2018


Jennifer Lynn Doyle
University of South Carolina

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BECOMING A SAILOR: A (CRITICAL) ANALYTIC AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF NAVIGATING TENSIONS AS A ‘WOKE’ WHITE WOMAN WORKING FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

by

Jennifer Lynn Doyle

Bachelor of Arts
University of South Carolina, 2010

Master of Teaching
University of South Carolina, 2011

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Accepted by:

Rhonda Jeffries, Major Professor

Allison Daniel Anders, Major Professor

Toni M. Williams, Committee Member

Gloria Swindler Boutte, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
DEDICATION

This academic novel (because it’s more than just a dissertation), is dedicated to my mother, Carol Lynn Van Valkenburg, who was not physically here long enough to see me start nor finish my doctorate, but who is everything I am and everything I hope to be. She was my first and best teacher, the woman who encouraged my writing since I first could spell, and forever was/is my number one fan. She taught me to always question the powers that be, love humanity unselfishly, and fight back against injustice. Her love never died. She is part of me and her presence can be read in every word. May her spirit continue to live on through me and for generations to come.

Simultaneously, I dedicate this story to the four young men I had the privilege of working with through our book club. Particularly Isaac and Mike. Though we were unable to keep in touch, I carry them within my soul. It is for them and all the other “subjects of research” that I must share this story. Even if it hurts.
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elle—thank you for opening your mind and soul to me through your writing. I found myself through your opening up of yourself to me as a reader.

Finally, to the important male influences (absent/present) in my life, thank you for all of the lessons. To my grandfather, Max Van Valkenburg, thank you for always encouraging me to follow my own path and never yours. At work as a child, you taught me how to count to 100. You told me that now I knew that, I could count forever. This doctorate is now 11,091 days. I will continue counting. To the man I spent my 20s with, Solomon, thank you for loving me at my worst. We were babies when we first met in undergrad, we grew together as young adults, and we grew apart as we grew into ourselves. But through it all, the love never wavered. You will always be a part of me. Finally, thank you to my father. What a blessing it has been to be forced to navigate tensions my whole life! I am a writer because of you. You are a part of every word as you are always a part of me. I carry you in my heart each day, praying that you, too, can find peace, serenity, and freedom amongst the chaos that is always our lives. Keep sailing!
ABSTRACT

This critical, analytic autoethnographic (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Anderson, 2006) dissertation details the journey of a young white woman practicing “woke whiteness work” in the pursuit of racial justice. The autoethnography illustrates the many complexities, layers, and tensions of racial justice work as a white woman, centering on the initial tension stemming from the spring 2014 semester where she was involved in a literary research project facilitating book clubs at a juvenile detention center with students who were incarcerated as part of an adolescent literacy course, while simultaneously enrolled in a Critical Race Theory (CRT) course. In an attempt to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline through literacy, several tensions arose from the juxtaposition of the two courses. It is a story of those tensions and the resistance she encountered that semester and over the course of the next four years (2014-2018). It is a critique of self, of whiteness, and the power of white hegemony in the academy, in research, in education, in scholarship, and in our minds. Through this critique, the role of white educators, scholars, researchers, and women is problematized in order to provide implications for educators, scholars, and researchers who are passionate about racial justice work. Similarly, this critique provides implications for embodying “wokeness” as an ontological state and epistemological understanding of the world; the author recognizes that “wokeness” cannot be claimed by white people, and that wokeness must always be about racial justice!
The chaos will always be there.

Doesn’t mean we have to entertain it nor seek it out nor live in fear of it.

Stay the course and navigate the chaos in productive ways.

Without fear.

Become a sailor.

Despite the chaos. Because of the chaos. Instead of the chaos.
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CHAPTER 1:
LEADING INTO THE BOOK CLUB (INTRODUCTION)

Spring 2014 ~ EDFN 845 (Critical Race Theory)

Thursday, January, 16, 2014. University of South Carolina, College of Education.

Wardlaw 274-D. 4:40-7:25 PM.

I nervously enter the classroom, the same one I had been in so many times in undergrad and grad school, but now I am a doctoral student. Dr. Anders walks in. She introduces herself. I am so nervous I can barely speak in front of the class. Where did this come from? She announces that this course should be taught by a person of Color and that she, as a white woman, is racist and that she benefits from racism but works every day to combat her racisms¹. I am astonished. I look around to gauge reactions from folks. I wonder how she became so brave. So unapologetic. I look at the syllabus. I ponder how I will do the readings. She uses words I’ve never heard before. I have never felt so dumb before in my entire life. How does she know all these words? Why does everyone here seem to know what’s going on? She’s eclectic, I think. I like her shawl she’s wrapped up in. Her hair in a messy bun. She looks like she drinks coffee and talks about ideas with other smart folks late into the evening. I’m not one of those other smart folks. I don’t know how to express myself. I am silent. I can feel myself turning red when it’s my turn to speak. I don’t even know how to tell people about what program I am in. Is it

¹ Throughout my dissertation, I do not capitalize “white” in order to attempt to de-center whiteness in a space where whiteness must be centered in order to critique it. This is deliberate.
Curriculum Studies? Or Curriculum and Instruction? Why did that girl say Curriculum Studies? I am scared. I want to cry. I black out as I speak. The voice that comes out of me as I introduce myself is foreign. It doesn’t belong to me. I don’t belong here in this class. In this space.

Navigate. She keeps telling us we are going to learn how to navigate. I don’t feel like a sailor. Or a captain. I feel lost. I am unworthy of being here. But I am one of the good white people though, right? I’m doing work at the prison this semester. All but two of my friends and chosen family are Black. I teach at the “Black” school in our small, rural county (because in the South, we still have white schools and Black schools, you know). I know racism is bad. I’m the one always calling out my family and co-workers! But according to my interpretation of what she just said, my very existence as a white person means I am always racist. And I have to always work on my racisms. I have so much to learn. The readings are hard. I can barely get through them. I know these ideas. I recognize them. I cannot speak on them though. I know what hegemony is, but I don’t know how to say it. I don’t even know how to pronounce the word. I don’t know how to articulate my examples. But I know what it is. I recognize it. I feel it. I cannot seem to write reflective papers. I know what I know but I don’t know what I don’t know… How am I supposed to be a sailor?!?

In the spring semester of 2014, I was involved in a research project on adolescent literacy at a local Juvenile Detention Center (JDC) (pseudonym) in a large city in the southeast. This research project was a part of a seminar class on adolescent literacy for my doctoral program. While simultaneously taking this class, I was also enrolled in a
Critical Race Theory (CRT) course. In this critical, analytic autoethnographic (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Anderson, 2006) dissertation I will analyze the tensions that surfaced that semester and continued to grow through the last few years—tensions between the two classes, tensions of turning theory into practice, tensions of working with people who possess differing epistemological backgrounds, and overall tensions of being a white woman engaged in racial justice work. I will particularly critique my own role as a white educator, scholar, researcher, and woman to problematize the role of white folks in the fight for racial justice and offer implications for other white educators, scholars, and researchers who are passionate about racial justice work and want to engage in creating a more equitable and just society for us all. Some of the stories will not be pretty. This journey continues to be difficult. But if we are ever to truly promote racial justice, it must begin with our own racialized awareness within sociohistorical, sociocultural, and sociopolitical contexts.

**CRT Book Clubs**

As a fusion between the two courses I was enrolled in spring 2014, I merged my “Racial Justice Project” from my CRT course with my adolescent literacy course’s research conducting book clubs with students at JDC. The racial justice project required us to conduct racial justice work that addressed inequities in the United States throughout the course of the semester. It was my belief then, and even more so now, that perhaps one of the most daunting, shameful, and current examples of inequity and injustice in the U.S. is the school-to-prison pipeline, which funnels students from their community schools and into the criminal justice system.
The school-to-prison pipeline became more popularized and pressing during the Obama administration when they, in conjunction with the Justice and Education Departments, issued recommendations and guidelines regarding classroom discipline in January 2014, at the start of my spring semester. These recommendations and guidelines were designed to combat school discipline practices and policies that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. However, this social phenomenon has been well documented since the early 2000s following a plethora of research on the effects of zero-tolerance policies and the racial disparities in school discipline throughout the 1990s, finding them ineffective and racially biased. While there has been much research on the role of zero-tolerance policies (Brown, Losen, & Wald, 2001; Skiba, 2001; American Psychological Association, 2006) and high-stakes testing (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Advancement Project, 2010; Thompson & Allen, 2012), there has been little research done on the role of the classroom teachers within the school-to-prison pipeline. Yet, Elias (2013) and Christensen (2011-2012) both suggest, as do I, that the role of the classroom teacher is perhaps one of the most vital when attempting to keep children out of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Based on previous inquiries, and from my own observations as a teacher in a small, rural high school in the southeast, as well as academic literature about culturally relevant classroom management (Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003), teachers often write referrals for students of Color because of cultural differences and teacher misperceptions of the behavior of students of Color rather than actual threats to students’ safety or to the classroom environment. From personal, informal interviews with administrators at my school, I learned that once a referral is submitted to the office,
the administration has a set of “zero-tolerance” policies they must follow depending on
the offense. I saw these policies as paving the way to alternative and juvenile justice
school settings and as the criminalization of our students in schools as gateways to
prison.

My hope from the infusion of my racial justice project and my adolescent literacy
research project was to understand firsthand, from the students’ point of view, what could
be done by teachers in the classroom to combat the school-to-prison pipeline. Simultaneously, I wanted to explore how to promote literacy and academic achievement
amongst the students who were incarcerated as a way to promote racial justice and
disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. Prior research from my professor in my adolescent
literacy course had shown me that effective reading interventions for juvenile offenders
could result in a 20% recidivism reduction as well as an acquisition of significant reading
gains (Brunner, 1993); as a high school English teacher at the time, I was particularly
interested in how I could reduce recidivism, encourage literacy, and promote racial
justice.

The adolescent literacy course, taught by Dr. Hendrickson, was designed for us,
as doctoral students, to facilitate book clubs with small groups of high school students at
the prison. Each book club was designed to be its own case study, as part of a larger case
study on book clubs at JDC. As doctoral students, we were given authority to design our
Lessons for Literature Circles*, as a guide for crafting the book clubs. I was familiar with
this text from my master’s program (those courses were also taught by Dr. Hendrickson)
and utilized its framework frequently in my high school English classroom in the three
years prior to our research (2011-2014). However, I felt that because we were solely
crafting a book club outside a traditional classroom setting and not also engaged in
critical literacy work inside an English classroom setting, it was important to craft our
individual book club more critically.

I wanted to utilize the book club as a space for students to not only respond to a
text as Daniels & Steineke (2004) frame it, but for that text to be a culturally relevant text
that allowed for the students to critically examine institutional, structural, and systematic
racism in relation to the text. I hoped to employ the text as a springboard for analyzing
systemic racism in schooling, in an incarcerated setting, and more generally in the
students’ lives. Responding to Thein, Guise, & Sloan’s (2011) call for more teacher
direction when constructing critical book clubs, I deliberately crafted our individual book
club as what I originally called a “critical race literature circle” with the goal of
promoting racial justice. My plan was to teach students tenets of CRT and utilize a CRT
framework to prompt discussion for students to critically analyze the ways in which
racism affected the life of the character in the novel, then facilitating the discussion so
that the students would also critically analyze the ways in which racism affected their
own lives. More so than just critically analyzing and discussing though, I wanted to craft
the book club in a manner that could promote discussion about the ways in which we
could all individually and collectively work to promote racial and social justice in our
own lives and within our own communities. I called it a CRT book club.

Critical race theory (CRT) draws upon an earlier legal reform movement in
critical legal studies (Harris, 1993; Bell, 1992). Responding to protracted white resistance
to desegregation, critical race theorists analyzed the relationship between the judiciary
Critical Race Theory (CRT) has several interrelated tenets that I explored throughout the book club as well as throughout this dissertation—the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992), interest convergence (Bell, 1995), whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), the myth of neutrality (Delgado-Bernal & Villalpando, 2002), colorblindness and the myth of meritocracy (Kennedy, 1995), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1993), and the challenge to majoritarian narratives through counterstorytelling and counternarratives (Delgado, 2000). The most central tenet I explored in the CRT book club was the disruption of the majoritarian narrative—including the white, mainstream, often deficit, dominant narrative often told about people of Color. Indeed, I knew from my previous work at JDC in 2010 that the students I would encounter at JDC in 2014 did not fit the dominant, deficit narrative of “struggling readers” that is so often told through academic literature, through media, and through stereotypes. I wanted the CRT book club to intentionally disrupt the majoritarian narrative often told about the types of students encountered in a prison setting.

The CRT book club that I implemented that spring 2014 semester was intended to actively work to combat stereotypes and oppression in the everyday lives of students who were incarcerated. As McKay (2010) illustrated, CRT “encourages critical collective action, through the engagement of the learner’s experiential knowledge and social
agency” (p. 26). I wanted the CRT book club to build students’ literacy skills, foster critical discussions, and promote practical decision-making skills in order for students to amplify their voice and agency to promote critical collective action within their school and community as a way of combatting the school-to-prison pipeline and promoting racial justice. Individually, I wanted each of my students to become more critical thinkers, critical readers, and critical collective action takers through the book club. I wanted them to critique white supremacy, critique institutional racism in schooling, in the criminal justice system, and in society; then to utilize that critique in order to develop ways to promote social and racial justice—not only behind the fence, but also back home in their communities upon release. Ultimately, I wanted the book club as a whole to be an activist-oriented racial justice project. However, this goal was not entirely reached through our research at JDC that semester for a variety of reasons that I discuss at length throughout this work.

Although there were moments when I felt autonomous in my decision making in the project—developing the curriculum of the book club and initial coding and analysis of the data—I was both working with a co-researcher and as a member of what Dr. Hendrickson had created as a larger research team of which she was the sole principal investigator. As I learned later, Dr. Hendrickson would not allow us to share interpretations and representations of our experiences with students from JDC that countered the ones supervised in the production of the course. And yet, I needed to share what I was allowed to share about what happened that semester and in the three years that followed. Autoethnography, in particular critical, analytic autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Anderson, 2006) gave me a way to do that.
Why Autoethnography?

“This study was approved by JDC within a certain context and under certain conditions, primarily that I would oversee all research processes, procedures, and products. None of you have received permission from JDC to use this data collected in any way other than that approved within the context of my guidance or for the purposes of this course. In other words, you don’t have permission to use any data collected beyond my supervision or outside the context of this course.”

(S. Hendrickson, personal communication, April 2014)

I chose autoethnography to represent and problematize my experiences because Dr. Hendrickson holds exclusive IRB rights to the research and data that was collected during our time at JDC. I am unable to pursue any work that utilizes the student data. Although I may not use descriptions and notes about the students Lindsay and I made during our book club, I feel passionate, even after all this time, about representing my personal experiences throughout the research process and what I learned and continue to learn from the experience. I elected to use autoethnography as the methodology (Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Ellis, 2004) to pursue this representation.

Anderson (2006) detailed this type of autoethnography as “analytic autoethnography”, which he defined as ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher’s published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena (p. 375).
He described this particular type of autoethnography as “a distinct subgenre within the broader practice of analytic ethnography” (Anderson, 2006, p. 374) and one that is different from what Ellis (2004) described as “evocative autoethnography” in which the story itself stands alone and often times evokes an emotional response from readers. As Hughes & Pennington (2017) stated when discussing Anderson’s (2006) framework, “From this perspective, only analytic (not evocative) autoethnography can elicit the type of empirical evidence (or data) that will withstand the tradition of rigor and scrutiny in the academy” (p. 29). I believe that his argument could be valid depending on audience, but that evocative autoethnography has a valid claim to empirical evidence as well and should withstand the tradition of rigor and scrutiny in the academy on its own. This is essentially just an epistemological debate between empiricists and postmodernists. Analytic autoethnography is the “only” type that can withstand the tradition of rigor and scrutiny only if one believes that research needs to meet modern, empiricist standards to count as knowledge.

For the purposes of this dissertation, and because I believe my situation aligns perfectly with analytic autoethnography, I employ Anderson’s (2006) framework. However, I do not join him in his argument regarding the de-legitimization of evocative autoethnography. Anderson claimed that “only” analytic autoethnography could withstand “rigor and scrutiny in the academy” (p. 29), but his argument presupposed that only modern, empiricist standards count as knowledge. And I disagree. Ellis (2004) made clear that one of the aims of autoethnography was represent story as theory. Additionally, I do intend to use elements of evocative autoethnography and agree with Hughes & Pennington (2017) that autoethnography serves “different purposes for
different research audiences” (p. 30). Indeed, I write evocatively, as Ellis (2004)
suggested, by making myself vulnerable and allowing the reader to situate
her/him/them/hirself into the story using scene descriptions, conversations, flashbacks,
vivid imagery and descriptions. However, I do not wish for this particular
autoethnography to be purely evocative and stand alone on its own as a story. Instead, I
practice analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006) to focus “on improving theoretical
understandings of broader social phenomena,” (p. 375), in this case, using my critical
reflection and storytelling to examine the roles of white teachers and researchers, in the
pursuit of racial justice.

My use of field notes (Glesne, 2011), analytic memos (Saldaña, 2016),
subjectivity statements (Roulston, 2010), notes from how I engaged in systematic
reflexivity by reflecting on my role in the research process through my researcher journal
(Saldaña, 2016)—from 2014-2018—allow me to make claims of traditional elements of
ethnography (Ellis, 2004). Additionally, I wrote “retrospective field notes” (Ellis, 2004,
p. 117) before writing my dissertation to concentrate on emotions and dialogue, places,
colors, sounds, and movements in order to tell a story with a plot that reflected these
experiences beginning in 2009.

More so than just a story, in alignment with Anderson (2006), I have a
commitment to an analytic agenda. As Anderson (2006) wrote,

The purpose of analytic ethnography is not simply to document personal
experience, to provide an ‘insider’s perspective,’ or to evoke emotional resonance
with the reader. Rather, the defining characteristic of analytic social science is to
use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. (pp. 386-7)

The broader set of social phenomena I wish to gain insight into through this research is the often-problematic role of white researchers, teachers, and scholars who take up racial justice work with students of Color.

My data analysis comes in the form of the personal and evocative stories (Ellis, 2004) told about the tensions between the two courses I was enrolled in during the spring 2014 semester and are situated within a critical race theoretical framework (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). By fusing theoretical and historical contextualization into my autoethnography, it becomes critical social research that increases the credibility of my story and allows me to connect my personal experiences to a larger sociocultural context (Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

This analytic autoethnography is also a critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014), what I name a (critical) analytic autoethnography. It is important to me to include a critical orientation. Critical autoethnography signifies ties to critical theory and “an explicit focus on how power intersects with one’s personal experience and the structural forces that helped to create those experiences” (Potter, 2014, p. 1436). This connection to issues of power and critical theory is particularly important for this work, because “a critical autoethnography attempts to do more than just reveal how one fits into the power structure—it attempts to deconstruct the very power structure that gets exposed” (Potter, 2014, p. 1436). Indeed, it is my hope to deconstruct the power
structures of whiteness through this critical, analytic autoethnography and theorize about my own identity as a white woman engaged in racial justice work through a critical lens.

**What to Expect**

Throughout my dissertation, I use excerpts from personal narratives derived from my personal journal, my research journal, and class reflections; emails; social media posts; and other dialogic materials interwoven within and throughout to highlight and illustrate the interconnectedness of my personal experience to larger theoretical and sociocultural implications about white hegemony. An autoethnography includes literary elements and tells a story (Ellis, 2004). Utilizing autoethnography can be considered a nontraditional methodology which results in a nontraditional dissertation altogether. The intertwining of the personal to larger cultural contexts and implications surrounding power is a key part of critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). As a specific genre, critical autoethnography allows for the researcher to “story the meaningfulness of personal experience in a cultural context” (Alexander, 2014, p. 110) while producing “analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better” (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 764 as cited in Crawley, 2014, p. 222). I want this academic novel to be analytic and accessible while changing the world we live in for the better by first changing myself and hopefully changing you as the reader. As I just stated, I do approach this autoethnography from a critical standpoint and declare this work as a form of critical autoethnography, while at the same time conjoining critical autoethnography with Anderson’s (2006) framework for “analytic autoethnography” in order to make claims to traditional roles of ethnography (Ellis, 2004; Anderson, 2006) through the use
of field notes, analytic memos, emails, personal journals, researcher journals, and personal narrative.

My goal is to explore the role of my actions and non-actions through a critical, analytic autoethnographic representation of my own inquiry into self. I analyze the role that my actions and non-actions played regarding the outcomes of the research process in ways that may have gone unnoticed. It is my hope that this inquiry will be beneficial for educators, researchers, and scholars who are particularly invested in racial justice work.

My inquiry questions are as follows:

1) What tensions arose from my racial justice work with students of Color who were incarcerated?

2) How did I navigate, or fail to navigate, those tensions?

3) What can be learned from my experiences and the tensions?

4) What does it mean to be a “woke” white woman engaged in racial justice work?

**Being Born into Tension**

Looking back on this experience, having freshly turned thirty, my entire life has led up to this dissertation. I was born into tension. My life has never fit into binaries, though I have always been forced into them. And for the majority of my life, I have struggled in the ways I have navigated those spaces and binary boxes everyone is always trying to put me in and where I constantly have tried to stuff myself into, knowing I do not fit.

I was born into the tensions of my mother and father—two people who should have never been married, but ended up as such when I appeared in my mother’s womb.
The tensions were manifold. Tensions of their divorce a couple years after my birth. Tensions of growing up in a single-parent household. Tensions of being the only person I knew with divorced parents. Tensions of sharing custody. Tensions of living a double life. Tensions of keeping the violence at my dad’s house a secret. Tensions of going to private school only because my grandparents paid for me to go, not because we were super-rich like the rest of my classmates. Tensions of being the only person I knew whose mom worked. Tensions of having to go to the office (where my mom worked for my grandparents and uncle) all the time growing up, because I didn’t have a stay-at-home mom like the rest of my friends. Tensions of being a book worm when my dad told me it wasn’t cool. Tensions of living inside my head through my writing, but being told by my dad that I was an anti-social, “stick-in-the-mud.” Tensions of being hated by my step-mother(s). Tensions of having an absentee father who I saw twice a year but never knew. Tensions of being a daughter to a father who did not understand me and constantly tried to change me, define me, and break me. Tensions of being the “black sheep” in the family with my mom, because everyone judged her for having me in the first place and for all her past mistakes. Tensions of being a Doyle (my father’s name) in a family of Van Valkenburgs (my mother’s name) in northern Virginia (NoVA). Tensions of being my mother’s daughter when my father wanted her dead. Tensions of only being “half-Catholic” in a large Irish Catholic family from Iowa (my father’s side). Tensions of being a Doyle in Iowa but not actually knowing the man who gave me my name. Tensions of being bisexual but having the privilege of keeping that part of my identity hidden. Tensions of being the “token white girl” in my friend group or in many other spaces since high school. Tensions of being the only person in my family with Black friends. Tensions
of interracial relationships with men. Tensions of a secret “best friend” relationship with a white woman in college while we both claimed to be straight. Tensions of secret interracial relationships with women. Tensions of not being white enough in white spaces. Tensions of trying not to be too white in Black spaces. Tensions of not being gay enough in LGBTQ+ spaces. Tensions of not being straight enough in heterosexual spaces. Tensions of being a woman in a man’s world. Tensions of being too independent to let a man be a man. Tensions between money and happiness; law-school and education. Tensions between being a daughter for my father and being a person for myself. Tensions between South Carolina and the DMV (a name for the collective area of DC, Maryland, and Virginia). Tensions between “teacher Jen” and “regular Jen;” “Ms. Doyle” and “Jenny Lynn;” “Jen on Ten” and “Jen on Two.”

I don’t know why I was so surprised when the most profound things I have learned from this doctoral program have come from the many tensions this program has exposed for me. I was born into tension, and it is within tension that I thrive. My world does not exist in binaries. It never has. And this has always created tensions. Tensions so intense that I literally made myself chronically sick to my stomach as a child. Tensions that often froze me into silence. However, reframing my thinking to understand the world in “both… and…” rather than “either… or…” has helped me navigate those tensions throughout this doctoral process. Finally, I thought to myself back in spring 2014 as I sat in my CRT class after first hearing about “both… and…” ways of thinking, the world makes sense. I can make sense of myself. But the more I learned that semester, the more I found there was to learn.
The tensions that arose out of that spring 2014 semester and continued to surface and resurface over the course of the last four years were merely amalgamations of all of the tensions I have been struggling to navigate my entire life. These last four years of tension that led to this dissertation actually began much earlier.

**Fall 2009 ~ EDCU 563 (Secondary English Introductory Methods)**

“If the idea of planning a unit excites you, then you’ve made the right career decision!” Dr. Hendrickson exclaimed in class one Monday morning in a high school gym classroom, the first semester of my senior year of undergrad. Her Midwest accent was crisp and clean—a stark difference from the southern accents my ears had become so adjusted to after three years in South Carolina. There was energy and excitement pouring out of her voice as she sat half-way on the edge of a table in the front of the room, deliberately tucking her parted, bleach-blonde hair behind her ears as she held the unit plan assignment sheet in her other hand. Her presence demanded attention from the whole room. She wore a white short-sleeve shirt tucked into her long, black, flowy skirt—the kind that looked like if she twirled around in a circle, it would spread out and dance around her. The skirt met her black leather boots below the middle of her shin. *My mom would really like those boots*, I thought to myself.

She spoke intensely, urgently, and passionately about planning a unit and teaching high school English. This was her life, her passion, her heart—you could hear it in her voice. When she told us stories about the twelve years she spent teaching high school English back in Illinois, I pictured a younger version of her in my mind as Michelle Pfeifer from *Dangerous Minds*, reaching and teaching the “struggling readers”—the kids who didn’t want to be there, or the kids who society had discarded. She spoke
passionately about her love for reading and the way in which she encouraged her students to love reading as well. I remembered back to a time in my life where I, too, used to love reading: before high school, before my teachers used to make me read boring, classic books. I was never a “struggling reader,” but I was one of those kids who didn’t want to be there; I had felt discarded in high school. Maybe not by society, but discarded nonetheless. I had grown up lost in literature, and had since lost my way. She offered me a way back into my passion of reading and writing, uncovering a new passion for teaching within me. I wished she had been my teacher back in high school. She spoke as if she had changed her students’ lives forever by thematically teaching canonical texts with young adult literature and allowing them opportunities to analyze poetry, songs, and short-stories while creating artwork, visuals, and multigenre writing portfolios. I wanted to change lives like this too.

This class was my last education course for my English degree with a concentration in Secondary Education. I entered the class that semester with a cockiness like, I’m not really supposed to be here. I’m actually going to go to law school. I’m just taking it for degree requirements. Plus, education courses are mad easy. But I found myself falling in love with it. I had forgotten how much I loved it because it had been over a year since my last education course. But Dr. Hendrickson was right, the idea of planning a unit excited me. Ideas rushed through my head. Songs I could include. Which book I wanted to read. What assignments we could do. Oh! We can write poetry and make picture books!

As I sat on that hard, blue chair with my binder, notebook, and books spread out all around me, twirling my pink pen in my right hand and daydreaming about my unit
while Dr. Hendrickson explained the assignment at length, my lips turned faintly upwards. I closed my eyes as I took in a deep breath in and smiled. It was one of those heart smiles. The ones where the corners of your mouth ever so slightly break into that delicate smile that barely cracks your face but radiates from deep within in your soul. It’s the smile you smile when your heart is truly happy. That feeling that circulates through your body, down to your toes, and you breathe the air as if it’s the most precious breath you’ve ever taken, suddenly grateful for all the world has offered you. And you smile a little, to yourself, on accident. A heart smile. That’s when you know you can finally be at peace. My heart smiled for the first time in a long time that cool November morning and I wrote to myself in my journal, “I’m SO GLAD I’ve decided to stick to teaching! 😊” (J. Doyle, Personal Journal, 16 November 2009).

See, just a month before, on a warm and sunny Monday afternoon in mid-October, I sat outside on our third story balcony, chain-smoking cigarettes, feeling like the weight of the world was upon me. I lived in Stadium Suites, off-campus college-style apartments full of college students, with two other younger white girls: Chrissy and Katelyn. Chrissy lived with Stephanie and I the year before, but Katelyn was new and I did not know her very well. She had taken over Stephanie’s room after she moved out. When I came back to the apartment in August, having spent the summer back home at my mother’s house in northern Virginia (NoVA), all of Stephanie’s stuff was gone, except the green vacuum she brought over from her mother’s house. It sat in the living room, just outside her old bedroom door, reminding me of what almost was, yet never could be.
I hated our new apartment. I hated everything about this year at school. It was my third year living here, but the first year I had to live here without Stephanie. I missed her presence deeply and longed to go back to the times when our friendship was easy, carefree, and full of laughter. Everything was different now. Stephanie had moved out and moved on with her life; my mom was forcing me to graduate in the spring even though I wanted to do another 900 years in school; my dad was pushing law school on me like he suddenly cared about my future; and I just wanted to everything to go back to the way things used to be, before I had to make all these life-changing decisions. What if I made the wrong choice? What if I didn’t like where I ended up? Why did I have to make so many decisions? What would people think of me if I make the wrong choice?

I glanced down at the people in the parking lot below me, mostly USC students coming to and from class, music blasting from their cars, a few walking to and from the pool and leasing office. I watched them from my balcony, as I often did, loving the way I could witness the world around me without anyone seeming to notice. My mind wandered back to the warmer months when we could tan and drink beers at the pool before class with all of the other students at our college apartment complex. Now it was still warm, but not pool-weather warm. My tan is fading, I thought to myself as I looked down at my left forearm. I miss summer.

The deadline to apply to law schools was quickly approaching. I had taken my LSAT. I hadn’t done great on it, but I hadn’t done poorly either. Now was the time I had to make a choice of where I wanted to apply, all the while knowing deep down I didn’t even want to go to law school. Sure, I could have been good at it, but my heart wasn’t in it. My dad was just so pushy about it though. He just loved me so much for going,
because his new wife was a lawyer and my new step-brother was going to law-school. (Never mind that this man never even graduated college and was never a part of my life before I turned 18). Plus, my mom had just spent $1,300 for me to take LSAT classes over the summer. And it was just so nice to finally have a father who cared about something I was doing with my life. I didn’t want to disappoint him. But I hated it. I hated even the thought of law school. And I loved my education courses. I was passionate about it. I loved writing. I loved helping people. I loved reading. I loved high schoolers. I loved teaching. It combined all of my passions into one. As I looked down at the palmetto trees surrounding the pool, I just knew I wasn’t ready to leave South Carolina yet.

So instead I just sat there, in our $8 kelly-green camping chairs Stephanie and I had bought from Wal-Mart when we first moved in, my feet propped up on the metal railing. There was a half-smoked pack of Newports and a pink Bic lighter in the mesh cup holder, and I held my phone in my right hand, lit cigarette in my left, trying to muster up the strength between puffs to call my mom and tell her she wasted $1,300 last summer. I dialed her number and felt my heart stop at each pause between rings.

“Hey sweetie! I called you yesterday. Is everything okay?” Of course, she knew everything was not okay. Because mothers just know these things. I don’t know how. Probably magic mother powers or something.

“Hey mom. Sorry I didn’t call you back yesterday.” I took the last puff of my cigarette and put it out in our gas station ash tray, blowing out the toxins into the sky.

As I tried to hold back tears, I took a deep breath and sighed, “Yeahhhh… I just have to talk to you about something… and I don’t want you to be mad at me. And I know you are going to freak out. And I feel really bad. So please don’t be mad.”
I paused but my mother said nothing. I often began difficult conversations like this. I took another breath then began hurriedly spewing out all my words at once, “But… umm… I just don’t know if I want to go to law school, because I really like my education class this semester, and I feel like I’m really good at it, and it just combines everything I love with writing and helping people and books and kids. But my dad is going to be so mad at me! And he finally loves me, and he finally is interested in things that are going on in my life, and you spent SOOOO MUCH MONEY on those LSAT classes, and then you came down here for the test last month, and you took off work, and I know I’m supposed to make a decision about law school, and I just don’t know where to go, and I just DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO MOMMY!”

My words toppled over one another so quickly, snowballing into tears I tried not to let come out through my voice. Having released my angst, the tears flowed freely and silently down my face. I took a deep breath and anxiously awaited my mother’s wrath…

She lingered briefly for a moment that felt like eternity. What was she going to say to me? Where was I going to get $1,300 from to pay her back? I bet she has that mean angry look on her face. I shouldn’t have called her while she was at work. My heart thumped in my chest as I took small shallow breaths, gasping at the air.

“Well, Jen, first of all take a few deep breaths and calm down,” she chuckled. “It’s not that big of a deal sweetie. I know you want me to tell you what to do, but this decision has to be yours.”

I could hear the smile in her voice and felt silly for freaking out. Her words calmed my tears but those tears quickly turned into frustration.
“UGHHH, MOMMY, whyyyyyyyy?!! I wish that just sometimes you would tell me what to do!”

“I know sweetie,” she giggled, “but mommy can’t always tell you what to do. I know it’s nice to have your dad supporting you, but he should support you no matter what. Maybe he will surprise you. But you can’t do things just for him. You have to do what you feel in your heart is right. You already know what your heart is telling you. Go with that.”

“Are you sure you’re not going to be mad at me for wasting your money if I don’t go to law school?” I ask apologetically.

“Well, it is a lot of money and I had a feeling you didn’t really want to do it, but I couldn’t make that decision for you and I knew you had to go through with it and decide for yourself” she declared.

That was an expensive way to end up here, I thought to myself, wishing she had just told me this six months ago and saved her money and my time. I could have had so much more fun this summer if I hadn’t been in that stupid LSAT class at night after work.

“Oh okay,” I replied, “I think I am going to go to grad school instead then and do the MT program… What should I tell my dad?”

“Don’t worry about your dad. Worry about you. I am here to support you no matter what you decide. But I have to get back to work now.”

“Oh okay mommy, thank you for understanding! I love you so much!”

“I love you too sweetie. You’ll be fine.”

I got off the phone with my mom, feeling relieved. Thankful for her understanding. Laughing to myself because I used to rebel if she tried to tell me what to
do and now that was the only thing in the world I wanted. Nonetheless, I was going to be a teacher! I smiled to myself as I finished my cigarette and went back inside. Chrissy was in the living room watching SpongeBob and eating a bowl of cereal. With my newfound glory, I jumped up and down, excitedly telling her the news.

“I’m gonna be a teacher! I’m gonna be a teacher! I’m gonna be a teacher! Yayyyyy!” I exclaimed in my little-girl-excited voice.

“Oh, yayyyyy!!! I thought you were going to go to law school?” she asked.

“Yeahhhh… I didn’t really want to do that anyways. So, I just called my mom and talked to her about it and she said I could do grad school instead! I’m gonna go schedule my MAT test and look at the grad school application. I AM SO EXCITED!” I declared as I skipped across the living room to my bedroom.

“I’m gonna be a teacher! I’m gonna be a teacher! I’m gonna be a teacher! Yaaayyyyy!!!” I sang as I entered my room, sat down on the wooden rocking chair, and opened my laptop to apply for the next chapter in my life. No longer scared of what was to come. Finally excited for what awaited me after graduation.

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While my heart was finally in the right place, I had a variety of other things going on at the time as well which are outside the scope of this dissertation, but circumstances and my life choices concerning my father led me to miss class and turn in that unit plan that made my heart smile late, because I was absent that Monday morning class before Thanksgiving. It was my second absence. I knew per the syllabus this was unacceptable and I would probably fail the course.
I mustered up my courage at 8:00AM that Monday morning, just an hour before class began, and called Dr. Hendrickson. With tears flowing down my face, I had to tell her that I was not going to make it to class. It was my second absence and I already knew that meant I had ruined my chances of getting into the MT program and that I would fail the course for the semester. Dr. Hendrickson was “not a professor who accept[ed] failure easily” and “believe[d] that attendance [was] vital to success in this course” (M. Hendrickson, personal communication, 8 October 2009).

Rinnnggggggggggg…

_I hope I have the right phone number. Please don’t pick up. Please don’t pick up._

_Please don…_

“Sarah Hendrickson” she answered with authority. I swallowed.

“Umm… yes… Dr. Hendrickson, this is Jen Doyle, and…” I sniffled and wiped away the tear on my right cheek, “Umm… So, I’m not going to make it to class today but I have my unit plan. It’s just that I am still in Charlotte at my dad’s house. But I can drop my unit plan off at your office today when I get back to Columbia.”

She sighed and I could hear the disappointment seething through the phone, “Okay, well you know the policy on absences. Make sure you drop your unit plan by my office by today. I have to finish preparing for class,” she said as she rushed me off the phone.

I slowly removed my Nextel flip phone from my ear, clicked the red end button, shut the phone, and pushed down the antenna. I sat and stared at the phone for a minute, unable to speak. Defeated. Sick to my stomach. I knew it was my second absence. I knew that my unit plan was late. I knew that I had tried to explain my situation away, but she
didn’t care. The fact of the matter remained that no matter what, she was not going to let me get away with this. I was going to fail this course. My whole life was ruined.

Shame rushed through me and I felt my body get hot with embarrassment while the tears silently rolled down my face. How was I going to tell my mother? I had to go see her in Colorado for Thanksgiving in just a couple days. How could I tell her that not only did she waste her LSAT money, but now she had wasted all of her money, because I was a failure. I had never received lower than a B in college! I pushed the thoughts out of my head, finding them too painful to bear, and instead went about my day making it back to Columbia.

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I waited until it was past dark outside before I attempted to drop off my unit plan in Dr. Hendrickson’s office. I only lived a few minutes from campus, but I hoped that if I waited long enough, she would no longer be in her office. I made my roommate Chrissy come with me in the car so I could park in the 30-minute loading zone outside the education museum entrance on Greene Street with my flashers on while she waited in the car to make sure no one towed me away. The five-minute car ride to campus was mostly silent. I was lost in my shame. She was lost in her phone.

Once we parked, I turned to her and exclaimed, “Ahhh, Chrissy, I really fucked this up. I can’t believe I did this.” She didn’t even look up from her phone, sensing that while I was talking to her, I really was not actually talking to her. I took the last puff of my cigarette, threw it out the window, and declared, “Okay, I’ll be right back. I hope the building is open!”
“Okay,” she replied, not even looking up from her phone. She was texting John and was preoccupied. She didn’t even want to be here in the first place. I had to bribe her with weed to get her to come with me. I said it was for the parking, but the truth was I was terrified and didn’t know if I could do it alone. I needed the moral support. Really, I just needed to not be alone. I hated being alone. I was scared of alone.

I walked up to the dark building and pulled on the door handle into the museum of education, surprised when it actually opened. I realized that I was halfway expecting it to be locked. Or really hoping it was locked so I didn’t have to face Dr. Hendrickson. I wonder what time they lock the doors around here? I thought to myself as I walked through the museum, into the hallway, and up the stairs to my right. This building is kind of creepy at night. It feels like I’m trespassing. What if someone catches me in here after hours? No way Hendrickson is still here this late. I’m okay. It’s okay, Jen. 232.

I wandered around the maze that is our college of education, realizing that I had never been to a professor’s office in Wardlaw before. The halls were silent, not a person in sight. The creak of the metal handle opening the stairwell door disrespectfully pierced the silence into the second floor and aggressively crashed behind me as I looked around near the canteen. How does anyone figure out how to get around here? Ugh and why does this building look so old? I would hate to have my office in here. The arrows and signs perplexed me. All of the numbers seemed to be out of order. Nothing made sense about how they numbered the rooms and offices. 232. 232. 232. 232. 232… Okay, where is 232… 232… I repeated to myself over and over again like a mantra. If I just focused on remembering her office number, it would all be okay. That was the only thing I had to remember.
After wandering around in a giant circle, carefully walking toe-to-heel to hush my footsteps, I finally stumbled upon her closed office door. *Oh good, she’s not here!* I looked down at my unit plan with pride and humility. I had worked for literally 26 hours on that unit plan, carefully organizing each lesson to fit into my theme, “Speak Up! Speak Out! Speak Your Mind!” surrounding the young adult novel, *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999). I handcrafted each assignment with such pride and joy, feeling as though the book told the story of my life and through the teaching of it, I could find my own voice as well. My unit plan was detailed, meticulous, and perfect. Right down to the font and formatting. I never did anything in life half-assed, but I had never done anything for another class with such passionate effort before either. *You really did it this time, Jen. You really fucked it up. The one thing you weren’t allowed to fuck up. Literally your best work, and it doesn’t even matter! Maybe she’ll see how good it is and forgive you anyways,* I thought to myself reassuringly. *Yeah, probably not though. You really fucked this up.* A piece of me was on each page of that unit plan. A piece of my heart, a piece of my brain, and a piece of my soul. I took it in both hands, glanced at it as if to say goodbye, and almost kissed it before placing it in the clear plastic inbox. I gently knocked on the door, just in case, but I was certain she was not inside. It was too late in the evening.

About to turn away, relieved I did not have to face her (I was more scared of her than I was of my own mother at that point in my life), I heard moving around inside. She opened the door and I nervously entered her office. I avoided eye contact and sat down on the opposite side of her desk, noticing the stacks of books and posters. I felt we would
be here awhile and I thought to myself about how mad Chrissy was going to be at me for making her wait in the car.

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We talked for a solid thirty minutes that evening. It was beautiful. We talked about fathers and their expectations, how law school and engineering were not our paths. She told me she knew what it was like to not have your family understand your career path. I talked about how much I loved teaching, how I knew how badly I messed up, and just how much I loved that unit plan. She reminded me that she told us on the first day of class that she used this course to vet who would be accepted into the MT program. I knew this didn’t make a good first impression.

I was surrounded by all of her stuff—all the books, all the academic things, pictures, organized chaos—surrounded by everything I loved. I admired her. I felt at home in her office and even though I was in trouble, I appreciated and respected the way she talked to me that night. I had spent all semester admiring her, looking up to her, wondering if I, too, could become an English teacher like she was. She gave it to me straight that night, no chaser. I had messed up. Something had to be done about it. She saw my potential and said I did great work, but that I was just not living up to my potential and if I couldn’t do that as an undergrad, what on earth made her think I was cut out for grad school?!? She could tell my heart was in it, but she was going to have to seriously consider what to do in this situation because attendance was crucial in this course, and she was unsure about my professionalism. I understood what she meant, as I had been known to be unreliable, but I hoped that she could see my heart and dedication
through my unit plan. I handed it to her and left, embarrassed, wondering how I was going to tell my mom when I got to Colorado in a couple days.

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When we came back from Thanksgiving break for our final day of class, Dr. Hendrickson pulled me to the side after class and said that I would get a “C+” for the semester and that I needed to attend an informal practicum the following spring semester with a first-year teacher and recent graduate of the MT program to prove myself to be reliable and professional. I would have to keep a detailed reflection journal during my time there and turn it in to her at the end of the semester. I was so happy I could have hugged her, but I’ve never been the touchy-feely type, and I could sense she was not either. I just knew I was not going to let her down this time.

Spring 2010 ~ Informal Practicum Reflection Journal

The following reflection journal was written on April 12, 2010 immediately after my sixth session observing a first-year English teacher, Ms. Weston at a local high school. The regular font is the original 2010 reflection. The italicized parts embedded within the reflection are my current, retrospective reflections on my former-self.

SESSION #6

Last week was BCHS’s spring break so I didn’t come in. This is now my 6th time coming to this class & the semester is almost over! Ahh! This is so crazy! I’m about to be a college graduate, in grad school too! Throughout this semester I’ve kinda gone back and forth about this teaching thing (@ the beginning at least), but after doing this practicum I’m even more eager to get started teaching.
I asked Ms. Weston during planning period today if I could teach a class & I’m super excited (and somewhat nervous) about it. She said I could do a grammar lesson (boring!) or I could help her do an introduction to the Holocaust unit—basically, give the students background info. on it, ask what they already know, etc. I think I’m gonna (wow, gonna? I shouldn’t write how I speak)…

There was a tension at this time in my life of having to become a “teacher” and what that meant—particularly as pertains to whiteness. I felt as though I should no longer speak how I spoke to my friends, namely using African American Language (AAL). All of the teachers I knew in the program were white, and even my friend, Lamar, who was the only Black male in my classes and who was going to be in the MT program with me, spoke in Standardized American English (SAE) around me and in our classes. I felt as though it was time for me to grow up and that I needed to stop being a college kid and start being a real-life adult. A professional. In my head, that meant I had to be more white. Everyone around me, professionally in education, performed whiteness. Everything I knew about professionalism from the business world at the office with my family, taught me that professionalism equated performing whiteness. All but two of my teachers growing up were white. It was even more clear and abundant in my education courses at USC where all of the classroom teachers I had observed during the course of my practicum experiences as an undergraduate were white, white people. I felt like I had to be a better white person—whatever that meant—in order to be successful because everyone around me in education, aside from Lamar, was white. I felt like that would get me far in my career, and I always knew how to play the game of school (game of whiteness). I knew there were rules to it. Ways I had to be. Things I had to do. But my
boyfriend, Solomon, was Black. And all of my friends back home were Black. But I still felt this need to act more white. It was the beginning of the tension between separating my personal life from my professional life; teacher Jen (Ms. Doyle) from regular Jen. A tension that was not resolved until 2013 when I was working in Nottoway. I reflect on this at the end of this chapter.

Anyways, I think I’m going to go with the introduction to the Holocaust lesson plan. I think it would be less disrupting to her overall plans (as she is going to do intro. that Monday anyways) and way more interesting for the students. Most students hate grammar and I don’t think I want to do it. However, if she needed me to teach grammar (since they’ll be getting papers back), I would gladly do that. Like I told her, I don’t want to detract from her overall lesson/unit plans. Time is of the essence when it comes to teaching.

In addition, I made official plans to come in next Wednesday to observe her Freshman focus group. I’m pretty excited about that b/c it will give me some insight to what it will be like teaching non-honors students, or struggling students. It will be (I’m expecting) a much different classroom atmosphere & I think I need to be put in that kind of situation. It will be good for me & it will be a good learning experience.

I clearly entered into the classroom and educational settings with deficit perspectives of students who were not honors students. At this particular high school, these “non-honors, or struggling students” were also primarily Black. I had not been in a primarily Black classroom before during my practicum experiences. Ms. Weston at the time had not out-right told me that all of her students were Black, but she described this class as being much noisier, needing more direction, and overall not as well-behaved as
her honors class. She encouraged me to come observe that class so I could see how she handled “that” classroom atmosphere. I remember thinking that I liked “these” kids way better than the snobby honors students because we laughed and had fun. I also remember being surprised by how smart they were because they were not anything at all like Ms. Weston had painted them out to be. Also, what did I mean “that kind of situation”? What kind of situation did I think I was about to encounter? Clearly a hostile one. And it was the complete opposite of that! The students were actually nice to me—a stark contrast from the honors kids—they spoke to me, asked me questions, we communicated. It indeed was a good learning experience—or rather an un-learning experience. It was the beginning of my journey of trying to un-learn everything I thought I knew about students and un-learn my deficit perspectives.

Furthermore, Ms. Weston gave me all of her contact info & new name (she’s getting married in July) so that I can contact her about coming to observe her first day of classes in the fall. SHE’S SOOO EXTREMELY HELPFUL! I LOVE IT! It’s somewhat ironic (I think) that I’m here b/c I messed up last semester. I actually think this practicum puts me at an advantage over other students who didn’t get this opportunity b/c I’ve learned soooo much (and still am learning so much) about the teaching process & how it works. Somehow, I feel like it was almost a blessing that I messed up last semester b/c now I’m here w/a teacher who is FANTASTIC & I can tell that she really cares about what she’s doing here w/her students. But what students did she care about? All of them? Or just the ones who looked and acted like her, who performed well in her classes and who behaved how she expected them to behave? The answers to these questions are abundantly clear...
When I look back @ where I was last semester & where I’m at this semester I’m kinda blown away. I must admit though, I’m not exactly up to par where I need to be, meaning I’ve still got plenty of room for improvements—but hey, no one’s perfect. At least this semester I’m not so lost feeling. I feel like I’ve become stronger as a person and that I now have a direction to go in w/my life. I’ve been actively acknowledging my problems & doing all that I can to improve my situation. I even told off my dad about my choice to go to grad school & not law school. Anyways, I’m not sure why I’m writing all of this down b/c it’s not relevant to teaching I guess, but my point is—I’m making a new Jennifer Lynn. That was a huge step for me to actually tell my dad how I feel & talk back to him. Not only talk back to him, but yell at him & get angry with him. Finding my voice correlates directly with my relationship with my father and has ties to anger. My silence is sometimes my response to anger. When I am silent too long, it comes out as anger. This is echoed throughout my dissertation. What are the results of that silence and anger? Particularly in raced spaces? See Chapter 5...

I’ve just gotta apply that same confidence & sticking up for myself & portraying my authority over my life—now I’ve just got to apply that to my teaching. That’s what’s the problem with this whole teaching thing—I’m too scared. I’m always scared & timid, always unsure of myself. I want to say things and speak up but I am silent. It’s been like this my whole life. I’ve been working on that this semester b/c I’m my own worst enemy. I’ve always been so nervous/anxious/shy/timid with my dad & it’s carried over to other elements of my life. Not anymore! I just wish I had found this new Jen years before. My silence here as silence that comes from the anxiety of feeling like I will never be good enough for the person/people I am surrounded by. So instead of using my words, which
will probably be used against me in a way that misrepresents me, I avoid speaking altogether.

Well, that was a long ramble, but basically, I want to jot down some of my thoughts about teaching. Here goes—I’m pursuing this path b/c I don’t want to take the easy way out in life. Yes, sometimes I want to take the easy way out, move back home to Northern Virginia, and work for my family. They own 18 McDonald’s restaurants and I’ve been working in the office since I was 12—it will be officially me working on & off for 10 years on May 27th. I literally grew up in the office and I’ve got to learn all of the behind-the-scenes stuff about all of the different jobs with filing, deposits, accounting, marketing, etc. Yes, I would have to take all the owner-operator classes, manage, supervise, & work all the stations at McDonald’s—all things that are extremely difficult, I know b/c my mom did it recently—but still, all I would have to do is say the word & here I come Hamburger University in Chicago… I want to make my own life, do things on my own, pursue something I feel passionate about. Yes, I do like working w/the family but I want to explore all my other options b/c I will always have that as a back-up plan. I’m very blessed to have such an opportunity for a back-up plan, but I want to live on my own terms.

Does living on your own terms have ties to whiteness? Or does living on your own terms mean resisting whiteness? It definitely has ties to resisting class privilege. What are the correlations? I can do this. I know I can. As long as I don’t get in my own way, there’s nothing that could stop me. I’m taking the hard route. Teaching as a calling, a dedication, a life-long commitment, a passion. But also, teaching as having the privilege
of choosing a hard route in life rather than being forced into a hard route in life. Oh, what a privilege of whiteness and class.

That’s another reason why I want to pursue teaching—it’s a challenge. The logistics of teaching—such as the lesson planning, organization, preparation & such—is something I’m really very good at. Somehow, that stuff comes naturally for me; I’m naturally good at it I feel like. The challenge part of teaching is that I actually have to put it in practice. The struggle of how best to turn theory into practice is a salient and persistent question in education, and it is echoed throughout this dissertation as well.

While I can be very outgoing sometimes, I ultimately think I’m much more of an introverted person. That’s why I love writing—I express in writing things I would never dare to speak. My writing as means of voicing my silence.

Overcoming this & establishing myself as an authority figure is what will be the challenge. I think about it all the time. There’s something about a giant group of students who can very well eat you alive (I used to be one of those students to certain teachers when I didn’t take Adderall) that scares the living poop out of me (haha). But really, it does! I’m so confident when it comes to elementary school & middle school b/c I feel like I already have an established authority over them. However, when it comes to high school students, I’m always terrified! But, that’s something I’m just going to have to get over. I can do it.

Here, my silence comes again from the anxiety of feeling less-than, unworthy, and not good enough to be an authority figure capable of speaking up, deserving of being heard. When I am afraid of what others will think of me—in this instance, the students—I am silent. When I feel like people don’t know me, don’t understand me, or have some sort
of power over me—like the students here—I am silent. Anxiously silent. And I have to be cognizant of the consequences of my silence. In this instance, with students, my silence hinders my ability to effectively teach them. So, I know I have to get over it. But I don’t overcome it just yet... and my silence has even more detrimental consequences in my research and racial justice work, as shown throughout my dissertation.

Another aspect of teaching that perhaps worries me a bit is the money situation. I make great money working for my family & I know I’m not going to make anywhere near that kind of money teaching. But, I know in my heart that teaching will be rewarding in ways that money can’t buy. I just hope that I don’t get burnt out as a teacher & that the little moments are enough to keep me motivated. Nothing’s worse than a burnt out teacher—it’s terrible for the kids.

I can anticipate getting burnt out by the stupid NCLB rules & regulations. I hate standardized tests (for students, not for me personally b/c I am actually very good @ them—performances of whiteness). But yea, I can see how that would be so frustrating. Those stupid school rules & regulations like that frustrate me (esp. b/c I witnessed the difference in teaching from learning in both private & public schools). Obama promised some much needed change in the school system, but who knows really what is going to happen.

I didn’t know this at the time, but this is foreshadowing for the work I engage in throughout this dissertation. The policies and regulations from the standardization of education are but one factor in a myriad of ways in which the students are funneled out of schools and into prisons. And the Obama administration attempted to address this, but what are the results of that now that he’s left office? There’s so many things, like
inequality in the type of education students get @ a public school with money & a public school w/o money. It actually angers me—especially down here in the South & how it’s divided up by race w/poor, primarily black, schools being part of the Corridor of Shame. It’s sickening. *This anger just multiplied throughout the years with the more information I learned about racial injustice. What a privilege of whiteness it was to grow up blind to these things. See Chapter 5 for more on this.*

Anyways, I should probably get to work on my other homework for other classes so I can actually graduate in 26 days. **WOW** where did these past 4 years go? More on teaching later…

I want to change the world, one student at a time.

**Summer 2010 ~ EDCU 617 (Foundational Reading)**

For my first semester of graduate school (that started a mere two days after my undergraduate graduation), we were required to take a foundations of reading instruction course with Dr. Hendrickson. This was my first course of my master of teaching (MT) program and the first time I had class with Dr. Hendrickson again after almost failing 563 a year earlier in undergrad. During this course, we were required to complete a “Reader’s Profile” of a high school student with whom we worked one-on-one with at JDC. The assignment required us to “get to know a reader for the purpose of putting into practice what is learned in this course” and involved us completing a Burke Reading Interview, administering a Miscue Analysis, facilitating a retrospective miscue analysis, and planning for and administering strategic reading intervention (M. Hendrickson, Syllabus, May 2010). It was my first experience working with students who were incarcerated, and
I provide my reflections throughout the experience below to situate my doctoral experience at JDC within this contextual backdrop.

The student that I worked with, Michael or Mike (pseudonym) as I called him once we got to know one another better, was a sixteen-year-old Black male student at JDC who was soft-spoken, but confident, and eager to participate in anything related to reading, often showcasing his excellent reading skills, making it very difficult for me to administer a strategic reading intervention because I did not find any specific ways in which he proved to be a “struggling reader.” Rather, he was just the opposite. And my surprise at the time feels like shame now. As with my reflection from Ms. Weston’s class, I offer my current retrospective thoughts in italics throughout the following reflections of Mike as a reader in order to problematize my past deficit thinking.

**One-Pager Reflection ~ May 13, 2010**

After our first class at JDC and conducting my first interview with Michael, I left the experience pleasantly surprised by his self-motivation for learning and reading. I know that as a teacher (or a person), you shouldn’t assume because it makes an ASS out of U and ME, but I still went in there with assumptions about him. For instance, I assumed that he wouldn’t be interested in reading and throughout the entire interview I was pleasantly surprised by his insightful answers and self-motivation. I left thinking to myself, this kid is wayyyyyyy too smart to be locked up!

*Why did I think that being smart (or lack thereof) had anything to do with being locked up? Whenever I would get in trouble, my mom would tell me I was being dumb and that I was too smart to be this dumb. But there are a million times in my life where, had my whiteness not protected me, I could have been (and arguably should have been)*
locked up... but I am smart too. It is white logic and “either/or” thinking that assumes that people who avoid prison are “smart” while people who are incarcerated are “dumb” but this line of thinking fails to take into consideration the systemic racial injustice of mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010). It is a mainstream, majoritarian narrative that people who go to prison are not smart. This is simply not the case. Folks who are incarcerated are individuals who live full, rich lives. It not EITHER that they are smart and do not end up in prison OR they are dumb and end up in prison. There are a million instances in my life where I have been incredibly smart and also done a variety of dumb, illegal things. I was just blessed (and privileged from whiteness) to have never been imprisoned because of my recklessness.

Furthermore, I went in there assuming—because we were told that we were going to JDC in order to learn how to work with “struggling readers”—that Mike was going to be a struggling reader. I had this picture in my head of struggling readers being uninterested in reading, un-insightful, and lacking self-motivation. Mostly because my step-sister was a struggling reader growing up, and I had always thought all of these things about her. At the time of this research, she was also locked up in North Carolina. I assumed that because we were going to work with “struggling readers” to teach them about reading, my student would be this way as well. Moreover, all of the readings from Alfred Tatum (2005, 2009) that we read in class presumed that all Black males were struggling readers who needed intervention. But that was a problematic presumption from our course—that struggling readers, particularly young Black male struggling readers, existed within the confines of prison walls, and it was our job as (primarily white) teachers to create interventions to save them. This is the “white savior” complex.
Sometimes throughout the interview I thought that he was just giving me answers that I wanted to hear. But after listening to him, I could really tell that he was actually interested in reading. His mother and sister instilled with him at an early age that reading is something that is of vital importance. *This is a counternarrative of what we learned about Black male adolescent readers in our course, and it surprised me at the time because it countered everything I was taught about Black male students as readers.* He repeated constantly throughout the interview that reading is a necessity and the importance of learning. He said it so much that it left me wondering if he really meant what he was telling me, or if he was repeating what he thought I wanted to hear about reading. *I was so eager to label him as a struggling reader that I failed to truly listen to him at the time and allow him to label himself as a reader.* *I held tightly onto the majoritarian narrative of him as a Black male struggling reader.* However, my general consensus is that he really meant what he said. *Who was I to determine this or not?!?* He talks a lot about improving himself and learning everything that he can, which is truly inspiring.

After listening to the tape extra closely and transcribing it, I’m mad at myself for being so nervous and repeating so many questions. He was such a trooper about the whole thing though and answered my repeat questions. He was actually the one who made the interview more comfortable for me. *It should not be the job of the student to make the teacher feel more comfortable.* Michael knew exactly what he was talking about and he looked completely prepared to answer any questions I threw his way. He’s very confident in himself and his abilities so I think that he felt comfortable talking with me. I’m mad at myself for not extending out my hand sooner to shake hands. He was the one
who extended his hand first and I knew right away that there was nothing to be nervous about. I’m mad that I allowed all the rules beforehand (like no touching and what not) to interfere with my polite manners.

I’m also mad that I couldn’t really hear him while the interview was going on because there were things he said that I heard on the tape for the first time. I tried to listen carefully, but he was speaking softly and I have a hard time hearing when there’s lots of background noise and distractions. I’m really glad that I had the tape though, but still sad that I didn’t hear some of his answers fully because I think I could have elaborated more on some topics. For instance, I should have asked him what his favorite Shakespeare play or poem was. Or to name more than one of his favorite poems. Or what kind of music he liked to listen to in conjunction with his poetry. We probably have a lot of common interests in the music area and I don’t think I touched on it nearly enough. Yes, I remembered to talk about it and I remembered to ask all the questions, but I should have expanded more and really got him to open up even more than he already did.

I think the fact that I didn’t expand more on the questions and just ran through them so quickly could have been avoided if I was more comfortable. When I’m nervous I tend to rush through things. I was a lot less nervous then though in comparison to when I teach whole groups of students in a classroom—which I guess isn’t normal? But I feel very comfortable working with students one-on-one so I’m glad that I wasn’t as nervous as I was a few weeks back when I taught in Ms. Weston’s class.

All in all, I think this experience was absolutely FANTASTIC! I’m mad at myself for being so nervous, but I’m excited that we get to go back next week! I think I am going to hook him into the book through a writing prompt where he can answer in free verse
poetry. I would love to read some of his poetry and I hope that by the end of this, he will feel comfortable enough with me to share some. I can't wait to go back because I’ll be less nervous and I will be less tense, more of myself. I’m going to thank him again next time I see him because I really do appreciate his help with my teaching. I know we’re here to inspire them, but I feel like he really inspired me. I’m already thinking about books that I can recommend for him. 😊 Can’t wait!

The fact that I thought we were there to inspire the students at JDC is problematic as well. We positioned ourselves as (primarily white) representatives of the university, in opposition to the primarily Black students at JDC. We (mostly white women) were the smart and knowledgeable folks from USC and the JDC students (mostly Black males) were the ignorant and struggling readers. Historically, Western thought has always placed white bodies and Black bodies in oppositional and hierarchical dualities such as these (Crenshaw, 1988), and the media/society reinforces these stereotypes for us. Our readings from the course reinforced this stereotype for us. This oppositional dualism feeds our presumptions as teachers about who we track into the school-to-prison pipeline and who it is that we think we might meet behind the fence in a prison. That day, Michael effectively demolished any assumptions I had about who I would meet in a prison. Yet, I was quick to hold on to my majoritarian narrative of him as a struggling reader because he was a Black male.

At the conclusion of our course, Dr. Hendrickson told us that was the point of doing this work in the prison—so that we would learn how to teach all students, learn that kids are kids are kids, and learn that just because they are locked up does not mean that they are not smart. But we never problematized the very premise that this entire
practicum was based upon—the assumption that we would meet Black, male, struggling readers at JDC. Nothing we read in class challenged this assumption, indeed readings from Tatum (2005 & 2009) merely reinforced this idea about Black male students as struggling readers and always needing additional support in reading. So, while we think we are doing good work, we have to ask ourselves—are we really? What does it mean to do “good work” with Black students as a white female? Are you there to save them? Or are you there to support them in ways to help them save themselves? In this capacity, we were there to save them and teach ourselves. That is not racial justice work. That is certainly not woke whiteness work. It is white savior work.

Two-Pager Reflection – May 24, 2010

Let me begin by saying that I’m so sad that this whole experience is over!!! It’s been truly wonderful getting to know Mike (I started calling him Mike as we built a rapport with one another). and I hate to think that I’ll never be able to see him again or find out how he’s doing. I saw him open up from a shy, quiet boy, to someone who felt comfortable sharing his personal feelings and connections to the readings. I hate the fact that we aren’t allowed to keep in contact with the students, but I completely understand why it is frowned upon.

I can see why it would be frowned upon to keep in contact with the students, particularly as we are just learning and growing as preservice teachers. However, as researchers in our later work at JDC, there can be detrimental, life and death, consequences of not being able to keep in touch with students. Particularly as pertains to member-checking and allowing students to be part of a humanizing research process (Paris & Winn, 2014). Humanizing research allows participants to engage in the
research process, respecting their views and ensuring they are represented how they would like to be represented. Humanizing research ensures that students are not “othered” (Bhattacharya, 2009) with research.

To start the day, I asked Mike what he wanted to do. I told him I had a list of activities, much like last time that we could do. I told him that today we were going to do some close-reading and dive deeper into the text, making connections and analyzing the text a little closer than we did last time. I wrote questions in the margins of my book that I thought we could go over in Chapters 7-10, brought sticky notes (which I forgot and actually had to stop at Walgreens on my way to JDC this morning!), and Double-Entry-Diaries that we could complete. I noticed last time that he chose to do two connection activities so I thought he would like to do those again, which is why I chose the last two activities.

However, Mike wanted to see what I had for my questions so we carefully went through each chapter and he answered some of my questions I had written down. One of my questions was “What does mind probing remind you of?” and he said television and how people waste away watching TV and things like that. After hearing his answer and responding positively and appropriately to it, I shared with him that I thought that mind probing reminded me of the dangers of drug use. He thought that was really cool once I explained it because it made so much sense to him. The rest of my questions were about making predictions about what’s going to happen next in the story (such as why do you think Spaz is so special?), using background knowledge from other classes (the important people who had epilepsy) and making personal connections through reader response (such as, did he think that Spaz was justified in running away?). He also gave me a
wonderful connection about the Pipe. I asked him what the Pipe reminded him of (thinking that he would give me some answer like the sewer system or water or something) and he connected it to the Underground Railroad, which I found to be fascinating!! I never even thought about the Underground Railroad and the Pipe, traveling by night and what not… plus the mention of Harriet Tubman on the previous page… he’s so smart!

The fact that I was surprised by the fact that he was smart when he obviously paid way more attention to the text than I did is problematic, again showing the oppositional dualities (Crenshaw, 1988) lens of subordination which I viewed him as a Black student. I just naturally assumed, because of this mindset, that he would be less intelligent than I was as a white teacher. This assumption was made evident through my prediction that he would make a literal connection to actual pipes rather than a metaphorical connection based on textual evidence. Also, now that I have done the necessary work to learn about Black history, I know that Harriet Tubman was also epileptic, and I doubt I would overlook the connections now having learned so much more about history in the last eight years. It appears that he had background knowledge that I lacked at the time or was just a better reader than me. Either way, both examples show how he was smarter than me, destroying my assumptions about him and surprising me. This serves a prime example of the ways in which my subordinate viewpoint based upon oppositional dualities of Mike caused me to think of him in a deficit and inferior manner.

After going through the chapters, Mike and I began reading Chapter 11 together. As usual, he wanted to read aloud while I sat and listened. He’s a very confident reader and I was glad that he enjoyed reading aloud so much. This time while he was reading, I
stopped him at certain places and asked him to repeat to me what was going on in the section that he read, or I asked him to make connections with the text or predictions about the text. He didn’t seem to mind that I stopped him occasionally and it made me feel like more of a teacher because teachers do that.

This is where I was learning how to become a teacher. I knew teachers did that from my observations of teachers throughout my life (Lortie, 1975/2002). I return to this concept of observation and the consequences of my observations later in my dissertation.

After he was done with Chapter 11, we went back to the text and used sticky notes to mark questions, background knowledge, and connections to the text. He really seemed to enjoy using the sticky notes. By now, we were quickly running out of time so I proceeded to hand him the book I bought for him, Bronx Masquerade by Nikki Grimes. One of the cool things about this book is that I had no idea it was written by Nikki Grimes and she was one of the authors that I printed out information and poems from last time. I even wrote a little note in the book for Mike that said, “To Mike— It has been a pleasure working with you. You are extremely intelligent and have a bright future ahead of you. I have no doubt that you will succeed in anything you want to do. Good luck and God Bless. –Ms. Doyle.”

Mike obviously already knew he was smart. Why did I feel like I needed to tell him this as a teacher? I was still operating under the assumption that one has to be either smart and out of prison, or dumb and in prison. That was a product of my white logic.

I also included some sticky notes in there of books I thought he would like to read (Sydney Sheldon books, Forged by Fire by Sharon Draper, and one other that I can’t remember right now for the life of me).
In addition, I included a brief list of some of my favorite musical artists and we talked about it for a bit. I told him that I knew he liked Lauryn Hill and Eminem, because that’s what he told me on the second day, and he looked so pleased that I remembered who he liked. I told him that I was a big fan of both of them and wrote down J. Cole and Talib Kweli as recommended artists because when they rap, it’s like poetry. I also included both them because they are conscious rap artists who speak about social issues and bettering themselves. I thought J. Cole was especially important to include because he went to college (St. Johns University) and graduated with a 3.8 GPA before he was signed to Roc Nation, and he’s from North Carolina so I thought he would be able to relate to him and also look up to him. (At the time, growing up in the DC area, I had a view of rap music as primarily being from “Up North” (New York), and did not know much about southern rappers.) To my surprise, Mike had heard about J. Cole (he’s new so not many people know about him) and he was surprised that I knew about those artists too. I guess he assumed that because I was white that I didn’t know about hip-hop music, and he pleasantly stated that we had more in common that he thought. It felt really good to be able to relate to Mike, and I think he really appreciated the fact that I took the time to get to know him as a person, not just as a reader.

At end of our session together, Mike told me that he wrote a poem he wanted to share with me, but that he didn’t have time to re-write it so he could give me a copy. I think he was just shy to share his poetry with me, which is cool and I’m not upset that he didn’t bring it with him. However, I am sad that I didn’t get to read his poetry! But, like I told him, it was the thought that counts. Also, he opened up to me about why he was at JDC—but I couldn’t really hear him because he was speaking so softly. Apparently, he’s
in there because of an accident and how he got angry, something about jealousy… I wish I heard more! But at any rate, I was really glad that he felt comfortable enough with me to share that.

Obviously, I didn’t respond to his sharing this with me very well if I couldn’t even really hear what he told me.

I could tell by the time we went and sat down to listen to the whole group that he had really opened up to me since that first day I spent interviewing him. We were even making jokes with Destiny (the only other Black student in our cohort aside from Lamar) and her student (also a Black male) who were sitting next to us and I know that he saw me as a relatable person, not just a teacher.

Really, what I said here was that I was glad that he saw that I wasn’t “one of them” (typical white girl teachers, like the rest of the young women in our cohort), that we had more in common than he originally assumed about me, and in return was willing to open up to me. Although it was raced in particular ways, it was a rich moment of exchange between him as a student and me as a teacher. It also serves as the first of many examples throughout my dissertation where I attempted to distance myself from my whiteness, or at least distance myself from fellow white teachers.

I wanted to reject my whiteness in order to connect to him as a student, but I also—at the very same time—am always white and cannot ignore my whiteness. Even so, with this critical lens, my whiteness and my attempts at distancing myself from my fellow white teachers does not negate the experience and the student-teacher connection and rapport we developed. I can acknowledge the social reproduction of whiteness through white teachers in school, knowing that I, too, am a white teacher who perpetuates this,
while at the very same time still have a moment of genuine connection with a student of a different race. It is never “either/or” and always “both/and.”

Whenever he handed me the book of poems I thought I was going to cry. The note he wrote at the beginning really affirmed for me that I want to be a teacher. He wrote:

First off, let me tell you I enjoyed the experience of working with you. You were funny, creative, and enthusiastic all of the time we spent reading. I like the fact that you were concerned with my interests and I wasn’t just a “subject” to you. I appreciate all you have given me from the poems, to the confidence to read aloud. I hope you are successful in your future. (Mike, personal communication, May 2010).

This whole entire experience affirmed that I made the right decision not to go to the law school and to pursue teaching. Like I said at the beginning, I’m just sad that it’s over now!!!

*I did not want to be like the other/typical white preservice teachers, and I was clearly invested in this work as a preservice teacher. Even before I knew what being a “subject” of research was or “othering” the students, I was invested in working with students rather than on students. Had Mike had experience being a “subject” of research before? How did he know these terms?*

**So What??**

I include these backstories as a contextualization of my relationship with the professor whom I conducted the adolescent literacy research book clubs at JDC to provide background of my previous experience working at JDC with students who are incarcerated. Dr. Hendrickson was the reason I ever even started down the path of
education at USC, still here nine years later. She was a huge reason why I became a teacher and she literally mentored me into the educator I was when that spring 2014 semester began. I am the English teacher I am today because of her; I am the researcher and scholar I am today because of her—though I am no longer practicing as an English teacher, and I am not approaching my research and scholarship in the same way as her. I include these background stories not to vilify her in the process of my critique, for James Baldwin (1955) taught me that one can only critique that which one loves, and it is because of this deep love and respect for her that I feel I must critique. It is my sincerest hope that my love for her shines through this necessary critique.

In many aspects, I felt as though I outgrew her that spring 2014 semester, and perhaps I had been outgrowing her since I left the MT program, but I always felt that I was not supposed to do that as a mentee, as the first of the 48 Laws of Power (Greene, 1998) is to never outshine the master. Indeed, the 48 laws of power are powers of whiteness, white hegemony, and white patriarchy. Likewise, I never wanted to offend her. And herein lies yet another tension. While a majority of my critique of the research process throughout my dissertation will challenge what happened, it is important to note that my purpose is not to slander my professor nor my research partner during my representation of my experiences and the juxtaposition of the two courses I was enrolled in during the course of the spring 2014 semester. We all have different ways of knowing the world and we all come to research from different perspectives and epistemological viewpoints. Often those differences create tensions, and I offer this dissertation as a critical reflection and embodiment of Maya Angelou’s saying, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better” (no pagination). Through this
work, I explore how I navigated (or failed to navigate) those tensions, and offer suggestions based upon the lessons I learned looking back through the research process through a critical race theoretical lens and utilizing what I call “woke whiteness work” to critique white hegemony. Additionally, I offer commentary on what it means for me to be a “woke” white woman engaged in racial justice work.

**Wokeness and Whiteness**

Merriam-Webster added the word “woke” to their “Words We’re Watching” list in 2016 to “talk about words we are increasingly seeing in use but that have not yet met our criteria for entry” (Merriam-Webster, 2016). I offer a screenshot of their definition of “woke” and the history of the terminology below (Figure 1). The word was officially added to the dictionary in September 2017.

Merriam-Webster traced its origin to African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or what Dr. Gloria Boutte, a professor at USC, calls African American Language (AAL) that “is a legitimate, rule-governed language system” (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Boutte & Johnson, 2012, 2013 as cited in Boutte, 2016, p. 104), and had its transformation into a “byword of social awareness” through Erykah Badu’s song “Master Teacher” (2008).

Essentially, “being woke” means that one is cognizant of systemic, institutional racism and racial injustice; “staying woke” means that one stays updated on current events, doing reading, and constantly questioning the status quo and racial injustice while striving for racial equity. But it’s more than that as well—it is a call to action—“working woke”.

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Angela Rye, in her interview with Trevor Noah on “The Daily Show” in February 2018, describes this as #WorkWoke. She demands us to ask ourselves, “What do you do after you read? How are you putting what you know into action?” She urges us to consider the ways we are using “woke.” It does not necessarily matter if we are woke or if we are
staying woke, unless we are working toward racial justice; “faith without works is dead” and (@angelarye, Instagram Post, 6 February 2018). The action piece of being “woke” is the important part. The word “woke” has ties to the #BlackLivesMatter movement and racial justice activism, too; it became a direct response to the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014.

As a white woman, however, my use of “woke” has dangers of cultural appropriation. Amanda Hess, a white woman and U.S. journalist noted how ‘Woke feels a little bit like Mackelmore rapping in one of his latest tracks about how his whiteness makes his rap music more acceptable to other white people. The conundrum is built in. When white people aspire to get points for consciousness, they walk right into the cross hairs between allyship and appropriation (New York Times, April 2016).

I could not agree with her more. There is a tension here that I, a white woman, am claiming and naming myself “woke” — co-opting a Black word and appropriating a culture that is not mine. Hess (2016) is right, there is a fine line between allyship and appropriation. It is not my place as a white woman to name myself woke. Furthermore, as one of my friends (a Black man) informed me, white folks cannot be woke. We can be aware. But we cannot be woke. Because racism is not a lived reality for us (D. Jones, personal communication, March 2018). And I agree. As a white woman, I don’t know what racism is like from the standpoint of a lived experience; I can be aware of racial injustice, systemic racism, and institutionalized racial oppression—but not woke.

Yet, the tension remained. I have always hated the word “ally” though I had never been able to figure out why. Indeed, when I first wrote an iteration of this story in
summer 2014, immediately following the conclusion of the book clubs, my professor at the time, Dr. Boutte, helped me extensively revise the story to continue to focus on myself so as not to vilify my research partner nor my professor. In an email, I asked her if there was another word to use instead of “ally” because “for some reason, the word rub[bed] me the wrong way” (J. Doyle, personal communication, July 2014). She replied back that she wasn’t sure about another word for ally, that many of her friends did not like it either, and she suggested that I could “perhaps come up with better terminology” (G. Boutte, personal communication, July 2014). At the time, the word “woke” was a couple months away from the public vocabulary via social media. So, I continued to struggle with the term ally—still not yet able to figure out why I was so against it other than I knew some white allies, and most of them didn’t seem as personally invested in racial justice work as I was.

During my early drafts of my dissertation, I went back and forth over and over again on whether or not I wanted to include the word “woke” in my dissertation title. I asked myself why I felt it was necessary—was it just because I liked the alliteration? Did I really need the word to make my point? Or was I just trying to earn brownie points by being one of those “good whites” (Thompson, 2003) who looked cool and knew the lingo? I wrote my way through it, back and forth, back and forth. I tried to remember critical moments in my life where I had been named “woke” by Black folks, trying to figure out why I even named myself with this word anyways.

I remembered a time in 2016 when I had game night at my house with two of my friends (Black women), the guy I was dating at the time (a Black man), and his two friends (also Black men) whom I met for the first time that evening. We were setting up
in my living room to play Taboo, and one of the friends I had just met that evening, started examining my bookshelf. He saw my copy of *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander (2010) as well as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964), amongst a variety of other books, and asked me, “Do you consider yourself woke?” Embarrassed, I answered quickly that the word was not for us (as white folks), but I was knowledgeable, well-read about racial justice work, and engaged in racial justice work in both my personal and private life. I immediately changed the subject. Secretly though, I was proud, because I did consider myself woke, but I was not about to just tell that to a stranger. I felt very strongly that was not my place as a white woman to claim that title. I wonder now, two years later, how my silence that night might have counteracted my goals of racial justice. I wonder what types of productive conversations could have taken place that evening during game night had I not been embarrassed, and instead engaged in conversations with him and my other friends.

