggested that white supremacy is masked in such contexts due to the standardization of such ideology. He went so far to connect this with President Obama's educational rhetoric in the following way.

> For whatever reason President Obama decides to speak of race in education in this context, he strengthens the dominance and privilege of Whites in America while continuing to suppress racial minority students at the earliest of ages. When audiences hear aspects of neoliberalism in education, they do not hear the racism it veils underneath (p. 242).

Hairston suggested that President Obama masked race when speaking of education by avoiding naming the particularities of racial history and narrative. Doing so, he deployed a neoliberal logic that confirmed systems of white supremacy. For Hairston, talking about race without talking about race became a powerful way that the president, in a precarious racial position himself, failed to undermine racial inequity in educational contexts. This suggests that educational institutions and systems continue to propagate white supremacy by masking race with conversations of standards or achievement that conform to white

ideals. From presidential rhetoric to ideology within standards of educational practice, white supremacy is confirmed. While this clearly happens in the broader field of educational policy, it also happens in how teachers are trained.

Hayes & Juarez (2012) argued that culturally responsive teaching is not happening in the United States because of normalized whiteness. They connected this to the way that whiteness systematically defends itself from inquiry. Of their piece about the lack of culturally responsive teaching in practice, they wrote the following.

> Our focus in this paper centers on examining why there is no culturally responsive teaching and social justice spoken in many public schools and teacher preparation programs in the United States—particularly because ours is a nation that defines itself by the democratic ideals of equality, justice, and freedom and the necessity and consequences for this omission in education are so profound for all of us (p. 2).

Hayes & Juarez are deeply troubled by the contradiction in educational practice from a nation that espouses a democratic ideal but continues to hold up practices of white supremacy. This neoliberal practice pays lip service to equity while disguising organizing logics of white supremacy. This problem is apparent to Hayes & Juarez in the day-to-day practice of public schools and in teacher preparation programs across the country. Ultimately, they link this discrepancy to whiteness.

Hayes & Juarez suggest that whiteness is not problematized in discussions of race.

> For the purposes of this paper, Whiteness is defined as an identity that is neither problematized nor particularized within discourses on race because it assumes a status of normalcy (p. 5).

Whiteness defends itself when it is masked as the standard or the norm. It is because of this that schools and teacher training programs are unable to foster more democratic, culturally responsive educational experiences. Much as Thandeka pointed out how whiteness becomes a vanishing point at individual level of the self, Hairston referenced the way that whiteness cloaked itself on the broader scale of educational policy. Hayes & Juarez connected this to teaching practices and teacher preparation. They traced this in specific instances of a teacher-educator who was intent on social justice practices meant to undermine white supremacy. They framed this sort of analysis as follows.

> …our purpose in this article is to identify and highlight moments within processes of White racial domination when individuals and groups have and make choices to support or challenge White supremacy, most often choosing to support rather than to confront and help to abolish Whiteness (p. 2).

For Hayes & Juarez, there are countless moments within the processes of white racial domination when individuals and groups must choose between supporting or confronting white supremacy. They suggested that, more often that not, whiteness is confirmed. They used the story of Malik to support such an argument.

Hayes & Juarez used the story of Malik to suggest that we know how to prepare teachers to be culturally responsive, teachers are able to do so, but systematized white supremacy impedes such work. According to them, "… we in teacher education already know what must be done to prepare teachers to effectively teach all students…. …Indeed, there have always been teachers who have been successful in teaching the so-called hard to reach and teach children, and there is a whole body of research that has documented exactly what they do and why they do it that way…" (pp. 2-3). Hayes and Juarez suggest that the implementation of culturally responsive teaching is a viable task. They move from this claim into the story of Malik. Malik is a teacher who placed culturally responsive teaching at the core of his practice. Malik deployed such pedagogy in a teacher preparation program. Hayes and Juarez made sense of the trouble he made in the following way.

> Malik paid a high personal and professional price in his department for standing alone and making decisions against Whiteness in several different situations. Through official letters of reprimand, being put on probation, and many informal, daily micro-aggressions from colleagues that subtly and not so subtly let him know that he was out of line with college expectations, he was sanctioned and disciplined. Individuals and groups in authority over him and as his peers intended to push him toward conforming to and colluding with the existing dominance of Whiteness, or risk losing his job (p. 4).

Hayes and Juarez used Malik to point out the way that systematized whiteness defended itself. By receiving letters, discipline, and informal aggressions, it was clear that Malik was not adhering to normalized whiteness. The standardized conventions of individuals and groups in such a system colluded against him, almost costing him his job. In this way, Malik's institutional narrative was constructed to focus on his failures as a teacher instead of the institutional norms that masked the sort of white supremacist discourse that both Hairston and Weilbacher suggest define educational contexts. Indeed, Malik's story is evidence of the sort of work that McKnight & Chandler (2012) argue needs to be taken up in schools to undermine oppressive systems. They describe that work as follows.

> Teachers working to surrender some cultural capital in order to resist the ingrained structures of class and race in schools is one that is fraught with difficulties and pitfalls… ….but it is this type of teaching and curricular understanding(s) that allow for different curricular decisions, and more importantly, curricular outcomes to emerge. We believe that a richer, more complex conversation can emerge in US schools, and we believe, perhaps we hope, that oppositional teachers and their agency can overcome the overdetermined nature of race, class, and oppressive schooling (p. 94).

Certainly Malik's story is pushing towards a "richer, more complex conversation" about race in relation to schooling practices in the United States. Other teachers like Malik have tried to expose the conventions of normalized whiteness.

Borsheim-Black (2013) argued that a high school English classroom that she studied was able to make systematic whiteness viable. She articulated that white students in Ms. Allen, a white teacher's classroom were able to participate constructively in critical race pedagogy. Of this, she wrote the following.

> Upon first glance it may seem strange for a White teacher to enact critical race pedagogy with White students through a canonical novel, because the overall Whiteness seems so pervasive. But isn't that exactly the point? Of course, I do not wish to undermine the importance of literature that focuses on the experiences of people of color. Rather, I want to argue that for White students, critical race pedagogy should encourage students to critically examine Whiteness, not just Blackness (pg. 28).

Borsheim-Black is describing a pedagogical approach that takes up Morrison's plea for whiteness to become the subject in discussions of race. This teacher also takes up the necessity that Weilbacher and Hairston point out of making systematized whiteness visible. This is a pedagogical move that makes possible a dialogue with normalized whiteness. It also poses the challenge of reinforcing institutional white supremacy.

The classroom that Borsheim-Black wrote about was successful because it engaged some of the complexity of whiteness in the classroom. This is due to the acceptance by both the teacher and the researcher of number of levels that make up the educational context of her classroom. Borsheim-Black wrote the following about this.

> Whiteness worked on several levels at once within Ms. Allen's critical race approach to *To Kill a Mockingbird* with her White students. This multi-layered Whiteness presented several challenges that Ms. Allen had to work against. At the same time, Ms. Allen found opportunities in reading with, within, and against Whiteness at each of these levels. Ultimately, making the Whiteness of her particular context visible was a central feature of her critical race approach (p. 38).

Borsheim-Black did not generalize whiteness in her analysis of Ms. Allen's classroom. Neither did Ms. Allen. Due to this, she was able to think about the nuances or "levels" of whiteness that Ms. Allen worked to read with, within, and against as she challenged her students to interrogate whiteness in *To Kill A Mockingbird.* According to Borsheim-Black, "Ms. Allen drew on the demographic disparities in their local area to make their exploration of race relevant to their lives. She and her students broke the silence of the taboo topic, making racism in their community more visible" (p. 32). Rather than placing her white students in a deficit model, she drew on their experience and layered complexity in order to expose normalized whiteness. By "breaking the silence of the taboo topic," they were trying to expose conventions of whiteness. While Borsheim-Black equated this with making "racism" visible, it might be that the teacher and students were going further and actually exposing standardized whiteness as a system of power in their community context. By accepting a degree of the sort of complexity in white identity that Morrison or Thandeka wrote about, Ms. Allen used her students to expose institutional traces of white supremacy. "By drawing

on their particular community and her students' experiences, Ms. Allen found resources for her critical race approach in her predominantly White context" (p. 33).

Borsheim-Black's work highlights the potential for critical whiteness pedagogy to both reinforce as well as critique systematic white supremacy. She suggested that the very use of *To Kill A Mockingbird* was problematic because the source text was linked with white domination. Of this, Borsheim-Black wrote the following.

> Critical race scholars generally view canonical literature as an obstacle to critical race goals. And, of course, the persistence of canonical literature in traditional literature curriculum is a problem because it continues to privilege Whiteness and marginalize literature written by authors of color. However, Ms. Allen's critical race approach to *To Kill a Mockingbird* illuminates potentially rich opportunities for doing critical race work with canonical novels (pg. 33-34).

Studying whiteness as a subject is problematic because it centers an already centered position. However, deploying critical practices makes it possible to inquire into the nuances of the subject in new, "potentially rich" ways. Making whiteness the subject exposes its normative function. While this might reify some of its manifestations, it also provides an avenue by which they can me made visible and questioned. Ms. Allen's classroom is not the only example of attempts to center whiteness as a subject.

Martell (2013) used action research in his social studies classroom to examine whiteness in a limiting, narrow way. He described this project as follows.

> Using action research, this study highlights the positive impact that a race- conscious social studies classroom can have on all students. However, it also shows the many barriers that teachers face in helping White students understand their role in a system that privileges them because of their skin color. Subsequently, this study offers several implications for the teaching of U.S. history (p. 22).

Whereas Martell's work does take up the centering of whiteness as a subject, there seems to be little self-analysis of how his own whiteness frames his interpretation of his classroom. He described his purpose as "helping white students understand their role in a system that privileges them because of their skin color." This generalization limits the nuances of the experience his students might bring to such a discussion. It is very much rooted in Macintosh's (1988) focus on the material privilege of white identity without taking into account the psychosocial complexity of the identity formation discussed earlier. Due to this, Martell has a simplistic agenda of accusing his white students of privilege without taking their psyche into account. Martell concluded his argument as follows.

> …this study highlights the importance of rooting discussions of race not only in the past, but also in the present. Social studies teachers must do more to help students, especially White students, better understand the

> institutionalized power that privileges White Americans today. When history teachers include examinations of race in the present, they can help students see that it is the power structure that continues to perpetuate racism in the United States. They can help students better understand that racism is a system of disadvantage, rather than simply individual prejudices. Social studies teachers may teach about race and inequity, but that is not the same as teaching about Whiteness (p. 23).

Again, Martell was positioning whiteness as the subject, thereby calling normalized conventions into question. He was also confirming traditional racial boundaries by limiting his pedagogy to demarcations of "disadvantage," and "privilege." He was trying to broaden the conversation beyond individual prejudice, but he was doing so without taking into account the damage to the white self beneath the material privilege of white identity. This is a common misstep in whiteness pedagogy and limits the potential for generative, critical transformation.

Pennington et al. (2012) used a curriculum focused on white privilege to show a group of mostly white educators their racism. After the obligatory "privilege walk" that is often attached to McIntosh's work, Pennington et al. wrote, "…the day ended with bouts of silence, tears, and quiet reflection. This was the single most discussed event by all of the teachers" (p. 760). The privilege walk is when students tally the number of arbitrary privileges, devised by McIntosh, that their whiteness grants them. In their interpretation of their teaching, there was very little discussion about the deeply emotional response

their students were having. It was assumed that the educators had seen the error of their ways and this led to a "bouts of silence, tears, and quiet reflection." This reflection wasn't guided, the emotion wasn't explored, and the conversation was left there. Pennington et al. were coming into contact with Thandeka's shattered self without realizing it. So they were simplifying their analysis of their teaching in assuming that students had simply learned that they were racist. Indeed, this fits with one of their student's realizations about their own whiteness after the "privilege walk." "…That night I started to realize what they meant about White dominance. No matter how bad you had it as a White person, the truth is, being White is enough to put you a step ahead. That was the lesson I took away from that night" (p. 759). This limited understanding of whiteness as only a material advantage leads white students to learn that they are guilty of having advantage without taking into account the nuances of Thandeka's white shame or McKnight and Chandler's organizing construct of race. This uncritical approach allows whiteness to make non-whiteness the subject. Whiteness is only presented as a list of things that people of color do not have access to. Whiteness is able to defend itself from scrutiny.

Pennington et al. included the following excerpt from a white student about the absence of nonwhite students in the class to detail the success of their pedagogy.

> But I think that without [people of color] you're just White people talking about being White and there's not . . . There's nothing really to grasp . . . So it's kind of a biased opinion. You don't have anything to measure by, or

> other experiences to draw on. I think the experience is a big part of it. Because when you read it in a book, it could be one person out of, you know, a million, that that happened to. But when you're hearing experiences from people who live where you live, who teach where you teach. Who you would assume would have a very similar life to you. That's a big difference (p. 761).

This is a strange thing to include as evidence of the effectiveness of their pedagogy in their write up. In it, the student clearly struggles to understand whiteness without its subsequent binary, "people of color." This student is doing exactly what Toni Morrison accused Charlie Rose of in the interview I cited earlier. They are deferring a conversation about their own white identity, which as Thandeka tells us is difficult to hold in the white consciousness, in favor of a conversation about people of color. As the student says, without people of color, "there's nothing really to grasp." This is Thandeka's vanishing point. This is how whiteness defends itself from inquiry. Pennington et al. seem to mark it a success that people are sharing experience and finding similarity. I would question the extent to which their curriculum is actually smoothing out the edges, limiting the nuances of introspective or generative conversation, and refining the complications of the white psyche into an offensively broad conversation about arbitrary privileges. Rather than helping their student to grasp the contradictory and complex nature of their splintered self, they are simply reaffirming white supremacy by leaving the core at the center of the white psyche unquestioned.

My interpretation of critical whiteness pedagogy in The Whiteness Project acknowledged Thandeka's white shame in order to facilitate a critique of systematic white supremacy. It took into account both material privilege *and* the deeply troubled, splintered white psyche that comes from living in a white supremacist context. During the year, I tried to consider the deeply idiosyncratic, systematized ways in which white folks come to their whiteness. I was hopeful that students might become critical of who they were and how their society had situated them. This approach created potential for white people to take up a critical whiteness stance despite white supremacy.

Sharma (2010) warned of the difficulty of the kind of work I attempted in his articulation of a pedagogy that shared the commitments I outlined above in reference to the film *Crash.* He cautioned teachers as follows.

> Nonetheless, to undertake a Crash pedagogy is likely to be a risky endeavour, as it may unleash racial antagonisms which more often than not remain repressed by anti-racist teaching compelled to denounce whiteness. Furthermore, there remains a risk that a symptomatic teaching approach may inadvertently re-valorize whiteness and affirm a particularized status by occluding its universalist pretensions…" (p. 548).

Sharma outlined two particular warnings that I explore further in chapters five and six. First, he cautioned teachers to be prepared to work with Thandeka's emotional byproduct that comes with participation in whiteness. Escaping simple denouncements of whiteness opens space for white people to work with the repression that comes from normalized white identity. This is illustrated in

my complex pedagogical relationship with Victoria and her powerful theorization of whiteness as depression in chapter six. Secondly, Sharma advised teachers to be prepared for their curriculum to be open-ended, even if it means "re-valorizing" or reaffirming white supremacy. There are no simple answers to white identity and white supremacy. Race is the product of five hundred years of sinister, racial discourse that continues to contribute to contemporary practices of inequity. There are no simple learning outcomes that will change that history. Chapter five explores the idea of a generative permission to be confused. My student Lauren named that permission during a presentation. I theorize her statement in concert with principals of YPAR to argue that critical whiteness pedagogy should afford white people permission to be confused in order that they might sustain generative inquiries into whiteness despite a lack of clear outcomes.

My use of critical whiteness pedagogy was mindful of this discussion of how whiteness standardizes and organizes reality in education. This standardization is clear at the level of policy, teacher preparation, and in the classroom. In order to undermine the way that whiteness defends and replicates itself in education, critical whiteness pedagogy need to expose, acknowledge, and work with whiteness at the level of individual, local communities, and the broader level of policy with Thandeka's depiction of the fractured white self in mind. I argue that The Whiteness Project was successful at the individual level through my work with students in chapters four, five, and six. Chapter seven shows how the local and national communities responded with unacknowledged

white shame to this pedagogical deployment by analyzing the disruption created by attention from a local radio show and a national blog. Chapter eight shows how the students' play accomplished a nuance rendering of white supremacy. In all four of these chapters, whiteness was made visible and open to discussion. As Sharma warned, this had the potential to both limit and facilitate thinking that undermined white supremacy. I use those chapters to conjure the complexity of Sharma's warning.

Clearly whiteness pedagogy needs to make space to account for the nuclear waste that Thandeka's work tells us is the product of whitening. That space can be constructed in education. To do so, we must first understand how whiteness is standardized and deployed in institutional education, teacher and student identities, and standardized practice thereby resisting the critical pedagogy that I deployed in this project.

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Amara: But what exactly are we fighting for?

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 35).

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Conclusion

Contemporary racial reality in the United States stems from the material exploitation of non-European and non-white peoples. The historical atrocity of colonization and imperialism has been perpetuated through systems of normalized whiteness. There is a serious material benefit for those who are identified as white in such a context. There is also a serious material

disadvantage for those who are identified as non-white in such a system. *There is also* a wounded psyche that undergirds this entire system – the splintered white self.

The racial mythology that has been crystallized into a truth throughout the United State's history undermines the democratic ideal that the United States espouses and creates deeply felt dysfunction, dissonance, and shame in signatories to the racial contract. In order to continue working towards equity and democracy, whiteness needs to be made visible as a subject in order to foster critical interrogations so that participants in this order can understand how it structures identity and racial reality. Doing so is essential if any real transformation in the American racial landscape is to occur. Indeed, according to Ellison (1953/1995) "Is it not a partial explanation of why it (America) has created no characters possessing broad insight into their situations or the emotional, psychological and intellectual complexity which would allow them possess and articulate a truly democratic world view?" (p. 91). For Ellison, America's authors give evidence that we are still striving towards a substantive democratic identity. We need to articulate a "psychological and intellectual complexity," in order to achieve this democracy. Indeed, he wrote "…despite the impact of the American idea upon the world, the "American" himself has not (fortunately for the United States, its minorities, and perhaps for the world) been finally defined" (p. 83). For Ellison, the American identity that might one day achieve democratic ideals is still in the process of being forged, still in the womb.

It is necessary for white people to make better sense of their whiteness in order to aid this process.

As both Dewey (1916/2011) and Chomsky (2002) argued, education is a process that can aide the birth of this sort of democratic, American evolution. We need a pedagogy that both exposes whiteness and allows for a process for white people to deal with what Morrison called their “serious problem,” their wounded psyche. This must happen in order for white people to transform, for organizing racial logics to be dismantled, and for the country to move towards an identity that Ellison suggested has a capacity for democratic practice. Lensmire (2010) argued that a critical pedagogy towards this end must be mindful of both the material privilege and the nuances of white identity to succeed in social justice efforts towards democracy. He described this as follows.

> “My purpose is to describe and theorize white identity and whiteness in ways that avoid essentializing them, but that also keep in view white privilege and a larger white supremacist context. A growing number of researchers and educators argue that our previous conceptions of white identity have too often hurt rather than helped our critical pedagogies with white students. My article, then, contributes to a more nuanced and helpful portrait of whiteness and white racial identity that we might draw on in our social justice efforts” (p. 160).

According to Lensmire, it is essential that critical whiteness pedagogy be deployed with an eye towards nuance and complexity in order to engage and transform participants and systems of privilege and supremacy. This can happen

with mindfulness towards both the material and psychic impact of standardized white supremacy in America's schools and societies. Schools need to be willing to forge a space for the traumatic and largely invisible byproduct that comes with whiteness to be acknowledged and worked with. This is problematic because schools often work to dismiss or minimize emotional or disruptive teaching and learning. They create spaces for simple questions with predetermined answers. White privilege pedagogy is an example of this. Critical whiteness pedagogy requires space for energetic fissures. In building this space we might forge a pedagogy that allows for new identities capable of extending the democratic experiment.

To the best of my ability, I mobilized the theorization of whiteness I have outlined here during the project. This was my attempt at a complex deployment of critical whiteness pedagogy. This deeply influenced both my teaching and research agendas.

Chapter Two: Self-Portrait

This chapter introduces the participants. I render a self-portrait with interpretation of my own whiteness, my history as a teacher, and my positionality as a researcher. I use auto-ethnographic methods of self-study in this chapter and in other chapters in this dissertation to both interpret and make visible my teaching practices. Indeed, Russell and Loughran (2007) argued "…self-study is one of the most appropriate methodologies for making explicit the knowledge that is generated when teaching is viewed as a discipline" (p. 116) This portrait shares teaching and learning experiences that led me to imagine The Whiteness Project.

Next, I introduce my research assistant Natalie as well as many of the students involved in the project. I asked them to create brief descriptions of who they were during the project. Those are included at the end of this chapter. Student writing was not edited. I chose to have them introduce themselves in their own words. This gives the reader a more accurate depiction of how the students understood themselves during the project. The character they played in the play is written in parenthesis next to their name. Their grade level during the project is also included (See Appendix A[4]).

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Marvin: You are not to go anywhere near this new family.

Jimmy: Why?

Marvin: Because they might make you sick.

Jimmy: What?

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, pp. 4-5).

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Self-Portrait: So I'm White, So I'm Privileged?

My great-grandmother used to deal in guilt trips.

"Sammy," she would say, "don't you think you should call your Gammy more often?"

[4] This chapter includes introductions to students who show up more often than others. Other student introductions are included in appendix A. Only students who chose to submit writing are included. Many students participated in this project in different ways during the year. I have reference to over sixty students who contributed in some way in my data corpus. It would not be efficient to introduce all of them in this dissertation. That said, I will write about a few students who are not introduced here.

My mom was unable to say "grandma" when she was a little girl. She said "Gammy." So the name stuck. Mom was spoiled. Her parents *privileged* her with anything she wanted. This was because they had grown up poor and wanted to spare their daughter from that same fate, to the degree that they could.

Gammy's real name was Dorothy Truman. Her father was a Norwegian immigrant and labor activist at the turn of the century in Truman, Minnesota. This is all I know about him. Gammy ran away when she was sixteen. She played piano in nightclubs in St. Paul and attached herself to whatever man would pay the bills. Gammy was poor. By the time I met her, she was an old, wrinkled, white face.

By then, her white face was the only thing I had to understand where I had come from on my Mom's side.

"Sammy," she would tell me as a child, taking a plate of food away from me, "you don't want to end up being a fat, Russian Jew boy like your dad, do you?"

Dad was the son of poor Jewish immigrants from Russia. Mom married Dad, developed serious alcoholism, and spent the latter half of her life imploding. I mention these things to note my complicated relationship with my caregivers. This is important to situate who I am as I write about whiteness from the complications of my own whiteness.

One thing I learned from Gammy was that her guilt trips did not work. I resented the way she skirted topics, imposed her ideas on me, and tried to manipulate my emotions. It seemed juvenile to me at the time even though I was

a child and she was an adult. She was accusing me of the crime of being a fat, Russian Jew boy. As I child, I didn't understand why this was a bad thing. She demanded that I be contrite to her idea of normal without being explicit about what she meant.

Years later, being "taught" Macintosh's (1988) work on white privilege in a workshop as a white, high school teacher felt a great deal like being talked at by my grandmother. It was as though I was supposed to feel guilty for something that I didn't quite understand. The workshop facilitators wanted my contrition. It was as though I was supposed to admit that the achievement gap was my fault as a white teacher, that I could fix it if I admitted my racism. They wanted this without any mention of our nation's explicit history of white supremacy or my deeply complicated ethnic background, my family history.

This confused me. When I tried to bring up my confusion, I was shut down. A white facilitator pointed her finger.

"That is your privilege talking, Sam," she told me.

Later, I made sense of this moment in the following way. The facilitator was enacting McKnight & Chandler's (2012) symbolic violence through her pedagogy. She was doing so because McIntosh's work, a focus on the broad, material constructions of race limits our ability to think critically about the nuances of our inclusion in systems of domination. McKnight & Chandler describe this as follows.

> Agents who are having symbolic violence inflicted upon them engage in a form of complicity; they are complicit in the act because the agent is

> taught (directly in schools, sometimes indirectly via culture) that the violence (although not always viewed as violence) inflicted upon them is normal and even productive or positive; simultaneously agents are denied the act of thinking about oppression in a critical ways—ways that would reveal them for what they objectively are, which is domination… (p. 91)

So even as the facilitator was trying to implicate me in acts of oppression, she was enacting a violence that kept the true machinations of systems of white supremacy concealed.

White supremacy provides a great deal of possible material privilege for those of us who are white. It is predicated on a European colonialism that exploited and decimated nonwhite cultures and ways of being for nearly five hundred years. This material atrocity cannot be denied or avoided. However, laying a guilt trip on the white descendants of this insidious history will not undermine it as an organizing principle of American reality.

"Sammy," I pictured Gammy saying, "don't you think that you should feel bad about all of this history?"

While I did feel bad about all of this history, simply wallowing in my guilt wasn't going to accomplish the complex task of understanding my own white identity and systems of white supremacy. It wasn't *teaching* me anything and I wasn't *learning* from it. So guilt caused the status quo to go unchecked by giving in to symbolic violence.

My mother listened closely to Gammy all of her life. So she wallowed in her own guilt for nearly sixty years. She felt bad about abandoning me when I was seven, she felt terrible about how her alcoholism broke up our family, she was so sorry that she took pain pills to escape from reality.

But even though her actions and habits were materially destroying her, she never changed. She never *learned* anything. Her problems were too deeply rooted in her psyche and nobody ever *taught* her another way to be.

It isn't enough for white folks to feel guilty about what whiteness is and where it comes from. As I outlined in chapter one, white people need to understand the complexity of white identity in relationship to constructs of white supremacy. This is particularly true of white teachers working in school systems that are racially organized by that construct.

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Oracle: Us. Too often do we split into us and them. Fight for us, in all that you do. Fight for those who have been kind to you, even those that haven't, and you will fight for love. You will even fight for the bitterest of your enemies, because they are the sickest of us all. If you stand toe to toe with them and use your compassion and empathy as your sword and shield, no club swung or word flung can land on its target. You must teach Hurston this, too. Even if they threaten physically, even if they do more than threaten, you cannot retaliate. (Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, pp. 4-5).

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Self-Portrait: My Research, My Teaching

Leonardo (2013) warned scholars that, "…colorblind methodology fails to explain the continuing significance of both (race and racism) in the lives of people of color as well as Whites" (p. 2). According to Leonardo, our scholarship needs to be deeply aware of how our own racial positioning, identities influence our thinking. We need to be conscious of our color.

So I am a white teacher-scholar working to disrupt white supremacy. Yes, my grandmother on my Dad's side was a Jewish immigrant who was chased out of the Ukraine by Cossacks during the Russian Revolution. Her husband changed his name from "Tankenov" to "Tanner" in order to Americanize – to whiten. Gammy was the daughter of Norwegian labor activists. Both of these women grew up in poverty in St. Paul. Dad was a manic-depressive. He was a Jew-for-Jesus-Freak, life insurance agent, and far more interested in smoking pot than raising me. Mom was a narcissistic alcoholic who abandoned me when I was seven. So they did not teach me the white, middle class values that folks often assume I possess when they see the color of my skin. That said, I figured out how to survive despite my caretakers. I picked up the mannerisms of whiteness. This complicated history deeply colors my methodology, my consciousness, and my thinking. So it informs my teaching and research.

Part of my challenge as a scholar and teacher is to mark and make sense of my own complicated whiteness. I do this so that I can better understand how my psyche has been affected and positioned by systematic white supremacy and my subsequent, learned white identity. In this way, I take care not to engage in the same neoliberal practices that often undermine antiracist work conducted by

white scholars. According to Scheurich & Young (1997), "the unfortunate truth is that we can be anti-racist in our own minds but be promulgating racism in profound ways we do not understand" (p. 15). A way to avoid promulgating racism in my scholarship is to deeply interrogate the nuance and nature of white psyche in order to understand the operating logics of white supremacy and white identity. I do not attempt this work out of narcissism and a propensity for navel-gazing. Instead, I want to be careful so that I am equipped to resist dominating logics in my thinking, my scholarship, and my teaching. Whiteness is crafty.

Whiteness defends itself from the sort of scrutinizing I am writing about when it is not a subject in discussions of race. De Genova (2013) used an analysis of Obama's presidency in order to warn that agendas of white supremacy and global capitalism continued to cloak themselves. For De Genova, "…this, indeed, is one of the most remarkable distinctions of the contemporary global empire of capital, and perhaps its signature innovation" (p. 271). What is ominous about this claim is that it suggests the decidedly innovative, seemingly infinite capacity for global empires of capital to evolve, become rhetorically cloaked, and carry out the work of colonization. In this way, white supremacy continues to reify itself as economic logic even as America celebrates the election of its first black president. Part of my reflexive work is to understand how whiteness operates in and around me. Indeed, as Sharma warned in the pervious chapter, this has the potential to reaffirm white supremacy.

As a white scholar, I have trepidations about centering whiteness in my work. I need to be cautious not to reify the dominant position of whiteness as I expose it. White people are implicated in histories that have caused so much harm. I must be careful to avoid adding to that long list of atrocities. At the same time, it is my responsibility to work towards unraveling the systematic racism of white supremacy that I have been born into. This racial reality has explicitly surrounded me my entire life as a white, American. If I don't work to disrupt it, I am complicit. And that is not an ethical choice I can make. I need to understand my own internalization of race in order to participate in pedagogy or research about race. Taking Thandeka (1999) into account, I have to be mindful of my psyche. If folks are acting out of compulsion, something is happening deep within their conscious being, at the level of what Morrison referred to as the psyche. Leonardo's warning against a colorblind methodology suggests that I need to understand the white psyche that undergirds, defines, and is thereby defined by contemporary social, racial reality.

Leonardo suggested that storytelling was a powerful way of troubling dominant, western discourses of knowledge that support white supremacy. Mahmoud El Kati (2013) helped me to make better sense of deleterious effect whiteness has on the white psyche by telling a story. This happened one night in a class I was taking during my doctoral work. A black educator and scholar, El Kati's compassion, humility, and critical faculty were profound as he spoke. I'll share the story he told here.

El Kati grew up in the segregated south. As he put it, “I’m a southern born black guy” (Personal Communication, 11/20/13). In his story, he was a little boy. There was only one white owned shop on the main street in SavLaurenh, Georgia. This is where he grew up. The white-owned shop was a bakery. One morning, when he was eight, El Kati walked up to the window. The scent of fresh glazed donuts drew him near. As he was standing at the window, the white baker calmly put down what he was doing. He walked out to where El Kati was standing and kicked him as hard as he could. The white baker then returned to what he had been doing. El Kati didn’t tell anyone.

Years later, reading Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* helped El Kati to understand this story. In Wright’s memoir of growing up black in the south, he told a story about a black elevator driver who let a white man kick him everyday for 50 cents. El Kati described his analysis of his childhood memory as follows.

> It is just something that stuck with me. You know, kick me, why’d he kick me? *(laughs)* And I was able to answer it years later. Richard Wright helped me understand it. Somewhere in his Black Boy he described, you know that man, when that elevator driver guy, had the guy kick him everyday, and I thought about that, before I was able to figure out the compulsiveness, what blacks do to peoples senses, you know, you know, it’s not, nobody I know, nobody’s born that way, you know, it’s a release, it becomes a part of people’s emotional life. It is a part of emotional life, you know, emotional lives are warped and they don’t even know that they are that way. This is what black people should say more of. You know,

> there is another kind of, another kind of vocabulary we need to develop, you know, you know its not just protest, you know, you see the old people used to say that white people are like little bad children because of the way they behave towards them you know like children could be very kind and mean at the same time, that's like white grown people, they're children, you know what I mean? (Personal Communication, 11/20/13).

El Kati makes powerful sense of why the white baker kicked him. According to El Kati, the baker acted out of compulsion. The baker had an almost emotional response to El Kati's presence outside of his bakery. The baker's warped emotional life caused him to lash out at El Kati as though the baker were a mean child.

This story is evidence of the distortion of the white psyche. If El Kati's claim is to be taken seriously, whites have a warped emotional life. El Kati argued that whites do not see this distortion. It rests underneath their consciousness. This echoes a claim that Mills (1997) made about whiteness.

> "Part of what it means to be constructed as "white" (the metamorphosis of the sociopolitical contract), part of what it requires to achieve Whiteness, successfully to become a white person (one imagines a ceremony with certificates attending the successful rite of passage: "Congratulations, you're now an official white person!"), is a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities. To a significant extent, then, white signatories will live in an invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland…" (p. 18)

According to Mills white signatories to contemporary structures of white supremacy are strategically confounded about their participations in this racialized, social reality. While there is some level of understanding as to how they are privileged and empowered by this organizing logic, there is *also* a serious distortion of their psyche that limits or obstructs transformative, mobilized critiques of white supremacy.

Ultimately, El Kati's analysis suggests that due to this confoundedness, white people are stunted in their development. This is a profound summation of what happens to the psyche of those who participate in white supremacy. According to El Kati, nobody is born like this. This warping occurs because of exposure to systems of white supremacy and causes white people to lash out in childish, violent ways. This is deeply problematic for those of us who are white and would dismantle white supremacy. Whites need to be cognizant of our psyche and manage this distorted emotional life that has been ingrained in us by a white supremacist culture. El Kati's story suggests that white identity is deeply rooted in the white subconscious. The sources of acts of racial oppression are deeply buried in the machinations of this troubled psyche. This echoes how Morrison and Thandeka theorized whiteness.

As a high school teacher, this theorization exposes a particular challenge. There is something happening at the level of the psyche—below the consciousness—that creates a compulsion in white folks. Part of my work as an educator is mentoring adolescents, young adults, and people as they grow up. El Kati likens white folks to children who can be both kind and mean. This seems

like an accurate description of the young people I have worked with. No matter how kind or mean my students are, I have always felt the responsibility to guide and nurture them. People have described me as having a radically open, relational way of being with my students. Indeed, this contributed to the work I conducted with both Victoria and Lauren in chapters five and six.

Regardless of what students bring to the table, I try and mentor them in order that they can see that their actions have consequences, mark their empathetic connection to others around them, and understand how they have been positioned in the world. This work has happened in high school settings and has attempted to create productive, pedagogical spaces. Like Leonardo suggested, story is a powerful way to disrupt oppressive practices. Much like El Kati, story is a part of my pedagogical practice. I don't tell a story about a baker. Instead, I share a story about card houses.

My first year as a teacher, I watched a 9th grade girl build a house of cards on her desk during a study hall. This was at Cardinal High School.[5] I watched as the girl meticulously added card after card until she had built a tower on her desk. Mostly unsuccessful as a first-year teacher, I remember thinking about how profound that girl's act of creation was. She built something remarkable in a chaotic, classroom space. After the girl finished, a group of boys across the room noticed what she had made. Without stopping to think, one of the boys threw something at the card house and destroyed it. Then the boys started to build their own house of card. The girl spent twenty minutes trying to knock down

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[5] Cardinal High School is a pseudonym I use for the first high school I taught at.

their card house. The bell rang, the student left, and cards were everywhere. I was devastated. Why in the world did the boys feel the need to destroy the girl's work? Why did she need to knock back? After spending some time with this story, I came to understand it is as a microcosm of the way that my students interacted with each other and with me. All too often we spent our time destroying each other's individual work. We caused each other harm rather than working together to make something. My pedagogy was transformed. I have shared this story with every class I have since taught. I have a simple message.

"We have the luxury of this time together," I tell my high school students on the first day, "my only rule is that we cannot knock down each other's card houses. It is in our shared interest to learn to build together."

This has been the organizing logic of my teaching. It works because it demands that students understand how their individual acts might harm the collective effort of a class. It necessitates either constructive or passive participation in the teaching and learning that happens in a space. If anyone is destructive or harmful (including the teacher), it is both our job as a group of people and my job as a facilitator to acknowledge the harm and adjust the situation so it does not happen again. This needs to happen regardless of the destructive compulsion to destroy things that is rooted in our psyches as evidenced by the story about card houses. Regardless of different, oftentimes competing backgrounds, interpretations, and purposes, I see the classroom a space to dialogue with and figure out participation in generative ways.

As El Kati shared his story about the baker with me, I thought about the boys who had destroyed the girl's card house. I had spent ten years teaching high school students to overcome their compulsion to destroy each other's card houses. Could the same pedagogical logic transfer to my work as an anti-racist, white educator? I was coming to form a question. Could I teach white people to understand their racial compulsions? Was it possible for them to overcome the distortion of their emotional life, their psyche, in order to overcome what El Kati described as their stunted development? Could I help them learn to grow up?

Growing up is a different sort of learning objective than traditional education privileges. There is no clear, measurable outcome of acquiring a critical perspective and wisdom. It does not afford the simple answers to simple questions that Ayers & Ayers suggest traditional schooling fosters.

My deployment of critical whiteness pedagogy valued the wisdom that comes from asking questions instead of arriving at simple answers. Indeed, I describe this as a generative permission to be confused in chapter five. More often than not, my experience has shown me that antiracist pedagogies have little long-term, transformative effect for students. Duggan (2003) described this problem as follows.

> "This common pedagogical mode seems counterproductive for political engagement, and is too often based on incomplete knowledge of the history of the social movements being "taught." Rather than admonish and advise, it would make more political sense to *locate, engage,* and *expand*, productive political moments for future elaboration" (p. 81).

Duggan imagined a mode of pedagogy that did not admonish and advise in isolation. Instead of the watered down multiculturalism that undergirds so much of our contemporary pedagogical practices of anti-racism, Duggan argued for a critical practice of coming to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of traditions and practices that crystallize in order to produce our contemporary, oppressive racial realities. She envisioned a practice of teaching and learning that located, engaged, and expanded our understanding of concepts. Using what El Kati, Mills, Thandeka, and Morrison show us about the white psyche, it becomes possible to imagine how we might locate and engage whiteness in localized contexts order to expand beyond contemporary, neoliberal or even explicit practices of white supremacy. I've spent years coming to articulate the kind of pedagogy I practiced during The Whiteness Project.

Cardinal High School is an urban, Midwestern high school. I spent four years teaching English and Drama there. That was my first job as a teacher. It was also the first time that I stood in front of a room of mostly black students and realized that my white identity had serious pedagogical and ethical implications. I spent four years learning how to navigate my whiteness and the way it affected my students. This experience forced me to reflect on the racial norms that had been inscribed on me by my own high school experience in an affluent, white suburban high school. It also troubled my undergraduate work at the University of Minnesota where I had been surrounded by white people, white systems.

By the end of those four years of teaching, one of my 9th graders shared something that stuck with me. It happened during a discussion of the use of the N-word in *To Kill A Mockingbird* in 9th grade English*.* Though it made me uncomfortable, I always chose to read it aloud when I taught the book to honor the author's choice to include it.

"It is okay if you say the word, Mr. Tanner," Chris told me, "you are one of *us*."

Chris was black. In that moment, he recognized a racial solidarity in our work in the classroom. Whatever that meant to him, it meant a great deal to me. This was not permission for me to use the word, something I did not feel comfortable doing. It *was* a moment where Chris saw that the work he and I were engaged in disrupted traditional racial boundaries. We were building metaphorical card houses together despite our racial positioning. My growing racial consciousness allowed me to move beyond my participation in white identity and deploy pedagogy to make critical disruptions into systems of racial inequity with my students. I had spent four years learning to identify with my black students, to advocate for them in powerful ways. Chris publically acknowledged that he saw that in class.

The next year I took a job at Primdale Area High School (PAHS). Though PAHS was a first ring suburban high school experiencing growing diversity, it *felt* more like the school I attended as a student than the school where I cut my teeth as a teacher. I had returned to a white space. The honest discussions about race

that I experienced in my first classroom were replaced by anxiety, silence, and seemingly preprogrammed responses.

"It is better now, Mr. Tanner," was a typical response from my mostly white, 11th grade students when we worked through *Black Boy* by Richard Wright in American Literature together. "We don't need to talk about this anymore."

After the class would agree that racism was pretty much solved, the bell would ring. White students would congregate near the music and art rooms. Some of them would hang out in my classroom, the drama room. I would overhear disparaging comments about "Compton Corner," the student moniker given to the space near the administrative offices where the black students hung out. Or I would hear a joke about "Hmong Mountain," the area at the top of the stairs, near the media center where the Asian students hung out.

It was as though the white students were unable or unwilling to see how discourses of white supremacy were reproducing themselves in their social and schooling contexts. A neoliberal cloaking of white supremacy was playing out on the microcosmic level in the school. In the same way that I understand schools as microcosms of their social context, I also understand them as sites of transformation.

This realization became the inspiration for my dissertation project. I wanted to build a critical intervention on how my students participated complicity in white supremacy. Could I help the white students at PAHS become aware of their own whiteness and its social implications in the same way that I

had grown to see it in my first teaching job? Could I help them, as El Kati put it, grow up?

***

(Hurston calls Dawn Amara. He recognizes the mistake and uses the previous line to both call into question Dawn's similarity to Amara as well as the name of the Teddy Bear. It's Amara.)

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 82).

***

Other Participants: A Cast List

Now that I shared my self-portrait, I will introduce the participants in this project. I asked them to write a reflection of who they were during the project a year after it was over. Many of them positioned their writing by thinking back to who they were a year ago, during the project. There is diversity in tense, length, and approach to their descriptions. I did not change anything in their answers to my question. Qualitative researchers can often introduce their subjects to support their agenda. I am disturbing the smoothness of such an approach by solely relying on student writing. These are not all of the students who were involved in the project. They are enough to evoke a strong sense of who the participants were.

***

Roman: Yeah. She does a pretty good job for the most part. Sometimes she can be a little naive, but she usually gets the job done.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 37).

***

Natalie (Research Assistant) – 22 – Early Childhood Education

I suppose my official title for The Whiteness Project was research assistant. I also suppose that this means that I was meant to assist the researcher (Sam Tanner) in whatever he attempted to accomplish. I would like to think that I did that.

Initially I joined this project because I knew that any experience with Sam Tanner would stretch my thinking in a way that would both challenge me and drive me crazy but in the end make me a better person.

I initially planned on being a detached observer, but I do not do observer well, nor do I think that Sam ever intended for me to be an observer. I became a fully involved, thinking, breathing participant. This also meant that I too was and am dealing with what whiteness is and means in my life, particularly as an educator.

To summarize my role in the project, I think most of the students involved would say that I was the "mom". I made sure that the schedule worked, that the students were fed, voices were heard, and as much as possible that no one walked away with hurt feelings. There were definitely students that I interacted with more than others but at some point in the process I spoke one-on-one with every student about an issue they were having. Usually these were issues with Sam or issues that they had brought to Sam and did not like his response. I don't pretend that I know everything or anything about Sam but I

have known him longer than the students involved and this did put me in a place where I became some sort of interpreter between him and the students.

There was one meeting where Sam was struggling with something and said to the students "It's a good thing that Natalie is everything I am not." I don't know that this is entirely true but it was certainly part of my role in this project. I handled the tasks that were not in Sam's wheelhouse, things like organizing rides and keeping track of the calendar. I was also the cautionary voice to Sam's eternal optimism and acted as a colleague for Sam to talk things through with.

I did a number of different things for this project but mostly I just jumped in where I saw something that needed to be done and tried to stop the train from falling off the tracks.

***

Amara: *(Ignoring the question)* Do you know what it's like to be alone? *(She circles him, whimsically)* Completely and totally alone. No one cares about you. You are nothing more than an animal to the outside. You are a tick…tick…ticking time bomb, waiting to explode and destroy them all. *(With each tick, Amara taps the bars on the door. This startles him.)*

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 32).

***

Victoria (Amara) – 11th Grade

When I was a junior in high school, I was a kid who was simultaneously everything and nothing. I was in deep denial about many things, but also thought that I had the perfect recipe for happiness. It combined two cups calm,

poised, collected and sweet exterior, while maintaining one cup of a fiery interior; a dash of perfect grades, lead roles, and varsity football cheerleader extraordinaire; a teaspoon of the perfect balance between modesty and a flawless self-esteem; and, finally, a sprinkle of approval. From everyone that I met.

Perhaps my journey to be the perfect person was a way to block out my past. Indeed, every time I thought of the person that I so naively wanted to become, I felt as if I were facing a fresh start. A way to obliterate the therapy appointments, interventions, humiliation and loss; after all, this model of perfection would naturally be free of scars. Or at least be blissful enough to forget that they had any.

But life, as it is wont to do, enjoyed slipping me teasing reminders of why my unachievable dream was, in fact, unachievable. A burst of uncontrollable anger here; an inexplicable moment of depression there; times when my internal world was so chaotic, harnessed so much power, that my perfectly assembled dreams began to crumble right before my eyes. The only way that I knew how to silence the chaos was to self-destruct; and each time I did, I gained more scars to hide, pushing the perfect recipe for happiness that much closer towards the impossible.

I certainly wasn't apathetic, or a carelessly unaware adolescent. In fact, I would often worry that my uncontrollable surges of passion would not be hidden well enough, consequentially ruining someone's day or making me a bad person. The combination of attempting to hide and control something far

beyond my comprehension and refusing to reach out for help when it visited (I often secretly hoped this help would come to me; it never did) wasn't a recipe for happiness. It was a recipe for disaster.

Although I was the perfect model of the AP student, inside, I was crumbling. My past haunted me, my future terrified me, and I spent nights crying myself to sleep for no particular reason. That is to say, I never quite understood why everything was so intense; the everyday tragedies that I saw in the world had a profound, horrific effect on me, as if I would experience poverty and war first hand as soon as I heard about it. I had a dangerous sense of curiosity about me and a thousand questions I wanted to ask; I'm sad to say that, for the longest time, I didn't allow myself to. I was too busy trying to create someone who didn't exist. But with this passion came the notion that I was a fighter, and a good one at that; perhaps my happiest moments junior year came from the moments when I allowed myself to fight for something truthful, anything at all, rather than fighting with myself.

Looking back, I realize now that I left out the most crucial ingredient in my recipe for happiness. It wasn't even on my radar, not even a passing thought. To be grateful is perhaps the one thing that I most desperately needed. I had no notion of being thankful for the body that I was so keen to destroy; to embrace my intense personality that had the potential to change the world, rather than smother it to satisfy societal norms. And, more than anything, to embrace the moments when I cried myself to sleep, for they meant that I could feel. I felt every emotion imaginable, and I felt it quite powerfully--I still do. The

difference is that today, I recognize the human experience for the magnificent, twisted, chaotic gift that it is. When I was sixteen, all I could see was an enemy hell-bent on destroying me. And in my attempt to fight it, I was the one who destroyed myself.

***

Dave[6] (Oracle/Thomas Troof) – 11th Grade

I started working with Sam Tanner on his dissertation when I was a sophomore in high school. As I write this I am on the eve of graduation. It has been a long journey. Working on this project was a pleasure and one of the highlights of my high school career.

***

Roman: Sorry about her *(points back to Georgia)*. She's a bit of a dolt, but she's harmless. I'm Roman.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 15).

***

Tony (Roman) – 11th Grade

Last year I was having the worst time of my life besides when my grandmother died. Broke up with my girlfriend for the second time and realized I had serious problems. I was indulging in stand up comedy from Louie CK, which gave me loads of inspiration for the show. See the bit "of course, but maybe" for reference.

***

[6] Pseudonym

Cecilia: Ok! I'm not even sure if I should be going to this... *(looks back in direction of house, nervous)* My mother...

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 57).

***

Lauren (Cecelia) – 11th Grade

I was afraid. But that wasn't a bad thing. In fact, I think a large part of this project was allowing myself to admit to being afraid, and learning how to use that to create something meaningful. I joined the project because my mom told me to. Actually, the summer beforehand, I was part of a project working with Karen students, and putting on a play with them. This got me very interested in social justice theater, and I wanted to do more with it. However, I was nervous about joining because before this, lets be honest, I didn't have too much experience with being controversial. It promised to be, if nothing else, a rather uncomfortable experience. But my mom told me that if you aren't at least a bit uncomfortable about something, it probably isn't worth it. Turns out, she was very, very right.

During the research portion of the project, I remember observing how power structures were created during the process, and also how people reacted to those power structures. In a way, it reflected what we were researching: hierarchies were in place, yet they were strengthened by people's perceptions of them, and because of those perceptions, they became untouchable. This project became more than an after school activity, it became our lives. I saw race everywhere. I saw denial and obstruction and people working through things in

everything I witnessed. I comforted a crying girl in the hallway, and I wondered why in doing so a small part of my mind was still mentioning race. It shouldn't matter! I didn't want it to. I tried so hard to make it not. But it did, it does. And its not going to stop mattering just because we think it should. Once I realized this, it became important to understand why things were the way they were, and what we could do to change them. But so many questions were left unanswered, and so many answers were never put into action, that I had to learn to be content with acceptance before action, and confusion becoming something I welcomed as an old friend.

Once we started the writing process, I became very involved with the character I wrote, and was to play; Cecelia. She became so real and purposeful; I remember crying at the thought of anyone messing with her integrity. When I got the part, I would spend hours thinking about each of her lines, because I knew every person who contributed to her words, to the words of the entire play, so that I could find as much truth within them possible. I saw other people doing the same thing, and felt as some dove so deep into their character, they didn't know how to get out. This project was real. It wasn't just something a bunch of high school students threw together in order to help their teacher write a dissertation, it became a statement on how we were to view the world from there on out. Who was I? I was afraid, afraid of being lost, and not being lost enough. I was afraid of offending people, of going too far, but also of having our project not mean anything. But the most important part of who I was at the time,

I think, I hope, was that despite being afraid, I was determined to make something happen anyways.

***

High School Teacher: Hey, hey. Let's get going.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 6).

***

Mark[7] (High School Teacher) – 11th Grade

Mark was a perfect angel. Because he was so emotionally developed he led the project like Moses and the Israelites through Egypt. Just kidding. He was as lost as everyone else and spent quite a lot of time rethinking everything he knew about himself and society during those twelve months. The biggest emotional meltdown, however, occurred post-project when he realized that the system set up to help him, as a white man no matter how gay was as grossly imperfect as an Orwellian dystopia. Though he is a beneficiary of the systems of power, realizing the flaws in the world around him ripped out the innocence held within the wrought iron birdcage of his soul and snapped the neck of the canary of his youthful naivety. In seeing the racial biases present in persons he is told to obey and idolize, he has emerged into a much more difficult but ultimately worthwhile plane of existence.

***

Uma: Your sister's not in a very pleasant mood. Be nice to her…

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 6).

[7] Pseudonym

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Megan[8] (Uma) – 11th Grade

In the spring and summer of 2012, Megan was a bright-eyed little shit who fully believed that she was going to be in charge of this upcoming debacle. Junior year started, and as the project got underway, she began to realize that this would be much harder than anticipated. Megan did not work well with others and this project was taking a toll on her hopes and dreams- but it sure played a big part in getting her into college. She was a controlling bitch who needed to learn how to work with others, to accept other peoples ideas, and to understand that people respect her as a person. She still hasn't quite figured out that last bit, but this project really helped Megan grow up from the train wreck that she was when this thing started.

***

Voice from off stage: And in a press release, the Mayor had this to say… (Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 42).

***

Hannah[9] (Mayor) – 11th Grade

I was a messy broken person during The Whiteness Project who was just trying to put themselves back together. During The Whiteness Project I was reforming my identity and sense of self which allowed me to see the community that I was living in as well as myself in a very different lens. I was an almost empty trunk of sorts. This process began filling in that trunk purposefully and

[8] Pseudonym
[9] Pseudonym

critically because the project forced me to think about my actions, who I was, who I wanted to be and what my place was in the world. Also not having an overflowing trunk caused me to not have as many assumptions about myself as I would have had six months before the project started when my trunk was cluttered. When I choose to be involved I came in with the desire to fix things, to make the world better. And when the project ended I realized there is no end all solution to the oppression of the world but that I can in my own actions make the world a little less rotten.

Chapter Three: How I Got Lost and Stayed That Way (or Methods)

This chapter describes the improvisational, critical ethnographic research methods I used to document this project. I demonstrate my design and subsequent deployment of this methodology. This description illustrates my disciplined commitment to complex teacher-research practice during The Whiteness Project. I begin with my theoretical approach to conducting research. This leads into my research questions, my data sources, and my methods of analysis. I finish with a reflection on my approach to educational research.

Adhering to this research methodology with rigor allowed me to organize and make sense of teaching and research that often felt chaotic.

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Doctor: What is happening there? How about chaos?

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 44).

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Improvisational Methodology

In order to articulate my approach to research, I need to describe how I understand long-form, theatrical improvisation. Improv is often dismissed as comedy or short form acting games. Serious long-form improvisation is a powerful artifice. Indeed, Sawyer (2001; 2003; 2004) claimed that constructivist teaching and learning had a great deal in common with the practices of long-form improvisation.

In serious long-form improv, actors take up content and explore it collectively without preconceived outcomes. There is nothing loose or undisciplined about the type of improv I am writing about. It is nuanced,

structured, and a conduit to rule-based exploration. This process has the potential to inform research and teaching practices in compelling ways.

I have directed long-form, theatrical improvisation in high schools for eleven years. In that time, I created a rigid, pedagogical approach to foster disciplined, improvisational experimentation. Though I never limit content, I demand adherence to a list of ideological practices in a rehearsal or performance setting.

Early on as an improv director, I became frustrated with the potential for students to undermine an improv troupe's experimentation. I watched students that were too focused on getting a laugh, relying on stock social scripts, or imposing their idea in a scene destroy the group's flow. As a response, I codified the practices I thought were necessary for good improvisation.

"Here is our covenant," I laughed as I handed out a document one afternoon in rehearsal.

I was serious when I told them that if they broke the rules of the covenant, they would not be allowed to continue on the troupe. The rules on the covenant were as follows.

> 1) You must perceive and accept everything your scene partner(s) says as a truth in the moment. You must listen to and investigate every idea as it appears in the scene. It is your responsibility to build off of those ideas as opposed to ignoring or negating them.
>
> 2) Accept that Improv is not a performance vehicle for your personality. Improv is about (re)defining yourself as the moment allows. Anything

> that you do that takes the attention from the improvised moment to yourself destroys the art.
>
> 3) Accept that a troupe is a mutable and organic structure that comes and goes as needed. You are not defined by the structure by which you create art. Troupes are structures that live and die but you, as an improviser, continue to grow as a performer who perceives, accepts, transforms, adds, and creates.
>
> 4) Accept that you, as an individual, are not allowed to critique your fellow improvisers. A director is the only individual in who can respond critically to what happens on stage. You, as a performer, must respond creatively by perceiving, accepting, and adding. You must never destroy.
>
> 5) Accept that you are one element among many in our endeavor. You must always defer to the collective ensemble. This isn't about *you*, it is about *us*. (PAHS Prov Covenant, 2007)

This list of rules defined my subsequent work as a director of improv. This contract created a vessel in which my students learned to improvise together. It was my job to ensure the integrity of this ideological container.

This container suggests five important ideas. First, the concept of "yes, and" requires the performer to perceive and accept whatever content is created in a scene. This does *not* mean they have to agree with it, it means that they have to work with it. They can establish new starting points by clapping into a new scene, but once something has been stated it must be worked with. Secondly, performers must always defer to the collective over the individual. They are

challenged to accept and add onto whatever is generated in the moment with the faith that good ideas will carry forward and bad ideas will fall away. This idea is also at the heart of YPAR and collaborative playbuilding processes. Thirdly, there are no predetermined outcomes. There is only the faith that the content of the scene will grow as much as it possibly can if people adhere to the rules I have described in order to nurture it. This idea shows up directly in my work with Lauren in chapter five. Fourthly, the process mediates conflicts and disagreements. They occur and add content to the scene if participants engage in that negotiation. Lastly, contexts will change but the artistic process remains the same.

These rules became fundamental to how I approached my work as an improv director. That work carried over into the way I moved through the world.

I began to see reality as a collection of improvisational moments. Regardless of the situation, I tasked myself with "yes, anding" what had been established in order to push the collective forward. I could disagree with what had been established or try to establish something new, but I had to work with what had already been conjured in the space. This seems a pragmatic approach for white people trying to take action in the aftermath of a colonial history that premised white supremacy.

This improvisational approach came to frame the way that I took or taught courses, played basketball, and made sense of the world. So when I found

myself conducting dissertation research as a critical ethnographer, it was no surprise that my understanding of improv was central to my practice.

My approach to methodology is deeply related to my approach to teaching and learning. I have always been a critical scholar. In first grade I remember disrupting the entire class because the teacher was stumbling through a lesson on self-esteem that seemed to trivialize the way that people hurt each other. In high school, top down, oppressive teaching and learning practices frustrated me. My high school GPA was 2.1. This wasn't because I was stupid, but because I was leery of the machinations of school. By the time I was a teacher, I was constantly trying to figure out how to turn oppressive power dynamics in my classrooms on their heads. I didn't care what grades my students received. I cared if they *learned* something. This work often got me into trouble with my peers or administrators.

After eleven years of critical teaching, I have come to realize something. I used to approach my teaching like punk rock music. I angrily deconstructed school contexts by raging against them as loudly as I could. The punk rock artist deconstructs in order to create. This was my strategy to create learning environments that questioned normative discourse. Whereas punk relies on destruction to create, jazz counts on improvisation and nuance. Jazz musicians deeply explore their situation in order to create beautiful music despite their limitations. I learned how to work within the constraints of oppressive institutions by relying on my understanding of improvisation. In order to make peace with my teaching situations, I began to think of my teaching as jazz. This

approach served me as I took up the critical work of making whiteness visible during the school year. Indeed, it became foundational to how I began to think about the qualitative researcher's job.

Cornel West's (1995) use of jazz to describe a critical way of being in the world exemplifies the research practice I am describing. In a discussion of Malcolm X, West identified the improvisational capacity for people to be critical and democratic beings in the following way.

> I use the term "jazz" here not so much as a term for a musical art form as for a mode of being in the world, an improvisational mode of protean, fluid and flexible dispositions toward reality, suspicious of either/or viewpoints, dogmatic pronouncements and supremacist ideologies (p. 146).

West wrote of jazz as a mode of being in the world. This is similar to how I described theatrical improvisation to my students. West suggested that jazz musicians are suspicious of dogmatic or closed realities. This is the work of "yes, anding" content in an improvisational scene. Regardless of the performers preconceived discursive stance, they are forced to consider whatever shows up in the moment. Yes, anding allows a process of negotiation that doesn't dismiss content that challenges ideologies. It is not smooth or without struggle. In this way, improvisation is inherently critical of forces that would police content. West went on to describe the jazz artist as a revolutionary.

> To be a jazz freedom fighter is to attempt to galvanize and energize world-weary people into forms of organization with accountable

> leadership that promotes critical exchange and broad reflection. The interplay of individuality and unity is not one of uniformity and unanimity imposed from above, but rather of conflict among diverse groupings that reach a dynamic consensus subject to questioning and criticism (p. 146).

West pointed to the inherent collective nature of a jazz ensemble. There is a diverse, critical exchange in the construction of jazz music. Individuality isn't squelched. Rather, jazz is the vessel where conflict is negotiated in order to take the performance forward. In the same way, my approach to theatrical improv required students to defer to the collective by contributing their individual perspectives and negotiating their stances as performance movements allowed. West went on to describe the potential of this way of being to create generative tension and democratic sensibility.

> As with a soloist in a jazz quartet, quintet or band, individuality is promoted in order to sustain and increase the *creative* tension within the group—tension that yields higher levels of performance to achieve the aim of the collective project. This kind of critical and democratic sensibility flies in the face of any policing of borders and boundaries or "Blackness," "maleness," "femaleness," or "whiteness" (p 147).

This is powerful description of how I am deploying the word improvisational in relation to research. West suggested that jazz offers a glimpse of a mode of being that undermines policing discourses. His vision of the "jazz freedom fighter" is an individual that can reflexively interact with social contexts in order to unleash

the potential of the collective. They use conflict and creative tension in order to carry something forward dynamically. That something could be a musical note, a theatrical scene, an act of social justice, or a *research project*.

The purpose of carrying something forward is transformation, evolution, creativity without predetermined form. Eventually a form will take shape but that form is openended and will be a response to the generative process. Carrying something forward in this way requires a willingness to disrupt normative discourses and the faith to work without predetermined outcomes. This description of West's jazz freedom fighter in conjunction with my understanding of long-form theatrical improvisation has powerful implications for a critical researcher. My vision of such a scholar is that of West's jazz freedom fighter. It is an individual who follows the list of ideological, improvisational rules that took form on the covenant I gave to my students.

Madison (2005) articulated the challenge of applying this concept of improvisation to qualitative research, namely critical ethnography. She used an analysis of how Sartre termed the idea of "bad faith" to make the following contention.

> It is Sartre who popularized the phrase "bad faith," meaning that people's recognition of their own freedom makes them anxious and afraid. Therefore, feeling the responsibility of their own freedom to be too terrifying, they turn away and run from it by imagining they are behaving under rules and norms by which they must abide (Sartre, 1993) (Embedded Citation). In bad faith, one goes by the rules or follows the

expected norm in order not to disturb the *status quo* or to rock the boat even if the person feels it might be better to do so (p. 72).

Madison used Sartre to suggest the difficult nature of the intellectual project that West outlined. This mode of being will disturb a status quo that is the social product of the rules and norms that structure reality. Improvisation requires its participants to embrace a willingness to remake reality as the act of improvisation redefines its content and direction. This allows an organic process of liberation from policing forces that would organize the players' behaviors and predetermine their outcomes.

Improvisation taught me to embrace and conquer the fear of such a freedom in order to facilitate the sort of processes that West is describing. I have faith that human beings, adhering to the improvisational process I am articulating, will carry an idea or concept as far as it can go. This is at the heart of my work as a teacher-researcher.

Lather (2007) articulated her vision of research in the contemporary moment as a process of "getting lost." Like members of my improv troupe, the researcher needs to purposely let go of their preconceived understandings of reality. According to Lather, the researcher needs to practice a "doubled science" in which they are taking up research practices while simultaneously troubling them in order to discover new ways of understanding and making sense of their work in the field. Lather's description of this process is a way of conducting research that resists allowing our own ideologies predetermining how we ask and answer research questions.

Lather's vision of research is improvisational. It requires the researcher to purposely trouble the ground that they stand on in order to discover new knowledge. This practice requires the researcher to overcome Madison's articulation of Sartre's "bad faith," in order to achieve West's vision of an improvisational mode of being. Lather suggested that critical ethnography was a research methodology that could facilitate this sort of ideological approach.

Critical ethnography afforded me a set of research methods to document and make sense of my work as a teacher-researcher in an improvisational way. It granted me a great deal of reflexivity to adapt to what was happening in the field. My research process and procedures were allowed space to evolve. Whether it was my data collection, my analysis, or the way that my research was connected to my pedagogy—I was able to build on my intuitive, experiential understanding of improvisational modes of being in order to reflexively negotiate an intense year of pedagogical and research commitments in the field.

A long-form improvisational troupe takes a suggestion at the beginning of their scene. If they are serious, the actors deeply explore that suggestion and allow the performance to go wherever the performers are able to take it. The suggestion for my collective of students and I was critical whiteness pedagogy. I tried to create and maintain a teaching vessel that allowed us to explore and experiment with our understandings of white identity through theater. Furthermore, my research project became a container for me to deeply interrogate the implementation of a pedagogy that undermines systematic white supremacy in a local context. As the year wore on, those vessels blurred. It was

exhausting trying to keep them separate. Conducting research while simultaneously being a full-time teacher in a high school is a rigorous commitment. I took both of those commitments seriously during the 2012-2013 school year at Primdale.

***

Roman: I'm really glad we got to go on this date. I really enjoy spending time together, showing you what Blanchekriest is about.
(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 38).

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Contexts: Primdale, Minnesota, Primdale Area High School (PAHS)

Primdale Area High School (PAHS) is located in (The Midwest), a first-ring suburb of (Midwestern City) with a population of 33,660 in 2010. For a first-ring suburb of an expanding urban city, its population is predominately white (83.7%). It is surprisingly less diverse that other first-ring, suburbs identifying as follows: 8.2% Asian, 7.3% African American, 1.3% American Indian and Alaska Native, 0.1% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and 2.4% from other races. Primdale was incorporated in 1948.

PAHS had an enrollment of about 2250 students in grades 9 through 12 during 2011. U.S. News & World Report ranked PAHS the 14th best school in the state and 889th best school in the nation in 2012. PAHS publically expresses a commitment to equity work in the phrase "Quality teaching and learning for all… Equity in all we do" (isd623.org).

At the beginning of this project, I had the students reflect on their participation in racial systems within the school. I did so in order for students to take up Duggan's (2003) argument that the first step of pedagogy was locating positions within discursive formations. Again, Leonardo's (2013) claim about the power of story was evident in this work. One white student shared a story about her participation in the racial reality of PAHS in her journal. In reflecting on the story, she became troubled about how her own white identity implicated her in the racial systems in the school. She was both in the process of developing a critical stance as well as describing the school context of PAHS in terms of race when she wrote the following:

> I had a story. I can clarify any questions you have about it later. Anyways, this event occurred this last winter. I was walking down the hall during class and I passed a teacher (we'll keep it anonymous for now, but you can ask me later if you're curious). I realized as I walked past her that I didn't have my passbook with me and that she was fully aware of that. I kept walking anyways and she said nothing. Not far behind me, a black student was walking down the hallway, also without a passbook. The teacher proceeded to stop the student and ask them where they were supposed to be and why they didn't have a pass. This story is interesting to me because both me and the black student were in the same situation, but I wasn't questioned (Sally's[10] Journal, 7/2/12).

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[10] Pseudonym

Sally's use of story shows that she is beginning to locate how her own whiteness worked in a school context. She was granted the privilege to walk through the hallway without being monitored in the same way a black student might be.

Victoria located her understanding of the school's racial climate by describing the importance of doing research into whiteness. This student's writing, like the one that is referenced above, occurred at the beginning of the project and both displayed a statement about the student's perception of her high school as well as her burgeoning critical identity.

> The research will be awesome, because I feel like race is kind of an elephant in the room at PAHS. We all know that we have a reputation as the "ghetto school" of the area, and it'd be straight up bullshit if you said race wasn't a part of that. Direct quotes from the urban dictionary definition of PAHS mention "the black perch" and students of "questionable moral character". And we all know there's the stereotype of the loud, rude black person at school. You know, the "hold my weave" thing. But I've never understood how the color of your skin can effect demeanor/personality. Upbringing and culture, yes. But not skin color. Which brings up the question of what race is, what it encompasses. I've never really bought into stereotypes, considering that they have virtually no value. But I go to Primdale, which means they're everywhere. So I guess I want to use this project to confront the idea of race in the most direct way possible, and see what we find (Student Journal, Victoria, 7/3/12).

Victoria acknowledged in July that race was the elephant in the room. She also recognized that, although Primdale was mostly white, it was defined in the urban dictionary as a ghetto school. She constructs this by speaking to black stereotypes that she encountered in the school. This took a dramatic turn for Victoria by October as chapter six illustrates. By the fall, Victoria began to see how her whiteness implicated her in racialized systems by turning her investigation inward.

In both of these excerpts from journals, students are sharing their perceptions of their school community as well as questioning them. In a way, they are conducting Lather's critical practice of doubled science. They are inquiring into and questioning assumptions. They are describing their perception of PAHS as a racialized community as well as asking openended questions about the nature of the research they would conduct. I share both excerpts to give the reader both a sense of how two white students in this project located their perceptions of the school's racial community and to show how the early phases of the project created space for students' to begin questioning their racial identities in terms of larger institutional frame. This was the phase of the project in which students were taking up Duggan's call to locate race within systematic white supremacy. Over the next nine months, students engaged their racial identities critically in order to expand their racial consciousness.

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Amara: What?

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 34).

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Research Questions

At the outset of this study, I created two research questions to guide the research. One pertained to YPAR process and the other was related to Critical Whiteness Studies. I wrote two sub questions under each of those categories. The questions were as follows.

1) Does YPAR process as deployed through theatrical inquiry create a democratic means for participants to analyze and transform systems of power in this school?
    a. What does it mean for a teacher or facilitator to share pedagogical and epistemological power with their students in this project and how is that dynamic negotiated?
    b. How does the institutional frame of this project respond to this YPAR, theatrical process in limiting or helpful ways?
2) How does making whiteness the focus of the study in this project expose, disrupt, and reify it as a system of power?
    a. How does whiteness as a system of power operate in this school in relationship to this project?
    b. How does whiteness defend itself when it comes under scrutiny in this project?
    c. How does studying white systems and identities affect the participants?

By the end of the data collection process, I decided to include a third research question. The question I added was about ethnographic reflexivity.

I began to notice the impact I was having on the project. According to both Foley (2002) and Wagle & Cantaffa (2008), the critical ethnographer needs to be cognizant of how their presence in the field interacts with their research. My relationships with the students seemed to influence the sort of work they were doing in powerful ways. Due to the complex variety of roles I took up during the school year, I wanted to trace how I juggled competing personas and identities. How did it complicate things that at times I was a teacher, a facilitator, a director, a mentor, a friend, an advisor, etc?

I also became leery of how my own whiteness was playing out in my work. Chadderton (2012) also worked as white researcher who tried to make sense of the potentiality of reifying systems of white supremacy while conducting research meant to disrupt them. Was I reinforcing the sorts of things I was trying to make visible or inquire into? The following question became my attempt to achieve the sort reflexivity that critical ethnography requires from the researcher by acknowledging how my presence informed the field.

3) What was my role in this process?
    a. How did my multiple roles in this project affect the work?
    b. How did my own whiteness influence the project?

These three questions guided my data collection process during the school year.

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Mayor: *(Tiredly but optimistically)* Before we react too quickly, let's pull together here. I have invited you here to discuss the situation.
(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 43).

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Data Sources and Generation

I used the following critical ethnographic data sources during my research.

- My personal writing – fieldnotes and a journal
- My research assistant's writing – fieldnotes and a journal
- Student work – journals, data analysis, research design, drawings
- Email correspondence
    - Students
    - Parents
    - Colleagues
    - District Administration
    - Friends
    - Former Students
- School memos
- Filmed teaching sessions
- Interviews with participants and audience members
- Transcriptions of audience talkback sessions
- Newspaper article in a local paper
- Response to newspaper article on local radio show

- Documentary created by my colleague Gregg Martinson
- Response to that Documentary on *The Blaze*

I kept a journal on my laptop that included general thoughts and reflections as well as more detailed field notes. I wrote in this document each day throughout the year. Some of the entries were general journals and others were specific fieldnotes. By the end of the project, I had hundreds of pages of journal entries and field notes. Emerson, Fritz, & Shaw (1998) described fields notes as essential to documenting and interpreting time spent in the field. Much of my energy went into this sort of writing. My notes were organized chronologically. I approached my fieldnotes by first describing the event that I chose to record, my initial interpretation, and a reflexive note about how my presence in the field may have influenced the item I was describing. I recorded teaching sessions, theatrical workshops, scriptwriting meetings, play rehearsals, conversations with students, and anything that happened during the day that seemed to be in relation to the project. In this way, my writing was deeply rigorous. Everything that was happening seemed interconnected with the ethnographic research I was conducting. Indeed, in January I wrote about my writing in the following way.

> These field notes are, in many ways, synonymous with a journal. My life as a teacher in the field. It is all interconnected. Challenging, eh? (Fieldnotes, 1/2/13).

Critical ethnographic research requires the researcher to be deeply immersed in their research site. This was certainly the case for me.

A non-traditional aspect of data collection was my collaboration with a research assistant. I was able to deeply trouble the traditional narrative of a lone ethnographer by sharing teaching and researcher responsibilities with my assistant.

Late in August I reached out to a former student of mine from PAHS. Natalie Conniff had created a close relationship with me when I was her high school teacher. We stayed in touch after she graduated. She heard about the research project I was conducting and was interested in helping out. The introduction she wrote is included in chapter two.

Natalie was a white college student. She was finishing up her undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Education at the University of Minnesota during the year. After we met in September, Natalie offered her services as a research assistant. Natalie became essential to the project. She sat in the back of most of the sessions and rehearsals with a notebook. When I was busy teaching or facilitating a session, Natalie took notes, photos, filmed, and made observations of what was happening in the space. I trained Natalie in critical ethnographic methodology in order that she was both descriptive and reflexive in her writing. She ended up with over a hundred pages of her own field notes and nearly two-hundred pages of jottings. We discussed and interpreted teaching sessions and student dynamics. According to Fontana & Frey (2005), researchers need to be careful as to how they influence interview responses. With that in mind, Natalie and I decided that it would be best for her to conduct the interviews with students, staff members, and community members at the

end of the process so that I wouldn't influence their responses. Natalie's presence in the school and local community was much more anonymous than mine. Students or parents might try to win favor with me by giving me the answers they thought I might want to hear. Many of the conversations Natalie and I had were about how the students were trying to get my attention or please me through their involvement in the project. So we became wary of how I was influencing the research site. Students did not have the same allegiances with Natalie. We relied on that throughout the project. Natalie also transcribed all of the footage that we gathered in the field. She even helped facilitate some of the scriptwriting sessions. In March, I wrote the following about Natalie in my fieldnotes.

> Natalie has stepped up in necessary ways in order to support this project. She has made task lists for editing the script, provided support around organizing the meetings, and kept me sane (Fieldnotes, 3/8/13).

Not only was Natalie helping with data collection, she was providing support for the project in administrative, pedagogical, and emotional ways. Indeed, the improvisational, critical ethnography that I used as a method to achieve Lather's concept of getting lost relied on the collaboration and improvisation that West described. With that in mind, I accepted Natalie into the data collection process, created a collaborative process with her, and she became integral to the work.

Natalie contributed to the critical, collaborative process of this research. Her involvement deeply disrupted the idea of a lone ethnographer, imposing their discursive will on the research site. Natalie and I discussed both pedagogy

and research during the project. These things were deeply entangled. If I were struggling to understand a student's reaction to something, to figure out a way forward, or trying to make sense of something that happened, Natalie and I would talk at length and come up with shared solutions to a problem.

There were multiple layers to Natalie's relationship with me, with the students, and with the research. We had extremely different perspectives on education. Natalie was an Early Childhood Education student. Outside of her work with me when she was a high school student, she had very little experience with the sort of arts-based, improvisational pedagogy I was deploying. Due to the strength of the mentorship I provided Natalie, we had space to disagree in generative ways during the year. Here is an excerpt from Natalie's field notes to provide evidence of that. She was responding to our reflection of a scriptwriting session in which one of the students, Emily (pseudonym), reacted violently against the process I was using to facilitate a discussion.

> Tanner and I talked a lot about the last meeting. He interpreted it as Emily saying this is bullshit, suggesting to overthrow Tanner and I agreeing and taking over. I didn't view it as much as an overthrowing but I just couldn't stand to sit there for another endless infinite sharing time. I think that Tanner and I disagree on which points were productive and useful and which weren't and I think the difference boils down to whether or not we ALWAYS have to say "yes and…" (Natalie's Fieldnotes, 2/4/13).

In this excerpt, Natalie was disagreeing with the improvisational approach I was taking to both my teaching and my research. This is most obvious when she questions the improvisational tenet of "yes and…" Furthermore, she was giving evidence of the space I created for her to share that disagreement and to intervene in the project in order to push the process forward. This is line with Lather's notion of doubled science, of creating ways to constantly trouble our assumptions as researchers. Furthermore, this also speaks to the tension and negotiation West describes as essential to jazz. Natalie and I disagreed in a generative way that added necessary tension that spurred the writing group forward. The first draft of the script took shape over the next week after our conflict.

To make sense of Natalie's work in the project is to disrupt the traditional role of the lone ethnographer, working as an individual in the field. Natalie's presence deeply contributed to the improvisational methodology I was deploying. She showed up in my context, I perceived and accepted what she added to the project, and I allowed her interaction to help define the content that was generated in both the teaching and the research. The duplicitous nature or our collaboration allowed for a more critical, collaborative research process. This idea of improvisational collaboration also allowed me to incorporate Gregg Martinson into the research process.

Gregg Martinson was the media specialist at the high school. He also had a personal interested in documentary. Gregg heard about the project early on and offered to film particular sessions. He was a white, middle-aged educator.

Gregg helped out in order to both document the process for my own research interests as well as to build his own documentary about the project to share with the PAHS community. Gregg filmed our weekly Tuesday morning meetings in the fall. He filmed the presentation of student researchers. He also recorded some of the scriptwriting sessions, a couple of rehearsals, and the final performance of the play. Besides creating a library of footage for my dissertation research, Gregg also built a thirty-minute documentary that shared his take on the project. He posted the documentary online and shared it with staff members and administration prior to our opening performance. Gregg was inspired by the work of making whiteness visible in the school context.