Then, I remembered a time in fall 2017 when I talked to my co-chair, Dr. Rhonda Jeffries, about my idea for my dissertation and how I was struggling trying to tell too many stories at once. I had to describe to her over the phone the many tensions that arose from the spring 2014 semester—the tensions of working with people from different epistemological positions, tensions of the resistance to multicultural education in my high school English classroom with a shut-down “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” protest in 2015, tensions of constantly trying to speak truth to power through our published work on the book clubs but feeling like my professor just “didn’t get it” when I would make suggestions to her—Dr. Jeffries named them all tensions of dealing with people who were just not woke! And I replied, “Yasssss!!!! That is exactly it!” Because it described
so perfectly all of my experiences over the last four years. But it was still not my place to use woke.

In communicating with Dr. Allison Anders, my co-chair and CRT professor from 2014, I attempted to problematize the word, stating that I not everything was for us as white people. I realized in communicating with Dr. Anders that I was using “woke” as a distinct rejection of the term “ally”’. Dr. Anders noted how “ally” can be a static identity claim that allows white people to identify as allies irrespective of engagement in social justice work—some white folks claiming ally identity when it suits them, but not all the time. The term “ally” allows white folks to use engagement in racial justice work as a credential for being a fair-weather sailor when they are in certain spaces and places, but they can stop sailing their “white ally” ship at any time. Additionally, I noted that many white “allies” still remain friendly with their white family members and white friends, allowing racism to continue to perpetuate in a variety of dangerous ways.

I offer the term “woke” here as a constant state of being rather than as an identity marker. In explaining why I did not like the term “ally”, Allison responded, “Only white folks, well maybe not only white folks, but a bunch of white folks think [ally is] about an identity marker. And of course we would, because we can move in and out of racial justice work—it does not have to be a state of being for (most) white folks” (A. Anders, personal communication, March 2018) and “woke” does have to be a state of being. I thought she made a compelling argument to explore “woke” in my dissertation, but it was still not my place as a white woman to use “woke” as I understood it.

Because I felt strongly that two white women should not be making the decision of whether or not it was okay for me, as a white woman, to claim myself as “woke” for
my dissertation, I problematized the word within my critical friends circle—Black women and men both inside and outside the academy from all over the country—by sending out emails, texting, and calling them about my intentions with the word, asking for their advice about what it meant for me to be “woke” as a white woman, and if that was even possible. I sent out nearly 30 different emails, sent dozens of texts, and spent hours on the phone and in person deliberately engaging in conversations about the word woke with my friends before claiming it here in my dissertation. In the next section, I acknowledge my friends who engaged in these important conversations with me, and I credit them for helping me to understand the power of the word, as well as the consequences of the word for me as a white woman.

**Critical Conversations on Wokeness**

The first response I got was from an accidental conversation about wokeness with my friend, David, who told me that white people could not be woke. He said that we could be aware, but we could not be woke because racism was just not a lived reality for us. I agreed with him wholeheartedly, but I still did not have another word. I needed to reach out to other people.

My conversations started off small, engaging in text messages with friends, asking them if they could help me figure this out. Then, it grew into a series of emails and dialogues: *What is your opinion on the word “woke” and my use of it as a white woman? Can white folks even be woke? What do you think about my use of the word? What does it mean to be woke / stay woke / work woke?* I received a variety of responses from people I consider family, people I share mutual friends with, my best friends, critical scholars, and
a variety of other folks—all Black men and women. I represent a selection of the responses below, in the order that they were received:

**Leigh:** I love this. Thanks for asking me to help. Knowing you, I think it’s okay to use the term “woke”. I think you can only say this once it’s been bestowed upon you by a Black person. I, thus, bestow this title on you. I do think it’s important that you internalize what this term means and know the most important thing is not just knowing about blatant and systematic racism, but working to breakdown those systems. This is where I think allies fail. I do not think you would be appropriating the term. I do always need even the wokest white people to know they will never FULLY understand Blackness and all of the internal and community struggles that go along with it. Being woke is a full time job. Can’t take a break. Allies take breaks.

**Nikki:** I guess the first thing to address is "woke" in and of itself. For me, woke is starting to turn into a caricature of what it wants to be. Kind of like that who's invited to the cookout phenomenon. At this point, it almost seems as if you aren't actively assaulting Black and Brown babies, you can come get a plate and maybe bring a side (just not macaroni or potato salad). Invitations to cookouts and wokeness are being doled out to any non-person of Color who says "hey stop assaulting those “others.” This is not to discredit your woke induction at all, but instead kind of confirms what you said. It seems like nowadays, anyone who is able to see that there are things that exist in our society that make it harder for people of Color is deemed #woke. Acknowledgement of the violation of basic human rights is most definitely the first step, but I think for a lot of people (Black, white, Brown and otherwise) it just kind of stops there. Saying racism is bad is relatively easy—or at least it should be (though if it were I suppose more people
would do it and we wouldn't be having this critical dinner of fried chicken and watermelon Kool Aid)—but the follow through of actively and purposefully working to solve problems is not, which is where true wokeness lies.

When it comes to working woke, some people don't know how, other's deep down truly don't care, and worse yet, as you have discovered, some honestly think they are part of the solution all the while becoming a major part of the problem. This is where we see Becky posting online: Being #woke is super on trend right now, ya know! Which is why I am so glad I can be here to teach these unfortunate, dirty, Title I kids (at least until my student loans are forgiven), but really I don't see why Tyrone's mom keeps sending him to school like this. #myblackson #helovesmebcIfeedhim #ididntknowhecouldtan #neverminditwasjustdirt #caneveryoneoninstagramseemehelpingallthesepoors #iamagoodperson #praisethelordIdontlivearoundhere #clutchyourpurse #justkidding #nobutreallydontbringyourbagaroundthesesekids

I do feel like woke more accurately describes the passion and intensity *wink wink* that you have for social issues. We all know the types of “allies” that claim to help, but really do not. For contrast reasons, let’s call her Kathy. Kathy is an ally. She had a Black roommate in undergrad and attends all the marches. She can rattle off some facts (that may or may not be a little outdated), but her heart is in the right place. She is down for the cause and will bring delicious banana bread to the company potluck. Now, white Jen? She woke. White Jen definitely gonna get an invitation to the cookout, probably before I do AND we can leave her unattended. Ally is nice. Helpful. Peaceful. Careful. Safe. Slightly distant? Safely disconnected? Passive. Woke is real life. Intense. Dirty. Gritty. Urban. Grammatically jarring. Militant? Scary? Woke.
Do I think white people are allowed to be woke? Sure, why not? As long as they are doing woke work. I think you can feel woke work; it's a calling that cannot be forced. Real woke work can also be seen in others. I think when a mission really clicks with someone you can just tell, it's not for show it is just who they are and what they are about. They are constantly educating themselves as well because they know they will never really know everything. I get the whole “you will always technically be a bystander” perspective, but there are plenty of willfully ignorant Black folks running rampant out in these streets. After getting to know you, I believe that you are woke, especially in its original form. You are this person professionally and personally. Formally and casually. But there will most assuredly be someone who initially questions why this white woman she doesn’t really know is yelling about little Black kids on a random Tuesday night *wink wink part two*. Your self-awareness only contributes to the true nature of your wokeness. You do not falter or back down. And while relenting would be easy, your determination to keep pushing for these random Black and Brown kids that do not belong to you goes to show like, oh dang, she really means this.

The fact that you are able to acknowledge and address what could be valid doubts is a large part of the battle. That ability also plays a role in your woke work. We can wokely be doing the same thing, but you will just have to continue to check yourself to make sure you are in it for the right reasons and responding to your population in the right way. Knowing all the same things, we will always have a slightly different perspective. And your blonde hair and beige skin will 100% give rise to times when you do not know best. Ultimately, I think constant self-evaluation is something everyone needs to commit to. Am I in this for Jesus points or for real change? You seem to have a
plan to address your hesitations which again just feeds into your full level of understanding and willingness to be called out. And those kids you are yelling about during a casual evening amongst friends are going to be better off for it.

#whitesuggestedblackapproved

**B.J.:** First of all, you know me, and you know I hate that word. But I get where you are going with this. I think it’s awesome and rad as fuck. So to me, being woke means that you are able to see past manipulation and lies, and you are educated on history. I ain’t talking about any of that institutionalized bullshit neither. Real history. I stay educated, always evolving, and always learning, always disrupting that colonizing mindset and that colonizer history. Everyone thinks I don’t know what the fuck I be talking about because I ain’t graduate college and they quick to dismiss me, but they be the same ones who conditioned into this colonizing frame of mind. They don’t know their past. Staying woke means you know your history (real history), know how the world works, know who you are, know how the system works, and know that the system was designed this way. The system is so powerful, it’s so easy to get caught up in that shit, especially here in DC. So you gotta work constantly to educate and re-educate yourself to not get caught up in that bullshit at all. That’s how you stay woke.

For you, as a white woman and a queen, I honestly don’t recommend you say you’re the “woke white girl” like it’s a thing. I know you don’t, because we go way back, but I know you have Black “friends” from around here who we been known for years, who aren’t smart like me, and who probably pump you up with it. Not all of them. But you already know who I’m talking about. They are the ones who introduce you as the cool, woke white friend, like it’s offensive. You know, like they call me the smart, artsy
Black guy. I’m BJ. And that fact that they introduce me like that is mad offensive. Same goes for you as a “woke” white woman. You’re Jen. Always have been and always will be. That’s why we family. They should never introduce you in that manner. They should just say oh, this is Jen. And right away, people will know, when Jen speaks, how she’s handling herself, and how she’s moving, that she’s woke. She moves in way that she’s casting out her privilege. She understands that she has privilege and she always deals with it. She already knows what it is, and everyone else around her picks up on those vibes. So do I think you should use the word? Fuck no. I don’t think you should want to. What’s understood don’t ever have to be said. You need to check your “woke” Black friends who introduce you like that or talk to you in that manner, too, cuz we do the same shit to each other that the oppressor do to us. Aight girl. Keep it locked in and build. Stay tunnel visioned on your goal. Peace.

**Briana:** In my opinion, wokeness in fact a state of being, thinking, living, etc. that manifests itself in all areas of your life—and not just in the sense of dealing with issues of racial justice, but even in the way we treat ourselves and nurture our own minds, bodies, and souls. I think you can be woke and not just aware, but regardless of how you think and how live, you are still a white woman and therefore you don’t live the reality that I as a Black woman (or any other minority for that matter) do every day. Being woke for you might mean something different than it does for me. But you can certainly be woke!

**Kamelah:** Woke is a state of being; it’s having both the knowledge of racial justice issues/systems, and the courage to speak up about them. I think an ally is someone who decides to align with the movement but can exit at any time. I envision allies like
double dutch, standing on the side contemplating when to "jump in", then jumping in and going hard for a while, or maybe hitting the ropes and their turn is over before it really got started, or maybe sometimes being the one jumping/turning/twisting/etc. and putting on a good show, but, at the end of the day, allies can always hop on out and stand on the side again. A woke white person lives this out daily and there is not option to "hop in or hop out". This wokeness is life!

Yes, there is such thing as a WOKE white person, and I strongly push against the thought that white people can't be woke. Collaboration is huge in this fight and that includes our brothers and sisters from white, Latinx, Asian, Brown, purple, green, etc. ALL backgrounds. This is fight against evil, and it will take ALL of us to be engaged and fight for equality because, real talk, in the words of Fannie Lou Hammer, "And not only changes for the black man, and only changes for the black woman, but the changes we have to have in this country are going to be for liberation of all people—because nobody's free until everybody's free." I think you are MAD woke and it’s the perfect definition for your purpose. You know that nobody is free until everybody is free! To be intentional in this movement you have to be woke, and more than just aware, and you are! I honestly feel like you should feel more than free to describe yourself as “woke” as a white woman dedicated to the racial justice movement in all areas of your life. While you may not have ever personally experienced these racial injustices you're woke to know that they exist and how harmful/destructive they are, while also constantly working to disrupt these systems.

Also, there is a spiritual component that always comes to mind: Galatians 6:2: (NIV) “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in sin, you who live by the spirit should
restore that person gently, but watch yourselves or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the Law of Christ.” Intentionally taking on the burdens of this battle is literally committing to doing God’s work. Our God is a God of peace, love, and justice and as a woke white woman you are demonstrating all three! I truly believe this is your divine calling, which is blessing but a lot of WORK. Stay strong, keep your heart in the right place and walk confidently knowing you are loved and you can DO ALL THINGS (aka unapologetically fight for racial justice and Black rights as a white woman) Through Christ who Strengthens You and Knows Your Heart! Keep sailing with yo WOKE ass ;)

**Nadia:** I don’t think that everyone that uses the word woke is actually woke, Black or white. You naming yourself as a woke white woman is a huge undertaking because it is a state of being. You have to live this shit in everything you do, which is hard for anyone. What I can say about it though, is that you’ve been woke longer than many Black people I know. You been woke before woke was a thing. Your work has been woke since before it became a popular term. As someone who has known you for 10+ years, you are woke. Stay woke my white sista!

**Camille:** When you started off the conversation with woke, my first, gut reaction was to raise an inquisitive eyebrow. However, knowing you, your work, and your background for the last 12 years, I don't take offense. I think any hesitation or resistance to allow white people to be called "woke" comes from Black people’s exhaustion from feeling like "we" can't have anything that's "ours," and when we do, it's inevitable that other races will misappropriate its meaning or use for their own selfish gain (whether it's
financially, culturally or otherwise). I do think white folks can be woke but it's harder for them to do so because, as you said, it is always a choice to jump in and out of.

I'd define an ally and woke white person similar to how you did - an ally is someone who sympathizes with the cause, sides with people of color and generally believes that the systemic issues that exist are valid and real. Allies won't necessarily go out of their way to fight for causes but they will, at their convenience, stand up against wrongdoings. An ally doesn't ruffle feathers with their conservative family and friends. I wouldn't trust an ally to show up to demonstrations, but rather applaud the people who did. A woke white person, on the other hand, is someone who isn't afraid to take the cause on as their own. They will willingly challenge the beliefs of their family and friends and show up, physically and otherwise, when necessary.

To "be woke" to me can, to a degree, be thought of similarly to awareness. Being woke means you have actively pursued a higher level of consciousness that comes about as a result of research and knowledge seeking beyond what mainstream media and what we're taught in educational institutions. It is an understanding of the underlying issues, and more importantly the root of the issues, among people of color with some degree of understanding of what it will take to improve these issues. "Staying woke" is an on-going journey that requires continually educating oneself in effort to not only be knowledgeable for self but also to share that knowledge and understanding with other Black people in effort to improve the Black community as a whole. "Working woke" is, of course, consistently taking actions to better the future of the Black community politically, socially, economically and spiritually.
Knowing you, I know you are woke and that you engage in woke work, but I caution you in the ways you choose to use this word.

**Nate:** You ask some very powerful questions that I need to grapple with. I will have to get back with you later. I will give some initial texting responses now, although not my formal response. As it stands, I do believe white people can be woke; however, I do agree it is different from Black woke. I would love to hear your juxtaposition of those concepts. That would be a hot paper. I see you as woke, but I don’t think you have the power to name yourself as such. I think Black folks or other oppressed groups can label you as such. I see white woke as being or becoming aware of your complicity in white supremacy and anti-Blackness and working hard to do something about it whereas Black woke as so much to do with recognizing his/her oppression and doing something about it.

**Woke Whiteness Work**

Following deliberate conversations with my critical friends, I take up the word “woke” here in this dissertation for argumentative purposes. I am uncomfortable doing so, but no other words seem to work. I am open to suggestions of a word without dangers of cultural appropriation. While I take up the word woke here, it is important to recognize that my use of the term “woke” is entirely different than what the term “woke” means for a person of Color. As my friend David told me, I can be aware, I can be awake, but I cannot be woke in the same ways. It will always mean something different to me as a white person who always benefits from racism and must work daily to practice anti-racism. I offer the definition here of “woke whiteness work” as a rejection of the idea of allyship and as a clear distinction from what it means to be woke, stay woke, and work woke as a person of Color. I do not wish to co-opt the term nor denote the same
meanings. Vital to woke whiteness work is an understanding that the ways in which the lived experiences and lived realities navigating oppression as a person of Color will never be something white folks can fully comprehend. I use the term woke here as a perpetual state of being rather than an identity that one can take on and off.

As a white person, however, I do understand that part of my white privilege is that I can, at any time, decide to take off this identity. My argument here is that woke whiteness work, as I am defining it here, can never be separated from the self. It is a state of being, every day, all day, no vacations, no days off, no rest for the weary, not an option to discard. This is where the work part of woke whiteness comes in. There must always be action. Woke whiteness work is more than just a label in the pursuit of racial justice—it is a feeling; a sense of clarity running through your veins that is felt in your bones; a dedication to #BlackLivesMatter; an inseparable way of living; an unbroken state of being; a constant disruption of white supremacy and white hegemony; an authenticity; a complete and brutal honesty with self about white terrorism, white oppression, and white violence; and unapologetic critique of self and whiteness; an ownership of complicity in racism; an always-working-on-my-racisms daily; a respect of culture that is not yours; an educating yourself on real white culture as well as Black culture, throughout history; a rejection of white morality; a respect and love for all of humanity; a realness; an intensity; a passion; a self-love in an unselfish way; a calling; a spirituality; a constant decentering of whiteness; a selfless dedication to the fight for racial justice; a collective action; an embodiment of the virtue of mudita; an understanding of Crenshaw’s intersectionality (1993) as she intended it; and understanding that as white folks we will never know what it is like to experience racial oppression; an ownership of actions and
non-actions; a rejection of “either/or”; a take up of “both/and”; a dedication to womanism; a rejection of white patriarchy and heterocisnormativity; a nurturing of self in mind, body, and soul; an always listening; an always-informed-by-people-of-Color mindset; an education of Black history and disruption of white historical majoritarian narratives; an always speaking back against white supremacy; an always-up-to-date on current events; an always learning; an always fighting; an always growing; an always working; an always humbling; an always-cautious-of-appropriation; always working; and most importantly, it is NEVER for bragging rights. All at the same time.

Wokeness manifests itself in all areas and aspects of your life, from the way you treat yourself, the way you treat others, who you surround yourself with, and how you tend to your mind, body, spirit, and soul. Wokeness is an embodiment and heightened awareness that permeates all aspects of life. It allows you to see, clearly, the power structures of oppression and understand how they are operating within your own mind, within others around you, and within systems and institutions. Once you are woke, you can no longer sleep again, for even when you sleep, you will dream in wokeness.

Woke whiteness work is a complete rejection of “either/or” (Western/Eurocentric, white) ideals and instead exists outside of oppositional binaries (Crenshaw, 1995), while at the very same time demanding an acknowledgment that it will be positioned inside these binaries as a product of white supremacy. It is an understanding of Crenshaw’s (1993) intentionality of intersectionality, an understanding of the many ways in which identities intersect as pertains to race, gender, class, etc. and allow for oppression to be experienced in varying ways amongst various individuals at the intersections of identity. Crenshaw (1993) spoke about how she, as a Black woman, was marginalized in a variety
of different ways that were different from her Black male counterparts—experiencing both racism along with Black men, and also sexism from Black men, causing her to experience racism in a completely different way than Black men; and she also experienced both racism from white women and sexism from white men, causing her to experience sexism in a completely different way than white women. Her marginalization meant that her experience with racism looked/felt/was different from that of Black men and her experience with sexism especially looked/felt/was completely and entirely different from that of white women (or any other women).

Woke whiteness work as a term is a sharp distinction from what it means to be just a plain white woman engaged in racial justice work. There are plenty of white women engaged in racial justice work who are not even allies and never stand up or disrupt white supremacy—in which case, they are just claiming racial justice work but are not actually engaged in it. Likewise, it is a sharp distinction from what it means to be a white woman ally engaged in racial justice work. Ally an identity that can come on and off. Conversely, what I speak about here is personifying and living a woke whiteness work embodied identity that can never be separated from self that involves being woke, staying woke, and working woke. It is a perpetual state of being and a constant conscious awareness of racial injustice (being woke) that maintains a constant dedication to sustaining the necessary knowledge surrounding current and historical issues of racial injustice while maintaining a constant decentering of whiteness (staying woke). Woke whiteness work embodies all of those aspects of being and staying woke, while also maintaining a constant fight in the cause for racial justice, a constant career and lifetime
dedication of waking up other white folks everywhere, and a constant devotion to eradicating racism and white supremacy, in all areas of one’s life (working woke).

Wokeness is always constant. It is not something you get to decide one day to wake up and be. It will be a feeling that you’ve felt but have not been able to name. Wokeness happens to you over time as you reject fairy tale notions of the world and begin to see it for what it really is: power and white hegemony, patriarchy, and heterocisnornativity circulating and permeating all aspects of life in self, individuals, cultural and societal values and expectations, institutions, and systems. Once you are woke, you can no longer live in the dream world of ignorance and bliss. You realize you never were sunbathing on the beach like you thought. You are awake for good. There is never an opportunity to go back to sleep. Once you are woke, you realize that you have been failing to navigate the angry waters of racism your entire life, because you were blissfully ignorant to the fact that you were even out on the angry ocean of white hegemony. Once you are woke, it is your duty, as Angela Rye said, to work woke, which includes taking care of yourself as well.

An Open Letter About Wokeness as a White Woman

Thank you to the two women, Dr. Jeffries and Kourtney, who named me woke before I ever claimed it—I know what an honor and privilege that is as a white woman. Also, thank you specifically to the individuals of Color—(in no specific order) Kamelah, Lamar, Nate, Dalisha, BJ, Camille, Nikki, Kourtney, Holly, Leigh, Briana, Poppy, April, Shonte, Malcolm, Whitney, Kami, Jacques, Nadia, Kevin, Kendrick, Devair, Solomon, Kala, David, Kala, Tasha, Melonna, JaMill (I know I’m forgetting people, I’m sorry)—critical friends both in and outside the academy, whom engaged with me in critical and
deliberate dialogues about racism, power, and privilege over the course of the last four years (and some for 15+ years now) and helped me navigate the tensions inherent in racial justice work as a white woman.

To all of my sisters and brothers of Color, I know there is power in this word, in this title, and that with great power there comes even greater responsibility. I promise to never claim this for bragging rights, to never turn this into a hashtag, to always listen, and to always do my very best to “work woke” in order to be worthy of this honor. I hope you will see through this work that I am “ride or die”, no questions asked, with this work—but also know that I did not write this dissertation just to prove my #rideordie commitment, which would be counterproductive to the collective goals in the pursuit of racial justice. I welcome your feedback, insights, and continued wisdom as you see fit. I also encourage suggestions for a replacement word “woke.
PROLOGUE TO THE BOOK CLUB

I interviewed my mom for a paper I was writing in undergrad one time and she told me that life was not about the destination for her, it was about the journey. Of course, I know now that is cliché, found on magnets and bumper stickers, but at the time I thought it was the most profound thing she had ever said. And I learned how to trust my journey. This dissertation and doctoral degree was a journey I never thought I would embark upon. Education really was a journey I never thought I would embark upon. Life in the academy was a journey I never imagined I would embark upon. This woke whiteness work is a journey I never thought I would embark upon. But it’s a journey I’m on and that I’m thankful for. It's my journey. It always has been. I was destined for this. I was born to do this. Let’s get sailing!

Email Exchange ~ Special Invitation

From: Dr. Hendrickson

Subject: doc seminar spring

Date: Wed, Sep 11, 2013 at 12:46 PM

To: Jennifer Doyle (and 8 others—3 of which ended up in the course)

I wanted you all to know that I will be teaching a doc seminar around adolescent literacies in the spring semester.

Some of the time will be spent working with readers at JDC, conducting collaborative research, and some of the time will be distance :)
I haven’t had time in my schedule to teach a doc course in a long while (and can’t say when I will be able to again)—

It’s also rare to have a focus on adolescent literacies.

So hope to see you there!

From: Jennifer Doyle

Subject: Re: literacy doc seminar spring

Date: Tue, Oct 15, 2013 at 4:09 PM

To: Dr. Hendrickson

Yay! Count me in! :)

Personal Journal Entry ~ October 21, 2013

@ 2:32 AM (technically 10/22/13)

I don’t miss my mom every day, but I miss her on Mondays when I drive home and want to call her.

She’s gone.

I miss her.

It’s been over four months now.

Most days I’m good. Very good. I accomplish wonderful things.

I’m a good friend. I’m a good person. I’m a good teacher.

But, now that the holidays are coming up, I fear I may fall apart. They will be without my mommy. My sweet and loving mommy. Thanksgiving and Christmas will come and go with no time with mommy. Never again will I spend the holidays with my mommy.

I knew it would be hard, but I didn’t think it would be this hard.

I MISS HER SO MUCH IT HURTS.
She always knew what to say to me when I was lost or confused about life. Is this what my life is supposed to be? What if it’s not? I just want to run away or immerse myself in it deeply.

I have been living day by day and not thinking about the consequences. I do great at work, and I look so good on paper! Everyone always tells me how proud they are of me for being in the doc program and teaching and owning a house and how my mother would be so proud.

But I’m not proud.

I just want my mommy to hold me and tell me everything is going to be alright but she can’t and she never will again and that’s such a hard fact to face. That’s why I haven’t faced it at all. Not even a little bit.

I refuse to accept it.

I keep holding on to her and there’s nothing to hold on to.

Just things and memories.

I just threw myself into work, doing Pink Out and teaching my babies (my high schoolers) and this online class for the doc program—all while I’m out here doing dumb shit like getting drunk on the weekends and partying too much. I’m so intense.

I work so hard and I play so hard. Why is there no in between?

Ugh I MISS MY MOMMY!

She would have told me if what I was doing was okay or not.

No she wouldn’t have. But I could have asked and talked to her about it.
I had all these plans for you mommy!! I was supposed to move home after a while. We were supposed to have dinner at least one night a week. I was going to pop in and out of your house because I lived not too far away.

You were supposed to help me grow into the young woman you wanted me to be.

You were supposed to walk me down the aisle.

You were supposed to go wedding dress shopping with me.

You were supposed to help me when I was pregnant.

You were supposed to give me advice about raising a child.

You were supposed to love me forever until I died. Not the other way around.

I know that’s selfish, but I don’t know how I am supposed to function without you mommy. I don’t know how to live. I don’t know how to be myself. You were always the one person I could be myself around. You never judged me, at least not to my face. You always loved me for who I was. I always pretended around everyone else. I tried to be the perfect daughter to my dad when I should have been the perfect daughter to you… but you always treated me as if I were the perfect daughter, even when I was less than perfect. You always accepted me for who I was. No one else I have ever known has ever loved me like you have, and I know no one else will. Perhaps that is the hardest part about losing you. I am loved. This I know. But no one loves me like you loved me mommy.
I make it so difficult to love me. Solomon is awful at comforting me when I am like this. I know he’s mad at me for being like this because it’s not fun for him. But that’s why I don’t call or text him about this stuff anymore. I know he’s mad at me and when I tell him about all of this he just gets more mad and then I get mad that he doesn’t react the way I want him to & everything is awful right now. I don’t have anyone to tell me it will be okay. I know it will be okay but sometimes when I’m freaking out, I just need to fucking hear that shit. Telling me things I already know is lecturing me.

What am I supposed to do?!?

I just want my mommy to tell me what I’m supposed to do.

I just want to hug her and know that no matter what, I will be okay.

I know I will be, but I am concerned.

What am I doing?

Where am I going?

Who am I going there with?

Alone? Together?

I love Solomon but I am so lost right now.

He can’t help me find myself but I never want to lose him. I love him so much.

I don’t know what to do to find myself.

I don’t know how to find myself with another person.

My identity isn’t his identity of me. I allow him to define me. He doesn’t mean to do this, and I don’t mean to allow it. It just happens without me knowing.

I feel like there are so many different sides of me.
The Jen my friends know.

The Jen I am when I am with Solomon.

Teacher Jen (Ms. Doyle).

The Jennifer my dad knows.

The even more proper Jennifer my grandmother knows.

My mommy was the only one who ever let me be all of me all the time and just loved me anyways.

The only place I feel good at right now is with school and my teaching.

But Solomon says I’m being extra there too.

I’m always too much. Too extra.

Dr. Hendrickson asked me to be part of her work at JDC next semester and Lamar suggested I take CRT. It seems like so much. I already told Hendrickson I would do it though, and I registered for the classes. It will be good for me to have a goal to work towards. I was really excited when she asked me personally. Maybe it will be good to be in her class again. I have so much other stuff going on next semester too though.

Relay for Life.

Trips planned.

I don’t even know who I am right now! I’m so lost without my mommy.

Everything is different in such a bad way and it will never be the same again.

I am having trouble living with that knowledge. I have this deep sadness in my heart & I cannot escape it. It will never go away. It will always be with me.
I need to figure this all out. Help me mommy. Guide me. Please. I love you.

**Retrospective Reflections ~ March 2018**

At the time of the above reflection, in October 2013, I was in the beginning of my third year teaching English at Nottoway High School as part of their Freshman Academy. Nottoway is a small, rural “city” in South Carolina, and Nottoway High School is one of two high schools in the entire county. It is unofficially considered the “Black” school in the district. Although white students made up roughly 25% of the population, the majority of white students were enrolled in all-honors classes (I later found out that a civil rights case was brought against the school the year before I arrived concerning these racial disparities).

I lived 30 miles away from the school, in Columbia, and commuted to and from work each day, up and down interstate 26. Because I did not teach honors classes, the majority of my students were Black, with a few Latinx students in each class and no more than 10 white students total each year, across all five of my classes. I taught a Freshman Focus class for an hour each morning which was made up of all girls. The Freshman Focus classes were divided up by gender and then again by reading scores based on their MAP test scores, a standardized test to determine reading comprehension. My Freshman Focus girls each year were the girls with the lowest reading scores on their MAP tests. My assistant principal deliberately placed them with me because I taught English and because I knew how to develop relationships and rapport with “those” girls. In the 2013-2014 school year, I had fifteen girls, all Black. We focused on developing reading skills, how to build and maintain positive relationships, “girl problems”, and study skills.
The rest of my classes—four sections of English I CP (College Prep, non-honors)—also were made up of primarily Black students. In my classes, I taught thematic units surrounding culturally relevant novels and often taught “untold history” to my students, using *The People’s History of the United States* by Howard Zinn (2003) and *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* by James W. Loewen (2007) as a guide. We began each year with a unit on identity, surrounding the young adult novel, *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes (2001), a story of an English classroom in the Bronx, filled with multiple culturally and linguistically diverse voices of students written in prose and open-mic style poetry. I also taught Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, using literature circles with young adult, culturally relevant novels that tied in thematically to complement the play and help the students bridge the gap between Elizabethan English and current-day contexts?. At the end of second quarter each year, I taught *Nothing But the Truth: A Documentary Novel* by Avi (1992), a story of the subjectivity of truth and how while individual statements can be true, they can inaccurately represent the truth when they are incomplete. Through this unit, I taught my students how to critically analyze and question the news, television, social media, and the “facts” presented in school and the curriculum.

During the third quarter each year, I taught a social justice unit surrounding the Civil Rights Movement, using the young adult novel, *Fire from the Rock* by Sharon Draper (2007), which is a historical fiction book about the integration of Little Rock’s Central High School. We extensively learned about Civil Rights history during this unit and tied it into present-day issues of social and racial justice. At the conclusion of the unit, the students completed a social justice project where they were asked to promote
social justice outside class. In the previous years, I had also taught *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007) surrounding the theme of “One of Many” to talk about collective struggle and the power of collective efforts in combatting issues of race and racism, as well as the power of education in overcoming adversity. However, a parent the year before attempted to have the book banned from not only my classroom but also libraries across the district. My principal defended me, and although the book was not banned, I was strongly discouraged from using the text again that school year.

During my time at Nottoway High School, I also coached the swim team (though not in 2013 because of my mother’s death), coordinated October’s breast cancer awareness month activities that culminated in the final “Pink Out” football game each October, and helped organize “Relay For Life,” a cancer event for our entire county which was held at Nottoway High School each spring. I also served on the Principal’s Advisory Committee (PAC), the Superintendent’s Teacher Advisory Council (STAC), and unofficially worked with the cheerleaders as my sister-friend, Tasha, was the cheer coach. I spent a majority of time and my life in Nottoway while working there.

Also, at the time of the reflection above, I was coming up on my three-year anniversary with my (now ex)boyfriend, Solomon, a self-identified Black man from Ohio who is a first-generation Guyanese American in his family. Both of his parents immigrated from Guyana in 1985, just a few years before he and his brother were born. Solomon was born in and grew up in Ohio and moved down to South Carolina with his parents his sophomore year of college when they both accepted engineering jobs at a company in Lexington, SC. We met at USC, his sophomore year of college and my
senior year. He was two years younger than me. His brother and I were the same age. When I was not in Nottoway or with people I knew from Nottoway, I was usually hanging out with Solomon and his family at his parents’ house. I was particularly close with his mother.

In the above reflection, I note how I felt like there were many different sides of me. The Jen my friends knew—in predominantly Black spaces around my predominantly Black friends back home in DC/NoVA. The Jen I was when I was with Solomon—also in predominantly Black spaces (but he had ideas of how I should act as a woman in general and as his girlfriend in particular). Teacher Jen (Ms. Doyle)—also in predominantly Black spaces in Nottoway. In all of these spaces, I always felt most comfortable being myself with my friends back home. Indeed, my best friend, Nadia, a Black woman, described me in my natural state of being back home in DC/NoVA as “Jen on Ten” (to describe my energy, excitement, and intensity) versus “Jen on Two” (which is how she described the watered-down version of me I was when I was around Solomon in South Carolina). Teacher Jen (Ms. Doyle) was the same as “Jen on Ten” from back home, just in a teacherly, professional way. All of these states of being were in predominantly Black spaces and were places where I felt like I did not have to perform whiteness as smartness, as pretending, as a constant state of anxiety trying to impress others. I felt free. If anything, I attempted to distance myself from whiteness and its ties to white supremacy—all while acknowledge that I am always white and always perform whiteness in any context. I was always keenly aware of my presence as the “token white girl” to varying degrees in these contexts, however. I knew I did not blend in outwardly, yet never felt out of place either.
I also spoke about the Jennifer my dad knew—where I performed working-middle-class whiteness. His large, Irish-Catholic family, The Doyles (where I am one of 28 first cousins), are all working-middle-class mostly with hard-labor jobs in construction if you are male, or nursing/education if you are female. But the women also do construction and labor jobs at home as well. The regular Jennifer I am around the rest of my father’s family performs this working-middle-class whiteness, but for most of my life and even sometimes presently, I was always a silent, scared, anxious version of this Jennifer around my father.

Then, there was the even more proper Jennifer my grandmother knew at the time, where I performed owning-class whiteness. This was corporate whiteness, business whiteness, and rich-people whiteness. And this whiteness also has ties to white patriarchy. It was not the whiteness my mother and I performed, existing exclusively outside patriarchy in our home life. We were outcasts in the family and had to “play the game” of whiteness around my grandparents at work, or on vacations, deferring to my grandparents’ authority, but we did what we wanted when it was just us. My mother was always aware of and made comments about how we were treated because we existed with no male influence. We always got seated in terrible places at restaurants, we were excluded from family events, she was excluded from the family company, working there for my grandparents and uncle rather than with them, and we constantly got bamboozled at car repair shops or when traveling. Outside this though, in our own little world at our house, we were free to act and do as we wished. There were strict rules to follow, but they were my mother’s rules and were not the rules any man put into place for us. Indeed,
she often taught me to question the power of men and taught me from a very young age
that as women, we could do anything men could do, oftentimes better.

Whenever we were around my grandparents, however, I learned from my mother
at a very young age that there were certain ways to act. Particularly, there were certain
proper ways to act in front of my grandmother, to impress her. (For more on this, see the
“Free, White, and 21” section of Chapter Three.) I can see now that my grandmother was
also acting in certain ways under white, heterocis patriarchal systems of oppression. That
was only when we were at work though, in front of my grandparents. When they left the
office building or when it was just us along in her office, my mother and I existed on our
own. Outside of them. Yet, inextricably intertwined with them because they were our
source of income. So, we had to act “right” in front of them. I hardly knew my
grandparents as anything other than my boss when I was growing up, so there were
always ways to perform around them, performances of whiteness. My mother, however,
was always the only person in my life who always allowed me to be all of myself, all the
time. All silly, all excitement, all emotion, all nerdy, all girly, all Black friends, all little-
girl-who-sleeps-with-stuffed-animals (in her 20s), all writer, all alone in my head, all
reader, all hip-hop music lover, all crazy cat lady, all party-girl, all wild, all intensity, all
me.

I also spoke in my reflection from Ms. Weston’s class on how in my senior year
of undergrad I felt the need to perform whiteness in a distinct way in order to be
successful in my educational career. It was the beginning of what I felt like was a
separation between regular Jen and teacher Jen, which created tension for me through the
MT program. I brought this tension and these feelings with me into my first-year teaching
at Nottoway (2011-2012). However, it wasn’t until I began working in Nottoway—where the majority of my students were Black, my work-best-friend/older sister (Tasha, guidance counselor, 6 years older than me) was Black, my school-mom (Mrs. Senn, front-desk) was Black, my assistant principal was Black, my principal was Black, and our superintendent was Black—that I felt the tension begin to resolve itself between having to perform whiteness in order to be successful in education and being authentically myself.

There were plenty of white folks in Nottoway (more so than Black folks), but I found them to be incredibly “nice” southern racists who said, “Bless your heart,” as they smiled, when they really wanted to say “fuck you.” I found the ways they spoke about the children to be offensive, always saying how “Our kids [Black students] can’t do that” during professional developments meant to improve the academic achievement of our students.

I hated them, and I openly distanced myself from them as I became closer to Tasha and Mrs. Senn in particular. The white teachers in Nottoway also openly distanced themselves from me as I became closer to Tasha. When I first started teaching there, they used to invite me to drink with them before football games, but after a couple months into my first year teaching, when I started becoming close with Tasha, they became silent when I walked into the faculty lounge. But I didn’t care. I liked that I didn’t have to pretend with them anymore. I didn’t like them. They didn’t like me. I knew the difference in the reasoning why. They hated Tasha and me. We hated them, because they were racist. They hated us, because they were racist. Or jealous. Or probably a mixture of the two. It was not all of the white teachers at the school, and indeed there were a significant
amount of white teachers at NHS that were loving, amazing people, but one white teacher I worked with in particular, Helene (pseudonym), along with her “crew” of 4-5 other white teachers, are those to whom I am specifically referring when I talk about the “white teachers” collectively at Nottoway. Again, please note that I am not referring to all of the white teachers at Nottoway, just these white teachers.

Tasha’s office was directly across the hall from my room, and we always stood next to one another during class changes. We always had so much fun together at work, laughing with the kids—who actually listened to us and respected us because we respected them as well. We were inseparable at work and if you saw Ms. Doyle you also saw Ms. Simon—we were always walking up to the main office together, taking long walks outside during my planning period to talk about life problems, eating lunch together, running errands around the school together, going to happy hours and the mall after work, attending all of the games, and always helping with things around the school.

We always joked about how the rest of the white teachers on our hall hated “Salt & Pepper” and the students would always ask, “Are you and Ms. Simon best friends?”, because she was always popping into my classroom and they would always see us together in the halls or in the main office talking to Mrs. Senn. But we were more than just best friends. We became sisters.

At the same time, I watched my mother die from cancer over the course of my first two years teaching. I was told that the good thing about being orphaned was that you got to pick your own family. Mrs. Senn especially welcomed both me and Tasha into her family (Tasha’s family lived in a couple hours away), as she had daughters who were my age and Tasha’s age with whom we also hung out. At the time of this reflection, during
my third year of teaching (2013-2014), I was dealing with (or not dealing with) the recent loss of my mother. We also had a new assistant principal join us that year, Mrs. JJ (also a Black woman). Mrs. Senn, Tasha, and I all became very close over the course of those three years, and we instantly became close with Mrs. JJ as well that year (2013-2014).

We have remained close throughout the years since, even though I left Nottoway after four years at the end of 2015. Tasha moved to New Jersey at the end of 2014. Throughout the years though, I’ve attended Mrs. Senn’s family birthday dinners, stood as a bridesmaid at Tasha’s wedding, joined Tasha in celebrating her baby shower, and got drinks with Mrs. JJ at Chili’s. Indeed, I just saw Mrs. JJ, Mrs. Senn, and Tasha at the state championship basketball game a few weekends ago (February 2018), and we all went out to eat afterwards, laughing and joking and picking back up like we never left one another. We are all still family.

My experience working with Black educators, students, parents, and families in Nottoway felt like a return to self after years in South Carolina feeling like I had to perform whiteness in particular ways while at USC and in the South generally. Not that I was Black or identified as Black by any means, but that I felt like I had, for the very first time in my seven years in South Carolina, close friends and family in South Carolina. My close friends and their families back home in DC/NoVA were almost exclusively Black, but I had never felt as though I had close friends in South Carolina aside from Stephanie, a white woman. It was not that I necessarily chose exclusively Black people to surround myself with, but it was that I felt like Tasha and Mrs. Senn were my family. It was the first time I actually felt like South Carolina was “home” rather than NoVA. Part of this was due to the loss of my mother and the figurative and literal loss of home that
accompanied her loss. Part of it was due to the fact that my life no longer revolved around Solomon.

Through my close friendship with Tasha, my experience in Nottoway became a meshing of my professional life and my personal life, as we often went out to happy hours with other Black faculty and staff members and partied on the weekends in many Black spaces around Columbia. Being friends with Tasha felt like my life back home in DC/NoVA. It felt like me. It was a return to self, but that self was still white, always white. Ever since undergrad at USC, where I learned several lessons the hard way about how very real segregation was at USC and in Columbia in general, I felt most white in South Carolina. My close circle of girlfriends back home were all Black, as was our larger circle that included male friends, but I found it incredibly difficult to make friends with Black women at USC.

My first week of school freshman year, I was trying to get in the dorm room and couldn’t figure out how to make my Carolina Card work. There was Black girl sitting on the steps, on the phone, and I was struggling to get in the building. I saw her, and said, “Excuse me, do you know how to make this work?” She paused her phone call to say, “Hold up, let me help this white bitch for a second,” before showing me how to get into the dorm. I was offended at the time, wondering why this stranger felt the need to call me white and why she felt an even stronger need to call me a bitch. However, I told the story later to one of my English professors in undergrad, a Black woman, as an example of how very real segregation is at USC, and that it was upheld by both white students and Black students at USC. She encouraged me to imagine what kind of negative experiences the Black girl had with white girls up until her life at USC, and what the consequences of
those negative experiences could have been for her. Then, she asked me to consider what the consequences of that one negative experience was for me. My consequence was being slightly offended. But it never affected anything else of power in my life. I don’t know her or her life, but my professor urged me to consider how her consequences might have been much more detrimental to her life, her livelihood, and her well-being. She urged me to consider how this girl might have been operating from a place of lived experience with oppression, racism, and discrimination. It was the first time I understood that there was no such thing as reverse racism and that racism was prejudice plus power.

I already had a hard time at USC making friends in general because I did not know a single soul in the whole state of SC when I came down here, and I refused to join a sorority. I found the white sorority girls to be incredibly racist and the Black sorority girls to ignore me all together (plus, I felt strongly that a Black sorority was not my place as a white girl). Indeed, I only had one close friend at USC who was a Black woman, Camille.

While Camille stated that we were best friends freshman year and we lived in the same dorm and ate together at our dorm, she never really claimed me around her Black friends. She would bring me around, but I could tell she was often embarrassed to be the Black girl who brought the white girl to the all-Black spaces like the fraternity and sorority parties, step-shows, probates, campus events, the student union, and Black establishments around Columbia. She would invite me, but when I went with her, she would ignore me, and I would be left standing there while she turned her back to me and talked to all of her other friends. While I was hurt at the time, I can understand now (having remained friends with her to this day and asking her about it) that a lot of her
distancing herself from me came from her attempt to find her space as a Black woman at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Despite this tension, we hung out all the time just the two of us and shared secrets, got to know one another’s mothers when they came to visit (we were both only-children who grew up with just our moms), and we even lived together sophomore year with Stephanie, a white girl with whom I had a complicated “best friendship” with in college.

I met Stephanie freshman year after a white girl I knew from class, with whom I often went to the library, told me I reminded her of her friend Stephanie because Stephanie also had a Black boyfriend (I was still dating my ex from back home during my first semester of college) and listened to “all that rap music crap.” The girl introduced Stephanie and me, and we instantly clicked. We grew to be very close and we ended up living together after that for two years.

Our friendship became complicated as we ended up spending every minute of every day together, blurring the lines of friendship. But Stephanie vehemently claimed that she didn’t like girls. So, our friendship became hard. Through Stephanie, I met a variety of different people and we ended up having a mixed-race group of friends, mostly Black, but none of whom were students at USC, and all of whom were people she knew from high school or around Columbia. I always felt like those were her friends though and without her, I doubted I would be friends with them. They weren’t like my friends from back home. We didn’t click.

I still very much kept my South Carolina life separate from my DC/NoVA life back home—feeling like I could never truly be myself down in South Carolina except at our apartment with Stephanie, but only if it was just us. It wasn’t that I was completely
antisocial; I had friends and I would go out to bars, attend Black Greek parties, Camille would host “Black” parties at our apartment, and Stephanie would combine our parties with our downstairs neighbors (four Black men), so we attended many all-Black events as two token white girls, but I always felt very weird about it. We always had race-based comments thrown at us from strangers at those events, like “Marsha, Marsha, Marsha!” (from *The Brady Bunch*) or strangers would make references to the Young Jeezy song “White Girl” when they saw us. It made me feel uncomfortable, so I didn’t go out very often. I know now that part of woke whiteness work is learning how to sit in discomfort in order to promote racial justice. I did not know that then. I mostly kept to myself at our apartment parties, and my room was always the “smoking room” in our apartment. I met quite a few people through our shared love of herbs, but again, no one—aside from Solomon—who I ever wanted to remain friends forever with. I spent a lot of my life in college at USC alone, inside my head, writing in my journal or alone-together with Stephanie.

Outside USC though, I would travel to visit my friends from back home at their colleges. Our friend circle would meet up at different colleges for party weekends, and I was the farthest South, so I would always drive to them. I would go to NC A&T for their homecoming each year, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), and Virginia Tech. It was like a giant Black-people-from-NoVA reunion everywhere we went. NoVA is very white, densely populated, and extremely wealthy. Indeed, the two counties that we hung around and lived in, Fairfax and Loudoun County, are the two richest counties in the nation. Because Black people only make up less than 10% of the overall population in this area, many Black people across more than ten different large public high schools in a
25 mile radius of our high school knew one another. Plus, our whole friend circle would all be reunited back home in NoVA each summer and Christmas break.

My mom’s house was the party house, and I always had people over. My mom knew all of my friends. She did not know I was bisexual, but I doubt she would have been surprised. Plus, all of my friends back home knew I “liked girls” (as I called it back then), and we had a lot of lesbian friends in our group. I never self-identified as bisexual though. My feelings for Stephanie were complicated, and I did not all the way understand them. I still almost exclusively dated men. When we were home from college, our friend circle would often go to the (Black) gay club in Baltimore, even those of us girls who were not lesbians. We were all very comfortable with the fluidity of sexuality. It was never a “thing” that I was bisexual or that I was white. I just was.

My life was completely different back home than it was in South Carolina, and I felt like I would always try to bring pieces of home with me back down I-95 South, but somehow it never ended up working. It wasn’t until I met Tasha when I was working in Nottoway that I felt like I finally could be all of the versions of myself—even the bisexual one because she, too, had dated women before and we used to talk about our experiences in dating women and laugh about the differences in dating men.

Likewise, Tasha and I laughed and joked about my whiteness, and Tasha taught me how she performed what she now named “professional Blackness” in unapologetic ways. It was the first time I learned how to remain true to myself (let me be clear, myself as always still white and performing whiteness) but I no longer had to “perform” professional whiteness by speaking exclusively in Standardized American English (SAE). I no longer had to pretend to be someone I was not in a professional setting to be
successful. I figured out a way to not have to try so hard to say the right thing, hold my body the right way, and be the “right” kind of white teacher for other white teachers and professors in my educational career. Indeed, being unapologetically myself was something I felt was never allowed in my white family, except around my mother, and Tasha taught me how remain true to myself yet strategically professional around all of the other white teachers so as not to let my anger get the best of me. She taught me the importance of being myself while still doing everything I needed to do, so they could never find anything to say about me concerning my work and competency as a teacher.

I am and was—and always will be white. I agree with Tatum (2002) that it is a privilege to be able to move freely between the two cultures such as this and attempt to opt out of my whiteness or distance myself from it. Though I have had and still have many ties to the Black community, I will never lose the power of being associated as white by society at large (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998). This is why racial justice work as a white woman is an on-going, never-ending, always present state of being, being and staying woke, and figuring out ways to defy racism—working woke every single day.

My years at Nottoway were the first time in my life when not only were all of my friends back home Black, but also my chosen-family, my friends in Columbia, and Solomon’s family. I had always been separated geographically from the (exclusively) white folks in my family down here in South Carolina, with my only close tie being that of my mother. After my mother’s death, I felt intentionally separated from my white family. I felt orphaned and abandoned. Entirely alone.

However, it was during this time in the years immediately following my mother’s death that I began developing relationships with my grandmother (my mother’s mother),
my Aunt Coey (my dad’s sister), and my little cousin Madalyn (Coey’s daughter, 10 years younger than me, and now she’s my “little one” and my “adopted daughter”), as well as my neighbors—Shannon and Steve, Mandy and Ben—who became part of my South Carolina family as well. Those white relationships had not yet blossomed though in the winter of 2014. These were the spaces I had been navigating when I started the spring 2014 semester, the semester this dissertation is centered around. Let’s go sailing!

**Becoming a Sailor**

Before we move on, I’m going to specifically address my white sisters and brothers right now, because I fear that they may be the ones who struggle with this sailing the most.

This is not to exclude my sisters and brothers of Color—these words are for you, too—but it is not my place to address you specifically with this work. I have to talk to my white sisters and brothers right now, so that we can all sail together as one.

An open letter to my white sisters and brothers:

I want to personally thank you for joining me on this journey of love.

Because although it is a harsh journey with some very harsh truths and a lot of hard pills to swallow, it is—and always will be—a journey of love.

Love is always laborious.

I will also warn you, what you may read in here might hurt your feelings.

It’s not going to feel good being called on your (white) shit.

Trust me, I know, I am calling myself out on all my shit, too.

And it’s going to feel uncomfortable at times. REALLY uncomfortable.
I have spent the last few years very uncomfortably sitting in this discomfort, trying to find comfort in the discomfort.

There is comfort in the discomfort though, I promise you.

I’ve found it. I’ve become a sailor. I’m going to teach you how, too.

But know that it will always be uncomfortable sometimes. As it should.

In order for me to teach you how to be a sailor, though,

You have to put away your selfish feelings. They have to be put the side now.

Your selfish feelings will get in the way of our sailing work.

I can’t let that happen, so please put them to the side.

Ask yourself—are my feelings blocking me from receiving the message here?

If they are, please put them to the side. Those are your selfish feelings.

Sometimes, I will call them your white feelings. I have selfish white feelings, too.

However, this work, this sailing work, this woke whiteness work, requires you to unselfishly hear this message and unselfishly open yourself up to this love.

Past the initial feelings, it’s love. I promise.

I’m going to break you here. Hurt your feelings. It’s not going to feel good.

It should not feel good.

That’s why I’m going to use some harsh words. You may not like them, but please feel them.

They are meant to make you “not feel good” on purpose.

It should not feel good to be broken. You’re broken. That should not feel good.
But once you really wake up, once you’re woke, you’ll see why this breaking was necessary.

You’ll see why I had to break you—so that you could heal properly.

That’s my work as a doctor. I’m practicing my doctor work right now.

Because right now, you’re already broken, and you don’t even know yet. You’re sleeping.

But I’m watching you sleep, and I can see that you’re broken.

I want to begin the healing process. The surgery. The breaking.

I want to teach you how to be sailor. But it’s not going to feel good at first.

This sailing is going to be uncomfortable.

But after you sit in that “not feeling good” discomfort from this breaking, I will give you postoperative care instructions. I will follow up with you. Point you to other professionals to help with your healing.

I will teach you how to be a sailor.

But know that gentleness may not look how you want it to look.

Know that gentleness will not mean that you will get to excuse away your shit.

There are no excuses in sailing.

No explanations.

I don’t care.

And I don’t mean to be harsh, but your good intentions don’t matter.

I don’t care about your good intentions.

We all have good intentions. I get it. I don’t care.
I care about your actions.

Actions always speak louder than words.

So I want your actions to reflect your good intentions.

And to do that, I will have to critique you. Harshly.

You will NOT be allowed to excuse away your shit.

I will force you to own your shit. Accept responsibility.

I will critique you here. Harshly.

But it’s okay to be both gentle and critical at the same time.

Indeed, this true critical love work demands such work of BOTH harsh words AND gentle soothing. All at the same time. That’s critical love.

Thank you for putting aside your selfish white feelings as we embark upon this collective journey together, sharing in a collective struggle, sailing onwards towards collective action and collective love in the pursuit of collective racial justice.

Please know that when I tell you to put aside your feelings, I am not telling you not to feel.

I am saying just the opposite.

I need you to feel. This work is a feeling. I will make you feel with this woke whiteness work.

I hope I have already made you feel in Chapter One.

I need you to be open to feelings.
I also need you to also be gentle with yourself. Be very gentle. Allow yourself to feel.

Just don’t coddle yourself. I am for sure not going to coddle you.

Know that this woke whiteness work is tough love, and it might hurt, but please know that you can always reach out to me, and I will always be gentle with you as you process this awakening.

But again, my gentle may look different than yours!

This is going to be a journey of being called out on your shit, and then having to own your shit.

And I so very much need you to embark upon this journey of owning your shit.

That’s how you become a sailor. By owning your shit. It’s a journey. A lifelong journey trying to reach the destination of racial justice.

And I’ll warn you, this racism thing is here to stay. These tensions, this chaos, it is here to stay.

So in the meantime, in between time, we will all just be out here sailing away, navigating all these tensions. I want you to join us on this journey of sailing. I want you to be a sailor, too.

I write this story because I’ve been working to become a sailor.

I’ve been working my whole life I think. But I’ve been deliberating working these last few years.

And I think maybe, now, I have it figured out. Or at least I’m trying.

That’s what being a sailor is—always trying. Always navigating tensions.
That’s what woke whiteness work is (and wokeness work in general).

It’s being a sailor. All the time. No days off. Always working. Always being a sailor.

It’s not a job you get to go home from. It’s not even a job. It’s a way of being.

We are always out here on this ocean, always navigating these angry waters.

We have been for quite some time. As long back as I could remember in history.

So we might as well wake up and realize that we are sailing.

I want you to be a sailor, too.

I want to teach you how to be a sailor, but I can’t do that unless you first know that you are in the ocean in the first place.

And I fear you may be turned away by the harshness of my words (some of them are not pretty).

But know that I am doing this for a reason. I don’t do this maliciously, to hurt you.

I do this because I love you. Because I love ALL of humanity. More than I can say.

I have to throw this dissertation bucket of salty ocean water in your face harshly, because you look like you’re deep in slumber, and I’m concerned you are not okay!

I need to make sure you’re still alive, still breathing.

I need you to wake up and see that we’ve been sailing for quite some time now.

I need you to become a sailor, too.

I’m so very tired of navigating this alone. This sailing work is not meant to be done alone.
The water has been angry, the weather has been stormy, we are losing countless lives of our brothers and sisters of Color, while you, my friend, have been thinking that you have been sunbathing on the beach.

You have not (or maybe you have), but it wasn’t a full reality.

You’ve been dreaming.

I need you to wake up now.

We need more sailors so we can join our sailors of Color to navigate these rough waters together.

They are way better at this than us, so listen to them and follow their directions, don’t try to just wake up and bark orders.

We’ve be sailing this whole time you’ve been sleep.

They were sailing even before me, when I, too, was dreaming.

I still always have to let them teach me how to sail. I’ll never be better at this than them.

But I have become a good listener. I want you to listen, too.

It’s my job—because you know we often wake up angry and fighting—to get you up out of your sleep. I can’t take the risk that you may hurt our sisters and brothers of Color, our fellow sailors (even if it’s accidentally), when you are woken up. That is too great a risk.

A risk I will just not take.

You’re already violently hurting them while you are sleeping. We are violent sleepers.

I was violently hurting my sisters and brothers of Color, too, while I was sleeping.

I didn’t know it, but I hurt them nonetheless. And I have to accept responsibility for that.

We all do. So it’s my job to wake you up.
I need you to wake up now.

We need more sailors.

I’ve tried gently nudging you. I’ve tried yelling at you. You just won’t wake up!

So now, I have to throw this bucket of salt water in your face.

We need you to wake up.

So I am going to be harsh in here, with my words, so I can awaken you.

But I promise it is a tough love kind of harshness.

It’s the only way I know how to teach you how to be sailor.

I have to be harsh because I need to shock you into feeling this sailor work.

Because this woke whiteness work, this sailing work, is FEELING work.

And I don’t know why our parents and grandparents and ancestors told us that feelings were not okay. But feelings are necessary. We don’t have to be “strong” anymore by pretending not to feel. That’s not strength. It’s true strength to face your feelings head-on.

So don’t be scared. Past these scary feelings, is love.

I’ll teach you how to sail. I promise.

I just need you to wake up now.

WAKE UP!
CHAPTER 2:
PREPARING FOR THE BOOK CLUB (LITERATURE REVIEW)

Spring 2014 Juxtapositions in Schooling

As I entered into the spring 2014 semester in January, I felt an instant juxtaposition between my Tuesday night class (adolescent literacy with Dr. Hendrickson) and my Thursday night class (critical race theory with Dr. Anders). In my Tuesday night class with Dr. Hendrickson, I felt at ease, confident because I had been in so many different classes with her, had already done work at JDC, and I knew how to play her game of school. I knew what she wanted from me as a student, I knew how she operated as a professor, and I knew that she respected me as a student, a teacher, and a person. I did not have to earn her trust or respect. I had already done that in undergrad and grad school from 2009-2011. Plus, we had kept in touch frequently during my first three years of teaching since graduating the MT program.

My first year teaching (2011-2012), my mother was diagnosed with stage IV cancer of unknown primary, and came down to South Carolina to tell me about it in October 2011, just a month and half into my teaching career. After learning the news, I had emailed Dr. Hendrickson for her advice about it, as I knew she had also lost her mother to cancer at a young age. She told me to spend as much time with my mother as I could. She told me that she had no regrets, because she had spent hours talking in the kitchen with her mother about how she was her first and best teacher. She told me to tell
my mother all of the things about how much she taught me as well. How much she meant to me. I tried to follow her advice as best I could.

It was in this head-space that I attended the National Conference for Teachers of English (NCTE) in Chicago, IL in November 2011 with Lamar and another cohort member, where I learned about the work Dr. Tambra Jackson did with Freedom Schools\(^2\) in Columbia as a part of USC, and thought to myself, *We do stuff like this at USC?!? Why didn’t we do this?!?* I remember feeling both proud that I came from the same institution that she was speaking about and simultaneously disappointed that I had not learned more in my year-long master’s program. This wasn’t to say anything about the MT program—I truly believed I received the best possible education I could in just one year—but I felt like it wasn’t enough to satisfy my appetite for knowledge. Sitting in the room with her and the many other educators who all believed similar things I did was extremely powerful—especially after entering into a school as a first-year teacher with so many veteran teachers who had deficit views of the students.

It was during that conference that Lamar convinced me to apply to the doctorate program. He was already in the language and literacy master’s program and was in the process of applying. Applications were due in a couple of weeks. He said we needed more education, because there were tons of people at USC doing really great work that we didn’t even know about before. He said people were doing social justice and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and multiculturalism in the College of Education.

\(^2\)Freedom Schools exist today through the Children’s Defense Fund. The program “seeks to build strong, literate, and empowered children prepared to make a difference in themselves, their families, communities, nation and world today. By providing summer and after-school reading enrichment for children who might otherwise not have access to books, the *CDF Freedom Schools* program plays a much needed role in helping to curb summer learning loss and close achievement gaps (CDF Freedom Schools Program, 2018).
That there was more than just Dr. Hendrickson and Pat (Dr. Pat Turner) at USC. I longed to learn what that more was—about social justice work, culturally relevant pedagogy, and multiculturalism (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2003)—after attending all of the different sessions at NCTE. The only reason we even knew about CRP was because Dr. Hendrickson’s doctoral student, Tempie, had introduced us to it during our internship seminar class a month before graduation, and I remember feeling cheated by my master’s program. I wanted to know more too. I took Dr. Hendrickson’s advice and Lamar’s advice, and sent my mom the following email the last night of the conference:

From: Jennifer Doyle

Subject: NCTE

Date: Fri, Nov 18, 2011 at 11:26 PM

To: Carol Van Valkenburg (Mommy)

Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to participate in this conference. I’ve never before felt so at home. It's such an empowering experience to be in a room full of people who believe the same things you do & feel just as passionate about these issues as I am. I have decided today that I am applying to get my doctorate in curriculum & instruction. I will learn about teaching cultural responsiveness & how to promote social justice through my own curriculum/instruction and other's curriculums/instructions. I will start this summer (if I get accepted).

I just feel so blessed to have such a supportive mother who has always given me the room to make my own decisions and own mistakes about my own life. I still remember debating abortion with you in the kitchen of our old house. You never forced
your beliefs on me, but you always led me to critically think about my own beliefs rather than simply accept what others told me as truth. Not a lot of people can say that. I can. Words cannot express what that means to me. You have single-handedly led me to be the woman I am today. You don't get nearly enough appreciation or gratitude, so I can only hope that this email will suffice.

Thank you.

I literally wouldn't be here in Chicago without your help, and I literally wouldn't be at this place in my life without you. I love you, Mommy. You're more than appreciated.

Love always,

Jennifer

PS: I hope chemo isn't kicking your butt! Remember what I said :)  

I love you.

My mother never responded to the email, but I did find it saved in a folder in her emails after her death, and she did ask me over Thanksgiving break that year if I had considered waiting until the following year to apply for the doctoral program. She didn’t tell me to wait, but I knew she was right, so I waited a year before applying. My mom knew I needed a goal to work towards after she was gone, something to keep me busy. Something I was passionate about. Something to sustain my life after hers was over. But there were pieces of Dr. Hendrickson in that email to my mother that evening. And pieces of the ways in which I already felt as though I was outgrowing her my first year of teaching.
In spring 2012, Dr. Hendrickson came to observe me in my classroom in Nottoway (as part of her doctoral student, Tempie’s, research project; Tempie was studying Lamar and me as social justice teachers from the preservice stage into our first year of teaching). I had planned all week to teach imagery in Maya Angelous’s poem “Still I Rise” to my ninth graders. The lesson was perfect. She came to observe my fourth block class, and I remember how excited and nervous I was for her to see me in action, to see all of the ways I took everything she taught me about becoming a teacher and put them into action in my own classroom. I wanted so badly for her to be proud of me. I never did get any feedback on my lesson, but I felt as though it went really well. I felt like I showed her something to be proud of.

Additionally, she invited both Lamar and me—along with a few other members from our cohort—to speak to the current cohort of teachers about job interviews and life as a first-year teacher. I was honored to come back as an “expert” with Lamar, because we had been ostracized and excluded from our cohort. Members of our cohort seemed too scared to even look at us or speak to us at the panel presentation (I share more on this later in Chapter 4)—which we found to be incredibly hilarious.

My second year teaching (2012-2013), I applied to the doctorate program and asked Dr. Hendrickson for a letter of recommendation. She happily wrote one for me, and I was excited to return to school. I felt as though I had been doing my own reading and research, but that I had reached a plateau in my learning. I was accepted in March 2013, just three months before my mother passed away. I thanked Dr. Hendrickson for her recommendation, and she said she looked forward to having me back at USC. Dr. Hendrickson also invited Lamar and me to submit a proposal with her for NCTE 2013,
and invited us to guest-lecture her MT internship seminar one evening, teaching her current students about culturally relevant pedagogy. We were now the experts.

My third-year teaching (2013-2014), Dr. Hendrickson personally invited me to participate in the book clubs at JDC (see Figure 2 from Chapter One). I was proud that she had even thought of me. I wanted to impress her with how much I knew now that I was an actual teacher and not just a preservice teacher.

When I arrived in her classroom on Tuesday, January 14, 2014, I was naturally confident, trying my best not to be cocky. Never outshine the master, I kept reminding myself that semester. Solomon had me study The 48 Laws of Power by Robert Green (1998) when I was teaching to understand how to make power moves at my school. I now understand all of the ways in which these were white, patriarchal power moves.

I was the only one in the class who had gone through the MT program with Dr. Hendrickson already, and I already knew much of the background stuff on adolescent literacy and book clubs that other folks did not know. Plus, I already knew her expectations. I knew how she worked. I knew she wasn’t actually as intimidating and scary as she comes off when you first meet her. I knew not to take some of the harsh things she said so seriously because although her tone might sound harsh, she typically does not mean what she shares to be heard that way. I knew that while the class seemed all over the place at the beginning, that it was all going to come together in the end, just as it had in all the rest of her classes. I felt like I knew her. I knew her process; I trusted her process; I trusted myself in her process; and I was eager to impress her during this process. Tuesday nights I was confident, trying not to be cocky.
On the other hand, Thursday nights I was frozen into silence. (See section “Spring 2014: EDFN 845 (Critical Race Theory)” in Chapter 1). I was insecure in the classroom with all of these other doctoral students from across different programs. Everyone else had their laptops. I just had my notebook. I suddenly didn’t know how to sit. I didn’t know who to expect to walk in the door for class. I knew that Lamar had told me to take this course, but I didn’t feel like I belonged in the classroom. I belonged with Dr. Hendrickson because that was familiar. But I hadn’t taken a class with someone other than her or Pat (Dr. Pat Turner) since fall 2010. It had been four years since I met a new professor at USC. I wondered if I even remembered how to still be a student. I wished I had taken an in-person course the previous semester rather than an online one. I was filled with anxiety, doubt, fear, and insecurity. A stark contrast to how I had felt just two days earlier in Dr. Hendrickson’s class. The juxtaposition began immediately, the first week of class, and I tried for the remainder of the semester to navigate the tension between the two courses.

It was at this point in the beginning of the semester and the beginning of our book club that I began thinking about the ways in which I could craft the book club in a way that promoted racial justice. Lamar advised me at the beginning of the semester to start thinking about this class and CRT as ideas for what I wanted to do my dissertation on, so I could build upon it throughout my time in the doctorate program. From the conversations and readings in my CRT class, as well as my interest in working with students at JDC, I became particularly interested in the school-to-prison pipeline (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Bahena et al., 2012) and the role of teachers in it. I saw how the other white teachers at my high school responded to student behavior and mistreated my
babies based on their biases and perceptions of students of Color. I saw my work at JDC in the spring 2014 semester, as well as my racial justice project, as a perfect way to combine both of my research interests. In my head, the school-to-prison pipeline explained how the two classes meshed together. I felt that the two classes could be and should be combined to inform one another in productive ways of disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, one of the requirements of my CRT class was to complete a racial justice project. I wanted to turn the book clubs at JDC into a racial justice project, a way to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline through literacy. My only struggle was convincing Dr. Hendrickson to let me do so, and then strategically convincing my researcher partner, Lindsay, to let me do it.

Email Exchange ~ Book Clubs & Racial Justice

From: Jennifer

Subject: Book Clubs & Racial Justice Project

Date: Wed, Feb 19, 2014 at 12:25 PM

To: Dr. Hendrickson

I have a few questions about CRT & book clubs—would I be able to teach them some components of CRT?

What I really want to do with my group of students is explore race with them in relation to the book club group. I don’t want to just study the book clubs and my students in relation to race, I want to work WITH my students and explore race within the book clubs. However, book clubs are extremely student driven. Therefore, I’m not sure if it is possible. A couple of our students have already expressed many thoughts and ideas
regarding race, so they’ve taken the lead in addressing it… I just don’t know how much, if any, direct instruction (through leading them) could occur… thoughts?

From: Dr. Hendrickson

Subject: Re: Book Clubs & Racial Justice Project

Date: Wed, Feb 19, 2014 at 4:44 PM

To: Jennifer Doyle

Yes—

Many of the articles in the lit review folder will provide you with ideas and guidance in how you might go about this—

Review Park (2012) again that you read for your craft study #1.

Then, read Thein, Guise, Sloan (2011)

And Fredrick’s (2012)

From: Jennifer

Subject: Re: Book Clubs & Racial Justice Project

Date: Wed, Feb 19, 2014 at 5:39 PM

To: Dr. Hendrickson

Perfect. Thanks!

Also, is there any way that I could continue working at JDC after this semester is over? I am very interested in working on racial justice with a group of volunteer students surrounding counternarratives. The idea just popped in my head last night and is just in the beginning stages right now. If it’s possible, I will work on developing something more concrete. Thoughts on this?

From: Dr. Hendrickson
Subject: Re: Book Clubs & Racial Justice Project

Date: Wed, Feb 19, 2014 at 6:24 PM

To: Jennifer

I want you to think through this on your own—

I will be there to provide guidance, I promise—but see what’s out there and what inspires you from the reading on blackboard—then you can adapt and create your research.

As for staying on with JDC, we can certainly talk with them about that.

It would be great if after we are finished, that some sort of book club could continue next semester—if you could facilitate, I am sure they would be on board.

It’s good to have a partner in research.

From: Jennifer

Subject: Re: Book Clubs & Racial Justice Project

Date: Wed, Feb 19, 2014 at 6:41 PM

To: Dr. Hendrickson

No worries, I wanted to think through it on my own as well. I am excited about it!

Thanks for all of your help. I will be working on developing all of this.

Email Exchange ~ EDCU 862 Feedback

From: Dr. Hendrickson

Subject: EDCU 862 feedback

Date: Sun, Feb 23, 2014 at 2:24 PM

To: Jennifer

First I want to tell you how nice it is to see you again. It seems a bit like old times, but you have gained classroom experience and school wisdom since I had you in class
last time. I also wanted to provide you some feedback on your work so far in EDCU 862. First, you did an excellent job on your first class presentation. You shared a lot of useful information with your colleagues. It was well organized, and I noted your strong presentation skills which will come in handy as you present at future conferences. I have read through your comments on the discussion board. You synthesized the readings well, and I appreciated your comments about schools’ misguided emphasis on standardized testing. I also agree with your suggestion regarding the importance of making personal connections and providing real reading experiences for students. In this way, we could make a difference.

From: Jennifer

Subject: Re: EDCU 862 Feedback

Date: Sun, Feb 23, 2014 at 5:34 PM

To: Dr. Hendrickson

It is definitely nice to be back in your class! You played an enormous role in my life as a teacher (and a person), and for that I can never thank you enough. I first met you at a time in my life where I was uncertain about where I was going to what I wanted to do. I always made excuses for myself and my lack of effort. Most people in my life accepted my excuses. You never accepted excuses from me and held me to the highest expectations. I remember distinctly going to visit my mom for Thanksgiving in 2009, right after you told me that there was huge possibility that I would fail 563 for attendance issues. I remember not knowing how I was going to break it to my mom that I failed a class my senior year. I had never come close to failing anything in college, and it was just
the wakeup call I needed. You gave me a second chance to succeed even though I didn’t
deserve it at the time. I am who I am and where I am today because of you.

I also remember right after my mom was diagnosed with cancer, I wrote to you
about it and you shared with me how you had no regrets because you shared everything
with your mom about how she inspired you and taught you about reading and life.
Because of that, I made sure I shared those same things with my mom. Now that she has
passed, I too have no regrets because I shared everything with her as well. I remember
thinking that if you could do all of the wonderful things you’ve done with your life, even
without your mother, I could do them as well. It was truly inspirational.

In addition, I remember writing in a reading response journal to our book club
books in the MT program about love and my doubts on love after reading If You Come
Softly. You wrote back about the ever changing status of love and how love grows and
changes throughout the years. Now, four years into my relationship with the same man,
I’ve taken that knowledge and advice with me and used it in difficult times.

I say all of this to tell you that you’ve been a teacher and mentor for me
throughout my years as a student, and I am extremely grateful. I just wanted you to know
that I am thankful for all you’ve done to help me and guide me to be the person and
teacher I am today.

I’m not sure how appropriate this email is since I’m currently enrolled in your
class, but I’m big on saying thank you to people who have helped me.

Thank you,

Jen

From: Dr. Hendrickson
Subject: Re: EDCU 862 Feedback

Date: Mon, Feb 24, 2014 at 12:37 PM

To: Jennifer Doyle

Thank you, Jenn, for taking the time to write this. You know how much this means to a teacher now :) I am sorry you lost your mom—I still miss mine terribly, but her presence is always with me—and I know we lived a good life together. And I am so very glad that you have found someone special to share life’s journey with.

Sent from my iPhone

Based on her response from the emails, I felt like Dr. Hendrickson was on board with my idea as long as I did the necessary work to situate the book clubs within the context of what the literature said. I truly believed that the two classes did not need to exist in opposition to one another. However, looking back at the email retrospectively, I notice that she did not address CRT at all, nor did she talk about race, nor did she direct me to any literature that used a critical race theoretical framework. Rather, the readings situated the book clubs within critical literacy theory, but none of the readings addressed race.

As part of our racial justice project, Dr. Anders had us do an annotated bibliography for our racial justice project, which is where I attempted to create a “critical race literature circle” (later, I named it a CRT book club) based on the critical book club readings from Dr. Hendrickson’s class. I describe how I crafted the book club in more depth in Chapter 3.
For the purposes of this chapter, I present a literature review on the school-to-prison pipeline focusing on methodology in order to situate my CRT book club within this context. I conclude this chapter with a theoretical conceptualization of the book club through a critical race analysis.

**The School-to-Prison Pipeline**

The school-to-prison pipeline depicts the interconnectedness of the K-12 educational system and the juvenile justice system. Educational researchers explore the ways in which an abundance of specific contributing factors intersect—funneling disproportionately students of Color from our classrooms and into our nation’s prisons. Research on the school-to-prison pipeline closely examines the relationship between the two systems, noting how intersections of inequity are perpetuated in the public school system and the (in)justice system, which in turn creates grave disparities amongst our nation’s youth. At its core, as Kim, Losen, & Hewitt (2010) explained, “the pipeline results from the failure of public institutions to meet the educational and social development needs of a large segment of the children they are charged with servicing” (p. 1). Essentially, many factors—such as inadequate resources in public schools, the overrepresentation of students of Color in special education programs, zero tolerance policies, discrimination, racial bias, institutional racism, test-based accountability systems, criminalization of students of Color in media stereotypes, increased school use of law enforcement tactics, substandard alternative education programs, and harsh discipline policies—all produce systemic intersectional disenfranchisement (Crenshaw, 1988) in ways that fail our youth of Color. As Bahena et al. (2012) noted, the school-to-prison pipeline is “an amalgamation of a number of different trends” (p. 1) that range
from individual interactions with students to broader educational policies and societal discourses.

To describe all of these factors and explore the relationships between each would take an entire book, perhaps several, and indeed many books have already been published on this topic (for compelling examples, see Bahena et al. (2012) and Kim, Losen, & Hewitt (2010), and Heitzeg (2016)). Similarly, to describe all of the different ways in which the school-to-prison pipeline has been researched qualitatively and quantitatively in law, juvenile justice, sociology, and educational research would take an additional several books. This social phenomenon has been well documented since the early 2000s, mostly focusing on the ineffectiveness of zero-tolerance policies (Brown, Losen, & Wald, 2001; Skiba, 2001; American Psychological Association, 2006) and high-stakes testing (Hammond, 2007; Advancement Project, 2010; Thompson & Allen, 2012). Much of the research since then has focused on legal and educational policy (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Osher et al., 2003; Bahena et al., 2012) and theory that conceptualizes the intertwining factors in the school-to-prison pipeline (Noguera, 2012; Vaught, 2012; Allen-White Smith, 2014; Dancy, 2014; Annamma, 2015; Bryan, 2017) with a few qualitative empirical studies (Raffaele Mendez, 2003; Casella, 2003; Fabelo et al., 2011), but more research is needed to empirically prove or disprove the direct correlation between teacher bias and perceptions leading to the school-to-prison pipeline, and specifically, how teachers can disrupt the pipeline in their own classrooms. Therefore, for the purpose of this literature review I examined the methods researchers used to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline in order to situate my CRT book clubs within the context of literature surrounding the school-to-prison pipeline.
Methodological Review of the School-to-Prison Pipeline

As my racial justice research interests pertained to the role of teachers in the school-to-prison pipeline, specifically examining discipline and teacher bias, many of the studies I reviewed for this literature review pertained to discipline and teachers. While I believed this to be mostly a problem with white teachers, I wanted to expand my scope to include teachers in general, regardless of race. I formulated my literature review surrounding the following questions: How are other scholars disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline? What methods are they using to do so?

Many early studies examined student data. For example, Raffaele Mendez (2003) studied the relationship between students who were disciplined and those who were not in order to predict student suspension rates and the effects of those rates on students’ educational achievement and graduation. She analyzed data from a cohort of students in Pinellas County, Florida who entered kindergarten in 1989 and were expected to graduate high school in 2002, looking at demographic characteristics of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and special education classification of 8,268 students. Of those students, 79% were white, 19% were Black, and 1.5% were Hispanic. She used student surveys, teacher surveys, demographic information, students’ standardized test scores, and suspension records over a span of 11 years. Raffaele Mendez found that there was an overrepresentation or students of Color who were being suspended and that two-thirds of poor Black males in sixth grade in special education programs were suspended, arguing that “certain variables, easily measured in elementary school are moderate to strong predictors of individual students’ out-of-school suspensions in sixth grade” (p. 19) and that “students who are suspended frequently in sixth grade are less likely than other
students to experience success in high school” (p. 19). Moreover, she argued that teacher
ratings of behavior in late elementary school played a role in predicting school outcomes
in later years; however, the impact of teacher bias was merely theorized with this data
and not fully supported. She suggested that, “the available evidence indicates that referral
bias on the part of school officials and teachers is a more likely explanation” (p. 26) for
the discrepancies across racial categories. Furthermore, this study does not distinguish
between types of students in certain special education programs or the types of
suspensions students encountered during those time periods, which Fabelo et al. (2011)
attempted to distinguish in their study.

Similar to Raffaele Mendez (2003), Fabelo et al. (2011) used student data to study
the link between discipline and student success. In addition, they examined juvenile
justice involvement. This research study was much larger and covered students from
across the state of Texas. Researchers examined the individual student records of all
seventh grade students in Texas in 2000, 2001, and 2002, with each student’s records
spanning at least six years to create a longitudinal study. Furthermore, they examined
juvenile justice records to learn about school discipline history of youth who were
involved in the juvenile justice system. In total, they studied nearly 1 million students.
Through their research, they documented the following themes: first, over half of the
students were expelled at least once between seventh and twelfth grade, African
American students and students with disabilities were more likely to be disciplined (with
emotional disturbances students at the highest rates); second, white and Hispanic students
were more likely to be expelled for mandatory reasons rather than discretionary reasons,
third, students who were expelled or suspended were more likely to be held back a grade
or drop out; fourth, there was an increased likelihood of involvement in juvenile justice system in the year following the suspension or expulsion with students suspended for discretionary violations nearly three times as likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system; and fifth, that suspension and expulsion rates varied between schools.

These findings had a variety of implications, but as they pertain to my CRT book club, Fabelo et al. found that “race was a predictive factor for whether a student would be disciplined, particularly for discretionary discipline actions” (p. 46), even when looking at factors like socioeconomic status or truancy. This coincides with Raffaele Mendez’s (2003) theory that teacher bias plays an important role in discipline rates, but neither of the studies pinpoint specific reasons for these racial disparities and more research is needed on the causes of this. Furthermore, Fabelo et al. (2011)’s finding that suspension and expulsion rates varied between schools demonstrated the power of individual school employees and individual schools themselves had a significant amount of power in their ability to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline as it pertained to the individual students at their schools. They urged law enforcement, courts, health services, departments of children and families, schools, and other stakeholders to work collaboratively to inform policymakers to come to consensus recommendations to improve the lives of our children. However, they also stated that schools did not have to wait for changes in policy or law reform, but that schools had the power to act.

Both of these studies inform this research as they found racial disparities in school discipline rates and theorized about the effect of teacher bias on discipline rates in schools. However, neither of these studies conclusively found evidence of the reasons for
these racial disparities, so further research is needed for the causes of discretionary
discipline practices. Moreover, both studies were missing student voices.

In contrast, Wald and Kurlaender (2003) conducted an exploratory study that
looked at student perceptions about treatment in schools and how it differed across racial
and gender lines, exploring school district survey data in Seattle, Washington. The
responses of students did not correlate with the overall suspension rates in schools or the
racial disparities within these rates, and the researchers? called for more in-depth analysis
at the individual school level and the disciplinary policies and processes at each
individual school. In a way, Fabelo et al. (2011) responded to this call for more
information at the school level, suggesting that individual schools have the power to
affect disciplinary rates. These research designs did not include the specific role of
teachers in the school-to-prison pipeline nor did were the specific voices of teachers,
students, parents, and other school officials included.

Filling this gap of missing voices in the literature, Casella (2003) examined
narrative data that was rich with participants? voices to explore how school officials used
preventative detention or “punishing dangerousness” as a means to suspend and expel
students whom they considered potentially dangerous. Casella conducted an ethnographic
study in two high schools in New York and Connecticut and a medium-security prison in
Connecticut to gather narrative-rich data that would inform his study. At the Connecticut
high school, he focused primarily on students who were identified as having social or
emotional disturbances or who were prone to violence. He conducted a case study of the
social worker; included interviews with school guards, the chief of security, school police
officers, administrators, teachers, parents, and students; observed the pupil placement
team meetings involving students who violated rules of behavior in schools; and conducted hallway observations and informal interviews of interactions between students and school police, administrators, and other professionals who were in charge of disciplining students. At the New York high school, he conducted observations of conflict resolution programs, discipline committee meetings, and violence-prevention programs and security efforts in the school as well as conducted interviews with school police officers, school counselors, and administrators. At the prison, he observed two violence prevention programs, taking detailed field notes and conducting informal interviews during the program. He interviewed all of the trainers of the program as well as twenty-one inmate participants.

Casella (2003) found that there was an over-selection of poor students of Color in discipline policies and questioned whether or not this disciplinary policy of preventative detention was in fact functioning as a form of racial profiling by punishing perceived dangerousness rather than actual threats to danger. He did not name the perpetrators of these racist practices as white or any other race, however. He only raced the student participants. By failing to name the perpetrators of these racist policies and practices, he could not hold anyone specifically accountable, only “policy” in general, making the likelihood of change a difficult possibility. Nonetheless, Casella added insight into the effects of racial bias, as he outlined how very difficult it was for students to re-enter educational spaces after suspension or expulsion, stating that this was a “critical component of the prison track that is not very well understood” (p. 63) and required further research. Though not conclusive, he argued that treatment by teachers and understanding that students were not wanted “cannot be dismissed when considering the
chain of events that led to incarceration” (p. 67). Moreover, he argued that “in many instances, school officials labeled students as dangerous because they did not function well in the traditional public school and displayed a range of behaviors that conflicted with the norms of the school” (p. 68). Again, he did not name these teachers or school officials as white (or any other race), failing to hold white supremacy accountable for these biases. Additionally, he found that the fact that “the youths on this track are often poor people of Color who are failing academically points to the consequences of a stratified society, educational failure, and racist definitions of dangerousness that encompass not just acts but meanings of blackness that signify danger” (p. 68).

These findings coincide with Ann Arnett Ferguson’s (2001) argument that Black children, particularly Black males, are criminalized and adultified in the U.S. imagination through mass media, cinematic images, and popular music. She named the ways white teachers in particular who did not grow up with friends/peers of Color relied on stereotypes when interacting with students of Color. She explained how we as a society do not let Black children be children. Instead, we adultify their behavior and transgressions through a lens of “sinister, intentional, fully conscious tones that are stripped from any element of childish naiveté” (p. 83). Essentially, she argued that what we often view as tolerable in some students [white] is seen as punishable in other students [Black and Brown], noting that “misbehavior is likely to be interpreted as symptomatic of ominous criminal proclivities” (p. 89) and because of this, white teachers are more likely to pay attention to and punish rule breaking behavior with Black children. She posited that this adultification of Black children often “justifies harsher, more punitive responses to rule-breaking behavior” (p. 90).
These studies reflected in-depth qualitative investigations into the connections between teacher bias and perception as contributing factors to the school-to-prison pipeline and theorize the correlations, and each points to the fact that white teacher bias of students of Color is a contributing factor to the school-to-prison pipeline. According to Osher et al. (2003) “whether bias is conscious or unconscious, it affects how behavior is perceived and interpreted” (p. 108). Although these studies lack claims of correlations of the previously reviewed studies, the next three studies reflect correlations between white teacher bias and the school-to-prison pipeline.

In their conceptual analysis of the sociocultural location of resistance to schooling, Pyscher and Lozenski (2014) examined students who had been victims of domestic violence in order to understand how society “throws away” youth who did not fit into school culture. They found that defiant and resistant youth who did not fit into school norms were often labeled as “broken” by teachers and schools and were consequently thrown away by schools, often causing them to end up in the school-to-prison pipeline. Conceptually, they argued that disciplinary and labeling practices by teachers were vital part of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Noguera (2012) critically analyzed responses to school violence, drawing upon his experience in the San Francisco Bay Area as a classroom teacher, school board member, university-based researcher, and consultant. He “generally found that teachers who lack familiarity with their students are more likely to misunderstand and fear them” (p. 21) and argued that the role of teachers in perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline is perhaps one of the most important. He articulated how “in most cases teachers make the
first referral in the discipline process, and therefore have tremendous influence in determining who receives discipline and why” (p. 20).

Teachers have a remarkable impact on deciding which students enter into the school-to-prison pipeline through the discipline process based on their referral decisions. This directly informs my research and continued work with pre-service and in-service teachers in my classroom management workshop, called “Keeping the Kids in the Classroom: Culturally Responsive Classroom Management.” In this workshop, I teach educators the importance of their role as teachers, encourage them to reflect on their own classroom practices that may have harmful effects on students of Color, and provide them with real-life classroom management strategies to ensure that all students are engaged, welcomed, and well-behaved to promote a community culture of academic success. While I operate from an understanding of the politics of difference and how implicit and cultural bias affects how teachers view students of Color in my workshop, Noguera (2012) articulated that “understanding how the politics of difference influence teacher-student interactions generally remains largely unexplored, except at the most superficial level” (p. 22), so continued research is still needed in this area. I wanted my research to continue to explore these politics of difference.

Similarly, Dancy (2014) examined the behavioral responses of Black males in “disempowering educational settings” (p. 476), conceptualizing how the troublesome perceptions of Black males actually fulfilled the commitment of the school-to-prison pipeline by looking at the ways in which Black boys were punished in schools and not allowed the benefits of childhood humanity. He examined this correlation by synthesizing literature surrounding the perceptions of Black males and providing implications to future
research, finding that in order to un-do hegemony in education and disrupt the pipeline for Black males, teachers had to realize their power in either perpetuating or disrupting the pipeline. Dancy argued that,

teachers play a critical role in reversing black boys’ academic and social behaviors that conflict with educational achievement. Teachers are leaders of classroom experience. The messages teachers consciously or subconsciously give to black males will manifest themselves in black males’ perceptions of schools and American society. (p. 489)

Dancy’s research in particular helps shape my aim to disrupt the pipeline through teacher education and professional development on the power of classroom teachers as “leaders of classroom experience” (p. 489).

Annamma (2015) conceptualized the understanding of the role of teachers in the school-to-prison pipeline through a critical race theoretical application of the tenet “whiteness as property” (Harris, 1993) to examine teacher education programs. Indeed, she argued that teachers lack the knowledge of systemic racism making it difficult for them to develop an ethic of caring that is integral in disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. She cited research that points to high-quality teacher education programs a way to disrupt the pipeline (Darling-Hammond, 2006, as cited in Annamma, 2015), which echoes with Allen and White-Smith’s (2014) research wherein they utilized critical race theory to conceptualize the relationship between teachers and the school-to-prison pipeline. They argued that, “teachers need to be trained not only in their subject matter but to understand, and be able to support, children’s developmental needs” (p. 40). They utilized a critical race theory of education to examine the intersection of teacher biases,
misinterpretation of Black and minority students’ behaviors, and harsh discipline policies. They illustrated how

racial incongruence, teacher bias, colorblind school discipline policies, and racialized tracking intersect in ways that deny black males meaningful learning opportunities, limits their occupational outlooks, and disciplines them in ways that directly (campus arrest), or indirectly (poor work preparation), places them in the school-to-prison pipeline. (p. 448)

Indeed, it is this intersection and culmination of factors that is key to understanding how to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline which I explore in detail in the next section.

It Takes a Village: Combined Efforts

As stated, many of these conceptual studies inform my research on the role of teachers in disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline, but continued research is still needed to empirically prove the correlation between teachers and the specific ways they perpetuate or disrupt the pipeline in their own classrooms. I know from my lived experience that I see a relationship, and the researchers I have cited have claimed correlations, but Bell’s (1995) critical race theory argument of interest convergence—the idea that white folks only support racial justice efforts when it benefits them—is important to note as well. Critical race methodology gives privilege to storytelling and lived experience, which is what I hoped my book club would center—the stories and lived experiences of the students—but in a white supremacist, neoliberal democracy, storytelling and lived experience it is often not valued like other forms of knowledge (Lawrence, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2005). By illustrating, through more empirical research, a direct correlation between teacher bias—based on white supremacist ideals—
and the school-to-prison pipeline, I believe we can encourage more white folks to care
about the need to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. I feel that we can then build more
effective movements against white racism if it is correlated in a direct way. Indeed, I only
found one study which utilized conceptual analysis to dismantle the school-to-prison
pipeline in a specific way.

Cavanagh and Garcia (2014) utilized conceptual analysis to disassemble the
pipeline through restorative justice practices in the classroom in order to change teacher
practice while involving students and parents as primary informers. Conceptually, they
used an ethic of care, culturally responsive pedagogy, and principles of restorative justice
practices to conduct focus group interviews with parents and students to collect data.
They found that their high school needed to change, especially in the classrooms, and that
many tensions in schools came from teachers’ deficit theories of Latino/Hispanic
students. They argued that schools needed to build capacity of teachers and students in
order to build relationships based on caring and using restorative justice practices to
respond to wrongdoing and conflict. The parents, consequently, turned this
recommendation into action with a program called “Culture of Care” at a large high
school in the Denver metropolitan area. These combined efforts made me realize that by
solely focusing on students and teachers in my understanding of the school-to-prison
pipeline, that I missed the vital community and parent voices that can inform and shape
our schools at a local level.

Likewise, it is important to note that while the research presented in this literature
review show connections between school discipline and later incarceration, and the role
of teachers in discipline policies, these discipline policies and teachers alone do not cause
the school-to-prison pipeline. Gateways into the prison system do not occur in a vacuum—as shown in the Children Defense Fund’s “Cradle to Prison Pipeline” (2007). Factors such as pervasive poverty, inadequate access to health coverage, gaps in early childhood development, disparate educational opportunities, intolerable abuse and neglect, unmet mental and emotional problems, rampant substance abuse, overburdened, and an ineffective juvenile justice system contribute to the funneling of children, particularly Black children of poverty, into the prison system. However, the term school-to-prison pipeline reflects how schools as an institution reproduce the pipeline through educational policy and practice. I represented literature here that particularly related to teachers and teacher bias, and each study examined how a myriad of factors intersected to lead students into the pipeline. It would be difficult to argue that just one factor, teachers, are responsible for producing and reproducing the pipeline. The contexts of individual interactions with students and problematic institutional educational policy and the ways it plays out in every day schooling are significant as well. Having said that, I do think teachers’ perceptions, interactions, and discipline choices for students of color are important factors. I believe that representing the role of teacher bias, naming it as racism, and problematizing the role of teachers can be one way to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

Nonetheless, as Kuttner (2012) articulated, we often look at the school-to-prison pipeline in terms of isolation, too often focusing on one of the multiple faces—pedagogical, discursive, disciplinary, legal, policy, or relational faces—but it will involve a collaborative effort across multiple facets to combat the school-to-prison pipeline and
we are going to need political will and buy-in from everyone. In other words, it will take a village if we wish to truly bring about change and dismantle this pipeline.

One group of researchers in particular proposed a way we can break the pipeline. Cramer, Gonzalez, and Pellegrini-Lafont (2014) outlined an integrated approach to breaking the school-to-prison pipeline through a proposed integrated learning model. They called for a bridge between theory and practice, culturally responsive teaching, and students’ cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Yosso, 2002) to guide classroom instruction and shift focus away from deficit-perspectives. To prevent school leaving they advocated the development of cultural awareness and action-based, culturally responsive pedagogy. Additionally, they called for continued professional development and training for teachers to integrate such programs. They created four tenets of this integrated learning model based on Gay’s (2002, 2010) culturally responsive teaching methods and Frattura and Capper’s (2007) integrated comprehensive services model: (1) focusing on equity of environments in culturally pluralistic settings, (2) establishing equitable, diverse, and interdependent communities of learners, (3) implementing change through critical cultural consciousness, and (4) providing access to multicultural curriculum with culturally congruent instructional strategies. While this research has not yet been tested in practice through empirical study, the framework informs my work as I continue to find ways to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline through teacher education both at the university level and through professional development in local schools.

It continues to take intersectional and collective efforts—village work—to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. As I shared in Chapter 1, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1993)—a critical race theorist and critical race feminist, who coined the term
“intersectionality” to reflect the experience of multiple targeted identities—argued for
“the need to account for multiple groups of identity when considering how the social
world is constructed” (p. 358). I argue that the need to account for multiple intersections
of identity also applies to the school-to-prison pipeline. In order to fully disrupt the
school-to-prison pipeline, educators must understand the full picture of an individuals’
experience at the intersection of targeted identities and societal factors in order to create
holistic solutions to keep our students in school and out of prison. While this is a
daunting task indeed, it is a necessary and urgent one that will take collective and critical
action from teachers, students, researchers, policymakers, government officials, and
community stakeholders. Through this critical collective action, we can and must imagine
these solutions such as those proposed by Cramer, Gonzalez, and Pellegrini-Lafont
(2014) in order to create a better and more just world for all.

Hopes and Dreams

I wanted my CRT book clubs to be part of those imagined solutions to create a
better and more just world for students I worked with at JDC. From my adolescent
literacy course, I noted how there had been significant research conducted on book clubs
and the positive effects they had on adolescent literacy outcomes (Daniels, 1994; Lapp &
Fisher, 2009; Sandmann & Gruhler, 2007), as well as research on the benefits of
promoting literacy with students who were incarcerated (Christle & Yell, 2008; Brunner,
1993). In addition, from my CRT course, I noted that there had been research conducted
on adolescent literacy and CRT (Groenke, Bennett, & Hill, 2012). However, I found that
there was little to no research which considered all three of these topics (adolescent
literacy, book clubs, and students who were incarcerated) through a critical race theory
lens. For this reason, I was extremely interested in applying what I was learning in my CRT class to my book club research at JDC and exploring the ways that CRT could inform and enhance the book club experience. More than just informing and enhancing the book club experience, I wanted to think about how to transform book clubs into a program of social change and collective action through a critical race pedagogy in order to promote racial and social justice. A way to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline through informed action. However, that dream has not yet been realized, as I explain in Chapters 4 and 5.

**Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

Employing a critical race theoretical framework illustrates how race is pervasive and threaded throughout the fabric of US society (Bell, 1992). CRT scholars recognize the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1993) and compounding jeopardies of race, racism, and power with other forms of oppression such as sexism, classism, ableism, or sexual orientation (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1989). CRT has several interrelated tenets, but for my work with book clubs at JDC, I was particularly interested in the affirmation of experiential knowledge of people of Color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, Solórzano, 1997) as “legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Specifically, I wanted to draw upon students’ experiential knowledge and cultural resources—such as “knowledge, practices, beliefs, norms, and values that are derived from culturally specific lessons within the home space and local communities of people who have been subordinated by dominant society” (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002, p. 172)—as a way to promote social justice and combat the school-to-prison pipeline that too many minoritized students
are falling victim to each day. Hence, I wanted to employ race as a critical analytical lens to investigate how students navigated the educational and juvenile justice systems through critical dialogue pertaining to issues of race, racism, and power surrounding a young adult, culturally relevant novel in a book club.

I did not wish to “use” my students and their knowledge for my own research gains (please note my positionality statement and theoretical conceptualization of this autoethnography in Chapter 3), rather my aim was to open a space to talk with students about race, racism, and power and invite their perspectives on their educational narratives and the school-to-prison pipeline using our reading material as a place to start. Furthermore, it is important to note that although I taught rudimentary tenets of CRT to the students, and I used a CRT lens to reflect on my experiences as a researcher, I do not claim to be a critical race theorist nor do I wish to co-opt CRT as a white woman scholar. Rather, my work is informed by CRT in an attempt to

join the fight to legitimize research that utilizes alternative methods such as CRT, that comes from the lived experiences of individuals who have traditionally been marginalized and considered unimportant to scholarship, and that grows from the passion of doing research to effect changes that will benefit people of Color (Bergson, 2003, p. 60).

My epistemological and ontological beliefs are likewise informed by CRT, and I do understand, view, and analyze the world through a centrality of race and the understanding that racism is a permanent and fixed system in our society (Bell, 1992); but I do not claim to be a CRT scholar. There is too much danger in CRT being co-opted by white folks (Bergson, 2003), and I do not wish to perpetuate that co-optation. That
being said, I share ideas from CRT, because I have been informed by CRT and I believe that critiquing whiteness from a CRT lens is the only way to disrupt white supremacy. Critical whiteness studies (Leonardo, 2009; Matias, 2016) attempts this disruption as well, and allows for me to critique whiteness by centering it in my own analysis of self. Yet, in order to critique the research process as a whole, I must decenter whiteness from a CRT lens.

Ultimately, through this work and my continued work in the fight for racial and social justice, my goal is to make a contribution to the creation of a scholarly climate that allows for white scholars, researchers, and teachers to address myriad inequities and injustices found in our world today. My hope from this research project was to understand, firsthand, from the students’ point of view, what could be done in the classroom to combat the school-to-prison pipeline, while at the same time understanding how to promote literacy and academic achievement amongst the students who were incarcerated as a way to promote racial justice.

The CRT book club that I implemented was intended to actively work to combat stereotypes and oppression in the everyday lives of students who were incarcerated. As McKay (2010) articulated, CRT “encourages critical collective action, through the engagement of the learner’s experiential knowledge and social agency” (p. 26). I wanted the CRT book club to build students’ literacy skills, foster critical discussions, and promote practical decision-making skills in order for students to develop voice and agency to promote critical collective action within their school and community as a way of combatting the school-to-prison pipeline and of promoting social and racial justice.
However, that goal was not entirely reached through the project at JDC that semester for a variety of reasons, which I discuss in detail.

I had approval from Dr. Hendrickson to include CRT in my book club and had situated my book club within the literature. I was ready to try to strategically implement my ideas. But first, I had to consult with Dr. Anders to make sure it would work for my racial justice project.
CHAPTER 3:

DESCRIBING THE BOOK CLUBS (METHODOLOGY)

Email Exchange: Crafting CRT Book Clubs

From: Jennifer Doyle

Subject: Racial Justice Project

Date: Tues, Feb 18, 2014 at 9:56 PM

To: Allison Anders

Hi Allison,

I am writing you with some thoughts/ideas about racial justice project.

As I discussed with you earlier, I was thinking about looking at counternarratives (Delgado, 2000) in relation to my group of girls I have for an advisory period each morning. However, I am also in a class on Tuesdays where we are doing a study surrounding book clubs at JDC. We meet with our book clubs (a group of 4 students) at JDC 5 times. Tonight was our second meeting with the students. After transcribing and analyzing our initial interviews this past week and our second encounter this evening, I left class tonight wanting to explore these book clubs through a CRT lens. The data is lending itself to this specific framework. I also am now thinking that I want to do something with my racial justice project surrounding these book clubs with incarcerated youth. I think the novel we are reading (The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie) coupled with the students in my book club (2 in particular are
extremely interested in race and racism in society) will make for an extremely interesting study of how to promote racial justice and literacy through book clubs with incarcerated youth.

To be honest, I chose to do counternarratives because I have already done this with my English students and written an article with Lamar surrounding counternarratives through a CRT lens in our English classrooms (Johnson & Doyle, 2013). I thought it would be interesting to look at my group of girls who I do not teach in the English classroom setting—which it has been—but I also feel like I have already done significant research on counternarratives. I think the unique opportunity to work with incarcerated youth and conduct research through a CRT lens that promotes racial justice is one I should not pass up.

All of this being said, I was wondering what your opinions were regarding this matter. I am going to be conducting my research at JDC through a CRT lens regardless, but I thought it would be interesting to pair it with my racial justice project. However, the issue of time arises. I do not want to be behind on my work if I switch now before Thursday? Do you think I should stick with what I have already? Or, should I explore the pairing of the book clubs with my racial justice project? Either way, I will make something work by Thursday. I just figured I should discuss these ideas and concerns with you before making a decision.

Please let me know. I’m sorry this is so last minute! It was just an idea that popped in my head in class tonight and wanted to discuss it before I made any rash decisions.

Best,
From: Allison Anders

Subject: Re: Racial Justice Project

Date: Wed, Feb 19, 2014 at 8:13 AM

To: Jennifer Doyle

Hi Jen,

First, I am excited to hear that you are so interested in CRT and its concepts. That’s fantastic!

I think the first question I might ask is how do you think a research project “on” Black folks is a racial justice project. The main difference I’m reading between these two possibilities is that in the original idea you sound as if you are working “with” the young Black women to explore issues of race and racism. In the second more recent idea, the young Black men sound more like objects of study for a CRT project. I’m not sure CRT as an analytical tool = racial justice. It doesn’t mean the second idea won’t work (& I am happy to give you an extension if you want to rework the project), but I also get the sense from reading your email that you could analyze the JDC book club from CRT at any point. It doesn’t sound like the data are going anywhere.

If you are interested in pursuing the JDC book club, think about ways to work “with” the young Black men rather than “study” the young Black men. CRT wants to center the lived experience of folks of Color. It works against the more frequent and historically common approach of studying issues in Black communities and of Black folks as objects of analysis. Not that your intent was to make them objects, but it will be
important to brainstorm ways to prevent this from happening. I am not sure how much control you may have in the space to set up new dynamics.

Let me know if you need to meet before or after class tomorrow to talk.

Best,

Allison

In hindsight, I see now that Dr. Anders could see right away that I would have trouble not “othering” the students through this research because of how the study was set up. But I was so determined to make these book clubs for racial justice work! It didn’t matter to me that it would be difficult work. It was necessary work. And I was certain I could brainstorm ways to prevent it from happening. It all made sense in my head, but implementing it was another problem. Dr. Anders knew that my control in the book club was limited, but at the time, I felt like Dr. Hendrickson had given us complete control over how to craft our book club, so I was eager to put theory into practice with the book clubs. Plus, literacy and book clubs in an incarcerated setting seemed like the best way I knew how to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline as an English teacher. I felt as though this was a unique opportunity to implement my ideas from CRT into my research at JDC—an opportunity I was not certain I would have again.

The idea seemed like it would work in my head, and I was willing to put in the extra work necessary to ensure that our book club would be a true enactment of racial justice. Additionally, as I stated in my email, our book club was lending itself to race-based conversations, and I wanted to problematize racism with my students on Tuesday nights, like we were doing in CRT every Thursday night. One student in particular, Isaac,
was extremely interested in untold history, particularly Black history, and talked often about Huey P. Newton and Malcolm X, often questioning why we learned about the Holocaust but not about the genocide of the “Indians” [Natives] in schools or about Black history month “game changers” and only the peaceful protestors.

Our book club (Lindsay, me, and the “Fantastic Four” group of teenage boys of Color, whom I describe in the next section), was already becoming a critical dialogue surrounding issues of race and racism, and I wanted to make sure we navigated that conversation correctly as white women educators. Furthermore, I wanted to ensure that I navigated the teaching of CRT properly as a white woman, being aware of the dangers of coming off as the “good white” (Thompson, 2003) or the “white savior” (Applebaum, 2010) to our students, or as an expert on race and racism (Bergerson, 2010) when it was not my lived reality. A huge piece of it as well was to avoid the potential danger Lindsay and I could have ran into of “othering” our students in the process of the research. I wanted to promote racial justice, and “othering” the students would only promote racial injustice.

I chose this email exchange to provide an introduction to “describing” the book club in this chapter and in order to provide another example of the juxtaposition between the two courses, too. Both the beginning of Chapter 2 and the beginning of Chapter 3 start with emails I wrote on the same Tuesday evening, asking both of my professors permission to mesh the two classes together. However, their responses could not have been more different. It is evident now that Dr. Hendrickson did not understand what I meant by teaching tenets of CRT to our students, and I did not know enough at the time to explain it to her in any other way. Nor did I understand enough at the time how very
different our two epistemic orientations were. Or even what the word “epistemology” was. I just knew that I knew what I knew and didn’t understand why Dr. Hendrickson didn’t know that too?!? I was her student.

**Book Clubs at JDC**

As previously stated, the book clubs at JDC were developed as part of a doctoral seminar class on adolescent literacy. The semester was developed around a six-week case study (Yin, 2014) of book clubs with students who were incarcerated at JDC. We as graduate students explored all aspects of the research process from planning the curriculum of the book club, to conducting guided literature reviews, writing to coding, and analyzing research data, submitting conference proposals on early findings, and finally writing up the data collectively as a class. The objectives of the research was to (1) expand the literacy experiences of incarcerated youth through the provisions of small group literacy instruction (i.e., book clubs) facilitated by certified teachers; (2) document the experiences of JDC adolescents during literacy instruction/book clubs; (3) explore the effects of book clubs on incarcerated youth; (4) consider the implications of book clubs in partnership with JDC for teacher education (S. Hendrickson, personal communication, January 2014).

During our first night of class, Dr. Hendrickson also told us that a hidden goal of the course was to teach us, as doctoral students, what life in the academy was like—from the start of conducting research, presenting at conference, and writing up data for publication. She was going to teach us what being a professor was like. And in fact, in the subsequent years following the class, my research partner, Lindsay, and I were also involved in presenting the work at three separate conferences, publishing a book chapter,
and extensively revising and resubmitting a research article that was finally published in 2017. The class consisted of a tenured professor, Dr. Hendrickson, and nine doctoral students.

All of us were white, middle-class women ranging in age from mid-twenties to mid-sixties, and ranging in experience from first-year doctoral students to fourth-year doctoral students. Organizationally, Dr. Hendrickson alone received approval from university’s office of research compliance to conduct the research as the principal investigator. As students in the class, we were not allowed to use any of the data we had gathered, coded, and analyzed without her permission or approval.

When we began our research at JDC, Dr. Hendrickson allowed us to have complete agency over our book club and the curriculum. Then, she deliberately placed us in groups of two or three to work with a research partner and a group of students at JDC. She placed us in these researcher partnerships based on our past experiences and strengths as students, attempting to group us in ways that would complement one another.

The students we worked with at JDC were all volunteer students who wanted to be a part of the book club experience. The director at JDC placed his students in groups based on his known understandings of how certain students worked well together and which students would not be able to productively work together because of past conflict. Collectively, there were four groups of book clubs with 2-3 university research partners, 3-7 JDC students, a guard, and a faculty member from the school located on site at JDC. We gathered as a large group in the school’s library and then broke off into our individual book clubs each night, for a total of five 1.5-2-hour book club meetings.
The book club Lindsay and I facilitated originally consisted of seven JDC students, but after the first night but we had four students for the remaining four sessions. One student was released from JDC, and two others opted out of the program for varying reasons. We lovingly named our book club the “Fantastic Four”, because we were the only group that maintained all of our students throughout the duration of the research. Another group lost all of their JDC members and an additional research partner, Jessica (pseudonym), was assigned to our group half-way through the book club experience. The “Fantastic Four” consisted of four 16- and 17-year-old males: three African American students and one bi-racial student.

My research partner, Lindsay, had little experience working with adolescents; she was trained as an elementary teacher and had experience working with preservice teachers. Therefore, as a high school English teacher, I initially led the curriculum development and facilitation of the book clubs at JDC while she originally took on the role of data collection through observational field notes and transcriptions of the interviews. She had already completed her qualitative course work as part of her program and I had not yet as a first-year doctoral student. I took field notes and transcribed the sessions as the book club progressed, too.

After each session, we both coded and analyzed the data separately and then discussed our findings afterwards on privately recorded Google Hangouts, which is where the first tensions arose for me. Several tensions also arose for me after the second book club session when Lindsay became more comfortable participating in the book club setting and became more of a participant-observer rather than just observer. Also, following the second book club meeting, additional tensions arose for me when Jessica
became part of our research process. After we were done with the book clubs. Even further tensions arose when we cross-coded our book club data with the data from the other book clubs from the course and were not allowed autonomy or agentic expression over interpretations of our own data. This eventually culminated in years of tension as we continued to try and write through our analyses, publish our work and present it at conferences. I unpack these tensions in detail in the subsequent chapters. For now, I continue to describe how we set up the book club.

The study involved two primary data collection methods: participant observation (Glesne, 2011) and in-depth interviews (Glesne, 2011) through the book club dialogue. We tape recorded and transcribed all of the book club sessions. There was also document collection from students in the form of writing invitations, text connections, and other writings the students completed in response to the novel we read, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie (2007).

I kept a field notebook to record my observations during book clubs and interviews, a researcher diary to record my own thoughts and reflections on the research to analyze my own biases and perceptions, and wrote analytic memos (Glesne, 2011). Essentially, I facilitated the book club while simultaneously carefully observing and consciously recording in detail the many aspects of the book club.

In order to pursue construct validity (Lather, 1986), I engaged in systematic reflexivity by reflecting on the data through my researcher diary and writing analytic memos (Saldaña, 2016) as well as subjectivity statements (Roulston, 2010) to analyze my changing thoughts about data during the research process as I attempted to “explore the effects of book clubs on incarcerated youth” (S. Hendrickson, personal communication,
January 2014). I also had numerous conversations with Dr. Anders, the professor of our CRT course, via email and after our class meetings, as well as the other members of my CRT class on Thursday nights that semester. I would do my adolescent literacy course work with students at JDC on Tuesday nights, process it on Wednesday nights, and come to class trying to figure out what it all meant on Thursday nights, then take that knowledge to reflect all weekend so I could be better the following Tuesday.

As a team, Lindsay and I used emotion, descriptive, and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016) to look across codes to note patterns and develop themes surrounding our primary data collection. We used codes and patterns to inform the direction of each book club meeting, and conducted member checking with the first transcript. Additionally, we recorded all of our researcher conversations privately using Google Hangout, which created private YouTube links to our conversations about the data and the book club. We posted everything to our shared ResearcherWiki page, which was a requirement for our course.

I provided the students with six different selections of novels to read that they then voted on at the end of our second book club meeting. Choice of literature within the book club was vital for increasing both student engagement (Daniels & Steineke, 2004), as well as empowering students to be agents of change in their own lives and society (Fredricks, 2012). All of the original six selections were multicultural, liberating novels because I had learned that if literacy is to be meaningful, it is important that it be rooted in students’ lives (Clarke, 2006). I had learned, too, that students who develop their own voice develop their own sense of self-worth (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

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For the curriculum of the book club, we read the novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007) and directly taught tenets of CRT through popular media and examples in the novel. The main tenets we focused on were the endemic nature of racism alongside Bell’s (1992) racial realism position on the permanence of racism in society, challenges to the dominant, majoritarian ideologies (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002), the legitimization of experiential knowledge of people of Color (Lawrence, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), and commitments to social justice (Matsuda, 1993). We fostered critical discussions about race, racism, and power and led our students into the analysis of what they personally could do to promote social justice during their time at JDC as well as in the local communities back home once they were released from JDC.

Although I never shared my hope with Lindsay or Dr. Hendrickson at the time, the research that I wanted to do with the book club was to use our interview data from our students who were incarcerated to critically look at the role of teachers—particularly teacher bias and perception—in the school-to-prison pipeline, from the perspective of the students and application of a critical race theories. I wanted to know, from the students’ perspective, (1) what could be done in the classroom to combat the school-to-prison pipeline and (2) how to promote critical literacy and academic achievement amongst the students as a way to promote social justice.

From my methodological literature review on the school-to-prison pipeline, I noted that much of the research on this phenomena had focused on policy and theory (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Bahena et al., 2012; Osher et al., 2003) with a few empirical studies (Raffaele Mendex, 2003; Fabelo et al., 2011; Wald & Kurlaender, 2003;
and a good many studies that conceptualized the correlation teacher bias and the school-to-prison pipeline (Pyscher & Lozenski, 2014; Noguera, 2012; Dancy, 2014; Annamma, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Allen & White-Smith, 2014). However, more research was needed to empirically explore the connections between teacher bias and perceptions leading to the school-to-prison pipeline, and specifically how teachers could disrupt the pipeline in their own classrooms, possibly using a CRT lens. I recognized that many scholars have already begun to conceptualize the role of teachers in the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma, 2015; Allen & White-Smith, 2014; Bryan, 2017), but more empirical research is needed, and I wanted to learn, directly from our students who were incarcerated, the roles they thought teachers had played in their lives leading up to incarceration. While I understood that a variety of factors influenced current incarceration, and I recognized, too, the power teachers had in keeping children out of the school-to-prison pipeline and in their classrooms (Elias, 2013; Christensen, 2011-2012).

Autoethnographic Pause: Phone Call with the Best

It’s a Monday morning in early February 2018, and I have just finished writing the section of my methodology chapter for my dissertation. I don’t want to stop writing, but I’ve come to a good stopping point, and I haven’t moved from the black leather spiny-chair in my home office for nearly four hours. My best friend Nadia is calling, so I decide to take her call and stretch my legs. I can feel how tight my hamstrings are from sitting for so long. I really have to remember to get up once an hour at least to stretch. These gym workouts and prolonged writing sessions are so intense! I think to myself as I
stand and answer the phone. Plus, I haven’t talked to my best friend in almost three days! It’s time for me to take a break. We have so much to catch up on.

My voice sounds foreign to me as the answer the phone with our usual excited high-pitched greeting, “O-M-GEEEHEE HEY BEST FRIEND!” I realize I haven’t spoken to anyone aloud all morning.

“Hey best friend! Whatcha doing? Writing every day and graduating in May?!?” she asks in a sing-songy voice.

“YESSSS GIRLLLL! I am ACTUALLY writing every day! I didn’t even want to stop! I just finished my methodology chapter to send to my advisor and I AM SO EXCITED! I feel like my whole life has led up to this. It’s been actually fun to write!”

“Look at you being productive out here in 2018, out here living your best life at 30!” Nadia exclaims impressively.

“Okayyyy!!! Ya’ girl done turned 30 and got her life all the way together!” I proudly laugh.

“Aww I’m so proud of you!” she states, while I frolic down the carpeted stairs in my small two-story townhome.

Beaming with happiness, I go outside to sit on my front porch to talk to Nadia. I quit smoking cigarettes last year, but I often miss sitting out on my front porch and looking across the townhome parking lot I used to watch over on a daily basis. It was always nice to take a break outside and gather my thoughts or catch up with my friends and family across the country while enjoying a good smoke. So, I replaced the behavior with just randomly sitting outside to take breaks from my writing. I’m sure my neighbors think I am crazy, but they probably already thought that when I used to sit outside and
chain-smoke cigarettes. At least this way I’m not killing myself in the process. I take a deep breath of fresh air as I step outside, reminding myself of how great it is to be able to breathe and not die a young and untimely death, and I hold it in for a couple seconds.

“Thanks girl! It’s so crazy… hold on…” I trail off as I get distracted by the door closing behind me and try to regain my thoughts. The parking lot is quiet this morning, as it often is on weekday mornings after all of my neighbors go to work and I sit at my house deliberately writing. I chuckle to myself at how they think I don’t actually work because I’m always home, but really I do the most work locking myself in my house and writing for days at a time.

“Wait, what was I saying? OH YES! GIRLLLLL… I thought I had the whole idea of autoethnography down but then I got this new book (Hughes & Pennington, 2017) and read some more stuff on the different types and it’s so cool! There’s actually an already established method that describes perfectly what I am doing for my dissertation (Anderson, 2006)!”

“Yay! That’s awesome. You know I don’t even know what autoethno… whatever you said was though,” she laughs. “But I love your excitement. Is this the same thing you were telling me about over spring break last year when we were doing work at your grandma’s house?” We had super-intense hours we spent at my grandma’s kitchen island last year while I was completing my comprehensive exam.

“Yeah it’s like an extension of that pretty much, but I couldn’t do my own book clubs, so it’s basically like a story of myself and my involvement with those other book clubs I did at JDC four years ago and a critique of myself and my role in the research
process. You remember those two different pieces I had published about it and how it was the research that never ended?”

“Yeah, I remember you telling me about that but that was so long ago! Are you still doing research about it?”

“Technically, but really I guess I’ve never been able to put it down now that I’m thinking about it. I just had to get my story out. So, you know how like when authors say that writing is easy once you have a story to get out? I finally feel like I have this story I have to get out! So, the story is in me, I just have to put it on paper…and try not to include everything ‘cause you know I be doing THE MOST.”

“The ABSOLUTE most!” Nadia laughs, “Just don’t know how to do anything simply. All or nothing type shit.”

“Right!” I chuckle, cherishing the way that Nadia knows everything about me and still loves me anyways, even in all of my intensity, even when I’m “Jen on Ten” as she calls me.

“But yeah, I’m trying to keep it focused just to the research at JDC and not all of the millions of other related things I want to include, because otherwise I will not be graduating in May!

It’s basically like a confessional tale (Van Maanen, 1988) of what happened in the research process and a critique of whiteness slash critique of my own role as a white woman teacher and researcher during that process. Technically, I just read last week that what I’ve been thinking and writing about is called an analytic autoethnography. But then also it’s like a story (Ellis, 2004), so I want it to read like a novel when it can and that’s been the really fun part! I want it to be accessible and not read so academic-y.”
“Oh, okay wow, that sounds really cool. I don’t know everything that you are talking about it but it sounds really cool!”

“Thanks, best friend! But that’s okay. You’ll see when I send it to you! I’m probably going to include some of our conversations in there, too, because you’re like one of the only people I talk to regularly about this, so I’ll need you to what’s called a ‘member-check’ and make sure that I got everything right and portrayed you accurately and how you want to be portrayed. Plus, you and Madalyn [my “adopted daughter” little cousin, 19-year-old sophomore in college] know me better than anyone in the world so I’ll have to check with y’all to make sure I am accurately portraying myself as well and making sure not to be too self-absorbed.

In the article I was reading earlier this researcher (Anderson, 2006) said that “autoethnography loses its sociological promise when it devolves into self-absorption” (p. 385) so I gotta watch out for that. Plus, too much focus on me and my white feelings are going to be counterproductive to my goals of pursuing racial justice work.”

“I can see that. But of course! I’m so excited to read it! And you know I’ll tell you about yourself,” Nadia snickers.

I laugh. “Yes girl! That’s why you’re my BEST friend!!!! BUT MANNNNNNN, NADIA! It’s been so cool! I spent four hours last week just reading through all my old journals, ‘cause you know I’m a hoarder right?”

“Haha YES! You just don’t know how to throw away anything, like your damn baby teeth we found when we were cleaning out your mom’s house! That was real white of you!”
“Look, my mother saved those, okay?!” I laugh. “You’re just jealous you don’t still have your disgusting baby teeth forever preserved in a plastic tooth with the dates from when you lost it!” I joke with her.

“Jen. That was gross as fuck. There was blood still on them! That is definitely some white people shit.”

“Listen, it’s only right that I saved everything! My mom saved all of my stuff and I saved all my stuff, and, LOOK AT ME NOW! Using all of my stuff for my dissertation. I have allllll my journals and notes and everything I’ve ever written since elementary school. But I just opened this box I had in my guest room closet full of all of my high-school, undergrad, and grad school stuff! GIRL! I have binders, notebooks, syllabuses—or syllabi, you know, whatever—every assignment and paper and everything I’ve ever completed! PLUS! All of my emails from 2006-now. Plus my researcher journals from my master’s and from the book club research and my teacher journals and my personal journals and FREAKING EVERYTHING. It’s like a whole entire collection of writing! Narns, I have SO MUCH STUFF that I spent three hours the other day just reading the thoughts and ponderings of past-Jen. Please do me a favor and if I die before you, BURN THEM! So embarrassing!”

“Haha, okay Jen, whatever you say,” Nadia replies in her usual way of dismissing my intensity and excitement.

“But honestly, it’s been pretty cool, because now I can use all of that as data for my research!”

“Look, you like it, I love it! I’m just glad you actually out here accomplishing your tasks! I just wanted to call and check on you and make sure you were not out here
getting distracted by your new boo and were writing every day so you could graduate in May! You know we have all the plans for Mother’s Day after your graduation!”

“Yesssss!!! Don’t worry I haven’t been letting her distract me. It’s actually been really nice to be supported through this dissertation process. But don’t worry. I got it under control. I know we have all the plans for Mother’s Day on the beach! Thank you for checking in on me, Narnie! I love you so much! I’ll let you know when I’m finished writing and will send it to you.”

“Okay sounds good,” she replies.

“Enough about me though, girl, HOW ARE YOU?!! How was Atlanta? How’s KJ? How’s work? Are you doing okay with everything going on with your uncle? Are you letting yourself feel? Tell me everything! I haven’t talked to you in three days!!!”

We continue to catch one another up on our lives until the last 72 hours have been exhaustively detailed, and we’ve come to conclusions on what to do about friends, family, our present tensions in our working lives, and how we have progressed thus far on our 2018 goals we set forth at the beginning of the year.

When we get off the phone, I return inside to the silence of my house and realize how accustomed I’ve become to the silence during the writing process, so much so that loud noises have been hurting my ears lately and I even had to tell Madalyn to turn down her music when she was here visiting the other week. “I’m old now,” I told her, thinking about how our relationship has grown and evolved since she is a sophomore in college now and how I, too, have grown and changed. Matured. Both of us have matured in different ways and it’s been a blessing to witness. But I hear every sound in my house now that I am stuck in my head. I can hear the shaking of the house from the wind. The
metal ringing of the decorative sun above my bed as it vibrates with the train. The cars driving by outside. The whirl of my air vent as it sucks up the air through the filter, which I probably need to change soon anyways. The voices of my neighbors outside.

I settle back into the silence, grab a water bottle from the fridge, and plop myself down at my desk again, determined to finish the missing pieces of my methodology section before going to the movies tonight. *It’s important to maintain a work-life balance and not isolate yourself, Jennifer,* I remind myself when I briefly consider skipping the “Black Stories: Two Cities” movies on the hospital strike in Charleston and gentrification in DC in the 1970s. It’s playing at the Nickelodeon Theatre on Main Street and going to “The Nick” is my weekly date night with myself. *2018 and my 30s is a return to self,* I think, feeling blessed to have had the opportunity to watch myself grow into myself through this process. *Don’t lose her again, Jennifer Lynn.*

**More on Methodology: Goals & Approaches**

As stated earlier in this chapter, my goal through this critical, analytic autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016; Anderson, 2006) is to explore the role that my actions and non-actions played regarding the outcomes of the research process in ways that may have gone unnoticed. It is an analysis and critique of the consequences of my actions and non-actions during the research process in my adolescent literacy course. Through this critique and inquiry into self, it is my hope that this work will be beneficial for educators, researchers, and scholars who are particularly invested in racial justice work.

My inquiry questions are as follows:
1) What tensions arose from my racial justice work with students of Color who were incarcerated?

2) How did I navigate, or fail to navigate, those tensions?

3) What can be learned from my experiences and the tensions?

4) What does it mean to be a “woke” white woman engaged in racial justice work?

I attempted to approach my original book club research from an emic perspective as I was trying to understand my participant’s perspectives rather than my own perspective as a researcher (Merriam, 1998). I wanted to approach the book clubs from this insider’s perspective; however, I was naturally an outsider. As Olive (2014) argued, there is always this tension between emic and etic approaches because given the inescapable subjectivity that every researcher brings to a study through his or her past experiences, ideas, and perspectives, a solely emic perspective is impossible to achieve. Conversely, if a research takes a purely etic perspective or approach to a study, he or she risks the possibility of overlooking hidden nuances, meanings and concepts within a culture that can only be gleaned through interviews and observations (paragraph 13).

Viewing the world in non-binary terms, I find it difficult to pick either an emic or etic approach as I am naturally an insider to my own experience (emic) but also am coming to the research with existing theories, e.g., CRT (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Lynn & Dixson, 2013) and critical whiteness studies (Frankenberg, 1993; Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, & Chennault, 1998; Leonardo, 2009; Applebaum, 2010; Matias, 2016) about
myself and my experience that semester (etic). Therefore, I come to this autoethnographic research from a combination of both emic and etic orientations as I already have pre-existing theories about myself that I am bringing with me to this research. However, I want to ensure that I am not overlooking anything when viewing my data through these theoretical lenses. Ultimately, I do not view this autoethnography as an etic study, rather it is one that is informed by theories that have particular resonance with me.

I approach this research from a critical theory and postmodern paradigm. As Glesne (2011) noted, “critical theory research critiques historical conditions of oppression and seeks transformation of those conditions” (p. 9), which is particularly what I hoped to do through my original book club research and also through this autoethnographic account of my research. As part of the critical theory paradigm, critical race theory (CRT) scholars promote racial justice particularly through the critique of historical, structural conditions of racial oppression and seek to transform those conditions for people of Color through activist-oriented social justice (Matsuda, 1993).

Furthermore, I reject the objective Truth, and such a rejection aligns with postmodern scholars who understand truth as multifaceted, changing with time, space, and perspective (Wilson, 1997). Indeed, many critical race theorists view truth as situational as well, arguing that “truth only exists for this person in this predicament at this time in history” (Delgado, 1991, as cited in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006, p. 21). As shown, many CRT scholars and postmodernism scholars acknowledge the subjective nature of truth and the many forms of what I call “little truths” that are situational in history and time. A CRT understanding of truth also reflects the ways truth is racialized
and that “our conceptions of race, even in a postmodern and/or postcolonial world are more embedded and fixed than in a previous age” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 9).

Together, both critical race theory and postmodernism inform my epistemological beliefs, but I am also informed by social constructivist, postmodern approaches (Kilgore, 2001), because I believe that knowledge construction is generated within greater social and cultural milieu where experiences, beliefs, and relationships with others are driven by context, culture, and social interactions through multiple ways of being in the world (Ramsey, 2000; Rogoff, 2003). CRT and critical social theory in general inform my social constructivist approach and add a layer of critical dialogue and critical reflection through racialized understandings of the role of race, racism, power, and privilege as part of the research process. Indeed, my understandings of truth and the construction of knowledge informed my entire approach and design to this research as I know that I have many truths, and that there are many versions of truth as pertains to this story (for instance, the truths that Dr. Hendrickson and Lindsay and Dr. Anders have about this experience). Here, I seek to honor my own many truths and many versions of self. Lastly, my epistemology allows me to understand that I cannot create any definitive conclusions from my personal experience.

My positionality and identity as a white, middle class (with ties to the owning class), bisexual woman who has never been incarcerated made me an inevitable “outsider” (Smith, 1999) on nearly every level of identity in comparison to the students I worked with at JCD. Additionally, my status as a doctoral student, who represented the university, and was allowed to move freely about the prison and the outside world made for a variety of tensions and implications which I could not remove from the research
Drawing from narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013), I tried my best to engage in autobiographical narrative inquiries through my analytic memos, researcher journal, subjectivity statements, and reflexivity statements as I was analyzing and interpreting the data. I shared these autobiographical narratives and reflections with colleagues in the academy, mentors from the university, and friends outside the academy to examine my preconceived notions and biases. I have always tried to be attuned to my “position and privilege” (McCorkel & Myers, 2003) and understand that “the context of discovery is shaped by personal biography as well as social structure” (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 212), but I had to learn to be even more attuned to it throughout this process.

Particularly in regards to my positionality as a white woman, I have to be constantly cognizant of decentering my whiteness (Thompson, 2003) and cautious of playing the role of the “good white” or “white savior” when confronting issues of race, racism, and power within my work. There is a tension between the fact that I, as a white woman, was engaged in research with students of Color and currently am engaged in research on myself as a white woman all the while understanding that white folks cannot and should not dominate the dialogue (Boutte & Jackson, 2013). There is a tension of wanting to decenter whiteness, but not being able to properly critique it without centering it through this work. This is a tension that I continuously strive to navigate in both my personal and professional lives.

Moreover, I am at this tension point because whiteness was centered in the academy in particular ways through Dr. Hendrickson’s “ownership” of the experiences of the students of Color who were incarcerated as “her” data—not even to be shared with other white students. And Dr. Hendrickson herself was educated through whiteness in the
academy. I am trying hard to decenter whiteness, but it is attention to white power in K-20 contexts that I need to bring with this work.

Furthermore, examining my whiteness within a prison setting “is a critical feature of the interaction order because it represents both a position of structural privilege and a legacy of cultural practices premised on exclusion, domination, and exploitation” (West, 1994; hooks, 1994; Abu-Jamal, 2000; as cited in McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 215). I cannot escape this, and indeed, I must be not only cognizant of it in my interactions but also in my analysis, interpretations, and representations of my findings. I have to be aware of my racialized positionality, and indeed Milner’s (2007) framework for understanding my racialized positionality helped me understand how I might have “othered” students at JCD in the process of our research rather than treating them as experts on a subject from whom we could learn. I will continue to discuss this in depth in my “Reflecting on the Book Club” in Chapter 6. Yet, engaging in systematic and brutally honest reflexivity on my whiteness and my privileged status as an university doctoral student/researcher is the only way that I can ever hope to humanize this research process (Paris & Winn, 2014). Below, I offer a brutally honest reflection on my own whiteness after presenting “woke whiteness work” as a methodology in autoethnographic research.

**Woke Whiteness Work as Methodology in Autoethnography**

As a methodology, I am practicing woke whiteness work, here in my autoethnographic dissertation, by writing against myself (Noblit, 1999) in italics throughout the dissertation. Speaking back to former-self, through a woke whiteness work lens, knowing that it will always be layered with more critique and more analysis, because I am a white woman, always complicit in racism. In order to speak back to
myself, I needed my racial justice toolkit. I originally formed a racial justice toolkit in spring 2014, following our book clubs, and my completion of CRT. My racial justice toolkit defined vocabulary that allowed me to talk about racism in a tangible way, giving power in conversation through the naming of hegemonic structures and systems. While doing the work for this dissertation, I formed an additional “woke whiteness work” part of my racial justice toolkit that allowed me to name the many ways that white supremacy and white hegemony was operating me, in the people around me, and in the institutions and systems. This was woke whiteness work as a critical pedagogy. I developed this from white complicity pedagogy (Applebaum, 2010), but extended it once I saw all of the ways in which Applebaum, too, operated under white logic as a white person and was still playing white power games of white patriarchy—using the master’s tools trying to dismantle the master’s house (Lorde, 1984)—realizing that I, too, was doing the same thing with my white logic.

The only way to get around all of this, was to exist outside the master’s tools, completely and entirely rejecting all notions of “either/or” philosophies and mindsets that were perpetuating notions of oppositional dualities (Crenshaw, 1988) found in Western/Eurocentric, Anglo/white thought processes. Simultaneously, there had to be an acknowledgement that no one could exist outside of the “master’s house” (Lorde, 1984) of white supremacy and white hegemony. This was wokeness work, in general—rejecting “either/or” ways of thinking and thinking of everything in terms of “both/and” instead. This “both/and” frame of mind is what causes tensions in everything because, indeed, nothing in the world is truly “either/or”. White people have used this “either/or” logic and thought process to their advantage to divide and conquer, split the world into opposites
everywhere they went, and claim their superiority based on “enlightened” ideas. Then, because we, as white people (and as all people who exist in a society built upon white hegemony), operate in these “either/or” binaries, we constantly deploy and reproduce hierarchies—cultural, gender, geographic, economic, political, racial, sexual hierarchies.

In everyday white communication, white people always try to “one up” one another at every turn. We wrap ourselves up in the dangers of whiteness—selfishness, greed, envy, pride, wrath (all of the seven deadly sins), all existing in opposition to what it means to be a “good” person. It is literally impossible to always be good, all the time, which is why the notion of goodness is flawed in whiteness. Applebaum (2010) calls this white morality. This “either/or” way of thinking about the world was creating a plethora of tensions throughout my life.

Crenshaw (1988) helped me realize just how pervasive this “either/or” type of thinking was, these oppositional dualities. She pointed out how these opposites are central to Western/Eurocentric, Anglo/white thought processes. White folks made this way of thinking up with the Enlightenment. Literally. Everything in white-thought handed down from the "enlightenment period" (which is literally everything in our government, courts, systems, schools, the academy, any institution, our curriculum, what we consider to be knowledge, what we consider to be science, what we consider to be research, what we consider to be Christian—LITERALLY EVERYTHING!) is divided into binaries of "either/or" that exist on a hierarchical scale—either white or black; good or evil; same or different; man or woman; presence or absence; life or death; norm or other; straight or gay; nature or nurture; fact or fiction; intelligent or unintelligent; moral or immoral; better or worse; law-abiding or criminal; knowledgeable or ignorant;
responsible or shiftless; virtuous/pious or lascivious—and this thought process favors white men to be in power over everything else. Whiteness—maleness, normalness, straightness became tied to the words—good, life, present, fact, science, intelligent, moral, natural, better, law-abiding, knowledgeable, responsible, virtuous/pious etc. while all else existed in opposition to that. So, if you were like me, your whole entire world existed in opposites that created a million different tensions that you had to learn how to navigate.

This process is the reproduction of white supremacy in white intellectual thought, in white being—in our thoughts and in our minds. It plays out in our actions and the actions of others everywhere. Each one of those first words on the list above is always the most powerful. The second word is always subordinate to the first in these oppositions which create divisions, polarizations, and tensions in our lives. It permeates every single aspect of white lives, our heads, our thought processes—we cannot escape it. It is all around us, everywhere we look! White people are socialized in the U.S. to think like this. White people do not have the double consciousness of DuBois and Black folk or the perspective from the bottom that demands living with paradox (Matsuda, 1995). We cannot exist in a world where this does not exist.

As I was working to point out white logic, white ignorance, white greed, white pride, white selfishness, white EVERYTHING in my own thoughts, I realized that this was the problem. We were always thinking in terms of “either/and” constantly at opposition with one another. This was the master’s tools that Lorde (1984) had been trying to tell me about for the last four years since I read her work! I always repeated it, indeed, that’s why I named my vocabulary a “racial justice toolkit” but I was not yet
there. I had to EXIST as a state of being, outside of the master’s house (while still knowing that this was impossible as a white person). I had to be completely woke. Not just aware of racial injustice, but also aware of the ways in which white hegemony and white heterocisapatriarchy was circulating throughout entire systems. I had to completely and utterly reject the master’s tools of “either/or” thinking in order to do this, however. I needed my racial justice toolkit to interrupt this, to complete this work. My racial justice toolkit and my woke whiteness toolkit were going to help me dismantle the master’s house.

Because I did not have my racial justice toolkits before, it did not matter what I did that semester or any semester after that, I was still operating with the master’s tools. I finally completely understood what Lorde meant. This was woke whiteness work. This was how I was going to navigate the tensions of racial justice work as a white woman. By waking up completely and joining my sisters and brothers of Color, my fellow sailors, with my woke whiteness toolkit to dismantle the master’s house—but not in a leadership role, just as a fellow sailor following their lead.

First, however, I needed the vocabulary to think about these ideas in terms that I understood, so I could name and see all of the different ways that whiteness was operating in the academy, in our research that semester, in the white folks I was surrounding myself with, and finally, in myself as I spoke back to my former-self, constantly writing against myself (Noblit, 1999), deliberately naming and calling out my faulty white logic, my selfish white feelings, my contradictory white notions of goodness, my own white ignorance and white invisibility. Once I had my woke whiteness toolkit, completely operating in “both/and” ways of thinking, I was entirely free to critique
myself, to critique my fellow white sisters and brothers, to critique whiteness in the academy, to critique any and everything.

In order to be free to critique, I had to really and truly live unapologetically. In my everyday life. That meant I had to own all of my shit. All of the ways in which I deflected blame, perpetuated racism, was always fully complicit in maintaining racism, upheld faulty white logic, performed whiteness, manipulated truth and people, excused away my behavior with the notion of “good intentions,” constantly busied myself with a “go, go, go” attitude, selfishness, greed, selfish white feelings, envy, the need to always seek outside validation, trickery, deceit—dangers and evil of whiteness! (Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of the dangers and evils of whiteness and white supremacy. There are many more, including white terrorism.) All of the ways I, personally, and my people, historically and presently, enacted metaphorical, physical, and spiritual murders (Johnson and Bryan, 2016) on people of Color. Every. Single. Day. And more than that, too! It has permeated my mind. I cannot escape it. In all of my spiritual sailing sister conversations I had with Kamelah this past semester, we talked about how she, too, as a Black woman, had internalized these dangerous concepts—the power of white hegemony. We had to join a spiritual sailing expedition to figure this out! And even yet, my spiritual awakening, my woke whiteness work, was STILL a product of white supremacy, because my woke whiteness work and this freedom that came with my woke whiteness work, came entirely from the Black community. I can never escape whiteness. I was, and am, and always will be, complicit in this system. I cannot escape it. This is why I must OWN MY SHIT!
Free, White, and 21: Owning My Shit

It was the night before Easter in 2015 and I was back home visiting my grandmother. I was trying to build a relationship with my youngest cousin on my mother’s side, Lilly, who was 20 at the time. She and her two-years-older sister are my only two cousins on my mother’s side. I am their only cousin on either one of their sides of family and the oldest grandchild in the Van Valkenburg family. Lilly had lived a very sheltered, rich-kid life in private school, and my grandmother and I often talked about how she needed to get out more and experience the world. I might have done some things in my life that I wasn’t proud of, but I also went through and witnessed some terrible things in life from a very young age, and I felt as though it made me strong (white rationalization to rationalize away dangerous, illegal, or immoral things by bringing up something unrelated, as if one thing negates another).

Additionally, while my cousin had grown up in the managerial (upper) class, only knowing people in the managerial class or owning class, my mother had raised me in the middle class, with access to the managerial class and owning class through my grandparents, but we were to never ask for handouts from them. They already did too much by providing my mother with a job and serving as our landlords of the home I grew up in. Because I was able to experience the “real world” (as I often called it outside of the managerial and owning class), I felt like I had a lot I could have taught Lilly in my 27th year of life: having lost my mother, gone through the terror that was my childhood at my dad’s house; had my heart broken, got in trouble but still succeeded and was now teacher of the year the very first year I was even eligible to receive the recognition. I was in a doctorate program. I owned my own house, and I paid all my own bills. I was completely
independent. I had my whole entire life together down in South Carolina. She didn’t, and it seemed like she was lost, having to move back home after failing out of college her freshman year.

I was always very close to Lilly when we were kids, taking care of her on family vacations to Colorado when I was in middle school and she was a child; I am seven years older. However, my aunt and uncle (my mom’s brother) never really wanted us to hang out once I got into high school. They thought I would have been a bad influence on her. And at the time probably they were right. But on my dad’s side of the family back in Iowa—where I am one of 28 first-cousins (not even including all of our second-cousins!) and in the middle of the birthing order—it is a rite of passage almost to do things with your older cousins. The first time I ever drove a car at age twelve was with an older cousin. The first time I ever drank a beer at fourteen was with an older cousin. The first time I ever smoked a cigarette at fifteen was with an older cousin. I wanted Lilly to have those same experiences. Not drinking and smoking per say, but that feeling of family and community and belonging to something larger than yourself. My dad’s family is large and loving and fun. Even though my dad was never around, my Gramma Doyle and my mom always made sure I was included as a Doyle in the family. My mom would often send me to Iowa in the summers to spend time with my cousins and family. Even if my father wasn’t around.

In contrast, I always felt like my mom’s family was the worst. They all hated my mother and me (or at the very least did not like us very much and ignored us completely), and we always “played the game” of white patriarchy when we were around them. But I loved Lilly so much when we were little. We always got along because our personalities
clicked. I did not really consider that it had been about 14 years since I really knew anything about her. I just had this memory of us getting along so well and always loving her. She was the first baby I ever held, and I got to hold her the day she was born when I was in second grade. Plus, I had recently started becoming really close with a younger cousin, Madalyn, on my dad’s side of the family (my dad and her mom are brother and sister; Madalyn is now my “little one” and my “adopted daughter”). I loved taking care of her and mentoring her and sharing my life’s wisdom. I would spoil her and take her shopping and out to eat and to get our nails done while teaching her how to cook and taking her to the gym, and occasionally drinking some wine—but teaching her that if she was going to drink anyways (I was never her first experience with any of it), she had to be safe about it and that I preferred she did it with me rather than with her friends who didn’t know what they were doing (white rationalization to attempt to negate illegal or immoral behavior through white logic that somehow makes the illegal or immoral behavior “acceptable”). I wanted Lilly to also benefit from that wisdom. (Not that there is anything wise about underage drinking, but I felt like I was pretty good at being a responsible, reformed badass at that point in my life—if there is such a thing—white rationalization to think there is such a thing as “correctly” doing anything illegal). Plus, earlier in the evening, Lilly had told me that she drank when we were at a family dinner. So, I had convinced her to come spend the night at Grandma’s house with me.

At the time, I was not used to spending anytime at my grandmother’s house. It was weird for me. I never grew up going to my grandmother’s house. My mom always told me that she remembered my grandmother telling her that she was not a babysitter when my mom first told her she was pregnant with me. And she was not. The only time I
ever saw her was at family dinners, or on vacation, or at the office. I think I had only
been to her house a handful of times growing up even though my mother and I lived only
fifteen minutes away. Essentially, she just seemed like my boss at work who also
happened to be my grandmother. But she wasn’t a typical grandma like my Gramma
Doyle was. Plus, my mom was always so adamant about me acting proper around her.
There were certain ways to eat in front of her, napkins to be placed on our laps, dresses to
be worn, chest areas to be covered up, language to avoid, voices to be lowered, only
speaking when spoken to, and proper ways of being. My grandparents were part of the
owning class, and we had to act accordingly. We were not supposed to act like the
middle-class we were at home. My mom always thought that my grandma saw her as a
screw-up, so she made absolutely certain that I knew how to act in front of her so that my
behavior would not be indicative of her single-parenting skills.

It was with this history that I stayed at my grandmother’s house when I went
home to the DC area two years after my mother’s death, still feeling like it was not my
home, although my grandma said it could be. We were much closer now after my
mother’s passing, filling my mother’s void with one another’s presence. I was getting to
know my grandmother better, understanding her as a person, learning why she did the
things she did, and appreciating all of her wisdom and guidance she could offer. Now that
she lived alone, I could see that she and my mother were really quite similar. Perhaps
more free now, able to exist outside of patriarchal oppression from my grandfather. From
the yogurt and bananas they ate for breakfast, to the Washington Post they read at the
kitchen island when they got home from work, and the piles of bills and papers and cards
neatly stacked in the kitchen for filing later; I could see how we were really all the same,
generationally, even though I never knew my grandmother outside of work growing up. I think we all try to not be like our mothers growing up, only to find that the older we get, the more alike to them we become.

I wanted my grandmother to see how alike she was to my mom and also how wonderful my mother was as a person. I felt that I had to fix my mother’s legacy. I would not let her die in vain. I had promised myself that her family would not simply think of her as the daughter/sister who always screwed up. She was so much more. Such a good mother. Her stories of love had to be told. But in early 2015, just two years after my mother’s death, and just one year after my book clubs, I was still feeling out my grandmother, and I was still holding on to my mother’s legacy of making sure I acted right around her so as not to embarrass her. I was supposed to be the physical proof that my mother was not a screw up.

One evening, the night before Easter, following a family dinner where I convinced Lilly to come spend the night with me, my grandmother, Lilly, and I all sat around my grandmother’s island in her kitchen, making awkward small talk about the weather. I had a plan.

“Rachel just text me saying she’s close. We are going to go down the street and meet her for a drink and hang out for a little while, if that’s okay?” I asked my grandmother’s permission. Now, I realize it seemed silly to ask permission as a 27-year-old who had been living on her own since she was 18, but that was just a formality. I knew she would say, “yes.” It just made me look good that I asked (white manipulation).

“Well, you’re free, white, and 21,” she replied with a chuckle, “so I supposed that’s okay,” and she smiled as if she had just told a joke.
“Don’t worry, I won’t let Lilly drink. She doesn’t have a fake ID anyways!” I replied awkwardly, trying to match her laughter and mask my complete and utter shock and surprise at the saying that just came out of her mouth. I had never heard it before, but she said it so casually, with humor, as if it were a shared joke.

I was confused by it. I thought my grandmother knew my cousin was only 20. I thought to myself, did she just say something about being white? I gotta remember this for later. Instead of addressing it or asking for clarification, I grabbed the keys as Lilly gathered her belongings. (white avoidance)

“Okay, we won’t be back too late. Love you, Grandma!”

“Love you, too, sweetie!” she replied.

And we were off.

We weren’t actually going to meet Rachel. I lied. I lied the same lie that I lied to my mom all throughout high school—“I’m going to Rachel’s house” or “I’m going to meet Rachel.” (white lies)

Rachel is my friend from swim team in high school. We met when we were 15 and proceeded to get in all kinds of trouble together throughout high school, even though we went to different schools. We skipped school, went to go get piercings, drank underage, attended parties, and chain-smoked cigarettes (white recklessness). She had come with my mother and me on family vacation the summer before we turned 16, and we got in all kinds of trouble at the beach. My mom yelled at us both like we were both her children. But she never told on Rachel to her parents (white cover-ups).

Rachel was more scared of my mom than I was, but my mom loved Rachel. She was like my mom’s adopted daughter, and she used to live with us back at my mom’s
house the summer of 2007 when her mom kicked her out of her house for getting her
tongue pierced. Rachel even stayed with my mom after I went back to South Carolina for
college in the fall. She used to work at the office with me back in high school and feed
the cats when my mom was away. We still laugh to this day about how when I would
come home from South Carolina, I would text Rachel to ask what food we had in the
house because she was there more than I was. My mom loved her. I am convinced that
my mom even died purposely the day Rachel was randomly at our house because Rachel
happened to be there that day.

Rachel was also one of only two of my closest white friends. Everyone loved her
and no one worried about what I was up to when I was out with her. I had to lie (*white 
lies*) I couldn’t tell my grandmother that my little cousin, her youngest of three
granddaughters, the baby of the family, was about to embark upon an adventure to
Maryland to go drink with my “brother”, BJ, who was also probably my little cousin’s
first encounter with a Black person, and then drive to the ‘hood to purchase drinks, before
driving back to NoVA to stay the night at my Grandma’s house, returning at 2:43AM
when we had to wake up at 6:00AM on Easter morning. Dead tired.

I wrote the following reflection in April 2015, immediately after the event. I offer
it in its entirety here, with some retrospective reflections in italics like in my previous
reflections in Chapter One. I offer further reflection on what it means to be “Free, White,
and 30” for me now in 2018 immediately following the 2015 reflection.

**Free, White, and 21**

The saying, “free, white, and 21” became popularized in the 1830s describing all
of those white men who could vote at the time (*white power and agency in voting*). As
Murrin et al. (2016) articulated about this time period in American history and this phrase, “Much more explicitly and completely than had been the case at the founding, America in 1830 was a white man’s republic” (p. 362). It is during the 1800s at this time that my ancestors immigrated from England, Germany, and Ireland to colonize Iowa, Colorado, and Kansas after Andrew Jackson began forcefully removing American Indians from their land once securing his 1828 election to president. Our government, non-Natives, quite literally took the land from the American Indians, Natives, and claimed it to be theirs with the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and opened up those lands for my ancestors (white supremacy and white terrorism in governmental policy).

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, continued governmental policies such as the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railway Act that were both passed in 1862 allowed for my white, male ancestors (non-Natives) to claim land and prosper in Kansas and Iowa. As Lui et al. (2006) noted, “the permanent grant of land and natural resources benefited many white settlers by providing jobs and transportation corridors, but typically extracted land and other wealth from Indian tribes without compensation” (p. 45). Then, at least on my mother’s side, my ancestors took the land, claimed it to be theirs and each generation got richer and richer so that by the time my grandmother was born in 1933, American Indians had lost several million acres of land while white farmers (my ancestors) prospered (white myth of meritocracy).

Now, my grandparents own two farms in Kansas, plus 15 McDonald’s restaurants, office buildings, and a plethora of other investments and such that I could not even begin to know anything about. They have more money than they or anyone else will ever be able to spend in their lifetime. They are part of the owning class. And one day I
have been told a portion of that money will be mine. That oppression money that has
been soaked in the blood and pain of “others” for generations. I don’t want it. It doesn’t
feel like mine. I don’t want it to be mine, just like I don’t want my mom’s money to one
day be mine. I didn’t earn it. It’s dirty (covered in white shit of racist colonization and
genocide and the wealth provided for the white settlers in Native lands).

But who am I to deny my mother’s money to my unborn children? After all, that’s
who my mother really left the money for, her unborn grandchildren so she could take care
of them like my grandparents took care of me and my two little cousins (white logic,
white rationalization). Intergenerational wealth. I never knew I had this nor what it meant
until my mother passed away, and I will find out what it truly means when I turn 35. And
my grandparents earned all of their money through corporate McDonald’s, which is how
my mother eventually earned hers, and they built a McDonald’s empire in the DC area, at
one point owning 25 restaurants. And that McDonald’s money paid for my fancy
education. And I worked there for ten years. It is a part of me. I cannot deny it. Though I
do feel strongly that I did not earn it. But that’s what parents work for, right? So their
children don’t have to worry about the things they did? (white rationalization) That’s
what my mom always told me when I wouldn’t accept her money—But when is enough,
enough? With capitalism, it’s never enough. The goal is to continue making more money
each year…and capitalism’s ties are to racism…Our capitalistic society was literally built
on the exploitation of Black and Brown bodies, through blood, sweat, and tears…But
isn’t this explanation of “that’s what parents work for” just rationalizing the whole thing?
Rationalized thinking (white logic) will not lead me to the answers or paths I’m trying to
navigate here. I know I must work to counter my privilege, but how?
In an interview from December 2014, following the racial protests responding to the police-murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, Chris Rock said that white folks need to “own your actions. Not even your actions. The actions of your dad. Yeah, it’s unfair that you can get judged by something you didn’t do, but it’s also unfair that you can inherit money that you didn’t work for” (Aker, 2014). I’m trying to own it, but I think there needs to be more than ownership/acknowledgement. There needs to be action. This action is woke whiteness work.

So what does it mean to be free, white, and 21 in the U.S. for me? It means that when I left my grandmother’s house, I went to buy alcohol and drove around with it and was not worried about driving around with it in my car because I knew that even if I got stopped, the cops wouldn’t harass me or randomly search my grandfather’s Mercedes that I was driving for the night (white invincibility). It means that even if I did get stopped, I would never fear, or even begin to think, that the cop would perceive me as a threat and then proceed to shoot me, handcuff my dead body, and proceed to plant evidence to blame me for my own death—which is exactly what they just did to Walter Scott in Charleston, SC (white invincibility and white safety). It means that I can drive around with a broken taillight, get pulled over, and leave with a warning, not even a ticket, to get it fixed rather than eight bullets in my back. It means that even if I did get caught with alcohol in the car, it would have been so easy for me to play the “innocent little white girl”, a performance that has quite literally become second nature, or rather a part of my nature. The fucked up part is, I actually believe I am an innocent little white girl! I’ve internalized that. And even though sometimes I question it, because I know my actions are less-than-innocent (manipulative, deceitful, and sometimes illegal—white
manipulation, white lies, white deceit, white recklessness, white invincibility), it’s never for long, because I truly believe that I am a good person at heart (white morality). But what good is a good person at heart if their actions do not align with their heart? (Questioning my white morality). I can be a good person all day, I can intend to be a good person (white intentions), but my actions and my performances of whiteness are not aligning with my good intentions and my good heart (white morality).

So what does it mean to be free, white, and 21 in the U.S. for me? It means that in high school, I was the one who drove my friends to DC to buy dippers and ecstasy and weed to distribute throughout NoVA (white recklessness) because the cops would never pull me over as the driver (white invincibility). In fact, that’s why my Black friends made me the driver (they knew about my white invincibility). It means I never once got caught doing that dumb shit (white invincibility). It means that when I got pulled over for going 90 in a 60 summer 2014 after day-drinking, the cop (a Black man) didn’t breathalyze me or arrest me—even though I couldn’t find my proof of insurance or my current registration (white innocence). It means giving him the previous year’s registration was enough to send him back to his car with my license to write up the ticket (white wriggling). Then, it means that he didn’t take me into jail for going 90 in a 60 in the first place, regardless of whether or not I was drunk (white invincibility). It means he didn’t even question me for drinking or never even guessed that I had been drinking that day. It means that when I went to court to pay the $483 ticket, I told the judge that I could pay the money and that I had brought it with me in cash, but that I was just a teacher and a student at USC on summer break and couldn’t they do something to help me out? Cue the innocent little white girl sad and pleading eyes (white manipulation using my white
innocence). It means I only had to pay $187 instead and got the charge reduced (white privilege). It means I didn’t lose my license (white privilege). It means I am still alive after a traffic stop (white racial hierarchy, white privilege of white safety).

Being free, white, and 21 means that I can live a recklessly dangerous lifestyle (white recklessness) that puts others at risk without fear of repercussion (white invincibility). It means I can get away with damn near anything because not only do I have the “complexion for the protection” (white safety) as Solomon calls it, but I have the money—or at least my family has the money—to get me out damn near any predicament (privilege of whiteness and class here, double-bonus-round privilege). And if they can’t get me out of it, they can get me the best lawyer money can buy (double-bonus-round privilege). It means that I never have to worry about being broke. Or homeless. Or unemployed. Or without a car. Or hungry unless I deliberately starve myself to lose weight which was passed down generationally, too. (All double-bonus-round privilege examples). It means that I never really have to worry about failure, because one way or another, these situations just work themselves out (white invincibility because these things work themselves out since the systems and institutions—police, courts, schools, higher education, white faculty, etc.—are all designed for me to succeed).