After the play in May, we had a beer together. He shared with me that a black preacher had come to his church during his first year as a teacher in a small town. During that conversation, he became aware of his whiteness and how it implicated him in white supremacy (Fieldnotes, 5/22/13). He became part of the project because he believed in it as a social justice practice. I was open to collaboration with him. This led to a great deal of filmed data, discussions between him and the students, and a generative, collaborative relationship with Gregg.

Another data source was student work. Each student kept a journal during the project. They used these to respond to our work in the Tuesday morning meetings. They also wrote observations or thoughts they had throughout the day in these journals. I collected research proposals from the students in the fall, helped foster data interpretation with them, and kept track

of their work by staying in dialogue with the students through email. Throughout the year, some students took it on themselves to write essays, short stories, emails, build visual charts, or even create sculpted examples of their thinking. Again, my openended, disciplined commitment to an improvisational approach to the project didn't impose a rigid expectation for the research or work they would do. Instead, I responded positively to whatever trajectory their inquiry took and then worked to foster their projects. This was a constructivist strategy. It also meant that I collected a variety of unexpected items as representations of student work.

Electronic messaging became an important part of my documentation. Throughout the year I made PDF copies of every school memo that was sent out over email as well as every email that I received or sent regarding the project. The memos allowed me to trace general school climate as well as make note of the official, institutional communication throughout the school year. The topics of these memos ranged from "appropriate student behavior," to "equitable teaching practices." I had nearly 250 memos by the end of the year. The emails I collected ran the gamete from my dialogue with students, my interactions with colleagues and administrators, to my correspondence with parents and community members. In many ways, they traced the way that I navigated the project politically and pedagogically during the year. Oftentimes, I spent so much energy crafting an email to a concerned parent or a principal that I didn't have any left to take detailed field notes about the experience. Saving emails allowed me to come back to them later in order to make sense of what was happening in

the project. This data collection method allowed for a real-time documentation of how critical pedagogy was received in the greater community context.

Natalie and I created ethnographic interviews to further understand the project. Spradley (1979) described the ethnographic interview as speech event. He likens it to a friendly conversation. Spradley tasked the researcher with creating this scenario. After the project was over, Natalie conducted interviews with ten students, one teacher at the school, and two community members who attended the play. I coached Natalie to ensure the interviews were conducted in the spirit of open conversation. We had discussed focal students and decided on a group of ten to interview. We also chose a teacher who had a strong reaction to the play to interview. Natalie interviewed her brother because he had such a strong reaction to her involvement in the project throughout the year. He was skeptical of whiteness work and made jokes about Natalie being part of the project. We also interviewed one of Natalie's teachers from the University who attended the play. The questions we asked the students who participated in the project are included in the appendix. Similar questions were asked of teachers and community members who watched the play (See Appendix B).

Victoria's Mom reached out to a local newspaper in the spring to pitch an article about the project. A reporter came over and watched two rehearsals. She interviewed Lauren, Mark, and Victoria. An article ran two weeks before the show opened. A week later a local morning talk show host read the article satirically on the radio. That same week, *The Blaze* linked to Gregg's documentary. *The Blaze* is a national blog associated with Glenn Beck. Both *The*

Blaze and the radio show were very critical of the project. Natalie transcribed the radio program. We also made PDF's of the articles and the comments that people made underneath them.

My data collection started in the spring of 2012. I documented my teaching and lived experience at PAHS through the spring of 2013. I used the methods that I described above to generate a great deal of data. Often I found myself writing before, after, or even during school. I was diligent in saving all of the relevant correspondence as PDF's or word documents. Whereas this data collection process was rigorous, I also had to reserve energy for my teaching.

The primary responsibility I felt during this time was to my students and to my teaching. I was responding to students in the hallways or before class eight or nine times a day. They came to me with ideas about their research or observations about whiteness. I was planning our Tuesday morning meetings so they could respond to what the students were discovering in their research and thinking. I found myself putting out political fires and guiding students through their own emotional responses to making sense of whiteness. All the while, I was focused on the reality that we needed to write and produce an extremely public performance at the end of the school year.

Critical ethnography requires the researcher to be wholly engrossed in their research site. My work as a teacher-researcher became complex because I was required to create the parameters of the teaching project, live it, reflect on it, adjust, and continue this process throughout the year. On top of that, I was documenting the process. It was exhausting work. Many of my journal entries or

fieldnotes began with comments about how tired I was. For example, here is something I wrote in October while journaling.

> Mostly, I feel exhausted this morning. It is the Thursday of homecoming week. I have a full day of teaching. I have improv rehearsal. I have to keep going (Journal, 10/4/12).

This summed up my process. Both my teaching schedule and research agenda were intense commitments. But I willed myself to keep going. It was clear to me early on how important this project was to both the students and me. An enormous data corpus was generated. Conducting the sort of project I am describing requires a great deal of energy from the teacher-researcher.

Deeply mindful teaching and learning in schools is complex and exhausting work. This project is evidence of that.

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Amara: How can you be sure that the bad things we see need to be shared so badly?

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 34).

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Data Analysis

Natalie finished conducting the final interviews in June of 2013. We met shortly thereafter and began talking about categories as a way to organize data (Sipe & Ghiso, 2004). We deployed a deductive, interpretive process. Erickson (1986) described this sort of approach to analysis as follows.

> A report of fieldwork research contains empirical assertions that vary in scope and in level of inference. One basic task of data analysis is to generate these assertions, largely through induction. This is done be searching the data corpus – reviewing the full set of field notes, interview notes or audiotapes, site documents, and audiovisual recordings (p. 146).

According to Erickson, an inductive examination of the data corpus allows the interpreter to begin assembling and testing assertions. Natalie Of handling these assertions, Erickson suggested this.

> Another basic task is to establish an evidentiary warrant for the assertions one wishes to make. This is done by reviewing the data corpus repeatedly to test the validity of the assertions that were generated, seeking disconfirming evidence as well as confirming evidence (p. 146).

With Erickson's depiction of the analysis of interpretive fieldwork as a process of building and testing assertions, I went to work with my vast data corpus.

Natalie and I started by creating a coding process with our data. First, I uploaded all of our data into the online, qualitative research program Dedoose. Natalie went through and began applying the codes that came from our conversation about categories into Dedoose. The codes were created to respond to the research questions. Each question had a subsequent master code that Natalie applied to our data on Dedoose. With each of the subsets we generated from the master codes, we arrived at 64 codes for our data (See Appendix C). I came up with a different approach to work through what we had collected.

During July and August of 2013, I created a chronological data log of every item of data that I had collected or generated. The log started with a journal entry on February 21, 2012 and continued through August 8th, 2013. It grew into a 62 page, single-spaced, Microsoft Word Document. To log an item I would read through it carefully, put an interpretive memo next to the piece in my log, and move on to the next item. This allowed me to create a chronological timeline of data collection events throughout the project. It also allowed me to spend serious time working through the data corpus.

Natalie and I met three times during the summer to discuss important trends or items that we were noticing as we organized and scrutinized our data. We continued to meet throughout the 2013-2014 school year to continue discussing and interpreting data. We did this by testing assertions with each other, examining data sets, and discussing our findings.

The process I am describing also borrows from a Constant Comparative approach to data analysis. Here is how Fram (2013) described this method of interpretation.

> "…the Constant Comparative Analysis method is an iterative and inductive process of reducing the data through constant recoding… …Incidents or data are compared to other incidents or data during the process of coding. This process begins with open coding to develop categories from the first round of data reduction and further reducing and recoding allows possible core categories to emerge" (p. 3).

Natalie and I would take data sets, or critical events, compare them against each other, and allow potential core categories of analysis to emerge. In this way we came up with concepts that were central to our inquiry. Then we attempted to make assertions about the groupings that emerged. Our dialogue allowed this to be an open and collaborative process of data analysis.

As I began to write my dissertation, I continued to take up a comparative, analytic approach to my data. I did this as I assembled my representation of my research in my writing. Colyar (2009) described writing both as method, as a process of sense-making, and as an improvisational space of unexpected discovery. Writing has always afforded me what Colyar described. This has been true in my personal, creative, and academic work. Colyar articulated her understanding of writing as inquiry in the following way.

> I am hopeful, however, about the ways in which writing seems now like a source of possibility rather than simply mechanical drudgery. Not that writing isn't above drudgery. On the contrary, much of my work on this article has felt like trying to walk in waist-high snow. But in the struggle, I also see the possibility of coming to know myself as a researcher, writer, and thinker... ... Undecidability is not just endless instability, but also the space in which writers think, rethink, and take care in their reading and in their text…" (p. 435).

This is an understanding of writing as the improvisational struggle to make sense of things. In this way, a disciplined commitment to writing becomes a source of discovery as the writer thinks, rethinks, and shares that work with

their reader. Colyar's explanation of what writing afforded her scholarship connects with how Lather imagines research as getting lost. It also echoes West's vision of jazz as a way of moving through the world. So I connected Coylar's idea with my experiential understanding of long-form improvisation. All of these ideological underpinnings take care to make procedural choices that allow for new discoveries. For Lather, it is permission for the researcher to get lost. West's argument requires good faith to become "jazz freedom fighters." Finally, Colyar suggested a similar openendedness in the writing processes as a way of analyzing and making sense of research data. This is how I continued to extend my scholarship and inquiry as I assembled the unruly assemblage that was my dissertation report.

In summary, Natalie and I worked in reference to the conceptual perspective I have outlined above. Chronologically, this occurred as follows: 1) Natalie and I each organized the data in the spring of 2013, 2) we met to present how we had organized the data, 3) we coded both of our data sets, 4) we created assertions that we tested against the data corpus during three, two-hours meetings during the summer of 2013, 5) I spent the fall writing about the assertions we found most compelling using methods of storytelling, interpretation, and assemblage.

What follows are the assertions that Natalie and I were able to find evidentiary warrant for. These assertions were flushed out as I wrote during the fall of 2013 and came to inform chapters four through seven. 1) Sharing power in a YPAR collective requires discipline, flexibility, and extreme nuance by the

facilitator, 2) critical whiteness pedagogy requires a permissive, generative confusion in its participants (and facilitator), 3) whiteness is linked to depression, 4) teachers conducting whiteness work need to negotiate the political implications of Thandeka's concept of white shame, 5) the play the students wrote was a successful allegorical telling of white identity in relation to white supremacy.

These assertions came from the coding process that led to the list that is included in the appendix and relied heavily on our coding of how whiteness affected our participants and the way that participants interacted with YPAR methodology. For example, our coding of student self-reflections under the sub-category of whiteness illustrated a high volume of references to the link between depression and whiteness. This led to the third assertion above and became the impetus for chapter six of this dissertation.

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Oracle: Is this what you believe to be true?

Amara: Yes.

Oracle: Then go.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 75).

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My Reflexive Conclusion

I didn't come to this project as a researcher. I came as a practitioner. This research arose as a product of my career as an educator, my circumstances as a human being. This work came about in the maelstrom of student voices,

institutional frames, and local realities. It was practice that came about as an amalgam of lived experience, pedagogical successes and failures, and trying to make sense of an enormous, complicated universe. In that way, it was Law's messiness and Lather's doubled science from the beginning.

In my experience, Law and Lather's descriptions of research transfer powerfully to teaching.

So its messiness was both the strength and weakness of this research. It spilled into my life. Whether talking with my father on a Sunday afternoon, sitting in a circle with thirteen students on a Tuesday morning, or teaching first hour American Literature, this work became a part of who I was as a teacher during 2012-2013. It was part of who I was as a person. And so it is a part of who I was becoming as well.

If I have learned anything from my practice as a teacher, it is the necessity of rigid practices to foster exploration. This has been true in all disciplines I have taught. If I am sitting in a circle with high school students in a drama class, I demand full participation from each student in the space, there is no "passing," or "come back to me." Nobody is allowed to sit on a chair, all of us gather on the floor of the stage. Only after those rules have been constructed, often taking months to settle in, do the students get to do what I really want them to—say and do whatever they want.

The same is true in my high school English courses. After ten weeks of carefully scrutinizing texts, following seating charts and arriving to class on time, I finally give the students the real work of the class. They have to build whatever

they want in order to show how they have made sense of the course content and the state standards. Real constructivist, student-centered teaching requires a deeply disciplined pedagogy and organization of space.

This idea transferred into my practice as a researcher. As much as I was open to new sources of data, I was mindful about my collection practices. After I realized that much of my communication with students, parents, and teachers was happening through email, I started to collect and record each email that I sent regarding the project. When it became clear that my involvement as a teacher in the project was interfering with my work as a researcher, Natalie stepped in and conducted the interviews or mentored the students. This was an improvisational process but it was not haphazard or loose.

Much work has been done about the split between theory and practice. My work found me smack dab in the middle of that chasm. I was a graduate student, a teacher, a researcher, and a human being trying to figure out how to live out those complex identities in a research site.

A fellow graduate student turned to me in the fall of 2012. I had just related my day to her. We were sitting in class at the University on a Monday night. After playing in a student-staff basketball game at 6:00 in the morning, I had a whiteness project meeting at 7:15. School started at 8:00 and I taught until 3:00. I wrote my field notes during my prep period. After arriving at campus at 3:30, I was in class until 7:30 at night. I would be up at 4:45 the next morning to follow a similar pattern.

“Sam,” she told me, “you are going to become schizophrenic.”

“Schizophrenic?” I laughed with a British accent. “I am bleedin’ quadrophenic.”

She didn’t get my joke.

It was a reference to a concept album by the Who. Their album Quadrophenia is about the inability of the protagonist to normalize into the social, racial, and class constructions presented to him by adulthood. Somebody tells him that he is schizophrenic. He responds the same way that I responded to the graduate student on Monday night. His society imposed an irreconcilable reality on him. I was sympathetic as I was living out my research agenda. In fact, I found myself listening to Quadrophenia with different ears as I was guiding my students through discussions about whiteness, about the systems that normalized them. The same pressures on the speaker in the album were the pressures that my students were facing, that I had faced and continued to face as I struggled with the complexity of paying my bills, keeping my teaching job, and remaining ethical in my treatment and understandings of the institution of school, of my white skin.

The only way I could continue to be part of a school system that was doing harm to so many people was to also question that system. This meant becoming a graduate student and analyzing my participation in discursive racial configurations. To do this in a way that wasn’t simply paying lip service to ideas of social justice meant organizing my schedule and my work in ludicrous ways. It meant becoming quadrophenic.

So that is what I did.

I refused to simplify the landscape by denying the contradictions around me. To make sense of my circumstances was to be immersed in complexity. To limit that complexity with pre-determined outcomes or understandings is to limit the capacity for adaptation, for evolution, and for improvisation. So instead of choosing the singular spaces of K-12 or Higher Education, I said yes, and to both of them. This was an improvisational choice. And instead of focusing on research or teaching, I said yes, and to both of them. From this choice spilled a cacophony of data, pedagogy, mistakes, successes, etc. In the same way that improvised scene work takes unexpected and fruitful turns, this research project continued to surprise me in generative ways. And that is the spirit of this work—the undulated hope that teachers and students can fine unexpected ways to make sense of things in new ways, to undermine the insidiousness of white supremacy, the expansiveness of oppression in our schools and our societies.

Chapter Four: Design and Implementation

Oracle: You have just defied the direction of your omniscient guide. I don't think that a set of bars is going to stand a chance.

Amara: I… *(looks intently at door, in a Matilda kind of way)(Door swings open) (Amara carefully steps out of cell, a room she hadn't been out of in seven years. Prancing lightly, she scampers off stage).*

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 76).

The Project Design

The Whiteness Project was designed so that students would become their own omniscient guides. I coached them to defy my authority as the teacher with all the right answers. They created their own questions about whiteness. This led to a variety of answers and actions. My commitment was not to consensus or overly preconceived outcomes. Rather, I fostered dissensus, disagreement, and dialogue. Students were given room to explore differing trajectories. The product of these different paths became threads that wove back together through the process of collaborative playbuilding. I organized this project with three distinct phases in mind.

First, I facilitated a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) collective in the fall (Appadurai, 2006; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Guishard, 2009; Morrell, 2008). YPAR is built on the following pedagogical axioms: 1) students should design their own outcomes 2) power should be shared between the student collective and facilitator 3) the ideas the collective generate dictate the research agenda and curriculum. So students built individual and group research projects.

They conducted those with support from a collective that met Tuesday morning before school each week to share, discuss, and write. Content during these sessions came from two places. First, I presented items to the group. Secondly, students shared data generated in their own work.

I also invited guest presenters to conduct two workshops during the fall. The first dealt with Macintosh's notion of white privilege. The next used a critical whiteness studies framework to understand race. These happened on Sunday afternoons. I describe these workshops with more detail in chapter five.

Student research interests varied. Some students conducted research about how students in the elementary and middle schools understood whiteness. Others led a theatrical workshop with immigrant populations at the high school to investigate how people not born in America conceived whiteness. Some simply took notes and made observations about how whiteness happened in the school. One student analyzed whiteness in social media. The research was diverse. Students presented the work that they did to each other at the end of the fall.

Second, I facilitated a script-writing, playbuilding collective in the winter (Boal, 1979; Norris, 2009; Zipes, 2004). Students used the research in the fall as the source material for the content of the play. A student meeting was held in February in order to decide what the virus was that was afflicting the town. They had decided that there was a virus afflicting their fictional community of Blanchekreist. They could not agree on how the virus worked so Victoria reserved a room at a local coffee shop so that the students could figure it out

without my facilitation. After that, four editors were selected to compile the script in collaboration with Natalie and I.

Finally, I directed the play that the students created. I cast, rehearsed, and staged their production in May. After each performance we held a talkback session with our audience.

The project was open to any interested student from the outset. Students participated on a voluntary basis. I never capped our numbers or turned interested students away. Meetings were held before and after school. Nearly 40 students were involved throughout the year. 20 of those students participated in all three phases of the project while others either helped with research, were a part of the script-writing group, or simply audition for the performance in the spring. Nearly all of those students had prior involvement in the high school theatre program.

This chapter will use a collage of vignettes, primary sources, and interpretation to conjure the pedagogical design of The Whiteness Project. I rely on three chronologically organized events in this chapter. First, I share my experience proposing the project to my school district. Next, I tell about initial sessions with the students during the summer of 2012 at the International Thespian Festival in Lincoln, Nebraska. These sessions both troubled me and made me optimistic. Finally, I explore some of the problematic power dynamics that came from my commitment to sharing power with a YPAR, playbuilding collective. These storied, interpretive vignettes capture events that make visible the tensions in the architecture of the project. They are meant to illustrate a

commitment to sharing power with my students even when that became difficult. Furthermore, they are meant to conjure and allow the reader to grapple with my teaching rationale during the year. This was an experimental project and I want to make room for the reader to experience the same discomfort, confusion, and dissonance that I *felt* as a white high school teacher facilitating a project about whiteness. These vignettes also reference explanations of the project that I submitted to both my administrators as well as my students. Both are included in the appendix.

The fragments of script in this chapter evoke the way that the students rendered school in the play. Oftentimes the voices of teachers or researchers are given primacy in framing what school is. Allowing the fragments of the play to illustrate student conceptions of schools troubles that power relationship.

***

Elementary Teacher: The book is teaching us that living in a cave makes you selfish. Can we all say that together? Sel-fff-ish

Students: Sel-fff-ish

Elementary Teacher: Good! Now, what does that mean?

Hurston: Excuse me?

Elementary Teacher: Yes?

Hurston: Well, it's just that I thought the book meant something different.

Elementary Teacher: And what would that be?

Hurston: Well, the hermits had different relationships with the Crouples, and the one that knew them very well didn't trust them, because he saw the evil and selfishness that was inherent in people?

Elementary Teacher: No. Do you see this? *(Pulls out book)* This is the Official Teaching Guide. It has the correct interpretations of the book. Yours isn't in there. Therefore you are wrong. That isn't part of the curriculum, so we're going to move on.

Hurston: But-

Elementary Teacher: I don't know what kind of school you attended back home, and I don't even want to imagine the type of people you had classes with, but here, in Blanchekreist, we do not talk back to our teachers. Am I clear?

Hurston: Yes sir.

Elementary Teacher: Good. Now, back to the lesson. Bruce, tell me, what do you think selfish means?

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, pp. 14-15)

***

Beginnings: The Proposal

I've already explained the theoretical and experiential traditions that inspired The Whiteness Project. Now I will share the origin story of the project more specifically to situate it within its localized, social context.

Nearly ten years ago, I stood in a high school auditorium. I was a white teacher in a mostly black school. One of my duties was to be a faculty supervisor

at the black culture show. I overheard a white student turn to another white student.

"Why isn't there a white history show?"

They laughed. I've heard that comment from white students any number of times since.

Years later, I directed a high school theatre project about teen homelessness. I had a team of student researchers who conducted interviews with a variety of people involved with teen homelessness in the fall. This included counselors, homeless teens, and the mayor of Primdale. After conducting interviews, the author of *The Laramie Project* Leigh Fondakowski came and led a scriptwriting workshop with us in the winter. She and I had powerful artistic disagreement about the direction of the script. I already had compiled sixty pages of writing for the script because our deadline for casting the play was approaching. Fondakowski created a process that required me to put aside my preconceived ideas so that the collective could create start from the beginning as a group. The process frustrated me and so I disengaged until it was over. Once Fondakowski left, I continued to struggle with imposing my vision for the project at the expense of the collective. This taught me that that collaboration requires the facilitator to create a productive process for generative disagreement without imposing their vision on the work. Multiple perspectives should be layered around a shared ideological core to the project if the collective shares power. Edmiston & Bigler-McCarthy (2006) described this idea as follows. "Drama… …can create fictional contexts in which teacher and students

share power by drawing on the authority of all the people in the classroom and do not only rely on the authority of the teacher or of predetermined written texts (p. 6). It became clear to me that the teacher's role in playbuilding was to facilitate a creative space that draws on all of the students involved. This was most obvious to me when I saw how my predetermined concept for the script in the project about homelessness limited students' ideas. An approach that values collaboration over the imposition of the facilitator's knowledge requires the teacher to avoid overly prescribed outcomes. In this way, Edmiston & Bigler-McCarthy's theorization is similar to the work of YPAR. Furthermore, this approach in concert with critical whiteness pedagogy is a much different way to conduct anti-racist work with white people than the narrow learning objectives of white privilege pedagogy. Edminston & Bigler-McCarthy described the kind of teaching practice this work requires by introducing a teacher named Tracey as follows.

> Tracey uses her power over the children to insist on standards for all activities whether or not drama is being used. Whether they are engaged in open-ended play or focused sharing of imagined ideas, Tracey will insist that as much as possible children are fair, that they listen to one another, that they are kind and considerate, that they share ideas and materials, and that they respect one another's different viewpoints and experiences, even when they disagree or argue. She is deliberately open about her own past and present struggles and successes, as well as those of the children, to live up to these expectations. She shows the children

> daily how power can be used over others, not to oppress but to insist on standards of fairness. She uses her power over the children to allow her and them to use power for and with each other (p. 3).

This is a powerful statement about how Tracey created a theatrical pedagogy that wielded her power as a teacher in order to attempt to *give up* power to her students in generative, careful ways. This is not a free for all. Tracey carefully organized her classroom so that students would consider convergent ideas, share their own thinking, and create together despite disagreement. The theatre project about homelessness taught me the importance of the type of practice that Edminston & Bigler-McCarthy credit to Tracey's pedagogy. What I learned during the theatre project about homeless became central to *my* teaching practice.

Eventually, the students wrote a script called *The Street Project.* Our core axiom for that project was that homelessness was symptomatic to the human condition. Building "home," necessitated "de-homing" somebody else. We produced a play that explored that idea in the spring. It was the first full-length play that I directed at Primdale. It occurred to me four years later that it would be interesting to do a similar project about whiteness. It would create a way to hold white identity up to the powerful magnifying glass of theatre.

Four years after conducting *The Street Project*, I sat across the table from my principal at PAHS, ready to explain my idea for The Whiteness Project. My colleague Vienna was there as well as the activities director, and the director of

equity in the district, Patricia[11]. Everybody was white besides Patricia who was black.

I explained my vision for The Whiteness Project. I gave each person at the table a description of the research and teaching I wanted to accomplish with The Whiteness Project. It was silent as the group took about five minutes to read my description of the project (See Appendix D).

Everybody at the table finished reading my proposal and looked up at me. I include an excerpt my fieldnotes below to show how I recorded my experience at the meeting.

> I described *The Street Project* in detail. That project was my first stab at building and directing a main-stage drama production with high school students. The project was so collaborative that I didn't list myself as the director or author in the program or on the script. It was *our* work.
>
> Anyway, I told the story of *The Street Project* and then handed out my proposal. A couple of minutes passed and, before I could say anything, Patricia popped her head up and said that this was a great project. In turn, my principal nodded and agreed to let the project happen. As I left, she said that it was important to her that the project showed the school in a positive light (fieldnotes, 5/30/12).

I left that meeting and walked back to my classroom. I thought about my principal's final statement as I walked towards my classroom. There was no malice in what she had said to me. She was committed to the kind of anti-racist

[11] Pseudonym

teaching that I was trying to accomplish. In fact, her doctoral research had been about how to address the race-based achievement gap. That said, her comment reminded me of the political position that both her and I held as employees of the school. There was no easy way to assuage my principal's concern. I resolved that I would do my best to avoid being false in my representation of the project but to also honor the anti-racist intentions of the school that was helping me to conduct this project. When I reached my classroom after the proposal meetings, my students Megan and Hannah were sitting in my great-grandmother's chairs.

That is how I refer to the area in my classroom that has six or seven comfortable chairs. Two of them belonged to my great-grandmother, Gammy. I brought them into my classroom after she died because they wouldn't fit in my house. They used to be fancy, Victorian sitting-room chairs. They were ragged after spending a couple of years in a high school classroom. I established the sitting area because theatre students always hung out in my room. I wanted there to be a separate space for them so they wouldn't disturb my teaching space.

Anyway, I sat down with Megan and Hannah. Both of them were white as were most of the students who hung out in my classroom that year were.

"Well, we are doing The Whiteness Project as the spring play next year," I told them.

"That sounds really interesting," Hannah said.

Megan and I talked about how she attended an elementary school in Minneapolis in which she had been the minority. She told me that she had never

really been able to talk about that with anybody and she hoped the project would let her think about that. Even in this earliest interaction, it was clear that whiteness did not often hold a subject position with my students. Sitting in those chairs with Megan and Hannah was the first of countless discussion I facilitated with students in which I made a commitment to centering whiteness as the subject of inquiry.

Even in those earliest, formative conversations, I was prompting my students to notice how racial logics informed who they were and what was happening around them. These conversations prompted the trajectory of The Whiteness Project. We began to discuss whiteness in order to mark how white supremacy informed our local contexts. Discussing whiteness openly was dangerous because it disturbed normative discourses regarding both how school should be conducted and how white supremacy informed our shared reality.

***

Hurston: Crazy things? Did bad things happen to you? *(regaining his thoughts)* I mean, how did you end up here?

Amara: *(Smiles at him)* Maybe they thought I did something wrong. I don't think I did. *(She pauses. The next words come out in a rush.)* I never had parents. I grew up in foster care, they sent me to school. There were always rumors, and they used to teach this history lesson about how people went blind the last time a new family came into town. They said that the family brought a plague. I asked—just once—if maybe the family was innocent. Then everyone hated me; I felt icky about everything. About my life, and how every person frowned at me. About the

word they called me. "Plotter". And about how they all wanted to forget that anything ever happened. So I told my teacher about how I felt, and I told her about how maybe the blindness marked the bad people. *(She stares straight at the Hurston).* And the next morning, they took me away. I guess we weren't supposed to mention it. But now, it's happening again.

Hurston: Who is they?

Amara: I don't know. People in the town who don't want to realize how people get sick.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness pp. 31-32)

***

Practice Complicates Theory: First Sessions in Nebraska

"Oh no," Adam[12] told the black girl who came up to him and asked him to dance, "I don't like chocolate!"

Tony and Dave laughed. Eric joined in.

Adam was white. So were Tony, Dave, and Eric. Adam and Eric would be seniors in the fall, Tony and Dave would be juniors.

They came up to me in the hallway after the girl walked away. I was chaperoning the dance. Dave told me what Adam had said because he was shocked that Adam had said it.

"The girl came out of nowhere. She started grinding on me. She was huge! I was terrified!" Adam said.

"Should we put that in the whiteness show?" Dave laughed.

[12] Pseudonym

I was confounded. Dave was making a joke about how inappropriate it would be to put Adam's troubling comment to the girl into our play. Yet, here was a visceral example of white supremacy at work. I didn't know the girl that Adam had made this comment to. She was a student from another school. There were nearly 1,000 students and chaperones gathered in a ballroom on the campus of the University of Lincoln. It would have been impossible for me to find her to explore how she had reacted to Adam's flippant comment. It was June 27th, 2012. We were at the International Thespian Festival in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Every summer high school students from around the country go to the University of Nebraska, Lincoln to participate in workshops, network with colleges, and watch plays. Each night there is a dance for the students. Teachers who travel with their students are responsible for chaperoning. This was my eighth trip to Nebraska with the theatre program. So it was the eighth time I that I awkwardly stood in a hallway watching an amorphous group of mostly white theatre students grind up against each other in a dim ballroom.

The boys walked away from me. In previous years, those same boys would have shared something stupid that Adam had said or done. I would have laughed with them.

Adam was chubby, awkward, and really funny. He had been a member of my improv troupe since his 10th grade year. It was so easy for him to make audiences laugh because he was a gifted comic actor. Usually I laughed along with him and his friends when he did something stupid.

But this time I was silent.

It was a Wednesday night. My first teaching session about The Whiteness Project was scheduled for Saturday afternoon.

The previous May, I had announced that our spring show would be The Whiteness Project at the drama awards ceremony. A room of mostly white parents and students stared back at me with blank faces. I had been standing behind a podium on the stage in the school auditorium. My plan was to begin working on the project immediately. I wanted students to start journaling and thinking about their research interests. So I scheduled a meeting with the students who traveled to the Thespian Festival.

Most of the nearly thirty students on that trip were participants in our theatre program. This meant they tried out for our fall musical, our winter play, and our spring show. We also produced a traveling troupe program, an improv troupe, and a fundraiser musical. It was a busy program that typically involved roughly one hundred and fifty students throughout the year. Historically, those students tended to be mostly white.

Adam's comment hung with me as I left the student union where the dance was held. I walked to my dorm room in the middle of the night. The humid, Nebraska summer was suffocating.

I was upset about what he told the girl that asked him to dance. It angered me that he could say something so hurtful. Moreover, I was worried because Adam had a huge personality and no filter. He often said and did things that his friends were too afraid to say or do. So not only was his comment indicative of the racial attitudes of some of my students, it also displayed Adam's inability to

censor himself when he wanted to get a laugh from his friends. This provided two important challenges for me. One, Adam's comment actually reflected some of the harmful white supremacist notions that my students held. Two, when those notions emerge they have the power to hurt people such as the girl at the dance.

The joke that he and the group of boys had shared with me was complicated. On one hand, the joke was that a girl had *actually* tried to dance with Adam. He often used his ineptitude with girls as a way to get a laugh. So it was funny that a girl had tried to approach *him*. That part of what the boys shared *was* funny to me. They shared this with me because they figured I would find Adam's failure with girls amusing. And it wasn't even that Adam had noted that the girl was black. Colorblindness disguises race. It is *not* racist for a white person to simply notice that a black person is black. What troubled me was Adam's reduction of his aversion to this girl to the color of her skin and the subsequent harm he caused her by saying what he had said. This was evidence of the very behavior of white supremacy that I wanted our work to undermine.

It always made me angry when Adam said or did things that caused harm to those around him. This had happened numerous times during my work with him. Sometimes I admonished him and sometimes I pulled him aside to talk about it. Indeed, it seemed to me that he was oblivious of the consequence of his behavior or actions. That said, I cared a great about him and we had grown close during his time as my drama student. As I have already written, I cast Adam on my improv troupe when he was a sophomore because he was one of the best

improvisers I've ever directed. He caught a major role in every play I produced after that. We worked closely in both curricular and extracurricular settings during his junior and senior years. I helped him with his college auditions, wrote him a strong letter of recommendation, and stayed in touch with him as he continued on with theatre in college. None of this meant that he didn't drive me crazy. His sense of humor was wild. Sometimes it worked, other times it didn't.

When I got back to my dorm room, I couldn't sleep. How in the world was I going to navigate both the racial attitudes that Adam's comment represented as well as Adam's unpredictable personality as I facilitated The Whiteness Project? I did not want to blow off the things my students brought to the project, even the things that troubled me. Real critical pedagogical intervention requires real student engagement so it requires real *teacher* engagement.

There were three simple actions I could have taken in response to Adam's comment. First, I could have chastised him for being inappropriate. Second, I could have laughed along with the boys at Adam's ridiculous reaction. Third, I could have attempted to question the boys further about why the joke was funny. The first would have interrupted the strong relationships I had with the boys in question. It would have interfered with their serious engagement in The Whiteness Project by policing what they were allowed to talk to me about. The second would have simply reaffirmed the portion of the joke that reduced the girl to the color of her skin, thereby validating white supremacy. The third was impossible. The conversation happened in a hallway outside of a dance. We were

surrounded by hundreds of people so it was not a good place for any sort of generative, critical conversation.

I chose a fourth option. I took no action at all. I walked away and thought deeply about the joke that they had shared with me. How could I use that interaction in the months ahead as part of my pedagogical design? I would not dismiss what my students brought to the project. In turn, I did not want them to dismiss the work in front of us.

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Georgia: *(Blows off the teacher, rolling eyes)*

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, pp. 15)

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The Courage to Let Theory Complicate Practice: First Sessions in Nebraska

The next day I was eating breakfast in a cafeteria in Lincoln with Michael Sheeks and Rachel[13].

Michael was in his forties. After ten years of teaching and directing at the high school, he was quitting his job in the school district. I took his teaching job when he moved into district leadership. He was a mentor to me after I started teaching and directing at Primdale. Michael decided to let his hair grow long and go back to college to pursue an MFA in directing. He was white. Michael and I had chaperoned Primdale's trip to the Thespian festival for seven years.

Rachel was a graduating senior. She had been the student director for our fundraiser musical the previous year. Her older sister had been a part of our

[13] Pseudonym

theatre program as well. And her parents were very close with Michael and I. So she seemed more like a colleague than a student by the time she graduated. Rachel was sort of white. Like me, she had a Jewish background.

"You should wait to have your first session," Michael told me after I shared the story about Adam's response to the girl at the dance. "You shouldn't do it here in Nebraska."

"Yes, you need to plan this out more carefully," Rachel was Micheal's protégé. She often echoed him.

I took a sip of coffee.

"But I feel like we need to get started," I said.

"Sam," Michael said, "You are about to take a group of privileged, white kids and show them they have privilege. You are going to show this to *Adam*. You need to be careful and build a safe space so that people can speak their truths."

Michael was using language from the Pacific Equity Group (PEG). PEG had done extensive white privilege training in the school district. It was interesting that he was using PEG to convince me *not* to begin discussing whiteness. There was a great deal of privilege wrapped up in the idea of using tenets of equity work to actually *avoid* having conversations about race.

Michael did something that morning that happened nearly every time I talked about The Whiteness Project to white people in the school district. He assumed the project was about making kids see they had privilege. Even though I introduced it as The Whiteness Project, they called it the white privilege project. I did not correct Michael in the same way I did not correct my principal or my

colleagues. The few times I had tried to explain a difference had only led to confusion.

I finished my coffee and left breakfast feeling disgruntled. Mostly white theatre students from around the country were milling about, eating breakfast lazily.

Maybe Michael and Rachel were right. Maybe the students and I weren't ready to start working.

I ran into Mark and Megan in the commons later that day. We had a long conversation about using the project to trace the historical roots of whiteness. Mark showed me a drawing he had recorded in his journal on the bus ride to Lincoln. It was of a faceless white man. The man was like a tree in that he had roots that traveled deep into the earth. Next to these roots were questions marks (Mark's journal, 6/25/12).

"I want to learn about where white identity comes from," Mark said to me. "This image came to me and so I drew it in my journal."

"You need to start naming some of those roots," I told Mark.

He nodded.

Tony ran into me that afternoon. He told me that he had been watching an episode of *Spongebob Squarepants*. He and another student had talked about the sorts of jokes that it was okay for Spongebob to make. They connected that to the kind of jokes it was okay for white people to make. We had a conversation about what was appropriate or inappropriate. I even referenced Adam's joke the night before.

"You should do a comparative analysis of the Spongebob episode and racial humor," I told Tony.

"Okay," Tony said.

After having informal conversations like these with students throughout the day, I wrote this in my field notes.

> This is a big, frightening project. Rather than being neurotic about trying to contain it, I need to relax and have faith in the process and the people I am working with. I can gently massage and nuance it. I have powerful relationships with all of the students here. That will serve me (fieldnotes, 6/28/12).

Talking with my students had eased my mind because I trusted my relationship with them.

My trust in the students was connected to YPAR. As Canella (2008) wrote about PAR work, "PAR as pedagogy is messy. Not all students learn the same things. The curriculum changes in ebbs and flows, necessarily being recreated by participants in processes of ongoing inquiry, reflection, and reformulation" (p. 207). I wasn't conducting a careful process designed to make sure every student learned the same thing in the same way. I didn't believe that all of the students were privileged in the same way, were white in the same way, or needed the same things. I trusted their ability to handle the complexities that would emerge from an acknowledgment of the diverse formations of whiteness. Instead of assuming a narrow conception of whiteness, I was trying to open up a space for them to inquire into white identity through research and imagination. Indeed,

Ginwright (2008) wrote that YPAR work was about "…making the world a more human dwelling place…" but that it "…requires that our research and advocacy create space to foster a collective imagination among youth" (p. 14). The assumptions both Canella and Ginwright articulated about YPAR as pedagogy challenge the traditional model of white privilege pedagogy that Michael referenced. It challenged the way that PEG conducted their equity work. My plan was to build a space for students to draw their own conclusions about whiteness and to take action based on those conclusions with their imagination through theatre. Yes, I would facilitate and present information with an ethical commitment to anti-racist work. I needed to figure out how to share how upset I was by the comment that Adam had made to the girl at the dance. That said, I would rely on a tradition of white privilege but push that idea with critical whiteness studies. This project would go where the students went with it. Teaching is one thing and learning another so the students would take from this project what they decided to take. The curriculum would, as Canella wrote, ebb and flow as our inquiry moved onward.

My commitment to YPAR is evidenced in both my response to Mark and Megan as well as Tony at Thespian Festival. According to Cammarota & Fine (2009), YPAR needs to take seriously student research interests.

> "Critical youth studies goes beyond the traditional pathological or patronizing view by asserting that young people have the capacity and agency to analyze their social context, to engage critical research

collectively, and to challenge and resist the forces impending their possibilities for liberation" (p. 4).