So what does it mean to be free, white, and 21 in school? It means that you don’t have to take responsibility for doing your school work (white abdication) and not having to worry when you turn things in late that someone isn’t going to accept it (white wriggling). I learned that in high school. It means deception (white deceit). It means excusing your way out of everything (white rationalization) because, oh, it could never be this sweet little innocent white girl (white innocence)! It means cheating my way
through undergrad and hardly ever reading a book (white deceit), yet graduating with a bachelor’s in English which requires all kinds of reading (white privilege because of my white deceit)! It means that I never read all of my required reading for a class until I entered in the doctorate program. It means being prescribed so much Adderall from my family doctor in undergrad that I could sell it in bulk even though I didn’t need the money for anything but herbs and procrastination (white recklessness). Because who would think this innocent little white girl would be selling her Adderall instead of taking it (white innocence)? It means I literally never thought about getting caught, I never worried about it, and I never even imagined that I could expelled from USC for doing so (white invisibility of my white privilege). But even if I did go to court, my family had the money to buy me the best lawyer to get me out of the ticket, or at least make sure it didn’t affect my future and career (double-bonus-round privilege). It means never being questioned about the fact that your doctor technically prescribed you to take 80mg of Adderall daily (white innocence). When all you really need is 10mg to stay focused. It means abusing said drug in college with no repercussions. And when I told my mom about it, she just said, “Sweetie, that’s just how you work” (white rationalization). No.

It means having the luxury to “find myself” in college with no other obligations (double-bonus-round privilege). And then return to that self through my dissertation with my doctorate (triple-double-bonus-round privilege). It means that life has been pretty damn good for me, though I always thought I had it bad. It means that when I look back on my childhood from a racialized lens, I had a pretty good childhood, despite the violence, the emotional distance, and the chaos at my father’s house. My mother loved me dearly. I got a great education. I was able to afford many educational opportunities. I
was blessed. It’s COMPLETELY FUCKED UP. *(white binary logic to think it’s EITHER I had a good childhood OR I had a bad childhood. I had both. At the same time.)*

I am free, white, and 21 (or 27, but you know). I can quite literally do almost anything I want *(white recklessness)* without worrying too much about whether or not it will jeopardize my future *(white privilege of white innocence)*. Aside from murders and violent felonies—which have never been in my nature anyways *(white rationalization to think that “my nature” is what kept me on this side of the prison wall, when the majority of folks imprisoned are locked up for non-violent offenses, and often it is non-violent offenses that contribute to the prison pipeline.)*—I can fuck up all over the place and act in ways that are morally heinous *(white morality)* and never have to take responsibility for my actions *(white invincibility because of white innocence)*. Part of this is due to how my mother raised me. The other part of this is due to how whiteness and the ideas of white supremacy have trickled down through generations in my family. *I knew this at the time, but my woke whiteness work toolkit was not yet formed, so I couldn’t name all of these things, but I saw how the system was operating in my favor. My woke whiteness work toolkit is all of the ways I have been naming the powers of whiteness in italics throughout.*

We have never had to take responsibility for our actions *(white abdication)*. We have always been able to avoid confrontation when it suits us *(white avoidance)*. We have always been able to evade accountability *(white abdication)*. We have always been, in fact, just assumed to be responsible people *(white innocence)*. We have always been given the benefit of the doubt *(white privilege because of white innocence)*. We have always been told that as long as we are good people in our hearts, we are okay *(white
morality). We have never had to look at the consequences of our actions (white invisibility). Especially not the consequences of our actions as pertains to the people and communities of Color in which we only exist in a hierarchy above in the social system of oppression because our ancestors made damn sure they set up the systems to privilege us (white supremacy). This has damaged us as individuals (white shit). Made us feel entitled to our privilege (white entitlement). But our privilege only exists because we take away the privileges of everyone else (white shit). I use a lot of “always” and “never” which is white logic, thinking in terms of “either/or”.

I am a brat. I have only ever been held accountable but a handful of times in my life—and even then; like when I got kicked out of high school, or got a possession charge in college, or when I almost failed 563 with Dr. Hendrickson; things always somehow worked out for me in the end (white complicity). (And I am using white rationalization here). I know this is an oversimplification (white logic), but it is true. My world and the world around me at large have not made me, as a white girl and now woman, take responsibility for myself (white abdication)—and what’s even worse is that I have been convinced that I have in fact been taking responsibility (white responsibility). I actually believe I am a responsible adult who does responsible things (white responsibility), and for the most part I am (white self-praise), but this idea of whiteness (white logic and white rationalization) and the ways in which white supremacy have trickled down generationally in my family have allowed me to function as if I will not have to be held accountable for my actions. To be free, white, and 21 means that no one will hold me accountable for my actions or the actions of my ancestors (white abdication, personal and historical abdication). In fact, until this current (2015) reflection, I knew I sometimes
blamed other people for things that I did, but I really did not think it was a problem
(white denial, white rationalization). I never looked at the depth of situations (white
invisibility). I never had to (white invisibility). I’m free, (I can do whatever I want—white
freedom); I’m white, (my/white people hold the most power in the world—white
hegemony); and I’m 21 (I’m old enough to do anything without anyone saying
otherwise—white agency).

I feel like my grandmother must have internalized these same concepts
(impossible that she did not, existing in a white hegemonic world). When I recently asked
her about the saying for my dissertation (using white manipulation and white deceit
because I did not tell her that she was implicated in this story, nor that I only knew the
saying because of her, instead using white avoidance of conflict and white lies to get her
to tell me what I wanted), she just said that it was a popular saying from her childhood.
Everyone said it and she could remember hearing the phrase from as early as five or six
when she could “first really understand what her parents were saying.” She said that it
was a term that people used when “you maybe did something you were not supposed to
do” (N. Van Valkenburg, personal communication, February 2018) but it was okay
because you were “free, white, and 21”—i.e., other whites excused you (white complicity,
white rationalization), reifying your white status and privilege (white supremacy) and
tacitly sanctioning your behavior by saying it (white innocence). Saying you were “free,
white, and 21” was just a very common thing to hear growing up in a rural farmland in
Kansas (white rationalization). It was just a part of her white, Midwest upbringing (white
innocence). It basically meant that you could do whatever you want (white invincibility).
As Heisel (2015) argued in his blog article, “The Rise and Fall of an All-American Catchphrase: ‘Free, White, and 21’,” the phrase appeared in dozens of movies in the ‘30s and ‘40s, a proud assertion that positioned white privilege as the ultimate argument-stopper. The current state of contention over the existence and shape of white privilege weaves back into the story of this catchphrase: its rise, its heyday, and how it disappeared. White America learned the same lesson as the society woman saying ‘free, white and 21’ to the fugitive: you can’t be sure to whom you are speaking. Every time a movie character uttered this phrase so casually, they were giving black America a glimpse into the real character of American democracy. Decades before it came to a head, they inadvertently fed the civil rights struggle. The solution to the problem would be quintessentially Hollywood, and this quintessentially American—a combination of censorship and propaganda that would erase ‘free, white, and 21’ from films, from public life, and nearly even from national memory (Heisel, 2015).

So my grandmother obviously heard all of these concepts from her parents, passed them onto my mother who must have heard all of these same concepts, and then she passed them onto me. My grandmother employed a white, privileged discourse that sanctioned white behavior and that had its effects on my mother, as well as its effects on me.

None of us ever take ownership for our actions really (*white abdication*). It is never our fault really (*white innocence*) and it can always be explained away (*white rationalization*). Whites ALWAYS get away with it (*white invincibility*). In fact, we just naturally assume that we are going to get away with it (*white invincibility*). It’s disgusting
and it makes me sick (white shit). I thought I was a good person? I thought my mom was a good person? I thought my grandma was a good person?

Here, I am questioning our white morality. Whiteness binds us in “either/or” thinking that my grandmother, mother, or I can EITHER be good people OR we are terrible racists. Whiteness and white supremacy affects us all. In reality, thinking through a “both/and” lens, it is the notion of goodness in whiteness (white morality) that is flawed. We are all messy in our privilege of whiteness and we have all been complicit in perpetuating the system of racism.

The hidden curriculum (Giroux & Purpel, 1983) of whiteness is now clear. Everything my grandmother and mother taught me about whiteness, without ever intentionally doing so (white intentionality). We live away from Black communities, in the white/Hispanic/Asian neighborhoods, but avoid the Hispanic/Asian communities if you have enough money to do so (white segregation). We employ people of Color, mostly Hispanic and Asian, some Black people, but we don’t necessarily work with people of Color (white isolation). We help our employees of Color though. Always (white morality). We help pay for their education, give them jobs, raises, and loans if they need them. We don’t exploit them, or at least we try not to (white intentionality, plus we don’t have to because capitalism does that for us by always producing a surplus labor force). We help our employees grow, but we always maintain a distance between “us” and “them” as well (white isolation). We buy our restaurants in white communities, or at least not in primarily Black communities because the DC area is very diverse (white isolation). We send our children to public schools in all-white communities and our grandchildren to fancy private schools away from people of Color (white segregation).
(unless you’re me and end up getting kicked out of private school, then have to go to public school where you meet all of your Black friends from back home because you so happened to know a Black girl—the only Black girl—from a trip you took to Australia in 6th grade). We don’t date outside of our race (white segregation) (unless you’re me and somehow managed to date the only Hispanic boy in your private school and then continued to date Black men because all of your friends were Black). We don’t have a problem with Black people or people of Color, per say (white denial), but we don’t invite them to our dinners (unless your daughter/granddaughter invites them as her friends or significant others). “They” only serve us as maids or babysitters when we are young (my mother), or nurses when are we are older (my grandfather) (white superiority). But we love the individual Black women we have grown to know and we love the friends our daughter brings to the house (white individualism). Once we get to know Black people, we are fine (white rationalization). But we don’t understand why they (as a community of people of Color) just don’t work as hard as us. We worked really hard. We still work really hard. We don’t have to pay attention to our white privilege because we worked so hard to get where we are today. We came from humble beginnings, but we built an empire. White myth of meritocracy. But we don’t have to acknowledge all of the ways in which our whiteness helped us do that (white abdication). Why can’t everyone else just work hard like us (white myth of meritocracy)? That’s what we don’t understand (white myth of meritocracy). But we are good people (white morality), right?

What does it mean to be a good person, who because of white supremacy, has never been held accountable for so many bad things (historically)? (white logic thinking you can be “good” inside white complicity in racism. You cannot, not in the traditional
sense of white morality. It has to be a different definition of “good”). How can we OWN the actions and inactions of our ancestors? How can we interrupt this cycle of lack of accountability in whiteness? How can we force other white folks to take accountability? Can we still be a good people and still do so much bad? How do I interrupt this cycle? *Interrupting this is woke whiteness work.*

And if I don’t interrupt this cycle, I will end up raising a daughter who does the same thing. Shit, I already passed it on to my sheltered, protected, little baby cousin in one evening. I taught her the hidden curriculum of whiteness that evening too. Keep your interactions with Black people mostly secret from your family so they don’t worry about you (*white hiding*). We can lie (*white lies*) and deflect blame (*white rationalization*). Society will never force us to take blame (*white abdication*). Nope. Not anymore. Woke whiteness work. If society won’t do it, we as white people must take on that responsibility ourselves. Woke whiteness work. This responsibility to interrupt the family tradition of being free, white, and 21 must stop with me. Woke whiteness work. I feel like it was my mom’s secret (*white hiding*) that all of my friends were Black. I never tried to hide it. She never made me feel like she hid it (*white hiding, white avoidance*). But I’m sure it was quite the shock to all the fancy white folks to see my Black friends and their families at my mother’s funeral. I remember seeing their surprise (*white astonishment*).

And what does this mean for me as a scholar who is passionate about social and racial justice? How do I unlearn these concepts of whiteness so I can become a productive member of society, rather than just be assumed to be one? How do I work to counter my privilege? I’m several years past the guilt stage where I used to feel guilty about coming from money and privilege, but I doubt that I have taken action in a real
productive way. I’ve done racial justice work in education, with my teaching, but have I really countered my privilege? *This is all woke whiteness work!*

It’s a privilege to sit around and ponder these thoughts in my head in my beautiful townhome that I purchased at age 24 thanks to my grandparents for the down payment—and ultimately thanks to my land-stealing, colonizing ancestors (*white double-bonus-round privilege*). But they were good people, too (*white morality*)? What other damaging, lasting, historical effects have racism had on my life and that of my family? What else have I been privileged to turn a blind eye to (*white invisibility*)?

And really, considering how all of this fits into the recent (2015) horrific events in North Charleston—the murder of Walter Scott, an unarmed Black man, by white police officer Michael Slager after a traffic stop for a non-functioning break light (*white surveillance*), which Slager lied about (*white lies*) on his police report and which video evidence proved his deceit—is it really a surprise that the white cops who go around killing Black folks continuously place the blame elsewhere (*white abdication*)? It’s never their fault (*white deflection of blame*). I bet you all of my inheritance money these white folks think they are good people, too. WE ARE NOT. Our definition of “good” is entirely different from the rest of the world. We can perform some of the most heinous, horrific, disgusting, despicable acts in all of history—which by the way, we have and do!—and still show up to church on Sunday feeling like we are GOOD PEOPLE. We are not a good people. We are a group of privileged, entitled brats who always get our way (*white morality*). **HOW DO WE INTERRUPT THIS?!? Woke whiteness work.** And more importantly, how do we convince other white folks that this needs to be interrupted?
*Woke whiteness work.* No one gives up power without a fight and the most powerful usually win those fights. *Woke whiteness work.*

It’s time we took responsibility for our actions. *Woke whiteness work.*

I have excused and manipulated my way out of trouble since I was younger than I remember. My mom did the same thing. My grandma still does the same thing. It’s really never our fault—other people are the ones to blame (*white blamelessness, white rationalization*). “Why can’t “they” just get over it?” We keep asking ourselves this; we don’t understand. It is my family, or is it white folks? We feel like we do enough “good” in the world and genuinely care about other people enough (*white morality*), that we don’t really have to take responsibility for any of the bad stuff (*white abdication*). People see our hearts and know that we do enough “good” that they overlook this fatal flaw in us. I wonder if other white folks feel the same way, but they must!

This notion of “good” is so farfetched in whiteness that it can literally make your blood boil! Where do we go from here? Realizing it on paper is different than understanding how to navigate this realization—without rationalizations! I’m the queen of rationalizing some shit (*white rationalization*). It needs to stop (*woke whiteness work*). I also can’t speak for all white people like I have been, but I know enough white people with money to know how this works. There’s an intersection of class here as well and gender (girls get away with more things than boys)…regardless…WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?!? *WOKE WHITENESS WORK.*

**Opening Myself Up to Darkness**

I wrote the above “Free, White, and 21” reflection in April 2015 accidentally. As part of an assignment for my curriculum theory class, we had to complete a “scholarly
dig” of a curriculum theorist. I had spent a week reading all of the work of Dr. Denise Taliaferro Baszile and completing an annotated bibliography about her scholarship. Her pieces operated as an activism, constantly speaking back to and challenging the common held assumptions of Western and Eurocentric knowledge. Her work could be best described as enlightenedly fierce, refreshingly critical, and deliberately revolutionary. In every piece she urged her readers and what felt like to me, personally (white selfishness to make everything about ourselves or us as white people) to constantly re-evaluate, re-think, and re-structure our traditional ways of thinking about curriculum and society. Certainly, she urged me (white selfishness; she was not talking to me directly as a white person) to reconsider what I traditionally had been taught about what constitutes scholarly work. I knew scholars were producing work that was rich in narrative and personal experience, but I did not know that nearly one’s entire career of scholarship could incorporate it so as to push back against traditional academia in such a profound and remarkably stunning fashion. She made me fall in love with the promise of academia again. And she made me fall in love with writing again.

Why was it that it was a Black, female scholar was the one who spoke to me in such a way that resonated? Perhaps it was her rejection of the strict confinements of traditional academic writing by interweaving personal narrative and lived experience into her work, redefining what is considered “legitimate” knowledge in the academy (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2010).

Much of Baszile’s scholarship focused on a critical analysis of her identity as a Black female, which she often refers to as her Black female self, and how her identity—and many “dialectical selves” (Baszile, 2003, p. 27)—provide rich commentary and
insight into the many paradoxes and contradictions found within academia. She drew upon the power of her Black autobiographical voice to explore and critically analyze these contractions and paradoxes that she often encountered as a Black female teaching about race at a predominantly white institution. She utilized her writing as acts of liberation and love, continuously countering traditional assumptions in academia. All of her work was an autobiographical return to self through unapologetically owning her Blackness. She had opened herself up and through her Afrocentric and unapologetic love for herself and her Blackness, she was able to disown white supremacist notions and harshly critique the dangers of Western, Eurocentric, white thought processes. She was free. It was beautiful and inspiring. When she opened herself up, she found beauty in her Blackness. I knew if I opened myself up, I would not find the same thing. I did not want to open myself up.

After reading her work for a week straight, engulfed in her thoughts, something came out of me too. I accidentally opened myself up. I didn’t mean to open myself up. But at 3AM on an April morning—not even a week after visiting my grandmother and taking my little cousin, Lilly, on an adventure—something came out of me, too. I woke up out of my sleep and wrote the “Free, White, and 21” piece for three hours straight. It was right after the police-murder of Walter Scott, and it was this horrible picture of self, of my family, and the ways in which whiteness and performing whiteness and the hidden curriculum of whiteness had fucked up the notions of “goodness” in my family and in myself (white shit). It was a completely raw story. It was not a pretty picture. But it was necessary.
The reflection in the previous section was that raw story that accidentally came out of me at 27. I didn’t share it with anyone for a year after that (white hiding). I had exposed my truth, but I ran from it (white avoidance). Then, a year later in 2016, I only shared it with my white friend, Stephanie, in fear that sharing that ugly truth (white shit) with anyone of a different race would make them hate me (white need for everyone to love us). It took me another year before I shared it with my best friend, Nadia, a Black woman, in 2017. It took me until 2018 to share it with anyone else here. Woke whiteness work takes time, but it is necessary! Do not be like me and hide from your white shit, your ugly truths! Woke whiteness work is too important!

I was scared of that truth.
It took me a long time to sit in that truth. To own it.
I didn’t want to see that ugliness inside me. I didn’t want to be that girl. I didn’t want my family to be those people.
But we already were. I already was that girl. I thought we were good people?

*Our notions of “goodness” completely messed up by our white morality. Our morals were messed up, because we didn’t know how to own all parts of us.*

I had to live in that truth at 27, 28, and 29.
I had to sit in that darkness. Own that darkness. I mean really own it.
Look at my actions and the consequences of my actions.
It didn’t matter if I wanted to be a good person.
I was not acting in a way that reflected my good intentions. Even if it was unintentional.
I had to look at my actions and non-actions.

I was so scared of that truth.
What would I find if I allowed myself to open up even more?
I had so many things done to me, and I had done so many things.
I had this darkness in me.
I remember trying to meditate in 2014 and it was so dark inside me. It was so dark. And I wasn’t ready to see it. I had exposed it, but I wasn’t ready to see it.
So I ran away from it for a couple of years.
Peeking back at it with my closest friends.
Revisiting it individually, trying to make sense of it, rationalizing it, knowing I could not rationalize it at all, yet unable to escape my white rationalization.
I couldn’t live in that truth yet. I wanted to. I was trying.
But I couldn’t live in that truth. Not yet. I needed people to love me.

I had to become a sailor. There’s no excuses in sailing.
There’s no need for love in sailing. You already love yourself in sailing.
So you own all of your darkness and ugliness and truth. And you own all your beauty and greatness too. You own the fact that beauty and ugly exist within you, always. At the very same time.
Owning all your shit; knowing you are the shit. Simultaneously.
That’s sailor work.
I had to become a woke white woman who could own her shit.
I had to become a sailor.
Now, I am thirty.

**Free, White, and 30**

“Today, ‘free, white, and 21’ is barely heard. It has no place in public life, no place in movies, except the occasional one set in the past...it’s basically dead. It was too dangerous. It made America look bad overseas and whites look bad domestically. Now it’s no longer around to do such harms, which is a sign of racial progress, but also, like any sign, distinct from the thing itself. Racism is rarely so brazen any more. It’s a lot easier to kill off a phrase than change the system that gave it life. We can lower a racist flag, but it’s harder to get rid of the sentiments that raised it. ‘Free, white, and 21’ lasted a hundred years after it had any official legal meaning. Why should we expect it to die just because the words have?” (Heisel, 2015).

Looking back on this reflection three years later at thirty, I can say that I want this dissertation to be an act of resistance to those power structures of whiteness. As my mentor told me, writing is an act of resistance (D. Cook, personal communication, March 2014). I can also say that I have tried to take ownership over my actions and lack of action in all aspects of my life, not just with this work. I’ve been trying in this dissertation to write against myself (Noblit, 1999) as an act of “woke whiteness work” while I try to figure out exactly what it means to work woke as a white woman. What a woke whiteness identity looks like. Sounds like. Feels like. Lives like. How to put it into action. But I don’t say that to celebrate myself or applaud myself for being a woke white woman. Indeed, I do not actually name myself as a woke white woman. That’s why it’s in quotes in the title. I say all of this to say that I will not be afraid to use my white
privilege and the power that comes with my white sense of white invincibility and my white need for white recklessness, to talk real recklessly in here, speaking back to white hegemony, attempting to use this work, my woke whiteness work in progress, as a harsh critique of self as a life and death necessity. This critical, analytic autoethnography is necessary if white scholars, researchers, and educators want to truly strive for equity. Because this white hiding of history, this white covering up of our white shit (our white ugly truth of our white dark ugly past), will only continue to perpetuate violence.

While we have indeed killed off the saying for the most part, we have not killed off the system of white hegemony that perpetuates this type of thinking. This type of thinking was passed on generationally to me from my grandmother, even without her ever muttering the word until I was 27. And it was passed on to her generationally as well. This is white hegemony. The power of these thoughts, these ideas, these presumptions to continue even when we do not mention them as words. It’s how we elected a racist president and then pretended like we were surprised to find out he was racist. There are real life consequences to our white hegemony.

When we tell white lies, cover up white truth, erase violent white history, to manipulate white narratives and engage in white avoidance because we are so good at white hiding, ACTUAL LIVES ARE LOST. Darren Wilson, a white police officer, killed Michael Brown, an unarmed Black man. In cold blood. In the middle of the street. In the middle of the day. Then, he told a white lie about it, using white abdication to deflect blame away from himself and on to the victim, Michael Brown. Who could not speak for himself. Because Darren Wilson killed him. This sparked an entire #BlackLivesMatter movement in Ferguson, Missouri. Countless other people died while our white logic
allowed us to scream “BLUE LIVES MATTER” and “ALL LIVES MATTER” while our white denial and our white refusal to own our white shit, our white ugly truths, continued to perpetuate a system of white hegemony and white supremacy and white racism that allowed for Darren Wilson’s white invincibility in the form of a lack indictment in the MURDER and PUBLIC EXECUTION of an innocent man whose only guilt was being Black. Shooting him ten times. Then, after the murder, to make himself look better, he lies saying that Michael Brown was reaching for his gun. Or that he feared for his life. Even though Michael Brown was unarmed. After his white acquittal, three years later in court, in March 2017, he admits it was a white lie. THERE ARE REAL LIFE AND DEATH CONSEQUENCES TO OUR WHITE LIES. And no. It does not make it any better to finally come out with the truth. We have to own all of our truth, all the time. Take responsibility for all of it.

So, for the little old white lady, Carolyn Bryant Donham—otherwise known as the white woman who accused Emmett Till of whistling at her, an accusation that precipitated his torture and horrendously violent murder by her husband and his brother, Bryant and Milam—admitted in 2017 that she told a little white lie, an untruth, about Emmett whistling at her. She “conveniently forgot” (white avoidance) what actually happened at the store, but her white lie about 14-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, caused his BRUTUAL AND HORRIFIC MURDER, at the hands of the white violence of her white husband, while his white invincibility got him and his white brother off with their white abdication of guilt, all while her decades of white avoiding and white hiding in her white entitlement, made her feel so remorseful on her death bed in her selfish white feelings, that she had to resolve herself of her pitiful white guilt.
White guilt does nothing. Nothing at all. What action will come of this? Emmett Till’s brutal murder sparked outrage and growth in the Civil Rights Movement.

Trayvon Martin’s murder and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman sparked the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Michael Brown’s murder sparked the use of the widespread use of the word woke. How can we, as Angela Rye calls us to do, work woke to disrupt these dangerous white systems of white hegemony?!? How can we dismantle these systems of white supremacy?!?

I, in my selfish white feelings, want my dissertation to be an active interruption and dismantling of the systems of white supremacy that reign so freely today. Because as Matias (2016) stated, “If one wants to truly engage in racial justice from a colonizer’s standing, one must first understand who one is in relation to the state of colonization in order to support the humanity of those colonized. Begin with you” (p. 175). This critical, analytical autoethnographic dissertation is my beginning with myself. But I am not so naïve to think that me, in my little white woman body, is going to be able to do it alone. I need fellow sailors. There are lives at risk here. So, we cannot focus on our selfish white feelings.

As I have stated before, my goal of this dissertation is not to vilify my professor, nor my research partner, nor myself. Okay, maybe to vilify myself as an example of the dangers of whiteness. I can own that. But I do not write this to commend myself. Rather, I write this to expose myself, to expose the systems of white supremacy, the hidden curriculums of whiteness, the white hegemony everywhere; in order to point out how whites like myself who are committed to doing this racial justice work must learn to not miss opportunities to speak truth to power—particularly when the circumstances are
difficult and when our own privileges can be (and arguably should be) lost. And I write it for my high school babies; all children of Color; for Mike, Isaac, Marcus, Quincey, and Walter at JDC. Lives are at stake here! I have to call myself out, call my family out, call my professor out, call our research out, call the academy out, call white supremacy out, call all of whiteness out, because that is woke whiteness work. It’s difficult work. It’s sometimes painful work. But past that pain is love. And if I am going to always have this white doublebonus-round privilege of whiteness and class, I mine as well use it for some good in channeling my white recklessness as white academic risk-taking with this dissertation, using my white freedom of expression as white rage for the sake of white wokeness work for racial justice, and utilizing my white agency to disrupt white erasure, white lies, white avoidance, white myths of meritocracy, white rationalization, white logic, white hiding, white manipulation, white abdication, and white denial. In other words, I mine as well use my white privilege to disrupt white privilege rather than perpetuate white dangers of not owning white shit.

So, like I told my rookie sailors in Chapter One, this dissertation is a bucket of salty ocean water. I need you to wake up! Because while we may have gotten rid of those phrases like “free, white, and 21”, we certainly did not get rid of the thought processes behind those words, and pretending something is not a problem is the quickest way to ensure that it always stays a problem. Therefore, we must name this hidden curricula of whiteness, knowing there is power in that naming because, now, I know I am not crazy, and I no longer have to be angry about this hidden curriculum in whiteness. I can direct my anger at the systems, that I now can name freely because I see them clearly. Now that I have named the hidden curriculum of whiteness that operates under white hegemony, I
can talk about it. That is my woke whiteness toolkit. And just because we are so good at hiding our white shit—our ugly truths—in whiteness, trying to erase vocabulary and uncomfortable history by covering up our white shit with perfume, doesn’t mean everyone else can’t smell it. It’s about time we stopped being nose-blind and got to work cleaning up our shit! That’s woke whiteness work. That’s sailor work. Wake up now. It’s time to become a sailor.

**Personal Journal Entry: Poetic Justice**

*Sunday, March 25, 2018*

I opened myself up & it was not beautiful.

I opened up my family & it was not beautiful.

I tied it to history & it was not beautiful.

It was murder & genocide & stealing land from American Indians.

And exclusion.

And racism. Pure evil racism.

And it was my grandma who uttered this phrase, “free, white, & 21”.

My sweet, loving grandmother.

My heart and my soul.

So it was a critique of her. And my mom. And me.

And I had to own it. All of it.

But my grandma hasn’t owned it. No one has made her do that.

Society has never made her do that. I’ve never made her do that.

I fear that she is delicate, but I also know how very strong she is.

I just never want to hurt her.
I’m so scared for my grandma to read my dissertation. Because it is a piece of this Chapter 3. It makes my heart want to stop!! Just because I have learned the necessity of sitting in discomfort as a white person, owning the ugly, and then actively working against it each day—that doesn’t mean my grandma is ready for it.

What responsibility do I have to truth? Versus what responsibility do I have to my grandmother? But what are the dangers of NOT exposing her?? Those dangers can literally & metaphorically be life and death for communities and people of Color.

Literally death. Actual murders of Alton Sterling, Stephon Clark, Saheed Vassell (and those are just the recent victims circulating the news in the last two weeks from March 27-April 10, 2018), but whose list of names could go on for way too long—Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Rekia Boyd, Philando Castile, Eric Gardner, Walter Scott, Sean Bell, Oscar Grant—and that’s just the names I can remember off the top of my head. There are actual lives at stake here. Literal murders. There are what Lamar and Nate call spiritual murders (Johnson & Bryan, 2016) as well. The spirit murders of our four students at JDC. And the countless other students I never
got the chance to know at JDC. Metaphorically shot with “bullets of rejection, bullets of silencing, and bullets of disrespect” (Johnson & Bryan, 2016; Bryan, 2017), but also, to extend their work, bullets of othering. We have metaphorically and spiritually murdered the students we worked with at JDC. And the news stories tell me, when I looked up the students, that they have murdered people too. We are complicit in those murders as well.

This is what happens when our whiteness goes unchecked for centuries and then we blame everyone else for not being able to succeed in a system that was meant to enslave them. Anger is what happens. Murder is what happens. We are responsible as well. Own that shit.

There are LIFE AND DEATH consequences of our white hegemony, our white lies, our white logic, our white rationalization, our white denial, our white avoidance, our white morality, our white innocence, our white denial, our white recklessness, our white manipulation. THERE ARE REAL LIFE AND DEATH CONSEQUENCES. REAL MURDERS WE ARE COMPLICIT IN PERPETUATING.

Versus individual hurt & pain caused by brutal honesty & unapologetic truth.

White people, let’s get the fuck over ourselves and own our white shit.

Stop being scared.

Scared money don’t make money, and scared work only perpetuates systems and makes us complicit in the murders of hundreds and thousands of innocent people.

The only reason you are scared is because you are scared of yourself.

I know, because I was, too.
But look at the DANGERS of being scared! The privilege of just being scared! That's it!

There are LIFE AND DEATH DANGERS!

The fear is what took me four years to write this story.

It’s a telling on myself. Telling on my family. Telling on my research partner. Telling on my old mentor, Dr. Hendrickson.

Just imagine, how different things might have turned out had I had the courage to tell this story sooner… but we have to trust in God’s timing (or the universe’s timing, whatever you believe in).

The story isn’t pretty sometimes.

It hurt people.

Dr. Hendrickson in particular.

When I met with her the other day at Cool Beans, I saw in her eyes the same hurt I saw in my mother’s eyes after something I wrote to her when I was 15.

And it broke my heart to break her heart.

But what motivated me to want to continue to work with students at JDC even after the class ended, was not Hendrickson, but the students whom I knew and know are being tracked into SPED, detention, ISS, suspended and expelled, leaving school / pushed out of school, often into illegal work, and then into juvenile detention and worse.

Allison reminded me of this yesterday.
It was always about the kids!

My work has always been about the kids! My babies.

The consequences of me not breaking her heart is that she will continue to “other” the students who are incarcerated. Unintentionally.

But other them she would if she didn’t understand how she did.

These are my babies. It’s life and death. The school-to-prison pipeline is life and death.

It is my responsibility to interrupt it.

*That is woke whiteness work.*

So what responsibility do I have to Hendrickson?

She’s so hurt right now.

She’s cleaning out her father’s house this weekend.

Her childhood home.

His death is hanging heavy on my heart. Though I didn’t know him, I know what death does to you. I know what it feels like to lose your home. I know how memories are attached to our late-parent’s things.

*Woke whiteness work is brutal honesty and love at the very same time. Together.*

Both me & Lamar were her academic children.

We have both now critiqued her.

She doesn’t know he’s coming for her in his new book.

I know this. We talk about it.
We talked all evening about it tonight.
We are going to keep writing about it.
We are going to keep speaking truth to her power.
Power she doesn’t even know she has.
There’s too much danger in silence!

We came up under her from undergrad to grad school.
And then we used all she had taught us to critique her.
Critique her premises.
Her entire premise of using canonical texts.
He/we speaks to truth to power, her power somewhat, but the power of whiteness in general.

I know she is a good person. Such a good person.
With such a good heart.
The best intentions.
She does great work.
She really is trying to understand social justice.
She really wants to do social justice work.
But we cannot do social justice work without also doing racial justice work.
She has much to learn. As did I. I am still learning.
I want to teach her. I tried. I am trying.
I cannot allow for excuses in sailing. That is not woke whiteness work. Good intentions do not matter in sailing nor in woke whiteness work. We look at actions and consequences of actions. It’s good that we have good intentions, but we have to work deliberately to ensure that our actions align with our intentions. Always. We must always check to ensure our actions align with our intentions. We must always work to check our intentions and actions to ensure they line up deliberately, before the outcomes might be exploitive.

That’s woke whiteness work.

And she assumes that we will find struggling Black male readers at JDC.

She doesn’t mean to assume this, but she does.

It’s the way she was raised in the academy.

The way whiteness has permeated English education work.

The way whiteness has permeated the academy.

So she assumes if we need to learn how to teach struggling Black male readers, what better place to find struggling Black male readers than in a prison? Was this her logic?

And she assumes Black male students are all struggling, because we have been assessing Black male readers under white male guidelines. Utterly unable to see Black male readers in anything but deficit terms. This is the apartheid of knowledge in the academy (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2010).

How is she defining struggling?

I’ve never met a struggling reader.

I’m not sure any of us did…unless they were looking for it???
I was writing my acknowledgements, and I was like mannnnn I’m so very blessed! Pages worth of beautiful people who love me—and that’s ONLY people who helped me with my dissertation. I could have gone on and on.

My grandma sent me the cutest response back to hers yesterday! It warmed my heart.

But she doesn’t know I expose her in here.

She doesn’t know because you used white manipulation and white avoidance on her,

Jennifer Lynn.

“Jen, I am so proud of you and your determination to complete this long journey, you are my inspiration to keep going when it would be easy to sit down and feel sorry for myself. Because of you I am inspired to try to set the example for people who take life as a given. It is not, you have to work at what you want and never give up hope regardless of what life throws at you.”

She doesn’t know I expose her in here.

She doesn’t know I expose myself in here.

And now I’m asking myself, who are these people who take life as a given?

I am just so scared!!!!!

There’s no time and no room to be scared in sailing. There are lives at stake.

Silence is violence. Literally.
Fuck, man, it does not feel good to break the people you love.

Sailing work should not feel good. It should not feel good to sit in your shit.

Sometimes, Trying Isn’t Enough

Hendrickson is learning social justice. She’s trying to un-learn how she was taught in the academy. She is learning culturally relevant pedagogy. She is changing the MT program. She is trying.

My grandma is learning liberation and feminism.

She’s trying to learn about racial injustice.

I even took her to the Brown v. Board museum in Topeka, Kansas last time we stayed there. We were there for our annual pilgrimage back to her birth place—Overbrook, KS—to tend to all of the graves.

We are the last people to do this. Ghosts of memories past. People I will never know. Our ancestors. Buried deep in Kansas soil.

Attending her high school reunion, checking in on her farms. Staying in Topeka.

It’s the closest city to her town. The only place with a hotel.

Traveling to Overbrook, Lyndon, across Pomona Lake, and back again to Topeka.

All over Osage County. This is where my ancestors lived. Where my grandparents were raised. Where my ancestors are buried. All within a 50 mile radius of Topeka.


The year before my mother was born.

My grandmother was gone by then.
Left in 1951 with my grandpa in the Navy (but he wasn’t a sailor).

*Brown v. Board* was arguably the biggest court case in Civil Rights history.

It over-turned segregation.

She grew up 27 miles away. Never even knowing any Black people. And now there is still segregation. I can count on one hand the number of Black people we interact with in Kansas. And they all work at McDonald’s or at the hotel. But now she is trying.

My mom was learning about white privilege too. I was teaching her how to “unpack her invisible knapsack” (McIntosh, 1990). Telling her, just like I always did since I was four, about the things I was learning in school. I was sending her articles that she saved in her email. I was asking her questions about the Civil Rights Movement.

She didn’t know any Black people though.

She knew it was going on, but she didn’t have the memories of it.

Only those of protesting Vietnam when she was in high school. Only white memories.


She was listening to me though. Asking me what I meant when I talked about institutional racism. Introducing me as her “liberal daughter” to her boyfriend. Watching Bill Maher with me on HBO. “Don’t tell Tom,” she laughed.

She has been trying to come on the journey with me since undergrad and the MT program and my first two years of teaching.

She was taken from me too soon though.
I felt robbed. My feeling of being robbed, as if I was the only one who lost my mother, was my selfish white feeling. But she was trying.

Sometimes, though, trying isn’t enough.

*Always, though, trying isn’t enough.*

Not in racial justice work.

It can’t always be about white feelings.

*It can NEVER be about white feelings!* 

Us white folks love sitting in our feelings! Making everyone else feel them.

Nah. Do that work on your own. Handle that with your own people and your own conscience. But don’t make everyone else deal with it. That’s counterproductive.

*As you say that, in your own selfish white feelings, Jen.*

This is WORK.

It’s life and death WORK.

*It’s woke whiteness WORK.*

As white folks, we have to learn to sit in discomfort. Own it.

Own your shit. Sit in your shit.

We have to be informed by communities and people of Color.

We cannot do this ourselves.

It’s okay that we aren’t the experts.
Like Nadia tells me when I try to do dishes but end up wasting all her water instead, “It’s okay. Let me do it. You are good at other things.”

Stop wasting all the water with your white feelings, trying to be in charge of things you aren’t in fact an expert on. Be an expert with your people. But don’t speak for people who are fully capable of speaking for themselves. And LISTEN.

My goodness. Just fucking listen.  
Us white folks, why is that we don’t know how to listen?!?  
Listen when people of Color tell you their experiences with racism.  
Listen to people who know better than you.  
Don’t argue with them, tell them they are wrong. They are right. LISTEN.

Let people who live this reality guide us, but don’t always assume it’s their job to teach us. Teach yourself.

My babies don’t get a choice in the matter.  
They sit in discomfort daily under systemic racism.  
And it’s more than just discomfort!  
It’s LIFE AND DEATH.  
They are funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline, murdered in the park while they play with toys, publicly executed on the street, violently ejected from classrooms, criminalized, adultified.  
It’s so much more than discomfort.  
It is LIFE AND DEATH.
But I always take it back to Dr. Boutte.

This work is necessary for the sake of the children.

When people ask us, “And how are the children?”

We need to be able to respond to them with, “The children are well.”

We do this work for the sake of the children. Every time.

All of our babies in our schools and out. Across the world. It’s for them.

My heart is so full. Even with all of these fears.

Because anything worth doing is scary like this.

Speaking truth to power is scary.

But the consequences of silence are scarier.

Responses to Poetic Justice

From: Lamar Johnson

Subject: Re: Poetics

Date: Tues, March 27, 2018 at 11:49PM

To: Jennifer Doyle

Hi Jen,

I hope all is well with your writing. It was great to catch up the other night.

Thank you, also, for sharing your poem. You have my permission to use my name. I really like it. It’s so raw and authentic!

We must continue to find powerful ways to disrupt the dangers of white supremacy in the academy. Just imagine if we had the language back in the MT program
to disrupt the racist comments from the rest of the cohort. We couldn’t disrupt it back then, but we have the language to do so now. As we talked about the other night, we must stab white supremacy in the chest with this truth.

Per our “woke” conversation, I am attaching a copy of my most recent publication. I think this piece can be helpful for your dissertation. I specifically talk about being “woke” toward the end of the piece where I provide and analyze students’ racial storytelling assignment. I hope this helps!

Peace,

L

Attachment: Johnson (2017)

From: Allison Anders

Subject: Re: Poetics

Date: Mon, March 26, 2018 at 3:52PM

To: Jennifer Doyle

Ah, Jen.

You have powerful, layered messages here.

The contrast between doing your scholarly dig w Denise's work and having to allow her and her work and her woke-fullness stand in contrast to whiteness must have been / must be painful. I think the contrast btwn what you read and what you've been struggling with is really significant in this poem.

White folks forego those celebrations of self (at least I think we do). Oppressors don't get those victories.
We have other work to do though struggling toward working woke. And what a righteous pursuit that is for any one.

You write, "Speaking truth to power is scary. But the consequences of silence are scarier." & often for white folks that means speaking back, speaking against, speaking out about those white folks who raised you, bathed you, tucked you in at night, nursed you through fevers and colds, fed you (body and soul) - it's a terrible bind: being loved by white people, loving white people, finding self-love as a white person in the US. We can't ever tear whiteness away from the love.

But the struggle doesn't have to be an either / or. Speaking against doesn't mean we can't invite those white folks we love to struggle with us. The struggle can be an invitation to join the fight. And wouldn't that be a miraculous day when white folks experienced "woke" as an invitation to join rather than a threat to privilege, entitlement, power.

A

An Open Letter to White People

*Please re-read “Becoming a Sailor” from Chapter 1 before continuing on with this letter if you think you might be offended by the tone or the profanity I use throughout.*

Dear Sisters and Brothers of whiteness,

I call you sisters and brothers because I love you as such—all of you. Even the ones in my story (real life) who I critique harshly with my work. I critique you all, I critique myself, I critique my family, I critique my friends, out of pure necessity for the need for someone to call us on our shit.
As a whole as white people, we have been so full of shit for as long as I could take it back in our history (see Chapter 6), walking around for centuries upon centuries upon centuries reeking of shit, acting like our shit doesn’t STINK, that we have become nose blind. And it is about time that someone called us on our shit. WAKE THE FUCK UP and SMELL THE ROSES. (Our roses smell like shit, by the way).

#sorrynotsorryforyelling

I’m #sorrynotsorry if you are offended by this work. I’m especially #sorrynotsorry if your hurt white feelings make it so that you cannot step outside yourself and your feelings to see the dangers of our unchecked whiteness and the absolute and dire necessity for my critique. I hope that you can put your hurt white feelings aside for a moment as you embark on this journey with me.

I also hope that you are able to see that this type of harsh critique comes from a place of love. It is this unequivocal amount of LOVE I have for ALL of humanity, that I MUST offer this critique. And I must use harsh words to do so as well. Because I do not think WE, as a people, are understanding the gravity of this situation. We need to understand that this is literally life and death.

It’s a damn shame that we may only hear this, truly hear this, coming from someone of our same complexion. As a whole, WE HAVE GOT TO DO BETTER. We have got to stop being so damn sensitive when people call us on our shit. People of Color have been telling us this shit for AGES. They BEEN known we’ve been out here smelling like shit. But we have been so butt-hurt in our privileged white feelings that we, as a whole, have failed to listen. We have failed to notice that our shit, does in fact, STINK. I don’t know why our ancestors told us that we could walk around like our shit
didn’t stink! IT DOES! Our white ancestors used massacres, genocide, slavery, law, prohibitions against education, reading, learning, etc. to take, exploit, and maintain wealth and power. We have to sit in this shit and stop pretending like our shit does not stink! And then we’ve had the nerve to make people of Color smell our shit for centuries. I know we’ve tried to hide it, but we cannot. The fact of the matter is that we’ve BEEN smelled like shit—whether we want to smell like this or not. And there are real, very dangerous, life threatening, consequences to that shit.

We have got to own our shit. We have got to sit in our shit. You know how I know this? I’ve spent thirty years not entirely owning my shit. And it is only through owning my shit and sitting in my shit, here at thirty, that I am now able to also call you on your shit. Because I am also calling me out on my shit. So, I’m #sorrrynotsorry if your feelings get in the way of you hearing this message. This message of love. This message of discomfort. This message brutal, honest, harsh truth.

I hope it feels like a slap in the face to us to discover these truths. It should make us feel a little bit broken inside (I’m here to help you heal you, too, I promise). I hope we do feel uncomfortable to sit in these feelings. In these truths. I hope we don’t feel good owning our legacy of violence. Our horrific past. It SHOULD make us feel horrible, because this work is too important not to feel horrible about it. It’s life and death. But it doesn’t have to be sunshine and rainbows all the time. We can BOTH feel horrible about owning our shit AND still own it unapologetically. We can BOTH feel guilty AND not wallow in the self-serving pity party with our(white)selves as the guest of honor. We can BOTH love ourselves, love our people, love our history AND hate our history, critique
our past, and critique our(white)selves. It never has to be either/or. It can always be both/and. Indeed, this work DEMANDS that it is such.

So yeah, a piece of this is going to be me making you (and myself) FEEL. I hope you do feel horrible. Like I said, it SHOULD make us feel bad. But don’t stay there in that feeling. Instead, ask yourself, how can we take all of our feelings and use them productively? How can we learn from Lorde (1984) to use our feelings and emotions (especially anger) as power? How can we understand that our feelings can never be disentangled from our whiteness? How can we understand that our white feelings are always going to be different, always going to have different connotations and consequences, compared to those same feelings of our brothers and sisters of Color? Having acknowledged that, more importantly, how can we use our white feelings as power to disrupt systems of racial oppression and white supremacy? Perhaps most importantly, however, how can we continue to always—deliberately and consciously—"check ourselves” keep the dangers of our white feelings at bay so that we can avoid the dangerous consequences of our white feelings in racial justice work? How can we continue to disrupt our white logic? How can we become sailors?

There are, for sure, examples of the dangers of white feelings in racial justice work throughout this dissertation. A million different ways my white feelings, as well as the white feelings of the white people in this story, inhibit the final end goal of racial justice. Think about that as you read about these book clubs. Note the many ways whiteness operates through the story—through the power structures in P-12 educational setting, in higher education and the academy, in research, and in real-life-human relationships. We will return to this in Chapter 6.
Until then, and before you move on, I want to personally thank you for joining me on this journey of love. I will repeat what I told you in Chapter 1. Although this is a harsh journey with some very harsh truths and a lot of hard pills to swallow, it is and always will be a journey of love. Love is always laborious. Sailing work is always about love. Woke whiteness work is always about love. So, thank you again for putting aside your selfish white feelings as you embark on this journey towards collective action and collective love in the pursuit of collective racial justice. Also remember, that when I’m telling you to put aside your feelings, I do not mean I want you not to feel. I am saying just the opposite. Remember, this sailing work is a feeling, and I need you to feel. Remember, I am being harsh now, and I will be gentle at the end.

You know how sometimes when you break a bone, the doctor has to break it again so that it will heal properly? Think of me as your doctor of education, breaking you again—because you are, in fact, already broken—so that you can heal properly. I cannot be gentle with you right now, I’m doing my doctor work. I have to break you right now. But you’ll see, you’ll heal! You are going to have to take it easy for a while though. Wear your cast. Then you’re going to have to do your therapy work for some time while you heal. But you’ll see. You’ll be better than ever! You just have to do the work afterwards.

So again, thank you for understanding the necessity of putting aside your (our) feelings as we get “down and dirty” rolling around in our shit and owning our shit. Thank you for allowing me to speak these harsh truths so bluntly, so vehemently. I use my words as metaphorical violence here, hoping to make us/you feel and understand the gravity of situation, and how our actions and lack thereof—no matter if they are intentional, unintentional, well-intentioned (Lawrence, 1987), conscious, unconscious,
dysconscious (King, 1991), aversively racist (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2004), silently racist (Trepagnier, 2006), whatever—our actions and lack thereof have enacted literal and metaphorical violence on communities and people of Color for centuries and our actions and lack thereof continue to enact literal and metaphorical violence on communities and people of Color every day, currently (Johnson & Bryan, 2016). One must only wake up and see—the evidence of this is everywhere. And unless we as a people WAKE THE FUCK UP and join in the collective struggle for racial justice, we will continue to enact literal and metaphorical violence on communities and people of Color—no matter if we mean to or not. I use my words harshly here so you maybe, just maybe, understand a tiny, itsy-bitsy, little baby, sliver of an inkling of what this violence we as a people, white people, enact upon people and communities of Color historically and presently, and will only continue to enact if we do not interrupt it. People’s lives are at stake here, humanity as a whole is at stake here. We are all in this, collectively, together. It’s about time we as a people started acting like it.

Thank you, also, for understanding that you/me/we will NEVER know what this violence actually feels like, what the experience of racism actually is, because we are white. It is impossible, in our whiteness, to understand or experience the lived reality of racism and the violent consequences of racism. We can never escape this because we can never escape our whiteness and we can never escape our membership to a racist society and a racist world. Our ancestors made sure of this through colonization. We can never disown our whiteness, nor can we ever be innocent of our role—in our white bodies, white minds, and white spirits—in perpetuating racism. So, thank you for joining me in the ownership of our whiteness and all the shit that comes with it.
Thank you, also, for understanding that no matter what, because we were born into this racist society and exist within this racist society, we are and always will be complicit in racism (Applebaum, 2010). We can never escape the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992). This does not mean we get to excuse away our racisms though—indeed, it means just the opposite. It means we have to own our shit.

It is my most sincere belief that in recognizing this shit (allyship), owning this shit (being woke), remaining informed about this shit (staying woke), and actively fighting this shit all day, every day, no matter what (working woke), that we may join in the collective struggle for freedom. Please know, that because of this shit, our role necessarily and unequivocally must look different than the role of people of Color. It has to. It is not our experience. It is our shit that is causing this experience. Thank you for owning this shit with me as I teach you how to be a sailor by understanding that we are always complicit in racism (part of being woke as a white person; we will always be covered in the shit of whiteness), and therefore must be cognitively aware that we have no innocence to hide behind (part of staying woke as a white person; owning our shit; knowing our shit will always stink), and constantly vigilant in our efforts to fight racism in ethically responsible ways (always working woke; no days off).

To all of my white people everywhere—sleeping, dreaming, napping, snoozing, resting, not-yet-fully awake—I hope that you can, as Allison so eloquently put, experience this work—this attempt at woke whiteness work—as an invitation to join us in the fight for racial justice. I welcome you with open, loving arms.

I love you always,

Jen
P.S. I wrote you a poem, too, in case you’re struggling with your feelings right now:

If you want to be sad/angry/upset about this, talk to me. I’m white. I’ll listen. I’ll help you work through those feelings so we can get over them and move to the more important stuff.

The woke whiteness work.

But be warned, I won’t be that patient with you. Racial justice work is too important. It’s too urgent. People are dying in the streets. In their homes. In our schools. Our feelings are less important than their lives. I’m sorry if that hurts you.

Actually I’m not.

I cannot care about your feelings more than I care about people’s lives.

We have to move past the feelings real quick. So we can do the racial justice work.

The woke whiteness work.

We can get back to your feelings as long as we make sure they don’t get in the way of our work. I will be gentle with you and encourage you to be gentle with yourself.

But we WILL do the work. One way or another. Your feelings won’t get in the way of this work. I promise you, I won’t let them.

I know, I know, it’s uncomfortable. It makes us feel sad/angry/upset. We feel robbed. Why aren’t we allowed to feel with everyone else? Because our people have been allowed to feel for centuries. And now we are too damn sensitive. Own your shit. Own the discomfort. Now take that feeling and let’s DO something about that. That’s woke whiteness WORK. So we can make sure we aren’t making other people feel that way because of our privileged ignorance to their problems. It’s uncomfortable, I know.

As white folks, we have to learn to sit in this discomfort. Own it.
If that’s the least we have to do, to sit in discomfort, then we are still winning.

The consequences aren’t life and death.

Just broken hearts and broken spirits.

We can heal from that every time.

I will help you heal if you promise to do the work too.

It has to be a collaborative effort.

We have to own all of our mistakes. Own all of our violent history. Own all of the ways our people still enact violence. We have to own all of our shit.

We cannot opt out of it. Racial justice work is too important. Humanity is too important.

Please, join me. The world needs you.

An Open Letter to People of Color

Dear Sisters and Brothers of Color,

I call you sisters and brothers because I love you as such—all of you. Thank you for being so patient with me, so patient with us, as white people, while it took us so long to wake up and smell our shit-stained roses. Thank you for continuing be patient with us as we continue to awaken our minds, bodies, and spirits in this collective fight towards racial justice. Thank you, especially, for being patient with me.

Thank you, also, for always seeing us (white people as a whole) as we really are—covered in shit—and loving us anyways, even though we have never deserved it. Throughout history, I don’t think we have ever known how to properly love ourselves because we have never learned to love all of ourselves by owning all of ourselves (please see Chapter 6 for more on this). That lack of love, and indeed our very real hatred, has made it utterly impossible for us to truly and completely love you on a most human level.
Indeed, it has only made it specifically possible to continue to (1) incompletely love you and metaphorically enact violence upon you at best, and (2) fervidly hate you and enact physical violence upon you at worst. I say we because we—white people, my people—we exist on all ends of this spectrum.

I believe that in order to completely love someone else, we (all people) must first completely love ourselves. I also believe that in order to completely love ourselves, we must fully, completely, entirely, unapologetically love all parts of ourselves. Even the parts we want to hide because they are messy (or are covered in shit). I think that is only through owning our shit that we are able to join you in genuine love. Critical love. Humanizing love. It is my sincerest wish in this work to join you in this collective, human love so we can collectively fight the systems and powers that keep us at odds when we are truly meant to be joined together as one. I also recognize that throughout history, and in the present, there have been, and are, an abundance of allies and woke white folks who have indeed loved you as well. And an abundance of white folks who have loved you the best they knew how without fully being able to love themselves. I cannot speak for all white folks, but I speak generally here as a statement of understanding the implication that white folks are always complicit in racism, and it is only through our “owning of our shit” through white complicity pedagogy (Applebaum, 2010) and extending that to woke whiteness work as a state of being, that we are able to love you completely, entirely, humanly, and critically.

I do not offer my statement about our inability to properly love ourselves as an excuse, nor as an explanation, to center myself or whiteness in this fight. Indeed, I do not excuse anything. I unapologetically call for complete ownership and responsibly for our
actions, our shit, and our role in creating, maintaining, and perpetuating the system of
centrally whiteness, point out whiteness, call out whiteness with this work as a way
declaring whiteness (Thompson, 2003). Though I also know that I can never unravel
my connections to whiteness and therefore will always be complicit in disseminating
whiteness within everything I do. While I know that sometimes trying isn’t enough in
racial justice work, I am trying, I do try, and I will continue to try to decenter whiteness
and myself in the fight for racial justice. However, I speak to white people directly in this
work, as a white woman, therefore centering whiteness in this work. I do not apologize
for this because I feel as though it is necessary, in this instance, to call myself, and my
people, out on our shit.

I thank the many people of Color—my spiritual sailing sister, my critical friends,
my spiritual friends, my chosen family, my academic mothers and mentors, my literary
loves, my counselor, my students, my colleagues, my fellow educators, my peers, my
mentees, my loves, my heart, as well as the many scholars of Color, authors, artists,
lyricists, poets, musicians, pastors, ministers, priests and all of the ancestors—who have
contributed to this work and contributed to my “wokeness” that makes this work possible.

I love you always,

Jen

An Open Letter to the People Implicated in this Story

Dear ___(insert your name here if you feel like this is for you)___.
I include you in this story, call you out on your shit, not to be malicious or to hurt your feelings. Though I imagine it might feel that way. It might feel unfair, unnecessary for me to expose you like this. You might be, and probably are, offended. I can most certainly understand why you would feel this way, I can appreciate and validate your feelings—they are very real—however, I do not apologize. If you are in this story, it is because I love you. Deeply and truly. In every sense of the word. I call you out on your shit, because I have to call myself out on my shit, and I am tied to you through love in this story. I wholeheartedly hold on to the belief that BECAUSE I love you so very much, I MUST critique you (Baldwin, 1955); I MUST call you out on your shit, because I MUST call myself out on my shit. If you are in this story, it is because I cannot disentangle myself nor disentangle my experience, this story from you. We are inextricably bound together.

I do not apologize to you because I do not apologize for this story. This story NEEDS to be told. It is a dire necessity to tell this story unapologetically so that we may learn from our past mistakes and own our mistakes—own all of our shit—for it is only through owning our shit that we are able to meet together as one, united in love, ready to begin the healing process and the journey towards harmony, freedom, and racial justice.

To my grandmother and father, I fear that I may hurt you the most with this story. But like I just said, this story is necessary and demands an unapologetic account. This story is part of me. Because you both are also a part of me—your DNA quite literally runs through both sides of my veins—I cannot extricate you from the story. I cannot extricate you from me, my story, this story, this necessary unapologetic critical, analytic
autoethnographic account. I will not apologize for having my heart intertwined to yours. I love you and am proud to be made up of your blood.

To everyone implicated in here, I hope that we can use this story as an open invitation to open dialogue through love and understanding. I know I come off as harsh. I’m a passionate person. I do not apologize for my passionate dedication to racial justice. Indeed, I call others to join me in this passion. But I also hope you all know that I come from a place of understanding and a place of genuine love for humanity—genuine love for you. I extend this invitation with a smile, a sense of humor, and an understanding of the satirical nature of this critique. I always approach this work from a place of love.

Genuine, critical love.

I love you always,

Jen
CHAPTER 4:

LIVING THE BOOK CLUBS (FINDINGS I)

Living the book club was intense. I engaged in the book clubs during a time in my life where I was actively avoiding grief and my mother’s death by throwing myself into my work, never giving myself a chance to breathe, heal, or fully process her death. The semester was intense. I was intense. I was surrounded by intensity. This is how I was named “Jen on Ten” (Q. Grant, personal communication, July 2014) the summer following this spring semester, January-May 2014.

There was a juxtaposition between my two classes each week—the book clubs with Dr. Hendrickson on Tuesday night, my critical race theory (CRT) course with Dr. Anders on Thursday night. Full-time teaching high school English during the day. Taking classes at night. Often times during the semester, I would wake up at 3:30AM, do two hours of work for class, get ready for work, then drive to Nottoway to teach all day. I frequently would work through my 25 minute lunch break from 12:25-12:50PM, then again during my planning from 2:00PM-3:35PM when the afternoon bell rang. I would then drive almost an hour to downtown Columbia, to make sure I made it in time for my classes at 4:40PM. Days when I did not have class, I usually stayed late in Nottoway, providing feedback for my students on their work, planning lessons and strategies for my high schoolers, catching up with readings for class after school, tutoring students, or
planning fundraisers and spirit weeks, designing t-shirts and coordinating sales, as well as organizing other events and meetings in preparation for Relay For Life.

I spent many of my weekends furiously working for these two classes, trying to make sure I executed the book clubs deliberately so as to promote racial justice. It was my passion work, my heart work, what I will now call my woke whiteness work. I had never felt so alive and exhausted and angry and exhilarated before in my life. I also went on a weekend cabin trip in January, celebrated Stephanie’s birthday in February, won teacher of the year in March, and went on a cruise in April. I barely had time to stop and think. The spare time I did have, I used to write in my reflective researcher journals, or hang out with Solomon and his family. Only once during the semester did I meet with my critical friend, Lamar, as we both were teaching high school English full-time and taking two doctoral classes. That conversation is represented within this chapter. My other critical conversations came in my CRT class each Thursday night and with email exchanges between my CRT professor, Dr. Anders, and me.

Now, four years later, as my co-chair, Dr. Anders suggested that I create a composite character (Cook, 2013) to help show you as the reader how I was processing and reflecting on the book club experience as my first attempt at this findings chapter lacked evidence of the ways in which I was reflecting after each book club meeting. I think, however, the absence of critical conversations with critical friends outside of my Thursday night CRT class speaks loudly. I did not have critical conversations with critical friends (aside from one with Lamar) because my critical friends community only consisted of Lamar at the time. And we were both super busy. It does not make sense to go back and re-create a composite conversation when, with the exception of Lamar, I
didn’t have them. I speak to the importance of critical friends later, as I reflect back on the book club experience, but I feel as though it is important to represent the data here as it happened—absent of the many critical conversations that I could have had if only I had the community of critical friends that I have now. And if I only allowed myself to breathe, feel, and process.

But I was too busy at the time. Purposefully busy. I furiously threw myself into work because that is what my mom always did and that is what my grandma always did and that is what my dad always did and that is what we always did. That’s what we always do. Just kept on working. Forever and ever and ever and ever. We don’t have time to sit and wallow in self-pity! We must work, work, work, work, work. And there were dangers to that busy-ness. And ties to whiteness in that busy-ness which I will address later as well (white busy-ness). Additionally, I did a lot of work that semester trying to keep my agenda hidden, not telling anyone about it, because I wanted it to be my dissertation research. I had learned the hard way at work what happens when I didn’t know how to keep my mouth shut about things around white people who wielded power.

My classroom-next-door-neighbor at Nottoway High School (NHS), Helene (pseudonym—a white, veteran teacher, ten years my senior) had constantly been taking my work from me and tried to “steal my shine” every chance she could get for my first three years of teaching (white jealousy). She was supposed to be my mentor-teacher my first year of teaching, but instead she threw me under the bus every chance she got, telling my principal I had terrible classroom management and that I felt like I did not need to follow the district pacing guide (white lies). My assistant principal told me this at our weekly happy hours with Tasha, and he warned me to watch out for her. He knew she
was spreading lies about me. Administration knew how she was. But it didn’t change the fact that we had to collaboratively plan together for English I with another teacher (a white man) during our weekly planning meetings.

As an incoming teacher, I felt alive with new ideas from my MT program, eager to put all of the ideas Dr. Hendrickson had taught me. I was eager to be a peer, no longer a student-teacher. Excited about my first year of teaching. During these meetings, I would present these really great ideas of things to do with our students, so excited about putting all I had learned into practice. And then Helene would take my work, my ideas, and my projects and present them at faculty meetings as her own (white stealing). Never giving me credit. When I had casually mentioned in passing that I applied for the doctorate program at USC, thinking she would not have enough time to apply until the next year because applications were due the next day—and because I, too, played power games (white manipulation). She immediately went home and applied that night. She knew I was a mentee of Dr. Hendrickson at USC, so when she found out that Dr. Hendrickson was offering the adolescent literacy course, she signed up for that as well. I could not escape this woman anywhere I went. She constantly tried to steal my shine!

When I would vent to Tasha (my sister/work-best-friend, a Black woman) about Helene, she would tell me, “I don’t mean no harm, Jen, but you gotta learn to keep your mouth shut! You see how when I do things to plan for freshman focus, I don’t tell her shit about it, even though she asks. I tell Ms. JJ [assistant principal]. I tell Ms. Simmons [principal]. Admin has to know. But she isn’t admin, so she can just go ahead and find out each week like the rest of the teachers what we are about to do for guidance lessons in
freshman focus. I ain’t tellin’ her shit! But I will make sure she has nothing to say about my work though.”

Tasha would constantly teach me how to do what I needed to do to make sure Helene never had anything negative to say about me, but also how to be strategically silent so as not to allow Helene to take my work from me. Because that woman stole everything from me and tried every chance she could get to make me look bad! This was the same woman who used to invite me for drinks when I first arrived at Nottoway, before she found out Tasha and I had become friends. After that, I swore Helene made it her life’s mission to take me down. Helene was one of the other eight white women also enrolled in my Tuesday night adolescent literacy course, doing book clubs at JDC with me.

In our second class that semester, Lamar and I had a published piece come out in a journal she edited (Johnson, & Doyle, 2013). Dr. Hendrickson gave me a “shout out” in class—which I was extremely proud of and humbled by—but I did not want Helene to know all I was up to outside of Nottoway (white secrecy). Tasha and I laughed about it though at lunch the day next day, how much it must have just killed her to see me shining like that. And shining in a way that I didn’t even ask for. Helene was always doing things that said, “LOOK AT ME!” Because of this, I privately begged Dr. Hendrickson not to put me in a group with her and not to share any of my dissertation ideas with Helene that semester. I asked her to please not mention this to Helene, and that I did not wish to speak poorly about her, but that I had just about enough issues at work with Helene and did not need any more of those issues creeping up into my doc student life as well. I tried to be strategically silent, like Tasha taught me. But I also secretly (white secrecy) played
the power game with Helene, too. I thrived in it, and I knew I was winning. It made me feel good *(white pride)*.

There were moments of conversations with Tasha during that semester that could have served as critical conversations if there had been enough time in the day, but they were fleeting moments. Tasha knew a little bit about my work at JDC and my CRT course, but we mostly just talked about Helene and the other crew of white teachers from our hall. As I mentioned in Chapter One, it was not *all* white teachers at Nottoway who were like this, just Helene and her “crew” of five other teachers on our hall who were very cliquey, had been working in the district, living in the district, and who had grown up in the county. They used these community ties to whiteness to wield power *(white hegemony)* in very specific ways. As I grew to find out the following school year (2014-2015), the entire school district and county operated in this manner. That could be an entirely different dissertation as well. For the purposes of book club context though, I will say that during this school year (2013-2014), my third-year teaching, while I was taking CRT, I was able to name all of my frustrations I had seen from my first three years as racist. I could see that they were racist—blatently, overtly, trying to be covertly, racist. Being from the DMV area, geographically dripping in class privilege and money (I grew up in two of the wealthiest counties in the nation, and the wealthiest Black county in the nation is also in this area as well), whiteness did not operate in such a disrespectfully obvious manner. *(Whiteness definitely still operates in that geographical area, just in a much more covert way)*.

I can see now, looking back that whiteness did indeed operate in specific ways back home, but it was harder to see back home. It struck me in the face when I first came
down to Columbia and hit me even harder when I began working in Nottoway. In my
memory, we did not have scenarios back home where you had white teachers, who
claimed to love Black kids, who went to church every Sunday feeling like good people
(white morality), wielding their white power all over the place, claiming not to have any
white power (white innocence). This is not to say that we did not have whiteness
operating in these ways back home, we most definitely did, it was just a product of my
white ignorance that it was white invisible to me.

Mrs. Senn, Tasha, Mrs. JJ, and Ms. Simmons (all Black women) all knew this.
Though they did not name it whiteness or racism. They were not surprised by my
noticings though. Mrs. Senn used to tell me that’s just the way Helene was, and Ms.
Simmons used to tell me not worry about her because she had to be so very miserable all
the time to always want to do this to other people. I was surprised by this though. How
could this be?!? I know y’all see this! I would yell. Tasha would just tell me that’s just
how things were in Nottoway, but that even they weren’t as bad back home where she
was from (two hours away). I just had never seen such apparent white power being
wielded in such blatently offensive ways before in my life (white ignorance). I saw it in
the court house in the town when I had to oppose a speeding ticket, I saw it with the
white students and their parents from swim team, I saw it with this group of white
teachers, and I wanted to scream from the rooftop, WE NEED TO DISRUPT THIS!!!!
DON’T YOU SEE?!!?

I had a lot of really interesting conversations with Tasha that semester about these
things that I was seeing. My racial toolkit was not yet formed though; I didn’t have the
vocabulary, and I don’t think Tasha did either, so neither of us could name these
frustrations as the power of whiteness. I also had a lot of good conversations in my CRT class that semester about these patterns I was seeing, as well as ways to disrupt these patterns in productive manners by being strategic and deliberate. The conversations in my CRT class, along with the readings in class, helped me to name things as racist, being able to clearly see how these frustrations were in some way related to race. This naming of the power structures was part of my racial justice toolkit that was beginning to come together that semester, but it was not yet fully formed. Including the many conversations about the power of whiteness in that school district would tell a different story entirely. While that is also an important story and a necessary one to tell, it does not move this book club story forward. Though it does explain how very silent and very strategically sneaky I was trying to be with my CRT book club idea.

I, too, was learning how to play the game of whiteness, but from a different angle now. I had never before been met with such dedicated resistance to my whiteness games before. I realize now, that my mother, teachers, and everyone around me had been teaching me how to play the game of whiteness my entire life. Indeed, the only person I was ever unsuccessful in playing power games with was my first step-mother, but that’s because she had manipulated me time and time again as a child. But I was always successful with my mother and I was always successful in school. I knew how to play power games in school and at work as a lifeguard (I didn’t need to play power games working for my family, I was already powerful as the boss’s granddaughter). I did have to play power games of whiteness with my grandmother (and grandfather) at work though. I had to perform whiteness in a very distinct way around her at work, to impress her. I followed my mother’s lead on this. I had already learned from my mother and
grandmother how to play the game of whiteness *(and really, my mother and grandmother were playing the game of white cisgender patriarchy—that’s why they knew how to play these games so well—they, too, had to play power games with my grandfather)*, then I had studied these powers in the *48 Laws of Power* (Greene, 1998) that Solomon had suggested to me (though I never named this power as white). All of these experiences with “playing the game” was how I knew how to play power games with Helene and the other white teachers. However, I also was learning during my four years in Nottoway, from the Black community, how to strategically deal with the wielded white power when it comes in the form of resistance and is being used against you.

I had never encountered resistance like this before. I had lost the game plenty of times while I was playing it, but I had never had the game resisted quite like this before, working with all of these powerful white people in my school district. I combined my knowledge from Black community with my already finely-tuned skills of performing whiteness to manipulate, and was trying it out in a real way, a potentially dangerous way, with my book clubs, with Dr. Hendrickson, and with Lindsay. At the time though, I was not fully aware of how I was operating. Everything was moving so fast. I was not even fully conscious of the ways I was playing the game *(not yet woke)*. My life in a whirlwind, I began the semester.

*****

At the beginning of the semester I was eager, hopeful, and full of energy and excitement with the book clubs and Dr. Hendrickson’s class altogether. It had been three years since I had taken a class with her in the MT program, and I was thrilled to see all of the ways in which she was now implementing social justice into her work. She was also
telling me all of the ways in which she had added community projects and social justice pedagogy into the MT program. I thought she finally “got it” with social justice work. I wasn’t even sure I “got it” enough to describe it in words, but it was a feeling. I thought she shared that mutual feeling with me (wokeness as a feeling). I just assumed when we used the word social justice, we both were operating from a shared understanding.

In my head, social justice always meant racial justice. I never saw it any other way. This is why I thought I was woke. Lamar had defined this as CRT social justice for me in our published article, but I was just now taking CRT. I had only read a couple articles on it, but I never understood that social justice could have different meanings. Indeed, I argue that true social justice cannot exist outside of racial justice, but that is another point. So, when Dr. Hendrickson talked about social justice, I thought she knew. As a class, we were defining social justice with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and their Conference on English Education (CEE) position statements on social justice work. We did extensive presentations on this work as well for our second class on the position statements and why social justice work was so important. Dr. Hendrickson framed the book clubs at JDC as an act of social justice, and she heavily articulated the social justice agenda of our book clubs. It was everything I loved and now my favorite professor was also doing social justice work. I was proud to have been her student and even more proud of the way she had grown and developed over the course of the last three years since I had been in her classroom.

However, as I grew to uncover that semester, she was still sleeping on social justice work. She was not yet woke. She was not even awake. Maybe she thought she was in and out of sleep, kept hitting snooze on the alarm, or was not all the way up, but in
reality, she was not up at all. She was not awake. She was not woke. She was trying to understand social justice, but she was not woke. The slow discovery of this information felt like betrayal to me throughout the semester. It caused tensions for me—here was a woman I loved, respected, wanted so badly for her “to get it” (be woke) with me, then felt like she finally did get it, only to discover that she in fact, did not. It was frustrating. I loved her. (I still do).

All semester, this tension of “she just did not get it” when it came to social justice work—multiplied by the fusions of tensions I experienced working with white teachers at Nottoway High School, the tensions of working with research partners who I felt also “did not get it”, the tensions of grieving the loss of my mother, the tensions in my relationship outside of school, and the tensions that always occur when you don’t sleep enough and don’t stop to breathe—was enough to break my heart. I felt like I was drowning. I was trying to navigate all these tensions. So many tensions! And my ship was sinking. So much water kept getting in. I could sense that I was going to go down, but I was trying so hard to just stay afloat. I worked harder. I was determined to navigate the tensions. I would navigate the tensions. I had to. The work was too important. I was okay. My mom never would have left me if she didn’t know I would be okay. I had to be okay. The work was sustaining me. My mother’s spirit was sustaining me.

I know now, in 2018, the importance of critical community and critical friends when navigating waters as a critical scholar/woke white woman. But at the time, I only had a couple critical conversations outside my CRT course. I also know now, in 2018, the very real dangers and consequences of all this busy, busy, busy; do, do, do.
In lieu of a composite character, and because I did not have the critical conversations needed during that semester outside of my CRT course (lack of time/hours in the day was a huge reason why), I offer narratives as I relive the book club meetings to illustrate the ways in which I was grappling with turning theory into practice during that time period in order to paint a fuller, more complete picture of what it was like “Living the Book Club” that spring 2014 semester. Also, in my narratives, I offer critique, commentary, and discussion about the data presented. Sometimes I will talk back to myself, write against myself (Noblit, 1999) in italics, as I have throughout my dissertation, as part of my woke whiteness work to disrupt my own white logic.

I present each of the five book club sessions as an individual section of this chapter. For each book club meeting, I include narratives derived from journals, my own social media accounts, re-tellings of the stories, and re-reading of the transcripts from the book club. Though, keep in mind, per Dr. Hendrickson, I am not allowed to use any of the data from the transcripts. Additionally, I offer email exchanges, reflective researcher journal entries, and re-creations of real-life conversations I had during that time period. I also present data on our last days of class, after the book club was done but before the semester ended.

**Book Club #1 ~ February 4, 2014**

**From:** Jennifer

**Subject:** JDC Today

**Date:** Tue, Feb 4, 2014 at 1:35 PM

**To:** Lindsay

Hey Lindsay!
I saw that we are in a group together, and I was thinking about what we wanted to do with our group of students this afternoon. I came up with a mini-plan (lesson) type thing, and was wondering what your thoughts were on it.

I also have 10 books that I will be bringing that are some of my students’ favorite books. They are very high interest and we can do a book pass with the students.

Here’s what I came up with so far (explanations below):

• 2 Truths & A Lie
  o I will bring notecards for this activity…
    ▪ Last year, I traveled to five different countries.
    ▪ Ever since I was a little kid, I’ve always loved to read.
    ▪ I met Justin Timberlake when I was in high school.

• If You Really Knew Me…
  o This is an activity I do with all of my students at the beginning of each year to get to know them and for them to get to know me. This is what I’ll probably share:
    ▪ I am obsessed with the color PINK!
    ▪ I have two degrees from USC and am working on my third.
    ▪ I absolutely love teaching English to my high schoolers & I love each and every one of them.
    ▪ My mother passed away from cancer six months ago and I still miss her very much.
    ▪ I love rap music—my favorite rappers are Jay Z, J Cole, & Kendrick Lamar.
- I grew up in the Washington, DC area.
- One of my life goals is to learn how to speak Spanish.
- I love to read now, but I hated reading when I was a teenager.
- I’ve never really lived with my dad.
- I traveled to England, Spain, and Italy last summer with two of my best friends.
- This is my second time working with students here at JDC, and I’m really looking forward to learning from y’all through these book clubs.
  - Usually, I have the students write their own “If you knew me…” statements. However, I don’t think we will have time to do this today if we want to get to all of the interview & the book pass. I was thinking about just sharing mine (and hopefully yours if you feel comfortable doing so). That way, the students get to know us and feel a little more comfortable with us for the interview process. Also, I will double check with Hendrickson on if we are even allowed to share this information about ourselves (though there is no identifying or personal information on here).
- Interview with Students
  - Ask the questions Hendrickson provides & record answers from all students. (“Burke Reading Interview Modified for Older Readers” (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005). These were all questions to get to know students’ as readers. What their interests were. What their
experiences with reading were. How they defined themselves as readers. What types of books they liked to read. Etc.)

- Book Pass
  - I have ten selections of books & paper for them to write which book they would be interested in reading so we can get copies for next time.
  
  Random Side Note—Please do not get too comfortable with such planning & these detailed emails and such from me! Haha! I’m in rare form today. I know I’m probably coming off as super OCD & kind of a lot to handle, but I promise I’m actually a really laid back person!!

  Furthermore, we don’t HAVE to do any of this. I’m not married to anything on here & you won’t hurt my feelings if you don’t want to do any of it. I am just pretty excited about this afternoon.

  Let me know if you need anything. My cell is (703)***-**** if you need to get in touch with me.

  Thanks,

  Jen

From: Lindsay

Subject: Re: JDC Today

Date: Tue, Feb 4, 2014 at 1:57 PM

To: Jennifer

Hey Jen,

  Wow, thanks SO much for this!! I am excited we are working together and it makes me feel good you’ve had experience at JDC. I’m actually dealing with 2 flat tires
on my car, and am hoping to get my car back in time before class. If not, my husband is
going to drop me off at JDC and I’ll bum a ride from there I figure. So this is great that
you did some planning, because I’ve been dealing with these 2 flats for over 24 hours
now (way long and complicated story).

So yes, I think it sounds like a great game plan. I’ll draft up “If you really knew
me” statements, and I agree that we can just share ours for sake of time. I’m thrilled
about the book pass too, because I was struggling with bringing books since I live in
Charlotte but stay in Columbia on weekdays… all my books are in Charlotte. And I’ve
been without a car to get to the library :)

As far as the interview, I figure you can ask a question and we’ll let everyone
answer, then I’ll ask the next one on the list, and so on…

Looking forward to this afternoon! Thanks again—see you in a bit.

Lindsay

my cell (in case) 704-***-****

As a high school English teacher, and because I had already done book clubs with
adolescents before, I planned out the entire curriculum for our very first book club
meeting. During this meeting, we had seven JDC students who we conducted a group
interview with. Four of those members returned the following week (and every other
week after that). One of the students was released after this first book club session and
the other two opted out of the book club program. Students at JDC had to give up their
free time in the afternoons to attend book clubs at this time, outside of the normal school
day. It was completely volunteer based, and Dr. Hendrickson warned us that we would be working with a “transient population” of students.

Our first book club session went very well, as Lindsay and I took turns asking questions that Dr. Hendrickson had provided for us. The goal of this initial interview was to get to know the students at JDC, figure out what their interests were as readers, show them some books, and then be able to use their interests to pick book options for the book pass the following week. I had already completed this same exact interview with these same exact interview questions four years earlier in my previous work at JDC with my student, Mike (see reflection from Chapter One). As a high school English teacher, I also knew the importance of making sure that our students got to know us in this process as well. I knew what it was like working with high school age students. I knew we had to build community in our book club and allow the students to get to know us as people too while we got to know them. As a teacher, I always told my students that I would never ask them to do anything that I was not also willing to do myself. So, I knew the importance of sharing myself with them as well. This is why I did the “Two Truths and A Lie” community builder as well as the “If You Really Knew Me…” activity. Although we did not get around to doing the “If You Really Knew me…” activity this first day of book clubs.

I also deliberately made sure that we arranged the desks in the classroom in a circle, allowing all of the students, as well as Lindsay and me, to be members of the book club. I wanted our physical positioning in the book club to illustrate to the students how we were not there as teachers, but as fellow-members of the book club. For this reason, Lindsay and I made sure not to sit next to one another. We sat amongst our students.
Overall, the book club session went entirely too fast. We were rushing to get through all of the questions, finding it hard to ask all of them to a group of seven students all at one time. It was even harder to transcribe the initial book club meeting. Dr. Hendrickson kept telling us that we did not need to transcribe the book club meetings in their entirety, and just to get the “important stuff” as related to our students’ interests so that we could present them with a list of books to choose from during the second book club meeting. There was so much stuff that we were doing, it was hard to decide what was the important stuff. We both felt like all of it was important.

Again, as a high school English teacher, I knew most of the young adult (YA) books the students referred to when they talked about their readings, and as the students were talking about their interests, I made note of what books we could include at the next book club session. Many of the students showed an interest in “real books with real situations” as well as books about “the lack of teachings in school” with a focus on “urban knowledge”. My heart filled with joy at their answers as I thought about all of the possibilities of critical book clubs, as the students were leading this book club down a critical pathway and were already interested in speaking truth to power. That was my passion. I left the book clubs that evening excited to plan for our next book club meeting.

However, I was also wary about the book club process after day one because I felt like we just did not have enough time to complete everything in a 90 minute session with students. Dr. Hendrickson wanted us to do a book pass, have students pick books, interview the students, and do a community builder. But there was just not enough time to do all of that. Per usual (as I knew what kind of teacher she was and how she operated as a professor from my previous experiences), she was trying to do too much. She was
trying to cram too much stuff into one session. This was abundantly clear in all of the readings she provided for us in class as well.

We were bombarded with so much reading outside of class that it was almost impossible to keep up with it. When I printed the readings for the first two class periods, I filled an entire binder. Thankfully, I had already read a lot of the stuff in the MT program, so I was able to skim things, and I also knew that she was never going to get around to talking about all of the different readings. I can only imagine what it would have been like to be in the class without any background on miscue analysis, book clubs, or how to engage “reluctant readers” or “struggling readers” through book clubs and alternative literacy practices. We never had a chance to get in-depth with any of the readings because it was just too much to do in too little time.

Likewise, I felt like our first book club session was too much! Just like with our readings from class, we were trying to cram too much into too little time. I remembered doing the same interview with my student, Mike, from my experiences at JDC and how long it took me just to interview him, one student. Now we had seven students. And we were supposed to do a book pass. And we were supposed to have them pick books. And we were supposed to do community builders. We needed a minimum of four hours with the students to actually complete all of this in one session. We only had 90 minutes.

The book clubs began in a whirlwind.

But I was excited nonetheless. I felt alive. The students were talking about untold history and speaking truth to power. I couldn’t wait to see where the book clubs were going to take us. I couldn’t wait to start reading with the students, to start discussing with
them. I was excited about where the students were going to take us this semester with this book club. We now had two weeks to start planning our next book club meeting.

**Book Club #2 ~ February 18, 2014**

During the two weeks in between our first book club meeting and our second book club meeting, Lindsay and I transcribed the book club discussion/interviews and read through them on our own before meeting virtually on Thursday, February 13, 2014. During our Google Hangout, we discussed the students’ answers from the interview, next steps for book clubs, and possible book choices we could bring. As a high school English teacher, I already had many books I could bring from my classroom for our book pass based on students’ responses to the literature. Because Lindsay was trained in Elementary education, she was thankful that I had knowledge about different novels of high-interest for the book pass.

Based on our students’ responses, I decided on the following selections—*A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah, *Muchacho* by Louanne Johnson, *Bad Boy: A Memoir* by Walter Dean Myers, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, and *Lockdown* by Walter Dean Myers. I had taught all of these books in my English classroom. Many of the students noted in their interviews that they enjoyed reading books by Walter Dean Myers, so I included many of those. I also made sure all of the texts were culturally relevant and written by authors of Color. For the most part, where I could, I deliberately did this in my classroom as a teacher as well. I figured the students would get the dead, white, male authors in a variety of other classes throughout their schooling careers, so I felt it was important to deliberately interrupt that in my classroom with literature from authors of Color.
Likewise, I felt that it was important to deliberately interrupt this in our book club as well. Each text selection in some way told a positive story of overcoming adversity.

The weekend before our book club, Lindsay and I emailed back and forth while we tried to find book trailers and different ways to “sell” each book to students. We planned to present each book to the students, get them hooked, and then I created a handout called “Judge a Book by Its Cover” where the students had a chance to circle their book club choices after our meeting.

We also had many productive and friendly conversations about how we could divide up the course work. I told her that I did not mind being the facilitator because I didn’t know much about researcher notes, but that I was flexible (J. Doyle, personal communication, 17 February 2014). She replied back that she agreed that I should facilitate during our book club the next day while she took field notes and that she wanted to initiate the member checking with students. She noted, “I think we’re a good team since you have experience teaching adolescents and I have research experience… so that will work out well” (L. Evans, personal communication, 17 February 2014.

I agreed that we would make a good team. I knew that Dr. Hendrickson has grouped us together quite well.

*****

During our second book club meeting, four of the seven participants returned from the initial interview from the previous week. We were in the same classroom as the week before and we sat the desks in a circle again. Lindsay and I had not had an opportunity to do our “If you really knew me…” community builder the first day due to time constraints, choosing instead to just do “Two Truths and A Lie” with the students
before beginning the interview, so started off this second book club meeting with it so the
students could continue to get to know us as we got to know them. I led this part of the
book club meeting.

Next, Lindsay, having extensive qualitative course work already under her belt,
took over the “member-checking” with the students. She printed out our transcripts and
brought them to our students. They had the opportunity to go through the transcripts and
make sure that their voices were accurately represented. The students were very
impressed that we had taken so much time so as to transcribe 34 pages of their
conversations.

After member-checking was complete, we went into the book trailers and
attempted to “sell” the books to the students. I did this often with my high school students
and already had experience with all of the texts so I took over this part. We showed a few
different book trailers on my laptop, and I gave a “sales speech” style argument for a few
of the others.

Following, the students were able to pick which book they wanted to read this
semester. Lindsay and I had bought 7 copies of each of the books (one for each
participant from our initial book club meeting). We planned on returning the copies of the
books the students did not choose (and we did indeed return them and get refunds). We
bought the students their books for them to keep. Lindsay also brought them a reading
calendar, and I brought them composition notebooks and pencils.

The students picked *The Absolutely True Diary of A Part Time Indian* by
Sherman Alexie (2007) to read for our book club. We then had them create a list of
expectations for book clubs and create a reading calendar/schedule for our remaining
three sessions. I remember thinking at the time how impossible it would be to discuss this entire novel in three book club sessions. But I was excited. Lindsay and I made a great team.

Plus, two of our students were particularly excited about their own “urban knowledge” (their words) and constantly were questioning curriculum in schools, asking why we didn’t learn about Huey P. Newton in school and were teaching us about John Mercer Langston, the first Black representative from Virginia, elected in 1888. As part of my hidden curriculum in my English classroom, I often taught what I called “untold history” and was extremely interested in the things our book club students could teach us.

In my head, the book club conversation—even though we had not yet started reading the book—was already being directed towards critical conversation surrounding issues of race, racism, and power in education through our students. I had not even had to guide the conversation down this path. It was where the conversation was naturally flowing, and the more I responded to it from the students, encouraging them to tell me more about it, the more they engaged with the topic—almost as if they were excited a teacher knew what they were talking about. It was an exhilarating feeling, being able to talk about these ideas of power in curriculum with the students. I instantly made connections between my critical race theory (CRT) course and these book clubs. I knew that we had a unique opportunity here to transform the book club experience into critical race dialogues as a way to promote social justice.

I went home that night (Tuesday, February 18, 2014) and emailed both of my professors—Dr. Hendrickson and Dr. Anders—about how to combine the two courses for my racial justice project (Dr. Hendrickson’s email exchange is presented at the beginning
of Chapter Two, and Dr. Anders’s email exchange is presented at the beginning of Chapter 3). As shown in earlier chapters, the juxtaposition between the two courses was already developing during this week.

Both professors attempted to encourage and support me in this endeavor. Dr. Anders was productively supportive, encouraging me to consider the ways in which this research had the potential to “other” the students by doing research on the students rather than with the students. She urged me to be deliberate in the ways in which I went about teaching CRT to the students and kept pushing me deeper into the CRT course readings to help me navigate that space as a white woman. I took my advice from Dr. Anders and tried to implement it with Dr. Hendrickson in her email. She responded back that she was supportive, pointed me towards the literature on critical book clubs in our course handouts on Blackboard, and told me that she was here to support me but that she wanted me to figure it out on my own.

At the time, I loved that Dr. Hendrickson was giving me complete agency over the process, but it was a difficult space to navigate how to teach CRT in a book club setting, guiding the conversation to issues of power surrounding race and racism. There was no literature out there on it. I was struggling to even find readings for Dr. Anders’s annotated bibliography that looked at adolescent literacy from a CRT lens, let alone, book clubs, adolescent literacy, and “incarcerated youth” all from a CRT lens. I felt that my work was going to be groundbreaking. I felt that I had found this gap in the literature. A space for me to make myself known in the scholarly literature. *Not my place in CRT.* My life’s work. *Co-opting CRT.* My dissertation work. *Using CRT.* It was my woke whiteness work. *Co-opting the word woke as well.* It filled my heart with so much joy. In
the midst of all the chaos and grief that was my year of “firsts” without my mother, I had found beauty. I had found passion. I LOVED IT. I lived it. I breathed it. I dreamt about it. I knew in my heart this was my life’s work. Actively disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. I felt it in my bones. I knew this is what I was born to do. It was the first time since Dr. Hendrickson’s 563 course in undergrad that my heart smiled again. Except this time, my smiling heart was more urgent. The work was more necessary. Too important for me to mess up. It was more than just my future at stake here. I was not going to blow it this time. Look at all of the my, my, my; I, I, I; and me, me, me seen in the above sentences. Centering whiteness.

This was how I went to sleep that night, with my heart smiling, that night after our second book club. I had work to do before next week, so much work, but it was important work. It was my life’s work.

_I do not offer the critique of self above to discount my own very real dedication and passion to this work. I still have this very same passion today, as I write this. But I also know that there will always be a tension here in this work, my racial justice work as a white woman—a tension of the necessity to decenter whiteness in racial justice work, and also a tension of feeling as though it is a calling for me to engage in racial justice work, a need for me to engage in racial justice work, and also a tension of knowing that as a white woman, sometimes my voice and my “mine” attitude about things can be detrimental to my pursuit of racial justice. This is the tension of being a woke white woman as I define it in here. But we (white people) and I personally cannot let this tension keep me from sailing. There are plenty of productive ways for me to navigate racial justice. Ways for me to become a sailor. I just have to keep navigating these_
tensions, keep checking myself, keep owning my shit, continue becoming a sailor always informed by sailors of Color. As one of my critical friends informed me, “Being woke is a full time job. Can’t take a break. As a woke White woman, you should listen to learn about experiences you have not witnessed or heard of. But then speak up to those that you are well versed in and feel passionate about. It’s a tough and tricky situation, but that is race in America” (L. Lovett, personal communication, March 2018). That is race in the U.S., indeed. Keep sailing, I must.

Book Club #3 ~ February 25, 2014

From: Jennifer

Subject: Google Hangout & Such

Date: Sat, Feb 22, 2014 at 2:40 PM

To: Lindsay

Hi Lindsay,

I am spending this weekend getting caught up with all of my work for my classes. Would you be available for a google hangout tomorrow evening or Monday evening? I have tons of ideas for how we can organize our paper and incorporate critical race theory (CRT), but I have to work on flushing them out.

What I really want to do with the book clubs is teach the students some components of CRT and incorporate that into the book clubs. There is a way to do this, but I have to read up on it first and see how to do it properly.

Would this work for you? I think there are a lot of possibilities here.

Let me know what you think.

Jen
Researcher Journal – February 23, 2014

I just got off the phone with Lindsay. Or Google Hangout. Whatever. You know what I meant. I am so excited about this CRT idea! But I wish she knew more about it. I think she’s SO SMART and so good at this researcher stuff! But I just like the “doing” stuff, the planning of the book club, the interacting with the kids, the teaching. It’s all important though. Maybe I don’t like it now because I don’t know what I’m doing yet. But it all reminds me so much of our teacher research stuff from the MT program!

Indeed, as I discovered throughout the semester, Dr. Hendrickson was defining qualitative (qual) work differently than Lindsay, having been a student of Dr. Anders in qual. Looking back now, also having been “raised” in qual under Dr. Anders, Dr. Hendrickson seemed to be defining our qual research in terms of teacher-research and different ways of doing qual research. There were dangers in this as well.

I at least know what I’m talking about when it comes to that. So that’s good. Plus, I’ve done work at JDC before and I work with high schoolers on a daily basis. This is my passion! This racial justice project stuff is so cool. I’ve been over here working every weekend!!! It’s so crazy! I’ve never worked so hard in my life! I just want to make sure I am doing what I am supposed to be doing and not fucking the kids up. It’s so scary as a white woman! It’s good that it feels scary. Woke whiteness work is scary. Sit in that. Own that shit. Get comfortable sitting in this discomfort. Sit in your shit. I don’t know how Allison does it! She navigates the tensions, she’s a sailor. She told me she is also often uncomfortable, but what is the alternative? Silence? No. That is not the answer. That is
never an option in woke whiteness work. I really like that I can talk to her about it though and get guidance from her. I don’t want to overstep my boundaries as a white woman.

As a woke white woman, I must ALWAYS be cognizant of this. Always checking myself. Always calling myself out. That’s part of woke whiteness work as a pedagogy. Two white women talking about race isn’t enough; this is the importance of critical community made up of and always listening to folks of Color that is essential to woke whiteness work.

Anyways, Lindsay and I talked about using Peggy McIntosh’s (1990) “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” for our book club meeting on Tuesday and giving them a brief introduction to CRT because Allison said the racial justice project could be teaching the students about CRT and I figured out a way to do this within the book club framework…

This was us centering our whiteness. This was not going to be productive. But when Lindsay and I were talking about it on our Google Hangout, and she told me that she was open to the idea of talking about race and racism, she told me that she was going to let me take the lead. She made connections where she could while I spoke about it, but my racial justice toolkit was not yet formed. I didn’t have all the vocabulary, all the words, all the language to speak about these ideas I knew to be true. I could only speak from my white perspective, finding connections in her to her white perspective, both of us as white women. I felt things differently, having learned so much in Nottoway and having so many ties to the Black community, both here and back home, but I was and always will operate from a white perspective. Which is why, even now, I have to always write against myself (Noblit, 1999) as a part of woke whiteness work.
Lindsay and I still had connections in our whiteness. We both came to understand race through McIntosh’s (1990) article. That’s how we began to see the invisibilities of our white privilege, but for our students of Color, they did not need to “see” what was not ever hidden from them, but rather blatantly revealed to them at a young age.

Indeed, as Solomon reminded me that semester, race and racism was just something that he inherently knew, felt, experienced, and lived with. When I would talk to him about the things I was learning in CRT, he would express that I was just telling him fancy ways of saying things he already knew with my fancy book knowledge now (in my white body, co-opting CRT, as I tried to figure it out, understand it) in an authoritatively antiracist manner (Thompson, 2003). Imagine if I had the critical community back then that I have now, so that I could have processed this information with more than one person, so that I didn’t have to push my white feelings and my white guilt that I was trying so hard to hide and my white-figuring-out what Solomon already knew to be true all semester.

We were always at ends (CRT only added an additional layer to the tensions in our relationship). Throughout the years, I had often felt oppressed by him in his maleness, constantly trying to push back against him and, what felt like to me, his need to control me and mold me. I had spent my life being oppressed by an absent/present father, never being taught how to navigate those tensions. I always felt the need to assert myself as a strong, independent woman who did not need a man, but I did not understand the ways in which I was oppressing him, too, in my whiteness, until later that semester when reading Crenshaw’s (1993) “Mapping the Margins” article on intersectionality for CRT. I don’t think either one of us had the language at the time to understand that.
Likewise, imagine how different our Google Hangout would have gone, had we been informed by a critical person of Color, even just had a person of Color involved in our conversation, a person of Color enrolled in our class that semester, a perspective from a person of Color when going about this type of work. See the importance of diversity? See how Pepsi and H&M put out incredibly racist ads and then people ask, HOW DID THEY NOT SEE THIS?!? Lack of diversity. That’s how. White logic. That’s how. I can just imagine the raised eyebrows, side-eyes, and looks of “REALLY?!?” that any person of Color would have given us had they heard us—two white women—talking about teaching about race and racism with four students of Color who were incarcerated, having an entire dialogue about how we really thought it might even be a remotely good idea to begin the conversation about race by beginning the conversation with white privilege. I’m over here now shaking my head, sucking my teeth, and cutting my eyes at us and our white logic. Still knowing that I, too, even now have white logic.

...I just love book clubs. I really love that I already do book clubs with my students so I know what I’m doing. Plus, I grew up as a teacher with Hendrickson. There is plenty that I do not know about book clubs. And even more that I do not know about CRT! I am not an expert at all.

As a child, I learned how to be a teacher through what Lortie (1975/2002) calls “apprenticeship of observation” which describes the socialization of students as they watch their teachers, allowing them by watching all of my white teachers all throughout my P-12 educational careers (I cannot remember having one single Black teacher except for my PE [Physical Education] teacher my senior year of high school), so teaching was already associated with whiteness. It is not a surprise to me now that in my reflection
from my final year of undergrad in Ms. Weston’s class in 2010 (see Chapter 1) that I felt as though I had to be “more white” or a “better white person” as I entered into the realm of teaching. I had never know anything else. Bryan (2017) extended this idea in his piece where he used Lortie’s work to talk about the “apprenticeship of observation in the disproportionate disciplining of Black males” (p. 339) and how white teachers learn deficit and dangerous ways of disciplining Black males in schools from observing their white teachers, and how this cycle perpetuates the school-to-prison pipeline when white students become white teachers who then discipline students in the same ways.

I, also, would like to extend Lortie’s (1975/2002) concept of the “apprenticeship of observation” here. I not only learned how to be teacher from all of my white, mostly female, teachers growing up, but I also learned how to be a teacher from all of the white, mostly female, teachers in my practicum experiences at as an undergraduate student at USC. Then, I learned how to be a teacher from watching Dr. Hendrickson (she taught us methods and strategies as a teacher, by having us, as future teachers, act as the students engaging in methods). Moreover, both of my coaching teachers were white women, as was Pat, the other professor in the MT program. But I most wanted to be like Dr. Hendrickson. Just like I most wanted to be like my mother as a child, my first teacher. I emulated both of them. I learned how to play the game of whiteness from both of them. Both of them were feminists, so they knew how to “play the game”—which I now take as playing the game of patriarchy—but they were also playing the game of whiteness. And maybe they didn’t know it. What a dangerous game—white patriarchy! A game in which I was learning just by observing them.
In Bryan’s (2017) work, he argued alongside Leonardo and Boas’s (2013) that white women are members of the “white racial army”—that they are complicit in maintaining racism. They argue that white women, “although they may not call the shots, they often pull the trigger” (Leonardo and Boas, 2013, p. 315, as cited in Bryan, 2017). Bryan (2017) critiqued Leonardo and Boas for undertheorizing the ways White women teach White children to become members of the White racial army and how to uphold and upkeep whiteness in and beyond schools. That is, these teachers teach White children how to point the gun, pull the trigger, and release the metaphorical bullets (see Johnson and Bryan, 2016) that penetrate Black boys (and other children of Color) (p. 339).

As Dr. Hendrickson’s student, I was becoming a member of the white racial army, and indeed, had already been a member of the white racial army for quite some time now as a white woman. Bryan (2017) was indeed correct. Leonardo and Boas (2013) were undertheorizing the role of white women in the white racial army. Even in my CRT course, there was a white racial army marching through CRT that semester with more white women than students of Color enrolled in the course.

The power of feminism is real—and white women have way more power than they would have you believe, or that they believe themselves. Particularly when they can exist outside white male influence, like my mother raised me. My mother never felt like she existed outside white patriarchy, and indeed, never did under my grandfather, which is why there were certain ways of being, certain ways of acting around my grandparents, certain ways of performing whiteness that I did not have to do with my mother.
I always knew my grandparents to be inseparable. They were always around one another, spending every waking minute together except for the time they both spent in the car—they both drove separately to work. But they shared an office at work together. For thirty-five years, they worked together in the same office, desks facing one another, my grandfather watching my grandmother’s every move, day in and day out. Before his McDonald’s career, my grandfather was in the navy and would be gone for weeks, months, sometimes even a year at a time. My grandmother told me in February 2018, that my grandfather never let her out of his sight when he was around, but then left her and the children alone for long periods of time, only to come back more overbearing and controlling when he returned. She shared with me how liberated (and guilty) she felt now that he is in a nursing home and she has been living on her own for the last two years. (This is not to say anything negative about my grandfather—he just had a very strong presence/absence in my mother, uncle’s, and grandmother’s life. A conversation with my uncle in December 2016 led me to believe that he did not understand the oppressive force of my grandfather—which is not surprising since he is a man.) I now understand the oppressive force he had on my mother and grandmother.

I existed with my mother outside this oppressive force, however, unless we were around my grandparents or at work. My mother raised me entirely alone, never having any boyfriends or any male influences around me until 2010, when I was 22. But this powerful white male influence, certainly explains why my mother and grandmother both knew how to play the game so well. And this was why there were certain ways of being around my grandmother. She, too, was part of the white racial army (Leonardo & Boas,
2013). Now, however, she has a great deal of power outside of his influence, liberated at last.

I do not claim to know Dr. Hendrickson’s life, but I do know that from her work as a white feminist, she was fighting back against a system of white patriarchy. Though she did not recognize that it was white patriarchy. Nor did she recognize that she was still playing a game of whiteness even as she resisted the dominance of patriarchy. And as Lorde (1984) teaches us, we will never dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools. We cannot beat the master at his game by playing his game. Likewise, we cannot beat whiteness by playing the game of whiteness. Maybe Dr. Hendrickson did not know this because of the invisibility of whiteness privilege.

I would like to extend Bryan’s (2017) theorizing here as well. These white teachers such as Dr. Hendrickson, my mother as my first teacher, all of my white teachers, and all of the white teachers I observed while learning how to become a teacher, operating under an “apprenticeship of observation” were doing more than just teaching me (and other students) how to pull the trigger even if they did not call the shots. In some spaces they do call the shots. Dr. Hendrickson, indeed, was calling all of the shots as program coordinator. While she may have been operating in a man’s world, she had a great deal of power. Though she did not realize it at all; indeed, when we met for lunch in March 2018 after she read my initial draft of my dissertation, she told me that she did not think she wielded all of this power. But white women are very, very powerful in their (our) whiteness. Cisgender-hetero-white women have dominated the feminist activists movements in the U.S., often at the expense of women of Color and
lesbian, bisexual, and queer women of color, and transwomen. White women, myself included, are extremely dangerous when they do not realize their power.

I know what Dr. H wants us to do. We did all this in the MT program. I can’t imagine doing this otherwise! I have to stop being so cocky with it though. I was cocky with it because I knew how to play her game of school, her game of whiteness. I knew how she operated because I operated that way too! She didn’t have to teach me her games of whiteness, I already knew how to play them.

But I feel bad like I’m taking over the book club and I should be allowing Lindsay to do more but then I don’t want her to do anymore because I have this idea in my head of how to fuse my two classes and make sure we are going about this in the right way… I’m trying so hard to bite my tongue sometimes and allow her to engage in the curriculum and planning process of it as well because that’s not fair, Jennifer Lynn! Don’t be a bully. But I just really do not feel comfortable talking about white privilege and doing this white privilege stuff with our kids! It seems like we are just going to be centering whiteness. Allison keeps telling us we have to de-center whiteness. Thank goodness you listened to her and did not do this!

I don’t like being in the spotlight. I hate it. It makes me so uncomfortable. And then this would be like putting our whiteness in the spotlight! I can just imagine the students like look at these crazy white ladies coming in here trying to teach us about racism. I don’t want to be a crazy white lady! LOL! I already am, I know, haha! I’m going to come up with a better way to do this. I have to. We do not need to do this white privilege stuff. That’s our work, for us, outside of this. When we talk to the kids, we have to use that knowledge to help them? Help them how? I’m not here to teach them about
racism as a white woman. They know way more than I do. How do I not “other” them like Allison said?!?

Maybe we can show that reverse racism comedy clip we watched in our CRT class by Aamer Rahman’s comedy clip on Reverse Racism (Fear of a Brown Planet, YouTube, 28 November 2013). We can talk about racial profiling too in the book with Junior! I hope they bring up those parts. I have to strategically guide the conversation from the book to these things if they don’t bring it up. But that feels a little bit like cheating… I want the book club to be any and every thing that the students want to talk about… I feel like it will be though. Both Isaac & Marcus already talked about all of these ideas… that’s what gave me the idea in the first place… They are the ones who originally guided this into these kinds of conversations, but I have to watch out not to put my own agenda on them. That counteracts book clubs in general.

Here, I am struggling with the tension of allowing students to talk about whatever they want versus guiding them into critical conversation. As Allison told me, when we are committed to more equitable versions of the world, sometimes it’s terribly difficult to actually sit back and watch things unfold as we are afraid that the unfolding will just reproduce the status quo. I struggled to navigate this tension all semester with our book clubs. This was just my first indication of that tension.

It’s all such a delicate balancing act!! I feel like I’m walking a tight rope. I just don’t want to fuck up. I just reallllyyyyyy don’t want to fuck up. Who do I think I am?!? Coming in here teaching these kids about things they already know… that’s like when I was talking to Solomon about this CRT stuff & he told me that just because I was reading about it in my university class didn’t mean I knew anything about it. He may not have the
fancy words and all the stuff I have now, but this ain’t new to him! I felt really bad about that afterwards. I can tell he was upset by it. And I can definitely see why. This is all so complicated. That’s a whole other thing I can’t even get into right now though.

Anyways, I also have to remember to tie it all back into the book! That’s the thing about doing this kind of work. You have to be sneaky about it. Well, maybe sneaky isn’t the word… or is it? But you have to be political about it. This was me playing into the game of whiteness. Like when I taught this book to my students & those crazy Christian folks tried to have it banned. Ugh they made me SO MAD! But y’all couldn’t say shit to me cuz we were hitting all the standards and doing all the great work! I always have research to back up what I do!

In this instance, I not only had to be sneaky and political about it because of my past experiences teaching this novel, but I knew that we were being watched constantly by a guard in the classroom and a JDC teacher as well. Surveillance from white folks is always prevalent in a variety of settings, as I was learning the hard way in my work in Nottoway, but at least in that space I could (for the most part) close my door and teach how I wanted to teach without anyone saying too much about it. But here, in this space at the prison, the students and Lindsay and I were all being monitored, under strict supervision, and I feared that we would start talking about “dangerous” ideas of liberation through critical dialogue pertaining to issues of race and racism, power and privilege.

As a white woman here though, I didn’t I realized just how much power I had in my whiteness to even openly discuss these ideas. The school district had my back, originally, because I played the game of school (whiteness) well by performing whiteness
when I needed to—I had paid my dues, proved myself the first couple of years at the school, made sure no one was concerned or worried about me, flew under the radar while silently disrupting the status quo in my classroom with my students, and now I was not worried about the repercussions. I knew how to be sneaky in terms of whiteness, my mom taught it to me. She called it playing the game. Playing the game of school, particularly, but it pertained to everything else in life as well, even down to how we interacted with my grandmother, performing whiteness for her. We, as white folks literally created this system to benefit elite, white folks in order to protect white identity, to protect white livelihood in our court systems, immigration systems, religious institutions, and school curriculums. I was so good at the game of performing whiteness that I didn’t even realize it was a game of performing whiteness. It was just playing the system. Playing the game. (A game designed for white folks. For me.)

When the book banning incident happened in fall 2013, I said immediately, “Good, I hope they do fire me for this book,” because I was not scared to speak that truth to power. And since I had won that battle, I felt a sense of cockiness about it at the time, like no one could stop me from fighting back. But that was a privilege of whiteness, too. And class. I didn’t have a family to feed. I wasn’t concerned about my job. I knew that I would not be in danger of being homeless. I knew that my grandmother would back me up, encourage my speaking truth to power, if it came down to that. I wielded my whiteness as power in this instance with my cockiness, blinded by how very privileged I was to even be able to have these options.

I digress… I gotta plan this book club out a bit more… maybe I’ll do a CRT explanation sheet or something. I’ll write it up. I’m always better at writing than speaking
anyways. Sometimes I just get so nervous speaking when I am not 900% prepared! I feel like I keep over-preparing for the book clubs though. I wish we had 3 hours with them every time! Lindsay and I kept talking tonight about how it’s like when we finally get to some good stuff with the kids in the book club, it’s time to go! We have to be careful not to waste any precious moments with them. We also have to be careful to stop interrupting them so much. It’s like we have SO MUCH TO DO and SO LITTLE TIME so we rush through the things and then it’s like AHHHHH!! But then we go back into the transcript and I’m like DAMNIT JEN SHUT UP. Idk. It’s so tricky. *Sailing work and woke whiteness work is always tricky. As my critical friend, Leigh, told me, that’s race in the U.S.*

I do know we have to keep doing these community builders though. If we are going to be talking about racism, especially as white ladies, we need to build some kind of rapport with the kids! Otherwise they are gonna be looking at us all crazy like who do y’all think you are?!? This would be so much easier with my babies at NHS. They know me and I know them. I just hope Lindsay isn’t mad that I keep changing things & planning all these things. I know she wants to be more involved. She came up with a cool idea today about making a Wordle out of all of their “If you really know me…” stuff they turned in last time so we could all see how we are all the same and what words we all used the most of… I thought that was a really cool idea… but then I could feel myself getting so anxious cuz I’m like ahhhhhh we won’t have enough time for all the other things I’m trying to do and then also the book club conversation!

**WE NEED MORE TIME! But, that’s just not a possibility. And I cannot be a bully! We are a team. United in whiteness.** And she is so much better at this research
stuff, but she wants to learn how to work with the high schoolers since she did elementary and I know we can learn a lot from one another. I see why Hendrickson put us in the same group. She always was good at knowing me and what I would need—well, all her students, LOL, but I feel like especially me! See, there I go again being cocky! It’s so weird, being so cocky about book clubs and this stuff, but then not wanting to say too much because then I know I can come off like an asshole—Solomon tells me this all the time—but then also, I don’t really know shit about CRT…I’m still learning that!

*I was cocky because I was performing whiteness. I knew how to play Dr. Hendrickson’s game of school. It was a game of whiteness. The way book clubs are originally crafted, non-critically (Daniels & Steineke, 2004), are playing games of whiteness, too, as were all the critical book clubs from that semester’s readings (Thein, Guise, & Sloan, 2011; Fredericks, 2012; Park, 2012)—see how whiteness works in these journals too? See how people are claiming critical pedagogy work, but not centering race? See the difference? If we aren’t actively working against whiteness, we are perpetuating it. Always. Woke whiteness work is actively working against it. Always. Especially in our own heads, thoughts, minds, and actions.*

It’s like I already know all this CRT stuff but the words are new & THE READINGS ARE SO HARD but it’s like I finally have this explanation for things that make sense in the world! It helps me see the power structures at NHS more clearly… it explains everything! But sheesh it’s hard… and then I’m still learning but now I’m trying to teach it to high schoolers at JDC & also I kinda have to teach it to Lindsay cuz she knows some stuff but not really and IT IS SO MUCH WORK… but I cannot even lie, I LOVE IT! I am so freaking EXCITED about this! Ahhhhhh I JUST WISH IT WAS
TUESDAY ALREADY!!! 😊 Okay, I have to go to bed now. You know how grumpy you are with your babies if you don’t get enough sleep, Jennifer Lynn. Goodnight!

At this point in the semester as we approached our third book club meeting, we had been doing an extensive amount of work outside of our book club research as well for our adolescent literacy course. As a class, we had completed article craft studies, looking at the predictable ways in which research followed predictable patterns (*what counts as knowledge in research, ties to Western, Eurocentric thought and whiteness*) and were transcribing the book club meetings tirelessly, making sure to post everything on our ResearcherWiki (*which ethically, as researchers, we should not have been talking about students, posting transcripts, data, entire video conversations about students—especially not students who were incarcerated—online*).

As a research team, Lindsay and I also were both struggling with how loud our voices could be as white women talking about issues of race with our students of Color at JDC. We noticed in our transcripts that we were often interrupting students, rushing through the process with so much to do and so little time. *Another critique of the research process here—too much to do and too little time. There are extreme dangers in rushing through things like this.* We also were talking about how we came to our own racialized understandings—through our reading of Peggy McIntosh’s “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989), but after left the Google Hangout, I felt that it was not going to be very productive to focus on our whiteness and our white privilege when talking about issues of race and racism. After watching our Google Hangout and accessing our data, Dr. Hendrickson emailed us both to check-in and provide feedback.
Hi Lindsay and Jenn,

I was able to enter into your study via your transcriptions, coding, and hangouts. A few comments: you don't have to do full transcriptions each week; you can do abridged transcriptions. Glad to know the tiny scan worked well for you.

I think you are asking a lot of very powerful questions. You are exploring issues of silencing and voice and the labels we assign kids. How do you facilitate equity of voice? How do you tackle issues of race? I am curious to see how the writing will go, and I definitely agree that you should continue with the icebreakers. You are struggling through the roles of being both participant and observer. Sharing your own white privilege – how will they respond? You are tussling with some very challenging and complex issues. I can hear the community you are building while reading the transcript. You will want to revisit these and break out your initial data by individual.

Great job, both of you--I look forward to learning more with you.

Sent from my iPhone

At this point in the semester, leading into the third book club meeting the following day, February 25, 2014, I felt extremely supported by Dr. Hendrickson and my research partner, Lindsay. We were working well together as a team, Dr. Hendrickson was proving us with really great feedback, asking up deeper questions about race and
racism (which she had yet to do in any of my emails). Lindsay and I were grappling with these issues, making sure we approached them correctly, and although we were hesitant and nervous, we were steadfast in our determination that it was necessary conversation. Dr. Hendrickson kept telling us that we did not have to include all of the transcript data, but Lindsay was properly trained in qualitative research and she was meticulous about us going about this research in the right way, according to the rules of qual. I am grateful that she was so determined.

For our third book club meeting, Lindsay began by going over the Wordle she created for our students based off their “If You Really Knew Me…” responses from last week. She also asked some of the students questions about things they were interested in that they mentioned in their responses, like one students who said he identified himself as Rastafarian. He elaborated and taught the book club more about it. Then, we moved into a writing invitation ice breaker that I often used in my classroom—pick a theme song and tell us why that is your theme song.

Looking back on my reflection from my interaction with Mike during my first encounter at JDC (see reflection in Chapter 1), I guess now I can see that I always did this so students could see that I was not a typical white girl teacher through my taste in music—and I am struggling with going back and forth with this right now, navigating these tensions as a white woman who loves hip hop, rap, and R&B music and who has done the work necessary to understand and appreciate the history of the music as well, educating myself on the history of hip hop. I try to be very respectful of the music and the culture—like never, ever, ever say the n-word when singing along; I teach my little cousin, Madalyn, this as well since she is an avid Drake fan—but what does this mean for
me as a white woman? I’m not trying to co-opt something that is not mine. But I have a deep love and respect for the music and the culture. I also enjoy 90s alternative rock, classic rock, and country music. I think it can always be both/and.

Both Lindsay and I shared our theme songs as well and that rationales behind them. (My theme song was Beyoncé’s “Flawless” (featuring Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) which is an unapologetic, feminist anthem—which actually seems very fitting for this unapologetic, “woke whiteness womanist” dissertation.)

Then, I introduced our goals for the book club—to talk about issues of race and racism as pertains to the novel as well as their own lives, but more so than just discussion, it was about action. What the students could do to promote racial and social justice. I gave the students copies of the handout, introduced critical race theory, and then tied it into the novel:

“So the book basically talks a lot about race, and also we’ve kinda or just looking over the transcripts, we’ve noticed that you guys have talked a little bit about race so I kinda wanted to give you some background on the theory. It’s called critical race theory and what we thought was that if it works with you, what we thought we could do with the book clubs, so basically it says…[reading straight from the handout, see Figure 4.1]…So it talks about racism in our culture, which is brought up in our book and y’all were talking a little bit about it so I wanted to give you some background on it. So basically racism is not defined necessarily as individual acts of racism, but it’s within our entire system and our entire system within the United States…[continued to read from handout]…It doesn’t just apply to Black and white, but it applied everywhere. It can apply to American Indians as
well, as we are seeing in the book…So we’re gonna be looking at different ways that we can combat racism in our society and create a more racially and socially just word for all. Does that work for y’all? What do y’all think? How do y’all feel about that? (J. Doyle, Transcript, 25 February 2014).

I was nervously babbling and reading off the handout as I explained CRT to the students. I was confident at first, I had done work like this with my high school students, but I felt a million eyes on me, watching me, surveilling me. The Black male guard. The white male teacher. Lindsay.

Lindsay felt awkward about the conversation and expressed that concern on our Google Hangout, which in turn made me feel awkward about the conversation. As soon as it was time for me to address CRT, my mind started racing. I was in my head asking myself, Who are you to talk to the students about racism? What do you know as a little white girl? I didn’t feel like an expert on race but I was having to present myself as one. I also didn’t feel much like a woman either, I felt like a girl. There was this awkwardness of white logic running through my head that maybe Lindsay was right, maybe we were putting ourselves in opposition to the students by talking about race with the students. But I also felt like had I been in that classroom alone, just me and the students, I would not have felt so weird about it.

I remember thinking that I wish I had known the students more, got to know them a little better, and allowed them to get to know me a little better. Just so they could see that I wasn’t like “one of those” other white women teachers who pretended to care about them but knew nothing about their culture or community. I felt even weirder that I would be lumped in with Lindsay in this manner because we were in that setting together.
Figure 4.1: Critical race theory (CRT) explanation handout given to students at JDC.

This time at JDC was the opposite of the last time I was at JDC in 2010 (see reflection from Chapter 1). Back then, I was proud that my student saw that I was not “one of those” white women teachers; this time, I was anxious that I automatically would be lumped into that “one of those” white women teachers category now that I was no longer working one-on-one with students and came to the book club setting. Instead, I came into
the setting each week with another white woman, who also had long blonde hair, and I was concerned that I would just be mistaken for “one of those” white woman who did not care about the students as people. I wanted them to see me as a woke white woman. I did not act in ways that were very woke, however.

There was tension in the handout that I was living out in real life. I said I was not there to teach the students, but I, in fact, did want to lead the discussions into topics of race and racism in order to disrupt these systems. I said I was not there in a leadership capacity, but I was. I just did not want the students to think that I was wielding any power over them. I wanted the conversations to continue to flow organically—the students were the ones who were already bringing up the topics about race and racism, I just wanted to expound upon it. Teach them what I was learning in CRT. I was learning how to name this reality that I knew. That I felt in my bones. I wanted my students to learn that too. It felt powerful, being able to name things, knowing that you weren’t crazy after all.

Immediately after my long-drawn-out explanation of CRT (which I can see in hindsight, I would have handled a lot differently—more on this in Chapter 6), I showed the comedy clip on reverse racism (Fear of a Brown Planet, 2013) to the students. I noted the parts of the comedy clip where there was a shared laughter amongst the students. Following the clip, one student asked why we never learned about the “game changers” during Black history month like Huey P. Newton but only learned about people who were peaceful. I turned the question back on the students, and one replied, “out of false power” and urged the group to consider the power structures behind it as pertained to the video clip. As the conversation progressed, the students continued to share laughter in response to issues of race and racism in the comedy clip and the novel (the book often used humor
to expose power systems of race and racism as well), and then moved into conversations of the “false power” of teachers and the very real consequences of teacher and administrative power over students in their schooling lives, citing examples from their own personal experiences.

The teachers and administration had so much power over the students—Junior (the main character) talked about it in the novel, the students talked about it in the book club—it was like my school-to-prison pipeline ideas about the role of teacher bias in the classroom were coming to light right before my eyes. The students were vocalizing everything that I saw and thought to be true from my lived experiences as a teacher at Nottoway. And the beautiful thing about it was that I didn’t even do it on purpose. I didn’t take the students there (to teachers). I only brought their attention to power structures. They took themselves to teachers. It was beautiful. I felt alive. I was super excited to bring my insights to my CRT class so I could continue to tailor it for book clubs the following week.

In reality, I did, in fact, bring the students to this conversation deliberately with the novel choices I provided for them, the conversations about race and racism, the comedy video clip on reverse racism, and the encouragement of all of the conversations. White logic, again, trying to not claim ownership over the things that I did, in fact, do very deliberately.

**Book Club #4 ~ March 4, 2014**

In the whirlwind that was this book club experience, our fourth book club meeting came even faster than it should have. At this point in the semester, we had class for about an hour after each book club experience, but there was never enough time to really
debrief and talk about the book clubs. That work was to be done on our own in our Google Hangouts. Class time was spent mostly talking about all of the other assignments that we were doing, as well as all of our other reading. The majority of class time was spent with Dr. Hendrickson talking at us, frantically trying to get in all of the words and information she needed to tell us in that short amount of time. We were all tired. Everything was rushed. But the experience was exhilarating. Exciting.

I thrive in this kind of chaos, which is probably why I loved taking her classes so much. But I find myself doing this as a professor as well. I often feel that I want my students to have absolutely everything, that they can never possibly read too much, and then both they (and I) get overwhelmed. Lost in the sauce. There are very real consequences to this. Sometimes we just need a moment to sit and digest. Together. Breathe. I am not sure if our whiteness will let us do this, though. It is hard to be deliberate when you are overwhelmed. Less is more when you want to go deep. I remind myself of this constantly: the dangers of doing too much.

Now it was our job to rush a conference proposal for the Literacy Research Association conference that December. The proposals were due March 1st. For the proposals, we were supposed to pick a “researcher slant” that we were coming to our data from. I know now that she meant a theory. I already had my theory. We were doing CRT. It was specifically designed to be a CRT book club. That was how I saw the world. There was no other option in my head. I wasn’t sure why the other groups were struggling with this idea of a researcher slant. We were supposed to be doing these book clubs for social justice. Where was their action? I kept my mouth shut though in class. I didn’t want Helene to know what I was up to in fears that she might try to steal my ideas.
I had not even told Helene that I was enrolled in CRT class on Thursday nights. I had not told her that I was enrolled in Dr. Hendrickson’s class on Tuesday nights (I guessed she just knew I would be in there based on my mentee status with Dr. Hendrickson and how I often referred back to what we learned in the MT program during our planning meetings when I tried to tell her the way we were teaching was wrong.) So Helene could take everything else from me. But she was not going to take this passion work from me, too. At this point, she could have anything at NHS from me, because I always knew that, at the end of the day, her stealing my ideas was actually benefitting the students. Plus imitation was always known to be the sincerest form of flattery. But she could not have my dissertation work. This was my heart. I knew from my CRT course and the annotated bibliography I was completing, along with the literature review I was doing on the school-to-prison pipeline that I was on to something here with this CRT book club. No one was doing this work anywhere else. I knew I had found my place as a scholar.

My, my, my again—the ownership of whiteness! Disrupting this way of thinking is part of woke whiteness work. Recognizing that “my” place as a scholar should never and could never be as a CRT scholar or in CRT work—it has to be here, in woke whiteness work. I didn’t know how to navigate that tension at the time, though.

I kept this little secret to myself though. Afraid of co-option. I wasn’t sure who to trust outside of Allison and our CRT class. But I knew that it wasn’t going to be any of the white ladies in my adolescent lit class. It was too dangerous to trust any of them; I knew how white women talked in groups. I already felt like an outsider amongst them, holding on to my research close to my heart.
I did know I could probably trust Lindsay. We were working very well together and she kept to herself mostly in class. She existed outside the P-12 teachers in our class, and she was very willing to work with me. I thought that we made an excellent team, complementing one another perfectly.

Because of my respect for her, I was struggling with the tension of not wanting to be too demanding with Lindsay in this research process. I knew that I could take what I learned from this book club and apply it to my work for my dissertation, but that I also had to be cognizant of her agency as a book club research member. This book club was not mine and mine alone. I knew I had only-child tendencies (selfish, mine attitudes—also whiteness!), and I was trying to be gentle with her and allow her time and space to grow into this book club experience as well. She was doing great work, and I was learning a lot from her particularly as pertained to qualitative research.

It was in this mind-set that I sent her my initial ideas on how I was specifically crafting the book club to be a “critical race literature circle,” which I then shortened to CRT book club. I had completed this work for my CRT class as I was thinking about how to promote racial justice and situate my racial justice work within CRT literature.

From: Jennifer

Subject: Racial Justice

Date: Wed, Feb 26, 2014 at 11:37 PM

To: Lindsay

This is in no way complete, but here is what I wrote up about book clubs & CRT. It may help clear up what I think would be beneficial for our book club.
Again, I realize this is a joint effort so if you don’t like this idea, please let me know and we can change it. No hard feelings :)

Jen

Attachment: Racial Justice Project, Element I

From: Lindsay

Subject: Re: Racial Justice

Date: Thu, Feb 27, 2014 at 8:42 PM

To: Jennifer

So I think it’s fine to try to continue this route, definitely writing up our LRA proposal with this lens. I’m really not sure how to approach it with the guys on Tuesday though… I think Isaac and Marcus will be fine, but I don’t want to shut out Wilson or Q. What tenets of CRT are you thinking of teaching? I’m wondering if you got any new insight from Allison tonight in your class… maybe that will help.

From: Jennifer Doyle

Subject: Re: Racial Justice

Date: Fri, Feb 28, 2014 at 8:26 AM

To: Lindsay

I got some good advice from Allison this week on how to approach it by being open and honest with the students and addressing our whiteness without centering it. It was going to start by explaining what I was studying & then we can tell them that we can never escape the charge of being the “good white” or “white savior” but that we don’t think of ourselves in that way and here’s why… we can also explain that it’s okay if they view us in that way.
I am going to continue to search for some good comedy video clips to address the issue again & tie it back into the book to open up conversation.

I won’t have time to finish my work on LRA until this afternoon after work. It’s been a crazy week. I’ll send you what I have when it’s completed.

**G-Chat with Lindsay ~ Friday, February 28, 2014 @ 6:19 PM**

**Jennifer**

hello :) I’m still working on the LRA proposal.. but I’m glad to see that we aren't the last group to submit our stuff!

**Lindsay**

Hey, yeah me too! I was relieved no one really started yet. Just sent you my first draft...

**Jennifer**

I got it. I'm still working on mine. Allison got me in touch with a friend of hers who studies CRT & adolescent literacy. She sent me an article (_Groenke, Bennett, & Hill_, 2012) this afternoon about research she's done in relation to it, so I'm reading those now.

**Lindsay**

Awesome, that should help.

**Jennifer**

I'll send them your way because I know you have all of the free time in the world to do extra reading ;)) haha! but just in case you were interested

**Lindsay**

Yeah, I do think it'll help if I can at least skim them---they should come in handy with analysis later on too.

**Jennifer**
Do you have a copy of that sheet that outlined for us how to do the proposal?

I have somehow misplaced mine. I know that's where I got the information for dividing up the workload, but now I can't find it.

**Lindsay**

Well, no I actually left mine in Columbia! So I was using your email where you divided that up as my guide. Whoops...I did have the example ones too as I wrote, and looked at those too. I think we just need the title, strategies, questions and findings still. Sorry I'm not much help!

**Jennifer**

No that's fine! I remember outlining everything we needed in the email I sent you, so I just went back to that & looked at the example one as well.

**Lindsay**

Ok

**Jennifer**

Also, as far as the theories that shaped our research, I think we should just mention CRT...while it can, by definition, fall into Critical sociocultural theories, CRT is its own entity & own epistemology that stands alone because it is the only theory that focuses specifically on race and the intersections of race, gender, etc.

**Lindsay**

Ok, so why don't we take critical out of sociocultural and just make it sociocultural and CRT...
At the time of this G-Chat conversation, I did not know that CRT was actually a critical social theory and we could have bridged sociocultural theory here in a way that would have actually worked for this as well. Instead, I just got frustrated that she didn’t see how CRT encompassed all of these ideas we were trying to convey in just one theory. But I was the only one with CRT glasses on. And I lacked the theoretical understandings to understand how we were both trying to say the same thing, I was just trying to center race at our analysis. At the time, however, it felt like she was trying to take over control of the research and I had formed this attachment to it—this only-child “mine” about it (whiteness). I was trying very hard not to be a brat. I knew I had these only-child tendencies, and I knew they were not productive to working as a team. I had to constantly remind myself that Lindsay was not Helene.

That frustration shut down the conversation. It shut down the possibilities of continued dialogue. There was privilege to my being able to withdraw from the conversation with the presumption that my research partner simply “didn’t get it” when we were talking about theory. In reality, I didn’t “get it” completely either when it came to understanding and articulating theory. There were missed opportunities to engage in meaningful conversation where we could have learned from one another. Yet, my racial justice toolkit was not fully formed.

Researcher Journal – March 1, 2014 @ 11:53PM

I AM SO EXHAUSTED. I cannot remember the last time I actually did school work on a Friday or Saturday night. Solomon is so annoyed with me. He wanted to do something last night, but I HAVE SO MUCH TO DO. And I am so proud of our LRA proposal! I went over to his mom’s house when I finished last night, but I felt so
disconnected. Like I wanted to just have fun and be there with him and his family, but then he got mad at me because I said I would be there at like 8pm but really I didn’t show up until like 10pm, and I can’t help that it takes me 900x longer to write than I anticipate. Ugh. Sometimes I feel like he wants me to pick him over my school work. But he never says that. He says he’s supportive. But the feeling doesn’t feel very supportive. I don’t know. I’m probably just being a brat.

*I also was failing to understand the many ways in which I was unreliable and overcommitted to too many things all at one time, and the consequences of my busy-ness on others around me. Solomon would always tell me to relax, calm down, just sit and take a break and breathe. However, I would interpret these instructions as him not caring about my work and its importance in my life, when really he was trying to care about me. I was just too wrapped up in my own world to realize that at the time. Also, at the exact same time, although his intentions were good and his heart was in the right place, Solomon was not very supportive of me and my work in his actions.*

I’m also feeling SO BRATTY about Lindsay too! Like when we were g-chatting last night when we were working on our LRA proposal, she kept trying to put everything else as our theoretical framework except CRT, and then I just stopped trying. She knows more than I do. I’m tired. I don’t know enough about CRT to really correct her at this point, but also I know enough about CRT to know that it just all feels so wrong. I want to make this all my own, but I cannot. We are a team. I have to stop being such a brat.

*Here, too, I was too wrapped up in my own world to see that she was trying to understand, and I got frustrated and tired (an inevitable result of my busy-ness) and just completely shut down the conversation. Moreover, I don’t think I had the language or*
theoretical understanding at the time to explain it to her in any concrete way that would have made her understand. I just knew what I knew and felt to be true, but without my racial justice toolkit, I was unable to inform her and disrupt this.

This developing tension makes things so awkward in front of the students though when we go to book clubs! I’m afraid we made them uncomfortable when we were talking about race.

Looking back through the transcripts, the only people who seemed uncomfortable by the conversation was me and Lindsay. It should be uncomfortable at first talking about racism as a white person—we are not experts. But the stronger our racial justice toolkit is, the more comfortable we can be navigating discussions as a woke white woman (or man). Reading back through the transcripts, the students were actively engaged in the conversation.

Because I was uncomfortable, I felt like the kids were uncomfortable, but I was uncomfortable because of the guard and the teacher and Lindsay. When I’m just with my kids in my classroom and no one else is around, it’s different. We have these conversations. I’ve been doing this same work with them at NHS.

I was not yet teaching them directly about CRT—that wasn’t until April 2014 when I took everything I learned from book clubs and applied it in my CRT in the Classroom unit—but I often felt comfortable talking to my students about race because we had an established rapport and mutual trust built up. You cannot always have an established rapport and mutual trust built up with folks you encounter, however, so this is why our racial justice toolkit is so important! So that we can use it to navigate the tensions of racial justice work. It’s a toolkit to help you become a racial justice sailor!
But when I get around all these other adults, it’s like I freeze! Why am I not confident?!? I wish I knew more. Ugh. *It’s important to note here that conversations about race are often uncomfortable for white people. But part of woke whiteness is learning to sit in that discomfort. If discomfort is the only thing we feel, we are still winning. Always.*

I wish I could be more like Allison! Navigate. She just keeps telling us to navigate and it’s my new favorite word. But how do you navigate these spaces when the other people JUST DO NOT GET IT?!? Like the white teacher. Or Lindsay. I know she’s trying, but she just doesn’t get it! I’m not even 100% certain that Hendrickson gets it. She has really just kinda left us alone for the most part though. I’m about tired of the rest of these clueless-ass-white women over here talking about aww they love the kids so much… miss me with that.

*This type of thinking was prohibiting me from being able to see that Lindsay was not my enemy. She was trying to learn. It also prohibited me from seeing that another girl in my class, Kayla, was a potential critical white friend—indeed, she is now in 2018. But I was unable to see this with my white selfish feelings of anger!*  


**Researcher Journal – March 2, 2014**  

UGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHH I just got off a google hangout with Lindsay and Jessica. Jessica seems nice but I’m annoyed that she was added to our research group. I
feel like we have so much other stuff going on and me & Lindsay already have a groove but also now I gotta explain all this to her too and IT IS SO FRUSTRATING.

Lindsay and Jessica drove me INSANE tonight on our Google Hangout! Like I have got to get it together! I cannot be out here this angry on a Sunday night! Especially when I have to work tomorrow! And those Nottoway folks already get me all riled up. Again, my selfish white anger was blocking me from interrupting this and seeing the potential in Lindsay to join me on this racial justice journey. But we were debriefing about the book club tonight and were preparing for our book club on Tuesday and I was attempting to center race, racism, and power in our discussions and preparations—cuz ya know, CRT & such (even this sentence has such a cocky, selfish white attitude)—but I felt like both of them were just ganging up on me! This is the power of whiteness—strength in numbers, now there are two people against one, resisting racial justice work (but not even knowing that they are resisting racial justice work). That is white ignorance. And white ignorance is dangerous and damaging to the pursuit of racial justice.

I tried to tell them what Allison told me about how we need to say that we are white women and as white women, we are always racist, but that we are working on our racisms… but they just did not want to do that! Of course, no one wants to do this work of admitting complicity in a system of racism. It’s difficult work. But difficult conversations are important. What are the alternatives? Not talk about it? Keep perpetuating racism? No. That’s not an option if you are doing woke whiteness work!

They said they didn’t want to discuss race so much because it would pit our students against us. THIS RIGHT HERE! This is white logic. White folks assume that
even just talking about race pits white people against Black people and other people of Color. This white logic is completely selfish, backwards “either/or” ways of thinking that are so very dangerous and damaging to racial justice work! Then, Lindsay said she was learning about Likert Scales in another class and wanted to make one… but then we are not going to be focusing on race! So I tried to maneuver it a little differently in relation to the novel because it already focuses on race. I used the master’s tools of whiteness to manipulate it back to what I wanted to do—racial justice work. But then Jessica just was out here agreeing with everything that Lindsay said and they are both older than me and I just gave up. This is the power of whiteness again.

There is this assumption that we have as white people that simply talking about race puts us automatically in opposition to people of Color. No, it’s Western, Eurocentric, rationalized thought (white thoughts, white logic) that puts Black and white in opposition to one another (Crenshaw, 1988). These oppositional dualities. This white logic and this way of thinking is what pits Black and white folks against one another. Talking about race is not what puts us in opposition of one another. Indeed, talking about race is how we interrupt racism. Talking about it in productive ways, disrupting white logic, is how we attack it. How can we possibly solve anything if we refuse to acknowledge its existence? If we are scared to talk about it? This white logic is ridiculous! How can we disrupt something we refuse to acknowledge?!! Woke whiteness work is changing our mindsets to always think of things in terms of “both/and”. As white people we can always be and, and, and! We can be complicit in racism AND work to interrupt it AND talk about it as white people AND still mess up sometimes when we talk about it because we have to do better forming our racial justice toolkits AND we can
challenge other white people to think about race and racism AND we can still perpetuate racism with our thought processes, with our “either/or” mentalities AND we can always be works in progress AND we can always work on becoming a better sailor in the fight for racial justice AND we can still love ourselves AND we can still love other white people AND we can still criticize ourselves AND we can criticize other white people AND we can especially criticize the white people we love AND… The list can go on and on. We can ALL (not just white people) always be “both/and”! Other cultures do a wayyyyyyyyy better job of understanding this though and understanding the dangers of white logic and “either/or” ways of thinking. We have to always interrupt this white logic.

It’s also not only white people who have white logic with “either/or” thinking. We are all affected by this “either/or” mentality because of the power of whiteness and how it has permeated absolutely every single aspect of our life—our institutions (schools, many churches, definitely Catholicism, our criminal justice system, our government, all of our laws and policies, every single institution you can name, GLOBALLY, etc.), our people (all people who exist in this world are affected by this), and our own minds (I have to work every single day to interrupt this way of thinking in my own mind, even in my personal life). This interruption of white logic—“either/or” thinking—is what wokeness work in general is all about.

As a woke white woman, though, I also have to be cognizant of the fact that I cannot escape my white logic because I am always white! Other folks of Color are able to reject white logic entirely, based on lived experience. However, as a white person, I am never able to reject white logic and we as white people are never able to reject white logic because we ALWAYS live with the benefits of whiteness in a white society. We
cannot disrupt this with the master’s tools of “either/or” thinking (playing power games with 48 Laws of Power (Greene, 1991). We must completely dismantle the master’s house with the tools we learned from our sisters and brothers of Color—rejecting “either/or” mentalities of whiteness and instead living entirely outside the master’s house (white patriarchy) by always thinking in terms of “both/and”. There is freedom here, even for white folks, once we are able to own all parts of ourselves.

For people of Color, this “both/and” way of thinking provides freedom in rejecting white supremacist notions of beauty and uncovering strength and beauty in Blackness, then owning ALL of that strength and beauty, unapologetically by calling on ancestors’ strengths of hope, determination, perseverance, and self-sustainment (this is wokeness work for people of Color). From my understanding from Dr. Denise Taliaferro Baszile’s work, AND my CRT readings, AND the work of Audre Lorde, AND my conversations with my spiritual sailing sisters and brothers and my critical friends; this unapologetic ownership of self allows Black folks and people of Color to find beauty in themselves despite being told by white supremacy that they are less-than AND still continue to move forward to fight the continued struggle of racism AND still operate in a world full of white supremacist ideals—but outside of it.

For white people, this way of thinking provides freedom in rejecting white supremacist notions of goodness, beauty, purity, selfishness, feigned innocence, and superiority and seeing ourselves in all of our evil, all of our ugly, owning our violent past by owning all of our violent ancestors, and owning our own metaphorical and physical violence that we have enacted on people of Color (even if our intentions were good, we look at our actions). Only then are we able to be free to ALSO (both/and) love ourselves
and all of our own individual beauty as well. But we cannot love ourselves completely until we learn to love ALL parts of us. Even the painful, ugly, really bad parts—we have to own all of that unapologetically. I don’t mean unapologetically in the sense that we deflect blame and avoid ownership. I mean we unapologetically have to own ALL THIS SHIT (because as white people, we are always covered in the shit of whiteness). Instead of going around with our white feelings of guilt, saying meaningless “I’m sorry”-s to people all the time, we need to be sorry with our actions by OWNING OUR SHIT. It is the only way to be free as a white person! We have to acknowledge that we have good hearts AND we enact violence AND we perpetuate racism AND we are complicit in racism AND we do bad things sometimes AND we can still love ourselves AND, AND, AND... This is woke whiteness work.

I said my piece to convince them that we need to begin any conversation of race with a statement like Allison said, that we as white women, could not escape our racism or our privileges, but that it was something that we actively worked to combat daily in both our personal and professional lives. I want my students to know that we might be perceived as “white saviors” but that we don’t view ourselves in this manner because we are not here in any leadership capacity—we are here to learn with our students, not from them. But is that REALLY true for them?!! I doubt it. They argued that we should not automatically put ourselves in opposition of the students in fear that they may then be positioned against us and not want to participate in the discussion. So I didn’t say anything. I was dead silent. Fuck that. I’m tired. Why am I so angry though?!!

Again, my anger here is stemming from my frustration with their “white logic” of how simply not talking about something will somehow make it better. That’s ridiculous.
We cannot interrupt anything if we do not talk about it. We, as sailors, need to be in the business of interruption, disruption of racial oppression as woke whiteness sailors. In order to do that, we need to disrupt the way we think about things. It is not us as white folks talking about race that puts us in opposition. Rather, it is white logic that already has us at opposition of one another. Talking about race is the only way to fix that way of thinking.

Nonetheless, it still makes me incredibly angry when people simply just do not “get it”. However, because I cannot exist outside of white logic, as a white person, my white anger as a response to racism (as different from Lorde’s (1984) anger as a response to racism as a Black woman), is still a product of white logic and white feelings—therefore, my white feelings of anger were getting in the way of my white wokeness work here. This is why as white people, I asked us to please put aside our feelings in this work. They have no place here. But I had to also—at the same time—learn how to feel things and not make myself numb to my feelings by always busy-ing myself.

At this point, I feel like it’s true for me that I work to combat racism in my daily professional and private life, and I need the students to know this about me whether or not my research partners are going to do it, but UGHHHHH now it’s two against one and I feel like the whole book club has been co-opted. Get it together, Jennifer. You aren’t this scary with your babies at NHS! Why are you so scared of these classmates of yours?!?

It seems here that maybe I was less scared of them than I just completely lacked the language to disrupt their ways of thinking. And I was tired of fighting. I knew what I knew in my heart to be true—that they were wrong—but I couldn’t do anything other
than sit in that feeling. I was not fully equipped with the language to articulate that feeling and then disrupt their thought process. I was trying to be woke, I felt woke, but my “racial justice toolkit” was not yet fully formed. I needed my racial justice toolkit to work woke. What a privilege it was to just be too tired to keep fighting and instead remain silent, complicit in the perpetuation of white supremacy.

My silence was detrimental to the research process, the students of Color at JDC, and to the pursuit of racial justice. Failing to address our own privileges granted to us as white, middle-class women was problematic. We were asking the students to reveal their ethnic identities and “lack of privileges” while vehemently refusing to reveal ours. Despite our good intentions (because white people always have the best intentions), the bottom line was that this was not about the students’ needs. Rather, it became about our own needs as white researchers and our unwillingness for us three to reveal the same vulnerability that we asked of our students. I wanted these book clubs to be a place of freedom and liberation for my students, but my silence made that goal difficult. Indeed, bell hooks argued that “an education that is truly emancipatory and for ‘freedom’ occurs when ‘students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess’” (hooks, 1994, as cited in Banning, 1999, p. 173). I did not share nor confess.

While I did focus on the experiential knowledge of my students of Color, I failed to acknowledge my own shortcomings by making myself vulnerable by addressing my own privileges and my own complicity in racism as a white woman. Instead, I got nervous; I said nothing. Rather than address my own complicity in racism, I positioned myself in such a way that upheld my own cultural invisibility while working to reveal the cultures of the students through their experiential knowledge. I did exactly what I tried
my best not to do: became one of the “good whites” (Thompson, 2003) with good intentions who actually do so much harm! That is not woke whiteness work.

Instead of doing woke whiteness work, I failed to act and remained silent—and thus guarded my privilege. As a white woman, with white logic, I have been deeply and dysconsiously (King, 1991) taught to succeed following the unspoken hegemonic rules of schooling. The tension I was experiencing became too much for me to handle, and I grew tired and frustrated, siding with my research partners rather than the students of Color. By doing so, I perpetuated the power structures of whiteness, perpetuated the status quo, and marginalized the same students I had hoped to empower through these book clubs. Thus, dismantling my efforts to promote racial justice. I was still playing the game of whiteness, trying to disrupt the master’s house with the master’s tools, not understanding the ways in which I always operated under the same power structures of white logic.

From: Dr. Hendrickson

Subject: 862 update

Date: Mon, Mar 3, 2014 at 7:34 PM

To: Lindsay, Jennifer, Jessica

I am thinking that these Google hangouts could also serve as an interesting source of data as I hear you reflecting on students. I also can see and hear that as you plan, you are also thinking of ways to collect more interesting data from students, especially artifacts, now that you have your researchers slant for LRA. Jessica, I know it is hard – entering into a new group. But you are bringing an outside researcher perspective to this
group, and this is a real strength. Pretty soon, everyone's data will belong to everyone. This is just the first step in collaborative research and writing.

Remember that the transcripts can be selective!!

Sent from my iPhone

As we neared the mid-point in the semester, I think we were all running on fumes. It seemed disruptive to our research process to have Jessica join in, last minute, and I felt that it was unfair to her to have to join our book club while she lost her own because her students stopped coming back. It seemed like the other book club groups were losing students left and right—one book club only had one student remaining in it. We felt proud that our “Fantastic Four” came back to see us every week. The conversations were becoming enriched by our CRT work, and I was beginning to feel like we were going to be able to go somewhere very productive with it during our final book club meeting. I longed for more time with our students though.

While the researcher journal only indicates my feelings of frustration, I did also have a feeling of unfairness as pertained to Jessica’s attention. I felt as though it was unfair to her, it was unfair to us, and it was unfair to our students to have her join in for the remaining two book club meetings—though I will admit that Lindsay and I both felt a bit relieved to have someone else to share the workload with. It was tedious work typing up the transcripts each week and our semester was wearing on us. Dr. Hendrickson kept telling us that we could have selective transcripts, but we knew better. There was entirely too much dialogue in the book club to capture pivotal moments. Each word, pause, and interruption was important to our book club.
In March, halfway through the semester, we still felt as though we had complete agency over our book club, though it seemed like that might not be the case with the sudden addition of Jessica into our book club. I was wondering how she would fit in or what her role would be in the book club. I was also frustrated that it felt like it was now two-against-one in our book club, as evident from my many frustrations in my reflective journals and the fact that I wrote two separate entries that week. Lindsay was way more welcoming than I was of Jessica. I had fears of outsiders coming in to steal our book club research that Lindsay and I had worked so hard on, and real-life frustrations already about having to work every day with white teachers who “just didn’t get it” when it came to issues surrounding race and racism. I was concerned that this would be another one of those incidents, particularly in this even-more white space now with three white women rather than just two. The power dynamics were bound to change.

Plus, Lindsay and I were in a groove with our book club. During our fourth book club meeting, we had done “Rambling Autobiographies” with our students, sharing our own paragraph-long autobiographies and having the students write their own life stories as well. Then, I taught about the CRT tenet of the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992) and the commitment to social justice (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I premised the book club that day with the reminder that CRT asked us all to think about ways to disrupt racism in the world and the different ways in which we could all make a difference in the world. Following, we watched the music video to Michael Jackson’s “Man in the Mirror” and spoke about how we as individuals had the power to change the world by starting with ourselves. Next, we completed the Likert Scale activity with the students, prompting discussion about race and racism in the novel, which the students then used to make
connections to their own lives. The final exit slip for the day asked the students to take all they had learned through book club discussion thus far and write down specific ways they wanted to promote racial justice and enact change in their own lives. I was blown away by the responses. It was our best book club experience yet.

I was concerned that with an additional member present in the book club—another younger, white female—the dynamics of the book club would change. We now had three white women, one white male teacher, and a Black male guard (five adults) and four students of Color (three Black males and one bi-racial male) in the classroom. I was most concerned with the idea that now having three white women in the book club, and now four white people in the room, it would be even harder to discuss issues of race and racism. Nonetheless, it appeared that we had done well building community so as not to shut down conversation. Lindsay also did a wonderful job introducing Jessica as a new member, telling the students how we had been bragging about how awesome our book club was. However, there was a critical incident that occurred that day in the book club. I detail it below, along with a critical conversation I had with my original critical friend.

California Dreaming ~ Happy Hour with Lamar ~ March 6, 2014

As I walked up to Cali D to meet Lamar for happy hour after my CRT class, I was thankful for the moment to get away from it all and talk with someone who knew what the hell was going on. I was exhausted. I could tell the semester was catching up with me and I felt like I was trying to learn to navigate but that I was getting pulled in so many different directions by my two different classes, preparing for Relay For Life at the high school, my full-time job teaching my ninth graders, trying to remember to eat, being a good girlfriend, making sure I did all of the readings and assignments for my classes,
keeping up with grades for my high schoolers, and attempting to sleep more than four hours a night. I loved the work though. I had never felt so alive! But I needed to vent to someone who knew the work.

Lamar and I both came up under Sarah and Pat in the MT program at USC. Now, in our third year of teaching, he called her Sarah, but I still called her Dr. Hendrickson or just Hendrickson for short. It was a respect thing for me. Lamar and I had been inseparable in the MT program, and I would often get him in trouble by talking too much and laughing during our classes. It was like I was finally back to my old self in the MT program because I was always the “social butterfly” in my classes growing up, constantly getting my friends in trouble by making them laugh uncontrollably. He was one of those friends you have that you just constantly get a case of the giggles around, and we grew to be very close during our year in the MT program, at first alongside the rest of our cohort then out-growing them after a series of racially-charged incidents, him faster than me. The rest of our cohort from the program hated us now—we suspected (knew) it was because racism is real—but we took pride in the fact that grown folks were too scared to talk to us when we saw them out in public. We had remained close through our induction years, still meeting at Starbucks to plan lessons and units together, venting about our school-woes, and talking about the craziness that goes on in South Carolina public schools when working with other teachers, parents, administrators, and students who were not “critical” (though now I think we could use the word “woke” interchangeably). Lamar was my critical community (outside of my CRT class), and indeed was one of the only people I could ever talk to about academia.
As I sat and listened to Lamar tell me about his Curriculum Theory course with Dr. Cook, the bullshit that was going on with his administrators at his school, and his dissertation writing, I couldn’t help but sit in awe and amazement at how he was managing everything! And still having a social life! He looked well-rested, he had plans for spring break, still went out and partied, and was out drinking with me on a school night! I felt like I was two steps behind him these days, whereas in undergrad and grad school we always seemed to be on the same page.

At the time, it seemed our friendship had evolved and grown into his mentorship of me, which made me proud and thankful for his guidance, but also made me feel pangs of inadequacy and immediacy to do more and graduate quicker. Not in a competitive or envious way, but in a way that made me want to be a better person and not get left behind. I felt like I was running behind him yelling like a little kid, “Wait for me! This sounds fun! I wanna come too!” But I knew I couldn’t tell him that because I would only hold him back. I wanted him to grow out of South Carolina because I felt like he was always so much bigger than the state, even though he used to say he couldn’t see himself moving far away. However, I had also found that all of my South Carolina friends said that, and I wanted them all to move away and know the things I only knew from my experience in living in a different state, far away from family and comfort. Learning how to be comfortable being uncomfortable. I knew I would miss him terribly though, and I had a feeling he wasn’t going to be back next year.

I selfishly wanted him to stay in the classroom with me so we could continue planning lessons, but I could sense that he had outgrown RNE. He was bigger than USC now too. So I knew I could not selfishly wish for him to stay. I always appreciated that
about our friendship; it never felt like competition but rather a push and drive for us both to be the best and both of our “bests” never overshadowed the other. I often felt like I was the practitioner out of the two of us, never wanting to leave my classroom and dedicating all of my time to the “doing” part of teaching, while he was the theorizer who was so good at all the “thinking” part of teaching who had one foot out the classroom door from the moment he stepped into it. This was not to say that he was not a great practitioner—he was (and still is)—but I felt our strengths complemented one another and gave us balance. *Lamar and I also spoke recently (March 2018) about how this busy-ness and never living in the moment is a product of whiteness and white ideals to always do more, more, more to prove our adequacy as people.*

Additionally, he was the one who was telling me how the doc program worked, encouraging me to get rid of my original advisor and request that Dr. Jeffries take me on because I needed someone critical. He convinced me that I could manage two classes per semester while teaching full-time, and persuaded me not to put Dr. Hendrickson on my committee because I needed a committee full of critical people for my life in the academy as a critical scholar. I wasn’t even sure I all-the-way knew what a critical scholar was at the moment to be able to define myself as one, but I laughed when he said “my life in the academy” and called me a “scholar” because I felt like my life was always going to be in the classroom with my babies. *(I call them my babies in a way that shows how I care about them as my own children, though I have no children of my own).* I felt like academy life, much like administration life that he used to strive for, was his realm and not mine. I appreciated that he thought so highly of me though. He was the reason I was
even enrolled in CRT this semester, and I was so eager this evening to tell him all about my work.

“First of all, THANK YOU SO MUCH for telling me to take CRT with Dr. Anders! SHE IS SO AMAZING!” I beamed.

“Right! I told you that you would love her!” he replied.

“She’s seriously so smart! Like sometimes I just be sitting in class wondering how she learned all of these words and how she can articulate herself and her thoughts so well! I feel like my words are all jumbled and I can’t figure it out!”

“Haha—you’ll figure it out!” Lamar reassured me.

“If you say so!”

“I do, I really do. You’ll see once you get into it. But how are things going in Sarah’s class this semester?”

“Ahhhh! Lamar! It’s driving me crazy. I wish you were in there with me! It would have been like old times!”

“Yeah no, I considered it but then I was like I don’t really need this class and the work that she does is not critical, so I just took my classes I needed to graduate.”

“Yeah, that make sense. But yes, I feel like it’s so cool to be back in her class again because I really like her and she’s the whole reason I even became a teacher—”

“Haha I forgot you said you were gonna go to law school back in 563! I remember just looking at you like haha okay Jen!”

“RIGHT! It was so long ago—haha—fathers and such! But yes, I feel like we keep going in there saying we are promoting social justice but then when we have class and I hear all the other white ladies in class talking about what good work we are doing at
JDC and how we are basically just out here saving these kids’ lives according to them,’” as I roll my eyes, “but none of the other book clubs are even doing social justice work! And I feel like we aren’t even defining social justice properly because it’s supposed to be about action. And since when is Hendrickson so interested in social justice work? We ain’t never did this in the MT program! Where was all this back then?!? And now I have these two research partners in my group who are driving me insane, and not approaching this from a social justice standpoint at the least, and definitely not a critical race theory lens at the most, and I keep trying to TELL THEM, but LAMAR they just do not understand!” I demanded, all of my words running together and becoming more intense as they spilt out of me.

“We are going to need more of these,” I stated as I took a deep breath, looked at Lamar with a side-eye like, I know you know how frustrating this is, and took a sip of my vodka-sprite through the two tiny black straws.

“Yes! I tried to tell you, Jen, they are not critical! They are not approaching this work from a critical standpoint and you are just not going to be able to get them to see that. But you have to do the critical work for your students though. We always do this work for them and their benefit.”

“Ugh, I knooowwwww but I just don’t know what to do because I don’t want to be an asshole and demand that we do things my way with my research partners. And then I don’t want to do anything to ruin my rapport with Hendrickson because you know I love her and I really want to go back to JDC and do my own dissertation research but I feel like I would be stepping on her toes, but I just want to do this how I want to do this, and I just feel like I CANNOT! They are going to give me all the gray hair!” I exclaimed
with frustration. “AND OH MY GOODNESS, LAMAR, YOU WILL NOT BELIEVE THIS!” I exclaimed as I forcefully put my drink down on the bar and repositioned my body towards him so he could get the intensity of the explanation.

“What?” Lamar laughed, looking surprised by my sudden intensity.

“OH MY GOODNESS! My research partner used the word ‘colored’ at our last book club meeting! One of our boys was telling a story about how last time he went to court he noticed how all of the white people got off for their charges while all of the ‘colored people’ were sentenced and locked up for their charges. So then she said that she also noticed how in traffic court the other week how many ‘colored people’, I described as I made air-quotes with my hands, “there were in court that day! I just looked at her like oh my goodness did you just say colored people!”

“Wait, so she said colored people or the student said colored people?” Lamar asked for clarification.

“Well the student said it first because we were talking about Junior in the book and the role race has in someone’s future, and so he was talking about when he went to court and all the white people got off and the people of Color were getting locked up, but he said colored people, and then he was talking about how he didn’t identify as Black or white but that he was bi-racial and ‘Other’ and I mentioned something about how society forces us to put ourselves in boxes and such… then she chimed in and said that she also noticed how all the colored people,” I emphasized, “were the ones that the officers were pulling over to come to court. And I just looked at her like REALLY?!? And immediately brought up The New Jim Crow (Alexander, 2012) to bring it back to structural issues of
racism and mass incarceration that he was getting at… but YES. COLORED PEOPLE, Lamar! I just did not know what to say!”

“Wait, so you didn’t correct her?” he asked me.

“Nooooo and I know I should have but I just didn’t know what to say! And I didn’t know how to address it with her without also bringing it up with him and then I felt real weird about it and just didn’t say anything at all and instead changed the subject because I didn’t want to undermine her in front of the students, but yessssss!”