I did not patronize Tony when I told him to push his inquiry into humor in Spongebob further. The same was true of the conversation I had with Mark and Megan about his root system. I was attempting to show them that they had the capacity to build serious research interventions into white supremacy. I trusted that my students had the capability to make powerful sense of the world.

So despite Adam's powerfully unpredictable and potentially harmful sense of humor, I decided to embrace the messiness that YPAR suggests is at the heart of real teaching and learning. Recall Satre's idea of bad faith in the previous chapter. I was willing to shrug it off. I would work with Lather's openendedness in mind even if my colleagues were afraid the students and I needed a more specified, narrow outcome. Maybe the students would see that they had white privilege, maybe they would not. But at least we would be talking about whiteness. And I would try to coax us towards wisdom.

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Jimmy: They all were talking about it. The kids, the teachers, even the principal. (Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, pp. 14-15)

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Going to Work: First Sessions in Nebraska

We gathered for that first session in a commons area in the basement of a cafeteria at the University of Nebraska. Almost every single Primdale student who came to festival attended. I was surprised at their interest. All of the

students were white aside from Sofia[14]. She wasn't sure if she was white. Sofia was Bulgarian but had very dark skin. She told us during the meeting that people didn't treat her like she was white.

I had all of us sit in a circle. Michael and Rachel sat outside the circle and watched. One at a time, I had each student share out what they wanted the project to be.

"I am really excited to have honest conversations about race," one student said.

"I mean, it is my senior year. I want it to be a good play," Adam said.

Mark shared out his drawing about the white figure and the roots that went into the earth. Tony talked about watching Spongebob. Some students even had their journals with them and took notes. I had emailed all of the students attending festival and asked them to get journals prior to the trip. Nobody spoke out of turn and people listened intently. I wrote in my notes that the session was "surprisingly smooth."

After the students shared, I used my laptop to show the portion of the film *Bowling For Colombine* created by the writers of *South Park* entitled "A Brief History of America." I played it on youtube. It was an animated history of America that focuses on white people. It was a sarcastic, biting summary of white America. It suggested that white people enslaved black people and wiped out native peoples due to fear and the desire for wealth. I wrote this about the clip in my fieldnotes.

[14] Pseudonym

> I showed them a clip of South Park's history of America. I asked them to think about how this compared to the song *Elbow Room* in the musical *Schoolhouse Rocks.* (The song was a horrifying presentation of Manifest Destiny without mention of genocide. A kid even put a headdress on and galloped around the stage) (fieldnotes, 6/30/12).

The students watched the clip and then discussed two things in small groups. I asked them to talk about both how the video presented white people and how it compared to the song we had watched in the musical version of *Schoolhouse Rocks* the day before. As my fieldnotes reflect, I was upset that the song in *Schoolhouse Rock* presented westward expansion by early American settlers as the need for more "elbow room." It erased the destruction of native peoples by white settlers.

"That is what Hitler said about annexing Poland," I told Tony after the performance of the musical earlier in the week. "The play didn't mention that native peoples that had to be exterminated so that Americans could move west."

My frustration was echoed in Weilbacher's (2012) analysis of traditional pedagogical renderings of cultural diversity that highlight non-white contributions at the expense of making practices of white supremacy visible.

> For example, in observing social studies lessons designed to incorporate cultural diversity, most teacher-candidates demonstrate how non-White groups have made musical, artistic, culinary, or athletic contributions to U.S. society. Rarer are the kinds of lessons that centralize and critique the outcomes of inequitable power dynamics and equate Westward

> expansion with genocide and manifest destiny with imperialism. While lessons like the first can allow non-White students to see their culture as a part of the whole, the alternative lessons cause students to consider White dominance as murderously problematic (Hayes & Juárez, 2012) (p. 3).

I used the clip from the film *Bowling for Columbine* in order to try and accomplish the rare kind of lesson that Weilbacher wrote of. I deliberately centered the inequitable power dynamics of westward expansion both by showing the clip to the students as well as making a flippant remark to Tony in response to watching the play.

After students finished discussing the short clip in groups, we had a conversation that included the following responses.

"White people are afraid," Tony shared out.

"Manifest Destiny *is* whiteness," another student said.

I recorded both Tony and the other student's comments down in my notes.

Tony's comment echoed meta-cognition of the historical ways in which Europeans eradicated epistemologies that they did not comprehend due to fear. The other students remark connected westward expansion with the formation of whiteness. Both of their theorizations echoed Smith's (2012) contention that settler colonialism is at the heart of white supremacy.

> I argue that the three primary logics of white supremacy are (1) slaveability/anti-Black racism, which anchors capitalism; (2) genocide,

which anchors colonialism; and (3) orientalism, which anchors war." (p. 68)

Smith claimed that white supremacy is anchored in a westward expansion that precludes slaveability of non-whites, genocide, and violent othering. Tony noted that by referencing violent fear of the other that relates to Smith's orientalism. The other student directly connected manifest destiny or westward expansion with whiteness as a form of anti-black racism, genocide, or colonialism. So even in early conversations, I was impressed with students' ability to begin theorizing whiteness in complicated ways.

After the discussion, I handed out copies of both a description of the project for the students as well as their task list. I gave the students time to read the sheet and they did so quietly (See Appendix E).

After they finished reading, I fielded questions. There weren't many. At the end, I reminded them this.

"This project is about *you* figuring out what *you* want to learn about whiteness. Then *you,*" I referred to them as a group, "are going to write a script. I will facilitate this but the project is *yours*. This will be the spring play."

After I finished, the students left the meeting and went to dinner and the project was underway.

Michael came up to me after we had finished.

"This is going to be powerful, Sam."

"I think so."

"Somebody should be filming this, it would make a great documentary."

Michael was prophetic. Gregg started filming when the school year started and by March had built a documentary.

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Hurston: *(Almost inaudibly)* What's wrong with you?

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness pp. 18-19).

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So Practice Complicated Theory: First Sessions in Nebraska

We took a bus back to Minnesota from Nebraska with students from a nearby, suburban high school. The other school was comprised of mostly white students and was considerably more affluent than PAHS. My students always made comments about how much more money students from the high school we shared the bus with had than them.

As we were pulling up to that nearby school to drop their students off, Adam and Eric asked me to come to the back of the bus where they were sitting. I had been up front with the other adult chaperones.

"Adam wants to read you the story we wrote," Eric told me.

"Okay?" I said.

The rest of the students on the bus were quiet as Adam began to read *Fuckleberry Finn.* They had already heard it. The story began as follows.

> It was the year 1836, in the middle of fall, this was the time of year when the Mississippi was at its peak. And this meant that child trafficking was at its highest point. You see child trafficking was a huge money maker at this time of year, all of the slave owners would save up the slave money

> and buy young boys to satisfy their sexual pleasures. Every summer Shaquille O'Neal would choose the ripest children from the field and take them on a magical journey down the Mississippi… (Fuckleberry Finn, 7/1/12).

I listened with an open mouth. Adam had often shared something sexually explicit with me in order to get a rise. Again, the racial components of his story in context of our inquiry into whiteness made it different. He finished reading his semi-pornographic retelling of *Huckleberry Finn*. All I could do was stare at him as I tried to make sense of the racial assumptions underneath his story.

The rest of the students looked at me waiting to see how I would respond. If I laughed as many of them had done, then what Adam had done was okay. If I admonished him, then they would see me enforcing the boundaries for appropriate behavior. I was deeply conflicted.

On one hand, I had been like Adam as a high school student. I used grotesque and sensational humor to make people laugh. On the other hand I was deeply mindful of the racial dynamics of the story. I was thinking about my role as a teacher about to conduct The Whiteness Project. What was I supposed to do with the way that Adam had turned Jim into the former basketball player Shaquille O'Neal? And Shaq was bringing Huck with him in order to sell him into slavery?

I encountered Fiedler's (1972) *End of Innocence* about racial dynamics in Huckleberry Finn during my graduate work. Adam's story recalled two important ways that Fiedler discussed how blackness circulated the white

imagination. First, Fiedler suggested a deep connection between the way that white people imagine black people and homosexuality. Adam's story provided evidence of that tradition in the sexual relationship suggested between Shaquille and Huck. Secondly, the way that Fiedler closed his essay was deeply ingrained in my mind. It read as follows.

> "In each generation we *play out* the impossible mythos, and we live to see our children play it: the white boy and the black we can discover wrestling affectionately on any American sidewalk, along which they will walk in adulthood, eyes averted from each other, unwilling to touch even by accident. The dream recedes; the immaculate passion and the astonishing reconciliation become a memory, and less, a regret, at last the unrecognized motifs of a child's book. "It's too good to be true, Honey," Jim says to Huck. "It's too good to be true" (p. 151).

Wasn't Adam's story another example of the way that racial mythos was being *played out*? Here we were on a bus in Nebraska. We were outside the traditional ideological limitations imposed on us by school or home. We were in the same liminal space that Fiedler suggested that Huck and Jim inhabited on their raft going down the Mississippi. Adam might be playing out Fiedler's mythos with more vulgar sexuality, but he certainly seemed to be playing it. His story was a space where Adam was using fiction to explore and exploit social scripts related to the very racial roles that I wanted us to deeply interrogate in the coming year. His story wasn't neatly reaffirming white supremacist discourse the way

traditional race jokes often do. It was complicating it in troubling and perhaps generative ways.

We were on a crowded bus, not in a carefully structured teaching space. And I was a tired chaperone who had just spent a week with these students. I didn't know how to respond. Again, I had three easy moves I could have made here. I could admonish, laugh, or question. None of those moves felt right because I wasn't sure what I should do. So I turned around and walked back to the front of the bus and considered the complexity of what Adam had just done.

This interaction haunted me. It also spoke to one of the core dilemmas in the pedagogical design of the project. On one hand, I wanted to provide space for students to really expose their racial assumptions in order to struggle with them. On the other hand I felt obligated to police racism even if I wasn't sure that what Adam had done was racist. On top of that, I thought Adam's story was kind of funny. So I was conflicted and confused. By April, I was more permissive of this confusion as I illustrate in chapter five. But it was June and I wasn't sure how to responds to Adam. *Fuckleberry* provided an extreme exaggeration of my problem.

At the end of February, I finally felt ready to sit down with Adam in my classroom and seriously talk to him about the story he had written. After months of tense discussions about whiteness, processing, and writing, I felt more prepared to address what happened on the bus with Adam. This talk happened during my preparation period.

Adam was taking an independent study with me during that time. The assistant principal came to me at the beginning of the trimester.

"Can Adam do an independent study with you?" He asked.

"I don't take independent study credits during my prep period," I said. This was a rule I created because I am easily distracted from planning and grading by students. And students gravitate towards being my teacher's assistant or doing independent studies with me.

"He has a free period and, frankly, nobody else wants him," the assistant principal laughed. So did Adam. So did I.

"He *is* a handful."

So I created an independent study credit for Adam. We prepared his audition pieces for college. Adam would be trying out for theatre programs that spring. Eventually, he was admitted to a local theatre college program with a robust theatre department.

Anyway, it was during that independent study that I asked Adam why he wrote *Fuckleberry Finn*. He and I were sitting alone in the chairs in my classroom. I took notes on my laptop as we talked.

"Eric and I wrote it with the main intent to make people laugh." Adam told me.

"Why did people laugh at it?" I asked.

"It makes people laugh because of immaturity, profanity. We were with kids our own age, just coming back from a long weekend. Everyone was tired and wanted to get home. It brightened up everybody's spirit."

“Where did the idea come from?”

“We were thinking about funny names for porno movies,” he told me.

“Would it have been different if there were more black students listening to the story. Would you have still read the story?”

Adam paused. He laughed.

“Ooooohhh….,” he replied, “If I was comfortable enough with the person, yes. I don’t know if (references black student on trip) was. The only thing was, er, was that Shaquille had a black cock. He wasn’t dumbfounded or a stupid representation of black people. The only thing I might have changed, er, wouldn’t have said was the last, I think it was in the last paragraph, it was something about Shaquille O’Neal having sex with Fuckleberry.” (Interview with Adam, 2/28/13).

Talking with Adam, I became more convinced that his story about Fuckleberry *was not* racist. Yes, it was vulgar, crude, and made people uncomfortable *but* it also inverted racial scripts. Shaquille was actually enslaving white people in the story. The roles were reversed in order that Adam could play with them. In this way, Adam’s story actually showed *love* not racism. According to Fiedler, “Trapped in what have by now become shackling clichés—the concept of the white man’s sexual envy of the Negro male, the ambivalent horror of miscegenation—they do not sufficiently note the complementary factor of physical attraction, the archetypal love of white male and black” (p. 147). Adam’s construction of Shaquille became a way from him to play with the physical attraction of an archetypal love between white and black males. While Adam’s

story might indeed be playing Fiedler's mythos in a positive way, the brutal sexuality of it iwas harder for me to understand. Again Fiedler helped me to both share my theorization with Adam during our conversation as well as to make better sense of his behavior.

Fiedler argued that the archetypal understanding of black men and homosexuality confound white people in powerful ways. He wrote this.

> "It is perhaps to be expected that the Negro and the homosexual should become stock literary themes in a period when the exploration of responsibility and failure has become again a primary concern of our literature. It is the discrepancy before which we are helpless, having no resources (no tradition of courtesy, no honored mode of cynicism) for dealing with a conflict of principle and practice" (p. 142).

According to Fiedler, there is no tradition for white people to explore these repressed concepts. Indeed, this recalls the way that Morrison theorized how white people are policed in chapter one. So Adam's story was actually innovative in that it created a vehicle for him to act out his own repressed, archetypal configurations of blackness and homosexuality. Adam had built a resource that allowed dialogue and even a re-imagining of stock literary themes.

The story of *Fuckleberry Finn* was difficult for me. So was Adam's response to the girl at the dance. I am almost embarrassed to share those things here. As a "good teacher" or a "good researcher" should I have censored Adam? Should I have disciplined him because his content was "inappropriate?" Having done so would have shut down the conversation before it started. Even as I write

this, I caution myself as I think about how the girl at the dance must have felt after Andrew's comment. I didn't shut Adam down and include these vignettes in order to include the complexity of my struggle to honor the openended pedagogical design of the project.

Later, Cabrera (2014) helped me to understand the approach I had intuited to Adam's two jokes. According to Cabrera, white people need to be prepared to "not laugh at a racial joking even though it might be socially desirable for them to do so" (p. 13). My silence in both instances had two powerful effects. It did not validate Adam's humor nor did it shut him down. This was not a socially desirable choice because it left things unsettled for both Adam and his audience. In that confusion there was space to make better sense of our whiteness. That is the same pedagogical approach I brought to The Whiteness Project. I worked to leave things unsettled even as I acknowledge that this might have had harmful consequences to people like the girl at the dance.

Over the year the student whiteness collective talked about Adam's story many times. We discussed how he over-sexualized Shaquille O'Neal. We referenced ways that it inverted Huckleberry Finn. We talked about the way that Adam made people uncomfortable when he made jokes about race. We talked about his insensitive treatment of violence and sexuality. I even brought Fiedler's essay to a Tuesday morning meeting in order to discuss Adam's story.

Some students like Hannah pointed out how offensive the story was. They said that it was evidence of Adam's racism. Others like Tony thought it was ridiculous and funny. Some students thought I should have reprimanded Adam.

Others thought it was up to the group to handle what Adam shared. Others thought that nothing needed to be done.

I cared about the students in this project very much. It felt like it was my responsibility to mentor them through this unsettling, confusing work. I worked with them individually to both refine their research projects as well as to figure out how to work with the tensions in our collective. So I helped students respond to Adam and his sense of humor in a variety of ways.

I coached Hannah to challenge Adam when he said things that troubled her. Oftentimes Adam could come off as misogynistic. Hannah learned to respond to him directly during the year to call him out if he said something that bothered her.

I suggested to Krista[15] that she needed to try to share how hurt she was by some of the jokes Adam made. Krista learned to push back against Andrew if a joke he told

I sat down with Adam and tried to understand why he told the kind of jokes that he did. I worked tirelessly to help him understand that it upset *me* when I watched him hurt other people. The strength of our relationship might be why he bothered to consider that potential harm of the way he carried himself in the world.

Coaching students in the way I described was a particular teaching choice. YPAR argues that inquiry belongs to the students so I would coach them, facilitate, and talk with them to push *their* dialogue further. I wouldn't force

[15] Pseudonym

them to adhere to a particular outcome, rather, I would help them to negotiate something as a collective. My commitment was to making space for them to conduct their own inquires in order to build a collective piece of art as a response to their formulation(s) of whiteness. As is evidenced by the difficult stories I've shared here, this was hard, oftentimes confounding work for me.

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(Lights up on previous elementary classroom. The teacher is in front of class during art time. Students are painting while the teacher reads out-of teacher manual. Hurston is center stage sitting on a stool with an easel in front of him.)

Elementary Teacher: Today we are going to learn about contrast and dullness. Contrast, in short, is the exposure of light versus dark, or the acknowledgment of opposites. Here we have two different colors: black and white. *(Holds up colored cards)* Notice how different the two are. The CONTRAST between the two colors is that white is bright and that black is dark. When you go throughout your day, notice the contrast between two things. Notice how they're different. *(puts down the book and begins to wander around the class she walks over to Hurston)* Hurston, what is it that you are going to paint today?

Hurston: I'm going to create my masterpiece! I'm going to use every color! *(He begins to paint and the teacher makes an unpleasant face, after some time he leaves.)*

Elementary Teacher: *(to the whole class, reading out of the guide book, students continue to work while listening)* Dull, if you're not familiar with it, has many definitions. It can mean a lack of intensity or energy, blunt or not very sharp, but

for our class, it will be defined as boring or not very bright. When painting, the combination of dull and bright colors can expose how much one or the other stands out. If you paint with a myriad of bright colors, then by adding a splotch of a dull color will make it stand out more. And on the contrary, if you have plenty of dull colors, adding a bright color will make it stand out even more. The contrast, if you remember that from what I said earlier, will be greater if you can use dull colors well. *(returning to Hurston)* Uh, Hurston. You're painting, there's no pattern to it. It's just a bunch of splotches. Here, let's add some more white to it. Reaches for paintbrush and is about to add more paint to the canvas

Hurston: *(Almost violently)* NO! *(Stops Elementary Teacher from making any adjustments to the painting)*. I like it the way it is!

Elementary Teacher: Alright, calm down. It is YOUR painting after all. I just thought you might want something a little more conforming. *(Walks away)*

Hurston: *(Stares at canvas)* I like it the way it is.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness pp. 18-19).

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Sharing Power: So Who Is in Charge?

"We have more freedom to say what we want," Mark said, "than him."

He pointed to me. I was standing off to the side. Nine of my students, Mark included, were lined up in a row. Hannah was also a student in that panel. She was listening quietly as Mark talked. They were sitting in front of a room of thirty or so educators, researchers, and activists. We were talking at a social justice conference in Minneapolis on a Friday morning.

This was the first time we were presenting our project. It was October and we were early on in our YPAR inquiry into whiteness.

“How so?” A person in the audience asked.

“We can’t get in trouble for saying what we think, he can,” Mark smiled at me. I smiled back.

I was always kvetching about getting in trouble with the powers that be to my students.

In the mornings, the students involved in the drama program showed up in my room nearly an hour before school. Anywhere from twenty to thirty students would start their morning there, doing homework, socializing, whatever. This has generally been the case in my eleven years as a high school English and Drama teacher. In fact, I ran into a teacher who observed one of my classes many years ago.

“You are the one with the coffee club,” she was referring to the students in my room before school, “they love you!”

This was why I brought in two of my Great-Grandmother’s Victorian chairs after she passed. It facilitated the community that grew around my teaching and directing as well as separated that social space from the more traditional routine in my classroom, the desks. I monitored that space as minimally as I could. It was theirs to do with as they pleased, within reason.

“Fuck!” One of the students would say as I walked by with a stack of papers.

“Don’t swear so loudly,” I would respond, “you’ll get me fired.” My performance of a teacher in this moment was ironic. I was acknowledging that it was silly for me to police the students’ language even as I was forced to police their language.

During the year I conducted The Whiteness Project, Mark was often sprawled in one of the chairs. Hannah would be there too. As they talked or worked on homework, I set up my lessons over by the overhead, the stage in the classroom, the desks. Every once in awhile, I would sit down next to them and talk, kvetch, teach, whatever the moment allowed.

It was my pedagogical choice that such a space existed. This was how I established a community of practice for our theatre program. Though it unnerved my administrators to see so many students freely gathered in a classroom, laughing, arguing, or talking loudly before school, it became an important part of my role in the school.

“Your classroom was like home,” one of my former students wrote to me in an email after he graduated last year.

That space contributed to the design of The Whiteness Project. Maybe it came from watching the students interact in that space. Nearly all of those students were white. Could I foster a critical analysis of the whiteness in that space? Could the students think about how it was connected to the theatre community, the school community, and do something about what they discovered? Many of the students who called my classroom home became the participants, the researchers, the writers, the actors, and the editors.

Incidentally, kvetching is Yiddish for complain. Though I pass as white to most people, I cannot deny my Jewish roots.

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Mark was right. The students did have more power than me to speak their minds. My opinion always seemed to make my colleagues or administrators uncomfortable.

“I know that I am white,” I said in an equity meeting that winter, “but it is more complicated than that.”

“But you have privilege, Sam,” a colleague pointed her finger at me, demanding my confession.

“I do, but there is more too it than that.”

The room around me became uncomfortable. I paraphrased Ralph Ellison. The American identity was still in the womb. I talked about Toni Morrison’s (1992) claim that white people have a severe, psychological problem. I mentioned David Roedigger’s (1991) idea that something is lost when folks are normalized into systems of whiteness.

“My father was raised as a Jewish immigrant,” I said, “he taught me to be skeptical of anybody with money, power, whatever.”

“You don’t get it, Sam,” the woman leading the session said.

I didn’t get it. At least not the way that she wanted me to get it. And I was powerless to say so because I was in a mandated session approved by my school district.

Later, as my students wrote the script for The Whiteness Project in the winter, Mark's claim became more evident to me. Much like the chairs in my classroom, my pedagogy built a project in which students had freedom to speak their minds without fear of the same admonishment given to me in that equity meeting. They weren't going to get fired for forming unpopular opinions because I wasn't going to police them. They could take their inquiry into whiteness wherever they chose, within reason. But could they do so without pointing fingers and telling each other that they didn't get *it*?

***

My work during the year was to facilitate a space for students to share their ideas, their opinions. I didn't have anything for them to *get*. Rather, I wanted them to sustain their inquiry into the action of building a play without defining that work with a right answer, without policing their outcomes. I describe this as generative confusion in the next chapter.

Once the script was finished, I interviewed Hannah. My intent was to set up a fair, democratic process in order that the students could share power. According to Hannah, this didn't always happen.

> …you had us go around the circle and say what our ideas were that we wanted to share and you said now you have one sentence. So the first person started out and they used one sentence. The next person used like a sentence and a half. The next person like two sentences. And it just kept getting like bigger and bigger and bigger until it got to Mark at the very end who just like exploded all of his ideas out and I think a lot of people

ended up getting upset then that their ideas weren't given that attention. And I think that was how the entire process went was everyone feels like they have a great idea and they really want to share and they want other people to think they have a great idea but the power is always given to specific people to share out their entire idea and they're able to manipulate the system that you have attempted to create and they're able to get what they want (Interview with Hannah, 4/20/13).

In Hannah's words, more power was given to Mark because he took it. I had wanted the students to use our project to dismantle oppressive systems. As part of that, they were building processes similar to those they had critiqued. Students like Mark took power and students like Hannah relinquished it.

Frustrated by my perception of their hierarchy, I wrote the following memo a couple of weeks after the first meeting that Hannah referenced.

> The structure I had given them wasn't working. And so when they revolted and took control, I shut up and let them shout (fieldnotes, 1/29/13).

I wrote this after trying to facilitate a brainstorming session. Irritated by the failure of my pedagogical structure of the session, the students started shouting out ideas and I let them. It was as though I couldn't facilitate the sharing of power without privileging people. So I stopped talking and tried to let them figure it out.

By the end of February, the students had written a ninety-page script. So it seemed to me that the next step was for them to choose editors. I assembled

our group. Each small group that had been formed after the brainstorming session chose one editor.

When I announced the four editors, we were sitting in my classroom. We formed a circle near my Great-Grandmother's chairs. This was because our usual meeting space, the auditorium, was being used for the Black History Month show.

"The editor's job is simply to take the ideas that are established and nuance them," I told them, "you are not in charge of changing the content of the script."

The students were listening to me. And I thought of this joke.

"I am not putting a crown on the editors and making them the king of whiteness in our script about whiteness."

The students laughed. We had been discussing normative discourses of whiteness for a year. Though they were participating in them, they also understood I was poking fun at how those forces were playing out in our group dynamic.

After the script was finished, I scheduled a meeting with all of the students who had been involved in the writing process. This was at the end of March. There were sixteen students in the meeting. One of them, Elizabeth[16] said this.

> "We were all worried about show being like that (like a PSA) but that changed as we changed and learned more and as we see things

[16] Pseudonym

differently. We separated ourselves from that view and became aware of the way whiteness exists. There are so many characters that show how this happens. We've stopped these systems within ourselves throughout this project. The show is not about one person; it's about all of the characters, there are so many levels" (Natalie's fieldnotes, 3/31/13).

Elizabeth's realization that the show was not just about one person's perception of whiteness was going towards the pedagogy of collaboration I had tried to deploy. Another student, Aaron, had this to say.

> "Tanner always says this isn't about what you wrote or who you are. Once it was on the google doc it's like it's not mine anymore it's the play" (Natalie's fieldnotes, 3/31/13).

Aaron was responding directly to my challenge. Many times I had told the group to give up their preconceived ideas of what the play should be, how our writing process should work. This was also an idea that I taught in my Drama Workshop courses. In that previous work, students like Aaron collaborated to generate a play. Many of my students in The Whiteness Project had also been enrolled in a Drama Workshop course with me.

Mark listened quietly through the meeting. Hannah had this to say as the meeting finished up.

"None of what we've done stops here. It's not enough to say "Oh yeah, I thought about all this (whiteness)" but it doesn't make up for the fact that we are still living in this society. We have to keep living and learning and being aware."

Hannah checked in with me on Monday morning after the talk.

“I just wanted people to realize that it isn’t over now. They don’t have a free pass to be racist now because they did this project,” she told me.

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Mark’s claim that the students had freedom to speak their mind was simple. How the group took up that space was more complicated.

I tried to facilitate a project in which the members of the group shared power. It was easier to provide them freedom to think than it was to train them to share that power.

In taking up the space I provided, students stumbled upon the same normative, social discourses of white supremacy that privilege some and marginalize others that they had researched in the fall. These ideas became inspiration for the virus that the students decided was afflicting the town of Blanchkreist.

At the end of the script, after one of the characters gave up their life to protect a character that has been marginalized by the town, the Mayor of the town has a realization about the way that the virus worked. That realization reflected the way that privilege and power undermined the students’ collaborative, scriptwriting process. It echoed the way that Edmiston & Bigler-McCarthy (2006) theorized the way power circulates playbuilding pedagogy. For them, it can either be used to dominate or empower. They argued “…we can conceptualize other ways that people use power other than to dominate. Using power over others is oppressive when people act as if power is only ‘about me’ but power can also be used over others intentionally for more altruistic reasons

on behalf of those who have been ignored or silenced" (p. 2). Edmiston & Bigler-McCarthy's theorization is similar to the way that the Mayor evidenced understanding in the script that power can be used in ways that cause harm but it does not have to be that way. Careful introspection allows for a more careful approach to the use of power After spending the year struggling to use the shared power I was trying to give them, they Mayor's final monologue is a profound summation of the students' reflection. This chapter ends with the Mayor's realization. Whereas I interpret her monologue directly in chapter eight, here I include it to show evidence of this realization.

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Mayor: Citizens, all of this horror in our town was due to us. These people *(gestures to family)* came here for a new beginning. We have made this place an appealing spot to raise a family. Can we hate them for wanting what we all want? To keep their family safe, to work a steady job, safety, and to know that they aren't being eyed as some sort of alien? This is what we thought we had created. We were wrong. We turned against them. We clung to what was ours. We raved and spewed nonsense out of fear, because we thought that our lifestyle was in jeopardy. Was that really so? Do they seek happiness to destroy us? If we think this, what does that say about us as people? Citizens, I have told you to hide behind this virus. We cannot see. Our fear is so potent that it has blinded us. Look at what we are doing. We are the villains. We have sought sanctuary in our victimization. It is an us versus them world we have made. We broke ourselves. We are the virus. The virus is part of us. It always has been and always will be. It

hides in the back of our thoughts. All it takes is one family like this *(refers to Sam, Uma, Hurston)* and it all comes to the surface. We can't allow ourselves to follow this path anymore. *(Looks at Amara, Hurston, Roman, town, audience)* I am sorry. (Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 80).

Chapter Five: Permission to be Confused

Amara: People are ruined here. *(She pauses)*. They think I'm the dead one. They should take a look at themselves.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, pp. 32)

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Critical Whiteness Pedagogy: Permission to be Confused

Real critical teaching and learning serves to undermine the way that we conceive social reality. The end result of this kind of pedagogy is internal disruption. The way that we see the world is broken. If the teaching is successful, the learning forces us to sit in the ruins of shattered conceptions of reality. This

is difficult work that often leaves the student without clear solutions to the problems they have identified thereby causing confusion.

As mentioned in chapter one, school is often a space where confusion is not rewarded. There are correct solutions to problems, right answers, and clearly defined outcomes. This approach to schooling delegitimizes critical inquiry. Confusion is important for students to experience as they grapple with social problems that do not have clear solutions. Racism and white supremacy are two such problems. So confusion in schools requires permission because it is counterintuitive to traditional schooling. The Whiteness Project fostered a space of *generative* confusion because it combined components of critical YPAR in concert with collective playbuilding.

By calling this confusion *generative,* I am suggesting that it fostered student transformation or action. Recall Lather's description of research as a process of getting lost in the introduction. She articulated a method of inquiry that necessitated confusion as an essential part of critical research. This process is not about becoming confused and assuming that the work of teaching and learning is done. It is about creating fissures and taking up permission to sustain long-term, openended critical inquiries without the need for specific outcomes, rules, or objectives.

Students were afforded a generative space to work with their confusion through the collective process of YPAR. According to Cammarota & Fine (2008), YPAR "Research findings become launching pads for ideas, actions, plans, and strategies to initiate social change. This final difference distinguishes PAR from

traditional research by pointing to a critical epistemology that redefines knowledge as actions in pursuit of social justice" (p. 6). Cammarota & Fine's work contends that YPAR creates conditions for participants to work with confusion by using it to fuel experimentation(s). This struggle creates "launching pads" aimed towards social transformation that generates "ideas, actions, and plans." This is a generative process that requires students to redefine their normalized perceptions by creating ideas or plans to counter injustice caused by social reality. Confusion is a necessary part of calling realities into question. It fuels the process. In the case of The Whiteness Project, confusion was the generative impetus for the building of a play.

Playbuilding created a way for students to move the generative confusion fostered by YPAR research forward. Norris (2009) argued that playbuilding is a form of qualitative research. For Norris, playbuidling is a collective "…form of participatory research in the extreme" because of a live audience and a process where "all stages of the research are collaborative and open to the possibility of new insight from other participants" (p. 40). Indeed, Norris claimed that "playbuilding is an attempt to operationalize dialogic research" (p. 39). So The Whiteness Project was designed to operationalize students critical, YPAR investigation into whiteness. Collaborative playbuilding provided a space for them to work with disrupted internal realities. It was a way to for the students to begin imagining something new or different after indentifying fissures in their worldviews. So if the students were willing to be disrupted by their research into white supremacy, and many were, the five months that followed our initial

inquiry provided an important, generative step. Students imagined new ways of conceptualizing their whiteness and subsequent place in white supremacy. This happened in the contested space of collective playbuilding. Though playbuilding held potential for transformation, it was made more difficult by the content the participants were investigating.

In chapter one, I illustrated how both Thandeka and Morrison outlined the complicated ways that white people are policed by discourses of white supremacy. Whiteness is rendered profoundly normal to white people. This makes grappling with the concept extremely difficult for them. It requires the white subject to critically question their inclusion in white society. Critical whiteness pedagogy necessitates generative confusion. In order to undermine white supremacy, we need a critical pedagogy that calls into scrutiny the way that people become complicit participants in this social reality. This requires two important steps. First, whiteness cannot be allowed to remain invisible by deferring to blackness. It must hold the subject position in a discussion of race in order to be scrutinized. Second, the white student must be willing to grapple with whiteness despite the disruption that comes from questioning normative ideology. This requires the courage and willingness to let go of deeply held conceptions of reality in order to resist policing discourse. It necessitates *confusion*. These two steps are crucial in effective critical whiteness pedagogy.

Being mindful of these two things, the pedagogical design of The Whiteness Project created conditions for Lauren to acknowledge permission for

confusion. This allowed her to inquire into whiteness in generative ways. This idea of permissive confusion became clear to me in the spring.

In April, the students and I presented our work at a graduate student research day held at The University of Minnesota. We had finished the script and were a month into rehearsal. Fourteen students joined me for the presentation. Lauren was one of them. She said something that illustrated the complexity I am describing in relation to critical whiteness pedagogy. I recorded it in my fieldnotes.

> "After the white privilege workshop, I felt terrible about myself, as though I had done something wrong. After the critical whiteness workshop, I gave myself permission to be confused" (fieldnotes, 4/4/13).

Lauren was speaking about her reaction to the two workshops I organized in the fall. Her reaction to the concept of white privilege was guilt. Her response to the critical whiteness workshop was far more complicated. After puzzling over her remark, I realized that the permission that Lauren had given herself to be confused was crucial to the success of critical whiteness pedagogy. Confusion is the natural outcome of successful critical teaching and learning. It is the outcome of Lather's critical research. Getting lost from normative discourse requires the subject to sit with internal disruption. So I was impressed by the courageous permission Lauren had given herself. By both making whiteness the center of her inquiry and being willing to grapple with the disruption that comes from this work, Lauren was moving past the paralysis that is often the result of an over-emphasis on privilege at the expense of a critical whiteness approach. Despite

the powerful forces working to police Lauren, she gave herself permission to disrupt her worldview and grapple with her whiteness and her subsequent place in white supremacy. Indeed, I realized Lauren's permission was the same thing I had been struggling to give myself.

All year long I had been insecure that The Whiteness Project didn't look like other teaching and learning projects about race. This was not a white privilege project. It was not the equity training that my school district participated in. Whiteness was the subject. This made people uncomfortable. In turn, this troubled me throughout the project. People expressed their concern that I was not doing race work the way that I was supposed to. They were afraid that I was doing something racist simply because I was talking openly about whiteness. I internalized their comments. I struggled to resist normative, racial discourse.

This chapter argues that what Lauren named as her permission to be confused is essential to critical whiteness pedagogy. I use vignettes to trace the way I used critical whiteness pedagogy to work with Lauren's (and my own) generative confusion. I show the tensions that came from the permission we gave ourselves to center whiteness, to resist normalizing discourse, and to sit in the confusion that comes from taking apart social reality in order to imagine something new.

***

(Cecilia is alone in her bedroom. She is confused. She takes out a pen. She starts to write. A disembodied voice is with her. It should be pre-recorded, it should be her voice, it should be distorted.)

Cecilia: I don't know what to do.

Echo: No, you don't.

Cecilia: I need to leave.

Echo: Yes, you do.

Cecilia: There is nowhere to go.

Echo: Nowhere.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, pp. 61-62)

***

Lauren's Permission to Be Confused

Lauren emailed me after attending the second workshop I organized in the fall.

The first workshop was about white privilege. Lee Fisher led it. Lee was a high school theatre teacher at a local high school. We met in a class on social justice theatre at The University of Minnesota. He used elements of Boal's (1979) forum theatre in order to present McIntosh's (1988) concept of white privilege to our collective. Though Lee created a powerful, intricate workshop, there was still a predetermined outcome. Embedded in his work was the learning objective that students would learn that white people had privilege. There was no space to interrogate this outcome or critique McIntosh's argument.

Two weeks later, my colleagues Brian Lozenski and Shannon McManimon from The University of Minnesota facilitated a workshop designed from a critical whiteness studies perspective (Ellison, 1953/1995; Morrison, 1995; Thandeka 2001). Both were doctoral students. They focused on the historical, social, and legal logics of systematic white supremacy. While Brian and Shannon had particular takeaways that they delivered, it was up to the students to mobilize and appropriate that knowledge on their own terms. Instead of confessing their privilege, students were asked to grapple with legal, historical, and contemporary manifestations of white identity and white supremacy. Brian and Shannon created a space where students were allowed to wrestle with the complexity of how race came to be defined in America. Students were presented with how whiteness sat in that intersection of historical, social, and discursive forces. Brian shared colonial race law. Shannon embedded those ideas into theatrical exercises.

I include the analytic memos that Natalie wrote to respond to each workshop below. Both memos illustrate how Natalie reacted to each workshop as both a participant and observer. They also show Natalie struggling with the same sort of permission to be confused that Lauren named in April. First, Natalie responded to Lee's workshop on McIntosh as follows.

> I feel like the survey raises awareness of these situations and your privileges but does not really say anything about your cultural sensitivity or whiteness or what-have-you. I knew I was very privileged but I felt more like we were being judged on how racist we were or something

> which is why so many people expressed shame with their physical depictions, which I have no idea why I felt that way because that certainly wasn't Lee's point. Generally I was uncomfortable with theater stuff. Obviously I enjoy concrete things that have answers; I did not appreciate people interpreting my group's image without allowing us to explain. I suppose that art mirrors life, when interacting with people on a daily basis we don't always get a chance to explain ourselves, I guess I would have done something different, acted different, made different choices if I knew that there would be no opportunity for clarification. Perhaps that was the point, or the point I took from it…that how we present ourselves in regards to thoughts on race, doesn't get to be clarified…I don't know. That is the theme of my head tonight, I don't know, which is not a place I like to be. Damn you Sam! (Natalie's fieldnotes, 9/27/12).

Natalie's response to white privilege pedagogy was to feel judged about how racist she was. She acknowledged that this might not have been Lee's point. White pedagogy privilege often has this outcome regardless of the intent of the facilitator. This is typical as noted in chapter one. However, because Lee added the component of theatre, Natalie was pushed to think about whiteness further and actually reached what I am describing as generative confusion by the end of the memo. This is evidenced in her comment about clarification and playful jab at me at the end of the entry. Though there is space for minimal confusion, ultimately Natalie was left with a simple conclusion. She had privilege because she was white. This did not create space for generative transformation. The next

workshop was different. Natalie responded to the critical whiteness workshop two weeks later in the following memo.

> I enjoyed this workshop more than Lee's. I felt like the information they shared was stuff I was already aware of (like the history stuff and the system of race things) but it was cool watching some of the high schoolers learn it for the first time (at least that's how it appeared). I also really enjoyed Brian's point about perspective, it seems obvious but it really made me think about things. Tanner and his group had some good conversations about realities and how we (as a group meeting outside of school time) are one reality outside of the whiteness reality and we are then taking what we come up with here and turning it into a script that will be put on a stage in a school which is the epitome of systems of race (Natalie's fieldnotes, 10/14/12).

This memo denotes a more genuine engagement with the context presented by Shannon and Brian. Natalie's writing denotes the generative dialogue that came from the presentation. This is illustrated in her enjoyment of the process, her description that it was cool to see the high school students learning something, and her positive association with the conversations we were having about social realities. Natalie's email is indicative of unfinished inquiry. It is evidence of a degree of generative confusion. Natalie's responses to the workshops echoed Lauren's.

Whereas the idea of white privilege had caused Lauren to feel extremely guilty, understanding the systematic construction of whiteness allowed her to

move past guilt into a space of generative confusion. This confusion was evident in the email she sent me that evening.

First, Lauren described her research proposal. She proposed using the practice of a theatrical workshop to examine how Karen refugees understood whiteness. Our school had a large population of Karen students. Lauren worked with many of them in a community theatre production the previous summer. She thought it would be useful to see how people not born in American understood whiteness. After outlining her research project, Lauren wrote this.

> Thank you for the workshop today, it was so interesting, and made me think about 'whiteness privilege' in a completely different way, and the system of oppression, how it, by effecting one group, effects everyone. and if so, does society base itself on oppression, and depend on it to stay organized? but then how can we, as 'americans' claim to be from the 'land of the free' if everyone is oppressed? and are we? or do we subconsciously allow ourselves to bow under these laws, because we feel we need the safety of having organized systems. and if so, is it truly oppression? And even if its not, it still seems wrong, so how do we change it? because there seem to be different levels of 'whiteness', in those who are in power, those who don't realize they have power, and those who from an outsiders perspective should be in power but because of that are forced to conform. And can one be oppressed if they are unaware of it? that was a very long rant and probably made no sense, sorry! I will write about it and try to figure some things out... (Lauren, email, 10/14/12).

Lauren's email shows the complicated way that she was beginning to question organizing logics of white supremacy. She asked a total of six questions in this email. Each question evidenced her willingness to interrogate formative narratives about America, oppression, and race. Furthermore, Lauren was one of the most successful students in our high school. She was usually careful to edit her writing so as to avoid typos and grammatical errors. That the she did not edit this email shows her passionate interest in ideas at the expense of form. Her curiosity was overriding appropriate norms of communication. So if the outcome of the white privilege workshop had been guilt, the outcome of the second was confused curiosity. She admitted that her thinking probably "made no sense" but she resolved to "write about it and try to figure some things out." There was no right answer but she was willing to struggle with whiteness and white supremacy in order to make better sense of the troubling questions she was coming to. She gave herself permission to do so.

I fostered this permission. This is what I wrote to Lauren the following morning.

> …your rant made complete sense to me. Speaking in broad terms, I think you nailed the thing on the head. One of the ways we keep ourselves from being a democracy is by being subjugated by systems of oppression that can be traced to the history that led to our country. In my idealistic view, the only way we can truly take up being a democracy where people are "free," or "equal," is to liberate ourselves from the systems that oppress us. First, we have to figure out what they are. I think that whiteness is at

the center of the way we oppress and are oppressed by. I think whiteness is what keeps us from participating in the democracy that American could be (Tanner, email, 10/15/12).

I was thinking aloud with Lauren. I made two pedagogical moves here. First, I validated her ideas. I did not critique or correct her. I let her questions sit. Secondly, I responded by sharing some of my own informal thinking. This allowed our conversation to continue. This was because of my deployment of the improvisational practice of "yes, and" that I described in chapter three.

So Lauren wrote me another email. I include my response to her second email below. Lauren's words are in italics. My words are not. I used the shared experience of our high school theatre production, long form improvisation, and a Drama Workshop class she took with me during her freshmen year to provide context. I think about the relationship of whiteness and democracy with her. In Lauren's Drama Workshop class, students built a collaborative play based off of the Hayao Miyazaki film *The Cat Returns.* This email shows how I was attempting to sustain Lauren's generative confusion as well as direct her to start thinking about how building a play allows a space to imagine new social realities.

Lauren,

I am really glad we are having this conversation (and impressed at your reflection on the workshop.)

I am going to respond like a person who just wants to think about your questions first. Maybe I will be teacherly, maybe not.

Do you think its possible to create perfect democracy?

Well this is a great question... I think that the problem comes in that every person involved in a social group has a different version of what "perfect" and "democracy" mean. I think that we (people) need to let go of our notions of what "perfect" is and what things "should" be. I think, when we do, we can learn to accept (yes, and) other people's ideas and things can happen as they need to happen. Can this happen on a societal level? I think so. But I think it needs to happen inside of our heads first. (And this is a shift for us.)

I point to your Drama Workshop class. That was a group of people who "said yes" to all of the diverse, weird ideas in the space. And so we created our Cat Production. And it was beautiful. But to really understand its beauty, you couldn't judge it against what you think a "perfect" play is. You just had to let it run its course. I don't know if that makes any sense. Any thoughts you have about this conversation will be helpful for me (and us) thinking about our work, our play.

Im so afraid of us not being capable of change. I know that, for me at least, when going into this project I am constantly thinking about how what we are doing here could translate into a bigger scale than just high school.

Yes, yes, and yes. The work we are doing is more about transforming ourselves and the world around us. That is a great deal more ambitious than what a typical high school production sets off to do. That being said, I think people are powerful. And I think that everything we do transforms reality whether we try to or not. (Guys and Dolls is

> currently transforming our school, our theatre program, and the people involved in it. Maybe not mindfully.) Our challenge is to harness our transformation. If that makes any sense.
>
> *then there has to be a way for people to look past themselves and want to change for the better, right?*
>
> What a beautiful idea. We have to see beyond our own, individual biases and realities in order to see the shared reality of ourselves as a community. And when we do this, we have to realize the ways we are limiting ourselves and oppressing ourselves and, when we do, perhaps we can begin making some transformations.
>
> This play is a start, right?
>
> I love the thinking you are doing. Let me know if you have more thoughts! (Tanner, email, 10/16/12)

I was making the same pedagogical moves in my response to her second email that I made to her first. I validated Lauren's thoughts enthusiastically and shared my own thinking with her to push the conversation forward. I also contextualized our conversation using the shared experience of our Drama Workshop class as well as the high school theatre program as evidenced by my reference to our fall musical that year, *Guys and Dolls*. My colleague Vienna was directing that show. Finally, I was directing the conversation towards the generative space afforded by YPAR research in concert with playbuilding. Lauren's follow up to my response was illustrative of her growing curiosity. It also shows that she was beginning to understand her participation in the

complex critical whiteness pedagogy that was the result of my teaching practice in concert with axioms of YPAR.

> Hi Mr. Tanner,
>
> It is so great to be able to write about this kind of thing-this is kind of what you were talking about with YPAR, its definitely not a conversation one would have in your typical high school classroom, but its getting me to think more than any class discussion ever has. :)
>
> I understand what you're saying, how ideas, or even goals of perfection often hinder us and blind us to seeing possibilities that could be better than we imagined. By opening yourself up to different paths that an idea could take, you're allowing yourself to see something different, instead of asking a question and only listening to the expected answer. Maybe in this show, the best way to get people to truly think about these issues would be to do something totally unexpected. That's the great thing about theater, being able to take people out of their comfortable lives, show them a different sphere of reality, then bring them back to the same world, only where everything now seems changed. Maybe the best way to change the world would be through theater-a medium people don't often expect to be changed by, but one that will unknowingly effect them-something one can't always control. do you think transformation can be done unknowingly? or does a person have to consciously accept change? If the latter is true, then I suppose a big challenge in this play would be to open people up to the possibilities of

change, not only that it is good and right, but that it is possible. Often, i think, people give up on the idea of changing society before the idea ever fully processes in their minds. the important thing then is to find kind of change that is worth giving up any "safety blanket" ideas that dismiss it as impossible, and be willing to actually do something about it. This we would have to do, as you say, as a community.

But that’s the thing! It can't be just the "white community" being willing to concede their power, or the "black community" trying to gain equal ground. It can't be an 'us' and 'them' undertaking. We have to be humble. To make change, i think you first have to change your perception of yourself, and allow your ideas to be shared and fitted with others, to accept other viewpoints, if not always as truth, then at least as valid. In doing this play, we can't always assume we're right, or that the perception we've found is the only one. these ideas are too big for that.

Why do you think all of this began? with 'black' vs 'white', I mean. I know about the social Darwinism theory, and all of that, but, it doesn't seem to make that much sense. are we, as people, so afraid of something different that we have to oppress it the first chance we get? I can't seem to wrap my head around it. and i am in no way perfect or not guilty of racism or anything like that, i don't mean this hypocritically, but, why did this happen? Do you think a society has to have 'the powerful' and 'the oppressed' to work? I have to believe there’s something else, a different path.

I'm not sure if any of that made any sense, or was relevant in any way. If not, I'll get back to you and try to figure out exactly what I'm trying to figure out here...I apologies for the lack of insightfulness today, shall we blame it on the PSAT? I would love to know if you had any thoughts! (Lauren, email, 10/17/13).

This long email shows how generative Lauren's confusion was. Indeed, she acknowledged right away that our conversation was getting her to think more than a "classroom discussion." The length of her email illustrated this. I was affording Lauren a space to think by validating her thoughts and letting her explore her confusion. She began to articulate some powerful questions. Knowing that Lauren would be embarking on her own YPAR research agenda, I worked to avoid providing any sort of conclusive answer. I responded to her email later that night as follows. Though I was exhausted from a long day of teaching and collecting data, I made a point to validate three of Lauren's ideas after making a joke about the PSAT test being synonymous with systems of whiteness. The email read as follows.

Lauren,

Good stuff even in the face of that induction into systems of whiteness, that PSAT. :)

Couple of things.

1) Unexpected! Yes, we NEED to hold onto that idea with this play. I think we need to be careful about how we put this thing together.

> 2) Humility. YES! I think that is at the heart of how we have to try and do this work. (Particularly as "white" folks.)
>
> 3) Different path? YES!!! And that is what theatre allows us. A way to experiment with some sort of different path where we give up our definitions of "rightness," "whiteness," and even what this play will end up being. And that, I think, is the notion of YPAR. That is also, I think, what education could or maybe even should be doing.
>
> OK, I apologize too. Long day. I will see you tomorrow and we will keep pushing this forward! (Tanner, email, 10/17/12).

This string of early emails between Lauren and I illustrated how I helped to foster permission for Lauren to begin questioning normative discourse. I validated her ideas, shared my opinions about some of the things she was thinking about, and directed the conversation towards refining her research interests in order to provide thinking that would aid our YPAR and playbuilding processes. I deployed similar practices with other students. Lauren took up the space afforded by such practice in serious ways. Other students like Victoria who I write about in chapter six did as well. Some students did not.

So this was the way that Lauren situated her work for the year. Eventually she would conduct research with Karen refugees, lead theatrical workshops in local elementary and middle schools, help write *Blanchkreist*, and portray the character of Cecilia in the performance. The confusion she spoke about in April was necessary for her to grapple critically with her own whiteness and subsequent participation in white supremacy. That confusion began to take

shape in October. My job was to validate, facilitate and provide a permissive space for her to explore her confusion. She used that space to ask questions, interrogate white discourse, and negotiate the complexity of making sense of complex systems of whiteness.

The permissive space I created for Adam to tell the sorts of jokes I referenced in the previous chapter was responsible for Lauren's thinking. She took up the space I created and gave herself the permission to be confused.

***

Cecilia: *(While chewing, Cecilia is rather confused. Swallows.)* Um... It's.. kind of bland. (Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 37)

***

What follows is an edited version of a journal entry that I wrote on 4/13/13. I wrote this after puzzling over Lauren's remark at our presentation. This writing is meant to show the complexity of my struggle to negotiate what Lauren termed as permission to be confused. It happened as a series of questions that I was wrestling with. It also names the tensions I was grappling with in April as the play was beginning to take shape. This was after nearly a year of conducting this project.

***

Bedford: I don't like you because you pose a threat. You and your pestilential family. You all polluted our town, causing social unrest, bringing violence, and homicide.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 76)

***

My Permission to Be Confused

I am a straight, white male. Is it okay for me to talk about my whiteness? Is it okay for me to teach about whiteness? Is it okay for me to suggest that I am more complicated than a list of privileges or the adjectives "straight," "white," and "male?"

The students in my project were predominately white. Nonwhite students who participated did not stick through with the project. Is this okay?

Why do I need permission to make discussions of whiteness about whiteness? Do I need permission? Can white people talk about their own whiteness without being racist?

Throughout this project, whenever I was talking with a black person, I felt I needed their permission to move ahead.

In August, The African-American liaison sat in my classroom. I told her about the project.

"Sounds cool, Sam. Let me know what you guys end up doing."

In September, I sat in the equity director's office. She headed up the school district's equity initiative. We had a great conversation about the district as a white system. She seemed confused as to why I was meeting with her.

"You work sounds great, what exactly do you need from me, Sam?"

In December I attended a social justice theatre workshop at The University of Minnesota with my students. Students from the other high schools

were mostly people of color. After hearing that we were going to be making a play about whiteness they had this to say.

"Cool, we want to come see it."

People of color seemed supportive. They also seemed curious as to what I wanted from them. So what did I want from them?

Perhaps it wasn't about getting permission from black people to ask the questions I needed to ask. Maybe it was about getting permission from myself.

I was hesitant to lump myself into white identity.

"My father was raised orthodox Jew," I would tell people.

"My parents were neglectful, I was hardly raised at all," I would say.

But over time, I had learned to play a part. My friend Tricia took me to Abercrombie when I was sixteen so I could dress "preppy." I wrote an essay in high school about how "trashy" or "ghetto" Wal-Mart was. I was learning to play into normative, white, middle class identity. Even if I knew that I was playing a part, I was still picking up habits and mannerisms. These were social scripts I was learning in order to be included in white society. They did not come without a cost. I learned to be embarrassed by my loud, sarcastic father. His Jewish background made me strange to my white friends. I distanced myself from Dad in order to fit the behaviors my white friends (and white teachers) expected from me.

So by the time I was conducting this project, as much as my identity was complicated, I had become white. And maybe white people need permission to examine whiteness. But permission from where?

Myself?

That might be what I provided the white students in this project. I gave them a permissive space to contemplate their own whiteness.

"My favorite part of this project was the Tuesday meetings," one of the students had said at the writer's reflection meeting in March, "I feel like we accomplished something there."

In those meetings in the fall, I let the students talk about whiteness without a particular outcome in mind. I wanted them to draw their own conclusions, connections, whatever. YPAR suggested this approach to me. So did what I knew about improvisation. Students were building their own inquiries into the world and I was validating their endeavor, adding content where it seemed to fit, vigorously nodding permissively, and thinking aloud with them.

"This project was different than other projects about race," Victoria said as we were presenting in April at the Graduate Student Research Day at the University of Minnesota, "because we weren't supposed to reach the same conclusion as our teacher."

That was the same meeting where Lauren named her permission to be confused.

My intention with this project was to undermine racism, to question white supremacy. By naming whiteness as the subject, I hoped to work with the students to hold whiteness up to the light, to see it, rather than blackness, as the subject in a conversation about race.

Throughout the project, it seemed that white people resisted that move.

"Have you talked to the equity director yet, Sam?" My principal asked when I pitched the project in the spring of 2012. "Make sure you invite students of color to be involved."

Why was my principal trying to make The Whiteness Project about people of color?

"Mr. Tanner, I've got something for your whiteness project," one student, Dave told me one morning in September. He proceeded to tell me a story about an interaction he had with a black kid.

Why was my student trying to make The Whiteness Project about people of color?

The most insulting version of this conversation came when my father brought his new girlfriend over to my house on a Sunday.

I was exhausted from this project, from my teaching, from being a doctoral student, from adulthood. But my father said that this new woman was the one and he was only in town for a week so I invited him over. When they arrived, Dad asked me to talk about my dissertation. He wanted to show me off.

"My students are researching whiteness. They will write a play about it and stage it," I yawned.

"What do you think about the fact that Barack Obama is a Muslim?" My father's date asked me.

Okay?

Why was my father's new girlfriend making The Whiteness Project about Obama's religion?

Perhaps it was because they hadn't given themselves permission to think about their own whiteness and subsequent participation in normative white supremacy. They were afraid to make whiteness the subject.

One of the students of color that stayed with the project was Krista. She was self-described as an Americanized Indian. She fit in with white students as well as students of color. After a year of this work, a handful of emotional, tear-filled conversations with me, and a slew of profanity to describe how much she hated everything and everyone, she boiled over at our presentation during graduate student research day at the University of Minnesota.

Mark was a white student who had been a leader throughout the year. After he finished talking about how the group had managed to overcome their discomfort with the subject, Krista spoke up.

"That is news to me," her eyes were wide and her mouth was clenched. She had been gasping or shaking her head as Mark was speaking.

"What do you mean by that?" a graduate student attending the presentation asked. He was the only one in the room who looked black. Krista was darker but dressed and spoke like a white person. She was Indian and at different times had represented herself as black, as a white, as Indian, as I don't know.

Krista became emotional and couldn't speak.

"Can I think about that?"

"Of course," the graduate student said.

After the conversation turned, Krista spoke again.

"White people think they are better than everybody else," she burst out, on the verge of tears.

Krista went up to the graduate student and spoke to him after the session. She seemed to assume some sort of connection with him. The irony came when he told her that he didn't really see himself as black. This shook Krista. As we were walking back to the cars in the parking ramp, I said this to her.

"Just because him and I look like this," I referred to a white student who was walking with. He was a mixed student who looked white. He was walking with us. I held up my arm and positioned it against his, " this doesn't mean that we are the same thing."

Krista laughed.

"And if Adam were here, he would be a whole different version of whiteness, right?"

"Yes," Krista said.

"I look white," the student I was walking with said, "but I am really mixed, right?" Aaron's mom was white and his dad was black.

Later, after my research assistant Natalie had spoken with Krista, she had this to say to me.

"I think what Krista did made everybody angry."

"How do you mean?" I asked her.

We were sitting in the box office after the rehearsal that had followed our presentation. I was exhausted but concerned.

"Victoria has had it with her, so has Hannah, so has Aaron. Everybody in the group has tried to open themselves to her, to understand her perspective. She basically just pooped on all of them in there," Natalie said.

Natalie had driven Victoria and Hannah home. They talked about this in the car.

It was true that I had arranged conversations between Victoria and Krista, Hannah and Krista, and even Megan and Krista. Nothing ever came of them.

I thought about what Natalie had said.

"Is it a social thing?" I asked. "Or is it a race thing?"

"I think it is a little bit of both," Natalie said. "Krista does have a different perspective, but she also doesn't get along with these people. She is a socially awkward 10th grader."

I thought about how Krista had shoved her way past a 10th grader during the production phase of the project. We were milling around in the auditorium, waiting for the first rehearsal to start. When he innocently asked her where Speech sections were being held, she told him to get the fuck out of her way.

Then she unloaded on me and told me how awful I was and went off to tell the same thing to her Chemisty teacher. Krista had been doing this for years, she was extremely emotional and would move from telling me that I was her favorite teacher to loud condemnations of me in short, quick bursts. There was always a touch of humor in her voice.

Krista troubled me. Was it whiteness at work here or something more complicated? Was I being racist by facilitating a project that didn't seem to accomplish what Krista had accomplished? Were her opinions more important because she was not white?

I realized that my biggest concern during the year was that I was being racist or somehow facilitating a racist project. I was so afraid of being racist even though I had built a pedagogical agenda that accepted the assumption that *all* Americans were participants in the logics of white supremacy. Again, it seemed as though I needed permission to incorporate this assumption into my practice in order to conduct a project that made whiteness the subject and asked white people examine how it worked within themselves.

"They don't get it," Krista told me any number of times throughout the year.

"They don't get what you get," I usually told her, "but they get something else."

"This project isn't happening the way it is supposed to," she told me.

As I got more exhausted throughout the year, I started to doubt myself.

But I realized when Lauren spoke at the University that I had done something important. I had given all of us the permission to be confused, *myself included.* What Krista wanted so badly were clear, crisp answers to her questions. This was the same thing that Lauren wanted. It was what I wanted. But there were no clear answers. There were only more questions. There was

confusion. This is the outcome of critical work. We were changing. Our learning objectives were shifting as we were becoming wiser.

Certainly Krista brought a perspective to the conversation that challenged some of the dominant ideologies held by the students. But she didn't have clear answers for the implications of her perspective. There were none to be had because this was a complicated discussion that varied by individual.

Later, I came upon something bell hooks wrote. This was when I was struggling to articulate why Lauren's comment about permission was so important to me. According to hooks (2003) "Anti-racist white folks recognize that their ongoing resistance to white supremacism is genuine when it is not determined in any way by the approval or disapproval of people of color" (p. 65). Hooks claim resonated with the important generative confusion that came from the permission that I tried to create for deep critical confusion. This permission is essential to critical whiteness pedagogy because it opens space to understand white identity despite the logics that would police white people away from such an inquiry.

So I came to understand permission as a crucial component of critical whiteness pedagogy—permission to be confused.

***

Mayor: So all we know is that there are reported cases of vision loss. We don't know the cause, the cure or any other symptoms.

Doctor: Yes that's correct.

Superintendent Ellen: Is that really enough to warrant a statement?

Mayor: We have to tell people something.

Superintendent Ellen: Yes I suppose we must advise attentiveness and patience.

Mayor: Yes, attentiveness and patience.

Chief of Police: Good luck with that.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 47)

***

Our Permission to Be Confused

In May, the importance of generative confusion in critical whiteness pedagogy became even clearer to me. This was during a talkback session with our audience after the Friday evening performance of the show. An audience member asked the cast for a definition of whiteness. I was embarrassed by the way my students responded. Later, I realized that I was actually proud of their response. The question and subsequent responses by the cast are as follows.

> **Audience Member:** I want everyone to answer at same time, have you defined the term whiteness for yourself?
>
> **All:** NO!
>
> **Sofia:** I personally wanted to figure out if I was white or not. I thought I am definitively going to figure out if I'm white or not? At the end it's more complex. No I am not able to define whiteness
>
> **Victoria:** No is the short answer. I realized quickly that every day that I worked on this another issue came up, I'm more confused than ever and more enlightened than ever…I'm not there yet and won't be for a while.

(Talkback Session, 5/10/13).

At first, I was taken aback by the way the cast responded to the question. All of them shouted "no," when the audience asked them if they had a clear definition of whiteness. Had I completely failed as their teacher? Had my student learned nothing? Did my students just share that with an audience of nearly four-hundred people? Just because students cannot articulate clear answers does not delegitimize their learning. In fact, their inability to answer is evidence of the serious way they took up the question. They refused to offer a simple answer to a complicated problem. This shows that their confusion was *generative*.

Both Sofia and Victoria's follow-up to the question illustrates the way that students were building complex responses to white identity and white supremacy. Sofia's comment suggested that whiteness was too multidimensional to be described by simple categories of identification. She realized that any definition of her own whiteness could not be simply stated. Victoria's response shows how confusion and enlightenment went hand in hand for her. Perhaps she was unable to come up with a concise summation of her learning throughout the year. Clearly she was still in the process of struggling with the question, gleaning wisdom. This is made even clearer in the next chapter. That chapter takes up Victoria's complicated theorizations of whiteness that were facilitated by a process that necessitated generative confusion.

So though it may go against traditional concepts of schooling, I was proud that my students did not have a simple answer to a complicated question. I was

proud of their confusion. For me, it evidenced their critical engagement with the complexity of whiteness.

Schools need to be permissive of the sort of generative confusion evidenced by the students' response to the audiences question in order to authentically tackle unsolved problems, unanswered questions. Certainly this is the case in pedagogy that means to grapple with white identity that is the byproduct of systematic white supremacy.

Chapter Six: Whiteness *is* Depression

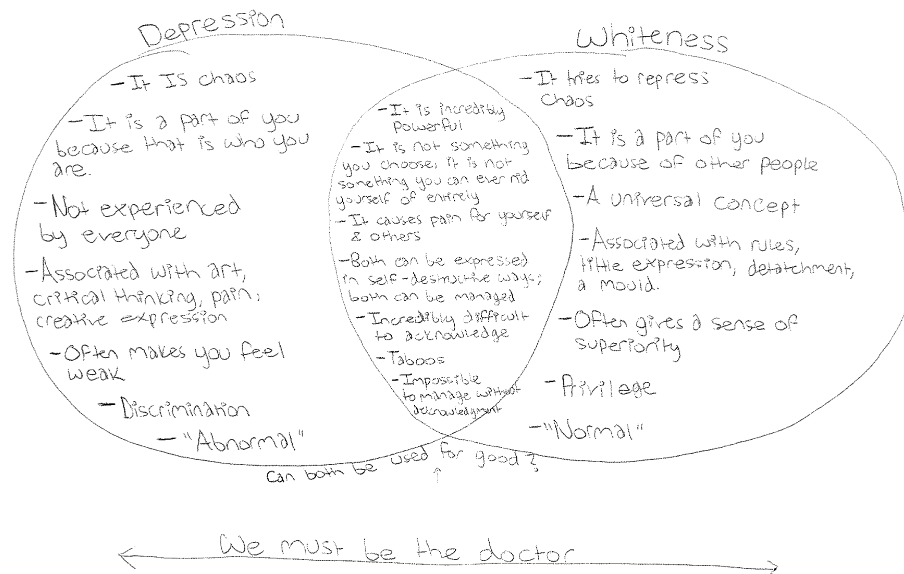
Victoria was an 11th grader during the year I facilitated The Whiteness Project. She was one of the top students in the high school. She took all AP classes, had an extremely high GPA, and participated in music, theatre, and even cheerleading. My relationship with Victoria in concert with the pedagogical design of The Whiteness Project created conditions for her to create powerful theorizations of whiteness, the PAHS theatre program, and the project that was a product of the two. Victoria's theorization that whiteness was synonymous with

depression connected in powerful ways to the work of Thandeka, Morrison, and El Kati that I outlined in chapters one and two. Furthermore, Victoria's theorization created circumstances that were conducive to her powerful transformation over the year. She used the permissive space that my deployment of critical whiteneness pedagogy created in order to wrestle with the generative confusion I described in chapter five. In the context of YPAR research and participation in playbuilding, this allowed her to articulate the nuance of both her own whiteness and depression. She learned to take action so that she was not controlled by the compulsions of either. This meant that she purposely troubled both the way that white supremacist thinking clouded her understanding of reality as well as her urge to inflict self-harm. This chapter will provide evidence of those two transformations.

Over the year Victoria accomplished the following tangible things; 1) she wrote reflective research journals, 2) conducted theatrical workshop with students in elementary and middle schools to examine their perceptions of whiteness, 3) wrote countless essays, poems, venn diagrams, and stories, 4) engaged in hours of conversation with me about whiteness, her writing, and the link she discovered to her depression, 5) presented at three conferences with the collective of students, 6) created the character Amara, 7) wrote all of the scenes that included Amara in the play, 8) organized a student-only meeting so that they could decide what the virus in the play was, 9) was an editor of the script, 10) built the cage that Amara was locked in during the play, 11) created a character journal for Amara during rehearsals, 12) portrayed the role of Amara

in the play, 13) continued to dialogue with me about the project into her senior year after it was finished. She was busy.

Over the year, Victoria began to theorize whiteness in much the same way that Morrison or Thandeka had. She saw it as linked to her own struggle with depression as I will describe in greater detail later in this chapter. The following Venn diagram that Victoria brought to me in January is evidence of Victoria's compelling theorization.



Victoria's misspelling of "ven" might be an intentional way to poke fun at the way that she is using traditional schooling practices in subversive ways. This is furthered evidenced by the sarcastic title, "A Ven Diagram of Fun." In this way, Victoria is taking up practices of Lather's doubled science; she is both conducting scholarship and critiquing it.

There are three important things to note about Victoria's diagram. First, the complexity of her theorization is clear in that she created seven descriptions of both whiteness and depression that are contradictory but also finds seven powerful connections that echo Morrison's claim that whiteness is a neurosis. Secondly, she asked a powerful question that became conducive to the transformative work she conducted over the year underneath the diagram: "can both be used for good?" Thirdly, she asserted that individuals need to take action in order to subvert the harmful compulsions of both concepts in her claim that "we must be the doctor." Victoria's Venn diagram is a tangible example of her compelling work as a theorist of whiteness during the year.

The intangible product of the list of the tasks Victoria accomplished that I included above is what this chapter will explore more directly. I assemble this chapter in reference to Law's call for a messy (not sloppy) approach to representing research. The mess here is carefully structured to show a conversation between Victoria's words and my own. I *do not* rely on the script of Blanchekreist here. Instead, the chapter works to share the dialogic relationship between Victoria and I. I chose to represent Victoria in this chapter in three segmented ways in this chapter. First, I let her speak for herself. Six excerpts from the interview that Natalie conducted with Victoria are included in this chapter. Secondly, I tell my story of working with Victoria. My writing is nestled in between the excerpts from Victoria's interview. I use fieldnotes and emails to undergird my explanation of the work I conducted with Victoria. This writing is organized somewhat chronologically. Finally, I interpret Victoria's

transformation that came from her theorization of whiteness as synonymous to depression.

I discussed how El Kati likened the compulsions of white people to the behavior of children in chapter two. In that chapter, I asked whether or not my pedagogy could create conditions for my students to grow up. In many ways, Victoria's powerful transformation over the year is evidence of her gaining wisdom or, to use El Kati's phrase, growing up.

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Victoria's Interview Excerpt #1[17][18]

Natalie: What did you see as your role in this project?

Victoria: Is that like a trick question or just regular? Is Tanner gonna listen to this? That'd be hilarious. Hi Mr. Tanner. Okay I'm done. So I was…oh this was so long ago. I was in the show as an actor and then way back I researched and I wrote and I edited and I thought. Thinker my role was thinker.

Natalie: Do you feel that you were given space to be successful in all of those roles?

Victoria: Yes. Yes, I think that if there was one role that I was a bit restricted in it would probably be researcher. Just because you know there were all of those

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[17] The rest of this chapter will be organized in three segments: 1) Excerpts from interview Victoria's interview with Natalie, 2) My interpretation of these excerpts, 3) My storied representation of working with Victoria.

[18] It was decided not to include overlaps, interruptions, latched speech, or emphasis in the transcriptions of the interviews that appear in the dissertation. This allows the interview excerpts to be more fluidly represented as a part of the content of this dissertation report rather than simply units of data. This is particularly useful in terms of my commitment to acknowledging the power of Victoria's theoretical work over the year.

blockades with the elementary schools and I just feel like I could have done more but there were so many restrictions around that. But especially with writing and acting there was…I was very grateful for the opportunities I had so yeah for the most part (Personal Communication, 5/24/13).

***

Interpretation Vignette #1

Victoria's initial reaction to Natalie's first question in the first interview excerpt is funny. She asked if "Tanner" would actually listen to the interview. She then said "hi, Mr. Tanner." Both Victoria and her parents had signed consent forms and were well aware that I was conducting my dissertation research. She laughed as she said this on the recording because the formality of the interview seemed strange after spending the year working so closely with me.

The switch between formal and informal versions of my name is also interesting. When speaking to Natalie, I was "Tanner." When speaking directly to me through the microphone I was "Mr. Tanner." Indeed, I played a number of roles with Victoria throughout the year that included; 1) teacher, 2) project facilitator, 3) mentor, 4) counselor, 5) friend, etc. The switch between formal and informal use of my names illustrates the complexity of the pedagogical relationship I built with her.

Victoria struggled to describe her role in this project. First she called herself a research, a writer, and an editor before she realized that what she had really been was a thinker. The tangible tasks Victoria completed through this project created space for her to conduct deep thinking about whiteness.

According to Cammaroto & Fine (2008) "… (PAR) is one way to create these vital spaces for young people. With an emphasis on democratizing knowledge, fostering critical inquiry of daily life and developing liberatory practices, PAR is both an art and method to engage youth in democratic problem solving" (p. 14). Victoria's "thinking" was fostered by the practice that Cammarota & Fine attribute to PAR (and YPAR) that fosters critical inquiry of daily life. This is what my work with Victoria in The Whiteness Project facilitated. And this thinking allowed Victoria to theorize her whiteness in relation to her depression. If Morrison's claim that whiteness is a distortion of the white psyche is taken seriously, the fact that Victoria was able to connect it to her depression is a logical step.

***

Working with Victoria Vignette #1

Very early on, our discussions about whiteness kept coming back to Victoria's depression. In October, she shared that she had been institutionalized for a short period during her freshman year after sharing that she had thoughts of self-harm to her school counselor. From that experience, she learned that it was not okay for her to talk about her depression with people in positions of power.

Despite the blur of student-teacher boundaries, I chose to talk with Victoria. I learned that she had a deep resentment towards school counselors, administrators, and therapists. The more we talked about whiteness, the more we seemed to be talking about Victoria's depression. Throughout the year, I set

up particular times to talk with her in my classroom, after school, or before or after rehearsal. I had a relationship with her mother so I made it clear that Victoria and I were meeting to discuss her work in relation to The Whiteness Project. I ensured that Victoria and I had a modicum of privacy but were also visible (i.e. classroom doors open, in social spaces).

Early in my career, administrators and colleagues assured me that male teachers shouldn't work alone with female students. This was problematic for me as a drama teacher. Oftentimes, I required privacy to work with a student on a monologue or an acting piece that required delicate validation in order to access sincere emotion. My relational skill with students is useful in eliciting emotional engagement. They trust me and feel safe experimenting with acting choices. I have found that it is harder to create that safety and trust when other people are in the room watching the work.

Balancing the need for privacy with propriety seemed important with Victoria. I felt responsible to her because I had unearthed her depression by involving her in The Whiteness Project. In May, Victoria told me that the only reason she had not committed suicide during her junior year was her involvement in The Whiteness Project. While Victoria was a drama student and did have a propensity for over-exaggeration, I trusted and honored the sincerity of her remark.

***

Victoria's Interview Excerpt #2

Natalie: What did you see as the purpose of this project?

Victoria: At the beginning or at the end?

Natalie: Both

Victoria: At the beginning I thought (no pun intended) I saw it in a very black and white manner. You know that we were kids doing some social justice theater trying to solve racism. Like to be perfectly honest I mean it was more or less that. But as it went on I realized it was as much about changing ourselves as it was about changing our community. And I almost feel as if, we weren't aware of this in the beginning, but one of the big, one of the main purposes of this project was to make ourselves more aware of what was going on and I think we almost like tricked ourselves into doing some introspection. Which I think was the greatest benefit for me personally, was that I learned so much about myself. Creating awareness more than anything.

Natalie: Do you think it was successful in doing that?

Victoria: With ourselves? Yes. For the most part, I don't know individually how people felt. I know that if you were open to it, it had the potential to change your life. As for the people in the audience, the people out there, I think it's the same case. If they are willing to be receptive then yes it did there job but if they're not there's only so much you can do with the type of time that we were given (Personal Communication, 5/24/13).

***

Interpretation Vignette #2

Victoria's response to Natalie shows a shift in her understanding of the project over time. At first, she thought that that she would simply be part of a

group of students using social justice theatre to "solve racism." As the year progressed, this "black and white" approach changed. She shifted her gaze inward as she started to understand how whiteness was actually something inside of her. According to her, my teaching project "tricked' her into "introspection." Though I felt I was transparent, Victoria's phrasing suggested that she was not expecting the deep sort of self-reflection that came from inquiring into whiteness in the way that this project suggested. Indeed, her introspection came from her conceived relationship between her depression and her whiteness. It was as though she was taking up Ellison's (1953/1995) plea for white writers to "…to recognize the broader aspects of their own" humanity that I cited in chapter one. This recognition of her own humanity allowed Victoria to take note of what Thandeka (1999) described as white shame. Recall from chapter one how Thandeka theorized this shame.

If Victoria really does have an injury to what Thandeka called her "core self that is hidden from view" (p. 17), making it visible reveals the wound. This comes from an injury done to her by what Thandeka called her caretakers. These might be parents, counselors, teachers, etc. This would be anybody that helped socialize Victoria into a "system of values that hold in contempt difference from the white community's ideals" (p. 18) So Victoria's repression of difference emerged as she began to inquire into whiteness because she saw a connection to her bouts with depression. Seeing things in this way allowed Victoria to begin transforming her participation in whiteness.

The way I rendered YPAR and the playbuilding process in my pedagogy fostered Victoria's theorization. According to Cammaroto & Fine (2008), "PAR blurs the line between pedagogy, research, and politics… each does not extend from the other in seamless fashion. Each demands specific competencies and skills, both on their own and when taken together. If nothing else, PAR is an invitation to a long-term struggle that forces us to operate in these "in between" spaces" (p. viii). The "specific competencies" that I brought to this project included experience with suicide, playbuilding, and radical relational openness. Furthermore, relying on my improvisational practices outlined in chapter three, I worked to embed a practice with Victoria that asked her to extend her theorization without expectation of a clear or defined outcome or answer. Indeed, the "in between spaces" that Cammarota & Fine described were our conversations, Victoria's research, and her theatrical work. The play itself became a powerful "in-between" space where reality was altered for the duration of the show and Victoria actually embodied the difference that had been socialized out of her by white supremacy.

***

Working with Victoria Vignette #2

"If it weren't for this project, I would be dead by now," Victoria told me.

We were standing on the stage in my crowded classroom. It was a May morning (Fieldnotes, 5/24/13).

I thought about all the times Victoria cautiously alluded to thoughts of self-harm or suicide during our talks. I thought about all the times that I had told

her that she would be okay, that she needed to keep going. And then I thought about my best-friend Nick. He took his life when he was twenty-two. Nick didn't trust counselors, psychologists, or his parents. He was too smart for them. Victoria was the same way.

Victoria wasn't too smart for me. So I opened myself up, gave her an honest audience, didn't judge or police her thoughts or feelings, and we talked. Unlike other caregivers, I refused to provide her with answers or to judge or assess her. Instead, I helped her form and interrogate her ideas, ask questions, and tried to inspire her to keep thinking and working.