“Well, Jen, you really should have said something to her! I woulda looked at her like, ‘What did you just say?!?’ But I get it. That is frustrating. I cannot believe she said colored people! Like what century are we in?!” he laughed.

“RIGHT!” I laughed back, “I just wish you were in there with me because it’s like everyone versus me and I don’t want to say anything because no one else gets it and there’s no one in there to back me up so then I just don’t say anything at all and I leave with my blood boiling!”

“Look, I do NOT want to be in there with you!” Lamar snickered.

“I know, I know,” I smiled, “but what am I supposed to doooooo about all of this?!? It’s so much and it’s so frustrating and I know we are laughing about it but MAN it just really grinds my gears!”

“Haha—‘grinds your gears’? Really, Jen?”

“It’s from Family Guy! I forgot you only watch ratchet-reality TV though—haha! You and Tasha. I can’t!” I joked with him, “But really! What should I do?”

“My roommate tells me the same thing! But umm… I don’t really know what you should do because it doesn’t sound like there is a whole lot you can do right now. But
what I would do is just continue to work on combining your racial justice project with the book club and make sure you are doing what you need to do to promote racial justice and then when the semester is over, you can re-analyze the data from a CRT lens.”

“UGH THAT IS THE OTHER THING! We cannot go ‘rogue’ with the data according to Hendrickson, so all of this hard work and all of this stuff that we are doing is basically hers to do with what she wants. She just told us in an email that the data is about to belong to everyone in the class now and we are going to start combining everything together across all of the different book clubs but NO ONE ELSE IS DOING SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK and she wants us to use this social justice and critical framework! But we really have not looked at any social justice stuff other than the CEE position statement like the first day of class. And she keeps claiming that we are doing social justice work, or critical work, but it just does not feel like social justice or critical work at all! None of the class gets it. And I just be looking at them like, how the hell all us white ladies gonna be in here claiming social justice work when the rest of y’all ain’t even social justice educators! Maybe one or two of them are. But it’s a room full of white saviors. It is enough to make me go insane.

“And how on earth are we going to be out here claiming critical work but not looking at issues of race! Talking about social justice work like it’s something we just leave with the kids at the prison. THIS IS LIFE! And then we are supposed to be writing these articles and publishing pieces from it and presenting at LRA if we get accepted and I am trying so hard to fake it until I make it because it’s just my first year and you know me and Hendrickson go way back… but DAMN! I’m gonna pull my hair out with this shit!”
“Well, Jen, just wait until the piece gets published and then write a counter to it and critique it.”

“Wait, I can do that? What if she finds out?”

“And what is she going to say, no, you cannot critique your own work?”

“Ahhh I guess not, but you aren’t as close with her as I am! I feel like I’ll be going against my academic mother!”

“Ha, yeah, I was always way closer with Pat. But you weren’t very close with her were you?”

“Umm… I wasn’t not close with her, but I definitely was closer with Hendrickson. You don’t remember when I fucked up and almost failed 563 back in undergrad?!? She gave me a second chance and I just don’t want to do anything to burn that bridge, you know?!?”

“Yeah, but honestly Jen, you can’t think about her with this work. It’s about the kids. So do what you need to do to do critical work with your students and then when it is over, just work with Allison on it and I’m sure you can figure out something. But in the meantime, just remember that we have to just keep doing what we are doing with our work by trying to help empower those who are culturally and linguistically marginalized while teaching those who are in power to recognize their power and privilege. It’s important work and it needs to be done, so stick it out and do what you need to do for your students!”

I smiled and instantly felt calmer about the situation. Lamar was right, this was not about me and my feelings of frustration and how much I wanted this to be done how I
wanted it to be done. This work was about the children. I had to keep on fighting back and working for my students.

“Thank you so much, Lamar!” I gleamed, “You always know what to say!”

“You’re welcome,” he smiled back, “Now, stop babysitting your drink!”

As the conversation continued and the drinks kept flowing that evening, I spoke with him about our shared commitments to CRT work and told him all about the work I was doing at JDC this semester. I told him about how I was doing a CRT book club, teaching students tenets of CRT and combining it with book clubs. We agreed to spend the last quarter of the year before EOC developing a shared CRT in the Classroom unit with our students at each of our schools.

Tensions continued to arise during the course, and indeed I did not address the comment with Lindsay, again choosing to side with whiteness ideals of politeness rather than with the cause of racial justice. That is not woke whiteness work. I did not even address the comment with Lindsay until my first rendition of this dissertation (February 2018), where I sent her a draft. She told me that this was a comment that she reflected on numerous times throughout the course of the last four years. A comment that haunted her. Imagine how powerful it would have been if I, as a white sister, to reach out to my white sister scholar friend and help her navigate the tensions of whiteness? What if I had not been so completely shut off by my angry, selfish white feelings? How could things have turned out differently then?
As we approached our final book club meeting, Dr. Hendrickson told us that we
would have to complete an exit interview with our students. I was extremely disappointed
that we would have to dedicate precious book club time to answering her questions for
her as a professor rather than continuing to explore the issues of race and racism in our
book club. Our conversation was extremely rich during our fourth book club meeting,
and I was eager to pick it back up again after a two-week break.

From: Dr. Hendrickson

Subject: JDC Final Interview Questions

Date: Thu, Mar 13, 2014 at 5:48 PM

To: Lindsay, Jessica, Jennifer, & 6 others

I’ve shared an item with you…

Here is the link to the GoogleDoc for the JDC Final Interview Questions—

Let me know if you can’t edit—

I will edit the document on Monday and bring the final questions printed to our
meeting on Tuesday.

(LINK TO GOOGLE DOC ~ JDC Final Interview Questions)

None of the students at JDC participated in creating the interview questions or
reflecting on the research. Indeed, none of the students at JDC participated in the
research process at all after our second book club meeting where we member-checked
with the students. Time just did not allow for it. As a class, we added a few questions per
group to the Google Doc, but the majority of the questions were questions given to us by
Dr. Hendrickson.
Retrospective Reflections ~ Woke Whiteness Work in the Academy

Johnson & Bryan (2016) discussed the metaphorical violence inflicted upon Black male professors in the academy, who endure bullets of rejection, silencing, and disrespect. Bryan (2017) described Black boys who are “shot with bullets of silencing or the evisceration of their voices when given disciplinary infraction they often cannot challenge (Hotchkins, 2016)” (Bryan, 2017, p. 339). In the book club, Dr. Hendrickson was shooting the Black male students at JDC with bullets of silencing, enacting “spirit murders” on them through our research. I know this from the transcripts that I am not allowed to use, we completely shut down any conversation they could have had to help us understand what they actually meant when we analyzed their words, rather than what we assumed they meant.

She was shooting me with bullets of silencing too—my bullets were just rubber bullets though. They weren’t going to kill me, they weren’t going to penetrate my skin, but they were going to leave nasty welts on my spirit that were going to require medical attention. Thank goodness Dr. Anders was there to tend to my wounds! And thank goodness I had a team of medical professionals join her—Lamar (Dr. Johnson), Dr. Jeffries, Dr. Cook, Dr. Boutte, Nate (Dr. Bryan), and Dalisha (Dr. Shingler)—throughout the last four years. If left unattended for long enough, who knows what would have happened! But this is not about me. My spirit was never murdered. Indeed, I grew back stronger than ever. I had a shield of whiteness to protect me.

What about the students of Color at JDC? Did we spiritually murder them? We may never know because we were not allowed to keep in contact with them. I do know that we spiritually shot them, and all I can do now is pray each day that they were able to
seek the medical attention they needed to heal from those wounds. Look how dangerous this dehumanizing research is!

Also, a huge part of woke whiteness work is always being informed by people of Color in our racial justice work. For instance, in the above section, I extended Dr. Bryan’s (Nate) and Dr. Johnson’s (Lamar) work. Because I am friends with both of them, I sent them both my above analysis to make sure that I was being consider of how I was taking up their work as a white woman and got their okay to extend this work in this way. However, because I grew up in the academy with Lamar and met Nate through Lamar as a scholar-friend, I freely text them, email them, an engage in critical conversations constantly with them about racial justice work in casual settings over drinks, dinner, coffee, and in informal settings at our homes and other’s homes outside of the spaces in the academy.

However, part of woke whiteness work is also that I do this with everyone, and I failed completely to do this with Dr. Denise Taliaferro Baszile because I was so star-struck by her and her greatness! I was so nervous around her at AESA in 2015, I was so nervous around my mentor, Dr. Daniella Cook when I first met her, and I have always been so nervous around Dr. Gloria Boutte, and I was even more nervous when I had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Joyce King in January 2017. I had read all of their work before ever meeting them, and I was in complete awe and shock before I ever even met them. Then, when I got around them, I often times froze—which is super counterproductive to woke whiteness work.

Woke whiteness work is always embracing the discomfort and scariness of working with rock-stars who have mastered the game of the academy in very real,
powerful ways because there is more important work to do. Woke whiteness work demands that you always are informed by scholars and people of Color, and if you are going to take up their work, you better make sure you check with them to make sure you are taking it up correctly (when you can). In all of these instances, I could have spoken with any of these women. But I was silenced by the fact that I thought they were rock stars (and they are)! However, I was so star-struck by the amazingness of their talent, having read all of their work beforehand, that I failed to interact with them on a real, human level.

Woke whiteness work is ALWAYS checking yourself and owning all parts of you. Even the bad parts that they may critique—indeed we always grow from critique! And feedback should always be welcomed. I should not have been scared as a young white woman scholar to reach out. That is the opposite of woke whiteness work. However, it should be noted that I also engaged in getting feedback from my peers and colleagues of Color about extending their work before doing so, but if the people are alive and willing—you should always reach out!

I credit Dr. Cook for teaching me this with the scholarly dig. She encouraged me to reach out to Dr. Denise Taliaferro Baszile, who has had a HUGE influence on my entire dissertation and life, but when I met her, I was so scared of her and her greatness (often worrying that I could never live up to her standards) that I often was silent! Or said the wrong thing. Same with many experiences I have had with Dr. Boutte. But at the time, I was not Dr. Cook’s mentor, and I did not know her on a personal level.

Indeed, I remember the first time during her curriculum theory class that spring 2015 semester when she set up phone conversations with us, I was SO SCARED to talk to
her on the phone! Even the first year I worked under her, I was scared to talk to her on the phone and she would often call me. I had read her work and seen her speak before I ever even knew her, and I was terrified of not living up to her standards. And this blocked us from having a very real, human connection for the first year I worked under her, and indeed, until now. There would be moments in time where I would open myself up to her, but they were fleeting. She did teach me everything I know about being strategically critical in the academy, however, and navigating the spaces of whiteness that permeate within the academy.

This hiding—this hiding of whiteness and being scared—it is actually just the fear of being yourself. As famous poet of Color nayyirah waheed writes, “what about this theory. the fear of not being enough. and the fear of being ‘too much.’ are exactly the same fear. the fear of being you” (2014). Indeed, I read and re-read her poetry thousands of times over as I was writing this dissertation because I felt as though she spoke to my soul. But she is absolutely right, owning myself and all of my parts of me (woke whiteness work) has been the only way I have been able to write this dissertation. Loving humanity, loving myself, and loving people has been the only way I have been able to write this dissertation. Allowing myself to be free, like she is in her poetry and like Audre Lorde is in her work, by accepting “both/and” ways of thinking has been the only way I have been able to do any woke whiteness work. Also, Cheryl Strayed, a white woman, does this in her book Wild as well. I call these three women, along with Denise Taliaferro Baszile and a few others, my literary loves, and I recognize their impact on my work in my acknowledgements.
I was not, however, scared of myself outside of the academy and learned from my dear friends, Tasha and Poppy, how to be authentically me outside of the academy and how to actively work against the power structures of whiteness within my experiences in Nottoway. However, imposter syndrome in the academy is real! This is the power of white patriarchy. Everyone else feels less-than. So everyone else works more-than. And there are very real dangers to this way of thinking! You just have to keep reading this story to find out the extreme dangers of this to racial justice work and to humanity in general when we operate in these terms and play these power games of whiteness. There are spiritual murders, spiritual rapes, spiritual pillaging, and spiritual assaults, and spiritual suicides happening all the time (to participants of research, to graduate students, to scholars themselves), everywhere in the academy because everyone is playing the master’s game of white patriarchy. It is only by existing outside of this power structure that we have any hopes of dismantling it.

This dissertation is an active woke whiteness work attempt to operate outside of the academy. Indeed, it is only because my co-chairs are Dr. Jeffries and Dr. Anders (Allison), that I am able to even operate outside of this power structure. This is why I was not ever scared of either of these professors though. At first, I hid from them because I was scared of myself. But once I owned myself, owned my work, and was unapologetically me, I was able to join them in operating outside of this space, while at the same time (both/and) still thriving and existing within this space in the academy. Likewise, I credit Lamar (Dr. Johnson), Nate (Dr. Bryan), and Dalisha (Dr. Shingler) for this work as well because they actively work to not play the political power games of whiteness within the academy and taught me much about how to navigate and become a
sailor, while Allison kept sending me back to myself to critique and disrupt my own thought processes. But see the power of whiteness here? It took another white woman to do this work with me. But Allison shared that she can only do this because she has a critical community that holds her accountable and sends her back to herself. I can never escape my white logic. I am always complicit. I must always interrupt it. That is woke whiteness work.

I could not do woke whiteness work, however, until I learned how to own all the parts of myself (indeed, that took me until December 30, 2017 when I turned 30), so I felt that they would sniff me out right away as an imposter in the fight for racial justice and expose me like the fraud I thought I was! But that is also because I had not done my complete woke whiteness work yet. I was not owning all of shit. And now, I can write this dissertation, having owned all my shit, knowing that I still have so much more shit to own up to. So I welcome the critique to learn and grow.

Researcher Journal – March 17, 2014

Happy St. Patrick’s Day! I dressed up in all green today for work. I just love this fake holiday! But anyways, our last book club meeting is tomorrow and I am trying to remember to write in this thing more often but I have just been so worn out! I literally spent all weekend locked up in my house, sitting on my couch, analyzing these transcripts from our book club! It is SO MUCH. I literally sat there for so long that there was an actual butt print in the black leather! I just kept going over the transcripts and getting so annoyed with myself that I kept on interrupting the kids! There were so many missed opportunities that we could have expanded on certain ideas or gone back to other ideas. WE NEED MORE TIME. But alas, this is something we have no control over. I feel like
the more and more we go through the book clubs, the less and less control we have over it. Or maybe the less control I have over it. Why am I such a control freak?!? *White people love to control things.*

I am super glad that Lindsay knows what she is doing with qual research though because I have an idea and I am analyzing it well, but I don’t know everything she knows about coding and so it’s nice for her to bring in her cool software and analyze the different words. I have a lot to learn and she’s teaching me a lot about the process but I still like the way I do it. I have got to get over that though. There are systematic & scientific ways of analyzing the data. And I think that’s partially why maybe we got some different stuff from our data? But also I feel like she just does not understand the kids. Jessica either. And that I am seeing things in the data that they are just not seeing or understanding. And maybe even are analyzing wrong. But who am I to tell them it is wrong when Lindsay is the one who has all the qual experience? And she has worked with Dr. Anders before so I feel like she’s trying to understand but she just is not getting it. And I don’t know about Jessica.

*At the time, I did not know the word “epistemology” that might explain why we could be looking at the same data and getting different information. Or why they were not seeing the systems and patterns of expression that I was seeing. The only explanation I had was that they probably did not know any other Black people other than our students and so they probably just did not know what they did not know, having never been exposed to Black culture. I had no further explanation at the time. When I analyzed our data, I saw the students responded together to issues of racism through humor and shared laughter. In order to find something funny, you have to have a shared*
understanding of the premise behind it—in this case, there was a shared understanding of systemic racism.

I also saw in the data that students were struggling to name systemic racism in concrete ways, but that they all had a shared understanding of it. They were able to talk about racialized systems of oppression in the book as well as their own lives, maintain a sense of agency in spite of the myth of meritocracy. They were cognizant of racial oppression on an individual, social, and institutional level, and spoke on shared commitments to collective responsibility for collective struggle. It was everything I could have hoped to find and more—plus, there was data from the students on the power of teachers and I had already made connections to the school-to-prison pipeline in my head. But I felt the book club nor my data really belonged to me at this point. I could see the ways it was getting co-opted.

I’m just more or less kind of going with the flow with Lindsay now. Privilege of whiteness to not engage with racial justice work and “go with the flow.” Plus, I haven’t been on top of everything like Lindsay and Jessica have because I am so overwhelmed and I’m turning in things later than I am supposed to but life is so full right now! Especially with Relay for Life coming up. Why do I not know how to say no to things? Why do I think I am superwoman all the time? I cannot wait until Spring Break! USC spring break was last week but I didn’t get a break from anything but my classes but I still was teaching. So I’m excited to go on this cruise with Solomon. It will be so nice to finally step away from this.

I have never worked so hard in my entire life and it’s so frustrating because I just feel like Lindsay and Jessica DO NOT UNDERSTAND. They don’t understand the kids.
They don’t understand what it’s like teaching high schoolers. They probably don’t really know any black people. They get the ideas about white privilege as relates to “unpacking their invisible knapsacks” but kinda like it’s on a superficial level. Like the level I was at back in undergrad when I first read that piece freshman year. But that was in 2006. I’ve been known this stuff. I’ve been known the kids. But I have to keep in mind, we live very different lives probably. And I don’t know what kind of life Lindsay and Jessica live outside of class. So let me stop. Because I don’t actually know them. But that’s what this researcher journal is for right, analyzing my own thoughts and feelings and assumptions?

So yes. Let me go ahead and check myself. I have to keep in mind that I literally spend my life around high schoolers in my classroom and live in an adolescent literacy world in my classroom whereas they do not.

*I was trying here to write against myself, to rethink about this in a different manner, consider multiple viewpoints. However, the viewpoint I did not consider was how it was still a privilege of mine to act so authoritative about issues surrounding race and racism. I felt as though it was okay because it was in an all-white setting, and an all-white setting that wasn’t critical. I felt I had to amplify a critical position in order for anyone to hear me—it was not something I would attempt to do outside that context—but I was extremely fed up with white people at this point in my life. I did not have any positive experiences with white folks on a regular basis, and I found the majority of the ones with whom I came into contact to either “not get it” or flat out make overtly racist comments to me because I was also a white person. I was extremely tired of dealing with white people who refused to check their privilege. I was tired of checking it for them. But at the same time, my whiteness and my white logic and my white feelings made it*
impossible for me to see the ways in which, I too, was operating with white logic and was not indeed any better than them!

OMG. This reminds me! Coach Daniels told one of my babies, Jamila, last week that she was a sociopath and was not going to make it in society. So then she asked him when he was going to retire and he said he had a couple more years, so then she asked him when he was going to die. I tried not to laugh when she was telling me this, but it is kind of funny. But yeah, she got kicked out of his class and came to mine. I told her to just come to my classroom whenever she had a problem with him so that she could do her work without getting so angry with him. But now he is literally sending her to ISS every single day instead of going to history class. HOW WILL SHE LEARN?!? You can’t just decide who you want to teach and not teach. That’s bullsh—. We are PUBLIC school teachers! FUCK OUTTA HERE. All the while he thinks he is doing the Lord’s work. NO. You, sir, are doing Satan’s work. You ain’t out here helping the kids! But I can’t say that. Everyone loves his racist ass. I can’t even stand it.

Here, my anger, my selfish white feelings, were preventing me from figuring out productive ways to interact with Coach Daniels, offer up suggestions of how to navigate the tensions so Jamila’s learning was not stopped. At the time, I could have stepped up and confronted Coach Daniels about this using woke whiteness work, rather than sitting in my anger and not doing anything to actually prevent the problem from happening.

Above, when I “speak back” to Coach Daniels, I am speaking in African American Language, which is interesting; I am processing the events in African American Language in my head rather than in standardized English. This was, in a way, righteous anger at literally watching the school-to-prison pipeline play out with my own
students. But again, my anger as a selfish white feeling just prevented me from being able to do the woke whiteness work necessary to actually disrupt this.

I mean, I know Jamila is a pain in the butt. I see her every single morning for Freshman Focus, and she cussed me out more than any other kid in life during the entire first semester, but I never gave up on her. It may have taken until January for us to be close, but she is worth it. All of these kids are worth it. That is our job as teachers! To help the kids! But honestly, for her to come into class every morning at 7:40AM that damn angry, she’s got a reason! No one wakes up every morning that damn angry for no reason. It’s not personal. It can’t be personal. We can’t take our work as educators personally. But I don’t feel like he knows that. Nor do any of these other teachers in this school. Tasha gets it. But she’s the guidance counselor. So I guess it’s good that I have her. But I have had to completely stop talking to the rest of these folks at lunch!

I keep telling myself that interpreting the students’ anger is never personal, but I took Coach Daniels threats to my student extremely personally and responded with anger. Which is good. I should be angry. But as Lorde (1984) asked a white woman about her anger, “How do you use your rage?” (p. 125). Indeed, it is my job as a woke white woman to use my rage to disrupt these systems and to make sure that my rage and my selfish white feelings do not get in the way of the end goal—sailing towards racial justice! Yet, sometimes rage is an appropriate response when you call someone out on their abuses of power if they represent power over you. This is speaking truth to power, which is important in woke whiteness work.

Before I used to just go to lunch with my book and sit and try to talk to them, but I cannot even do it. Ms. JJ said we all have to eat in the lunch room though so now I just
bring my book and sit by myself at a table and read and eat my lunch in peace. The kids all think it’s hilarious LOL but I don’t mind. But I talk to the kids. I tell them how proud I am to be nerdy haha. But I don’t tell them that I am just NOT here for their stupid Freshman Academy clique-y teachers they have! Because you can’t say that to the kids. Seriously though, I cannot stand those racist-ass teachers! But what do I know? I’m just a third-year teacher. (Eye roll) But also, that’s why I won teacher of the year last week! And oooooohhhhhhh they were MAD! Haha! I know what the fuck I am doing. But they don’t know. They don’t get it. They are all from here and think they are doing such great work and it’s such a great honor to work at NHS over MCHS because they are teaching the black kids. Fuck outta here. I cannot stand them sometimes. I feel like I am just so angry all the time. Like DO Y’ALL NOT SEE THESE SYSTEMS?!? Talking about that’s just the way it is here in Nottoway… NAH MAN! Like literally it’s insane!

*I saw the systems of whiteness that they were operating under, but I was failing to see that I was complicit in the same exact systems! I was no better than them, entangled in my white logic, thinking I was better than them for seeing them in their white logic, but still not able to humble myself enough, step outside myself, and do the woke whiteness work I needed to do to see my own white logic. However, as Thompson (2003) explained when she cautioned against performing the role of the good white by decentering whiteness and self-righteousness, it is not righteousness that is inherently antagonistic; it is righteousness without love. Indeed, I have been reminded this several times throughout the semester with all of my newfound wokeness discoveries— not everyone will understand that you come from a place of love and will attempt to silence you by calling you out on your righteousness, completely unwilling to even hear your message, shutting*
down the entire conversation. I was incredibly selfish here, still playing the master’s
game of white patriarchy, trying to outshine people in my critique of their racism, trying
to beat them at their own game. “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s
house” (Lorde, 1984, 112). I was trying to make them jealous, playing their games of
whiteness, making it all about me while I enjoyed the power games. That was not woke
whiteness work. That is not how you promote racial justice as a woke white woman.

How Duncan (the black school) got dismantled and all the kids came into Nottoway. But
they don’t teach the students that in school. That’s their actually history! Right here in
Nottoway. But you won’t find any of that in any books or online. Trust me, I looked.
They don’t want to talk about how terrible the KKK was out here, yet we want to talk
about gang problems as a district. How about we talk about the worst gang of them all
then! But they want to get my babies in trouble all the time for wearing clothes they
aren’t even 100% certain are gang-related. They just look the part. So they assume. And
some of my smartest kids have ended up in ISS off this! Stupid teacher assumptions.
They don’t even know! Talking about “our kids can’t learn that.” Umm, yes the fuck they
can. Have you tried?!? These low expectations are what are killing our babies out here in
Nottoway. HOW DO THEY NOT SEE IT?!?

Here, I am forgetting that until freshman year of college, when I read Peggy
McIntosh’s (1990) “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” that I, too, was blind to the
invisibility of whiteness. White folks have to be trained to see it—we need our racial
justice toolkits because racism is not a lived experience for us.
But that’s okay. That’s why I’m going to start this CRT in the Classroom unit with Lamar and I am not going to tell anyone else about it at Nottoway. Because y’all are not serious about social justice work! And my babies are. And we do not have time for these other folks who claim to be doing the work but are just not critical!

_Actually, yes Jen, you do have time. That’s your woke whiteness work. It’s not the fun work, but that’s your job. Try to stay calm, open a place for new ways of thinking, invite folks to think differently, and try not to shut people down with your anger and frustration. It is a lot of work._

And I’m tired of getting all of my work co-opted by Helene. Taking credit for all my work I’ve been doing. Following me in everything I do. Ugh even the fact that she is in this same doc program and in this same class doing book clubs at JDC! That’s a whole other thing though.

_Look at the power of whiteness and the inability to live by the virtue of mudita. Whiteness is steeped in jealousy, a presumption of ownership over EVERYTHING as it is steeped in colonization, colonizing land, bodies, cultures, ideas._

That’s a whole other thing though.

I just have to keep reminding myself with her that it is for the babies. They are the ones benefitting from her stealing my work. But she is not about to steal this CRT in the Classroom unit. Nope. I’m not even gonna put it on my lesson plans. I told Ms. JJ she can get a separate copy of my lesson plans that Helene cannot see. Because no one has time for her to steal my dissertation idea too! I really want to do book clubs at JDC again for my dissertation, a chance to go back and do everything I want to do with the book clubs rather than being told what to do. We will see if Hendrickson even lets me do that.
though. Because I feel like she was all for us taking ownership over the book clubs at first but now it’s like we have to analyze the data using her theoretical frameworks and using her research questions and looking across all of the book clubs and in that case, what the fuck was even the point in making our own book club?!? And now we cannot even do anything with it. I want to scream.

The theme of this semester is they just do not get it! All of them. Sometimes I get so angry and Solomon tells me I need to calm down. That it’s not that serious. But it is. It is life or death I feel like. I just know that I am going to isolate people if I am too angry with them though. And I keep remembering back to that Audre Lorde piece we read in CRT to use anger and emotion as power… but I am just TIRED. And this is important work! So I cannot be tired. My babies don’t get a day off from this. Why should I?

*Part of woke whiteness work is also learning how to take yourself and realizing that when you are doing too much by playing the game of busy, busy, busy with whiteness, the students and the people you are trying to help are the ones who get the most damaged. The people closest to you are the ones who are the most damaged with your whiteness mentality of “never stop working.” We need to slow down, take deep breaths, and just be in the moment. Allow ourselves time to process all the things that are happening to us. Allow ourselves time to feel. To heal. To breathe. That’s wokeness work, and as a white person, that’s woke whiteness work.*

But sometimes, I feel like I need to pick my battles. Like with Lindsay and Jessica. There are just some battles that are just not going to be worth my time and effort because we are not going to get anywhere!
Woke whiteness work is figuring out how to navigate spaces and places where you can make the most impact, but also knowing when you need to take a step back, fill yourself up again, and then proceed. If I took the chance that semester to really sit with all of this and analyze this information and process all that was happening around me, I could have figured out a way to navigate this tension in a productive way. I also would have been able to see that Lindsay really was trying to understand what CRT work was.

I feel like this CRT lens battle is going to be one of them. But the work is SO IMPORTANT for the sake of our babies and they are just not understanding and I am just so tired. The dangers of white busy-ness, and yes, this racial justice work is extremely important, but also, you I cannot do wokeness work if I am not taking care of my woke self and also stepping outside the master’s house and using tools that are different than the master’s tools. It’s an entire new way of thinking, being, and existing with its own set of consequences and freedoms. I address this in the afterword.

On top of that, I feel like Hendrickson and no one else in the class is understanding it either so it’s almost like I have this idea about how I want the data and the research to go and I’m so excited about it but then no one is speaking my same language.

I was conscious, I was woke, but my racial justice toolkit was not yet fully formed so I was unable to do the woke whiteness work. Also, the fact that Hendrickson was not, in fact, woke with me like I wanted her to be felt like such a terrible betrayal. I felt like I was screaming in my white logic and no one could hear me. It was exhausting.

And I just cannot get them to see it or understand me. But people like Rachel in the class who have taken CRT before are in class telling me they understand and how
interesting it would be to look at the data from a CRT lens, but REALLY?!? DO YOU?!?

Because I feel like they are missing the severity of this. Like it’s not even that it’s from a CRT lens that I want to look at the data, like this is literally LIFE. It’s LIFE. It’s how I look at LIFE. Because lives are at stake!

Thompson (2003) talked about this in her work as well, the ways in which white folks like to “try on” different theories from people of Color with a quote here or a quote there, never actually doing the actual work to understand their own positionality and privilege in the ability to do so—all while being nose-blind to the fact that they are smelling like shit!

I don’t know how they do not see it other than the fact that I have to remember that before I knew any black people (obviously I’ve always known black people, but like actual close friendships and relationships and family-like relationships), I did not get it either.

The invisibility of whiteness. And indeed, I really did not know that many Black people until middle and high school. Even then, thinking I was awake, I was completely blind to the fact that I actually did not know that many Black people and there were deliberate reasons for that in my privileged white life.

And once you see something you cannot un-see it. Like that Plato story about the cave.

The same goes for wokeness.

I don’t know.

It’s just frustrating because it’s like I’ve been known this stuff for YEARS and I am trying to get them to understand how problematic all of these things are but they are
just not understanding and they are just not getting it and I am just GOING TO GO INSANE.

Even then, I did not fully get it! I was still thinking in my white logic. I have to keep disrupting it, time and time again. I can never escape my selfish white feelings.

But I have to stay calm. Navigate, Allison keeps saying. Navigate. It’s my new favorite word. I’m trying so hard to navigate this book club but at this point in the semester with our last book club coming up, I feel like I just am fighting a losing battle here.

I was fighting a losing battle because I was trying to use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house! While at the same time, I was also dealing with resistance in the form of explicit white power, implicit white power, white colonizing behavior, white avoidance behavior, white silence all while trying to connect with my students, my children, my babies. It was exhausting.

It’s making it very difficult because I can already feel the tensions when we are talking about analyzing the data. I already tried to explain to them about looking at all of this data through a CRT lens, but it’s abundantly clear they are not doing so.

You cannot know what you cannot know, and I was able to see things in the data that they were missing because I was woke, as far as the extent of being able to see the basic power structures, conscious of the way the system worked.

They keep saying that it’s so interesting that I came up with this analysis of the data, but that they didn’t find the same things I did, and then it’s like two against one and then I start doubting my knowledge about what I feel in my bones to be true.
Part of wokeness work, too, is learning how to trust your gut fearlessly, and then equipping yourself with the tools to navigate spaces in productive ways.

And it makes me want to scream. But they don’t know what they don’t know. And I only know what I know at this point.

My racial justice toolkit was not yet formed.

I feel like I don’t know it well enough to teach it in the way that I want to teach it to them so we can use this CRT lens but that it’s just the way I view the world and they just do not. And it’s so frustrating wanting to say things to them but then I feel like I get shut down at every turn when I try to talk. Really it’s just so exhausting.

It is super exhausting work trying to always fight the master with the master’s tools! You will be met with resistance, every single time!

But the work sustains me. Plus, the babies make it worth it. I feel like our book club and our students are the best! I JUST LOVE OUR KIDS! I want to really sit down and interview them more, get them to expand more on the research, and talk more! This work is so difficult when you don’t build a rapport with the students. I mean, we’ve been trying. That’s why I said we have to keep doing community builders each time we meet with them, but sheesh. We just got here and already Hendrickson is having us do exit interviews! Like we still have so much more to talk about in our book club! We are just scratching the surface!

This is how you end up othering (Bhattacharya, 2009) your participants in your research, by moving through the research process entirely too fast. These are the dangers of busy-ness in whiteness. That is not woke whiteness work.
I feel like we finally got to the meat of the in-depth conversations about racism concerning the book and the role of teachers the last time we were there before USC spring break. But now it’s been two weeks since we’ve seen them and we have all of these exit interview things we have to talk about with the students and none of the book club stuff. We are going to run out of time like always. I wish I had them longer and saw them more like my high school babies. We have been able to build an even better rapport because we see each other every day. We only get to see our book club kids these five times! I miss them already and we haven’t even completely left yet.

*The dangers of white busy-ness.*

I am excited for all of the ways in which this work has translated into my classroom though. Especially this CRT in the Classroom unit. I have noticed from our book club at JDC that our students understand systemic racism, are able to speak deeply about the ways in which racism affects them in their personal lives while connecting it to the literature, and understood the tenets of CRT that we were relaying to them. However, it seems like maybe they lack the vocabulary to articulate their points and delve deeper into the topic. It seems like they all had this shared, unspoken understanding of systematic and institutional racism, but not the language to describe such an understanding and critique the systems. I think that it would be really cool in my CRT in the Classroom unit to create a “Racial Justice Toolkit” for my students and give them the vocabulary and definitions necessary to discuss, critique, analyze, and fight back against racism. It could be like their own personal dictionary where students explore how racism works in our society, the history of racism, and how to fight back against racism. I know that this CRT class has really helped me with this because at the beginning of the
semester, I just did not know how to articulate the things that I just did not know! It was like I knew these things to be true, but just did not know how to articulate them and I am trying to get better at this. There is still so much more for me to learn though. But I am excited about the work. So excited!

My original racial justice toolkit was formed as a direct result of my work at JDC with students. On the backs of my students of Color. As we othered them with our research. Then, this woke whiteness work, this writing against myself (Noblit, 1999) as woke whiteness work as a methodology in autoethnographic research, was formed as a direct result of my reading the work of scholars of Color, authors of Color, interacting with people of Color on a daily and consistent basis, having so many ties to the Black community—again, this sense of freedom that I feel from being able to name all of the power structures, knowing how to deal with people with different epistemological views freedom all came from the Black community. It is and always will be a tension in my work, but BOTH/AND ways of thinking in woke whiteness work help me to navigate these tensions.

I really hope that Hendrickson lets me do book clubs at JDC for my dissertation. I don’t want to step on her toes or take over anything from her.

Yes, I did actually want to just extend her work into my own realm, but I could sense that she was holding tight onto her work, and I was holding tight onto the power structures of whiteness. I remember how Dr. Hendrickson was so excited in class about how groundbreaking her idea of book clubs at a juvenile prison was and how it had never been done before. She told us this repeatedly that semester, as well as in the years that followed. I could sense her feeling of ownership over the work, that she did not want me
to steal it from her. I knew what it was like to have my work stolen from me, used without
my permission by Helene at work all the time. I felt like honesty, openness, and
transparency prevented people from feeling used, and I understood how no idea was ever
and original one. Indeed, she told us to find a gap in the literature, and I had! But the
gap extended her work, and I could tell she did not like that. The power structures of
whiteness lead us, as scholars and researchers, to believe that any research can be solely
ours or that there is any “original” idea.

I want it to be my own thing, but she was the one who came up with the idea for
book clubs in general at JDC and that is her partnership that I have just had the privilege
of working under in the MT program and now. She’s always been really supportive of my
work, but I don’t want to make it seem like I am trying to overshadow her work. I
reaaaaalllllyyyyyyy wish that she would let me analyze this data from my own lens
though, outside of Lindsay and Jessica, using CRT and following our original research
questions that we came up with rather than the ones on positioning and power and third
space theory and “social justice” (whatever that means to the rest of them). I know I
would have to include Lindsay and now Jessica because she came on afterwards but also,
I feel like I have just been fronting the whole entire CRT stuff! Like this isn’t their work
at all. I’ve been the one doing all of it. Except for Lindsay has really done A LOT on
analyzing the data and I feel like she’s super strong at that… but sometimes, like I said
before, it feels like we are looking at different data!

I really missed at the beginning of the book club when Lindsay said that I could
do all the “doing” part of the book club and she would do a lot of the field notes and all
the qual type stuff and observe everything and how we could complement one another
with it. But she got more comfortable with the students and in the book club as the time passed along and then I just could never say anything to her about it—especially not in front of the students (like when she said colored people!) because we have to be a united front and it’s never okay to undermine someone in front of others.

This inability to address Lindsay’s comments made me complicit in upholding white supremacy in order to protect Lindsay rather than the students. It was a learned white behavior, a performance of whiteness, to be polite rather than engage in confrontation. And especially do not engage in confrontation in front of anyone else.

I just feel like there is so much more that we could be doing! She probably thinks I don’t get it. So I just don’t even say anything anymore. Maybe I don’t get it. Maybe I’m missing something from not having done all of my qual classes yet. I’m still new at this. Sometimes you have to humble yourself, Jennifer, and know when you just do not know things to sit down, shut up, and listen.

I can tell that when I talk about race and racism and such and wanted to make it a central discussion topic in the book club (as it was also a central discussion topic in our book we read and the kids were the ones wanting to talk about untold history and such anyways), I could just sense that Lindsay got real uncomfortable with it and let me take the lead. But her being so uncomfortable in front of the students made me feel really uncomfortable in front of the students. I could sense Jessica felt a little uncomfortable too. And now it’s like three white women in this group setting with four black students all sitting around in a group and suddenly the power dynamics change in a very different way than if it was just me talking to the students with Lindsay taking notes (like in the beginning) and now we have this other blonde-haired white lady in there…and it almost
becomes an “us v. them” dynamic and I’m always an “us” with Lindsay and Jessica. The whole thing just makes me feel so uncomfortable because I do not feel like an “us” with Lindsay and Jessica because I do this work all the time with my high schoolers! But in my high school classroom, no one else is there watching. It’s just me and my kids. And we are free.

I feel so limited at JDC with my research partners. But I have to stop being such a brat. It’s not all mine. We are a team. I am also another white lady in here in this space. And we have to talk about that. I have to problematize that. WE have to problematize that. But they aren’t the ones doing this work! Plus all the work I’ve done outside of book clubs in my CRT class—the whole literature review and annotated bibliography and the school-to-prison pipeline stuff that I haven’t even brought up with them. Ugh. How do I go about this when I talk to them? The limitations in this study are insane. I feel like we just did not have the time to make the personal connections truly needed to build trust and understanding within the group with the students this semester. This limitation on time makes me feel so uncomfortable talking about issues of race and racism with my students at JDC because I am painfully aware that I am an outsider, a stranger, and a white woman. I don’t want to present myself as expert on race because I’m not. I am learning about it, I know about it, but I am not an expert on it. I haven’t lived it. But I do want to teach tenets of CRT. I have been struggling teaching about the concepts of CRT to my JDC students without presenting myself as an expert. And then when I get confused or overwhelmed or cannot find the words or the ways to go about this in the right way, I feel like I am just dead silent. And that silence is privilege.
Also, how do you go about telling your favorite professor—the one who made you into the English teacher you are today—that you think she is dead wrong on something! I feel like she told us that we had agency over our book club experience but now that we are approaching the final book club tomorrow, she’s taken it back. Like a false sense of power here like one of the students in the book club said about his teacher. She encouraged us to craft the book clubs how we saw fit in accordance with the literature. And I did.

I did so much research in crafting our book clubs so specifically in a way to promote racial justice and tied it into her goals of critical literacy and “social justice” (my definition, not hers). She wanted us to play with it. And I did. I was deliberate. But this freedom actually hasn’t been freedom AT ALL. It was lies the whole time! Because as soon as we are towards the end, now we have to analyze the data how she wants us to analyze the data. Never mind that we’ve already analyzed the data how we planned to do so in the beginning with our CRT lens (or at least I did). And now we are being forced to ask all of these interview questions tomorrow across all of the book clubs and every book club is SO DIFFERENT from ours and we have way more important things to talk about tomorrow…it almost feels like our work is now becoming her work. Like my blood, sweat, tears aren’t in this! Like I haven’t sacrificed sleep, food, relationships, and sanity over this. Which I would do any day for my kids.

No one else is out here promoting social justice and definitely not promoting racial justice?!!? And really Hendrickson isn’t doing any of this work! Not the critical stuff. The rest of it, yes. Lindsay too. She’s put in SO MUCH WORK. But it’s not critical. Not critical in the way that I mean critical. Not critical race critical. So how is
someone going to tell me that I can’t do anything with all of MY work?!? This is literally the hardest I’ve ever worked in my life. On top of everything else I have going on. And you mean to tell me that I can’t do anything with it?!? With MY work?!? This just cannot be fair. It feels so very unfair. I think I’m gonna try to talk to her about it or maybe email her. I don’t want to burn any bridges though. Navigate. Who knew it would be this stormy?!?

**Reflections on Isaac ~ March 2018**

Our last book club meeting, the day after the above reflection, March 18, we began with an entrance slip on how the students could work towards racial justice outside of the book clubs. This was supposed to be their exit slip from the previous book club, but we had not finished our discussion nor our Likert Scale activity with the students. Although we had the exit interview questions to get to, the majority of the book club discussion surrounded the novel that evening. The students opened up to all of us about the effects of racism in their lives as connections in relation to the book and in response to their Likert Scale prompts. Then, we rushed through a few of the answers to the exit interviews at the end before we ran out of time. We inevitably ran out of time though.

After our book club meeting, we (as the university) threw the students a book club party. The students made us hand-painted quotes of the Dr. Seuss quote about reading: “The more than? read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you’ll go.” The JDC students were able to pick a USC student to give their painting to. Our one student, Isaac, who was talking about untold history, questioning racism in curricula, and doing his best to speak truth to power during every book club meeting, gave me his painting.
Isaac and I sat in the library and talked about books alongside Lindsay, sharing the different books we had read, eating cupcakes, and pizza, and drinking juice. I gave him suggestions of books I had read that had sparked my interest about untold history and helped me understand the ways in which power worked: namely, *A People’s History of the United States* by Howard Zinn (1980) and *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (1995/2007), and *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander (2010). These were the books that I used in my classroom as an English teacher to understand the multiple viewpoints of history, connect past history to our present history, and to interrupt the majoritarian narratives (Solórzano and Yosso, 2000) told throughout school. I talked about Robert Greene’s books, *48 Laws of Power* (1998) and *The 50th Law* written by 50 Cent and Robert Greene (2009). I had learned about these books of power from Solomon and used them to understand power structures.

In exchange, Isaac told me about *Behold, A Pale White Horse*, by Milton William Cooper (1991), as well as the author K’wan, and American author of urban fiction texts. I had never read any of his books, so Isaac told me about his favorite ones. We had a discussion about different young adult (YA) novels written by authors of Color that my students loved to read—*Tyrell* by Coe Booth, *The Playground* by 50 Cent, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, and the *Forged by Fire* series by Sharon Draper. Isaac had read all of these books already.

During the course of the thirty minutes of the book club party, we had fleeting conversations about books and the types of knowledge that could be counted in schools, and how to understand power structures; and we offered book suggestions back and forth to one another. However, while we were eating and sharing, both the JDC director, John,
and Dr. Hendrickson were talking a lot, so we had to whisper almost between the “presentations” that were going on at the front of the room while we ate. I don’t really remember what they were talking about, but they were talking a lot about everything they learned and everything the students had learned, yet never giving us nor the students a chance to speak and engage with one another. They did a lot of talking at us; yet again running out of time and limiting meaningful, shared dialogue. While Lindsay did not actively participate in the conversation by suggesting books, she was actively engaged in the conversation as well, intently listening to Isaac as he told us about his book suggestions. We both wrote down his suggestions.

At the end of the meeting when the students had to go, Isaac slipped me a tiny piece of paper with his name and address on it, telling me to write him “as friends, of course lol”. It hurt my heart then, and hurts my heart even more now, that he never knew I was not allowed to contact him. As part of a humanizing research process, they should have been transparent about this and told all of the participants the guidelines to no contact, instead of only telling us as university students. This was white power over white information, controlling all forms of communication routes. All of this weighs heavy on my heart, all of the ways in which I knew I could do so much better next time if granted permission and access. I left class that evening and wrote Dr. Hendrickson an email.

From: Jennifer

Subject: Dissertation, Book Club, Letters, & Thanks

Date: Tue, Mar 18, 2014 at 9:57 PM

To: Dr. Hendrickson
Do you think it would be possible to do my dissertation on book clubs at JDC? I want to do everything I wanted to do with CRT & critical race pedagogy in book clubs this time around that I didn’t really get to do in this setting. I am willing to start whenever & will draft something formal up if this is possible. I already have the beginnings of a literature review for this & a write up of how I want to craft it in a way that promotes racial justice. I would want the study to be significantly longer, but also with a group of volunteer students in the afternoons/evenings like we did this time. It would be more of a CRT curriculum, directly teaching tenets of CRT & bringing in books (based on student choices) that support CRT. I’ve spent hours and days and sleepless nights researching the topic. There’s hardly any information out there on CRT & adolescent literacy and definitely no information (from what I’ve found) on CRT, book clubs, adolescent literacy, and incarcerated youth. Do you think this would be possible?

Furthermore, would it be possible to follow my own research questions that I developed for LRA [Literary Research Association] in my own separate write-up of CRT & book clubs this time around? I am assuming I would have to include Lindsay & Jessica in it because they were part of the process, but they also shared that they have not done any research on CRT, so I’ve been fronting that entire end of it & would only use my own data/coding/student artifacts in relation to CRT and critical race methodology.

Also, on a different note…would I be able to draft a letter to my one student who wanted me to write to him and gave me his address tonight? Perhaps I can email it or mail it to a teacher at JDC so he doesn’t have my address or any personal information about me? I don’t want him to think I forgot about him because I won’t be able to write him. I think that could be disappointing. However, I also don’t want to cross any
boundaries. I just don’t want him to think I don’t care enough to write him. That would break my heart more than having to leave them tonight did!

On an even more different note, I don’t think any of this information should all go in the same email, but I won teacher of the year last week for NHS! Like I’ve told you previously, I am the teacher I am today because of you. Therefore, this honor really goes to you! Thank you for inspiring me to be the teacher I am today!

Best,

Jen

No Response, March 2018

Dr. Hendrickson never responded to my email. She was better at playing power games than I was. I didn’t fully realize at the time that I was even playing power games with her, but I can see that I said too much. Always say less than necessary. Also, I can see now that I did not conceal my intentions with her at all. I was open and honest with her about my intentions to continue book club work. I was genuinely interested in continuing my work and it hurt my heart to leave Isaac hanging like that, never knowing why I could not reply back to him. I genuinely wanted her advice about how to proceed with book clubs, since she had done so much work with book clubs and had been engaged in work at the prison for years.

At the same time, I was making power moves with her, trying to appeal to her self-interest and ego. I wanted her want to mentor me and give me advice. This was usually my white go-to power move—to ask someone for their advice about something just to make it seem like they had influence and input in the matter, engage in a dialogue about it, and compliment them. However, I genuinely was trying to be transparent, not
hiding my desired outcome. Because I did not want to manipulate her in a way that disrespected her, I just wanted to manipulate her in a way that I could get what I wanted. It was manipulation nonetheless.

Indeed, my mother taught me this about “playing the game” and it worked very well for me with my grandmother. I watched my mom do it with my grandparents for years. We both, however, always made the fatal mistake of revealing too much of ourselves and failing to conceal our aim, mostly, I think, because we are too trusting and are able to see the best in everyone, so while we manipulate people, the end goal is usually not one of selfishness. I can see now that Dr. Hendrickson was way better at playing the game of whiteness than me. She was keeping me in suspense, not getting back to me, and therefore, able to keep me dependent on her with the book club data, and with possible future access. I could sense this at the time, but I was unable to name it. When I met with her recently for lunch, she told me that she “never meant to wield any power” over me, but that’s the thing about whiteness—you’re always full of shit even when you think you are not, because you’re always hiding something. I was trying to seductively deploy my white power moves, and she was maintaining her white power through the absence of recognition and response. Both of us were unable to name our deployment of white power.

This is the same problem I encountered many, many times throughout the course of my interactions with Dr. Hendrickson over the past four years since book clubs—I was trying to genuinely and actively work against whiteness, fighting the hegemonic structures of whiteness, while at the same time, unable to escape my own whiteness—entirely unable to step outside myself and see that I was playing white power games with
her as she was playing them with me. She was just better at the games than I was. As Lorde (1984) keeps reminding me, we will never dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools. I needed my racial justice toolkit and my woke whiteness work to interrupt this mindset, so I could stop playing her games, white games. I was trying—but I was unable to name the powers of whiteness and see all of the ways in which I was playing into the games as well.

**Final Month of Class: April 2014**

During our final month of class following the conclusion of book clubs, we were told to present our findings and discussion to the class and then look across all of the book clubs’ findings for similarities. This is where I felt as though I had lost complete agency over our book club entirely. Dr. Hendrickson never did get back to me about doing my dissertation at JDC, aside from to tell me in class the following week that she got my email and that she wanted us to get through the rest of the semester and then we could talk. I was discouraged and felt as though she did not want me to do work at JDC if it was not going to be through her. The thought “never outshine the master” kept running through my mind during that month. She was the whole reason I even had this idea and this opportunity in the first place. She was the whole reason I ever became an English teacher in the first place. Who was I, a lowly first-year doctoral student, to extend her work? She had been doing this for years. What did I know?

*It is important here, as part of woke whiteness work, to understand that I am giving her a significant amount of ownership over the lives and thoughts of the students by calling it her work. Indeed, it was not her work. No research is truly ours because we do not own the research we engage in. Our participants share things with us, and we, as*
researchers, should treat this as offerings rather than our ownership over their thoughts and lives.

Moreover, as part of woke whiteness work, it’s important to note the ways in which Dr. Hendrickson held a lot of power over me in this work, concerning access to JDC. I felt betrayed, defeated, yet still wanting to impress her and still determined to do the work at JDC. Again, as part of woke whiteness work, we have to always look at the world in terms of “both/and” instead of “either/or”. She did hold a lot of power over me AND I felt betrayed by her AND I still had a deep respect AND gratitude for her. All at the same time. I felt controlled by her betrayal, existing as a lowly first-year doctoral student in this hierarchy of higher education in the academy. We were both complicit as white folks playing into the power of whiteness. We were following a very distinct set of rules. The tension continued to build, however, as I was unable to step outside myself (and am still unable to step outside of myself in whiteness) to understand all of the ways in which I, too, was complicit. I thought I was not going to play her power games in order to do the work I wanted to do for my dissertation, but I was already wrapped up in them as a white person, always complicit in playing into the power of whiteness. Unable to escape it, I had to own it in order to maneuver around it.

My frustrations and tensions (my selfish white feelings) continued to arise in the course when listening to the other book clubs present their work. One lady in the class even cried as she told us how her student (they only had one book club member by the end of it) said the book club felt like freedom to him. It was like we had this room full of white tears and pats on the back and “feel good” white folks who really thought we were in here changing lives and saving these poor little criminal black kids locked away.
through our book club. *This was a group of well-meaning white teachers with good intentions who were actually, in fact, doing harm by allowing our well-intentioned whiteness to get in the way of the true pursuit of racial justice.*

I would just look around the room at them and glare at them and their white tears with all their white feelings as if I was outside of them, as if I was somehow better than them for having done the reflective work necessary to know that we were not, in fact, doing white savior work. I felt like an outsider, like I had more commitments to this racial justice work than they did with my commitments to friends, community, students, Solomon, and his family. It enraged me to see them in their white tears of pity, as if this work was all about them.

*I was still wrapped up in my whiteness as well, forever bound to it, always selfishly thinking about myself as if I was somehow better than them. I was not. I was complicit in perpetuating the system as well.*

That there was a fine line between ally work and savior work—and there was no place in the world for white saviors and no place for us as white saviors at JDC.

*I was acting as a white savior too, though.*

That’s not what our kids needed from us. Our students of Color at JDC didn’t need us to save them. We couldn’t give them a voice. They could save themselves. They already had a voice. But surrounded by nine other white women who just didn’t get it and who suffocated the room with their feelings each Tuesday night in class, I fell silent. My silence perpetuated racial injustice rather than racial justice.

*It was not until our final day of class that I met with another white woman in class, Kayla, that I realized that we both were noticing the things that were going on and*
just looking around the room in complete and utter shock and appall. My selfish white feelings of anger and frustration made it impossible for me to see that there was indeed another critical white person in the course. But both of our experiences as first-year doctorate students who existed within the confines of the hierarchy that is higher education, both advisees of Dr. Hendrickson, (her for the first time ever, not knowing what I knew about how Dr. Hendrickson wielding power). We both were following Dr. Hendrickson’s lead, trying to play the game of whiteness, unable to stop playing the game of whiteness as white women, looking around the room at all these crazy white women with their white tears and their selfish white feelings.

They all spoke so loud. And I wanted to scream. But I was silent because I knew Dr. Hendrickson well enough to know that it was whatever she said goes. I knew what she wanted from us. I knew how she worked. And while the other folks in the room maybe didn’t know, I knew how to play her game of school.

*Power game of whiteness.*

I knew how she operated. So, I sat back and did what I was told.

*Actively a part of her white racial army (Leonardo & Boas, 2013) through my passive actions.*

Silently struggling to fight the urge to karate-chop the next white lady who forced her pitiful tears and feelings on our class like this was the most heroic thing she had ever done in her entire life.

*But what about the kids?*

I wanted to keep asking them.
We are over here talking about the kids and talking for the kids as if they never even existed as people.

I felt defeated. I tried to ask them that. I kept looking around the room for someone to meet my eyes and give me the knowing glance of RIGHT! “I can’t believe she just said that dumb shit!” Like Lamar and I used to do back in the MT program. Saying things without even saying them.

But no one ever met my eyes.

I was too blinded by my selfish white feelings at the time to try to lock eyes with Kayla.

Their eyes were all fixed on what “good work” we were doing.

I grouped all of the white teachers together, assuming that I somehow was better than them just because I could see how the power structures worked, but I was unable to step outside myself and my white logic either.

I knew we weren’t doing all this good work.

Yet, I said nothing. That is not woke whiteness work.

I knew our individual book club did some pretty damn good work—or at least we tried—but even then, I was most embarrassed by our work because I had tried to promote racial justice and felt like I failed. And here I was again, feeling like I was failing the kids. Trying to speak up for them as an advocate in a room they didn’t even know they existed in, tucked away late into Tuesday nights in the Education Museum within the College of Ed. But by the time I strategically and deliberately spoke out, I was outspoken by the strength of nine other voices who just did not get it. They couldn’t see what I could see. And I couldn’t make them see it. No matter how much I explained it. No
matter how much I wanted to scream. It didn’t matter. They couldn’t see what I could see. And who was I to do this anyways as a white lady? I was no better than these women in this room.

I was one of them, even though I wished so badly that I was not. I wanted so badly to not be grouped together with all these white women. But I was a part of them. I knew I was playing a role in all of this too.

*This is always the tension in whiteness, an inability to ever escape your whiteness, your white complicity in perpetuating the system even when you do not want to, your thoughts always controlled by white logic and “either/or” thought processes. This work is an everyday tension. The only way to do woke whiteness work is constantly disrupt your thoughts, write against yourself (Noblit, 1999), because you will always have white logic thoughts as a white person. In order to do that, though, you have to first own your complicity.*

I was defeated. I had poured my heart and my soul into our book club, only to at first have it dominated by two other white women, then have it co-opted again by the remaining six white women in the class and our all-powerful white woman professor.

*This was the power of whiteness and niceness in whiteness. It was manipulation through niceness and silences and redirections in white institutionalized power and constantly keeping others in suspense.*

Dr. Hendrickson was having us re-analyze the data according to the new research questions, and our book club could answer those research questions, but no one else could talk about social justice. They didn’t get it. Social justice was about action. I think maybe she thought we were doing social justice work just by having the book club there
in the first place, but who really promoted social justice? Our book club was the only group that even tried, and I could not even definitively say that we accomplished that task in a way that I was proud of. But it was a part of me now. I was in it. I was in deep. And I wasn’t about to give up without a fight. I had to be strategic about my fight though. I needed advice from Dr. Anders. She would know what to do.

From: Jennifer

Subject: Unrelated (not really) to CRT

Date: Tue, April 15, 2014 at 3:10 PM

To: Allison Anders

Hi Allison,

I have to fill out a course evaluation for my other professor. I want to comment with the following statement. However, I have a few concerns about doing that & I wasn’t sure who to ask about them. I am hoping that if you have time, you could help me with this.

What I want to say in my course evaluation for my other class…

“I would have liked to have had the opportunity to write about the research from a different theoretical standpoint rather than how she wanted us to do it. Some of the group research is from a deficit viewpoint of studying the students at JDC rather than learning from them. There is a significant difference, especially in terminology and language. We are ‘othering’ these students with this research and merely promoting the status quo rather than social justice.”

Chances are she would know it’s me, right? There are only 9 of us in the class & I’m pretty sure I would be the only one who made a statement like this. I’m not trying to
make enemies before my grade is turned in. Plus, I’m not trying to burn any bridges that may need to be crossed in the future…

I guess what I’m really asking is… is honesty really the best policy here, in this particular situation?

I think it is because if I don’t say anything, the talented, intelligent, young men who happen to be incarcerated will continue to be “othered” by her in the future. On the other hand, I enjoy my good standing I have with this particular professor and the privileges that come with that good standing. I know how important relationships with the right people can be… thoughts?

Also, so you can see where I am coming from, these are the research questions we are forced to pursue for the collaborative article(s) we are writing:

--How do incarcerated youth position themselves within book clubs?

--What are issues of power evident during book club discussions with incarcerated youth?

--How do book clubs with incarcerated youth respond to issues of social justice?

--How do book clubs with incarcerated youth facilitate the construction of third space?

In addition, this is the email she recently sent out to the entire class when I asked her personally in an email if I could pursue my own research questions from a CRT lens using only the data I personally collected during this process:

“This study was approved by JDC within a certain context and under certain conditions, primarily that I would oversee all research processes, procedures, and products. None of you have received permission from JDC to use this data collected in any way other than that approved within the context of my guidance or for the purposes
of this course. In other words, you don’t have permission to use any data collected
beyond my supervision or outside the context of this course.”

I have not taken qual yet, so I don’t know how this works…and like I said, I don’t
want to burn any bridges. However, I did mention this to a colleague (Lamar) who told
me that as long as I use pseudonyms and describe the setting as “a local juvenile justice
center in a large city in the Southeastern US” that I would be fine…In other words, I’m
not sure what I am allowed to do with all of my work this semester if she won’t let me do
anything with it. It feels like a waste of my time and effort. Ideally, I want to write my
own data up because I did pursue this book club from a CRT lens, using critical race
methodology and critical race pedagogy. However, if I can’t write up my own data the
way I want to write it up, I want to at least write a counter-article to the one we will be
producing…would that part at least be possible?

Sorry this is so wordy! Let me know if you can help shed some light on this.

Appreciatively,

Jen

From: Allison Anders

Subject: Re: Unrelated (not really) to CRT

Date: Tue, April 15, 2014 at 3:39 PM

To: Jennifer

Hi Jen,

First, you’re asking great questions…

1) Professors do not see any evals until after final grades are submitted. In fact it
takes usually a month to get the evals/comments.
2) Even with 9 folks, she may or may not know it’s you. As an instructor I have to say sometimes I am so surprised by which student actually loved a class and which didn’t. I think if you offer this critique, that a) I would be specific. Use an example or two about where you see deficit rhetoric being used, deficit perspectives employed in the research. And if you want, you could even suggest other perspectives/readings (they don’t have to be CRT readings. They can be more general on Critical Pedagogy, perhaps Henry Giroux or Jean Anyon.) I always love new suggestions from students! It’s one of the reasons I like doing the Student Seminars in CRT. You all always find the best readings out there! One thing I noticed in the research questions is that she keeps naming them “Incarcerated Youth”. From the 9 years I spent interviewing folks in prison, no one liked being called “incarcerated”…And 94% of all folks incarcerated are released. They are our neighbors, our friends, our military service people, our community members. Just simple changes like that could help. Lastly, as an instructor I prefer to hear specific critiques instead of broad ones. I can’t change or improve if I don’t know specifics.

3) The question about whether or not you write about this as “your data” is trickier. We can talk about this after TH night if you like. If your prof is what is called the Principal Investigator on the project and she has not listed class members on her IRB, then you might not be able to write it in an historic format. But we can figure out another way. A Critical Race Autoethnography may be one way to go…but let’s chat.
I hope this is helpful. It’s tough to know based on just what’s in the email. I’m not sure how “social justice” was even defined in your course…

Very best,

Allison

EDFN 845: Critical Race Theory ~ April 17, 2014

After class that evening, Allison and I chatted about my opportunities to write up my data as an autoethnography, which I had never heard of before but which excited me as I considered all of my own personal data I had collected in my researcher journal that semester, along with all of my racial justice project reflections, course reflections, literature review, and annotated bibliography. I felt like it was the prime opportunity to tell my story and talk about my research the way I wanted to talk about it—without it being co-opted by other folks who just didn’t seem to understand where I was coming from!

*It was a way to play into the power structures of whiteness by also work around them.*

I sat in class, it was like they had these racial blinders on and there was nothing I could do to open their eyes to the realities of the potential harmful practices we had committed during our research; for example, when I had tried to speak out in class during our final class meeting, sharing that we, in fact, were not doing social justice and could not claim social justice work because our students were not engaged in any action.

It was obvious that all of the other book clubs were not engaged in social justice work, nor even critical work, because there was no action in their book clubs and there
was no questioning of power structures. I did not know exactly how to articulate this at the time, however.

My racial justice toolkit was not yet formed.

There was no deliberate interruption of systems of power, no fighting back against the status quo. Rather, we were looking at the way in which the students positioned themselves and used power in reading. But we never asked the students how they positioned themselves.

Helene’s group spoke about how they were interpreting one student’s constant use of the word “I don’t know,” but they never worked with the student through the research to ask him what he actually meant by that. Indeed, Helene noticed that I, too, often used the phrase “I don’t know” at work in Nottoway during our planning sessions. She pushed her interpretation on me, saying that she thought I was saying it because I was unsure of myself. I remember feeling incredibly awkward, vulnerable, and abused by her deficit analysis of me and instead fell silent when she mentioned it. She had completely misinterpreted me, and it made me feel naked and exposed, yet misunderstood. After giving it some thought, I realized I said this as a way to seem humble, so as not to come off as too cocky in my relaying of information. I also remember distinctly interrupting my use of the phrase, because I did, in fact, know quite a lot of things. This was not humanizing research. This was how we othered the participants, by not having them actively engaged in the research process. This was how we silenced our students, not even allowing them the opportunity to speak for themselves as we interpreted their words freely from outside the fence.
This analysis of another book club is not to excuse away our own individual book club. We likewise did not work with the students on our analysis and interpretations of them. We did not have time and we were not allowed to go back to interview students and conduct follow-up meetings. There was no member checking (Glesne, 2011) aside from the first transcript. It seemed that we were all too focused on how great of work we were doing with our white-savior-selves—myself included—feeling like we had done something remarkable with our CRT book club when really, we had not. We were no better than any of the other white people in the class. At the same time, I was struggling not to be an authoritative antiracist (Thompson, 2003), while also trying to find my voice as a first-year doctoral student.

*I did not realize at the time that in all-white spaces, woke whiteness work requires you to sometimes be authoritatively antiracist with other white people, or at least constantly work to disrupt whiteness, white thinking, and white logic with other white folks.*

I took Dr. Anders’s advice home with me that evening and crafted the following critique for the course evaluation, careful to save it as a separate word file just in case I got brave enough to actually share it with Dr. Hendrickson. It felt like the cowards way out, but if I wasn’t going to be brave enough to tell her to her face, I needed to at least tell her for the sake of my babies and our kids everywhere. For our final reflection of the course, we were required to post it on BlackBoard where everyone else could see it as well. Instead, I attached it to an email with my reflection.

*I was still playing into the roles of whiteness here, trying to protect my future access to JDC work, and I can see now all of the ways in which Dr. Hendrickson was*
also trying to protect her access to JDC work. But what we constantly have to ask
ourselves in woke whiteness work, what are the consequences of our actions? What are
the dangers of playing into whiteness in these very powerful ways? There are very real
dangers of whiteness, indeed. As Johnson and Bryan (2016) point out—the spiritual,
metaphorical, and physical murders of people of Color, of students of Color, of scholars
of Color. So as white people, always complicit in racism, we have to own our roles and
our actions and non-actions.

**On Being Courageous Without Being Suicidal**

_In summer 2014, while taking the course, Educating African American Students, with Dr.
Gloria Boutte, she told our class that we have to learn how to be “courageous without
being suicidal” (G. Boutte, personal communication, June 2014). This was my attempt at
being courageous without being suicidal at the end of the spring 2014 semester._

**From: Jennifer**

**Subject: Reflection**

**Date: Tue, May 6, 2014 at 11:12 PM**

**To: Dr. Hendrickson**

I attached it because it’s personal.

Also, I included what I wrote in my course eval at the end of the reflection. I
debated doing this for quite some time, but I have issues with saying something in a
course eval that I wouldn’t say to you personally because I have a deep respect for you. I
hope my writing comes across as pure and as good-natured as my intentions.

Best,

Jen
This is yet another way that well-meaning white people perpetuate racism and are always complicit in racism, despite our good intentions! The notions of goodness are completely messed up in whiteness!

During this course, I can tell I have grown not only as a researcher, but also as a person. I have reaffirmed my understandings of what it means to truly promote social justice in a place where social injustice and inequity are the norm (prison).

Throughout this semester, I have taken the lead on the curriculum presented in the book clubs, as well as the facilitator role within the book clubs. I started the semester with an idea of what I wanted our book club to be. Lindsay let me take the lead on this because her experience was in working with elementary students. I wanted these book clubs to be a place that promoted social justice and challenged the status quo. As Thein, Guise, & Sloan (2011) articulated, book clubs can fall short when attempting to engage students in critical analysis of texts and can perpetuate stereotypes and the status quo during student discussions without teacher guidance. I wanted to work with my students at JDC to help them develop ways in which they could promote racial justice within the confines of JDC, as well as back in their own communities as a way to reduce recidivism rates and decrease the rates that their peers are also being criminalized.

However, due to the many limitations of these book clubs (time), as well as my white complicity in racism, I think (know) I fell short in promoting racial and social justice in a way that I am truly proud of. Or at all. I did not have enough time to develop the critical personal connections needed with the students and with my research partner to
talk about race and racism within the book clubs—especially as a white woman. When analyzing my transcripts, I think I ended up centering my whiteness and therefore promoting racial inequalities rather than racial justice. Thompson (2003) argues “to pursue social justice, we have to decenter whiteness from programs of social change” (p. 16). Our book clubs are programs of social change. They absolutely were not, but that was a well-meaning, good-intentioned white perspective on the matter.

I knew I had to be constantly aware and overly cautious about playing the role of the “good white” or the “white savior” when confronting race as a white woman to a group of four African-American male students. However, I do not think I did a good enough job of doing this through my research and my time at JDC. For this, I can only live and learn. The excuse, “it is what it is” is not taking responsibility and ownership over my actions. This is just my white logic explaining everything away here as a way to deflect blame away from myself. However, the explanation, “live and learn” is an ownership of faults, of constantly trying to do better by learning from past mistakes and deliberately attempting to not make the same mistakes again.

I have used my research from these book clubs to apply my newfound reflections and knowledge in my own classroom. For this opportunity to learn from my mistakes, I am forever grateful. That is a privilege of my whiteness, too—I was able to walk away from these book clubs, learn how to do better next time—but what about the students at JDC?!? What of them???

In addition to taking the lead role in crafting our book club to promote social justice, I also took the lead role in drafting the social justice aspect of our article. Social justice is something I am passionate about. It was why I became a teacher: to promote
social justice in my classroom. It was why I also came back to school: to continue
learning about the different ways I can promote social justice in my classroom, in my
research, and in my classroom. I recently felt frustrated when drafting our social justice
piece for the findings. I am thankful that we had the chance to revisit this piece of the
article during our class this evening. I now feel proud about how we are writing up our
social justice findings, whereas before I just felt confused and concerned about whether
or not we were actually promoting true social justice in our book clubs. I am now excited
to continue drafting the social justice findings in our article—thank you for that!!! 😊

*I thought after my comments in class that evening that Dr. Hendrickson did, in
fact, understand what I meant when I was talking about social justice and racial justice
being about action. She was so very excited in class when I mentioned it and spoke back
to the class about it and seemed supportive of the idea, but I was betrayed again over the
next four years in exchange after exchange by just how much she simply did not
understand at all.*

As far as my other duties, I created and managed our researcher’s Wiki [the
website we posted all of our research to] throughout the process. I transcribed the first
interview and the third book club meeting. I also analyzed, coded, and cooked all of the
data twice. However, I only uploaded the second set of data analysis because I did not
want to take too much of a lead with the book clubs. I wanted to give Lindsay a chance to
play with the data as well. I did not want these book clubs to be mine. Okay, I lie. I did
want these book clubs to be mine. However, I understood and still understand that this
research project is not mine alone. It is a collective project. Therefore, I tried to be
mindful not to promote my own views over those of my peers.
There is a delicate balance and navigating of tensions here, too, when engaging in woke whiteness work. Sometimes you cannot just sit back and watch things unfold when you are actively working to challenge and disrupt the status quo.

Playing with the data, writing up the data, and engaging in the entire research process was fun to me. I don’t know what that says about my definition of fun, but I do know that I am in the right place. I worked harder during these last few months that I think I ever have in my entire life. And I’m not even mad about it! I’m proud! 😊

I felt righteous in my anger that semester. I felt superior that I knew more than the other white women in the room. Indeed, I did know more than some of them, but it was coming from a self-righteous place. However, Because it was coming from a self-righteous place, that meant it was me and my own white logic and my own selfish white feelings getting in the way of true racial justice work.

This class, especially when taken alongside my CRT class this semester, changed my entire life. I never thought I wanted to go into higher education because I like being on the front lines, deep in the battlefields of the classroom. But, I think I have something to offer in this area as well. I now have a deep understanding of the world, of education (especially higher education), and of myself. This semester has transformed me into the person I am today and the person I will continue to grow and develop into. Thank you for the opportunity!

Dr. Hendrickson told us that part of her “hidden curriculum” of the course was to learn what life in the academy was like that semester. How to conduct research, how to draft proposals, and how to write up research. I was learning through what she cited as her “hidden curriculum” and which I will cite as “apprenticeship of observation”
(Lortie, 1975/2002) how to navigate the spaces of higher education. I was feeling extremely held back, restricted, and powerless within these confines, however. And this has been a tension for me in the last four years of my doctoral program as well. It is only through attempting to step outside the confines of “either/or” binary thought processes that I/we can hope to dismantle whiteness in the academy. However, as white people, we can never step outside these confines either because we are always complicit in racism. But we can, as white people, work every single day to disrupt it. Indeed, that is woke whiteness work.

Also, because I have issues with writing comments on an end-of-course evaluation that I would not be willing to tell you myself, here is what I wrote (in hopes that honesty is truly the best policy and that it will not affect my grade). Please keep in mind that I wrote this prior to our class meeting today:

Some of the group research seems to be from a deficit viewpoint of studying the students at JDC rather than learning from them. There is a significant difference, especially in terminology and language. I am afraid we are "othering" these students with this research and merely promoting the status quo (and perpetuating racist ideology) rather than social justice. For example, referring to the students at JDC as "incarcerated youth" presents them in deficit terminology as if that is their permanent state of being—incarcerated as youth. These students are people, students, young men who also happen to be incarcerated, but they are still human and at indeed often released. We, as white, middle class researchers, need to be cognizant and careful in our language and terminology. (SIDE NOTE—reading the Thompson piece cited in references helped me understand my role as a white woman in anti-racist and social justice work. I also have
several articles I can share about turning the deficit perspective on its head when writing about students of Color.)

I attempted here to open up the conversation, to help her become a woke white woman with me, but it is clear that she was not willing to learn from me. Indeed, I do not think she was willing to learn from me until recently when she read this dissertation. And this is yet another problem of this hierarchy of white patriarchy in the academy! It fails to allow us to exist as human beings who can learn from one another. There is space in mentorship to help grow and teach graduate students without exploiting them.

Furthermore, I think there needs to be significant reflection on what it means for a group of white women to come into the classroom space and lives of the students at JDC. We, as white women, need to seriously reflect on our role in the research, our deficit viewpoints, and our own assumptions about these students. These assumptions are coming out in the research in deficit terminology.

This is our own white logic! Woke whiteness work demands that we constantly critically reflect and disrupt our own white logic!

I think this needs to be an assignment, and I think this needs to be written up along with the research. (SIDE NOTE—I completed this both in this reflection, as well as a reflection for my CRT class this semester. I am happy to forward that along if it needs further explanation—Again, I was reaching out to her, offering her an olive branch to extend my learning to her, to make the educational process reciprocal, but she seemed unable to step outside her selfishness and the white patriarchal hierarchy of the academy to accept learning from a student. This is another danger of whiteness.)
The role of the researcher is never neutral (that's also an ideal promoted by white folks and white ideology)—Western/Eurocentric ideals of everything existing in opposition in an “either/or” context and on a hierarchical scale (Crenshaw, 1988), and it is extremely important to address our own positionality as researchers—especially if the end-goal is to help students at JDC and promote social justice. We can never help these students if we don't know how we are failing them and how to correct our failings/deficit thinking.

All of that being said, I think this class is important. I learned a great deal throughout the semester, so I don't want it to seem like I hated the class or that it's not valuable. It is. However, I just think we need to be more reflective and careful when navigating spaces such as JDC--especially as white women. (SIDE NOTE—I am specifically referring to some comments from classmates rather than you and your overall role as professor during this course. As stated, I think you did a fabulous job navigating this space. You can take my comments or leave them with no further opinion from my end. I just have a huge issue with “talking behind your back” in a course evaluation. I hope I am not overstepping my boundaries. Please accept my sincerest apologies if I am. That is not my intention. I realize I am still young, learning, and a student. I trust that you know best from your years of experience in the field. I am just a newcomer.)

I attempted to speak truth to power to her here in this reflection, but I was also still playing power games of whiteness with her, trusting her to guide me and stroking her ego rather than actually, unapologetically, calling her on her whiteness; instead, I deflected blame away from her and placed it on the students. I, too, was playing power games of whiteness with her.
From: Dr. Hendrickson

Subject: Re: Reflection

Date: Wed, May 7, 2014 at 3:51 PM

To: Jennifer

Oh Jenn—

How very brave and honest and reflective and wonderful you are—seriously.

I know it took a lot for you to attach this—

It didn’t have to include your concerns at the end, but you chose to include these.

And because of this, I have the utmost respect for YOU.

I tend to be too obscure as a professor, I think—I am not overt enough with my goals and objectives.

I don’t like to “profess”—

I like to learn by “doing” and let the hidden curriculum in my courses emerge naturally—

I like students to muddle about—to figure things out—to make those important realizations at the end of a semester—

With that in mind, I purposefully designed this study rather loosely—

So that it would indeed lead us to trouble—

We want and need to trouble data and findings—

Thank you so much for gaining voice last night and speaking back to the data and questions—

That was my hidden curricula—

That you would talk about and trouble all that we have experienced—

You were and are very right indeed to question our roles as white women.
Nobody has brought this up yet—I was waiting—and finally you spoke.

This is the beginning of your research journey—it starts with voice and agency.

Let it continue across this summer until we have an article that says what we need it to say.

As well, I knew more than others, you struggled with ownership of this book club—

It is not easy to research and write with others who may not always do or think as you—

But we always grow smarter from other perspectives and ways of being—

But this all said, if you want to write about just your book club experience with your two partners, I am here to support you; I would have to be an author but could be the last one—letting you gals lead and me follow. So that your voices and story of your book club can be told.

_The true “hidden curriculum” that Dr. Hendrickson was trying to promote with us that semester was teaching us how to play the game of whiteness in the academy, while she was also playing the game of whiteness against me as well. I was learning all of the ways in which white folks, and particularly white women (myself included) want you to speak truth to power when it comes to dismantling patriarchy, but found that speaking truth to power was confined to confronting only patriarchy. Where was an interrogation of white supremacy? There was none. If we let our whiteness go unchecked, we are always going to perpetuate it and wield power with it in very real and harmful ways._

_Dr. Hendrickson said she was waiting for someone to bring up our roles as white women, but indeed she was not. What if I had never found my voice and spoke out against her? Indeed, I was only able to do so because I knew her from undergrad and the MT_
program and knew that she did not intend to wield power in the way that she did. But no one else knew that. And her intentions did not matter. And I still wanted access to JDC to complete my dissertation research there. I could not escape my whiteness any more than she could, and we played white power games with one another toward the end of the semester and continued to play white power games with one another across four years as we tried to write up the data (2014-2018).

Her “hidden curriculum” that she wanted to teach us was something in fact even more hidden than she even knew—the hidden curriculum of whiteness and how to play into white power structures in the academy. This is the danger when we as white people do not know how to take responsibility for our actions and the actions of our ancestors and all of the ways we are always complicit and benefiting from whiteness on a daily and consistent basis. We were learning how to play into the white power structures of the academy, learning how to be white women scholars in the academy on the backs of young men of Color who are incarcerated. Further marginalizing them.