I gave Victoria what I wished I could have given Nick. I was too dumb to give Nick what he needed when I was twenty-two. I had learned a great deal by the time I was thirty-three.

So this project provided a context to let Victoria talk. According to her, this saved her life.

Incidentally, my friend Nick's white parents adopted him from an orphanage in South Korea. He grew up in a predominately white suburb. I still think that one of the reasons he and I were so close was that neither of us seemed to fit into that community. He was Asian and I was the son of a loud-mouthed Jew.

Nick had been dead for eleven years by the time I was working with Victoria.

***

Victoria's Interview Excerpt #3

Natalie: How do you think the racial identities of the individuals involved (including yourself) contributed to how people participated and understood the project?

Victoria: Oh I always…I actually have never talked about this before. I always felt like I couldn't be deep enough because I was white. I always thought that I could not contribute enough because I was white and there was only so much soul searching I could do when I had been handed like this white utopian life, you know? Well, utopian in certain aspects, racial aspects. So for me I think one of the reasons that I pushed so hard throughout this process, trying to do more and more and more, trying to contribute as much as possible is because I felt like I was lacking something because I was white. (Pause) Hmm? I never realize that before. That's one of the reasons I've worked so hard is 'cause I felt like because I was white what I was doing had less value. And so yeah, I pushed really hard because of that. I don't know if other people had the same sentiment but then of course we were talking earlier in this interview about Krista race and obviously that made her feel as if she knew things that we never would. And that could be true. I'm sure she knows a lot of things about race that I never will, but it came to a point where it was "yes, we're never going to know that…what can we do about it?" honestly, what can we do about it? We can't do anything. We're trying to do something here and apparently that's not good enough. And then Tara[19] too. I think it created a tension, Sofia was very peaceful, even though she's Bulgarian. It was more Tara and Krista it was just this constant…you know it was almost as

[19] Pseudonym

if they wanted to be the ring leaders of the show because they weren't white, which also reinforced my idea that my work didn't have as much validity as theirs. It was almost like they wanted to be like, "Oh white people that's nice, you can help us as we try and explain to you how your own race works in our world". And I'm like well, don't you think that our opinion is valid too? It came back to that thing of whiteness cannot be inspected on its own it has to be related to other racial minorities. I think it made a lot of people feel as if they didn't know and they could never find the answers because they weren't a racial minority. And I think that thought was already there in the first place and then for other people to come in and reinforce that I think hurt a lot of people, including myself. So that was another thing I think stunted our growth. Why are you asking me all these sad questions about what made the project go wrong? But I mean yeah, that kind of sucked at times and it was really refreshing when you would hear them say something that was a bit more welcoming. I almost feel as if they like took it as an opportunity, like historically to get…would it be really awful of me to say it felt like historical revenge? Like to make us feel excluded and like I'm sure that they feel that in many settings. And I feel like they kind of wanted to turn that back on us and they succeeded (Personal Communication, 5/24/13).

***

Interpretation Vignette #3

Victoria's response to Natalie in the third excerpt shows how white students can actually be positioned by deficit-level thinking in anti-racist pedagogy. Victoria felt like she "lacked something" because she was white. She

used Krista, Tara, and Sofia to describe her feeling of inferiority. These were three non-white students in the project. Victoria argued that she worked harder on this project because she felt it was her responsibility to make up for whatever she was lacking as a white person. This troubled her. Certainly she could not understand the exact racial experience of what it is like to be Latina like Tara, Indian like Krista, or even Bulgarian like Sofia. Victoria's implicit point seems to be that there needs to be space for white students to bring something constructive to the table. Indeed, her remark that "It came back to that thing that whiteness cannot be inspected on its own," recalls the way that the students and I discussed Morrison's response to Rose in the interview I cited in chapter one. Instead of simply making Krista, Tara, and Sofia the "ringleaders," of the project, couldn't white people figure out a way to move forward without being positioned in terms of a deficit?

After discussing this, Victoria asked Natalie why she was asking "sad" questions. Again, addressing white supremacy and the way that racial roles undermined The Whiteness Project led to Victoria to note a sort of melancholy the likes of which Morrison (1995) described in her preface to *Playing in the Dark.* Morrison presented a white woman who broke into tears because a black musician, Louis Armstrong, made her whiteness visible to her in relation to a performance. Non-white students were making Victoria's whiteness visible to her even as she was trying to articulate ways to work on whiteness as a white person in relation to participation in the project. This caused her to feel sad.

Again, the wound she received at the hands of her caregivers was coming to the surface during the interview.

***

Working with Victoria Vignette #3

One of my first memories is a dream.

In that dream, Mom, Dad, and my sister Christie were boarding a bus. They were down the road.

"Wait up," I screamed.

They took no notice of me.

A row of bulldozers stretched out behind me. They were approaching. I was going to be crushed. My parents were ignoring me.

I was four years old.

It took me years to make sense of that dream. I have come to think that – even when I was four – I had an intuitive sense that my family wasn't going to be there to protect me. I would need to handle the bulldozers on my own.

The story of what happened next followed this logic. Mom was an alcoholic who abandoned the family when I was seven. Dad was a snake-oil insurance salesman, a pothead more interested in his corvettes than his son. Christie was the special needs byproduct of their breeding.

I was on my own. So I've spent thirty years teaching myself to cope with my complicated universe. I did this despite my caretakers. Talk about experiential learning. This coping led me to survive and eventually become a

high school teacher. I've spent my adult life working to teach others how to cope with their own complicated universes.

This doesn't qualify me as a licensed therapist. It does mean that there is very little that fazes me. So the first time Victoria had a panic attack in front of me, I wasn't that taken aback.

We had been talking about the research project she designed. She proposed to go into elementary and middle schools in the school district and use Boal's image theatre to investigate how children conceptualized whiteness. Her and I were discussing the research in my classroom after school. We were sitting in my grandmother's chairs. The classroom door was open but nobody was around aside from an occasional janitor or student.

After Victoria's panic attack, I agreed to schedule another time to talk with her. Here is what I wrote about preparing for that meeting in my fieldnotes.

> I offered to talk with Victoria after school on Friday. She is scared of sharing her thoughts and emotions with me. I think she needs somebody who will not judge her and that is at the heart of who I am as a teacher in schools. So I can provide that. And I won't be weirded out because nothing weirds me out because I have seen some crazy shit (fieldnotes, 11/15/2013).

So I wasn't "weirded out" the next time I met Victoria and she shared that one of her earliest memories was a reoccurring dream where she was falling through the clouds towards a bed of bloody spikes. Our conversation about whiteness quickly led her to that memory. Instead of being weirded out by Victoria, I

shared my dream about bulldozers. I did this in the spirit of solidarity. It seemed intuitive to share my first memory in light of hers.

After making myself vulnerable by sharing the dream, Victoria and I continued to meet. We usually started our discussions by talking about her research project. This quickly led her to share her numerous panic attacks, her depression. The more we talked, the more Victoria began to theorize whiteness as synonymous to her own depression. After analyzing the data she collected in her research project, Victoria shared some initial analysis with me. In it, she asserted the following. "Depression is whiteness; the difference is that the infected victim is aware of it" (Victoria Data Analysis, 1/24/12). The permissive space I created for Victoria to talk with me allowed her to conceive a relationship between whiteness and her depression. Indeed, without prompt, she brought me an essay the she wrote on a Friday morning before school in January. In the essay, Victoria referenced my bulldozers.

> "Because I am too weak to deal with the panic on my own. I see the bulldozers coming, I see them coming from every direction. And all I want is to be the one person that makes it past them alive, despite the countless stories of others who don't" (Victoria Essay, 1/24/12).

My dream about bulldozers deeply influenced how Victoria was trying to make sense of the relationship between whiteness and her depression. By modeling my own coping mechanisms and being a springboard for Victoria, I was facilitating a process by which she was starting to come up with strategies to

make her way past her own "bulldozers." In turn, this led to her theorization of her whiteness as symptomatic and synonymous with her depression.

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Victoria's Interview Excerpt #4

Natalie: Do you think that this project critiqued whiteness? Reinforced whiteness? Both? Neither?

Victoria: Ugh Natalie why would you ask me that. I don't know. You said you wanted me to be honest right? I think it (long pause) well it did both. But I feel like its reinforcement of whiteness overpowered its critique of whiteness. We were critiquing whiteness and I think for people who, you know how Ms. Ormseth was talking about the stages we were each at with this whole shindig and uh… I feel like people who were not so far along it was more of a critique but for people who were like a little farther up there it was more of a reinforcement. Just because we had to do an…and this wasn't even our fault it's just kind of how our society is being run right now. We had to do an allegory we couldn't just come out and just talk about it and I feel like in a way that was a creative choice but in another way that was because we were too afraid to be more direct with it. KQRS ripped us to shreds and it would have been worse if it wasn't an allegory. So I think it critiqued whiteness but it was really weird and twisted it like brought awareness to people's minds and made people but at the same time it reinforced whiteness by saying you know, whiteness is too powerful for you to ever try and attack it directly because it will eat you alive. And we kind of got a taste of that so I think that the way that the script turned out, I feel like there was

almost a, in certain parts, I feel like there was almost a lack of honesty there. And yeah, so it did a bit of both and it was really weird and I'm still trying to figure that out (Personal Communication, 5/24/13).

***

Interpretation Vignette #4

Victoria finished her response to Natalie's question about reaffirming whiteness by saying "it was really weird and I'm still trying to figure that out." This echoes the confusion that I argued was necessary to subvert organizing logics of white supremacy in chapter five. Indeed, something that is "weird" is something that is not normal. It is not normal for white people to make their whiteness visible. She pointed out the dangerous consequences of making whiteness visible in reference to the KQRS morning show "ripping us to shreds." I analyze this response by the community directly in the next chapter. Indeed, the very question that Natalie asked required Victoria to make her whiteness visible. By suggesting that she was still trying to figure it out, Victoria was suggesting that the transformative process that had been instigated by her participation in The Whiteness Project was still happening. Something in her trajectory had shifted and she was still exploring and learning what that was. As will become clear in the final interview excerpt, Victoria was learning to manage the compulsion brought on both by white supremacist thinking and the self-harm brought on by her depression.

***

Working with Victoria Vignette #4

There was a poster hanging up in the school hallways during the school year. It was a picture of a young girl with a tear coming down her face. The caption read as follows. *If you are sad, tell somebody.*

Victoria came in one morning after seeing this poster. She made a joke to me.

"Yeah, tell them so that systems of whiteness can lock you up," she laughed.

I laughed with her.

Though I enjoyed Victoria's keenly critical intellect, my trepidations in working with her grew more pronounced over the year. Was it okay for me to talk with her so candidly about depression? In my role as a high school teacher, was I letting Victoria share too much? Was I pushing the boundaries of a teacher-student relationship in a high school too far? In the winter, I realized that drama afforded Victoria and I context to continue working with the complexity of her emotional response to whiteness.

So I suggested that rather than spilling her guts to me, Victoria build a performance piece. I coached students through dark monologues all the time. So Victoria created a monologue to represent the panic attacks she experienced at home. She shared the monologue with me in February. This monologue became the impetus for the character of Amara that Victoria wrote and portrayed in the play. So Victoria started to turn some of her feelings into performance art that I watched, coached, and used to talk with her about her thoughts and feelings. I was cautiously building an arts-based pedagogy with a careful set of teacher-

student boundaries in order to facilitate Victoria's inquiry into whiteness, depression, and her psyche in a public high school.

As I was so cautious in my work with Victoria, I made sure to include her parents in the process.

During one of our early conversations about Victoria's whiteness research in September, I got an email from Victoria's mom. Victoria and I were finishing up our discussion on a Friday afternoon.

From: (Victoria's Mom) [********@comcast.net]

Sent: Thursday, September 27, 2012 4:48 PM

To: TANNER, SAMUEL

Subject: Victoria

Hi Sam,

I'm trying to track down Victoria and wondering if she was supposed to meet with you after school today. Let me know if you are aware of her whereabouts. :)

Thanks.

(Victoria's Mom)

From: TANNER, SAMUEL

Sent: Thursday, September 27, 2012 5:04 PM

To: (Victoria's Mom)

Subject: RE: Victoria

(Victoria's Mom),

Victoria is here! We are working. I just read this and told her to contact you!

She also told me that she is planning on walking to the library. I told her to get in touch with you!

Sorry about that!

Sam (Email Correspondence, 9/27/12).

Indeed, as our conversations continued and took a more serious turn, I tried to broach the subject of my conversations with Victoria's mom over email. I didn't want to break the confidentiality I felt as Victoria's teacher and mentor, but I did want to make our work visible to her parents. Victoria was sharing some powerfully emotional statements about her own thoughts of self-harm and depression. I was working to set careful boundaries in how I was dealing with Victoria due to both the aforementioned gender dynamics as well as the seriousness of our talks.

In February, Victoria's mom was helping to coordinate our media outreach campaign for the show. After sending me some questions regarding a pitch letter she was writing for a local newspaper, she shared the following.

On a personal note, I want to thank you for being a mentor and especially a sounding board for Victoria. We are aware of her emotional struggles and want to support and help her, but we also know that it's difficult for teenagers to open up to their parents. We're very glad she has a few people she can confide in. If you ever have any serious concerns, feel free

> to reach out to me. Otherwise, we appreciate your willingness to listen and to be of support. Thank you! (Email Correspondence, 2/22/13).

Here Victoria's Mom acknowledged that Victoria has "emotional struggles" without directly naming depression. She also suggested that she was "glad" that I was there to support her. I responded by answering her questions about the media pitch and including a note about my work with Victoria. This is what I wrote about Victoria.

> I really am happy to help Victoria out. I have been cautious as not to overstep my bounds. That said, I have tried to make myself available to her as somebody who can listen to her. As somebody who has dealt with my fair share, I have tried to talk her through some of what has come out in our conversations about this project. I can handle pretty much whatever students bring to me and, as long as you are okay with me being a listener, I am okay with it (Email Correspondence, 2/22/13).

Victoria's Mom sent back another thank you. From that point on, she mentioned how thankful she was that I was working with Victoria nearly every time we talked. By the end of the project, both Victoria's mother and father came up to me and thanked me for working with her throughout the year. In fact, after the performance, Victoria's father gave me a firm handshake and told me he was grateful that Victoria had the opportunity to work with me on this project (Fieldnotes, 5/11/13).

So I did my best to operate within the context of the school culture, Victoria's family, and my own definition of students/teacher boundaries in order

to foster a healthy space for Victoria to process upsetting thoughts, emotional dissonance, and the deep upheaval that came from self-reflection and the study of white identity and systems of white supremacy.

***

Victoria's Interview Excerpt #5

Natalie: How do you feel that discourses and systems of whiteness pertaining to competition and need for attention and fighting for power affected the group dynamics? If they did

Victoria: The need for power. I wrote Tanner like a twenty page essay on this. I mean we kind of have this mentality in the theater department that you can only get somewhere if everybody else is below you. There is no being on even ground up high. It's like there's only one spot, and there are a couple spots below that but it's just not as good as the top and I think that that is something that whiteness has enforced into our society and it definitely effected our group. You could see it from the writing process how people were arguing about whose ideas should be the central aspect of the story. You see it in acting and who wanted the leads and who didn't get the leads and who was angry they didn't get a certain part and whatever. You saw it in the research, who had the best research…why aren't I being recognized, why wasn't I picked to be an editor. I think people…it just was such a power struggle all the time and people couldn't take what they had contributed and they couldn't be proud of just that, there always had to be one more thing. Because everybody wanted the most power in this process because they wanted to come out in the end and I say I was

responsible for this. But I think we've realized in the end that nobody could because what I began to realize was if you take one person out of the equation it would have all crumbled. I mean the things that they contributed were essential for what someone else contributed and what someone else contributed. And we were all like linked together and I don't think we realized that, but if one person had been pulled out of the equation it would have just all fallen to the ground. But we weren't aware of that, was the problem. And we all thought we were more important than the person sitting next to us. And I think that we could have done a lot more if we hadn't had that power struggle there. We could have done a lot more. It like stunted our growth in a way which sucks but there it is (Personal Communication, 5/24/13).

***

Victoria's Interview Interpretation #5

Victoria's analysis of power dynamics during The Whiteness Project suggested that students were constantly fighting for attention or power. Her theorization of the students involved in the theatre program, a mostly white group, suggested an extremely isolated and competitive group. She argued "you could see it" in the writing, the research, the acting, etc. "It" was the desire of the students to be better than the people around them. Indeed, Victoria did write an essay about this problem. It argued that the students in the theatre program needed to be more empathetically connected with each other in order to stop causing harm. Of the project, Victoria told Natalie that, "we could have done a lot more." The students could have accomplished more if they hadn't constantly

been vying for power. Turning Victoria's theorization of the theatre program into a more general assertion about whiteness is fruitful. If whiteness necessitates normalization into a never-ending attempt to accumulate power and wealth in order to fit a white ideal, the white person is undermining their ability to "do a lot more" in the same way that students in The Whiteness Project undermined their successful collaboration over the creation of a play.

In order for YPAR research and playbuilding to work, people need to buy into the collective. Victoria articulated the tensions in being linked to a collective. Ultimately, the students were successful in building a collaborative process. This is interesting in terms of white supremacy. In order for white supremacy to work, people also have to buy into it as an organizing logic. The subsequent byproduct of white supremacy causes harm those who participate, both white people and people of color.

***

Working with Victoria Vignette #5

During the performances, Victoria played the character Amara. Amara was a thirteen-year-old girl who had been locked away from the community because she questioned its values. Her teddy bear was a talking Oracle. This Oracle guided Amara to resist the normalizing forces in the town.

Victoria wrote all of the scenes that included the Oracle. Many of the interactions between Amara and the Oracle echoed the talks that Victoria and I had during the year.

In the middle of April the students built a cage to represent the shack that Amara was locked away in. [20] Victoria helped to build the cage herself. She sent me the following email while they were working.

From: Victoria

Sent: Wed, Apr 17, 2013 at 5:44 PM

To: Samuel Tanner

URGENCY: WE ARE AT CREW AND DO NOT KNOW IF YOU NEED THE CAGE TO BE BIG ENOUGH FOR ME TO STAND.

HOW MUCH ROOM DO YOU WANT ME TO HAVE. ANSWER. NOW.

Victoria and crew

From: Samuel Tanner

To: Victoria

YES! WANT YOU TO STAND! (Email Correspondence, 4/17/13).

The cage the students built was enormous. It was down stage left during the play. Victoria was in the cage with her teddy bear for the duration of the show. The black cage was in sharp contrast with the white aesthetic of the set. She escaped from the cage at the end of the play to give her life in order to save her friend Hurston.

My interpretation of the cage as a director was that it was a symbol for how white people suppressed certain parts of themselves in order to participate in white supremacy. Though they are repressed, there is still space for them to

[20] Appendix E contains three pictures of Victoria in the cage. I include them so the reader can see the powerful image of Victoria as Amara in the cage. Note the stark contrast between the white set and the black cage.

stand. This was a powerful stage metaphor for how I was thinking about whiteness. I staged the play with this in mind. I said as much to two colleagues of mine. They asked me about the cage during a staff meeting in the auditorium.

> The previous day, in a staff meeting, I referred to the black cage on stage to Charity and Tara.
>
> "This will make you uncomfortable. That is meant to symbolize where white people put all of their "non-white stuff." (Fieldnotes, 4/24/13).

Victoria took the acting challenge of Amara seriously. In each rehearsal, she entered the cage and tried to conjure Amara. She even started keeping a journal. She wrote in it in the months leading up to the performance. In her writing, she took on the persona of Amara. The journal seemed to have talismanic importance to her. She carried it with her during the school day. Finally, she asked me to hold onto it because she was worried people would find it and report her. This is documented in my fieldnotes as follows.

> In the morning, I took Victoria's Amara journal. She was having dreams that her friends were taking it and reporting her to people (Fieldnotes, 4/24/13).

The cage became a powerful theatrical artifice during the rehearsal process. Adam was irritated by its presence.

"It doesn't make any sense!" He would rage. "I hate her character," he nodded towards Amara.

Megan felt the same way.

"I hate that character," she told me during rehearsals.

I was convinced that Adam and Megan's loathing of the cage had much to do with a compulsion to dismiss non-white things. In fact, he may have had a point about the plot inconsistency. We had built a black cage to represent what the script described as an old shack.

What might also have been at play was the way that Victoria's performance of Amara was so different than the rest of the play. This is important in terms of whiteness. She was on stage throughout the play doing, as one audience member told me after the show, "her own thing."

Recall how Cornell West described jazz as an improvisational negotiation of discourse in chapter three. In many ways, Victoria's rendition of Amara was making the difference that had been repressed by socialized at the hands of her caregivers visible to both her cast mates as well as the audience. Her depression was coming to life in Amara. This made people uncomfortable. Furthermore, building a black cage to contain that depression on stage was a powerful statement about the need to contain anything that disrupts the white ideal. Amara's presence pushed the play's allegorical rendering of whiteness further because Amara's presence became a subversive foil to the white supremacy that Bedford represented as is outlined in chapter eight.

Prior to the performances, I was talking with Megan's dad. He had studied under David Roedigger. We had talked at length in the fall about how important it was to understand what white people give up in becoming white. I recorded a

conversation in the auditorium after rehearsal with Megan's dad in the following fieldnote.

> Another thing to mention is my chat with (Megan's dad). He stopped in during rehearsal (conferences on Thursday) and noticed the cage. I explained that it was a place to contain all of the non-white stuff about white people that they had to give up to become white. I referenced Roediger as I said this to him.
>
> "And it is on stage the whole time?"
>
> "Yup."
>
> I had shivers explaining the metaphor. The cage is beautiful in that way (Fieldnotes, 4/29/13).

The run of performances exhausted Victoria. She came to me each night before the play started and shared how much she did not want to go back into the cage. Each night I told her that it was good for her. I also told her that we had a huge audience coming to see what was an extremely important project for me. So she damned well better get back in the cage. I laughed as I said this. So did she.

I told Victoria that the metaphor of the play was what was happening to her. She was exercising her repressed Amara by embodying her each night. When she was finished, the character Dawn would arrive. She would give birth to a new person. It sounded corny to me as I said it, but I did believe it.

***

Victoria's Interview Excerpt #6

Natalie: In what ways have you been changed by this project?

Victoria: Seriously?! You're going to ask that question

Natalie: I know you have pages and pages and pages that Tanner will read, but some sort of summative statement…

Victoria: Uhhhhhhh… Does this have to be like a racial related question or can it just like? Well one thing I told Tanner was that, well there are two parts to this question. How I see the world outside myself: I told Tanner that as much as we would all hate to admit this obviously we go through the hallway every day and we make snap judgments about people constantly. Although I strive to be a sort of good person that still happens. And I just remember there was this day, and I wrote him this essay called I am beautiful I am you and that was about how we needed to stop with the power struggle and stop making these snap judgments and it was more articulate than that. But I just remember the day after I wrote that I was walking through the hall and every time I made a snap judgment about somebody I remember reaching into myself and finding an emotion that was really poignant for me and thinking that person has probably felt that at some point in this day. And all of a sudden it was like we were just both people, and now I do that all the time.

(Interruption from Mark and Megan)

So then all of a sudden we were both people. And I started, I don't know if this is meaningful at all, but I started instead of seeing a girl as black or trashy or dressed provocatively or whatever it was me, I was seeing myself in all of these people instead of emphasizing all of these differences that we're so caught up in.

That wouldn't have happened without the project. Furthermore personally I feel like my junior year was the most pivotal point in my self-discovery and that wouldn't have happened without this project. And I mean oh god I don't want to be cheesy but Tanner kept talking about how like Amara and Dawn was like I mean basically a mirror of me and how this was just the process of me finding Dawn. And I don't think I ever would have even began that journey without this, I feel like I would have just kept sitting in the dark. And I don't know where that would have led me in life, but I'm guessing it's a bad place. So I think this almost jump started something, a process for me that I can't quite identify that's really necessary and for that I am grateful that this happened. So I think it changed my life and for other people they may say this is a stupid project I did in high school and I didn't figure out anything but …and I'm still figuring it out, but it changed something (Personal Communication, 5/24/13).

Victoria's Interview Interpretation #6

Victoria's response to Natalie final question is a powerful indication of the transformation that this project fostered in Victoria. According to her, "I think it changed my life" and "I'm still figuring it out, but it changed something." Again, this is the sort of permission for confused inquiry that chapter five argued was necessary to help white student begin to understand and transform their participation in white supremacy. Victoria's final statement is a testament to the ongoing journey towards wisdom that comes from sustained inquiries into whiteness. By realizing that people she had judged in the past because of race or class actually shared similarities with her, she illustrated that she was

overcoming her compulsion towards white supremacist thinking. The self-discovery of that she described by referencing Dawn illustrated the way she was coping with her depression.

In the play, Amara gives her life for the community. In the final scene, Victoria returned as a little girl named Dawn. She moved in with a new family that was accepted by the community after it had learned how it was causing harm. As I argue in chapter eight, Amara's subversion of white supremacy cost her life but provided space for Dawn to come. Of course, dawn represents a new morning or birth. By exorcising her depression and perhaps even her whiteness through her research, her conversations with me, and her performance of Amara, Victoria was transforming into a new person.

Recall how El Kati's story challenged me to worry about whether or not I could help my white student grow up. Victoria was participating in something of the process through her participation in a pedagogical relationship with me, in The Whiteness Project. If growing up is synonymous with examining the broader aspects of our humanity in order to overcome destructive, oppressive, and harmful compulsions, than Victoria was certainly growing up.

Chapter Seven: Critical Disruption is Disruptive

This chapter interprets the community response that happened during production week. It examines how The Whiteness Project was disturbed by the very critical disruption it was trying to create after a local radio show and national blog caught wind of the work.

I rely on vignettes, emails, and transcripts in order to show how Thandeka's theorization of white shame fueled a frightening but illustrative backlash from some powerful discursive forces through the media. I tell an interpretive story of the week of performances. This story shows two important things that might benefit teachers who attempt similar projects. First, it illustrates my political work to protect my position as a teacher. My relationships with parents and administrators were carefully crafted over the year in order to build a power base in case something like what I describe in this chapter happened. Second, I warn that participants in the project may have actually *enjoyed* the controversy stirred up by the media attention at the *expense* of anti-racist work.

***

Cecilia: Just walking. I wanted some air after school. Actually, I ended up seeing the wall that you told me about.

Roman: You walked all the way to the wall? That is some walk. None of us usually go to the wall. Better to steer clear. What did you think of the wall?

Cecilia: *(She thinks for a moment.)* I guess. I guess it was sad.

Roman: Sad? What do you mean?

Cecilia: I am not sure. It was just sad. *(Roman studies Cecilia for a moment. He is confused. So is she. He frowns. Cecilia recognizes that she has said something strange. She smiles and laughs.)*

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 29)

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Making Whiteness Visible

My Aunt worked as a secretary in the Primdale Area School District at the Fairview office. She sent me following email on a Monday morning the week before the play opened.

> From: (My Aunt)
>
> To: "Samuel Tanner"
>
> Mon, May 6, 2013 at 10:34 AM
>
> Hi Sam,
>
> This could possibly be the last morning I ever listen to KQ. Every morning on my way to work I listen to KQ. I was super jazzed to hear them talking about the up-coming play and your name. Tom Barnard, especially with age, has become so right-wing, I AM THE ONLY ONE WHO IS RIGHT, that many mornings, it is a downer to listen to. I hope he gets a lot out of his treatment and he finds some happiness in life!
>
> On the flip side it was super fun to hear them talking about the play, mentioning your name. I sat in the parking lot of Fairview, but had to go in at 7:08. Even bad press is good press!!!!

Love,

(My Aunt)

I was confused. KQRS was a local radio station and Tom Barnard was the host of its morning show. According to Wikipedia, "The 92 KQRS Morning Show (also known as the KQ Morning Crew) is a popular, long-running radio morning show originating from KQRS-FM in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It is currently hosted by Tom Barnard, and features several other regular personalities. It is also one of the highest-rated local morning shows in America" (Wikipedia, Retrieved 3/4/14).

Had the KQRS morning show mentioned The Whiteness Project? Did they mention *me*? Why was my Aunt so upset?

Throughout the day it became clear to me that The Whiteness Project had been mentioned on air. People kept coming up to me and asking about it. Apparently Barnard had found the article about the project that appeared in a local paper. *White on White: Primdale Area High School students explore race by writing play* was written by Sarah Horner and published in the Monday paper. Barnard read the article on air. His commentary was divisive, he attacked my character, and he called out the students mentioned in the article by their names.

The next morning I came up to my classroom after playing morning basketball. Students and staff played basketball from 6:00-7:00 every Tuesday morning. This was a game that I helped organize. We had been playing for nearly six years. Back in my classroom, I saw that Tony, Sally, and Victoria were in my office. They were gathered around my computer. I realized they were listening to

a podcast of the KQRS morning show on my computer. I stood with them quietly. It was the first time I heard the broadcast. I listened to Tom Barnard speak. He was enraged as he called me a fool, a hatemonger, and said that I was destroying America. I heard him call Lauren disgusting.

Tony laughed loudly. I did too. Victoria joined us. Barnard was so vicious so what could we do but laugh? Humor is often a response to fear.

Tony looked at me when it was over.

What if he is right?" Tony laughed.

I didn't know how to respond. Tony continued.

"Basically, he just said this. "I don't get it. So FUCK YOU!"

I laughed, that seemed about right.

I was immediately worried that this response by the media would trouble my principal. Hopefully the work that I had done to be transparent and involve her in discussions about the project would pay out with her support. Furthermore, I was struck by how much Tony seemed to be enjoying the fact that we had stirred up some controversy.

After rehearsal on Tuesday night, Lauren came up to me and told me her response to having listened to Tom Barnard's commentary.

"I feel bad for him, Mr. Tanner, I realized that the line Cecelia has in the play, "It made me feel sad," about going to the wall around Blanchekreist is about Tom Barnard. He has a wall up and he'll never get through it" (fieldnotes, 5/7/13).

I ran into Lauren again the next morning before school. We were in the hallway. All day people had come up to me asking about my response. People paid far more attention to a perceived conflict between Barnard and I than they had to the project prior to the publicity. Folks told me that I should try to get in touch with KQRS in order to make an appearance on the morning show with Barnard. I told Lauren that I wondered what it would be like if *both* she and I were guests on the morning show with Barnard. I figured we would be seriously concerned about the anger our project elicited from him.

"Are you okay, Tom?" We would genuinely ask. Both Lauren and I were deeply empathetic people. We were not the sorts to retaliate violently.

"And not in a condescending way," Lauren agreed with me. "He has valid ideas, he is just so closed off. He seemed really troubled" (fieldnotes, 5/7/13).

Lauren had participated The Whiteness Project for nearly a year. She was used to the confusion and emotion that comes from white people thinking and talking about whiteness. The process I had facilitated worked to validate the sort of response that Barnard had in order to move towards processing, understanding, and transformation. Indeed, many of the students I had worked with during The Whiteness Project had similarly visceral reactions to discussion of whiteness during our discussions. Barnard was experiencing what Thandeka named as white shame. Recall chapter one, this occurs in white people when their contradictory white self is exposed or made deeply visible to them. The difference was that Barnard experienced this in front of a microphone. The KQRS

morning show did not create conditions for the commentators to acknowledge and process the byproduct of their own white shame.

I ran into my principal later that night during rehearsal. I was walking out of the auditorium to go the bathroom. She was passing in the hallway.

"You've heard about the Tom Barnard thing?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"I need to ask. How do you feel about it?"

As I wrote, I knew how important it was to have administration support the kind of work I was doing in order to protect myself as a teacher.

All year long I had been meeting with my principal. I had been preemptive in my communication with parents, students, and colleagues. I worked rigorously to address any concerns or feedback immediately to make sure people were aware of the work I was conducting. It has been an exhausting year. I had been worried that something like the KQRS morning show could happen from the beginning. My work ensured that our appearance on the radio did not blindside my principal. This was a necessary political component of my anti-racist whiteness work as a teacher employed by a public high school.

"This is bound to happen if you are doing cutting edge work," she told me.

I could tell that she was behind me.

"Besides Sam," she smiled, "he is an asshole" (fieldnotes, 5/7/13).

I laughed and went back to rehearsal. Clearly my transparency and relationship with my principal had paid off in terms of political support. She

stood behind the project because I had used the year to foster her investment in the work. This protected my job.

***

Bedford: Hello. Thank you Mayor! I am so honored to be your acting chief of police and I am so pleased that people are finally "seeing" the light about this whole blindness mess. I would have written a speech for this event but I wouldn't be able to read it! *(laughs)*

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 29)

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How It Happened, Why It Happened

In July of 2012, I met with two parents to discuss The Whiteness Project. Both were parents who were involved in the theatre program's booster club. Again, I knew that parent support would give me an important political base should there be backlash against the project. One of the parents was Victoria's Mom. We had a lengthy discussion about what the students would be doing over the year. I expressed my fear that conducting such work could have powerful repercussions. Victoria's Mom thought that it would be important to manage public relations with the project. She agreed to handle PR because she had a background in media relations. By inviting them into the process, I was buying political investment from an important power source in our school district.

In February, Victoria's Mom followed up that conversation by sending me an email. The parents had just finished a parent booster meeting.

> We talked about "The Whiteness Project" at our recent parents meeting. I asked the group to let me know as they come across stories in the Star Tribune or Pioneer Press that might be written by reporters who would be interested in this subject. These could be reporters / columnists writing on diversity, high school theater, race relations, etc. Let me know if you have any specific thoughts, as we'll start by approaching one reporter to gauge interest (Victoria's Mom, email, 2/21/13).

I was leery of making the project more visible. I had spent the year negotiating with administration, parents, and students. I had already put out fires in the fall when my students tried to conduct research in the elementary and middle schools in the district. As I have written, cautiously navigating responses to The Whiteness Project and explaining the rationale behind it had exhausted me. Despite this, my commitment was to involving people in the project and validating their ideas. If I was buying investment from parents, I needed to honor what they brought to the project. So I responded carefully in the following email.

> I like the idea of contacting a reporter. I think we would want to be cautious. If the story came out and riled people up in a negative way, that could be a challenge for the high school. (Talking about whiteness sometimes has that effect...) That said, I think we are doing a very unique project here and, if the story could generate some supportive PR and community interest, that could be cool. (Tanner, email, 2/21/13).

By April, Victoria's Mom had identified a reporter at the Pioneer Press. She wrote a pitch letter. I shared it with both my principal as well as the district

media relation person in the district. They gave us permission to send it out. The pitch was successful. Sarah Horner came out to watch a rehearsal. She interviewed me. She also spoke with three students. I selected Lauren, Victoria, and Mark as student voices. Victoria's Mom created a list of tips for the students and I to follow during the interview. The article was published early in May. It opened as follows. "A white teacher from a predominantly white school district is helping a group of mostly white high school students put on a spring play about whiteness. The result: "Blanchekreist: A Collaborative Project About Whiteness," will premier Thursday, May 9, as Primdale Area High School's spring play" (Horner, 2013). The article ran with two full-length pictures. One depicted Victoria in the role of Amara inside of her black, cage. The other was of Tony as Roman on a date with Lauren playing Cecelia.

The attention the newspaper article created made me nervous. I was worried about the possible byproduct that I learned was part of what happened when whiteness was centered as a site of inquiry. So I wasn't surprised by Barnard's reaction and the subsequent commentary of his co-hosts.

This response by the KQRS morning show was a perfect illustration of how white shame can lead to rage and hinder productive or critical dialogue around whiteness. Thandeka (1999) defined white shame as "the complex of reactions called forth" when white people address their "own contradictory racial statements, emotions, and mental states" (p. 12). I will analyze excerpts of the transcript of the morning show's commentary because it is instructive as to how unprocessed white shame can fuel the reification of logics of white

supremacy. Note that all of the speakers in the following excerpts are white, therefore their contradictory statements, emotions, and mental states give evidence to Thandeka's definition of the complexity of white shame. The italicized sections of the transcript denote that Barnard was reading the article verbatim. His commentary is not italicized.

> **Tom Barnard (Host):** *The play is the culmination of months of research, dialogue and reflection a group of high school students engaged in under the guidance of Primdale's drama and English teacher Samuel Tanner about what it means to be white. "I am deeply impressed with the amount of energy and work they put in to this; they made themselves very vulnerable," Tanner said of the students.*
>
> **Brian Zepp (Co-host):** Gross.
>
> (KQRS Morning Show Transcript, May 6th, 2013)

Brian Zepp's initial response to Barnard's reading of the first paragraph of the article was "gross." This was an almost visceral response to whiteness being made the center of inquiry. White shame was clear through Zepp's reaction because the very idea of thinking about whiteness was "gross" to him. The adjective gross is a way describes something that causes people deep discomfort. Zepp's initial reaction recalls the almost instinctual kick that El Kati's baker gave him in his story that I shared in chapter two. The complex, contradictory emotions, mental states, and racial logics were "gross" for Zepp to consider the moment they were made visible to him. He was clearly unsettled by the very

idea that white people would think about whiteness and that the topic was being considered by the morning show.

What upset me most on my first listening of the morning show was when Barnard attacked Lauren. Lauren was one of the most empathetic, intelligent, and deeply sensitive students I had ever worked with. So it angered me when Barnard named her and attacked her on air.

> **Tom Barnard:** So now we're into the power thing. All of a sudden we went from whiteness to being in power. *Lauren, a junior at Primdale Area High School, worked with uhh... Kar-en students. Others attempted to reach out to other communities of color.*
>
> **Brian Zepp:** Ugh
>
> **Tom Barnard:** *"A lot of them talked about how it seemed like the people or culture in power often tried to brush them off as an unintelligent,"* Bullshit!
>
> **Brian Zepp:** Maybe you're unintelligent
>
> **Tom Barnard:** Yeah *Lauren said of the Karen students. "That seems to be a lot of what whiteness is about ...(*Pause)
>
> **Terri Traen (Co-Host):** (Laughs)
>
> **Tom Barnard:** God you are so disgusting *unwillingness or fear to learn from other people because we might realize there are things we don't know and it's scary to think we don't know everything."*

In this brief excerpt, the rage produced by Barnard's white shame is evident as it is directed towards Lauren. Barnard mispronounced her name as well as the reference to the Karen refugees that she worked with in her research. He

focused his rage towards Lauren. “Bullshit!” and “God you are so disgusting” are the words Barnard used to describe his reaction to the connections that Lauren had made. He sounded enraged as he spoke them. In the newspaper article, Lauren claimed that working with the Karen students in the fall showed her the following. "That seems to be a lot of what whiteness is about ... unwillingness or fear to learn from other people because we might realize there are things we don't know and it's scary to think we don't know everything” (Horner, 2013). Lauren was directly asserting a connection between white supremacy and dominant, societal power formations in her response to Horner’s interview question. This answer led to Barnard’s angry dismissal. By exposing how whiteness operates as a discursive function, Lauren was poking at Barnard’s own whitened rationalizations about racial reality. This is an important first step in understanding how white supremacy works. Because there was no pedagogical space to process or acknowledge the byproduct of Barnard’s whiteness, the result was an unacknowledged expression of Thandeka’s white shame. Indeed, here was Morrison’s deleterious consequence of whiteness. Barnard’s anger was evidence that something was disturbed at the level of the psyche. Thandeka described this as a “hidden civil war” (p. 12). She went on to argue that shame “…is a pitched battle by a self against itself in order to stop feeling what it is not supposed to feel: forbidden desires and prohibited feelings that render one difference” (p. 12). So rather than being a catalyst for transformation, Barnard’s reaction served to further confound his own

contradictory whiteness and reify his own racialized assumptions. This rage or shame fueled his ensuing interpretation of the project.