Students who are incarcerated do not exist for the purpose of white women to begin to understand and grapple with systemic oppression and racism. They, like all participants of research and all human beings, live full and complicated lives of their own, lives that should not be exploited or used as a learning experience for white women—or anyone in the academy—to figure things out. Indeed, I was guilty of this, too, with my racial justice project, using my research to create a “racial justice toolkit—vocabulary and definitions that allowed for students to talk about and name the difference between racism, prejudice, discrimination, bias, and oppression so as to speak back against racism. This idea was born out of my CRT book club transcripts as I
realized the students were speaking from a shared understanding of what racism was, but
seemed to be struggling to find the words to talk about it. I, too, had found power in
naming that semester through CRT, and I felt like we could have had much more
productive conversations if we all had the same vocabulary. I used my CRT Book Club
knowledge to create this racial justice toolkit for use with my students at Nottoway. that I
then used with my high schoolers. See the power of whiteness here? We can never escape
it.

Yet, woke whiteness work also means being able to practice discernment between
exploitation for self-interest (the class, or my original dissertation idea where I wanted
my own selfish commitments to racial justice) and teaching my high schoolers, my
babies, new language and concepts because doing so might benefit some of them. There
is a difference in self-interest here. My whiteness is not deployed the same in each of
those spaces. Context is always important in woke whiteness work.

Nevertheless, as white folks, we are always wielding powers of whiteness, all the
time! Even as we are actively trying not to—which is why I have had to write against
myself the entire dissertation as woke whiteness work, as a methodology. And I could still
go back twelve more times over, layering again and again all of the ways even my
italicized words from 2018 are perpetuating racism. It does not matter if I want to do this
or not, I am always doing it, all the time, no matter what. I am always complicit as a
white person. And unless we, as white people, learn to own that ugly truth of white
complicity AND own every single piece of ourselves which can include beauty as well
(woke whiteness work), we will FAIL every single time and we will continue to
spiritually-exploit-murder-rape-pillage-colonize-and-destroy people of Color at every
single turn, because that is the power of our whiteness and how it permeates EVERYTHING. Until we learn how to OWN OUR SHIT in whiteness, we are going to keep walking around like our shit does not stink, forcing everyone else to smell it, nose-blind to the damaging and deadly effects of our toxins, our shit! This is our job as white people—to OWN OUR SHIT.

When we do not own our shit and take responsibility of our actions and non-actions, we are never able to move forward towards the goals of unity and collective freedom in the collective struggle for racial justice. It is an impossibility.

This continued layering of complicity in whiteness should not get you lost, down a rabbit hole of no return, however. That is not woke whiteness work. That is us going around and around, paralyzed by constant critique. That is self-serving and does nothing in the fight for racial justice. Woke whiteness work is always critiquing, always acknowledging that there will always need to be constant self-reflection, and always practicing discernment about when we are doing helpful, selfless work in the interest of racial justice or when we are doing harmful, selfish work claiming to do so in the interest of racial justice. Woke whiteness work always begins and ends with ownership over our complicity in perpetuating racism.

In her email, Dr. Hendrickson deflected blame and tried to make herself look good (strategic whiteness power move) by referring to her “hidden curriculum.” Instead of just owning the fact that she completely dropped the ball on doing any sort of actual social justice or racial justice work that semester, Dr. Hendrickson deflected blame and tried to make herself look good (strategic white power move) by referring to her “hidden curriculum.” What if I had not spoken up? What if I had indeed let her silence me? What
if I, even now, didn’t realize what an enormous amount of privilege and power I have as a white woman to even speak back to her in these ways?!? If her goal was for us to uncover this, why not teach us explicitly about systemic issues of inequity? Why not craft questions for us as USC students and as JDC students to answer together, collaboratively, that would allow for us to reveal and examine together the institution of white supremacy? Why not have more readings (or any readings at all) about racial justice? Why not provide us readings about problematizing the role of white women in P-12 spaces and the academy?

She was full of shit here. Reeking of whiteness. And I was, too! We were both complicit in perpetuating all of these same power structures because we both are always, always, always, unable to scrub ourselves clean of our shit of our whiteness! We always try to hide it, deny that it exists—but the fact that we pretend like something does not exist does not mean that it does not exist. Indeed, it is just the opposite! AND we are still always, always, always complicit in perpetuating this white supremacist system even now. Even this racial justice, woke whiteness work with my dissertation is perpetuating the system of whiteness.

We, as white people, always have to own our shit!!!! We have to stop trying to deflect blame elsewhere, and just own up to our shit. Realize that we have become nose-blind. Understand that there is not enough Febreeze in the entire world to cover up our shit. And then own all the parts of our beauty, too—allowing ourselves in our ugliness and our beauty to always exist alongside one another. But we have GOT TO own our shit. It is the only way to stop this cycle from continuing to perpetuate itself. We have to use new tools—racial justice tools formed from the lived experiences of our fellow sailing
sisters and brothers of Color—to dismantle the master’s house. All while at the same time, understanding that we, as white folks, are ALWAYS complicit co-opting the ideas, mindsets, and ways of being from people of Color because our shit will always stink!

Everyone else can smell it on us already. There is no sense is trying to hide it. Let’s own it, accept responsibility, and then transform that into ACTION to disrupt institutionalized white supremacy and the white logic that reproduces white supremacy CONSTANTLY.

Daily. No days off. That is what woke whiteness work is. That is how we become sailors.
CHAPTER 5:

(NEVER) ESCAPING THE BOOK CLUB

This is the research that never ends...yes, it goes on and on, my friends...Jen-ni-fer started doing it, not knowing what it was...and then she kept on doing it forever just because...This is the research that never ends...yes it goes on and on my friends...etc.

(To be read to the tune of the Lamb Chop song...)

As I mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 4, my life was a whirlwind in 2014, my year of firsts without my mother, and the summer semester was no exception. My mother’s birthday is May 3rd, Mother’s Day was May 11th, and the anniversary of her death is June 11th. I had not given myself anytime to process her death, nor grieve at all. Indeed, in the three weeks in May that I had off from my university course work, I wrote to myself that I couldn’t wait to be busy again (J. Doyle, personal journal, 13 May 2014). I was still working full-time at the high school though, so it’s not like I had a ton of free time, but as my life started to slow down in those three weeks, I felt myself growing sadder and sadder. I was able to sit still long enough to feel things, and I did not like the feelings that were coming up.

I was in a perpetual state of anger. I was angry at my mother for dying. I was angry at her for neglecting me to be with her boyfriend, Tom, before she died. I was angry that she left me all alone with no family (I did not realize at the time that I already had family in Nottoway). I was angry at my father for not reaching out to me more and
loving me unconditionally like my mother did. I was angry at Solomon for not knowing how to deal with me in my grief. I was even more angry with him that he did not seem to be supportive of my research or my work at USC. I was angry at all the white teachers in Nottoway for their incredibly racist attitudes. I was angry at myself for how I had failed to do the racial justice work in a way that was productive. I was angry at Dr. Hendrickson for not supporting me like she said she would. I was angry at all of these people who said with their words that they cared about me but said with their actions that they very much did not.

I was selfish with my anger.

At the same time, I tried my best to keep it under wraps. All of this anger was inside me, but I was trying my best not to show it outwardly. I performed and played pretend, perpetually happy all the time—a very intense happy and excited where I threw myself into making sure I was happy all the time, for the sake of my mother, I always used to say. I had rationalized her death in my head like this: she had worked her entire life to make sure I was happy, so it was going to be a slap in the face to her for me to be anything but happy following her death. I don’t know why as white people we are told not to feel or that feelings will make us weak, but this woke whiteness work demands feelings. It demands feelings that are not selfish white feelings that get in the way of racial justice work, though. Which means, as white people, we have to let ourselves feel sometimes—on our own—so we do not let those feelings come out in anger, tears, or any other selfish white feeling that will interfere with this sailing work. This racial justice sailing work, this woke whiteness work, it is too important. Let yourself feel.
A Poetic Response to Anger

In 1981, Audre Lorde publicly responded to racism with anger.

In 1984, she published it.

“The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” she called it.

The first time I read it, in CRT that 2014 spring semester, it stuck to bones.

It stuck to my ribs. It spoke to my heart. It moved me. It changed me.

“Probably one of the most powerful things I have ever read,” I wrote in the margin.

At the time, I was 26. In a perpetual state of anger.

It seemed I had been perpetually angry since birth.

If my mom was alive, I’m sure she would tell me that I was born of angry sex.

No one wants to think about their parents’ sex—eww—but it’s how I was made.

That’s nature. That’s how it works.

(White people, stop being so scared to talk about these things.)

I can just imagine that I was born out of that. I had to be. Anger was in me.

I got my dad’s anger in me. That Doyle anger. Coey knows about it. It’s in our fighting Irish blood.

I had been angry since I was child.

Angry at how unfair my world was.

All the books I had been read as a child painted these pictures of pretty princesses and princes coming to save them. And whole families. Their dad was a king.

My dad was angry.
Not all the time, not at first.

_I was old enough when they divorced at age four to remember that my dad used to make me laugh._

_He used to take me to work and show me how to use the tools. Let me help him with the hammer. Show me how he laid tile. He would dance and sing silly songs with me. He would tickle me and give me bodacious dog licks._

_He used to be a king. Most of the time._

_But sometimes he was angry. But kings did that sometimes too._

_I learned very early on, when he still lived with my mom, not to get him angry._

_Don’t wake him up from his nap. Don’t play the TV too loud. Don’t get up during nap time. You’re not allowed to leave your room if it’s bed time._

_But I could follow these rules. Because he was my daddy. And he loved me. And he wasn’t like this all the time. It was only when he was tired from work. But he would play with me later and make up for it and make funny noises and do silly things and I would laugh and laugh and laugh. He loved me._

_Then one day while Daddy was working, Mommy took four-year-old little me to see a different house._

_A light blue house. A tiny house. A house attached to other houses._

_This isn’t my house._

_You keep telling me this is going to be my house, Mommy, but it is, in fact, not._
Daddy built me a swing set out back at my house. In my yard.

I remember because I watched him build it while you were at work one day, and then I watched him spit while he was working, and then I spit, too. And he told me little girls don’t do that. Okay, Daddy, I’m sorry, I said.

So, tell me, Mommy, where is my swing set? Daddy built that for me. He told me it was mine. This isn’t my house. Where’s my swings? My house has swings.

Do you like your new bathroom? At the top of the stairs.

I guess? I have to go potty. Number one. Why isn’t there any toilet paper?

Drip dry. Drip dry? What does that even mean?

Ewwwwww yucky, Mommy, I’m not doing that!

Frustrated, you find a napkin. I’m mad at you, Mommy. Yucky.

Sometimes we just have to do things we don’t want to do.

No. I don’t like it. I don’t like this house. It doesn’t have swings. My swings my daddy built me are at my house. I watched him do it. He built them for me. He told me they were mine. I want my swings. My house has swings.

This is going to be your house now. Your daddy isn’t going to live here with us, okay?

But we both love you very much. So much. That will never change, okay?

No, Mommy, it’s not okay. I need my swings. They aren’t here. Leave me alone.

We go back to my house with the swings. They are still out back. I checked.

Mommy was being silly earlier.
No, don’t talk about it again, Mommy. Just read me my story so I can lay here and suck on my thumb while I rub the silky edges of my blankie across my cheek.

Mommy reads me my story, tucks me in to bed. Kisses my forehead.

“All my lovin’, I will send to you…” Mommy sings to me. I drift off to sleep.

Wait! What is going on? Why is everything in boxes? Whose truck is outside?

Daddy why aren’t you talking to me? Are you mad at me? Stop yelling at mommy.

Mommy I don’t want to go. Hello? Can you hear me? Why isn’t anyone listening to me?

NOOOO! I don’t want this PB&J. You forgot to cut the crust off!

NOOOOOOOOO!!!! I DON’T WANT IT!!!!!!!

Leave me alone. I’m not going. I don’t want to go.

See, you’re going to take away my daughter from me?

See, she doesn’t even want to go with you! She wants to go with me!

Yeah, see! Daddy knows I like it here with the swings.

The old swings come to the new house after we move in.

Daddy doesn’t come with the swings.

I thought he built those swings for me? Where is he?

Now I just see Daddy at his new house. In the basement.

It’s scary down there with the washing machine. There’s weird people upstairs. But we don’t ever go up there. Why was he acting so different to me?

Maybe it was his new water bed. It was squishy and fun.
Oh, sorry, Daddy, I won’t play on it anymore. I’m sorry I keep making you mad, Daddy. I’m sorry I threw up all over the comforter in the middle of the night. I tried really hard not to. I was rubbing my tummy. I tried to make it feel better. I didn’t mean to make you mad.

Please stop fighting with Mommy. Mommy says those are bad words & we are not supposed to say them. You don’t care what Mommy says? Okay. I want to say bad words, too. Wait, why are you mad? I can’t say them?

I thought you didn’t care what Mommy said about the bad words? I’m sorry, Daddy.

Do I want a sister? I guess. I don’t know. That girl next door? She’s a baby. Still in diapers. I’m a big girl. I’m four. She’s only two. Why are you being so nice to her? No, please don’t go to work. I don’t want to hang out with that lady next door. She’s mean. I don’t want that girl to be my sister. She broke my favorite toy. Please don’t go to work, Daddy. I want you to stay and play with me. Why don’t we ever play anymore?

I’m sorry, Daddy. I’m sorry I keep making you mad. Please stay. I’ll be good.

I should have said no when you asked me if I wanted a sister. You brought that mean lady with you to your new house. I don’t even see you anymore. You’re never here. Always at work. Why are you being so mean to me? Okay, I’ll stop crying. I’ll suck it up. But I want to still sleep with my blankies. I know, I said I was a big girl, but I want my blankies. Mommy lets me sleep with my blankies. You’re right, you’re not my mom. Okay, I’ll be a big girl. I’ll suck up my tears. No, I don’t want you to give me something to cry about.

Okay, I’ll be nice to Melissa, but she’s mean to me first. Donna is mean to me, too. No
really! I’m not lying. My mom didn’t brainwash me. I don’t think? What does that mean?
I told Mommy I didn’t like you anymore and she got so mad at me! She said you still love me. Do you still love me? Will you love me if I’m good? I’ll be good for you. I’ll play with Melissa. I’ll listen to Donna. I promise. I’ll be good. Why don’t you dance with me anymore? You’re always dancing with her. Being silly with her. But Melissa is mean.
She’s a bad girl. She’s a brat. See, look, I’m good! Why don’t you ever laugh with me?
You used to only laugh with me. Why are you giving her bodacious dog licks? Those were for me. She’s so mean! Look, she can’t even read! I’m such a good reader! I’ll show you.
I can read and she can’t! I’m really smart, Daddy. Look at me. I can read all these books.
Go outside and play with the other kids. Don’t be a stick in the mud.
Okay, Daddy, I’m sorry. I’ll be quiet. I’ll be good. I won’t read my books. I’ll play outside with the other kids. I really just want to hang out with you though. They are all so mean. My friends at school and my friend at the pool are nice to me. Why don’t you ever come play with me and my friends?

I devoured books as a child. I had so much anger in me.
I was angry at how unfair my world was.
I tried to tell my mom, but there was nothing she could do. Court-ordered, she said. My daddy still loved me. She promised me he did. He was a good person. She knew he was. She reassured me.
I tried to tell her Donna hit me. She yelled it at my dad in a fight. It was my secret, Mommy. You weren’t supposed to tell my secret. Donna made me tell them all I lied about it. No one believed eight-year-old little me after that.
I never told my mom anything about it ever again.

I was mad at her. Angry that she would tell my secret to my dad in a fight. Angry that she took me away from my father. Angry that she could not and would not save me from my father’s house. Angry as hell.

I just lived in my hatred, in my anger, all inside my head. I hated my dad’s house. I hated Donna and Melissa for making him so mad. I hated my mom for making him so mad.

*If they all just had not made him so very mad then we could have still been swinging on the swings in our big back yard and I could have a Daddy like everyone else I knew. Why was I the only one without a Daddy? Why did Melissa steal my daddy from me?*

*I don’t understand.*

As nayyirah waheed (2013) said about how she became a writer,

“As a child

there was either books

or

pain.

i chose books.”

I chose books, too.
But all the books that were read to me as a child painted these pictures of pretty princesses and princes coming to save them. And whole families. Their dad was a king. My dad was just angry.

He wasn’t a king anymore. He didn’t love me anymore.

My mom said he did. He said he did. But it sure didn’t feel like he did.

It was my mother’s fault, he said. She had brainwashed me. I believed him.

I learned how to be silent around him, not to make him mad. Only say mean things to Melissa when no one was looking. But somehow I always got caught. Then punished. So I just started saying mean things about her in my head. Repeating all the bad words I heard come out from my father’s mouth.

See, I’m like you. I am your daughter. See, I am a Doyle. She’s not even a Doyle. I’m a Doyle. Do you like me now?

Bottling all that anger. Quite literally praying to God in my head that he would just strike her down with lightening. Or that she would get run over in the street.

See, I told you I was smarter than her. I told her not to play in the street.

She never listens to the rules. I’m always so good! Why don’t you love me?
That was the life I lived inside my head at my dad’s house. Every other Wednesday and every other weekend. It became a habit to call my mom every other Wednesday and Friday from school, tell her I wasn’t feeling well, I had just thrown up at school, couldn’t she come and get me? I wasn’t lying. I really was sick to my stomach.

But Mommy had to work so we could go to Williamsburg in the summer. And wouldn’t that be fun? *Yeah. You’re right. I’m sorry.*

She knew something was up, but I never told her anything about why.

*Oh yeah, no, it’s okay. I just don’t like going there because I don’t like Melissa and Donna. But yeah, I’ll try to get along with them. It’s okay.*

The fancy rich kids at my new school in first grade all knew each other from kindergarten. They all got to hang out on the weekends and after school. Their mommies would come pick them up right away after school. I was stuck in after-care. I couldn’t go over to their houses all the time. They all got to play outside of school. But no one lived where we lived. They all had these fancy houses and pools and big back yards.

Bathrooms and TVs in their rooms.

*No, don’t come look at our house. We live far away. Our house is attached to other houses. Your house is cooler. Mommy, are we poor? How come we only have one TV in the basement? Even my neighborhood friends, all them live in those other houses. They*
aren’t attached to anything. I hate it here. Daddy was right. You shouldn’t have taken me away.

I hate this new school. I’m bored. I should have just answered that one lady’s question when she asked me what 2x2 was. It’s four. Same as 2+2. I know that now.

Can I get more homework? I really like doing homework. Can I just do homework?

But Ms. French is really nice. She loves me! She’s knows about Colorado, too!

And we are going to read Charlotte’s Web! Mommy, you already read that to me! Look! I already know all about it! We even have Templeton, our cat! Ms. French, Ms. French, Ms. French, Look!!! I know all of this! I love it! I’m so good at it! I want to be just like you. I’m gonna be a teacher, too.

She keeps making me play during recess. I don’t want to play. I want do homework.

Our playground doesn’t even have swings! Swings are my favorite. At my old school, me and Claire used to swing on the swings every day! And sing the Captain Planet song.

“Captain Planet, he’s our hero, gonna take pollution down to zero!”

You guys don’t even have swings.

Fine. Okay. I’ll go play. I’ll do the monkey bars. Every day.

The next year, I spent every day of recess in second grade in the library instead of out on the playground. I was a better reader by second grade. I could read all of the books.

Even the chapter ones!

The book fair was my favorite. I got to help set up for it.
I got to learn the Dewey decimal system. Surrounded by books. Reading as many books as I could.

_Daddy, look what I learned today in school! I got to put away all the books at the library!_  
Why aren’t you playing at recess? Why aren’t you playing with your friends?  
_I do play with my friends. Katie and Chrissy and Ashley and MJ and Aaron and Kavon._  
_But I like the library._ You shouldn’t be going to the library every day. _Okay, Daddy, I’m sorry._

But I kept going. Mrs. Bartholomew only let me go twice a week though.  
I read all the books I could find.  
_Matilda_ was my favorite. She didn’t have a perfect family like everyone else.  
Oh, how I longed to be Matilda!  
She used to get so mad that she developed these magic powers so she could enact justice on those terrible people doing all those terrible things to her.  
I used to lay for hours at my dad’s house at night, silently staring at the popcorn ceiling only a couple feet from my head on the top bunk in Melissa’s room. My dad said it was our room. But she kept saying it wasn’t. She was so mean.  
_Fine. That’s okay. I have my own room at my mommy’s house anyway._

As I laid there, silently crying myself to sleep every night,  
I used to try to channel my anger so I could have magic powers, too.  
Every breath from step-sister enraging me even more, filling myself up with anger, just trying to bundle up all my anger, so it would turn into magic powers, too.  
It never did. I kept waiting, hoping that one day if I just bundled up all my anger long enough, I could do magic things with it, too.
My dad moved the next year, when I was in third grade, so now I only had to see him for a week, twice a year. I had to fly by myself to Charlotte though. But it was fun pretending to be an adult. I had learned how to hide my diaries and hide my books from him. I knew he didn’t like it when I read. So, I just sucked it up and played with Melissa instead.

Bundling up all my anger inside my head. Stockpiling it. Saving it for later.

I was in a constant and perpetual state of anger that I completely denied.

Everything was wrong there. The dishes were washed wrong. There were always spots of food on them. Donna made her veggies too soggy. Melissa yelled, “I HATE YOU” to her mom if she didn’t want to take a bath.

*This is not the right way to live. Why can’t you see that, Daddy? Where have you been? I’ve been here two days. I only saw you once. I know, I know, you have to work. Okay. Mommy always does, too. Yeah, I’ll be good for Donna and Melissa. Yes, I’ll be good. I promise.*

My mom’s house was peaceful though. It was serenity. It was reading. It was love.

We had “lap time” each night, where I would curl up on her lap and we would read together. I knew I was getting too old to have her read to me, but she kept reading to me.

Every night. Singing me my bedtime song. Every night. “All my lovin’, I will send to you…”
I didn’t have anger when I was with her. I had reading. And games. And homework. And study games. And spelling words. And lots of time inside my head because she had work, too. And I would go to work with her and sit under her desk, my own little lair, I had a lamp and wallpaper and everything.
I would just sit under there and read and read and read.

Then, I would write and write and write. I would write about how unfair it was for Melissa and all the people around me to get everything they ever wanted all the time and my mom just could not give me all of those things. I wanted all of those things, too. I didn’t understand why my dad didn’t like me or want to play with me anymore. I couldn’t get why he couldn’t see that my mom wasn’t making decisions for me. I was making decisions for myself. Why didn’t he believe me? I just kept writing that God would never let me have divorced parents if he didn’t know I could handle it. I knew I could handle it. I was saving my anger for later anyways. It was going to be magic powers one day!

I would write like I was one of those girls from the *Dear America* historical fiction series. Hoping that one day I, too, would live through an historical event someone would read about in my diary. Writing down my everyday things like they did, just waiting for some big historical thing to happen to me. I doubted it though. We weren’t going on a ship to America. We weren’t going to war. There wasn’t even any real reason for me to be this angry with all my stuff going on. It’s not like some big major event happened to me like in the books.
Man, I wished lived back then. This all sounds so exciting. I hope a war breaks out. I’ll be ready. I’ll have it all here in my diary. You’ll see.

Those were the stories I could relate to. The stories of strife.

All the other stuff was fun to read—I would read anything and everything—but the stories about injustice and anything unfair were my favorite. They were my life.

Two stories stuck most with me as a child:


I remember thinking that I knew exactly what Patsy felt like, having to hide her writing, her books, always hiding how smart she was, while all the grown-ups around her were always keeping secrets. I, too, had a hidden secret life like this in my diary in my head. I, too, knew what it was like when all the people in charge of you lied to you and didn’t keep their promises. I, too, had been manipulated and lied on. I, too, wanted to become a teacher. I, too, wanted to strive for freedom.

I didn’t realize that my freedom was different than hers though.

I didn’t realize that I was already free, in so many different ways.

I didn’t realize that I had so much freedom, just because of my grandparent’s money and my see-through white skin with my blue veins that looked like markers down my arm.

Nothing about my life felt free though, except for my diary. Just like her.
I thought we were kindred spirits, Patsy and me. I began writing like her in my diaries.
I didn’t know any Black people at the time though. Only Patsy.
And I strongly believed that, even though I didn’t know any Black people, that the stuff
that Patsy was going through in the book didn’t happen anymore. We were past all that as
a society. That’s what I was told. Slavery was bad. But it ended a long time ago. And
now we were past that. But I didn’t know any Black people at my small, private school.
There were two Black students in the grade above me, but we kept to our own grade
levels. 32 students per grade. Two classes. 16 students in each class. I was in third grade.
After finding my kindred spirit in Patsy, I was eager to read more books like hers.
I carried her spirit with me every day and started thinking like her, narrating my life in
my head like she narrated hers. Indeed, I read her story many times over that year.

My teacher, Mrs. Parker, paid special attention to me that year.
She always called me Jennifer Lynn. Her daughter’s name was Jennifer Lynn, too.
I was flourishing. My dad moved to Charlotte that year.
His absence from my life freed me to be me.

My mother now helped grow me into me every weekend.

We got to ride bikes on Sundays when she didn’t have to work and go feed the duckies in
the pond and go on walks with the cat down the path in the woods and play Pooh Sticks
in the stream. We got to make up games and play baseball with two people, silently
counting ghost runners in our head. We played kitties and school and memory (I always
won) and monopoly (I always lost) and pick up sticks.
I played with Lauren and Alex and Bridget and Clare and Chickie and Annie who all lived down the street.

I had time to do gymnastics and swim team and read and play with my school friends any weekend, not just on Mommy’s weekend. I could go to all the birthday parties now. It was free.

I only had to play pretend and suck it up twice a year now.

I could do that.

The following year, in fourth grade, when our teacher took us to the library, I asked for a suggestion of another book that was like Patsy’s story.

The new librarian suggested *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

She said it was for older girls and that I had to ask my mom’s permission to read it, but that if my mom let me read it, she thought I would like it.

I begged my mom to let me read it.

She agreed. But she warned me, I might not like what I read in there.

*I can handle it mom, I promise!*

Similar to Patsy, I instantly felt like Anne was a kindred spirit.

But she was going through SO MUCH that I couldn’t even imagine.

It made me feel really very grateful that I did not have to do that much hiding!

I only had to hide sometimes now, but I was getting very good at hiding.

For the most part.
Donna was still very good at manipulating me, lying on me to my father, and twisting the truth around to make me look bad. Somehow, she always found my writing.

I had to get better at hiding. Why did she keep reading my stuff? Didn’t she know this was my little secret? My secret life.

You weren’t supposed to read about how much I hated you. That was for me. I sent Daddy a letter telling him about you. Why did you steal it? That wasn’t for you. Now Daddy is mad at me again. See what you did? He’ll never love me now!

Like Anne Frank, I felt like I was also two different people.

There was the me who I was on the outside—Jennifer.

Trying to always be cheerful and smiling and happy.

But on the inside, there was another me.

I wanted that inside me to be a better person, too.

Just like her inside person was trying to be.

But I knew my inside me was dark. It was angry.

My inside me, on the day of my first confession in second grade, screamed at God inside my head to smite Melissa for ruining my pretty white lacy dress. My mother had bought it for me. I always had one nice dress each year on Easter. And I loved pretty dresses! Melissa got mad because she wanted it, so she stepped on the back of it with her dirty
shoes, ripping the back of it before we could even get in the car for church. I was supposed to be clean for church. I had to be clean for confession. God knows everything. He was always watching. My dad told me to stop worrying about it. It was just a dress. I was more worried about my soul though.

My inside me was dark. My Catholic guilt held me hostage.

I had learned in CCD [Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, or Catechism, religious education] that even my thoughts were sins that I had to always pray God’s forgiveness and do penance for my sins. I felt that I was always living in sin in my thoughts about Donna and Melissa. I was trapped. I couldn’t stop thinking these thoughts no matter how much I tried. I couldn’t even tell the priest all of my confessions that day. I haven’t been back since. I prayed the rosary almost daily at my mother’s house. But I was stuck in my guilt. I couldn’t escape my thoughts.

I wanted my inside me to be beautiful like Anne. Strong. Always trying to be a better person. I was trying, but I just could not escape sin! I could not escape my Catholic guilt! I was completely entrapped by it.

I had so much anger inside me. It had been growing in me through the years. I knew I was not supposed to be so angry at Donna and Melissa. I kept trying to forgive them, to pray for them, for their souls. For my own soul.

CCD and my family had taught me that I needed to always forgive people, but they never taught me how to deal with the anger or hurt. I learned that forgiveness meant not holding
anyone accountable for anything. No one in my life was held accountable for anything they were doing. I was always told to love my dad anyways. Or to love Donna anyways. Or to love Melissa anyways. I never knew that I could have expectations for people, or boundaries for people. Indeed, there was no one in my life who did not lie or manipulate me. I thought everyone worked this way.

But they JUST KEPT TRYING ME! Donna became an alcoholic. The tensions in the house grew worse each time I went back to Charlotte. I hardly ever saw my dad, he was always working, but when I did see him, he was tired. I knew not to bother him when he was tired. He was mostly mad. I was scared of my dad all the time. I would just count down the days until I could see my mother again. Count down the hours. Count down the minutes. He was always mad at me. I couldn’t ever do anything right. I tried to help clean the house, I tried to keep myself busy. But I was only allowed to do what Melissa wanted to do. I was never allowed to read. She would take my books and throw them, rip out the pages and laugh. She was a bad reader. She was a bad girl. I was trying to be so good.

How could you not see this? Why did you keep telling me to be more like her? I didn’t want to. She was mean.

Melissa would drive me insane. She would insist on sleeping with me in my room. She would never leave me alone. I loved being alone. There was no alone at my dad’s house. No privacy. Ever. I just waited it out. Counted down the days until I could see my mommy. Narrating my diary in my head.
We would often wake up in the middle of the night to yelling and screaming and crashing sounds downstairs. Melissa said it was good when I was there. I thought Donna deserved it. I prayed each time they fought that this would be the time my dad finally decided to leave her. She was the worst.

After my dad would go to sleep, Donna would wake me up out of my bed, make me come downstairs with her, and listen to her talk all night. Her breath smelled funny. It was disgusting. I didn’t know this smell. It was her smell though. Disgusting. I didn’t understand why she loved me so much at night and was so mean to me in the morning. She kept getting me to trust her, then she would manipulate me into doing something that would make my dad mad at me. Then she would force me to tell her I loved her. I knew I was lying. My Catholic guilt ate me alive. I apologized to God silently each time I lied and told her I loved her.

So, when I read Anne Frank’s diary, all that anger I had been building up over the years, I found an outlet for it.

I was enraged by the things that were happening to her. Infuriated by her death. How could people be so incredibly horrible?!?

I took all of my anger towards Donna and Melissa and put it towards the Nazis. They were people I could really be mad at. I was allowed to be mad at them.

Patsy didn’t bring out that kind of anger in me. She just had freedom at the end of her story. She dealt with some injustice—a lot of injustice—but in the end, she was good.
Look what a dangerous narrative of slavery we are told as children! Look at the dangers of this single story (Adichie, 2009). How long it took me to become enraged about racial injustice. It was not until college, freshman year, when I learned the real truth. Just imagine if we read narratives of slavery that actually showed how incredibly horrific it really was!!! Look what the uses of my anger could have been at a much younger age...

Patsy was fine. But Anne died at the end.

SHE DIED! THEY KILLED HER! I screamed.

HOW COULD YOU NOT TELL ME??!

I told you may not like what you read...

Yeah, but you could have warned me...

History isn’t pretty sometimes.

We had a conversation about it. My mother and I.

About history. White history. We could be mad at the injustice.

Indeed, it was super important to learn about the injustice so that we knew never to repeat it again.

(Not knowing that we were full of shit. We smelled like shit. We couldn’t smell it.

Personally, I felt like I could relate to Patsy more, but my mom knew nothing about slavery or racism, having been taught the dangerous narrative that slavery was something that happened a long time ago, but did not still go on today. Had my mother been taught all of this about American history and white terrorism, we could have had the same productive conversations. The same learning experiences. But history was whitewashed. We were covered in shit.)
I had a place for my anger, it was no longer eating me alive.

I was righteously angry at the Nazis.

I learned everything I could about the Holocaust after that. I read every book I could find about it. I begged my mom to take me to the Holocaust museum in DC. She told me I had to watch Schindler’s List first. She prepared me. Then she took me to the Holocaust museum. We lived it. We felt it. This horrific history became real.

I was in fourth grade.

Yet, we were distanced from it.

My ancestors weren’t Nazis. We were English and French and Dutch.

On my dad’s side we were German and Irish. But we had been in Iowa since the 1800s.

So we weren’t Nazis. We were good people.

We could feel better about ourselves that we weren’t Nazis.

My anger had a place to go.

Now just sit back and look at that white logic!

Imagine if I could bottle up all this anger I feel RIGHT NOW about how completely fucked up this entire system is that is designed to teach white people that their shit don’t stink, JUST IMAGINE what kind of work could have BEEN done in the meantime, in between time.
JUST IMAGINE that my mother, from who I got my love of history, JUST IMAGINE what would have happened had she known that she, too, was full of shit.

That she, too, smelled like shit.

Just like the Nazis were full of shit.

Or my grandmother.

Or anyone on my father’s side.

All of us white people.

JUST IMAGINE the types of things we could have passed down in my family generationally. REAL HISTORY. Horrific history. Owning our shit history. Instead of always owning others history. Always complicit in racism history. The dangers of whiteness history.

JUST IMAGINE HOW DIFFERENT THIS STORY WOULD BE!

Instead, as white people, we are taught to use the Nazi’s and the KKK as scapegoats, as the ultimate examples of white supremacy. So as white folks, we are so quickly able to say, “I’m not a Nazi” or “I’m not David Duke.” As if racism is not in everything, permeating all of our institutions, our culture, our way of life; as if racism is not able to continuously be reproduced with the explanation of us (good white people) versus them (racist white people)—a product of either/or thinking. Failing to see that we are operating in a binary mindset. But it is these every day, un-interrogated spaces of white power and white logic that support white supremacy that we must pay particularly close attention to.
JUST IMAGINE if my mother had not been so scared of herself, that she would have been able to speak up for herself rather than sneak around and manipulate and lie? JUST IMAGINE how different that would have turned out with my father! For Donna. For Melissa. For me. There are lives at stake here, too.

JUST IMAGINE if my anger had a place to go towards slavery, mass incarceration, colonization, and racism as well?

Back then, when my mom was teaching me so many things about the world, but never knowing any world other than a white world. She could not teach me what she didn’t know. JUST IMAGINE though, had I been equally as enraged at every day white people (not just Nazis and KKK members), my people, for all of the horrific things we’ve done throughout history?

We can see how useful my anger was about the Holocaust. It became a lifelong passion of fighting for social justice, fighting injustice everywhere, it was a place for my rage. And I was living in my white complicity (Applebaum, 2010), perpetuating racism, never owning my shit.

JUST IMAGINE how very different so many other things would be if White people just learned how to own their shit. Historically. Presently. Onwardly. JUST IMAGINE what that future could look like…
JUST IMAGINE if my mom had a racial justice toolkit.
If I had a racial justice toolkit from a young age.
JUST IMAGINE how powerful that would be.

But white people, we are so motherfucking scared to own that shit.
We just cannot sit in our shit!
But sit in our shit, we MUST.

Lorde (1984) told us, on the uses of anger, that
“Anger is an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes, as is fury when the actions arising from those attitudes do not change” (p. 129).

So, I have felt justified, righteous, and commendable? in my anger throughout this dissertation. I used my anger and my fury as power. Or so I thought. Perhaps I have.
But that is just me sitting here again, in my White feelings.
Not owning my shit. Pretending like my shit wasn’t stinking up to high heaven.

My anger as a response to racism is and always will be white.
Just like my wokeness will always be white.
It will always look different and it will always have very real and dangerous consequences when it is not deliberately used in productive manners that take ME and my white self, no matter how woke, out of the center of the fight for racial justice.
Because I will always smell like shit.
I will always be covered in the shit of whiteness.
I have to own it.
I have to sit in my shit.
Figure out a way to make it fertilizer when I can,
But know that I’m never getting it off me.
So I might as well get used to the smell.
I might as well own it.
It’s already mine.

While I felt—all 2014 semester, and for the last four years, and even before then—that my rage and anger towards racial injustice was justified, righteous, and pious even.

It has not been.

And you know why?
My anger is always, always, always, white anger. White feelings.
I cannot escape this.

So own it, I must.
I must sit in my shit. Roll around in it. Get comfortable being uncomfortable in my shit.
Because there’s never going to be anything comfortable about sitting in shit.
But sit in shit, I MUST.

It is the only way to truly fight for racial justice as a white person.

It is the only way to do woke whiteness work!

But it doesn’t have to be either/or. It’s always both/and.

I can have BOTH a painful childhood AND a beautiful childhood at the same time.

Indeed, I did.

I can BOTH love my father AND be hurt by his abandonment.

I can have BOTH a painful childhood AND own my shit, sit in my shit, in whiteness.

I can BOTH critique Dr. Hendrickson AND have respect for her.

She could have BOTH helped me grow AND hindered my growth AND I can still love her AND I can still be mad at her AND I can empathize with her AND do my best to hold her accountable.

I can BOTH sit in my shit AND also be gentle with myself.

I can BOTH get over my white feelings AND still let myself have white feelings (as long as I don’t let them bleed all over my racial justice work to make it about me).

See how I did that just there?

I presented BOTH a painful story AND still critiqued myself.

I can BOTH love myself AND hate my perpetual white complicity in racism.

I can BOTH love my white people AND still be mad at them for not owning their shit.

I can BOTH critique my whiteness AND try to decenter it.

When I was learning about the Holocaust and feeling really good about my anger,
I didn’t know I smelled like shit. I didn’t know my mom smelled like shit.

I didn’t know all of my teachers smelled like shit.

I didn’t know everyone around me in elementary school smelled like shit.

I didn’t know it because I thought that shit smelled good.

I was taught to believe that my shit smelled good.

That my shit didn’t stink.

It might have stunk in the past, but that was the past, and we were past that now.

“Our shit doesn’t stink anymore. We’re done. Plus, we never owned slaves. So we’re talking about those other white people over there [Bull Connor, Neo-Nazis] Not me and my ancestors.”

No, Jennifer Lynn, we are talking about you, too.

You smell like shit, too.

Own that shit.

My white anger as a white feeling has been problematic AF. Let me show you.

My white anger prevented me from seeing, until this dissertation, just how much Lindsay was trying the entire time to “get it” with the CRT stuff.

I thought she didn’t get it until last year.

Nope. She was trying the whole time.

My white anger blinded me, it shut down conversation, and it silenced productive dialogue that all could have been made for the sake of racial justice.

Look how deadly white feelings are to racial justice!
My white anger prevented me from having productive conversations with Dr. Hendrickson until March 2018 after finishing the initial draft of my dissertation.

My white anger made me lump all white people together, and I almost missed the opportunity to engage with my critical white friend, Kayla, during the course. We didn’t connect until the very last day of the very last class. I thought everyone in that class was a room full of ignorant white women. Indeed, they were not.

My white anger shut down the possibility of me having productive conversations with Coach Daniels about my student, Jamila, whom he pushed into ISS. Silence as a result of my white anger, was a privilege. (And, I keep hearing Dr. Cook in my head telling me that not everyone is worth my emotional investment…would he have been worth my emotional investment?)

What is the role of self-care here? Because you can’t do woke white work without taking care of yourself. So you need to BOTH be okay with filling yourself back up every once in a while AND knowing that this work cannot be about you. This dissertation is me filling myself back up again. And it’s always self-serving. As a white person I struggle constantly to not be self-serving. That’s part of my shit. I have to own it.
My #sorrynotsorry attitude as a result of my white anger with white people in general.

My use of the master’s tools.


Own it.

The fact that I used CRT scholars and authors of Color, their intellectual ideas, to further my own agenda of finding myself, returning home to myself, writing myself through this work. I have to own that. That is true.

AND this dissertation is a critique of whiteness, of white hegemony in the academy, in research, in education, in scholarship, and in our minds. That is true.

AND I took up CRT for the students, to tackle racial justice in the book club. To combat the school-to-prison pipeline through literacy. That is true.

AND CRT gave me a new language to name white hegemony. This dissertation is a result of what happened when I was not able to utilize that new language. That is true.

AND, it is a complete ownership of all of my ugly truths and especially in my complicity in racism.

AND ALSO, at the same exact time. I can love myself.
Indeed, this woke whiteness work requires you to own all parts of yourself.
The good, the bad, the ugly, the really ugly, and then always critique yourself to make sure that you stay confident and never cocky.

Woke whiteness work is balancing.

You cannot pour from an empty cup.

Woke whiteness work is balancing.

So I will show you, too, how I came back to me, even after owning all my shit:

Figure 5.1: Picture from of the stream on a path in the woods by my childhood home in Falls Church, VA; March 2017.
(See figure 5.1): I brought myself back to where it all began. Where I first felt most at peace. Here playing pooh sticks with my mom. Riding bikes. Picking up trash. Taking the cat on walks. Where I would smoke cigs with Daniel. Where me & Lauren would play. And Alex.

This is where I felt most myself. Some of the best times in my life were spent here on this path. Some of my happiest memories. It was always the place I felt most myself. We played in the stream.

I would imagine that I was uncovering lost history. I got my love for history from my mom. It was over there by the cul-de-sac that my mom told me she wanted to be a history teacher. But life didn’t end up that way.

My mom always made sure I could be myself. She let me be me.

I was always myself when I was playing alone. Always in my head. Getting lost in books. Pretending I was part of the books I read. Pretending I could write my own books. Imagining a life that was different than the one I lived. But I’ve been here before. I am most myself here. Before the world told me who I should be. I just was. I was me.

We have to go back to our purest parts of ourselves. Where we felt most happy and at peace.
Do you remember who you were before the world told you who to be? Go back to that place.

So you see, all of these stories can exist all at one time and indeed they do. We just have to free our minds to let us think about them in these ways. This allows us to both love ourselves, take care of ourselves, and then also know that in whiteness, there is no such thing as a “pure” part of me that is untainted by whiteness.

But that’s okay, because I can own the fact that there is a pure part of my nature as a human being AND there is no such thing as purity in whiteness AND I can own all my shit AND I can own all my beauty AND I can own all my ugliness AND I had childhood that was violent AND I had a childhood that was peaceful AND I had a really privileged childhood AND I made a solid attempt at racial justice work AND I failed in so many ways AND I perpetuated racial injustice AND I tried really hard to promote racial justice AND I’m trying to interrupt it right now AND it’s a privilege of my whiteness to do so in this format AND I can love my dad AND I can be angry with him AND I can love my mom AND I can be mad at her for dying AND I can be mad at her for being a terrible mom sometimes AND I can appreciate all the ways that she was a great mother AND I can be happy AND I can allow myself to be sad AND I can date women AND I can date men AND I can feel oppressed by men AND I can still wield power as a woman AND I can constantly check myself AND I can be confident AND I can own all of me AND I can decenter whiteness AND I can still temporarily center it to critique it AND I can be a sinner AND I can be a child of God AND I can do good things AND still be a racist at all
times AND still work on my racisms every day, all day, no days off AND that’s what woke whiteness work is… Always AND. Always owning. Always working to disrupt. Always all at same time!

Nothing ever has to exist in opposition ever again!

And there is a freedom in that ownership. Own your shit.

**Summer 2014**

I say all of that above about anger because woke whiteness work requires you to feel, to open yourself up, and to be fully aware, conscious, mindful, cognizant, of absolutely everything around you at all times. This means that you cannot just be busy, busy, busy all the time. You have to give yourself time to heal. Time to process. *Why don’t we know this as white people?!?* There are very serious dangers that occur when you are not able to do this.

So, in the summer of 2014, determined to keep on sailing away through these tensions, I was perpetually angry on the inside. By all outward appearances, though, I was thriving. I was teacher of the year; I was enrolled in two summer courses; Dr. Boutte had told me that I was “impressive”; Dr. Anders told me to consider becoming a scholar; Dr. Boutte helped me write my first autoethnography; I felt really good about my first write up of my autoethnography; I went to spread my mom’s ashes on the beach in Charleston, purposely alone, on the one-year anniversary of her death (June 11); I was completing all of my reading for my classes at the pool; I was staying on top of my work; I was out on summer break; I was really good at pretending like everything was okay; I was trying to find my place; I was finding beauty in the world even amidst all the sadness and darkness I felt inside; I was feeling alive and nourished; and I was hiding my sadness
and darkness really well; I had it all under control; I was navigating all these tensions…

Or so I thought.

Really, I was still operating and existing in the tensions of “either/or” even though my entire life I have never existed within these confines. I truly felt in my heart that Dr. Hendrickson was here to support me in my efforts, however. Particularly after the way in which she received my feedback in the course.

From: Jennifer

Subject: Dissertation & JDC

Date: Wed, Jun 18, 2014 at 10:42 PM

To: Dr. Hendrickson

After much thought and careful consideration, I have decided that I would like to pursue my idea of research on CRT, adolescent literacy, book clubs, and students who are incarcerated for my dissertation. I know you said it would be a lot of extra hoops to jump through logistically, but I think it would be worth it in the long run. There is a need for this research, and I am extremely passionate about it. I tried to draft a research proposal using my same idea, but with students from my school & it was like pulling teeth trying to write it. My heart wasn’t in it. Dr. Boutte encouraged me to look into research at JDC as an option. Is this still an option? How do I go about initiating the process?

I have drafted an initial research plan, but I don’t want to send it to you until I perfect it. I can have it ready by next week.

As far as a time frame, I would like to conduct a once a week, 6 month, study with a group of volunteer students at JDC. I would ideally like to begin this project in the
fall. Do these things sound possible? Is 6 months too long for this type of study (I know many students often come and go sporadically)? What are your thoughts?

My (initial) research questions for my dissertation:

1) What happens when students who are incarcerated are engaged in a CRT book club?

2) How can book clubs be crafted to promote social justice through critical race pedagogy?

3) What role does race, racism, and power play in how students navigate the education and incarceration systems?

Also, I know you will be on sabbatical this upcoming year, so I will not cause any extra work for you. I can handle everything. I just need to figure out if this is possible & how to go about doing it. If you lead me in the right direction, I can take it from there.

Best,

Jen

From: Dr. Hendrickson

Subject: Re: Dissertation & JDC

Date: Mon, Jun 23, 2014 at 3:43 PM

To: Jennifer

Thanks for your email—

I am checking with John at JDC about this :)

From: Jennifer

Subject: Dissertation & JDC

Date: Tue, Jun 24, 2014 at 12:34 AM
To: Dr. Hendrickson

Thank you :) After talking to Dr. Anders, I think a 12 week study would be more productive for this particular project (still once a week). I would like to begin in September if at all possible so I can use my data in my 840 [an advanced qualitative inquiry course] class to start building my dissertation.

Best,

Jen

Dr. Hendrickson replied back a few days later with an email that only had the contact information for a person at JDC in it. I was a bit discouraged because I wanted her advice about how best to go about creating this type of research and ensuring its success, but I sensed that she was going to leave all of that up to me. I even felt at the time that she was avoiding me, not wanting to help me with anything because maybe she secretly did not want me to do my research at JDC. Or maybe she was busy? I was not entirely sure how to interpret the information. She put me in contact with John (pseudonym), who put me in touch with the superintendent of the JDC schools. I finally was able to get in touch with someone in September, and from there, I scheduled an initial meeting for October. But that summer still continued.

From: Allison Anders

Subject: Thank you, again

Date: Sun, Jul 27, 2014 at 12:57 PM

To: Jennifer Doyle

Dear Jen,

I finished Wild and am grateful all over again for it and your thoughtfulness.
There were such important passages and stories within stories from which to learn. I am still learning from it even though I have finished "reading" it.

I am headed to VA on Friday to spend time with my mom again. I got back last Monday and wanted to turn around and head north again right away. It's where I need to be. I won't be back until the night of the 19th just before classes start. I suspect I will be in VA as often as I am in SC in the coming weeks/months. My mom is uncomfortable more often now and is medicating with morphine. Her spirit is still so strong. I am so proud of her.

I wanted to touch base with you before I left to say thank you again in case I am not in touch between now and when classes start.

I hope your summer has been good to you and that you are well.

See you soon.

Gratefully,

Allison

From: Jennifer Doyle

Subject: Re: Thank you, again

Date: Sun, Aug 17, 2014 at 12:52 PM

To: Allison Anders

You are very welcome. I'm glad that the book helped you as much as it helped me.

I also want to tell you that I am going to have to drop EDRM 840 this semester. I do not think I have enough time in my day to complete everything I need to complete. This will give me some more time to get everything squared away at JDC as well, so I
can take 840 simultaneously either in the summer (if it's offered) or next fall [2015] as I work with students at JDC.

I am sad I won't be able to work with you this semester, but I am somewhat relieved to be able to focus on my students at NHS as I will only be taking one course.

I hope everything is going well (or as well as it can) with your mother & that you got to spend lots of time with her over the summer. You both have been in my thoughts and prayers.

I will of course keep in touch throughout the semester :)

Best,

Jen

From: Allison Anders
Subject: Re: Thank you, again
Date: Wed, Aug 20, 2014 at 11:38 AM
To: Jennifer Doyle

Hi Jen,

You will be missed in 840 but I am glad you are only conquering one course this fall.

Though I had an amazing couple of days with my mom when I first returned on the 1st, she declined very quickly to our surprise and her doctors and we were calling in hospice within 48 hours. She crossed over on the 7th. The last two weeks have been a blur of preparing for her service and receiving out of town relatives and friends. I drive back to SC in just a few hours. I dread driving away from her home. She is all around me here.

Thank you again for your steadfast support and care. I appreciate it so much.
Very best,

Allison

From: Jennifer Doyle

Subject: Re: Thank you, again

Date: Wed, Aug 20, 2014 at 4:12 PM

To: Allison Anders

I am so sorry to hear about the loss of your mother--and so suddenly too. My mom went very quickly as well with only a few days under hospice care. While it is sad for us, it is good for them. They did not have to suffer any longer & they can now be at peace.

I know how hard it is to leave your mom's house. I slept mom mom's bed all summer after she passed & spent as much time as I could there before we had to sell the house. I remember feeling her presence so deeply when I was in the house & felt as if it no longer existed when I came back to SC. However, I have recently discovered that she is all around me and always with me, guiding me and protecting me wherever I go--even down here in SC. She's like my own personal guardian angel! I try to talk to her every day now (which at first made me feel crazy, but now makes me feel comforted). There is also a comfort in this as I didn't always get to talk to her daily or even weekly when she was alive. Now I can talk to her whenever I want. She continues to live on through me & I know your mom continues to live on through you as well. I try to be everything wonderful my mom was, plus more. She is me now & I am her. But more. It's weird and hard to explain. It's like I have all of my own strength that my mom instilled in me growing up, but now I have her strength as well. It's powerful.
Somehow, someway, our mothers give us strength from beyond the grave that we did not even know we had. It is difficult, and it is painful, but it gets easier to deal with over time. Allow yourself to feel all the grief that comes with "firsts" but also allow yourself to be happy and joyful. I always think about how my mom gave her whole life for my happiness, so it would be a slap in the face for me to be anything but happy.

This will change you. You won't be able to be the same person you were before, but you can be better. That's how I try to look at it. Plus, the good news is that the worst thing that could ever happen to you has already happened. There's nothing to be afraid of anymore. I try to find the positives in the situation. Some days are easier than others.

I know it is tough, but this happened for a reason--even if we don't know that reason yet.

My thoughts and prayers are with you & your family. Best wishes for a safe drive back to SC & an excellent start to the fall semester! Please do not hesitate to let me know if you need anything at all. You will be just fine--your mom never would have left you if she didn't know for sure that you could handle it! :)

Best,

Jen

Sent from my iPhone

Fall 2014

While it appears that I was able to give the best advice about the loss of mothers, having lost mine as well to cancer a little over a year before Allison, I did not actually live out my advice. Also, it’s white logic that we have to operate in these binaries anyways of convincing ourselves that we will be just fine but not actually be fine at all.
Repeatedly telling ourselves that we are weak if we do not navigate the tensions of grief in clear cut ways.

I was burnt out from taking four classes over the summer immediately following the intensity that was the juxtaposition of my two classes during the spring 2014 semester. About a month into the semester, I ended up dropping the one course I was enrolled in with Dr. Jeffries and taking the entire semester off. I still presented at three conferences that semester—even initially drafting my first culturally relevant classroom management workshop that is now a staple of my work as an educator—but I was growing weary and tired. The poem by Tyler Knott Gregson kept echoing in my head that fall: “Promise me you will not spend so much time treading water and trying to keep your head above the waves that you forget, truly forget, how much you have always loved to swim” (no pagination).

I felt as though I had spent the last two years in a whirlwind following my mother’s sickness, and then her death, then the semester of book clubs.

July: I was fighting with my dad following family vacation; I was calling out my new step-brothers and new step-mother (not Donna) for their racisms; I was speaking out against the school-to-prison pipeline on the beach; I was being blamed for ruining her family vacation; I was told I was a bad person because I didn’t wish her happy mother’s day; I was being lied on and manipulated by yet another step-mother of mine; I was being forced to spend a week in Florida with my not-family and Solomon; I was being told it was “cute” I thought I could “change the world”; I was doing all my school work; I was being comforted by Solomon; I was finally telling Stephanie how I felt about her in
college; I was hearing it was never reciprocated; I was in DC with my grandparents and friends.

August: I was in Hilton Head with Solomon; I was back in DC again; I was conducting my classroom management workshop; I was crying in my classroom the day before the kids came back because I couldn’t get my printer to work; I was teaching full time; I was running around the pond by my house; I was alone after Tasha moved to New Jersey, Poppy moved to Texas, and Lamar moved to Ohio; I was traveling back and forth to DC; I was in Philly with Solomon for a music festival;

September: I was in Atlanta with Camille; I was attending Relay For Life meetings; I was teaching my students to critically analyze the news and figuring out how to change the ways they were being portrayed in the media; I was designing Pink Out t-shirts; I was planning fundraisers; I was dropping my class at USC.

October: I was presenting at the Diversity Conference in Charleston, SC; I was visiting my mommy on the beach; I was being recognized as teacher of the year; I was disrupting Columbus Day; I was being met with resistance; I was meeting to discuss my research at JDC with John and the superintendent to discuss my research ideas and research plans.

The superintendent was so excited by my idea that he tried to hire me on the spot as an English teacher at JDC and told me I could conduct all of my research in my own classroom that way. I laughed and politely declined, as I told him my principal at NHS wouldn’t let me go in the middle of the school year and that I was already on a contract, but that I would keep the offer in mind for the following year. They were both encouraging and supportive of anything I needed, except that John told me that I was not
going to be able to discuss racism at JDC with the students (white logic assuming that simply talking about racism was going to pit the students against one another in the prison, which was already riddled with racial tension).

All I needed to do now was to do the work on my end to strategically figure out how to do this as a book club. I had it all envisioned in my head. I just needed to grind to make that vision into reality. I had quite a bit more work to do to prepare for such a large research project and a significant amount of coursework left to complete. I was convinced I could keep navigating forward. I have always been a strong swimmer though, so I kept telling myself that I was okay. Just keep swimming...

Still October: I was reading the Autobiography of Malcolm X; I was trying to understand what he had to say about white folks; I was celebrating homecoming with Camille; I was engaging my students in critical work; I was being visited by my grandparents for the first time ever; I was missing my mother’s presence deeply, but was unable to remember her how I wanted to; I was wondering if it would be like this forever; I was going to New York with Solomon and his family; I was reuniting with Tasha in Queens.

November: I was voting; I was experiencing a sexual harassment incident; I was hiding the incident; I was being visited by my father for the teacher of year ceremony; I was having my house fixed by my dad while he was here; I was only told a week before he came that he was coming; I was being described at the teacher of the year ceremony as a teacher who knew I wasn’t going to “change the world” with my “teaching” even though that’s not what I wrote; I was being misunderstood; I was trying to be a racial realist, but they missed my point of daily struggle and collective action; I was being
misunderstood everywhere; I was having panic attacks; I was engaging in “Conversation Calendars” to build rapport with my students and deliberately disrupting harmful classroom practices; I was eating all the sushi and chewing all the gum and drinking all the drinks in DC with Nadia; I was visiting with Rachel in NoVA; I was attending the 35th anniversary party of my family’s company party; I was being forced to attend the event in the same hotel lobby where we held my mother’s funeral reception; I was being coerced in to looking at pictures of my mother’s erasure from the company and my own erasure from the ten years I had spent working there; I was having panic attacks and having to beg Rachel to come stay the night with me; I was missing my mommy; I was disrupting negative stereotypes of Ebola in Africa; I was being visited by Camille; I was crying as I watched the lack of indictment of Darren Wilson in the murder of Michael Brown; I was posting quotes about disrupting injustice on social media; I was spending shopping days with Stephanie; I was attending state championship games football games for the high school; I was trying to go to New Orleans for Thanksgiving; I was staying in SC with Solomon and his family instead; I was hanging out with my friend Poppy while she was back in Columbia; I was being yelled at by Stephanie for not coming to her Clemson/Carolina party.

December: I was traveling with Kayla to the LRA conference to present on book clubs; I was seeing that Dr. Hendrickson looked sick; I was seeing her smile; I was presenting with her and my fellow classmates; I was feeling proud of our book club; I was feeling annoyed with the others; I was having important conversations with Kayla; I was engaging in CRT study sessions where I met Dr. Toni Williams; I was having dinner with professors; I was finding my space at LRA; I was sitting next to Dr. Hendrickson; I
was having deliberate conversations; I was feeling alive; I was drinking coffee and
laughing with Kayla; I was eating lunch with her by the water; I was showing her all the
CRT stuff; I was finding out in a session about the lack of indictment of white police
officers, Daniel Pantaleo and Justin Damico in the Eric Garner case; I was holding back
tears; I was learning how to disrupt white supremacy with other literacy educators; I was
saving social media pictures of die-ins and “hands up don’t shoot”; I was showing my
students pictures of peaceful protests all around the world; I was showing the collective
action; I was having my students critically analyze the news; I was teaching about police
brutality and the history; I was having panic attacks; I was not realizing my students
would be shut down if they tried to protest; I was completely silenced by the white school
board for even talking about police brutality; I was still talking about it anyways; I was
reading poetry, “And now coming back home isn’t really coming back home at all”
(Woodson, 2014); I was grieving police murders; I was being told by my principal that
she saw my social media posts; I was being told I was pushing my political beliefs on
children; I was getting lawyers involved; I was ready to be fired; I was still teacher of the
year; I was protected in whiteness, even as whiteness attacked me; I was shopping with
Stephanie; I was finally going to counseling; I was purposely finding a Black woman
counselor; I was being told I was emotionally constipated; I was being told I needed to
feel; I was being scared of feeling; I was participating in “Stand Up For Us, Stand Up
With Us” with my SILENCE IS VIOLENCE poster at the State House; I was missing
Stephanie’s Christmas party to go to Dr. Boutte’s; I was feeling unworthy of being there;
I was feeling bad about neglecting my autoethnography; I was breaking up with
Solomon; I was feeling free as a single tear rolled down my face; I was dealing with a
water leak in my house that ruined my hardwood floors; I was going to Iowa to see my dad; I was being ignored by step-brother and step-mother; I was being treated weirdly by my dad; I was trying to tell him how good I felt to be free; I was finding out he didn’t care about my freedom because he was too wrapped up in his own; I was bonding with all the new babies and my cousins; I was having fun with my cousins; I was feeling like a Doyle; I was being forced by my step-mother to go back to her home and not stay at my cousin’s house; I was crying and crying and crying and crying on Christmas Eve at my dad’s house; I was hyperventilating; I was trapped; I was alone; I was stuck and couldn’t go outside my room; I was calling Nadia; I was calming down; I was crying myself to sleep like a little girl; I was missing my mommy for Christmas; I was having fun back over with my cousins; I was loving Doyle Family Christmas; I was being so loved by my extended family; I was being so misunderstood by my dad; I was playing with all the new babies in our family, over 10 of them under the age of 10; I was rocking little Roz for hours while she stared at me with those big blue eyes; I was late night drinking with the Harveys; I was taking funny pictures; I was part of the family; I was loved; I was getting yelled at by my dad; I was not wishing that bitch a happy mother’s day; I was telling him to tell her to get over it; I was flying back home; I was surrounded by girlfriends for my birthday; I was fighting with Stephanie; I was getting my first tattoo; I was having commitment issues with it; I was trying to be mother’s daughter; I was visiting my grandpa at the hospital; I was not understanding why I had to do this alone; I was wondering where everyone else was when my mom was in the hospital; I was going to the club with Nadia; I was blacking out drunk; I was looking at nursing homes for my grandpa; I was partying for New Years; I was laughing with Kamelah and eating Chinese
food in DC; I was entering a new year of life; I was feeling alone; I was wanting to move back home to DC.

2015: Part I

Starting anew. Trying to figure out my role in racial justice work. Admitting my truths in Dr. Cook’s class, curriculum theory. Attending “A Poetic Call for Justice” at USC. Marching down Huger Street. The revolution will not be televised. It will be tweeted though. Attempting research what the role is of white women in the fight for racial justice. Really dope conversation with Kamelah & Lamar & BJ and great answers from Allison & Dr. Boutte. Trying to figure it all out. Reading all of Denise Taliaferro Baszile’s work. Learning what a scholar activist is. Finally feeling free. Like this could be me. But mine isn’t pretty. Denise’s work is pretty. Empowering. But I like how she explains the world. My world never did make sense to me. Mine isn’t a pretty picture. Free, white, & 21. It’s ugly. It’s real though. So real. I’m scared of it. I hide it away. It feels good to release it though, at least from me. I have to leave NHS. It’s not for me. Mr. Bennett (superintendent) thanking me for “knowing how to teach all the children, not just a certain type of child.” He pulled me to the side to say that. Why didn’t he say that to me five months ago? He said what he said without saying it. A shared understanding that he couldn’t say in front of the other white folks. Rest in peace. “Friendship Nine” in Rock Hill, SC. Started teaching SC untold history. Orangeburg Massacre. Still couldn’t find Nottoway Black history. Spent hours researching it. So much silence in that county. Also, conversations with Malcolm about racist white folks we went to high school with. Continued networks outside SC and academia via social media and text messaging and phone calls and skype. Kamelah. Told Malcolm I remembered when I first became a
teacher, and he told me not to teach his people lies. I knew what he meant but I didn’t know how to articulate it at the time. I let him know that I didn’t have the vocabulary then but I do now. Just wanted you to know I never forgot that. It stayed with me every year as I taught Black children. It stays with me now as I do my work for the sake of Black children. And equity. Racial justice. Woke whiteness work.

From: Jennifer Doyle

Subject: Re-Analyzing Data

Date: Fri, Feb 20, 2015 at 2:00 PM

To: Dr. Hendrickson

Hi Dr. Hendrickson,

I am writing because I want to know if I will be able to see the following idea come to light:

I want to re-analyze the data from our research at JDC in preparation for my dissertation. Somewhat of a pilot study using previous data. My dissertation will be similar to what we did, but different this time around. The way I analyzed the data & the research questions would be different this time around. I was wondering if I did this for practice, would I be able to use any of it for other purposes (presentations or possible articles). I did know your name would have to be associated with all of it, which is absolutely fine. I just really want to do this in preparation, but I also don’t want it to be done in vain if I can’t use it for any other purposes other than personal. Thoughts?

I know you said we cannot go rogue with the data, but you also said that we could write up our own book club group too… so I figured it didn’t hurt to ask.

Please let me know at your earliest convenience.
Best,

Jen

**Personal Journal Entry: February 25, 2015**

UGGGHHHHHHHHH… I just got the most annoying email response ever from Hendrickson and I want to just SCREAM! *Responding to resistance with white anger again.* I feel like I just keep getting the run around from her! I keep on emailing her, asking her about my JDC work. She keeps talking about how “permission can be tricky” and how she’s so “antsy” about her work and permission forms and gathering permission from my co-researchers and including everyone on the publication (even though not everyone did the work).

Dr. Boutte helped me so much with my autoethnography last summer! And she didn’t ask to put her name on my work. All she asked was for me to include her in the acknowledgements. Why does her name have to be on FREAKING EVERYTHING??

*The power of whiteness in the academy, the hierarchy.* I feel like she’s lying about the fact that she has to put her name on everything. *Sneakiness and manipulation of whiteness.* I feel like this cannot be the way the system works. It’s completely fucked up.

And then I would have to include Lindsay and Jessica on this, even though they didn’t do any of the re-coding of data? Just because they typed up the transcripts and participated in the research? They wouldn’t be doing anything else. I’ve already looked at my data several times over in qual last summer! I have already re-analyzed it. There’s SO MUCH COOL STUFF in there. A beautiful story that will never be able to be told. I am so pissed. There’s so much good data on the role of teachers in the school to prison pipeline.
So much wisdom from the students! So much advice for us as teachers. But I can’t do shit with it?!

She keeps saying she needs oversight in the publication or any kind of presentation that I do with the data. How are you going to provide me oversight on something that you aren’t even seeing in the data? Why won’t you let this go?!!? Who used this power over you so that you are now wielding on to me?!!? Did your professors use your work in graduate school this way? Or are you just out here being selfish? Using my name, using graduate students to do your heavy lifting, putting your name on everything. Publishing left and right all over the place but really, it’s us as students who are the ones who BURNT OUT with all of this stuff! The power of whiteness in the academy. She does this to all of her students. I know all of her doctorate students. We are all tired. We all know how she co-opts our work. AND what’s worse, she keeps telling us that it’s for our benefit. Apparently, it’s done all over the academy! The power of whiteness in the academy. Allison and Lamar were telling me about it. I’m sure this was done to her, too, but SHEESH, you would think that if someone had all of this done to them, they would be a little bit more understanding. Apprenticeship of observation of whiteness. Why is she holding on so tight to this?!!? Does it have to do with whiteness? Is she trying to maintain her own access? Is she concerned that I will damage the reputation of JDC and USC?

AND she told me earlier today that I could do these book clubs in any setting. NO. I don’t want to. It defeats the purpose of my work. It does not defeat the purpose of my work. I could have conceptualized the book clubs in a similar fashion in relation to the school-to-prison pipeline, but I wanted the direct connection, the direct correlation
between schools and prisons, still holding on to my own white commitment to fighting racial injustice on my own terms and my own ideas about the legitimacy of research, completely covered in whiteness. I want to learn, from students who are incarcerated, what their schooling experiences were like with teachers. While promoting literacy. While promoting racial justice. This is just not going to work in any other setting! She keeps saying that I am making things rather “difficult” for myself, but the superintendent was all for it! He said I could get all kinds of permission. John was the one who was standoffish during the meeting in October. WTF. Why won’t she let me be great?!? Was it John (white man) who was holding power over her as pertains to access? Or was she being selfish with her Whiteness? What is the role of patriarchy here?

From: Dr. Hendrickson

Subject: JDC article

Date: Tue, Mar 3, 2015 at 12:12 PM

To: Jennifer, Lindsay, +2 others

Literacy Ladies—

First, can each of you let me know when you received this e-mail please?

Yes, I know—it has been quite a while since we last talked about the JDC book clubs. This year has been more challenging than I expected—

Based on my notes from our last class meeting, I decided to drop the third space lens and re-visit the data, substituting a positioning lens—you will see this lens reflected in this new article draft I am attaching.

It is intended for JAAL—
Not sure it is strong enough but is a good place to start—our back-up is *American Secondary Education*.

I am sending this article to you 4 for an initial read-through; sending to all 9 would be too much.

I have either written or presented with each of you so would like you to have the first solid read-through.

I need your feedback in general and then specifically on the following:

1) Based on your book club data set, does this article accurately reflect your experiences and findings?

2) I am concerned about the article having any negative tone—please read through and let me know if it does, and if so, where specifically you would make changes to be less derogatory. I am in a tough space—I have to accurately reflect the findings across book club cases that you all determined, but I want to do so in a way that is not a deficit approach—

Please be aware that we are already over word count—it can be submitted as is, but we can’t add any words without cutting somewhere else.

Could you get back to me in a week please? And please do not disseminate at this time—

Attachment: JDC Book Clubs JAAL 2.23.15.doc

**My comments/feedback on the JAAL 2.23.15 article:**

Comment #1: Why disenfranchised youth? Feels like deficit vocabulary without explanation of why they are disenfranchised. Perhaps a different term? What do we mean by disenfranchised?
Comment #2: Hendrickson: Is this the word we want to use (dominant) to name this category? Is it derogatory?

Reply from Jennifer: I don’t think your use of the word dominant is “derogatory” necessarily, but it does have a bit of a negative connotation to it, which could lead it to being a deficit term for students. Possible replacement words: commanding, assertive, or predominant…but I don’t really like any of these because they don’t “match” the other words. I have no solutions at the time.

So many findings. It’s so long. We are trying to do too much with our research by combining all three book clubs. It is clear that Dr. Hendrickson did not take any of my suggestions from my end-of-course reflection to heart. She clearly did not read Thompson’s (2003) piece that I suggested for her to read as it pertains to not othering the students, because if she did, she would see how “third space” theory was just her trying on different theories from scholars of Color without understanding differences in epistemologies. She was looking at it only from a privileged, white woman epistemology. And even more dangerously, she was completely unaware or clearly unwilling to engage in doing any of the work necessary to understand the difference.

She completely missed my point in my reflection about “othering” the students (and still called them incarcerated youth like that was their name), and she was failing to understand the many ways that the “sociocultural, political, and economic position of the researcher and the researched plays an acute role in how research is presented and therefore interpreted” (Dunbar, 2005, p. 86). In her white ignorance, completely blinded by the invisibility of her whiteness, she just thought third-space theory was “cool” to think about in relation to the book clubs—but she did not have the epistemological
background to fully understand nor respect the theory, casually disregarding it when it no longer fit into our data. Attempting to use the knowledge of scholars of Color, gained from the lived experiences of people of Color, to describe students of Color, without ever stopping to think what the lasting damaging effects of that might be on students of Color at JDC, shoots them with bullets that silence (Johnson & Bryan, 2016) by not allowing them to participate in the research, by not allowing them to have a voice in how they were represented in the research. This is the power of whiteness. This, amongst other things, is what we need to disrupt in white research, white research constructed for racial justice.

It was almost painful for me to see this representation of our work, the ways in which all of our book club research, all of the richness and beauty in our story, was lost completely when analyzed across book clubs. Furthermore, I was personally offended (in my selfish white feelings) that she had not even read the article I suggested for her but had claimed have been “waiting” for someone to bring critique up during the last class about our positioning as white women. It had never been more strikingly obvious to me than at that very moment how much she just simply did not do the work necessary to understand her racial positioning. Even down to the fact that she was concerned about a “negative tone” and “derogatory” ways of describing students. That is not? the same as approaching research from a deficit viewpoint. She was going to get deficit findings no matter what, because she was approaching the entire project as intervention for struggling readers from a deficit epistemology. A deficit epistemology that she was clearly not even willing to even attempt to interrupt.
Milner (2007) argued that “when researchers are not mindful of the enormous role of their own and others’ racialized positionality and cultural ways of knowing, the results can be dangerous to communities and individuals of Color” (p. 388). Indeed, our research was dangerous to our students of Color who were incarcerated that spring 2014 semester. Because we were not mindful of our own racialized positionality, we silenced and othered our students of Color, causing metaphorical violence.

After meeting with her in March 2018, I understood more about the dangers of whiteness. She had a million other things going on in her life, outside these article submissions, writing two books, teaching, etc. She described it as her Midwest upbringing from her father, how important it was to work so much. I understood this from my mother, and my grandmother and father. We all threw ourselves into our work, unable to ever take a break, sit still, do nothing, and process. This is yet another danger of whiteness. This is what happens when we do too much all the time—busy-ness—walking around like our shit doesn’t stink, nose-blind to the stench of our shit of whiteness. Everyone else sees it though. Everyone else smells our shit. I certainly smelled it on her.

However, I was not blameless in this either (I never am as a white person). I was playing her game and the game of whiteness in the academy as well. I wanted a research publication for my CV. Plus, I planned to critique the piece once it was published. It was clear my efforts were not going to be invested wisely in any work with her, so I planned to save my critiques and intellectual contributions for my own work, after we got it published, as a way to critique myself. Likewise, I didn’t try to interrupt too much in the manuscript, because I had a lot of other things going on in my life.
I was trying to teach myself how to feel again. I was nose-blind to my own shit of whiteness too. I was still doing too much. I was still hurt. I was still grieving. I was still unable to see all of the dangers of my busyness in my year of firsts in 2014; indeed, I was having health effects from all the stress. I did not have time to be actively engaged in doing all of the work for the book club when she was not willing to do any of the work to understand her racialized positionality (white quid pro quo; white refusal to recognize white hierarchy, white elders, white elders power). Nor was she even open to any of my suggestions. Nor was she being helpful or supportive of me and my graduation efforts. I was mad at her. So, I did what she asked, I gave two brief comments, then I sent it off. I was not going to invest more emotional energy than that into the work if she was not going to do any of the work with me. I was over it. I was tired. I dreaded going to Nottoway each day. I needed a way out. Dr. Jeffries provided me a way out via an assistantship. I had to be free.

2015: Part II

Finding my niche in the academy. So much free time. Trips. Colorado. DC. Heart break. Not being able to let Solomon go. Managing my time now that I didn’t have to be to work every morning. Freedom. Dr. Cook introducing at YHS as “one of the good white people” after reading my discussion board posts. Finding my niche in PDS work. Realizing no one really checks for you in higher ed. Hendrickson asking Lindsay and I to write a book chapter.

I call Lamar to get his opinion.

Speak truth to her power, he tells me.

I share my autoethnography and voice my concerns.
She says she is envious of my passion. Here to support me.

Says we need practitioner work though. It’s impossible not to other students.

I wholeheartedly disagree.

I shouldn’t other her or Lindsay with my interpretation of the research, she says.

She makes a valid point. Okay, I agree.

I don’t invest my emotional energy in engaging her with conversation about it though. It’s clear she is not listening to me. She tells me about “mentor moments” and to be careful not to judge others who share different backgrounds just as I don’t want the students at JDC judged and othered. She’s missing the power structures at play here. Can White people “other” other white people? Othering comes from work in particular post-imperialist, post-colonial contexts (Said, 1978). We are the imperialists! We are the colonizers! Our bullets of othering will never kill us. Our bullets of othering on the students enact spiritual murders and violence on students of Color. Particularly students who are incarcerated. She doesn’t get it. It’s not worth my time.

I am excited to write the chapter though. Finally, I feel free. I can tell the story of our book club. Teach others how to do book clubs like us. I am passionate about it. I am free. Lindsay is excited, too. We turn it into her. She changes all of our words. “Too narrative,” she says.

I want you to feel with me. This is feeling work. Why do you keep trying to take the feelings out of this work?

NAME [National Association of Multicultural Education] conference in New Orleans. Presenting with Dr. Jeffries. Poppy, one of my critical friends and a fellow educator, comes with me. Navigating resistance to multicultural education. It was a story
of the power of whiteness and the silencing of whiteness in Nottoway with the shut-down protest and the book banning incident. I just named it “powers” though. Poppy and I, having been engaged in speaking truth to power all day, go on a ghost tour. Got kicked off for calling them out on their racist and scientifically inaccurate stories. We didn’t care. We were proud. Fuck that.

AESA [American Educational Studies Association] two weeks later in San Antonio. USC paid for me. Met so many awesome people. I hung out with Lamar. Token white woman in an academic space. First time. Couldn’t perform whiteness in this space. Knew how to navigate token white girl spaces with my friends, with my Nottoway family, had never had to do it before in the academy. Didn’t realize that until afterwards. Was in complete shock and awe of the greatness that is Dr. Denise Taliaferro Baszile. I had read all her work. Probably navigated that space wrong being star struck. Didn’t even have the courage to tell her how much of an impact she had on my life. She opened herself up and found beauty. I found ugliness in my whiteness. I didn’t know how to own it yet.

Left the predominantly Black space, went to go meet Allison at a restaurant across the street. That was a white academic space. What a privilege to be welcomed and to exist in both spaces. I was behind on my independent research. I had completed my literature review. I was working on my methods. I was figuring out how to navigate the tension of my whiteness in racial justice work. Always scared I would be found out to be a fraud. Only was a fraud because I was hiding my dirty secret of the dangers of whiteness, of my family, of my ancestors. I was covered in the shit of my whiteness. I am sure people smelled it on me.
Spring Valley violence. A Black girl, violently and forcibly removed from her desk and thrown about the classroom. My internship was there. I was pissed. Why can’t we as teachers understand that these are kids and we are adults? How the fuck did that teacher have to call an SRO to get a cell phone?!? This would never happen in my classroom. No one is blaming the teacher. He handed it wrong! My kids and I shared mutual respect. Teachers need to know how to deescalate. Sheesh. Talking about the kids are entitled brats who need to respect authority. Maybe if we gave them something to respect they would? Why do teachers have these power trips?

Edits came back from JAAL [Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy]. Hendrickson pushes the edits on us, asks me and Lindsay to take the lead. She sends them to us. It’s November. I was planning on doing comps Christmas break. Guess not. I’ll do edits instead. FML. Lindsay and I meet for coffee. JAAL editors tell us we’ve used a deficit perspective. Duh. Lindsay and I are in charge. No one gets back to us really though. I hated positioning theory and thinking of ways to make the piece less deficit because the whole thing is deficit. Hendrickson was looking at the entire thing from a deficit perspective. Lindsay was learning positioning theory. I refused. We need to do the racialized positioning work. I been told y’all that. Lindsay and I grow closer that day as we shared our common frustrations with Hendrickson over coffee.

Hendrickson, Lindsay, and I meet again a month later. December. Lindsay and I present a united front about deficit terminology and what we thought was problematic. Hendrickson said she understood. But when we saw the edits, she didn’t. No one really helped us do the work. Still nine names on the paper. But we didn’t tell on the other classmates for not helping. We didn’t snitch. Whites protecting whites. We just did what
we needed to do to get it published. Ugh. I’m over it. So is Lindsay. I was supposed to do comps, I tell Hendrickson. I’m trying to graduate in May 2016. Stay another year, she tells me. Don’t rush through the process. WTF lady. I swear she just does not want me to graduate.

My heart breaks at the meeting. In a million pieces. Had spent all semester working on my proposal. Dissertation research at JDC. She tells me I cannot go to JDC for my dissertation. She tries to set up something else. There is chaos. Riots. Sexual harassment. John is texting her, telling her to tell me not to come. I don’t know this. Sneakiness and hiding of whiteness. All I knew was that I had spent all semester and the last two years working toward a return to JDC. And she was telling me to be afraid of JDC. But I was not afraid. I knew how to handle myself. I had been sexually harassed by men since I first grew boobs. I was probably being naïve. But the superintendent seemed supportive. Only people who didn’t seem supportive in the last two years was John and Hendrickson. They were a united front. Two years of MY LIFE. And nothing was going to come of it except a stupid positioning piece that was deficit AF. I almost cried at the restaurant. I actually had to hold back tears. I email Dr. Anders and Dr. Jeffries. My heart is shattered. Fuck this. I’m not going to graduate. Allison helps me navigate new ways to do research. I tell my grandma. She tells me it’s okay. I won’t graduate May 2017 either. Aiming for May 2018. I’m stressed out. Why won’t they let me be great? Look at the powers of whiteness. This gatekeeping. Are they scared because they know the type of critical work I want to do? Why won’t they just tell me that then? I cannot know what I do not know. I just know I’m being met with resistance by all the white people. I’m
having trouble navigating this space. They are beating me at the game of whiteness every time. I didn’t understand how to beat them.

Small birthday celebration. Brought in New Years with Kamelah and Rod at church. My heart was full of blessings and gratitude.

2016

Colorado with grandma. Teaching Equity and Community Engagement. Coming alive in the classroom with undergrads. Learning from and learning with future educators. Working with social justice and equity teachers! A real professor. They didn’t laugh at my corny jokes though like my high schoolers. I missed my babies. I didn’t miss those white teachers though. Teaching white students. Met more resistance. But there were some really good ones, too. And they gave me hope every week. Inspired me.


Panel presentation at USC on the role of school resource officers. The most glorious thing. I was invited to speak. There were cameras!

People liked what I had to say.

Father came to visit for St. Patrick’s Day. Counseling. He admitted he abandoned me. We were going to build our relationship. We were trying.

Shannon and Steve. My Crossbow neighbors were family now. I had a white family in SC. Coachella. Mr. Bennett dies. A former student dies. My mommy’s birthday. My laptop breaks. Lost everything. Cried and cried and cried and cried. Solomon celebrates mommy’s birthday with me. This was all the first week of May.
Who will buy me a laptop now? Missing being spoiled. Buying it myself. Can’t turn in any work for the end of the semester. Fuck this. I’m not going to graduate. I don’t need to graduate. It’s okay. I know enough. No more passion work. My heart is broken. “Take the summer off,” Grandma says.

Georgia for Maddy Sue Sue’s graduation from high school. “It always takes a Doyle to straighten us out”. I was part of Coey’s family now. I was a Doyle Wallace now.

Kansas with Grandma. Putting flowers on the graves of our ancestors. All of them gone. Ghosts of the past. Such a complete contrast to the 100+ people I am related to on my dad’s side. It must be lonely for my grandma. We bond and have so much fun. She reminds me of my mommy. I am learning all my past history. I don’t tell her I know our dark family secrets of the shit of whiteness. I just wanted to hear her stories. I asked her thousands of questions. I wanted to know everything. I was her and she was me. We are all tied to our ancestors. Why don’t we know this as white people? It can be beautiful and horrible all at the same time.

Tasha’s wedding. Token white girl. Bridesmaid. Beautiful. I was family.

Hendrickson wants to submit to ECTP. Sure. Whatever. I can’t even think about school.

Yep, looks great. Submit.

Cross country road trip with Nadia. Best two weeks of my life.

Dad on family vacation with his new family, only 4 hours away from me. Didn’t even tell me. It’s not like I wanted to come on family vacation anyways, but you could have at least told me! We fight horrifically. He is going to disown me. I am broken. I am mad.

Why can’t he understand where I am coming from?!? Angela texting me. Leave me alone.
Come back from two weeks on road trip, one week home with my grandma, refreshed and renewed.

Dr. Cook builds us a community of scholarly love. I have academic friends now. It translates everywhere. My critical friends. JaMill, a fellow graduate student, in his first year of the doctorate program, also a chronic worrier. We grow very close. He helps me navigate spaces. Be unapologetically me. He could tell I was part of the community. I laugh when he says this. How did he know? I calm his anxiety, but really I tell me to calm down, too. I have bad anxiety too. These are the dangers of doing too much. I didn’t even need to take classes. I could graduate. I needed to be inspired. Inspired, I was.

Aspen trees with grandma. The most beautiful thing. Adventures of Jen and Grandma are a thing now. We are so beautiful. But I still perform whiteness. Proper ways of being around her. Things you say. Things you don’t say. I’m getting better though. The more time we spend together. I am growing closer to her. Allowing myself to be more of me. All of me. Free.

NCTE in Atlanta. Presented our book chapter. Presented with other folks who also wrote book chapters. All of us working “behind the fence”. White woman who presented before me said her work wasn’t critical, but that she didn’t need for it to be critical. Sometimes the act of reading and writing was worth it alone. I don’t agree with her. But she catches me off guard. I guess her point makes sense? Our book chapter was really critical. Our whole work was critical. I froze. I didn’t want to not be critical. She critiqued me before I even went, saying we did not need to be critical. I was nervous. I critiqued her with our work. I answered all of the critical questions from the audience after. I knew what I was talking about. Why did I let that woman make me nervous? Hendrickson says we have a
diversity of voices presenting in this work. I look around the room. All of us are white women. Here presenting. Diversity how? Us white people, we define diversity funny. Hendrickson and Lindsay and I meet at NCTE. Talk about the edits. ETPC [English Teaching Practice and Critique] reviewers tell us revise and resubmit. Lindsay and I are a united front. I will talk back to her, I say, you just cosign. But we are NOT doing this unless we are the only authors. This is not fair. Years’ worth of work. Reviews are so great though. Focus on one book club. Make it critical. Talk about positioning. It was a beautiful affirmation of what I had been saying all along. Lindsay agreed that it was what I had been saying all along. We were both fed up. We tackle the edits. No comps again over Christmas break, I guess.

Christmas sucks. JaMill said his did, too.

At least I had Nadia to hang out with back home. My bestest friend in the whole wide world. Who cares that the rest of your mom’s family is the worst? Your grandma is still great. Your uncle and all them, though? Fuck them. I am sad. I have been orphaned for Christmas. But I am not letting myself be sad. You don’t need them. It can just be you and your grandma. It must be me though, I laugh. No one liked Mommy and me. Now they don’t like Grandma and me. Are you all scared of our feminine authority? How we can exist outside the confines and control of you men?!? We don’t care!!!

I turn 29. Three cities in one day, December 30. DC. Columbia. Atlanta. Doing too much. I have many blessings to be thankful for. Always remember that, Jen. Remember to let yourself feel, too.
2017

Determined. I will graduate this year! Busy, busy, busy. Slow down. I can’t! Life is everywhere! Running around. Meetings with community partners for EDSE 500; teaching; classes; supervising; professional development schools work; so busy! I get to Statistics class late. Where is JaMill? They all ask me. I text him. That’s weird. “Yo, did you drop stats?” No response. Break time. Girl next to me. Is this him? Yes, I say with a side eye. You don’t know him. Why are you talking to me about him? “I think he died.” Tears. “What?!” A friend of a friend posted on Facebook. “Tell the others,” I whisper. I run outside. Leave me alone. You didn’t even know him. I have to call people. This isn’t true.

Dr. Joyce King lecture. One week later. JaMill should be the one here. He worked way harder than me. I am unworthy. I don’t know why I’m still here, I will go on for him.

Why doesn’t anyone at USC care about him? We all ask that as students. Stop trying to co-opt his work. Our professor wants to publish his stuff. Publish a piece as a class. No. You all did not know him. That is JaMill’s work. Not ours. I am selfish with my grief.

Meeting with Dr. Long. Autoethnographic dissertation. The validation of one’s story. The joy I felt in my heart. Determined to do comps. No spring break. Worked at grandma’s house. All day with Nadia. It was beautiful. We were growing.

Working all through the PDS conference. Same article with Hendrickson. Revise and resubmit. Asked me to do the positionality piece. NO. Fuck that. I’m not doing this work for US when I am the only one who did it. Lindsay does it. Hendrickson still doesn’t. I attach the articles I sent her in 2014 again (Milner, 2007; Thompson, 2003) and the one the reviewers suggested (McCorkle & Myers, 2008). I tell her we need to consider this.
She sends me back a positioning statement that proves to me she never opened the articles. Lindsay and I are FRUSTRATED. We are a frustrated team. Every time we send our stuff to Hendrickson, it’s changed. She doesn’t get it. Deficit! SUPER DEFICIT! Stop trying to change it. We did this. “Allison would flip if she saw how we were taking up qual work,” we say. We go back and forth. Back and forth.

Then we stop resisting. Sure. Whatever. Fuck it. Publish it.

We need to be done with this.

Three years’ worth of work. And you weren’t even going to let me get a dissertation out of it? Oh no.


Mommy’s birthday, May 3.

Josh’s funeral in Iowa the following week. I cannot cry. I never processed JaMill’s death.

I can’t believe Joshua Tree is gone! It can’t be.

I agree to do summer research work. I never get paid. I never say anything. I turned it in late anyways. I know I am unreliable. I am overwhelmed. I never should have agreed to it. I am always doing the most.

Kansas with Grandma. This time I take her to the *Brown v. Board of Education* museum though in Topeka. She learns many new things. I am so proud. We talk about being liberated. Being free. Liberated from the oppression of men. Never having to answer to anyone. I like that she’s becoming a feminist. She asks if I’m a lesbian. I am shocked.

OH MY GOODNESS, NO!
Summer is a blur. Colorado for a cousin wedding. Another wedding with Nadia. Jacksonville to visit Coey. She makes my heart smile. Charlotte to visit David. Solomon is mad at me, rightfully so. Back to DC. I have too much going on.

August. FINALLY our work is published. ABOUT TIME. WE CAN BE FREE! I’m not even that excited though. I’m just tired. I am sad. I don’t understand why I am so sad. Solar eclipse. I realize I don’t want to keep doing the same things. I don’t know how to interrupt these patterns. Philadelphia for Made in America music festival. Dancing in the rain. Stealing kisses. Fighting in the street.


December. Cleanse. Cut off all the people who aren’t coming into your tomorrow. They all have to go. Goodbye. Clean out your house. So much toxic energy. This cannot come into 30. Golden birthday. 14 women from 5 different states. So full of love. Everyone was doing things for me. I felt so bad. Nadia and Poppy kept yelling at me to sit down, go take a nap. As I laid there, feeling bad, I asked myself, “Why do you feel like you don’t deserve for people to do nice things for you?” Interrupted that thinking. Right there. You deserve love. You do so many nice things for so many people all of the time. But you’ve also done some pretty messed up things, too. Lied, manipulated, you’ve been a sneaky,
sneaky white girl, playing innocent. Own all your shit. Be a woman. Take ownership over it.

You had too much going on. Clean up. Clean out.

Prepare yourself for all that will come in 2018. Envision it. You are worthy.


Birthday dinner. Token white girl. 14 Black women. “Do you work with all of them?” the Black woman at the table behind us asks me. No. She’s confused. “Do you know them from work?” No. They are my friends from home, from college, from high school, from work, from Columbia, from Texas, from Georgia, from DC, from VA, from NC, all over. Here to celebrate me. My heart is so full. I am humbled. So full of love. You want to ask how I know all these Black women though. I heard what you said. I’m sure it was confusing. That’s okay. I’m me. I’m free.

Look who walks into your house on NYE. Blessings. Someone who lets me be me.


My spiritual sailing sister.
CHAPTER 6:

REFLECTING ON THE BOOK CLUB

(THE DANGERS OF WHITENESS)

An Open Letter to Dr. Hendrickson

You were supposed to be my mentor.

My academic mother.

Support me.

Help me grow into myself.

But you didn’t.

You hindered me.

Why didn’t you want me to grow?

I needed love so badly.

I was so broken.

I wanted to be so vulnerable with you.

I wanted you to see me.

To understand me.

To grow me.
I wanted you to be a woke white woman with me.

I kept trying to speak truth to white power.
You were the white power.
You told me you didn’t mean to wield this power.
But our intentions don’t matter.
You were powerful.
Always.
Over me.

You confused me with Shannon in 2009.
Undergrad. Third or fourth class.
You told me I had missed two days.
Sent me a really nasty email.
I printed it out. I still have it saved.
I re-read it recently.
I wasn’t absent though. Shannon was.
You didn’t even know my name.
What I looked like.
To notice that I was, in fact, there.
I had loved that class that day too.
I was beginning to switch my mind away from law school and on to education.
I was alive & excited. Raising my hand. Speaking in class.
I was no longer silent.

But you didn’t remember me being there.

Told me I had missed too many days.

To drop the course.

Try again next year.

I wasn’t the one who missed class though.

That was Shannon.

I was the other blonde girl.

But I was oh so different.

I was oh so unique.

That’s why I was crying over my second absence. I already knew what your wrath looked like. My heart was smiling that semester. I wanted it to keep smiling. But you couldn’t even see me.

You mispronounced and misspelled all of our names.

Jen with one “n” I kept telling you.

I wrote you three different emails in undergrad that semester.

That was the only thing in it.

Jen with one “n”. 
Jennifer has two.

Jen with one “n” is me.

Can’t you see?

My name is me.

I had picked this name at 12-years-old.

Told my mom I was no longer Jennifer.

I am Jen.

I declared it.

One “n”.

Jen.

I’m an adult now.

At 12.

I’ve allowed you to call me Jenn for so long I actually became that girl.

Because she’s a girl. Not a woman.

I met you when I was a girl. I am a woman now.

This Jenn with two “n”-s?

I don’t know who she is.

Only you & my uncle can’t spell my name right.

I’ve corrected you both three times.

You both hold white power over me.

You both fail to see me. To understand me.
I’ve stopped trying.
I know how to play both of your games.

It wasn’t just me though.
Jeremy was actually named Scott.
He went by Scott.
By you confused Jeffrey and Jeremy each time.
They looked nothing alike.
Except their names.
We laughed about it as a cohort.
Jokingly called Scott, Jeffrey
(even though his real name was Jeremy).
But he went by Scott.

The following year you called Desmond, Lamar.
They both were so confused.
Lamar said, “Lady, you came to watch me my first year teaching!”
They look nothing alike.
Not even in white people standards.

We laughed.
But really,
It made us sad.
How could you spend so much time with us and still never see us?!

We saw you.

See what happens when you’re so busy doing, doing, doing?!

See what whiteness has done to you?

You forget we are people.

We are delicate.

We want to be seen.

In our entirety.

We are trying to grow into ourselves. As teachers. As adults.

At the same time, we want to impress you.

You hold so much power over us.

As our advisor.

You make or break us.

That’s what you’d have us believe.

And that’s probably what we needed at the time.

It’s for sure what I needed.

I needed to be held accountable.

I loved you for it.

You changed my life.
But I also needed to be seen.

Understood.

I graduated. We kept in touch.
I wanted so badly to make you proud.
So you could see me as a colleague.


You personally invited me to join your research.
I was honored.
I’m a colleague now.
Or so you’d have me believe?

Were you hurt I didn’t do Language & Lit?
Both Lamar & I left you...

Didn’t matter.
I didn’t care.
I wanted to impress you.
Look at me! Look at me!
Mommy, look at me! I’m doing so well!
I did everything you taught me!
Look at me! Look at me!
It was unfair to you.

I know.

To project so much of my mother on to you.

But you held me accountable when she couldn’t.

And I needed that.

I had a healthy dose of scared of you.

That kept me in line.

Made me a better person.

I needed that.

I was unreliable.

In every aspect of my life.

I had all the potential and none of the living up to it.

You made sure I lived up to it.

I wanted to make you so very proud.

This is how I entered into JDC book clubs.

Excited. Ready to show off my skills. My talents. I was a great teacher.

Look, I did everything you taught me! Do you love me now? Do you see me?

I love your work with book clubs in a prison setting.

But I want to make it my own.

I don’t want to take your work.
I know it’s yours.
You hold it tight to your chest.
Afraid it will be stolen.
Has this happened to you before?
Why are you so protective over your work?
Sharing is caring...
But it happened to me too…

You had a “mine” attitude about it though.
I’m an only child. I know what that looks like.
And that’s okay. It was yours.
You told me to make it mine though.
And then didn’t let me see that through…
I could sense you didn’t really want me to do this for my dissertation.

I had to be strategic.

So I was delicate with my footsteps.
Careful with how I trekked around your work.
Because it was YOUR work.
I knew it was your work.
But I also knew there was a piece of you who didn’t want me to uncover that truth.
That all along this was YOUR work.
Not mine. Not ours. Yours.
I tried to respect that.
I tried to make sure I didn’t step on your toes.
I pretended like I didn’t see you holding on to your research with a unrelenting grip.

But I saw you.

Not right away.
But I saw you fairly quickly.

I could feel just how many ways you did not want me to do my work at JDC.
It was a tension.
That was yours.
Not mine.
I was stepping on your toes.
I knew it.
You knew it.
We both felt it.

This unspoken tension.

I tried not to.
I tried to ask your permission.
I tried to make things right.

To do things the right way.

To allow you to teach me.

I asked your advice on CRT & racial justice work.

You were supportive at first.

Then you weren’t.

You just ignored me.

I asked for your advice & you ignored me.

Kept telling me, “I got your email…”

But we were going to wait.

Now is not the time.

You said that so many times in class.

I kept emailing you.

After the semester ended.

Over the course of the next couple years.

Now is not the time.

I wanted this so badly.

I kept asking for your advice.

I wanted you to support me.

In more than just your words.

Your actions.

Now is not the time.
I'm here to support you.

But now is not the time.

Your said you were supportive.
Your words said that.
But you were not.
Your actions said that.

I wanted to be free.
I needed to be free.
I needed to be me.
But you kept trying to make me you.

You kept trying to make me write like you, do research like you, analyze data like you.
Perform your ideas of school.
Be your ideal student.

It was all tied to whiteness.

I knew how to do that.
I knew what you wanted from me.
I knew how to be your perfect student.

I knew how to perform whiteness.
I had been doing it my whole life.
And that was fine for undergrad.

It worked okay in my masters.

But I wanted to be a doctor now.

Your colleague. Your mentee.

Not your student.

I wanted to be me.

I wanted you to help you grow me into me.

And actually, no it wasn’t fine in undergrad. Nor my master’s.

Because I felt I had to be a better white person, perform whiteness better.

Just imagine if I was not white? Then how would I feel?

The type of school you required from me was a stifling school to me.

Drastically different from the freedom to explore ideas that I was finding in CRT.

I wanted freedom to explore.

Make it work. I was determined.

This was racial justice work.

True racial justice work.

Woke white woman work.
I was going to take a problem I saw in my school, in my classroom, in my life & enact change.

Disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

You kept telling us we were using social justice theory & social justice always meant racial justice in my head. But I didn’t have the language to articulate that yet.

My racial justice toolkit not yet formed.
I just knew what I knew in my bones to be true.
CRT racial justice work was the embodiment of this social justice ideal you claimed to love.

But I sensed you didn’t know what true social justice was. Raced and gendered and queered and sexed and oriented and located and positioned and historicized and AND and…
I knew what it was in my soul.
I had been living this. Breathing this. Unable to name this.
But feeling this. To my core.

This work was my life.
CRT was helping me name it.
Deliberately fight back against it.
I wasn’t crazy.
I knew this.
I saw this.
I recognized this.
I saw the effects of it in my family.
With my friends.
This was how the world worked!
I could name it now.

My racial justice toolkit was coming together.

I was developing the vocabulary to talk about these ideas.
Rather than just sit in anger and disgust as I felt the injustice around me but was utterly unable to speak on it.
Unable to interrupt it.
I didn’t have the tools.
I couldn’t speak the language of truth.
But I was learning. I was reading all the work.
Bell and Crenshaw and Yosso and Solórzano and Delgado.
I was reading legal studies work.
(Knowing now why I never wanted to go to law school.)
Feeling Gramsci’s hegemony in my bones.
Seeing it everywhere.
Not knowing how to name it.

But I was trying.

I was trying to learn how to write against myself.

I couldn’t give the students at JDC a voice.

They already had one.

I couldn’t give them agency.

They already had that.

I was trying to work my way through the literature.

Synthesize the readings.

I was so used to making connections. That’s it.

I had to synthesize now.

What does that even mean?

Dr. Anders wants more reflection.

I’m trying.

Her purple pen inspires me each week.

Her feedback was delicate.

She asked me questions.

Made me go deeper.

Have you thought about this?

Say more here.
What do you mean?

Connect it away from personal all the time.

Connect the readings.

What do the systems look like?

What are the consequences of our actions?

What happens to our babies?

(I saw they are my babies because all the children are mine. Not in a possessive way but in a way that shows that I care about them like a mother.)

But not like my academic mother.

You were my academic mother in 2014.

Before Dr. Jeffries.

I felt so betrayed.

The book clubs felt like freedom at first.

A place for me to develop curriculum.

To do my passion work.

My heart work.

My woke whiteness work.

CRT felt scary at first.

It was opening me up to myself & I was scared to see what was inside of me.
The ugly truths.

The truths I had never named.

The truths I had yet to fully admit to myself.

Dr. Anders was so raw.

So unapologetic.

So honest.

So real.

So authentic.

I wanted to be that free.

CRT made me feel that free.

She held this mirror up to me with CRT.

Pointed me back to myself.

I was scared of who I would find.

I was scared of me.

I knew I had to be unapologetically me.

But I didn’t like who I found.

I didn’t want to be her.

But I already was.

And the only way to interrupt that is to write against yourself.

Actively.

Go against yourself.
Challenge yourself.

She challenged me gently.

Caring.

Nurturing.

Just asking questions.

Always sending me back to me.

Asking me to consider other things.

Think deeper.

I just wasn’t all the way ready.

I didn’t want to see.

It was scary.

It was me.

Woke Whiteness Work

I wanted to be one of the good white people.

But I found there were so many ways in which I just was not.

And then I learned the dangers of being one of the good ones.

I know it’s not about me though.

That’s selfish.

This work is about disrupting systems of racism.

That’s woke whiteness work.

Take yourself out of it.
It’s not about you.
It’s about racial justice.
It’s about the cause.
That’s woke whiteness work.

Wake up other white people.
That’s woke whiteness work.

That’s woke whiteness work.

CRT brought out all that dark truth in me.
I was scared to see the truth in me.
But past that initial scare, it’s free.
So free.
So full of love & gratitude & abundance & blessings & all the things that fill my heart with joy!
I’m no longer scared of me.
Because I know my ugly truths.
I know how to work against them now.
I know how to do woke whiteness work.
But I own all my ugly.
All the violence.
All the pain.
All the detrimental consequences of my unchecked whiteness.
I sit in my shit.
I own it.
Because this work is necessary.
For the sake of the children.
I always bring it back to Dr. Boutte.
For the sake of the children.

That is my passion.
The kids.
The people.
The work.
Humanity.
Love for humanity.
Outside of me.
I can talk about me all day, but it’s pointless if I do not take that work to use it to always do better for the sake of the children.
That’s woke whiteness work.

And now I have other white people to do this with.
Coey & Madalyn & my grandma. Dr. Hendricks.
Working with white students at USC.
Engaging in equity work and working with communities.
That’s woke whiteness work.

I’ve had other white people in my critical community to do this with.
Allison and Kayla and Lindsay and Stephanie.
(I should probably try to make friends with some white men.)
But that’s woke whiteness work too.

Waking up other white people.
That’s woke whiteness work.

Making sure other white people stay woke.
That’s woke whiteness work.

Speaking truth to power.
That’s woke whiteness work.

Always being sure to be informed by people and communities of Color.
That’s woke whiteness work.

Always making sure we are trying.
No days off (Wale voice).
But also knowing that trying sometimes isn’t enough.
Not in racial justice work.
That’s woke whiteness work.

Getting out of white feelings.
That’s woke whiteness work.

Knowing that this is life and death WORK.
That’s woke whiteness work.

Knowing that you cannot care about your own feelings more than you care about people’s lives. The lives of Black and Brown babies, students, communities, young boys, young girls, men, and women, PEOPLE—their very breath.
Not letting our feelings get in the way of our goals for racial justice.
That’s woke whiteness work.

Sitting in our discomfort.
Owning our white shit.
All the white violence. Rape. Murder. Exploitation.
Literal and metaphorical violence.
All our past mistakes. All the mistakes of our ancestors.
ALL of that shit.
Sitting in our shit.
Owning that shit.
It’s yours. It’s mine. We stink. You can’t get it off you.

That’s why white people smell different.

We smell like shit. All the time.

That’s our scent.

Own it.

Try your best to clean up the next generation.

Try your best to scrub off the blood, sweat, tears, bodies of Black and Brown folks from your generation, from older generations, from new generations.

But know that no matter how much you scrub, you’re still going to smell like shit.

We as white people are never going to be all the way clean.

Our own white history of terrorism makes that impossible for us.

There is no such thing as purity in whiteness.

Our notions of goodness are all the way fucked up.

Own that shit.

Sit in your shit.

Sitting in shit doesn’t make you dirty.

(It doesn’t make you clean.)

Okay, it does make you dirty.

But it doesn’t have to be this “either/or”

You can be dirty and trying to be clean at the same time.

“Both/and.”

Both always dirty and also always doing our best to be clean.
We aren’t going to escape it. It’s going to follow us.

We can spray as much perfume as we want
(Us white folks love covering up our shit with perfume)

But the fact remains, people still smell our bullshit.

They smell our shit.

The shit of our white ancestors.

Just because we have become nose blind to it,

Nose blind from centuries of acting like our shit don’t stink,

Doesn’t mean we don’t still smell like shit.

There’s not enough Febreeze in the world to take care of this shit.

It’s with us always. In our systems. Ingrained in society.

We cannot escape this shit!

We will ALWAYS smell like shit.

But Bell (1995) tells us that we don’t have to be scared of the permanence of this.

Because this racism thing is permanent.

This shit that we smell like, that’s permanent too.

But Bell tells us that there is victory in the continued struggle.

I am telling you that there is victory in the continued struggle.

Own your shit.

Train your nose to smell your own shit.
Start sniffing out other white folks and their shit.

Call them on their shit. Always. Even it hurts.

(Be productive with how you do it though).

Always come from a place of love.

The anger you feel? Don’t hurl it at the wrong people.

Grow into yourself. Even if that self smells like shit.

Especially because that self smells like shit.

But remember,

You can ALSO

Be gentle with yourself.

Take yourself back to the purest parts of you.

(Even while knowing there is no such thing as purity in whiteness).

There’s a place of home inside you.

Go back to that place.

Take yourself back to where it all started.


I brought myself back to where it all began.

Where I first felt most at peace.

You can do this “both/and”

You can BOTH return yourself back to the purest part of you,
AND also know there’s no such thing as purity in whiteness.

We will always be complicit in racism, because we are white.

Applebaum (2010) told us this.

This complicity is inescapable. It’s permanent. Racism is permanent.

Bell (1995) told us this.

We will always smell like shit.

I am telling you that.

Now get over yourself.

Smell your shit. Get used to the smell.

But don’t you ever for a second stop smelling it.

Stop trying to breathe through your mouth.

Even if you think you can’t smell it,

Other people will always smell your shit.

No matter how much you try to hide it.

So stop trying to hide it.

No matter how hard you try.

You will ALWAYS smell like shit.

We will smell it anyways. They will smell it anyways.

We will all smell it on you a mile away.

Strangers will smell it on you in the subways.

Don’t be one of those allies who smells like flowery shit.
You’re not going to make your shit smell any better by hiding it.

Now your shit just smells like flowery shit.

But it still smells like shit.

So own that. Stop trying to hide it.

Don’t apologize to everyone about it.

“Sorry, I know I smell like shit”

Bitch, we know too!

You don’t have to say it.

Just own it. Inside you. Outside you.

Don’t be afraid to smell like shit.

Cuz guess what?

That’s YOU!

Be unapologetically you.

Don’t run from your shit because it’s scary.

Don’t hide from it because you don’t want to smell like shit.

I don’t really care if you want to or not.

You will.

You will ALWAYS smell like shit.

So stop complaining about it.

Stop whining & making everyone feel sorry for you because you smell like shit.

That is not going to make you smell any better.

It’s just going to make other people mad.
It’s just going to make me SUPER MAD. Big mad. Not even little mad. Big mad.

Because I’ve owned my shit. Own your shit too.

Seriously, just think about it.

Sit and think about your white fucking logic.

How incredibly insane and backwards it is.

Just sit and think about that shit.

So, you walk around, smelling like shit every morning.

You were born smelling like shit.

You, your people, your mom, your grandmother, your aunts, your uncles, your dad, your ancestors, your cousins, your European white people, allllllllllll of y’all (all of me),

We all smell like shit.

But because we are white, our people raise us to be nose blind.

But their people raised them to be nose blind too.

So it’s not about playing the blame game & deading the conversation.

It’s about ownership.

So know that.

Own that.

A Poetic Call for Historical Justice

We as a people, us white people, we BEEN smelled like shit (in our whiteness)

For CENTURIES. Longer than that.

We BEEN smelling like shit for longer than we haven’t been smelling like shit.
Walking around like our shit don’t stink.

Since before the Dark Ages. Before the Early Middle Ages.

Us white people, we weren’t really doing shit.

Eastern cultures, African cultures, Asian cultures, North American native cultures, South American native cultures, Middle Eastern cultures—all these other cultures before we named them our white names.

They were all out here thriving. 1000BC.

Farming out in Kenya. The earliest evidence of such.

Cultivating rice out in Japan.

Refining gold and irrigating out in Peru.

Creating alphabets out in Egypt, developing letters from hieroglyphics.

Smelting and forging iron for tools in Nigeria.

Building dynasties out in China.

Everyone else was out there minding their own business.

Making sure they and their people were great.

Cultivating entire civilizations, building greatness.

Self-sustaining greatness.

Tending to their own gardens. Growing their own seeds.

But us white people just can’t STAND to see someone doing better than us though!

So much jealousy. So much power. So much conquering. (It doesn’t have to be “either/or,” you know.)
Just because they are out here being great doesn’t mean that you aren’t also great.

Maybe you’re just better at other things.

It’s okay to be better at other things.

Not everything is for us.

Other people’s greatness doesn’t take away from our own.

We’ve never known this as a people though.

Why have we never known that we ALL can be great?

All at the same time. Always “both/and.”

Why don’t we know that? Why didn’t our white mother’s and father’s teach us that?

We could have been out here trying to cultivate our own civilizations like the rest of the world, you know, tending to our own gardens. Growing our own seeds.

But nooooo, we had to be out here taking over things, trying to build empires.

We wanted more and more and more and more.

Always more. It was never enough.

We could have been building dynasties too, you know.

Dynasties right there in our spaces. In our own places.

Tending to our own gardens.

Cleaning up our own shit. Refining our own shit.

Putting our own shit back into the soil, using it as fertilizer to grow our own seeds.

That’s how we could have made sure our own shit didn’t stink.

It would have stunk in the garden, but it would have helped us grow.
Our shit would have grown our own seeds, fed us, nurtured us, sustained us.

For centuries and centuries to come.

We could have kept our shit to ourselves back then,

Used our shit as nourishment for our soil,

Grown ourselves into ourselves,

We could have been great on our own.

But nooooooooo, we soiled ourselves in our shit, didn’t even wash ourselves free from it, and then had THE NERVE to go take everyone else’s shit?!? Their land. Their resources. Their gold. Their riches. Their people.

We just ran around, covered in our shit, and forced everyone else to deal with us.

While we walked around smelling like shit.

That’s why we can’t wash away this shit now.

That’s why today I smell like the shit of my ancestors.

So full of shit.

It’s a part of my scent.

While everyone else in the world was using their own shit as fertilizer, tending to their own gardens, making sure to grow themselves into themselves,

We (Europeans, white folks) could have been doing the same thing.

We could have been out there minding our own business, using our shit as fertilizer, cultivating our own civilization, building greatness. Working collectively.

Tending to our own gardens. Growing our own seeds.
Enriching our own soil with our own shit.

Shining on our own. Embracing our own shine.

We didn’t have to steal anyone else’s shine to be great.
We had some shine too. Bronze work. Refining metals.
But that wasn’t enough for us. It was never enough.
We wanted to trade for riches and gold. And people. But not white people.
It wasn’t enough for us white folks to stay in our lane.
Mind our business. Cultivate our own civilizations. Build our own greatness.
Grow our own seeds. Shine on our own. Embrace our own shine.

Nope. We had to take over all of Europe.
Colonize it. Build empires in the name of holiness.
Spread our Celtic culture all over Europe. Trade. Exploit.
Bombard everyone with our Holy Roman Empire.
Mine mine mine. Take take take.

We needed more more more. Always more.
Once we had more, we could be happy, right?
That’s how we maintained power.

Just look at us white people, expecting to find love in all the wrong places.
Always looking for love and happiness elsewhere.
In other lands. In other cultures. In others.
Us white people, taking over things, trying to build empires.

We could have been out here trying to cultivate our own civilization like the rest of the world. Knowing their greatness didn’t mean ours was lacking.

We could have been better at other things. Our own things.

Instead we got better at taking things. Exploiting things.

We thought cultivating our civilization meant expansion.

Taking over.

It was never enough to mind our own business.

Maybe we didn’t see the beauty in our homelands.

It was cold and dreary and dark.

Maybe we didn’t see the beauty inside us.

Inside our home lands.

I don’t know.

Maybe no one taught us how to love ourselves.

How to love humanity. Unselfishly.

Mudita. The opposite of jealousy.

We don’t even have a word for this type of love in English.

We just always needed more, more, more. Always more.

So much more than we never learned how to properly love on ourselves.

How to tend to our own shit before trying to take over other people’s shit.

Walking around smelling like shit.

Walking around like our shit don’t stink.
We all got shit. White people just hate to admit it.

We don’t know that we can use it to grow.

That’s why we smell like shit now. That’s why we can’t erase it.

This is why I smell like shit. Today. Always.

No wonder we had the Dark Ages.

We weren’t out here using our own shit as fertilizer.

So then we just sat there in our own shit. In the dark.

Our shit became a part of us. A part of our being. A part of our DNA.

Our shit is now passed on forever generationally.

Just because we didn’t have the foresight to use our own shit as fertilizer back then.

Instead, we forced our own shit on to everyone else & stole all their beautiful shit (things) they grew using their own shit as fertilizer.

Meanwhile, just out here smelling like shit!

THEN, got the NERVE to call ourselves “Enlightened” after we “woke up” from the Dark Ages. The Early Middle Ages.

You know why it was dark?

We were covered in shit.

Just sitting in our shit. Never even cleaning our shit up. Never figuring out how to use all of our own shit as fertilizer to grow ourselves into ourselves.

While in the meantime, in between time, while we sat in our shit,
Egyptians, Africans were flourishing.

Building entire universities, educating their people, all people, for the sake of humanity.

Knowing a candle never loses its light by lighting the way for others.


Fighting for a common goal. A common love for humanity. Unity.

But what do we do? All covered in shit?

Take something that was so beautiful, so insightful, so wise, so intelligent.

All of that knowledge, wisdom, art, ideas, thinking, intellectual property.

We as white people just had to take it.

Just couldn’t stand to see someone doing better than us.

In our heads, it was EITHER we were going to be great OR they were going to be great.

Why couldn’t we just see that, collectively, we could have all been great together?

But we couldn’t see that then.

We couldn’t see it before then when we were taking over all of Europe.

We sat in our own shit in darkness for ages, then used their ideas to manipulate them into our own white logic. Our own “enlightenment” and our own ideals.

Meanwhile, we are still COVERED IN SHIT.

Claiming to be enlightened.

BULLSHIT.

Taking over the world. Still taking over the world.

WE ARE SO FULL OF SHIT.
We still didn’t get it. We didn’t learn our lesson as we sat in our shit in the Dark Ages. We could have got ourselves out of it, had we just learned to turn our own shit into fertilizer. To grow ourselves.


We took this knowledge from the East and from Africa, we used it to become “enlightened,” (still smelling like shit), then we had to spread this toxicity everywhere. It was all bullshit. It wasn’t ours. We made it ours by covering it in shit. Manipulating it to fit our own selfish ideals. We were claiming it as our own but it wasn’t ours. Not to begin with. It wasn’t our own shit, that we grew from our own shit. It was our taking of other people’s shit. And we used their power to promote our own selfish needs. It was never enough. More land. More gold. More riches. Expand. Expand. Expand.
Colonize. Enslave.

Then, now that we were enlightened, we said
“Aww, woe is me! I’m being persecuted! They won’t let me be free!”
So we came to America, found indigenous people thriving.
We saw them out here shining!
And ooooo we were MAD.
“Oh no, this will just not do!”

Nope. Y’all are gonna take our shine.
It’s either me or you, buddy.
I’ll tell you what, it’s not gonna be me.
(How many times have I heard white people say this???)

So instead, we said,
Here, let me trick you into giving away your shine.
“Yes, that’s it, use this really warm blanket smallpox blanket. This radiation blanket. Yes, here, here, that’s it. Lay it down. Look, it’s okay now. You’re safe. We love you. You’re wrapped in our “blankets of love.” We are doing this for you. You are going to better for this. I promise. Shh, shh, it’s okay now. Go to sleep.” Die.

Mu-ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!
We laughed evilly.
Gimme, gimme, gimme.
Take, take, take.
My land. Mine.

But wait, oops. Fuck.
I forgot, we never ever did learn how to grow things.
How to use our own shit as fertilizer.

“Hey, I’m sorry for being so mean,
Can you show us real quick?
I didn’t know that smallpox blanket had smallpox.
I swear!
Come on, man, you see us out here STARVING on your land.
You know you want to teach us how to grow corn.
It’s the right thing to do, you know.
The Christian thing.
You see us out here, emaciated. Famished.
We’re not going to last through the winter.
I know you know that.
Come on, we didn’t mean it.
It was a misunderstanding.”
We trick you into helping us.

Using our whiteness and our white sense of morality and our white Christianity to tug at your heart strings with our white feelings, just so we can further our own selfish gains.

Hendrickson did this to me.

I did it to Lindsay.

Then, I did it right back to Hendrickson.

We both hid our real intentions.

Our real goals.

We used our whiteness and the sneakiness and the manipulation of whiteness to strategically manipulate people to reach our own goals.

We used the same tactics.

I cannot claim to be better than her just because my goal was racial justice.

Because when we think the end goal justifies the means of getting there, We’ve already fucked up right there. White Machiavelli.

I want to, I reallllyyyyyy want to say that because my end goal was racial justice and because my heart was in the right place as I played the game of whiteness all these years to further my goal of racial justice, that somehow what I did was okay.

It was not.
Dr. Hendrickson’s heart was in the right place too. Social justice work. That’s where her heart was. She didn’t see that there is no room for good intentions in social justice work. Only room for action. Your good intentions don’t mean shit. Neither do mine.

Here we both are trying to rationalize (through “enlightenment”/western/white logic) all the harm we have caused as means to an end that justify it. No. Absolutely not. Western, European, white logic is what got us into this mess in the first place. Own your shit. Sit in it.

I don’t care if your racism was unconscious (Lawrence, 1987), dysconscious (King, 1991), aversive (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2004), well-intentioned (Lawrence, 1987), or was simply just an effect of systemic white ignorance (Applebaum, 2010). At the end of the day, we as white people are all complicit. We all smell like shit.

Our good intentions don’t mean shit. You still smell like shit. I still smell like shit. We all—all white people—smell like shit. We cannot escape it. History is what it is.
But we cannot move forward unless we own it.

Unless we sit in our shit.

Even now, to this day, as I write this, I am full of shit.

I have used CRT and the work of authors and scholars of Color and the wisdom of Black folks—that wisdom that was handed down generationally, that wisdom my people tried to destroy—I used all of that wisdom, all of that intellectual property, all of that knowledge, to create this.

I cannot escape my shit.

I need the rest of y’all white folks to own your shit too.

And stop trying to apologize for smelling like shit.

Just look at your white logic here!

This is why I was so angry! This white logic doesn’t make sense!!!

And it’s dangerous! Let’s look at the effects of it!

WAKE UP! OPEN YOUR EYES!

So for poetry sake, I am going to imaginatively step outside myself here for a second, in order to practice writing against myself (Noblit, 1999) in a way of talking to myself and my fellow white people, yelling at you and us, if you will, so you can really capture the gravity of the situation here. Because this is some serious shit.
First, I know I cannot ever disentangle my writing, my thoughts, my words, my feelings, my ANYTHING, from my white self. My white body. My white mind.

So please know that going into this as I school you (me) on your (my) stupid white logic.

I will call you, you. But know that I implicate myself here too.

I am writing here as embodying “woke whiteness work,” a shared commitment to the cause of racial justice. Fellow sailors.

I am writing to you, embodying this woke whiteness, aligning myself in coalition with woke Blackness, not to co-opt it, but to say, I am ride or die with this shit. No questions asked. I’m with the shits. I ain’t taking no days off. It’s a part of me. A part of my being. A part of my soul.

I also write in African American Language not because I wish to be Black or because I want to be “cool” or because it’s the “hip” thing to do and I think it will make all the Black people like me or somehow it will make me more “woke”.

Nope. That’s not how that works.

I literally think like this. In this language. And I know how fucking up that is.

I tried very hard to fight it. Not to co-opt the language. Not to acquire it. Not to use it once I had accidentally acquired it. But that’s the thing about language.

If you’re around it long enough, you acquire it.

You dream in it. You think in it. You speak in it.
You are engulfed by the language.
Smothered, covered, and capped in the language.

And what a beautiful language it is, but it is not mine.
So I know how fucked up that is.
I know how it sounds, this language, coming out of my thin, white lips.
I know how I come off when I use it.
And I don’t mean to offend, but I know that because I am covered in shit, at all times, it does not matter if I don’t mean to offend with it. I do.
All I can do at this point, is own it.
I own my shit.
Own your shit too.

An Open Letter to (Almost) Dr. Jennifer Lynn Doyle

This is dedicated to the (almost) Dr. Jennifer Lynn Doyle.
But this is for all the other white folks too.
OWN YOUR SHIT! (Your shit of whiteness):
First of all, we smell like shit.
“Me and you
Your momma and your cousin too” (OutKast, 1996)
All of us.
We BEEN smelled like shit.
As far back as I could go, our people BEEN covered in shit.
BEEN reeking of shit.

Everyone else here has smelt it.

Just because we’ve been out here nose blind,

Sleep,

Not yet awake,

Doesn’t mean that we haven’t always smelled like shit.

We have always smelled like shit.

Own it.

Stop trying to mask it, hide it, cover it.

Cuz now you just smell like flowery shit.

But you still smell like shit.

There’s no “poo-pourri” for white shit.

So you mine as well get used to it.

I know, it stinks. It’s uncomfortable. You don’t like it. You’re scared of your shit. You want to run away and hide your shit. You want to bury your shit. “Ahhh, don’t look at me and all my shit! Avert your eyes!”

Trust me, I get it, I did that too.

But guess what?

Ain’t no hiding places anywhere here on God’s green earth that will ever, and I mean EVER, be able to hide your shit. We will always smell like shit.
So, dear white people, dear miss jennifer lynn,

Get used to smelling like shit!!!!!!

Own that scent, girl.

Own the fact that our ancestors covered us in their shit.

Never learned how to do shit except take.

Never figured out how to turn their own shit into sugar.

Past on all their old shit to us.

We can’t escape it.

Own that shit.

Own all of it.

But don’t be out here feeling sorry for your shit.

Don’t apologize for your shit.

We got more important shit to focus on than your own white feelings.

We don’t have time for your stupid apologies.

Your I’m sorry-s don’t mean shit.

White people, we love to apologize for shit.

Drown other people in our guilt.

Get that shit out of your head.

It’s wasteful. It’s not a good use of energy.

Just because you say sorry doesn’t make it right.

What makes it right is your ACTION.

That’s woke whiteness work.
As Solomon told me recently,

“There’s room to be an ally, but we already know the past. No need for any more days of atonement. I’m over it”

(personal communication, 7 March 2018).

So yes, I had to tell myself too, STOP PUTTING YOUR GUILT ON EVERYONE ELSE.

Us white people just lovvveee to do this.

Basking everyone in our sorry-s and explaining, explaining, explaining.

Stop trying to put that shit on everyone else.

Let’s WORK WOKE INSTEAD.

I mean really, let’s think about this white logic of apologies:

First, you smell like shit.

Everyone smells your shit.

We BEEN smelled your shit.

But now that all the sudden you’re no longer nose-blind to it, we gotta hear about it all the time?!? You’re gonna bombard me with your shit TWO TIMES now?!?

Miss me with that.

Do that work on your own.

You ain’t telling me anything I don’t already know.

That’s what I want to say to you.
That’s what I have said to you.

But that’s me and my white feelings too.

As a white person, trying to do woke white woman work, it is, in fact, my job to hear about your shit sometimes. Because I woke you up. And because it shouldn’t always have to be (and indeed never should be) the job of people of Color to have to listen to our shit about our own shit.

That’s the job of woke white people. Do that woke white work.

But like I told you in Chapter 3, don’t expect me to be super patient with you.

We got important woke white work to do.

Expect me to call you on your shit.

Expect me to lovingly heal you after I break you,

But know that my love is going to look a little different than you want it to.

I won’t apologize for that.

This is life and death work.

This is NO DAYS OFF. NO BREAKS. NO VACATIONS.

We don’t have time to bask in white feelings.

We’ve got important woke whiteness work to do.

So please know, that I will try my very best to put aside my anger towards your white tears and white feelings.

Because my anger towards you is my woke white woman feeling.

But it’s a white feeling nonetheless.
So I can’t sit here and talk about you and your white feelings and all your white tears, without also acknowledging that I, too, have white feelings. And mine is anger. (Which I’ll get back to later).

But it’s a white feeling nonetheless.

And white feelings are counterproductive to the woke work we are trying to do here in the pursuit of racial justice.

Take yourself out of it. Always.

(Thompson, 2003).

So really, I guess what I meant to say above was,

Instead of miss me with that shit,

Miss people of Color with that shit.

Don’t bombard them two times,

First with the stench of your white people shit and then again with your white feelings about your white people shit.

It’s not fucking pleasant, always having to smell other people’s shit all the time.

So don’t add insult to injury by making people of Color sit there & listen to you whine & complain & apologize & “woe is me” all over the fucking place with your white feelings and your white tears and your white fucking guilt about smelling so disgusting all the time.

GET OVER YOURSELF.

We have more important work to do here.

Your white feelings are counterproductive to our goals of racial justice here.
We get it, you smell like shit. I smell like shit too. Own it.

Let’s move forward.

But when I say own it, I don’t mean talk about your ownership of it all the time & tell everyone all the time how much you “get it” how “woke” you are now that you can smell your own shit. Cuz that’s not owning your shit. Take yourself out of it. Always.

But also, it’s important to note here, before we move on, that my white feelings of anger are still white feelings. And what a privilege it is for me to sit here and yell at you in this dissertation and know that there is no stereotype of an “angry white woman” that will be attributed to me because of my anger towards you and your white logic.

Because I have white logic too.

And my white feelings of anger are as equally detrimental and destructive when they are presented in spaces and places of Color when it is my woke white job there, in that space, to just shut up and listen.

Similarly, my white feelings of anger are also detrimental and counterproductive to the goals of racial justice when they are flung about so violently so as to shut down what could have been productive conversations with my fellow white brothers and sisters.

And I’m going to call all of you white sisters and brothers.
Because for a verrrryyyyyy long time down here in the South, I really tried to disown y’all. I tried to distance myself from my fellow white preservice teachers in grad school, I tried to distance myself from my fellow white teachers at Nottoway High School. I tried to distance myself from my fellow white sister-scholar, Lindsay, during the research. I tried to distance myself from y’all for years. I’m not gonna lie. I was mad at y’all!!!! I’m still mad at y’all. I’m so very angry with y’all for JUST NOT GETTING IT.

But I can be BOTH mad at you AND still love you.

At the very same time.

In fact, I’m so mad at you because I do love you so much. I love me so much. I love my family so much. I love my people so much. And it is because of this deep LOVE for y’all that I am SO FREAKING MAD at y’all for not being able to own your shit.

But also, with me and my white logic, I was out here not owning my shit either.

White hypocrisy.

I AM SO FREAKING MAD AT ME TOO!

Just walking around in a perpetual state of anger 24/7.

Flinging my words about violently.

Feeling righteous in my anger.

My anger, my white feeling, prevented me from truly experiencing love for y’all. And for me.

It prevented the true development and nourishment of true white-on-white love.

Critical love.
And it is because of this love, this deep, genuine love, that I must offer these critiques.

It’s okay to be both gentle and critical at the same time. Indeed, true critical love work demands such gentleness.

But know that gentleness does not mean you get to excuse away your shit. Own your shit. Accept responsibility.

I can critique you with tough love, harsh words, and then hold you in gentleness afterwards. All at the same time. That’s critical love.

Critical love is owning all of your beauty and greatness.

Knowing that both beauty and ugly exist within you, always.

At the very same time.

Owning all of your shit; knowing you are the shit.

Simultaneously.

**Woke Whiteness Work: Recruiting Sailors**

When you become woke, you will start seeing other people in their sleep. And it might feel like betrayal, I’ll warn you.

When you’ve been trying to figure out if you white sister is woke, because she hangs out with nothing but Black folks, but you know something ain’t right, but you don’t know what it is, so you have to ask your spiritual sailing sister a really difficult question, and she tells you the really difficult answer that you’ve always known, but you have not been able to name this feeling, but your spiritual sailing sister can name it right
away, because this is her lived experience, but you still want to give your white sister a chance, because you want her to be a sailor, too, and you need her to be a sailor, too, and so you ask her if she thinks she’s woke, and you give her the dictionary definition, and she reads it and says, “Lol no not if woke is like Macklemore rapping,”

But you have been in this woke whiteness work for months at a time now, so you just keep on asking her more questions, hoping to reveal herself to herself like Allison revealed yourself to yourself, too,

“That’s a critique of woke in whiteness & white people who claim to be woke just for brownie points,” you say, and then you ask, “Privately, would you consider yourself to be woke?”

She gets nervous right away, trying to laugh it away, “Oh okay lol clearly didn’t read that one thoroughly. Yeah I would,” you hear her say.

“In what way? And why?”

“I would say that overall knowing the systems that put in place to suppress groups especially black communities, and knowing the injustices that go on, being able to identify when things aren’t equal”

But you know what you know in your bones to be true, you know this white girl isn’t able to identify when things aren't equal, because you’ve had these conversations with her and your spiritual sailing sister, and you kept getting so mad hearing the things coming out her mouth, she was full of shit, and you hated her because you saw so much of yourself in her, that used to be you too! It still is, you.

So you keep working with her, trying to help her reveal herself to herself, “What is the difference between being woke / staying woke / working woke?”
“And what, if any, is the difference between being an ‘ally’ and being ‘woke’??”

“Also, can white folks be woke in the same ways that Black folks can be woke? Is there a difference? Are they the same?”

Your white sister responds right away.

“Hmm.. I think being woke is knowing and not denying the injustice, staying woke maybe speaks more to continuously being aware of the different ways that injustice happens everywhere and who it is affecting and watching how you play into it. I’m not sure about working woke. I would think that may have something to do with how you work towards fixing the issues and realizing what you can do to contribute to a change”

You know right away, you’re peeling back layers to herself that she doesn’t want to see, that you’ve known to be true, you can’t be woke if you don’t also do woke work. There’s no way.

“Do you think you do woke work?”

“Sorry I don’t mean to interrogate, I just don’t have many white friends lol”

But why did you/I say that last part? That’s your/my own whiteness coming into play. You are trying to trick her into revealing the answer that you already know is true, but real wokeness work has no room for this deceit and manipulation of whiteness! You cannot escape it though. You, too, are white. Playing into whiteness. It’s all around you. It is you.

“I think being woke is really knowing the issues and being able to see them without people pointing them out and you want a change for equality even if it doesn’t affect you. I think an ally may be more someone who will agree when a topic is pointed out and they know they should join the cause it’s the right thing to do.”
“I think I try to when I can but I don’t go out of my way to help as much as I could”

“Lol it’s okay,” she responds, “Sorry for my short answers I’m writing this and my grant application lol.”

You see right away you’re peeling back layers to this whiteness and she’s getting uncomfortable because her answers really have not been short, and she’s been responding back right away.

But you’re missing, initially, until you go to write it up, that you are playing into your whiteness, too. Apologizing for things you aren’t even sorry for. You’re not sorry to be peeling back these layers.

You are doing it on purpose.

So why are you trying to pretend like you aren’t? That’s not woke whiteness work. But you are always complicit in playing these games. Because you are white and you are full of shit, covered in shit, and you have to keep owning it every day, in every way, continuing to critique yourself, continuing to disrupt your own dangerous patterns of thought, attempting to erase, “I’m sorry” from your vocabulary but it’s second nature to play these games, you don’t know any other way. You’re trying, but you’ll never get there completely. You’ll always be complicit in racism. This is what Allison meant by that on the first day of class back in January 2014.

So you continue on with your woke whiteness work.

“No worries. Take your time responding. Don’t need immediate answers.” you let her know. You try to get her to be honest with you. Give her time and space to be honest
with you. “Can you give specific examples of ways that you work woke?? Of examples of when you ‘try when you can,’ perhaps how might ‘go out of your way’ & perhaps all the ways you ‘could’ do woke work? “You want me to call and go through these or texting them is better?”

Deflecting blame. I see you. Cuz that always is me too.

“Texting or email. Email is preferable. Does not have to be today,” you say.

“Okay yea I can email them to you”

“You’re awesome. Thanks love!”

See what you did there, Jen? Made another white power move. Complimented her to get her to do what you wanted. Just say what you mean directly. That’s owning your shit. You don’t have to play these power games with your words.

You know right away that your white sister is just not woke. You’ve been known this, but for some reason you are delighting in revealing this in her. You know why? Because you, too, are full of shit! You recognize it completely. You see all of these things you’re doing to her, are all of the things you had to do to yourself, and you want her to see herself for who she really is because you want her to be free too…all the while knowing you can never be completely free from whiteness…but this is damn near the closest thing you’ll ever feel for it, because you know this woke whiteness work is never ending, that you will have to continue to do this work over and over and over again for the rest of your life, continuously disrupting your white thoughts and your white logic and your white power moves.
You talk to your spiritual sailing sister that night. No judgement. Four hours of honest, deliberate conversation on how to disrupt our own thoughts, all of these toxic thoughts we have in our head, how we’ve been thinking in white supremacy and patriarchy and how we can deliberately interrupt those thoughts in our head. How we can help our friends when we see them going through these things; how we can stop enabling our friends to make all of these bad decisions; how we can be supportive and nonjudgmental of our friends; how we both know that we, too, are not innocent, we love to drink and party too! Shit, we still do!

But we know what that looks like in our family. We know that can’t be our path. But we can still have fun, too.

We are just trying to work woke right now, trying to become sailors in every way, trying to be spiritual sailor sisters and children of God, spending four hours on the phone on a Friday night at the house, unwinding from the exhaustion that is being woke all the time and having to navigate our anger when everyone around us is dreaming, and talking about how woke whiteness work looks different than wokeness work as a Black woman, and how my anger has to be expressed differently if I want to work for racial justice, but her anger is righteous and powerful. I read her Audre Lorde’s work aloud on the phone. I send her the article. We are deliberate with our readings. Our reading of God. Our readings of scholars and authors and poets of Color. Our readings of wokeness, in all ways. Our readings of the world. Our readings of ourselves. It’s honest. Through and through.

We share our deliberate readings. We share our experiences. Finding similarities and celebrating our differences because we know it will never be the same experience,
we live in two different bodies, the world interacts with us differently because of these white supremacist power structures, and we know this, but we are bonded together as spiritual sailing sisters, so we talk about our differences, we reveal the power structures that we both know from our own lived experiences, we name it, and in that naming, is power. Collective action in the collective struggle. That’s wokeness work.

We navigate all these spaces together, joined together as spiritual sailing sisters. We are just trying to keep sailing on, keep on figuring out this wokeness work together, always interrupting our thoughts deliberately, talking about how to become more deliberate children of God, how to re-train our brains into thinking in “both/and” and un-learning all of the things we thought we knew from an “either/or” point of view.

We are doing this wokeness work. Day in and day out.

We want our friends we love to do it with us, too.

We are concerned about our friends with our drinking problems.

We say our because we know it’s in us, too.

We are concerned about the lack of growth.

We ask ourselves why, why is it that our friends always talk about the old you?

I’m not the same club queen I was.

I’m not the same party girl.

AND also, while we were doing all of those things, we were ALSO building our careers, too!

Why does our white sister think we weren’t?

We were partying but we were also building our lives too. At the same damn time.

(Future voice.) I thought she was too…
We’re trying to be women now, own up to our mistakes, unapologetically live through them, knowing that no matter what, the glory of God is that he always welcomes you back into his kingdom, singing, “God, didn’t give up on me!” (Deitrick Haddon, 2004). This sailing work can never be done alone. You need fellow sailors. People who love you. People who love humanity. Critical community.

We keep building critical community. Recruiting more sailors. Sailors of racial justice. Doing the work of God. We are making plans for how we are going to disrupt the systems. Her in DC. Me in SC. Collaborating. We have ideas for book clubs. Ways to join people together via social media. We are collaboratively loving humanity. Fighting for humanity. Spiritually sailing through life!

It’s beautiful and glorious and free. To be so unapologetically me! Our hearts fill with the love of God, and how He has so divinely rekindled our friendship in His name this year, revealing to us all of the ways that he has been divinely and deliberately placing us in one another’s lives for the past 10+ years—keeping us close enough for this year to happen, yet far enough away so that we did not drag one another down in our spirals of self-destruction that were our teenage years and our 20s.

We know we have found spiritual sailing sisters for life in one another, that we are going to continue to push ourselves to disrupt our negative thought patters of “either/or”, learning to trust ourselves again, allowing ourselves to feel, always trusting in God, continuously finding strength and joy in one another’s friendship, knowing that we will
continue to keep sailing on through all of the calm and angry waters of life—separately, together, and never alone.

We want our friends to join us on this spiritual sailing journey.

Won’t you join us too, friend? We love you.

But our white sister, she texts me back this morning, “Good morning. Sorry I didn’t get to do your questions this weekend. I was writing a stupid grant proposal. Do you still need them? I can email you everything today.”

“Whenever you get a chance,” I say.

She forgot that I know her location at all times on my phone.

She knows mine too. We are sisters. We were bonded in the deceit of whiteness, playing men because it was fun. I had to own up to all of my mistakes though, God kept teaching me that lesson time and time again until I finally learned to listen. You cannot be unapologetically you if you have any ounce of dishonesty in you. It just does not work like that.

You have to own all of you. Own all of the things you have done to other people, own all of the things people have done to you, own all of the things you have done to yourself. Open yourself up. Let yourself feel, sister. Learning how to stop playing pretend with yourself, lying to yourself about your feelings. “It’s okay, I’m okay…” is what I used to say when I was hurting.
I was not okay. It was not okay for those things to have been done to me. It was not okay for me to do those things to myself. It didn’t have to be okay. There was beauty and freedom in allowing myself to not be okay. I had to break myself to heal. Owning all parts of me. Even the ugly. Especially the ugly.

I was covered in shit. I was covered in the shit of my whiteness, fully incapable of owning every part of me because I kept hiding pieces of me from others, from myself. I could not be free until I owned all the darkness. The darkness was in me. But past that darkness was light. They existed together. Yin and yang. With so many other areas of gray. Because none of it exists in binaries.

I had to own all of it. All my shit.

I had to especially own all of my beauty.

I had to stop feeling bad when people tried to do nice things for me.

Why do I feel like I don’t deserve love?

Because I do.

Why do I put myself in situations that will never give me love?

Because I do that too.

Interrupt that. Own yourself in your glory, your wickedness, your evil, your heart.

Own your people, yourself, your society, own all of it.
Then, having acknowledged your worth, learning to love yourself and all the parts of you—both the beauty and the flaws—working every single day to enhance your beauty, critique your flaws, own up to your mistakes, and do this as a way of being, an existence, a constant disruption of thoughts, actions, speaking up, speaking out, speaking together, collectively working towards becoming a sailor—only then can you begin to be woken up.

Only then can you realize that the world is full of contradictions. We cannot change that. It is the “either/or” white supremacist world we live in. But what really matters is how we navigate those paradoxes.

The chaos will always be there. Doesn’t mean we have to entertain it nor seek it out nor live in fear of it. Stay the course and navigate the chaos in productive ways. Without fear. Become a sailor. Despite the chaos. Because of the chaos. Instead of the chaos.

But the journey to becoming a sailor starts with you.
AFTERWORD

As I sit here, at my spiritual sailing sister, Kamelah’s house in Northwest DC, spread out across her dining room table, finishing up my edits for my dissertation that are due tomorrow (Monday, April 23), I ponder the consequences of wokeness. I have just spent the last week at home in DC, surrounded by friends and family. I brought all of my work with me, determined to keep working while I was home. I was excited to be here, back in DC, surrounded by love. I had not been home since the first week in January, when Kamelah and I first spoke 2018 into existence on a frigid, negative-three-degrees night at Busboys and Poets in DC.

When I first came home last week, I did not know that my wokeness would mean that I was able to see all of the ways in which I was living a fantasy, for years. I have not been able to stop thinking about one of the questions I received at my defense: what is the role of self-care in wokeness? I decide to take a break and talk to Kamelah and her boyfriend, Rod, who just got back from church.

“Hey Jen! I brought you some lunch from Panera. I know it’s your favorite for dissertation writing. I also got you a cookie. How’s it going? How are the edits coming along?” Kamelah asks me.

“Aww, Kam, thank you so much! Thank you, also, for letting me finish up my writing here. There was so much toxicity at my grandmother’s house. Not because of her,
but because I just had too many feelings. I had to escape my feelings and get a change of scenery!” I reply back to her.

“Right, I always tell Kam I love doing work at her house! It’s so peaceful here,” Rod says.

“Yes, it IS so peaceful! But yeah, my edits are going. I just have so much anxiety because I spent so much time upset this week! The dangers of wokeness are REAL! I wasn’t ready to find out that my BEST FRIEND wasn’t woke,” I respond.

“Listen, we done asked God for the truth back in January, and He delivered! We weren’t ready for the truth—haha! But in all seriousness, I know it hurts right now, but we have to remember that people can only meet us where they are at themselves. You cannot make someone else join this spiritual sailing journey of wokeness with us. We have to love people anyways—though, sometimes, that love has to be from afar. We have to be clear about our boundaries, and we just have to keep sailing!” Kamelah advises me with a giant smile on her face.

I was heartbroken by this woke realization of brutal honesty and truth. I had to come to Kamelah’s house last night to escape my heartbreak and continue to write, determined to finish. Our entire friend-circle was toxic. I was toxic. My grandmother’s house felt toxic. I needed to get away from it all. I needed to be surrounded by love. Non-toxicity.

I found refuge at my spiritual sailing sister’s house—a beautiful brick row house in Northwest DC that her grandparents bought in 1952 for $11,000, after they were pushed out of Georgetown because of all of the white economic development: gentrification before gentrification was a word. Now, we are watching gentrification
happen in DC yet again: Kamelah’s neighborhood is no longer a Black community, and most of her neighbors are now white. Her mother was raised in this home, in this Black community that is no longer Black, and Kamelah has built a life in this home. This is the home I have found refuge in—a beautiful home with beautiful people and beautiful energy. No toxicity. I do not want to be a toxic person anymore. I want to be woke, I want to stay woke, and I want to work woke. Deliberately.

Lost in my thoughts for a moment while Kamelah and Rod chat about the church service I missed today, I turn my attention back to them in the living room: “I seriously cannot thank you both enough for getting me lunch and letting me hide out here to finish. It has been such a crazy week!”

“Of course, Jen! I am just glad you are able to get your work done. Whatever you need, there’s tons of stuff in the fridge, too. I just cannot believe all of that craziness with everyone! I get it, everyone is ‘and’ and ‘both’ but that whole friend circle is toxic!” Kamelah replies, “No judgement, I still love all of them, but that is not the type of energy we need to be around right now. We can love them from a distance, but that is not how friends treat friends.”

“I know, but I was complicit in it, too, for years. I just do not want to be that person anymore. Not everyone is ready to come on this journey of wokeness with us,” I respond, “and it is not our job to force them. But I really did not want to leave my best friend behind.”

Rod quickly chimes in, “Yeah, it’s hard at first. You have to watch out who you surround yourself with, Jen. I realized this when I first was in law school, and I was trying to bring my neighborhood friend from back home around all these events I was
going to, because he was super smart, introducing him to all these people—mayors, councilmen, influential people—I was using my political capital with all of these influential people, but he wasn’t doing what he needed to do on his end to also have that political capital. I realized I had to be careful about the people I was surrounding myself with. I had to learn how to observe people and patterns and behaviors. You really have to watch how they treat other people, because if they have no boundaries with others, no moral compass, and you know this from watching how they interact with others, they most definitely will do that to you. There will be no boundaries in their lies. You have to watch out for that so you do not keep getting dragged back down into that same logic and same mindset, especially if your end goal is to help the entire community. In order to do that, you have to make sure that you can get to a high enough position to be able to reach back out to entire communities and help your communities. You cannot help anyone, though, if you are not helping yourself. You cannot help yourself if you keep getting dragged back down. You have to separate yourself from toxicity, so you can help entire communities. You cannot have one foot in and one foot out."

I ponder his words carefully. One foot in and one foot out. That was me. Trying to exist above the friend circle and all of the lies. Still operating within in. Still lying myself. Still being a mean girl. Still lying, while trying to live authentically.

“That makes a lot of sense to me. It does not matter how badly I wanted anyone else to come with me, I cannot want something for someone else. And I really have had one foot in with that whole friend circle from high school, always stepping back to my old ways; and one foot out in South Carolina, doing the work I needed to do outside of them. I never realized this before. It reminds me of the nature of research. In order to be a
researcher, you have to be a part of a world and apart from it. You have to straddle the lines, but you cannot straddle the lines. You must always be a part of and apart from.”

“Yes,” Kamelah interjects, “I love that a part of and apart from! Because we need to stay connected with our communities and never forget our past or the people who helped us get here, but we have to distance ourselves as well, at the very same time. Always AND and BOTH.”

“Always sailing!” I exclaim.

“Yassss! Always sailing! Can we help with anything else?” Kamelah asks.

“Actually, yes,” I reply, “I have been going back and forth since my dissertation defense about something two of my committee members asked me. Do you guys have a minute to chat?”

“I would love to stay and chat, Jen, but I have to go. I’ll leave you two to catch up for a bit. I just wanted to stop in and say hey while you were here!” Rod replies as he put his jacket on, kisses Kamelah goodbye, and heads out.

“No problem, thanks for all your help, Rod! I really like that one foot in, one foot out advice. And O-M-G, it was seriously LIFESAVING to learn how to combine documents on Word! Thank you!”

“Glad I could help,” Rod smiles, “good luck finishing everything!”

“Thanks, Rod!” I reply appreciatively.

As Kamelah says bye to Rod and walks him to the door, I continue to ponder his advice about being sure not to have one foot in and one foot out. *I have to operate in the clouds, in this wokeness work, yet always remain grounded and connected with communities. I have to be careful not to judge, and I have to always come from a place of*
love. I have to always take myself and my selfish feelings out of wokeness, yet I have to allow myself to feel. I have to practice discernment, and I have to be deliberate about aligning my actions with my intentions. Sometimes this alignment means I have to distance myself from toxicity in friends and family. This does not mean they are bad people. It does not negate any of the love. It just means we must continue to keep woke working, so that we can continue to build and grow for the sake of collectively striving for racial justice from a collective place of love. There is no room for lies and manipulation in wokeness, though. I have to release my own toxicity. I have to take care of myself, so that I can take care of fellow humanity. Unselfishly loving myself, and unselfishly loving humanity.

As Kamelah closes the door, I return my thoughts to the present moment. “I have an hour or so before I have to go meet Robyn for lunch,” Kamelah says, “so we can chat for a bit. What can I help with?”

“Awesome, so I’ll make it quick,” I state. Kamelah sits back on the couch, attentively listening while she snacks on some Chex Mix. I begin my explanation.

“So, in my defense, my advisor, Dr. Jeffries—she’s like my academic mother—wanted to know, how was this wokeness and this dissertation bigger than just me? Just me as a white woman.”

“Good question! I wish I could have come to your defense!” Kamelah states.

“I know; it was a random Tuesday though! But yeah, so I paused for a moment in my defense, and told her that wokeness and my dissertation was about ALL of humanity at the end of the day; love for humanity, and collective fighting for racial justice. So that
we all could exist in harmony, fighting for justice, collectively together. It was about collective love and collective action.”

“Well, yes, this wokeness is always about others!” Kamelah asserts. “This wokeness work is about striving for, like you said, collective justice and working together, collectively, to demonstrate God’s love in everything that we do and for everyone that we encounter—even those people we may not agree with, and even those people who may have done us wrong. We have to keep working, collectively, for racial justice. It is a blessing that we are this woke, that we can engage in this work, and that we can continue to grow our own seeds for harvest, but we always have to remember that this wokeness work is always bigger than us. It is always about humanity as a whole.”

“Yes, that’s what I said in my defense, too. Critical love for humanity. I thought that I illustrated that point in my dissertation, but Dr. Jeffries brought up a good point as well. She told me that I must have mentioned the word ‘white’ at least 5,000 times in my dissertation, and that is what made it seem like it was just about me, or just about whiteness—which is counterproductive to woke whiteness work or any racial justice work. Then, she asked me why I was only calling out white people with my work. She asked me why people of Color automatically got a pass for being ‘woke’ just because they were not-white.”

Kamelah laughs, “Girl, now you know not all of us Black folks are woke! Shoot, we’ve had this conversation about people we know numerous time this semester—haha! So it’s definitely important that you don’t just give Black folks or people of Color a pass on wokeness just because they are Black.”
“Yeah, I mean, that’s what she said too. But Kamelah, that is not even my place! What do I look like, with my little white self, calling out a Black person or a person of Color for not being woke?!!?” I ask.

“Yeah, but what do you look like if you don’t?” she counters.

I pause for a moment to ponder. “Damn, You right,” I say almost to myself. “I mean, I guess that is what Allison—the white woman professor I’ve been telling you about—told me in my defense, too, though. She told me that I will never escape the charge of being a called ‘white savior’ and because I am white, my messages of wokeness will always come off different, but that I cannot let that stop me from woke work. She told me that’s where I have to learn how to practice discernment.”

“Yassss! Discernment! This is what we have been talking about all semester! I just love Allison every time you bring her up! Look at me, talking about her like we are old friends—haha, I don’t even know her—but really, we have been learning how to practice discernment all year. Always coming from a place of love and non-judgment. Setting boundaries. Being deliberate. I think you have to be cautious with the ways that you go about these wokeness conversations as a white person, but, seriously, we are just going to give Black folks a pass on assumed wokeness just because they are Black? Nah, that’s not how that works! This work is too important! Plus, I ain’t even gonna lie, I get tired of always calling out my people!”

I smile, appreciative of our many conversations and the wisdom Kamelah shares with me. “Actually, that echoes what my advisor, Dr. Jeffries, said in my defense. She said that she was tired of calling out non-wokeness with white folks AND then also with people of Color.”
“Yessssss! Jen, it’s so disheartening when it comes from someone who looks like you! You almost expect it from white folks, like, I just expect this from all the white women I work with. I’m legitimately not even surprised by it even more, and you know this because we’ve talked about it all semester. But now I know how to interrupt non-wokeness with my mere presence in those spaces at work with these white people. But when it comes from other Black people, it’s so frustrating! All of the divisions amongst ourselves as Black people breaks my heart. Especially here in DC. The intersection of class here is insane! There are SO MANY successful Black people who just really do not care about the community and are doing nothing to give back or mentor younger generations. You know the type, they want to go to all these day parties and turn up and talk crap about Republicans and Trump, but they don’t want to do anything about the real issues or help with our inner city schools or give back to our communities. But then, they are quick to shut down any productive conversation that could bring about real change, just too busy worrying about poppin’ bottles and showin’ out for the other Black elite. But where are we doing REAL work?!?" Kamelah asks urgently, “Why aren’t we giving back to our own people and pouring into our own communities?”

I nod my head in agreement, “Yeah, we see a lot of that in this area especially. It’s much different down in South Carolina.”

“Girl, YES! And sometimes I get tired of calling out my people on this all the time, so if you can do it with your book or your dissertation or whatever platform you have, you should! No one should get a pass on this wokeness. It pertains to all of us! We all have to work together, collectively, to fight these divisions. I know it’s going to be
slow and steady progression, but when we are deliberate with this work, look how much we can accomplish!”

“Yeah, I mean, you make excellent points…but I don’t think I can go about it in quite the same way I did in my dissertation. I use all kinds of cuss words and everything! I am going to have to be strategic in how I go about calling out anyone other than white people on their lack of wokeness,” I respond.

“That’s where your discernment comes in, Jen, but it’s important that white people share in this burden of fighting for racial justice, too!” Kamelah reminds me.

“You are absolutely right. I will just have to watch out how I say things, who I say things to, and how I go about the calling out of folks. Things will always be taken differently coming out of my white lips.”

Kamelah nods her head in agreement. “Yes, and I think you just need to be aware of that, and deliberate, but, again, I do think it’s important that you call out not only white people in your dissertation. Us Black folks, we ain’t always woke! Shoot, I wasn’t even always woke! At the end of the day, people will have their thoughts and opinions about your work, particularly because you are white, and you will have to hear them and discern what is applicable for your growth, and what is an attempt to discredit the cause through you. You will always have to be aware of folks who don’t have anything to do with your mission and purpose and who are only trying to bring you down. If you aren’t careful, the enemy will speak through these people and have you doubting and questioning yourself. Don’t let that happen.”

“Yes, that’s good advice,” I acknowledge as I take in her words.
“I think you just need to keep in mind that this collective action woke work for racial justice that you’re doing, this is God’s work that you are engaging in. And we both know the journey is going to be difficult—there has been evidence of the difficulty of this journey especially in the last week with everything going on—but look how much we’ve grown in just this one semester! Since our conversation in January! Look at how God has been deliberately placing people in and out of our lives so we can enact change, together! Seriously, Jen, it’s almost overwhelming and too much to handle!"

I smile a heart smile, thinking of how much we have grown in the short, four months of 2018 once we decided to start deliberately aligning our actions with our good intentions. We have accomplished so very much.

“Yes, Kam! You are SO RIGHT!” I exclaim.

Kamelah adds, “Jen, I don’t know what the feeling is that I am feeling, but I am so blessed! My heart is so full! I am so woke! I am able to see everything so clearly, and we are building something right now. Collectively putting together a community, combining our efforts—me in public health and emergency preparedness; you in education and with your writing—we are planning things in our 30s! We are sowing seeds! So, when the harvest comes, we will be prepared to give back. I am really looking forward to our 40s!”

“Yassssssss, Kam! My heart is so full. It IS a feeling. You’re right. I cannot explain it at all, but I can feel it, too. It is like I can see everything so very clearly. What a blessing this journey has been! Heartbreak and all!”

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“I don’t know what is in store for us next, but I know it’s something big! I cannot wait for it!” Kamelah beams. “I gotta go meet Robyn for lunch, but keep working, keep sailing, and know that anything you need, I got you!”

Kamelah leaves for lunch and I sit back down at her dining room table. My heart is full of joy. My newfound wokeness, and even the disheartening revelations, have all been blessings. I have not had a bad day in all of 2018, even though I have never cried so much in my entire life. It has all been beautiful. It has been the most beautiful journey.

As I sit here, pondering this semester and the last four years, I feel I must warn you, as the reader. When you continue to be woke—beginning first to analyze power and how it operates in systems and in people around you, then how power operates within you—you will be able to recognize very clearly others around you who are not woke. You will be able to see the ways in which power is manipulated through individuals and how they use their power to manipulate others. You might also discover all of the ways in which you, yourself, have been manipulating people and how you’ve been manipulated—all of which may result in the feeling of betrayal from yourself, as well as those friends, family members, and others who you thought were woke. This is where the importance of self-care and critical community comes in. You will need to surround yourself with other woke people in order to learn to trust your instincts of wokeness. Authentic people who do not lie or manipulate truth. Spiritual sailing sisters and brothers.

This wokeness has consequences to it. At first, I called these consequences dangers—the dangers of wokeness being that it will feel like betrayal when you find out others are just not woke like you. But now—surrounded by love, positivity, and prayer—
I know that there are no dangers to wokeness. There are only beautiful consequences that open you up to beautiful people and beautiful things that await you in your future.

I realize now that wokeness is not a criteria for membership—we are not an exclusive club—rather, our collective wokeness is an open invitation for others to join us on this spiritual sailing journey. Wake up now, my friends. Join us, collectively, together, as we navigate the angry waters of racism, the smooth waters of true friendship, and the never-ending waters of life.

Good morning, fellow sailors. Welcome home.
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