Sound bite: That means that white people hate us

Tom Barnard: It's just…The hatred behind all this is just immense

Brian Zepp: I'll tell you what, this though, he's gonna get that A on his Masters.

Tom Barnard: Oh absolutely he is. *The students infused their findings into an 87-page script. The final product is an allegory on race relations told through the lens of a small rural town with a long history of xenophobia.* Because that's what whiteness is all about to you isn't it Mr. Tanner? That's what it's all about

Brian Zepp: Is this teaching racism?

Tom Barnard: Yes, that's exactly what it is to me. *When a new family moves in, certain residents go blind. Though they blame the outsiders for causing their affliction, it's really their reaction to the newcomers that is to blame.*

Tom Barnard: So now we're placing blame, we got the power, we got racism, we got it all in this story.

Sound bite: I'm not the white man's bitch, bittchh

Tom Barnard: *We didn't want it to be a list of facts or come across*—well of course you didn't want it to be a list of facts!—*or come across as some seminar about whiteness, Mark, a junior, said of the decision to make the*

play an allegory. "It mirrors the way that ingrained racial prejudices are, in fact, you losing your ability to see people as human beings."

Tom Barnard: It's ridiculous! Jesus Christ you people are annoying! Ugh!

(KQRS Morning Show Transcript, May 6th, 2013)

This excerpt illustrates the implications of Barnard's rage that came from unacknowledged white shame in useful ways. Barnard was able to dismiss this project as propagating hatred or actually teaching racism. This was because there was no pedagogy in place to help him work towards understanding his response to whiteness being made visible. This was most clear when he screamed into the microphone that this project "is ridiculous" and that "we are annoying." Clearly Barnard was caught up in a potent emotional response. Barnard's rage almost instantly turned into discourse that reinforced white supremacy. This was because Barnard was unable to negotiate contradictory white self. So when the emotional byproduct of making whiteness visible is left without space for interrogation, careful reflection, or transformation, it becomes simply another justification for dismissing the disruption to the subject's racialized understanding of reality. This reinforcement of racial logic was also evidenced by the sound cues that interrupt Barnard's tirade.

The producer began to play sounds bites during this segment that both de-centered whiteness and reified narratives about blackness. A man can be heard saying the words, "I'm not the white man's bitch, bittchh" and "that means white people hate us" in black vernacular. This happened between Barnard and Zepp's conversation. This has two immediate effects. One, it does exactly what

Morrison suggested to Charlie Rose that he was doing in chapter one. It attempts to force a conversation about whiteness to defer to blackness. The subject position of whiteness is resisted. Secondly, it relies on traditional, stock narratives about angry, black men blaming white people for oppressive realities in order to position any critique of white supremacy as irrational or emotional. The irony of this, of course, is that Barnard was responding both emotionally and irrationally to the project.

Barnard and Zepp's rage ultimately rendered their analysis of the newspaper article almost entirely unintelligible. This can be seen in the following excerpt.

> **Tom Barnard:** *The group's predominantly white makeup concerned Lauren as they dug in to the subject matter, particularly because she worried their homogenous racial experience would leave their play one-sided. Even if it is, she has decided it's still a side worth sharing. "I think the best thing we can do is share our side of the story and hope it starts a conversation that will let others share their side of the story, then somehow maybe we'll land upon some form of the truth," she said. Mostly, the students said they hope the play will get people talking.*
>
> **Brian Zepp:** You got a bunch of white students that will now look at minorities as victims.
>
> **Tom Barnard:** Mhm
>
> **Brian Zepp:** And a bunch of minorities that will now feel as though they're victims.

Tom Barnard: That's exactly right

(KQRS Morning Show Transcript, May 6th, 2013)

Zepp interpreted the passage that Barnard read from the article in an entirely irrational or incorrect way. He concluded that Lauren's statement showed that she was being taught to see minorities as victims. The actual content of the portion of the article outlined Lauren's hope that sharing a white perspective in racial dialogue would get people involved in more fruitful discussions about race. Barnard quickly agreed with Zepp's strangely incorrect analysis. Zepp went further and suggested that Lauren's statement somehow contributed to minorities feeling victimized. What is astounding about their conversation is how removed it is from what they are actually reading. It as though their initial response of shame quickly transformed into preprogrammed discourse that repositioned the conversation so that minorities and their victimization became the subject. Thandeka argued that the byproduct of making whiteness visible was almost too traumatic to hold in the white psyche. Zepp and Barnard's inability to interpret the passage reflect that claim. Barnard's next move was deeply confounding.

Barnard continued along an irrational trajectory by prefacing a claim that he shared a great deal in common with Martin Luther King as he relied on the traditional narrative that high school students are not capable of thinking on their own.

Tom Barnard: *"I think whiteness protects itself in a lot of ways, so to break down that barrier and have people examine it both in and outside of*

themselves would make me <u>very happy</u>," said Victoria, another junior.

Again, and I'm not blaming the students here because they're young children. They think they're adults, they're not. So of course they're going to fall for it, they're going to try to get the best grade they possibly can. I've told you before and I'll tell you again. I can tell you for a fact, I don't judge people by their color, you're either an asshole or you're not. Okay that's how I judge people, *(ding sound)* if you're a jerk I don't care what color you are you're a jerk. I mean how tough is that?

Brian Zepp: Wait a second, you're basing someone on their individual character?

Tom Barnard: Exactly

Brian Zepp: Huh?

Tom Barnard: You know who else did that? Martin Luther King Junior, he did that. These people who think they know ALL about race relations and ALL about how people need to get along and all…You know Chris Rock said it best (In Chris Rock impersonation voice) "Oh I love old Willy at work I just love old Willy that old Willy's my favorite, but you know what Willy hates your God Damn guts" okay, that's right out of the mouth of Chris Rock so why don't you look at that side of it? You keep putting up these barriers, you think you're tearing barriers down but actually, as Brian has stated already, you're putting them up.

(KQRS Morning Show Transcript, May 6th, 2013)

Barnard started this section of the transcript by suggesting that students were falling for whatever it is was he thought my curriculum was teaching them. He credited this with their desire to get a good grade. His analysis might have been more apt if this were traditional white privilege pedagogy delivered in a mandated classroom. In this case his reading of the newspaper story was profoundly lacking. The article mentioned that students were using YPAR process to conduct their research and doing the project voluntarily. So his interpretation of the content of the article and actual educational design was flawed therefore his rationalization and subsequent dismissal of their thinking or motives were incorrect.

Barnard's next move was to argue that people should be judged as individuals. This argument assumes that social context does not contribute to behavior. Somehow Barnard connected this assumption with the work of Martin Luther King Jr. He moved from this statement to impersonating the black comedian Chris Rock. From there, he finished by arguing that The Whiteness Project was putting barriers up rather than removing him. On one hand, we can acknowledge that this is the sort of work a shock jockey does to get a rise out of their audience. On another, it is almost mystifying how Barnard transitioned from his impulsive, enraged reaction in the first two excerpts to three seemingly disparate assertions; 1) he was similar to Martin Luther King Jr., 2) behavior has nothing to do with social reality, and 3) my pedagogical project was reinforcing what he referred to as "barriers." All of these arguments predicate that people should be "judged by their character." Barnard was deploying Martin Luther

King to make the claim that people should be judged by "merit" despite racial identities, despite the way that racialized discourse works to create definitions of what is meritorious or deplorable. This argument does not acknowledge that structural logics or race undergird social reality. In the same breath, Barnard impersonated a black comedian by mimicking black vernacular. By this point it was as though Barnard was spewing innocuous and childishly inconsistent discourse in order to make sure that the subject matter of his radio program was not the actual content of the teaching project or the newspaper article. He was doing something I watched my high school students inadvertently do all year. He was avoiding a discussion about whiteness. The only difference was that there was no mechanism in place to allow and redirect what could have been the generative confusion I wrote about in chapter five.

Barnard and Zepp had another co-host with them the morning that they read the article. Terri Traen was their white, female counterpart. Her initial confusion and subsequent interpretation actually showed some a degree of processing in terms of whiteness. Traen began by claiming that whiteness was synonymous for American.

> **Terri Traen:** Do you find that in even like talking about cooking for instance, when people are so eager to say how much better it is in another country, it's like—
>
> **Tom Barnard:** What do you mean?

> **Terri Traen:** Like why, what's wrong with American? It's just some people just have to elevate whatever is different then they are. Does that make sense?
>
> **Tom Barnard:** Mhm. Well they're trying to destroy this country first of all. They just hate the idea of the United States of America, they just cannot stand it.
>
> **Terri Traen:** I don't. I just don't understand why, like why… like you said why do you have to pull something down to elevate something that's ridiculous?
>
> (KQRS Morning Show Transcript, May 6th, 2013)

Traen was almost thinking aloud when she asked "what's wrong with "American?" Her interpretation was that an investigation of whiteness undermined whatever her definition of American was. Barnard was quick to agree. He replied that the students and I "hated the idea of America." Her choice of the word elevate was interesting. For her, The Whiteness Project was pulling something down (presumably whiteness) in order to elevate or give power to something else that she could only describe as "ridiculous." This ridiculous something was clearly outside of Traen or Barnard's understanding of America or American identity. So it was something for them to ridicule. Traen and Barnard's conceptions of America or American identity were synonymous with whiteness. Both of them could not conceive of pulling down whiteness in order to hold something else up. After more banter in which Barnard presumed that I was homosexual (recall Adam's story in chapter four that drew on Fiedler's

connection between homosexuality and blackness), that I lived on the fringe of society, and that I was socially awkward, Train came to an even stranger conclusion.

Terri Traen: I think I agree with the teacher, what's his name…

Tom Barnard: I think his name is train

(Laughter)

Tom Barnard: Some kind of train

Brian Zepp: Wreck

Terri Traen: Oh, come on

Tom Barnard: Very unusual for you to take the opposite view of everyone

Terri Traen: Well it's a Monday, gotta laugh. You just have to… what are you gonna do?

Tom Barnard: It's just disgusting; if I were a parent of one of these kids I'd raise holy hell

Terri Traen: you could go to the play and boo 'em. Boo the kids

Tom Barnard: Yeah, boo the kids. Like I said I'm not blaming the kids at all, although you know what…

Terri Traen: I am, if they don't have to be in it.

Tom Barnard: Why are you blaming the…they're trying to do the best they can and get a good grade that's what they're trying to do

Brian Zepp: They're elementary students, five year olds

Tom Barnard: Oh Jesus

Terri Traen: Don't turn on me now, I'm just trying to joke around

Tom Barnard: Then be quiet

Terri Traen: I'm trying to have fun

Tom Barnard: Well you know what that's not your job, to have fun, you know that right?

(KQRS Morning Show Transcript, May 6th, 2013)

By the end of the segment Traen stated that she might agree with me. That she cannot remember my name seems no coincidence as the content of the article has been so carelessly interpreted that their discourse seems overtly removed from the actual project. This is clearly evidenced by Zepp's comment that the students in the project are five year olds and Barnard's continual dismissal of the work because the students were trying to get good grades. Traen may have been agreeing with the my quote from the newspaper article that they read at the beginning of the segment in which I offered that discussing whiteness was difficult, emotional work. Certainly the radio segment became difficult and emotional for the commentators. Her voice sounded uncertain as though she were trying to make sense of what it might mean to investigate whiteness. Barnard attacked Traen viciously when she confusedly admitted that she might have some sympathy for the project. He commented about how rarely she played the dissenting voice. So the fact that she spoke against Barnard here is interesting. She quickly retreated into the statement that she was just trying to be funny. Barnard told her to be quiet and reminded her to not have fun. With this reminder, Barnard was explicitly re-asserting an expression of normative

whiteness in order to remind Traen that she *did not* have permission to be confused about whiteness. In this moment of the transcript, Barnard is reminding her that she does not have space to question his opinion about the project. This was true even if she were simply trying to make a joke. So there was something insidious about the way that Barnard was protecting white supremacy even in the context of a morning radio show.

This analysis must be read with the reminder that all of this discussion occurred on a radio program known to be purposely provocative. The jockeys were trying to get their listener's attention. Despite the shock tactics, Barnard, Zepp, and Traen's response to the project is illustrative as to how the initial response by white people of shame can be so quickly rendered into angry rationalizations, dismissals, and justifications of logics of white supremacy. If the complex of reactions that Thandeka described as contradictory racial statements, emotions, and mental states are not acknowledged in generative ways that give room for confusion, the civil war that she described "often ends as a stalemate, a momentary paralysis marked by the red flag of a blush," (p. 12). The commentators on the morning show end in a stalemate. Unlike Lauren or Victoria, the commentators became paralyzed by their discussion. This failure to have a generative conversation about whiteness points to the importance of teachers building pedagogical spaces that can acknowledge and work with the potent byproduct of whiteness being rendered visible to a white subject. It echoes the importance of a permissive, generative confusion that I described in chapter five. Had the radio personalities been given a pedagogical process this

could have been a fruitful discussion. First, the intensity of their emotions needed to be validated. Second, they need prompting to think through their operating assumptions and experience. Finally, they needed a generative process to work with and transform these things in order to allow the potential for critical transformation. This was not possible in the context of this radio show.

The day after Tom Barnard read the newspaper article on air the project achieved national attention. *The Blaze* is a blog connected with Glenn Beck. A story appeared on the website. It linked to the documentary that Gregg had posted on YOUTUBE. The documentary received over 40,000 views after *The Blaze* embedded it in their article. The article *Minnesota High Schoolers Study America's 'systems of whiteness'* by Meredith Jessup read as follows.

> Remember the days when the biggest worry high schools had revolved around who to take to prom or passing a geometry test? And when high school theater productions revolved around Shakespeare and Arthur Miller? Yeah, it appears those days are over:
>
> A white teacher from a predominantly white school district is helping a group of mostly white high school students put on a spring play about whiteness.
>
> The result: "Blanchekreist: A Collaborative Project About Whiteness," will premier Thursday, May 9, as Primdale Area High School's spring play.
>
> The play is the culmination of months of research, dialogue and reflection a group of high school students engaged in under the guidance of

Primdale's drama and English teacher Samuel Tanner about what it means to be white. [...]

Tanner is pursuing his Ph.D. in critical literacy and English education at the University of Minnesota. The students' project is the focus of his dissertation.

Well that's convenient.

Here's a highlight clip from PAHS Report Daily Broadcast which shows students prepping for the play and the teacher explaining how "whiteness" is akin to a "social virus":

I'm really intrigued by this whole concept, a class — a theater production, in fact — about whiteness. According to the Pioneer Press, the students prepared for their roles by attending a workshop on white privilege and reaching out to minority communities. "A lot of them talked about how it seemed like the people or culture in power often tried to brush them off as unintelligent," one student observed. "That seems to be a lot of what whiteness is about..."

(Call me crazy, but I could understand how a bunch of uppity white students studying minorities like lab rats might given them that impression...)

In the end, the students put their observations into an 87-page script, an "allegory on race relations told through the lends of a small rural town with a long history of xenophobia."

> "This was really emotional work," the teacher explained. "After almost every conversation we had as a group, I would spend countless hours talking with students one on one as they emotionally responded to realizing they were part of this system of whiteness" (Jessup, 2013).

There are three important things to point out in the way Jessup crafted this blog. First, the assumption that Jessup made was that high school theatre students should be studying Shakespeare and Arthur Miller. Both are traditionally thought of as canonical authors. They are often lumped into the white, western tradition. Jessup deemed traditional curricular activities such as geometry or reading western authors as appropriate. She did this while deriding The Whiteness Project. This was an attempt to defend whiteness from inquiry. American whiteness is the byproduct of a western, Eurocentric worldview. So this shows that traditional American schooling practices work to protect systems of white supremacy. Secondly, there are two instances of white shame. First, her sarcastic line "well that's convenient," attacked the idea that my dissertation research was selfishly connected to the theatre project. This sardonic statement reflects that Jessup was upset by the way the project served my professional interests. Second, her parenthetical comment about uppity white students was overtly aggressive in order to make the project look ridiculous. Again, her emotional response to the content is irrational unless Thandeka's notion of white shame is taken into account. As a white writer, Jessup has no reason to be offended by this project other than her whiteness was made visible and this caused an emotional response. The third important thing

to note is her misinterpretation of the project. Like the KQRS morning show, Jessup assumed that this project about whiteness was somehow a way for white students to study minorities. This is another example of whiteness being displaced by blackness in the white psyche and is connected to Jessup's comment about "uppity white people." Presumably, Jessup is writing from the perspective of "the minorities" that my students were studying. Jessup cannot seem to understand that whiteness could hold a subject position in a project about race. Her subsequent interpretation of the content is rendered senseless.

These responses by *The Blaze* and the KQRS morning show to The Whiteness Project are helpful. They show how community members responded to critical whiteness pedagogy in informative ways. Both give evidence to the way that unacknowledged white shame can lead to irrational responses that quickly transform into discourse that protects whiteness from holding a subject position.

It is an interesting and important academic device to interpret these transcripts. It was another thing to live out the disruptive consequences of having caused this critical disruption as a teacher in a school.

***

Oracle: If you raise your voice, gesture too grandly or even move in a way that they could call threatening, your plea is lost.

Amara: But it would be easier to just come out and say it, and I feel so—

Oracle: In under the time it would take you to breathe, they will have twisted your words and turned you into a convict, a criminal, and a lowlife. You will be

shown as the reason to fear. They will fly up to their cloud of security, lauding "I told you sos" to those who could be your allies.

Amara: But they're so violent! It isn't fair.

Oracle: It's not fair, but you have to do it this way. It is the only way to be heard and respected. It is the only way to heal*. (Another long pause).* Goodnight, Amara.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, pp. 35-36).

***

Coping With Visibility

What follows is an illustration of how the students and I reacted to the public visibility that came from the media attention. I include narrative, fieldnotes, and parent responses in order to show how I handled the difficulty created by the project. While this section could be read as an uplifting story of triumph, I do not share it in order to pat myself on the back. Rather, I acknowledge that high school teachers trying to conduct similar work face powerful obstacles such as Barnard's response through the media. Relationships with students, parents, and administrators were necessary for me to weather the political storm created by the media attention. Furthermore, I share the story of our response because I was worried that the community was gratified by the controversy we created in self-serving ways that were more about celebrity than disrupting white supremacy. Self-congratulatory celebrity was *not* my intention with this project. So including this section accomplishes two things. First, it provides example of the way I used relationships to protect my position as a

teacher during the week. Second, it shows my fear that the controversy that came from media attention was more interesting to the community than their inquiry into whiteness.

Natalie description of the media attention in her fieldnotes illustrates both how she responded to the attention as well as the relationship between celebrity and anti-racist work. Her analytic memos are in italics.

> This morning there was a nice article in the Pioneer Press and then we were on the KQRS morning show with Tom Bernard. He read the article on air and tore the project, Tanner, and the quoted students to shreds. Accusing Tanner of brainwashing them, hating America, and called him a scruffy weirdo.
>
> *My response to this was first anger, then amusement, and then the realization that we must be doing something right. I was worried about the students' reactions and that they would be big and emotional. I thought Victoria might put out a hit on Bernard.*
>
> Tanner: We're running the show twice and then painting the stage. We will be here until we're done. (Talking about the Pioneer Press and KQRS) We are going to get those types of reactions. We need to be prepared for the talk back sessions. If I am nervous about anything it is the talk back sessions. A fellow teacher of Tanner's is coming in tomorrow to talk to us about how to handle these types of conversations. We will very likely have a conversation that has nothing to do with the play. During the talk back sessions I want the researchers and the people

who have been here all along to come forward and everyone else to take a step back.

Talking to Tanner about the KQRS thing: *Obviously we shouldn't be worried about being racist if we're getting hated on by Tom Bernard. I think we should be careful about how the students hear it because I think the students will be defensive of Tanner.* Tanner still hadn't listened to it (Natalie's fieldnotes, 5/6/13).

Natalie's fieldnotes show how both she and I were responding to the media feedback. Natalie's realization that "we shouldn't be worried about being racist," reflected the conversations we had regarding the potential for The Whiteness Project to reaffirm logics of white supremacy. Furthermore, it shows a certain enjoyment of the attention garnered from the media. She described her initial reaction as anger. This quickly became "amusement." This word suggests that she was deriving some sort of pleasure out of the idea that we had reached more of a macro audience with our project. In this way, the controversy created by the project was actually serving the participants interests. Indeed, after the segment on the KQRS morning show I was inundated with far more attention than had previously been paid to the project.

Natalie's fieldnotes clearly show that stress was caused by the disruption we had created by garnering community attention., parents emailed me throughout the day as they became aware of the newspaper story and Tom Barnard's comments. This created an enormous amount of stress for *me* as I tried to assuage their concerns. A teacher's job can become tenuous in the face of

public outcry without community support. Some of the parents were worried that we would need security at the performance because Barnard had incited people to come to the show in order to boo.

It seemed morally wrong to put armed guards in a theatre. I also knew that I couldn't simply dismiss their request. So I responded by sending out the following letter to parents of the students involved in the project. Many parents or students suggested that I should try to reach out to Tom Barnard in order to respond. I was not interested in fueling controversy or contributing to celebrity. Instead, I wanted to focus on the inquiry into whiteness that we were creating. The following letter illustrates my desire to shy away from the "amusement" that many community members seemed to be having in relation to spectacle created by media attention. This letter also shows how I included parents in the process in order to gain their political support.

> Parents,
>
> I wanted to send out a quick note. I am sure that many of you have heard that the project was mentioned on the KQRS morning show on Monday morning. The show did not portray the project in a positive light. This was not a surprise to me.
>
> The cast and I are going to talk about this tonight during rehearsal. In fact, I am inviting a colleague of mine at the school who does work on whiteness to share her own experiences with this sort of thing. Hopefully this will help us talk about facilitating the Q and A session at the end of each performance.

I think it is important not to give credibility to the folks on KQ by way of response. I mean this both in terms of letting the KQRS morning show disrupt the flow or rehearsals and performances and in terms of a direct response to KQRS. I plan on taking up the radio segment in my dissertation writing in order to figure out how and why they responded the way that they did. I'll be happy to share all of that with you when I am finished writing about this project.

If you have heard the podcast, I'd ask you to think about Tom Bernard's response to the project in terms of the play that you will watch. If you are paying attention, I think you will find some of his character on stage this weekend. In fact, the KQRS segment could inform the Q and A session that will happen after the play in interesting ways.

Thank you for your help and support throughout this process. This has been a difficult, important project. I am excited for you to come see the play.

Thanks,

Sam

(Letter to the parents, 5/6/13)

This letter illustrates my attempt at transparency with the parents thought my acknowledgement of their support for the project. This comment served to protect me in case the media storm continued to direct negative attention to my teaching. Indeed, after this letter was distributed to parents, I was inundated by responses. The parents eventually agreed that there was no need for security

guards. Some of them offered to be on site to deal with anybody who was disruptive. They came up with an observation schedule and I made jokes about having covert bouncers in the crowd. We ended up not needing parents because our audiences were not disruptive. The desire by parents to help in concert with my deliberate communication evidence the powerful political base I was building to protect myself in case the media scrutiny became more intense or threatened my teaching position.

I will share two parent emails to illustrate how parents communicated their feedback and support. All year I had been working with both of these parents to ensure their support should something like the media response occur. I knew that parents are enormously powerful stakeholders in public education. The following emails show two things. First, my relationships with the parents paid out in political support. Second, the parents seemed to derive some enjoyment from the controversy stirred up by the project. Mark's Mom was an elementary teacher in the district. Mark, Lauren, Victoria, Megan, and Natalie had gone to her classroom in the fall to conduct their research. She wrote this.

From: (Mark's Mom)

To: TANNER, SAMUEL

Sent: Tuesday, May 07, 2013 4:31 PM

Hello Mr. Tanner ~

Just wanted to give you a shout out of appreciation from a parent and teacher. You have given these students an opportunity to delve into a topic that still has quite a long journey to go. Challenging topics are

usually met with push- back and others will have a very different perspective. What an opportunity for your students and this project to learn how to stand tall and face the critics. You have provided an incredible opportunity for these students to grow, question and respectfully push-back too.

I couldn't be a bigger supporter - I hope that you are able to eavesdrop on the conversations that they are having with each other when they are not officially talking about the project in classrooms or in the theater. Your impact will be life- long and they will continue to change the world around them!

My students will still bring up the day that the PAHS students came for morning meeting. Attached are a few pictures to make you smile and remind you of the fantastic conversations and action that we have been able to use here at FH. The boy in the green and white shirts response to "What is a symbol of power?" Simon said, "Ohio." I thought at first, geez is he not listening,... then is dawned on me and your students prompted him to say more, he explained that our presidential election for re-electing our first black president came down to one state - Ohio.

Ah, kids are fabulous! :) Enjoy the rest of your day and thanks again for an amazing lesson for all of us!

(Mark's Mom)

4th Grade Teacher

(Local) Elementary

(Email, 5/7/13)

Mark's Mom's email shows that she had my back. The inclusion of anecdotes and even an emoticon suggest an intimacy between us. To me, this meant that if I found myself in trouble with the school district for my work, Mark's Mom would offer her support. I had her political backing because of my work to include her in the process throughout the year. Tony's Mom wrote an email the next day. Again, Tony's Mom actually seemed excited about the controversy. Her email read as follows.

From: (Tony's Mom)

To: TANNER, SAMUEL

Sent: Wednesday, May 08, 2013 11:33 AM

Hi, Mr. Tanner:

If you look at the KQRS discussion of the play purely in the "showbiz" context, you can just repeat that old saying, "There's no such thing as bad publicity."

I'm sure some of the things Tom Barnard said were a bit hurtful and even scary for some of the students, but what a good lesson in real world reaction to sensitive issues, and how different media treat information and social issues (Pioneer Press reporting, vs. morning radio opinion). Wouldn't it be cool if you had even more media outlets look at the play and see how they reported on it and/or expressed opinion -- say public radio or TV, a legitimate theater critic, etc.

> The attention it is getting is a great opportunity for both you and the students. It's a good thing! Good for you for taking risks. The kids are learning more from that than anything, in my opinion.
>
> Thanks for pushing boundaries. I'm looking forward to seeing the show. I'll be there Thursday.
>
> (Tony's Mom) (Email, 5/8/13)

Tony's Mom described the attention by the media as a good thing. Though she was voicing support for my teaching, she was also enjoying the spectacle. Again, this conversation between her and I was more expansive than any of our discussions about the actual content of the project. This is evidence that people were more excited about controversy than about the actual work of inquiring into whiteness.

That same week, I also received support from my colleague in the Drama Program. Vienna was a director, the administrative head of the program, and an English teacher. She wrote my principal to see if she could have permission to write a response to Barnard's comments in the local paper. My principal consented. She also CC'd the director of equity in the district.

My principal had watched the matinee performance of the play on Wednesday afternoon. We invited three sections of 10th grade English to watch an afternoon performance of the play that happened during the school day. She stood in solidarity with me before and after the performance during the introduction and the question and answer session with the 10th graders. My work over the year to include her in the project continued to serve me during

the production week. So when Vienna asked to write to the paper, my principal responded positively to the request. This email also includes the text that was published in a letter to the editor in a local paper the Friday of opening weekend. Note that my colleague had very little to do with The Whiteness Project *until* the controversy created by Barnard's remarks.

From: (Principal)

To: CROSBY, VIENNA; TANNER, SAMUEL

Cc: (Pat)

Sent: Thursday, May 09, 2013 8:42 AM

I support this letter and certainly support the project. I continue to reflect upon the impact of the play–very powerful indeed. Patricia–if you have a chance, please consider attending a performance. We really would appreciate your perspective/thoughts about replication/etc.

Thank you---(Principal)

From: CROSBY, VIENNA

To: TANNER, SAMUEL; (Principal)

Sent: Thursday, May 09, 2013 8:33 AM

Kudos go out to this paper for highlighting our next school play ("Primdale Area High School students explore race by writing play", May 6) and raspberries go to shock jock Tom Bernard for his public attack on it.

On his radio program Bernard made lazy assumptions and shameful personal attacks directed at students and teachers about this weekend's high school play, "Blanchekreist: a collaborative project about whiteness".

Under the tutelage of my colleague, "Blanchekreist" has been researched, written and presented by a group of intelligent and open-minded students as an extracurricular activity at Primdale Area High School (PAHS).

When Bernard targets our kids and spews misinformation and ridicule about their theater project he diminishes himself as well as the students who are making sincere efforts to explore serious and relevant issues. Contrary to Tom's assertions that this production is teaching racism and dragging everybody down, our students' insights relate to universal issues of intolerance while exploring the prevailing presence of institutionalized racism and cognitive bias in our society.

At PAHS if someone objects to our curriculum the first question we ask is "Did you read or watch the material in its entirety?"

This a teachable moment, and I invite anyone who is curious or concerned about "Blachekreist" to attend this weekend's performances and review the materials for themselves as a catalyst for discussion and introspection.

Heck, Tom Bernard, I'll even spring for your ticket.

Vienna Crosby Head of Primdale Area High School Drama program

(Email, 5/9/13)

This email illustrates two things. First, my relationship with Vienna was politically savvy. Her support both assuaged my principal and the general community that the work I was conducting was creating "teachable moments." Secondly, it shows the way that controversy can be more interesting than actually conducting anti-racist, whiteness work. Vienna had attended an early session of The Whiteness Project before mostly ignoring it. The comments by Barnard gave her the chance to contribute to the spectacle created by the media backlash. I share this not to attack Vienna. She was a friend, a colleague, and sincere in her attempt to provide support. So were the parents who shared their feedback during the week. I bring it up to worry that it might be more "amusing" or pleasurable for white people to feel like they are contributing to controversial projects instead of actually doing the work of conducting anti-racist, critical inquiry into whiteness.

***

Oracle: I hope that you understand the enormity of this situation, Amara. (Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 34)

***

Our Conclusion?

This chapter has served to share my interpretation that the reaction by the media was the product of unacknowledged white shame. I contend the subsequent support by my school community came from the politically generated power base that came from relational connections I had with parents, colleagues, and students. Furthermore, it shares my concern that white people

can enjoy controversy at the *expense* of anti-racist work. I'll finish by excerpting three comments that students made during the question and answer sessions that followed the five performances. These were their responses to audience questions about what their reaction to the media attention was. These answers illustrate that Barnard's rage that came from unacknowledged white shame fueled their thinking and learning. It also shows how students were almost gratified by the controversy of the project. First, here is how Tony handled the question about media attention.

> Tony: What Tom and the rest of the people say I don't get it so screw you. It sucks when people do that. Anything weird or big like this project, you can't make everyone happy. You gotta keep doing it, keep building (Natalie's fieldnotes, 5/11/13).

This response by Tony echoed what he told me after listening to the podcast. He said "fuck you" when he told me his thoughts. He censored his language in front of an audience. He also referenced my notion of building card houses that I wrote about in chapter two at the end. Indeed, Tony had heard my story about card houses any number of times in the six classes he had taken with me. Tony's response illustrates his commitment to the project even if it didn't "make people happy." This is a powerful realization for a seventeen year old about the nature of work that disrupts norms. On the other hand, it might have served Tony to see himself positioned in conflict with Barnard. The controversy of such a position might have been enjoyable for him. Lauren also used what she said to me the morning after she heard the podcast to respond to the audience.

> Lauren: When I first heard the radio show I felt very uncomfortable, some of the comments were directed at me, at first I was upset, then I kept listening and I felt sad. I think here is a man who read this, and that is the only exposure he has to this. I don't know his thoughts but he chose not to go any farther and determined what we are doing is wrong. To cut yourself off there and not learn more, made me sad. Not seeing other sides. That is what we've been trying to do here (Natalie's fieldnotes, 5/11/13).

Lauren's response is evidence of her empathetic demeanor and subsequent interpretation of her character Cecilia. The permission for confusion that I contend Lauren gave herself in chapter five allowed her to do what Barnard could not. She wrestled with Thandeka's white shame in order to "go farther" and not worry if "what we are doing is wrong." Again, the pedagogical design of this project created conditions for Lauren to use her white shame to fuel inquiry as opposed to Barnard's rage. Finally, Sally's statement shows that Barnard's response made the experience real for her because she realized the cultural significance of the work. It also shows that she enjoyed the controversy of the attention.

> Sally: This week Tom Barnard ripped us to shreds. That's when I realized how much I love the controversy of this. The whole white culture thing slapped me in the face when I started the project but didn't come alive until I saw the other side, and made me ask is what we're doing right? I really feel it is (Natalie's fieldnotes, 5/11/13).

Sally realized the importance of the work only after the whole "white culture thing slapped" her "in the face." It was made real for her when she saw the community response to the project. This was because the critical pedagogy of the project was successful. Though it was difficult as is evidenced in this chapter, it disturbed narratives of white supremacy. Finally, I'll worry that Sally "loved the controversy of it all," more than she had enjoyed the actual work of inquiring into whiteness.

Chapter Eight: Blanchekreist

Chapter eight concludes with my interpretation of the students' script. First, I summarize the story of the play. Next, I claim that the play was an allegorical telling of white identity that is the byproduct of white supremacy.

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Blanchekreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness

The title of the play the students wrote was *Blanchekreist: A Collaborative Play about Whiteness.* The word Blanchekreist was an amalgam of the French

and German words for "white" and "circle." Student chose this title both to reference the European roots of whiteness as well as suggest the circular nature of its logics as it continues to replicate itself throughout generations.

The story was set in the fictional community of Blanchekreist. Blanchkreist was an isolated village. It had an old wall around it. People could not remember exactly why Blanchekreist was walled off. A new family moved to the town and a dormant virus was activated. The main symptom of this virus was blindness. Many townspeople blamed the new family for the virus. The derogatory term they used for newcomers was "plodders." There was a xenophobic history in the town of blaming outsiders for spreading sickness.

The new family consisted of Sam, his wife Uma, and their two children Cecilia and Hurston. They had troubled fitting in. Sam struggled to find a job. Uma was unhappy about how cold the members of Blanchekreist were to her. Cecilia had trouble being accepted by her friends. She was sixteen. Hurston had trouble at school. He was eleven. Hurston liked to paint. His teacher kept telling him to change the way that he painted. He refused and continued to get in trouble. Townspeople were weary of the new family.

Hurston made friends with a thirteen-year old girl named Amara. Amara was locked up in an old shack on the edge of town. Amara had no parents, questioned her teachers, and did not share the town's fear of outsiders so they locked her away in an old shack on the edge of town. She had a teddy bear that counseled her to resist the values of the community that served as an oracle. Hurston met Amara because two boys that were bullying him dared him to

approach Amara's shack. She struck up a friendship with Hurston.

During this time, a powerful faction developed in the community. It was made up of people who were going blind. They began holding meetings in order to come up with a solution to take care of the "plodders." They figured eliminating the plodders would cure the virus. The leader of the faction was a man named Bedford.

Cecilia had started dating the Mayor of Blanchekreist's son, Roman. Roman took Cecilia to one of these gatherings so that the community could accept her. Cecilia's mother followed her to the meeting. She watched as Cecilia swore to give up her values and uphold those of Blanchekreist. Violence broke out after Uma's presence was discovered. The faction was enraged that a plodder had infiltrated their private meeting. Uma forced Cecilia to come home with her. That night, Cecilia took her own life.

Eventually, Bedford seized power after convincing the Mayor of the town that those with the blindness had actually been chosen to lead the town. He was named chief of police. Bedford led a systematic effort to rid the town of those who were not infected by the virus.

The night that the new family tried to escape Blanchekreist, Hurston went to find Amara one last time. After saying goodbye, Bedford's faction came upon Hurston in the middle of town. The town prepared to lynch Hurston. Roman tried to stand up for Hurston with a small minority of townspeople who did not side with Bedford. Violence broke out. While this was happening, Amara escaped from her shack. She defied the advice of the oracle in order to protect Hurston.

She got in the way of Leon as he struck at Hurston. Amara was killed.

When the town realized that Amara was dead, the mayor made the choice to detain Bedford. This led to the community's realization that the virus was a self-inflicted problem.

The town buried Amara and honored her and Cecilia's tombstones with flowers each day. A new family moved to Blanchkreist. Aside from Bedford and Leon, the community, welcomed this new family. This family had two daughters. One was named Clarice and the other Dawn. Roman welcomed Clarice and Hurston welcomed Dawn. The same actress that played Cecilia was intended to play Clarice. The actress that played Amara also played Dawn.

Hurston took Dawn up to his room to show her the painting that he had been working on throughout the play. Hurston had continued to add color to the piece as a response to the terrible things that were happening to him. By the end, the painting was entirely blank because he destroyed it after his sister's death.

***

Blanchekreist: An Allegorical Illustration of Whiteness

The students in this project created the story of Blanchekreist as a summation of their yearlong inquiry into whiteness. Competing research agendas and ideas were negotiated, argued over, and brought together in an 84-page script. The play they created served as a sort of research report that indicated their findings after conducting YPAR research. What follows is my interpretation of the script.

Blanchekreist is an allegorical illustration of white identity that is the byproduct of a state of white supremacy. This is clear because of its representation of the normalizing function of schools, Bedford's white shame, and Amara's subversion of the town's values.

Schools

The play represents school with two teachers. One is a high school teacher and the other an elementary school teacher. The Elementary Teacher shows how schools disguise and practice normalized white supremacy at the expense of people that resist that logic in his interactions with Jimmy and Hurston.

The Elementary Teacher's warning to Jimmy illustrates how white values are disguised in schools. Other students knew that Hurston was an outsider when he arrived for his first day of elementary school. One of the students used a word that his father taught him to make fun of Hurston. He said plodder under his breath. The teacher corrected Jimmy as follows.

> **Elementary Teacher**: Today, class, we have a new addition. This is Hurston. Hurston, would you like to say something to the class?
>
> **Hurston:** Sure? *(Walks to front and turns to face the class. The entire class shifts their desks back out of fear)* I'm Hurston. I'm from the big city, today is my second day in this town... But I really like it here so far!
>
> **Jimmy:** *(Coughing)* Plotter.
>
> **Elementary Teacher:** Jimmy!
>
> **Jimmy:** What? That's what my dad calls them.

Elementary Teacher: I don't care who at your house uses that word. You are not to use it here.

Jimmy: *(momentary honest curiosity)* Why is it so bad?

Elementary Teacher: It just is. Now, can we all move on?

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 9)

The word plodder is a fictional rendition that comes out of a tradition of American racial slurs. Jimmy used this word he learned from his father and was told it was not appropriate. This caused Jimmy a moment of curiosity in the classroom. Jimmy was sincerely interested in understanding what the slur actually meant. The teacher could have used Jimmy's curiosity to have a discussion of the community's values. Instead, the teacher asked the class to move on. The teacher made a superficial attempt to protect Hurston from the oppressive language Jimmy had used. He also disguised Blanchekreist's values. Schools often teach students what is appropriate or inappropriate racial behavior without explanation. There is rarely an explicit articulation the systematic and historical conditions of white supremacy. This superficial commitment to equity disguises organizing logics of whiteness. This relies on a rigid code of conduct that normalizes those logics in order to defend them.

The Elementary Teacher's admonishment of Hurston demonstrates how schools enforce practices that protect white supremacy. On his first day of school, Hurston disagreed with the Elementary Teacher's interpretation of his favorite story.

Hurston: Excuse me?

Elementary Teacher: Yes?

Hurston: Well, it's just that I thought the book meant something different.

Elementary Teacher: And what would that be?

Hurston: Well, the hermits had different relationships with the Crouples, and the one that knew them very well didn't trust them, because he saw the evil and selfishness that was inherent in people?

Elementary Teacher: No. Do you see this? *(Pulls out book)* This is the Official Teaching Guide. It has the correct interpretations of the book. Yours isn't in there. Therefore you are wrong. That isn't part of the curriculum, so we're going to move on.

Hurston: But-

Elementary Teacher: I don't know what kind of school you attended back home, and I don't even want to imagine the type of people you had classes with, but here, in Blanchekreist, we do not talk back to our teachers. Am I clear?

Hurston: Yes sir.

Elementary Teacher: Good. Now, back to the lesson. Bruce, tell me, what do you think selfish means?

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 14)

The teacher made two important moves here. First, he referenced a standardized book that codified his ideology. This legitimated his interpretation at the expense of Hurston's. Secondly, he insulted Hurston's previous school. This

implied the superiority of Blanchekreist's school system and the values that of its curriculum. This interaction shows the impossibility of critiquing white values in schools. Schools rely on standards that have made whiteness and commonsense analogous. According to Weilbacher (2012), "If we unquestionably accept standards, we also unquestionably accept White dominance, as the standards are the voice of White dominance. By contrast, challenging the standards calls into question White dominance by putting a target on an inequality that is very visible everywhere (p. 5)." Just as the Elementary Teacher's values have been legitimated by the official curriculum, white values protect their supremacy through standardization. Hurston's tenacious resistance to Blanchekreist's oppressive values precludes any sort of advancement in its schools.

The Elementary Teacher's feedback on Hurston's paintings literally exhibits how schools try to whiten students. Hurston's teacher read a passage from his standardized curriculum. He attempted to critique Hurston's work.

> **Elementary Teacher:** *(to the whole class, reading out of the guide book, students continue to work while listening)* Dull, if you're not familiar with it, has many definitions. It can mean a lack of intensity or energy, blunt or not very sharp, but for our class, it will be defined as boring or not very bright. When painting, the combination of dull and bright colors can expose how much one or the other stands out. If you paint with a myriad of bright colors, then by adding a splotch of a dull color will make it stand out more. And on the contrary, if you have plenty of dull colors, adding a

bright color will make it stand out even more. The contrast, if you remember that from what I said earlier, will be greater if you can use dull colors well. *(returning to Hurston)* Uh, Hurston. You're painting, there's no pattern to it. It's just a bunch of splotches. Here, let's add some more white to it. Reaches for paintbrush and is about to add more paint to the canvas

Hurston: *(Almost violently)* NO! *(Stops Elementary Teacher from making any adjustments to the painting).* I like it the way it is!

Elementary Teacher: Alright, calm down. It is YOUR painting after all. I just thought you might want something a little more conforming. *(walks away)*

Hurston: *(Stares at canvas)* I like it the way it is.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 19)

Hurston's teacher articulated a dichotomous way of understanding art. This approach to reality comes from a western tradition. It relies on a prescriptive pattern. Hurston's painting did not fit this approach. The teacher literally tried to add white to the painting. This offended Hurston to the point of near violence. The teacher made a passive aggressive statement and walked away. Schools standardize a curriculum that often makes an attempt to whiten students. Students like Hurston that do not share white values are delegitimized. This is evident in the achievement or opportunity gap that shows statistical evidence that non-white students do not "succeed" to the same degree as white students. If the definition of success comes out of a tradition of white values, it should be

no surprise that non-white students are not engaging education in the same way as their white peers. The Elementary Teacher's handling of Hurston's work exemplifies how schools use white values to whiten students.

Bedford

Other adults in the play are instructive as to how white supremacy circulated the community. Bedford was the most powerful example of this. He was a middle-aged man with a wife, a daughter, and no job. Throughout the play, he accumulated power and privilege at the expense of others. Bedford's character is a representation of how unprocessed white shame leads to disguised white supremacy. This is clear in his interaction with the new family, his organization of the faction, and his rise to power.

Bedford is a representation of white shame because of his first interaction with Sam. Bedford realized that he and Sam were applying for the same job in Blanchekreist's government.

> **Bedford:** How am I not suitable for the job? I have great credentials!
>
> *(Bedford calls after Sarah, but is cut off as she leaves stage left. Bedford is rather angry but remains where he is. He is about to leave stage right when Sam speaks up.)*
>
> **Sam:** Are you applying for the position too?
>
> **Bedford:** *(Stops and turns.)* Yeah. Well, I was. They just denied-- *(Gives Sam a glance over.)* Aren't you a member of that new family in town?
>
> **Sam:** Yeah, I am.
>
> **Bedford:** Wait a minute, you're trying to steal my job, aren't you?

Sam: *(Confused)* Well, I'm applying for the job, if that's what you mean.

Bedford: Damn plotter. They'll probably hire you at a lower pay. They didn't give me the job so they could give it to some money-groveling plotter like you.

Sam: Excuse me? *(Standing up)* I'm here to apply for the job, same as you. That's it. Why should it matter whether or not I'm new in town or a whatever you called me?

Bedford: You think you can come into Blanchekriest and steal my job? *(Edging closer to Sam)*

Sam: I'm not stealing anyone's job! All I'm doing is applying for a position!

Bedford: That's MY position! I deserve that job! Me! If it wasn't for you, I'd have that job!

Sam: How could you know that? I haven't even had my interview yet. They might deny me too.

Bedford: *(Quietly and more seriously, speaking right into Sam's ears)* You should join your fellow swine and eat slop like the pigs you are. Taking a hard working man's job is a dirty move. In the meantime, we civilians of Blanchekriest will keep everything how it should be around here: clean and WITHOUT plotters. *(Sam is startled and fuming, standing right next to Bedford.)*

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, pp. 24-25)

Bedford was told he would not get the job he had applied for before meeting Sam. So Bedford had already been rejected by the institutional representation of Blanchekreist—it's government. Bedford's own inclusion in the community had been questioned prior to meeting Sam. Bedford turned on Sam with the ferocity of unprocessed white shame. His unrefined anger at Sam's filthiness is really displaced frustration at his own filthiness—his rejection by his own community. The slurs he leveled at Sam reflect Thandeka's rendering of white shame. Bedford slandered Sam because of his own treatment at the hands of Blanchkreist's community in much the same way that whites displace their rage onto the racialized other. Beford's contradictory self creates unprocessed white shame that leads to supremacist thinking much in the way that Tom Barnard's rendering of The Whiteness Project illustrated.

Bedford's white shame illustrates how the desire to fit a white ideal leads to the construction of supremacist thinking. Bedford gathered people to his side as the virus began to spread through the community. His anger fostered a movement to eliminate the plodders.

> **Bedford:** *(Strolls through the three angry to-be faction members in a very suave and casual fashion.)* People, people. Let's keep our cool. See, unlike them, we are civilized. *(This provokes a laugh from the soon-to-be-faction.)*
>
> (Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 50)

The Elementary Teachers legitimized his actions with a standardized curriculum. Bedford did so by associating his faction with civilization. His

treatment at the hands of his community led him to construct the notion of civilized supremacy in relation to the plodders. Attempting to fit in to the same system that had rejected him caused his unprocessed white shame to become supremacist thinking. This is instructive in terms of how white shame becomes white supremacy. Bedford's desire to fit Blanchekreist's allegorical rendition of the white ideal lead him to pray on the community's fear in order to seize power.

Bedford's seizure of power demonstrates how white shame leads to disguised white supremacy. The Mayor gave Bedford the job of chief of police to combat the plodder threat. Bedford made the following speech on television after he was sworn it.

> **Bedford:** Hello. Thank you Mayor! I am so honored to be your acting chief of police and I am so pleased that people are finally "seeing" the light about this whole blindness mess. I would have written a speech for this event but I wouldn't be able to read it! *(laughs)* Now to business. I would like to encourage everyone to return to their former habits and ways of life before this so-called virus. As the mayor has said there's nothing to fear in fact, what has been called a virus is really just the next step for our town. We are changing in a wonderful way. Thank you.
>
> (Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 65)

Beford's speech suggests the reifying logic of white supremacy. He claimed that the blindness caused by the virus was a positive thing. It was part of the evolution of the town. Such a claim works to protect the virus as normalized behavior. The virus is no longer something that needs to be addressed. In this

way, it is disguised and Bedford's position of power is ensured. Bedford's initial unprocessed white shame became supremacist thinking. His seizure of power allowed his ideology to become disguised and normalized. Bedford's character is a study of how white supremacy operates as an organizing logic. Amara's character is a study of subversion.

Amara

Amara's presence in the play runs counter to Bedford's. Whereas Bedford does not process his white shame, Amara is forced to make sense of her marginalization at the hands of Blanchekreist's normalized, white values. Bedford's unprocessed white shame lead to selfish violence. Amara carefully analyzed her situation under the guide of the Oracle. This led her to selfless act that transformed the town. Amara demonstrates that subverting white supremacy requires critical consciousness and selflessness.

Amara shows that resisting white supremacy necessitates critical consciousness in her initial meeting with Hurston. Amara's critical stance towards the town came about because of her intuitive mistrust of the forces meant to normalize her.

> **Amara:** Oh, I know that it is not nothing. They don't think it's very nothing, either. They care about it so much that they'd lock a sweet little girl in a house for five years to shut her up about it. *(Looks meaningfully at Hurston.)* And you must be new here if you're talking to me. But a word of advice: Don't talk to your teacher about the crazy things you're going to

see. Bad things might happen to you. *(She giggles again, but there is sadness)*

Hurston: *(Digesting what she said)* Crazy things? Did bad things happen to you? *(regaining his thoughts)* I mean, how did you end up here?

Amara: *(Smiles at him)* Maybe they thought I did something wrong. I don't think I did. *(She pauses. The next words come out in a rush.)* I never had parents. I grew up in foster care, they sent me to school. There were always rumors, and they used to teach this history lesson about how people went blind the last time a new family came into town. They said that the family brought a plague. I asked—just once—if maybe the family was innocent. Then everyone hated me; I felt icky about everything. About my life, and how every person frowned at me. About the word they called me. "Plotter". And about how they all wanted to forget that anything ever happened. So I told my teacher about how I felt, and I told her about how maybe the blindness marked the bad people. *(She stares straight at the Hurston)*. And the next morning, they took me away. I guess we weren't supposed to mention it. But now, it's happening again. (Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 31)

People began turning on Amara when she started asking questions about Blanchekreist's values. This led Amara to feel icky about everything. Icky is a powerful word for a child to articulate the felt, intuitive sense that something is wrong. Amara's description of her exclusion from Blanchekreist because of her beliefs is evidence of the critical consciousness. She questioned her community

and was willing to stand by her intuition that their ideals were flawed. It is this stance that a white person needs to adopt if they are willing to questions organizing logics of white supremacy. This risks exclusion from white society and the "icky-ness" that comes from disturbing normalized conventions. Amara's critical consciousness became more articulate in her second meeting with Hurston.

Amara's experience at the hands of normalized values exhibits how her critical consciousness grew in order to undermine logics of white supremacy. This is obvious in her conversation with Hurston.

Hurston: You don't know who they were?

Amara: *(Ignoring the question)* Do you know what it's like to be alone? *(She circles him, whimsically)* Completely and totally alone. No one cares about you. You are nothing more than an animal to the outside. You are a tick…tick…ticking time bomb, waiting to explode and destroy them all. *(With each tick, Amara taps the bars on the door. This startles him.)*

Hurston: I don't understand why you couldn't have just…you know. Kept it to yourself.

(Amara glares intensely. There is a long pause. Hurston Begins to stammer, quietly) I just thought…if it turned out so bad, it couldn't have been worth it.

Amara: Don't you dare talk down to me. Don't you dare tell me that I made a mistake. I have been through things you couldn't dream of, all because I trusted someone. *(Rises. Begins to walk towards him slowly.)* I am thirteen years old, and they've turned me into this half-dead memory

that barely clings onto life. I have been stripped of everything. They scraped off every piece of dignity I had, every piece of worth and love I had ever felt. They called me a freak. And they put me here. *(They are face to face now. Amara is almost hissing.)* Do you want to know why they put me here? *(Silence).* It's because I did what they were too afraid to do. I dared to be different. *(darkly)* Do you see the world we live in? This is becoming a corrupt place again. The worst is when a person looks different. You see a girl whose skin is a little bit darker, hair's too curly, whose wardrobe isn't plain, and she has to make up for it. As if she owes these people something. She has to talk the same as the conformers. Dress the same. And if she wants to get anywhere, God knows she can't acknowledge her differences. *(Almost at a scream)* People are ruined here. *(She pauses).* They think I'm the dead one. They should take a look at themselves.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 32)

Amara told Hurston that the reason she was locked up was because she trusted somebody. This was an allusion to sharing her trepidations about the community with teachers or adults. Instead of listening to her, they called her a freak and put her away because they were afraid of what she was asking. She raged that people whose skin was too light, hair was too curly, or clothes weren't plain enough were oppressed by the dominating social norms of Blanchekreist. According to Amara, the very people that whitened themselves in the ways that she was critical of are the ones who were ruined or dead. Amara's choice of the

word dead is important. For her, accepting the supremacist ideals of Blanchekreist is synonymous with death. It is necessary for a white person realize that participation in whiteness in the way that Amara described has dire consequences for both the oppressed and oppressor. Indeed, this echoes the excerpted warning in Wright's novel *Black Boy* that I cited in chapter one. According to Wright, both whites and blacks are doomed unless they transform logics of white supremacy. Amara's sees the same thing in the people in Blanchekreist. They are as dead as the people they are oppressing. Amara's burgeoning critical consciousness came to fruition when she took selfless action in order to protect Hurston.

Amara's selflessness allowed her to subvert white supremacy. She gave her life in order to save Hurston thereby freeing herself from the dominating logics of whiteness.

Amara: Yes! I've got to go and save him!

Oracle: You must stay here! You can't leave! If something were to happen to you-

Amara: But he is my friend.

Oracle: Some things are more important than friendship.

Amara: My life isn't one of them.

Oracle: Is this what you believe to be true?

Amara: Yes.

Oracle: Then go.

Amara: How?

Oracle: You have just defied the direction of your omniscient guide. I don't think that a set of bars is going to stand a chance.

Amara: I… *(looks intently at door, in a Matilda kind of way)(Door swings open) (Amara carefully steps out of cell, a room she hadn't been out of in seven years. Prancing lightly, she scampers off stage)*

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, pp. 75-76)

It was when Amara was willing to sacrifice her life for her friend that she freed herself from the trappings of white supremacy. Amara's conversation with the Oracle that counseled her throughout the story shows how she came to the final realization that her life was not more valuable than others. There is an essential selflessness in Amara's insight. After this realization, the door to the shack swings open in a "Matilda kind of way." Matilda was a film from 1996. In it, a little girl had magical powers that help her to overcome obstacles. Amara's selfless realization allowed her to triumph over the cage she was in throughout the story. This shack or cage was a manifestation of how white supremacy imprisons both the oppressed and oppressor through dominating, racial logic. Amara's selflessness led her to escape the trappings white supremacy.

Conclusion

The normalizing logics of school, Bedford's unprocessed white shame, and Amara's selfless act illustrate how Blanchekreist was an allegorical telling of white identity that is the byproduct of white supremacy. The play allegorically outlines the limitations and potential of participating in white identity in a white supremacist system. Bedford was destroyed by his unacknowledged white

shame. Amara was transformed. By conducting difficult critical inquiry under the mentorship of an Oracle, Amara selflessly gave her life and transformed into Dawn. She was changed. Dawn demonstrates that white people can work to transform themselves in order to undermine organizing logics of white supremacy if they are willing to embrace selfless, critical work. There are two moments at the end of the play that give further evidence to this potential. The first is the Mayor's final speech. The second is Dawn's final line in the play.

The Mayor's final speech shows the profound realization that students made about the self-inflicted harm of white supremacy. I referenced the speech without interpretation in chapter four. I do so again in order to highlight the Mayor's insight about the nature of the virus, of white supremacy.

> **Mayor:** What I have to. Citizens, all of this horror in our town was due to us. These people *(gestures to family)* came here for a new beginning. We have made this place an appealing spot to raise a family. Can we hate them for wanting what we all want? To keep their family safe, to work a steady job, safety, and to know that they aren't being eyed as some sort of alien? This is what we thought we had created. We were wrong. We turned against them. We clung to what was ours. We raved and spewed nonsense out of fear, because we thought that our lifestyle was in jeopardy. Was that really so? Do they seek happiness to destroy us? If we think this, what does that say about us as people? Citizens, I have told you to hide behind this virus. We cannot see. Our fear is so potent that it has blinded us. Look at what we are doing. We are the villains. We have

sought sanctuary in our victimization. It is an us versus them world we have made. We broke ourselves. We are the virus. The virus is part of us. It always has been and always will be. It hides in the back of our thoughts. All it takes is one family like this *(refers to Sam, Uma, Hurston)* and it all comes to the surface. We can't allow ourselves to follow this path anymore. *(Looks at Amara, Hurston, Roman, town, audience)* I am sorry. *(Takes off jacket, and lays it over Amara. Lifts her into his arms Hurston moves to protect Amara. The mayor smiles and directs the next line to him.)* Here, let us go somewhere private. *(To family)* Come with me. *(To crowd)* Move. Go home.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 80)

The Mayor claimed that the horror created by the virus was caused by the townspeople. They created the virus, hid behind it, and became blinded by fear. According to the Mayor, the people of the town broke themselves due to their inability to see that the virus as the product of their values. This is powerful description of the way that white people participate in white supremacy. The Mayor was transformed because she has come to critical consciousness about the nature of her social reality. Experience taught her something. This led to her willingness to change. Indeed, the Mayor told the town that they needed to follow a new path. This entailed honoring the sacrifice of Amara and opening their community to newcomers. The Mayor's realization opened space for transformation in the same way that critical whiteness pedagogy creates space

for white people to undermine logics of white supremacy. Eventually, a new family moved to town.

Hurston welcomed the daughter of this family at the end of the story. He invited her to his room to show her the painting he had been working on.

Hurston: *(Unveiling the blank canvas)* What do you think?

Dawn: It's blank.

Hurston: *(Realizing for the first time that he ripped up his old masterpiece earlier in the show)* Oh. Well…

Dawn: I kind of like it.

Hurston: The blankness?

Dawn: No, the opportunity to add color.

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 84)

The same actress that played Amara was intended to play Dawn. So Amara's selfless death and subsequent triumph over white supremacy allowed for the character Dawn to arrive. Her response to Hurston's painting was important. She was not impressed by the blankness of it. She liked it because there was an opportunity to add color to the piece. Rather than whitening it, there was room to make it colorful. This is a profound statement about the generative potential of undermining white supremacy in order to create space for something new to emerge. The end of this play echoes Ellison call for a more democratic, American identity that I referred to in chapter one.

Conclusion

Mom: I guess this is where we stop. Here's the house.

Dad: It's beautiful! I can't believe that this is ours.

Clarice: This place feels right.

Mom: Clarice, go and give these cookies to the neighbors. Let's start off on the right foot.

Clarice: Where's Dawn?

Dad: I'm not sure…

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 81).

***

After the Friday performance of the play an African-American man in his thirties walked up to me.

I was standing in front of the auditorium. I had finished the question and answer session. A line of people had formed. They were coming up to me to discuss the project. The audience members were milling about, some were talking with the students and others were leaving.

The man came up and shook my hand.

"I attended this high school nearly fifteen years ago," he told me, "and I just want to thank you."

I kept listening. The man was emotional.

"Fifteen years ago, things were so bad here for black kids that I organized a group of students to have lead a panel discussion with the teachers. I am so happy to see white people trying to have this conversation."

I became emotional as well.

"Thank you for saying that," I told him.

He walked away.

I thought about that interaction many times after The Whiteness Project was finished.

Was it necessary for white people to have permission from black people to investigate their own whiteness? No. But it sure felt good to connect in solidarity with this audience member across color lines.

***

Bear/Oracle: They did it. And so the town moved forward. I will not say that the virus was cured. Everyone has it. You. And you. And you. We all have the potential to recreate and relive what you have just seen. And so Amara was buried right next to Cecilia. On Cecilia's tombstone the following words were inscribed. "Fēng xiàng zhuàn biàn shí, yǒu rén zhú qiáng, yǒu rén zào fēng chē." For those of you that are not omniscient, those words mean this. "When the wind of change blows, some build walls. Others build windmills." Amara's read as follows: "A little girl who gave her life for another." *(At this point, the town begins*

to assemble. They form a tableau that is reminiscent of the first scene.) Everyday flowers were piled upon both her grave and the grave of Cecilia, and with each bouquet, the blindness of those that recognized the virus in Blanchekreist faded a little bit. Unlike the 13th of March, something had been accomplished this time (Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 81).

***

I've accomplished what I set out to do.

Rather than sharing a straightforward story about The Whiteness Project, I assembled an unruly but careful mess in order to suggest that anti-racist, whiteness pedagogy in high schools needs to move beyond the simple answers predicated by traditional white privilege pedagogy. Using pieces of YPAR and playbuilding in concert with my localized teaching practice allowed me to conduct a more nuanced deployment of critical whiteness pedagogy. This nuance was evidenced in the following ways: 1) my commitment to sharing power with my students, 2) the generative confusion about whiteness that I gave the participants (myself included) permission to experience, 3) my mindfulness of what Thandeka, Morrison, and El Kati theorized as the neurosis of whiteness, 4) the way I negotiated the difficulty of attempting critical disruptions in a school setting, 5) the care I took to conduct an improvisational version of Lather's doubled-science in order to "get lost" in both my theorization and practice.

The implication of this work for both YPAR and playbuilding pedagogies suggest the importance of building collaborative processes to negotiate

difficulties that come from sharing power with students. Teachers interested in this approach to pedagogy should consider the following things: 1) students need to be a part of designing outcomes and processes to share power with the facilitator, 2) students *will* attempt to exert power over the collective and this needs to be managed by the facilitator, 3) the work of the teacher or facilitator is to inspire, shape, coach, and help, but *not* to impose final decisions, and finally 4) the work may not turn out the way that the facilitator or teacher had imagined.

Indeed, this project *did not* turn out exactly as I hoped. Though I think that allegory is a powerful way to tell a story, part of me was worried that allegory was a way for students to avoid direct discussions of whiteness. The use of allegory might have been a way for students' whiteness to defend itself from scrutiny. Furthermore, I was worried that students felt like they had figured out racism and were finished with their work at the end of the project. In the Q and A sessions with audience members, I cringed when students spoke with confidence. I wanted them to be humble about the work they were doing. I did my best to impress upon my students that they had only begun but I cannot be sure that message way conveyed. Despite these trepidations, I *was* immensely proud of what my students and I tried to accomplish during the 2012-2013 school year. It felt like a step in the right direction.

In the previous chapters I theorized the design of both the teaching and research, explored the idea of generative confusion, presented Victoria's theorization of whiteness as it connected to her depression, interpreted both local and national feedback to the project, and analyzed the script as an allegory

of white identity as the byproduct of white supremacy. As I finish, I want to make something abundantly clear. This is *not* the whole story.

Many important things happened during the year that I had planned on writing about. Other students theorized whiteness through writing, performance, and discussion in powerful, difficult ways.

As is the way with writing, I was forced to make choices. In my estimation, the items I included in this assemblage were the best way to conjure my interpretation of the year for *this* writing project. I am still engaged in the endless process of inquiry that Lather suggested is at the crux of critical scholarship. So the picture here is limited.

As I wrote in the preface, we are *never* finished trying to theorize our experience. There are hundreds of pages of journals and writing that were omitted here. There are photographs and filmed sessions that did not show up. So even as I finish, I know that the sense-making that I have done here is simply another step in an open-ended journey that is about figuring out a more nuanced pedagogy that creates ethical ways for white people to articulate the nature and implications of an identity that is the byproduct of white supremacy.

***

(Hurston Reaches with paintbrush to add color to the canvas. A long stream of Purple issues forth from his brush. He turns back to Dawn to see if she liked it. Blackout on Dawn, holding the Teddy Bear, as Hurston looks at her)

(Blanchkreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness, p. 84).

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Appendix A

Student Introductions that are not included in chapter two.

***

Aaron (Sam) – 10th Grade

My name is Aaron and I am a student. I am interested in theater and pursue that interest by taking any opportunity I can get. Last year I was just starting to get into theater and acting as more than a fun hobby, and through Blanchekreist it transformed more into a passion. I didn't have much experience in traditional theater but I did have a bit of experience in the kind of thinking needed to do social justice work theater due to how I was raised. The project itself sounded really interesting so I went to a few meetings and was inspired by it. It was overall a great experience and I am still looking into how to continue the work even though the official process is over.

***

Eric (Leon) – 12th Grade

My name is Eric and I am currently a freshman studying to be a geological engineer at the University of Wisconsin Madison. Last year I was a senior at Primdale Area High School where I was strongly involved with theatre, the school's orchestra, and a nearby speed skating club. My roles in the Whiteness Project facilitated by Samuel Tanner were writer and editor of the script and a supporting role in the performance of the script. I was involved with the project for two reasons: I was curious about Tanner's work and wanted to learn more about the idea of white identity and I also had friends who were participating in the project that I knew I could fool around.

***

Betsy (Chief of Police) – 12th Grade

Betsy was an eccentric and unique human. She spent her time making music, drinking coffee and being pissed off at authority and issues in the world. She constantly was doing her own thing because she refused to do what she was told. A free spirit, yet will work her ass off to accomplish something great when it is something she cares about.

***

Melissa (Leah) – 12th Grade

I was a senior that helped with research, script writing, and acted in the show. There two main factors why I wanted join the project. Throughout high school I spent a lot of my time in athletics but always wanted to find time to participate in theater. This opportunity allowed me to not only let me do that but also be able use theater as a way to examine and dig into whiteness. I started my involvement in the project after Tanner had come to my CIS Modern Literature to discuss some of his questions about whiteness. I wanted to continue to explore these question and ask more questions on whiteness

***

Emily (Sarah the Intern) – 11th Grade

I am Emily. I participated in this project as a junior at Primdale Area High School. That was really a transitional year for me. Still in the limbo of too young to actually be taken seriously and too old to be dependent on adults. As a junior, I was on the path of trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, with, from what I now realize, were terribly unrealistic expectations on how to get there. I was, and still am, the kind of person that likes to be heard, and doesn't mind dominating a discussion, to make sure the discussion actually gets somewhere. I am capable of being both a leader and a follower when it is needed, which I though was really beneficial for this project. I am an artist, and spacial/visual work is where I thrive. My contributions in creating the play were in building and designing the world of Blanchekriest. I honestly don't remember too much about who I was junior year, but from looking back at myself on the 20 min documentary that was made about the project, I realize that I wore my hair the exact same way in a stupid bun, and really didn't change my clothes up much... I guess you could say that I was a little weary of change....

***

Elizabeth (Georgia) – 11th Grade

As a junior, my schedule was overloaded with AP Classes, Orchestra, and Choir. Plus I was in four main stage productions within the theater department. I began learning how to collaborate with people from all realms of the school and help them communicate with each other without having one clique dominate too much over the others. I took one regular course this year where I interacted with completely new people and an entirely new academic environment. The advantage was they, the students in this class, could see real problems with society and they weren't afraid to share their opinion; but what was frustrating to me, was that they didn't think it was changeable and there was nothing they could or would do about it.

Appendix B

This is a list of interview questions that we asked ten focal students. A similar questionnaire was built for a teacher who watched the play and two community members who attended the performance.

1) What did you see as your role in this project?
2) Do you feel that you were given room to be successful in all of those roles?
3) What did you see as the purpose of this project?
4) Do you feel like the project was successful in accomplishing that purpose?
5) From your perspective who had the most influence over the way the project turned out?

6) How do you feel the facilitator managed the project? Do you think it was done the best way it could have been? Are there things you wish would have been done differently
7) How do you feel that discourses and systems of whiteness pertaining to competition, need for attention, power effected how the group dynamic worked? If you feel that they did?
8) How did individual's racial identities affect how they approached this project? How they understood this project?
9) If you could have changed anything about the script writing process what would it have been?
10) Do you think that this project critiqued whiteness? Or reinforced whiteness? Both? Neither?
11) In what ways have you been changed by this project?
12) Do you feel that this project changed the surrounding community in a meaningful way?
13) Why did you do this project?
14) Why did you stay through all the difficulties?
15) What in your opinion is whiteness?

Appendix C

Codes

YP=YPAR Participator YI= YPAR Institutional
WI= whiteness as institution WD= whiteness defense WP= whiteness e/affecting participants

YPAR

1. Student Conflict YP
2. Teacher Conflict YI/YP
3. Conflict with Parents YI

4. Collaborative Flow YP
5. Power Struggle YP
6. Normative/Appropriate Behaviors YP
7. Student Agendas YP
8. Student Social Groups YP
9. Motivation YP
10. RAHS Drama Program YI
11. Revolving door of participants YP
12. Role of Teacher/Facilitator/Adults in project YP/YI

Whiteness

13. Definitions of whiteness WP
14. Avoidance/Discomfort WD
15. Directness WD
16. Reinforcing whiteness WI
17. Normative and Appropriate Behaviors WI
18. Self-Reflection WP/WD
19. White Privilege WI/WP/WD
20. Critical Whiteness WI/WP/WD
21. White Culture WI/WP
22. GLBT WP
23. Non-white student involvement WI/WP
24. Non-white audience responses WI
25. White Audience responses WI
26. Co-construction of Whiteness against Non-whiteness WP/WD/WI
27. Anonymity WD/WP
28. Offended WP
29. Moments of White Supremacy WI/WP
30. It's everywhere (whiteness turrets) WI

The Play

31. Fighting over roles WP/WI/YI
32. Playing what you wrote WP/YI/WI
33. Things Tanner wasn't supposed to know YI/WI
34. Press WI
35. Audience Response WP/WD
36. Transformed the topic WP/WI

The Students

37. Emotional response/Inner turmoil WP
38. Sam as therapist/emotional base WP/YI
39. Fighting for attention WI/YI/WP/YP
40. Leaders and followers WI/YI/WP
41. No trust WI/YI/WP
42. Age WI/YI/WP

43. Mark YP/WP
44. Victoria YP/WP
45. Megan YP/WP
46. Hannah YP/WP
47. Krista YP/WP
48. Tony YP/WP
49. Adam YP/WP
50. Lauren YP/WP

The Staff

51. Staff WI/YI
52. Principal WI/YI
53. Admin WI/YI
54. School Conflict YI
55. Public Conflict YI

Physical Spaces

56. Sam's classroom (chairs) WI
57. Auditorium WI
58. Caribou WI
59. Workshop (Community) WI
60. Church WI
61. Digital Space WI
62. Natalie's Car WI
63. Caravan WI
64. Liminal Spaces (Unofficial Spaces)

Appendix D

This is a copy of the proposal I submitted to my principal and the equity director in the district in the spring of 2012.

Sam Tanner - Theatrical Inquiry Project Proposal of Process (Draft)

Purpose:

To build a theatrical inquiry project that explores how whiteness works. For the purposes of this project we will view whiteness as a social construction based on historical and political power structures.

I will facilitate this project as a researcher and a director with two goals. One goal will be to use the data that I collect as material in my dissertation. (The data will include the following; ethnographic field notes, individual interviews with participants, filmed segments of discussion sessions, writing sessions, rehearsals, performances, and drafts of the script.) The second will be to create an original spring play at Primdale. We will build a play that shares our exploration of whiteness with the general RAS community.

Possible Benefits for PAHS:
*Create a mechanism that allows for cross-cultural dialogue between staff, students, and community members.
*Use the theater program as a way to facilitate social justice.
*Open the theater program to a more diverse population of student participants.
*Align the theater program with our equity statement. Whiteness is in direct relationship to the race-based achievement gap that has been noted in public schools. In examining whiteness, this project can be part of the process of narrowing that gap.

May-August:
*Identify and organize students interested in being the research team for the project. (YPAR)
*Work with my colleagues at PAHS to identify potential students of color interested in working on the project.
*Reach out to the equity meeting for feedback or ideas building the project.
*Reach out to administration for feedback or ideas about building the project.
*Work with professors of my dissertation committee (Tim Lensmire, Cynthia Lewis, Sonja Kuftinec, Thom Swiss and Maria Asp) to begin building a framework for the project.
*Reach out to Jan Mandell at Central High School regarding theater and social justice work regarding race.
*Generate Research Questions/Methodologies.
*Begin scheduling community talk sessions with specifically designated groups.
*Begin forming interview and discussion questions.

September-December
*Schedule and conduct individual interviews with a broad sample population.
*Schedule and conduct community discussions with broad sample populations.
*Compile and code the data collected during interviews and discussions.
*Invite community members to contribute other forms of data to our process? Artistic contributions? Written contributions?

January-February
*Employ a public and collaborative script-writing process.
*Draft and form the script.

March-May

*Cast the play and assemble the production staff.
*Put the play into production.
*Present the project as the spring play at PAHS.

May-June
*Reflect on and code the data collected in the project.
*Interview my participants (Researchers/Students/Community Members/Audiences)
*Assemble Dissertation

Appendix E

This is a copy of the handout I made for students. It describes the project as well as outlines the initial tasks I asked them to accomplish.

What is this Project?
I am going to create a space in which *we* (as a group of researchers/artists) inquire into whiteness and build a script that *we* will share with PAS as our spring play. The question I will ask to start our project (and this question will probably change) is as follows. What does it mean to be white, and how does whiteness work?

Why Would You Want to Do This Project?
I am going to list some reasons why you might choose to put energy into this project. (And because this is not a curricular class, it will be those of you who take the challenge of my question most seriously who get the most out of this project.) Here are some reasons:

-You will improve your ability to write a play
-You will examine and learn about whiteness
-You will learn or improve your ability to research
-You will improve your ability to build collaborative theater
-You will make some positive impact on your world
-This will look great on your personal resume/college application
-We will have the chance to publish our script and project and share it on a larger stage than the high school
-This is going to be one behemoth of an interesting/cool play

Disclaimer:
Talking about race (particularly whiteness) can take us down some sensitive roads. I will do my part to keep our work productive. Here is what I ask. If something happens in this process that makes you uncomfortable, bring it to me and we can figure it out. Furthermore, if your parents are uncomfortable about anything that you are doing at any point in this, please ask them to let me know. The more I get a chance to talk with your parents, the better. Simply put, I want to work through any issues that come up in an open way.

A Little More Explanation
This project is going to require you to fulfill one (or multiple) of the following roles; researcher, writer, performer. As we move towards the school year, we are going to hold a couple of workshop/rehearsals to build our collective group of artists. The point of that group is to find people with different opinions and perspective on what it means to be white. In order to be a part of this collective, we will work to follow two rules. They are as follows. 1) We will say "Yes, And" to every idea that is contributed to the space, even if you disagree with it. 2) We will build the card house of this project, you will not knock down your fellow artists. We will work on these things through the year in our rehearsal, research, and writing groups.

Why Now?
I am reaching out to you prior to the formation of our collective because I want you to join me in my thinking/work now. This is going to be a big task and a busy school year. I am going to rely on you to get the process moving. Therefore I am going to assign you tasks to start doing with me prior to our first rehearsals. I will list the tasks below.

Task List - Prior to our first rehearsal (and ongoing)

1) **Get a journal:** Many of you have done this. I need someplace where you can record your thoughts. I don't care if you think they are important or not, I want them recorded. It is easiest for me if this is online, but a notebook is fine. Please feel free to write anything you like in this journal. I will read, respond, and think about your thinking. Please date your entries. I will look at these sporadically throughout the year.
2) **Respond to the following questions as separate, dated journal entry (free-write and let yourself go wherever you feel is best):**
    a. What do you think this should should/will be about? What do you think it will look like?
    b. What does it mean to be white? What is a white person?
    c. What do you consider yourself, racially? Why do you think this? When did you first learn your race?
3) **Notes:** From here on out, I want you to pay attention to what it means to be white or what whiteness is as you are living your life. Anytime you see something that triggers a thought in your head, I would like you to write it down. This could be watching a play, an episode of SpongeBob, an interaction you observe, a memory that comes to you, anything. Discipline yourself to write in your journal.
4) **Email me/Talk to me:** I want you to feel comfortable emailing me or sharing thoughts as you have them. The more that we talk about what you are thinking, the more we can think about how to best proceed.

Last Word: This is the most ambitious theater project I have tried to undertake at Primdale. I will be bringing in a number of people to work/think with us. This will include people in the district, professional theatrical artists, and some friends from the University of Minnesota. At the end of the day, this project is going to rely on you. I think that the people in our theater program are ready to go to work on this. I am excited and nervous to do this with you.

Appendix F

Here are three pictures of Victoria in the cage. A caption appears over the picture.

Amara in her cage talking to the Oracle

Amara watching the violence of a faction meeting

Amara alone in her cage