

The Epistemic Uncertainty in Learning and Doing Anti-Racist Work

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Abstract

In this article, I start with an overview of two major events in 2020—the Coronavirus and the murder of George Floyd to contextualize White women’s engagement in anti-racist work. I make meaning of the learning process for other White Women as I reflect and analyze my own learning experiences using autoethnography. I offer an overview of critical whiteness studies and scholarship about White women who engage in anti-racist work. I share my autoethnographic narrative account of engaging in anti-racist work. I conclude by highlighting the hopeful possibilities anti-racist work can create for a more just society.

Keywords: *anti-racism, education, critical whiteness studies, autoethnography*

Introduction

In this article, I start with an overview of two major events in 2020—the Coronavirus and the murder of George Floyd – and use these events to contextualize White women’s engagement in anti-racist work. I make meaning of the learning process for other White women as I reflect and analyze my own learning processes and experiences using autoethnography. I begin with an overview of critical whiteness studies and scholarship about White women who engage in anti-racist work including defining epistemic uncertainty (Shollock, 2012). Next, I describe the autoethnographic methods used to collect and analyze data. I follow this with an autoethnographic narrative account of my engagement in anti-racist work. I conclude by highlighting the hopeful possibilities anti-racist work can create for a more just society.

I situate my anti-racist work and learning through three educational experiences: 1) the journey toward anti-racism; 2) the work within the @antiracismeveryday virtual workshop I attended for 9 weeks, and 3) experiencing ridicule in conservative news for a presentation I gave at a gender conference in 2021 about my anti-racist research. To highlight these educational moments, I draw from an autoethnography I have been conducting for the past 13 months that involves participating in rallies and marches with Black Lives Matter in Denver, CO, attending virtual anti-racist workshops with @antiracismeveryday, analysis of the workshop curriculum, and my experiences in dialogue with other White women. These forms of anti-racist work are imperative in the intense context of social dialogue around critical race theory and White supremacy and provide broader transformational possibilities for society.

Major Events in 2020

In 2020, the global community faced a pandemic of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, commonly known as COVID-19. Among those disproportionately affected by COVID-19 in the United States were/are Black, Brown, and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC). In addition to the global pandemic, on May 25, 2020, while stuck at home, many people found their eyes glued to the television and social media as the video of George Floyd's murder at the hands of police officer Derek Chauvin played out over and over again. The *New York Times* (2021) described the videos circulating on social media as showing George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, being pinned to the ground, face down, with his hands handcuffed behind his back while a White male police officer, Derek Chauvin, held his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck for more than eight minutes. The next day, protesters flooded the streets of Minneapolis, MN, and by May 27, demonstrations started in other major cities around the nation (Deliso, 2021). Millions of people took to the streets chanting, "Say his name!" and "I can't breathe!" (Deliso, 2021). Amid this virus, awareness of and direct action against police brutality soared. According to the Pew Research Center (2020), 67% of White people supported Black Lives Matter in June 2020.

In June and July of 2020, in social media spaces—Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, my White women friends who had never mentioned racial injustice before instantly advocated for racial justice. I saw my White women friends declare their move from non-racist to anti-racist. As a White woman, also participating in these anti-racist movements I narrate my experience engaging in anti-racist work with other White women to illustrate the learning process and offer an example of grappling with epistemic uncertainty that occurs in anti-racist work in the current social context. By "epistemic uncertainty," I refer to the grappling with identity and emotions necessary as part of the process of reconciling my complicity in White supremacy (Sholock, p. 704, 2012). My intention is not to center my White experience, but relay my learning as a White woman.

Critical Whiteness Studies: An Overview

The foundations of Whiteness Studies rests on Black scholars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. More than a century ago, W.E.B. DuBois, a significant African American sociologist and educator, anticipated that race and racism would remain one of the United States' key social issues when he argued: "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (Dubois, 1903/2007, p. 1). Dubois's (1903/2007) critique of Whiteness as a part of the problem laid the foundation for critical whiteness studies (Applebaum, 2016; Bailey, 2016; Casey, 2021; Yosso, 2005). Critical whiteness scholars frame race and whiteness within various forms of White supremacy as a socially constructed means of upholding and articulating varied institutions of privilege for White people and structures of oppression in the United States (Casey, 2021). At the same time, CWS scholars are critiqued for centering Whiteness in their analysis (Matias & Boucher, 2021).

Yosso (2005) argues that critical whiteness studies (CWS) developed from critical race theory, which also stems from critical legal theory, ethnic studies, and feminist studies. In the 1980s, CRT developed as a result of legal scholars feeling limited by the separation of critical theory and race and racism (Yosso, 2005). Legal scholar Haney López (2006) situates critical race theory (CRT) and race scholarship by constructing race historically through an examination of legal scholarship that traces how race is socially constructed through the work of anthropologists and case law. Lopez (2006) found that in law, whiteness was the norm. Leonardo (2009) traces the

construction of whiteness from critical social theory and Marxism while engaging with the movement of CWS and critiquing the call for the abolition of whiteness. Delgado and Stefancic (2013) argue that as members of a social world, social norms, practices, and structures of power that change over time construct our identities. When we write or speak about the social practices that are unfair and discriminatory, the hope is that we are contributing to a more just world (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). While scholarship about race and racism began in the 19th century, ethnic studies work in the 1980s advanced previous assumptions developing branches of critical race theory to include critical whiteness studies.

The development of critical whiteness studies can be outlined in two waves. Casey (2021) traces this history starting with scholars examining White privilege, followed by pedagogies of anti-racism with an emphasis on praxis in teacher education. Some first-wave scholars include Peggy McIntosh (1989/2014) who identified and critiqued White privilege, comparing it to an invisible knapsack of systemic advantages that White people are seemingly ignorant of carrying. Professors of teacher education use McIntosh's (1989/2014) work to begin discussions about White privilege. However, Lensmire et al. (2013) argue the continued widespread use of McIntosh's (1988/2014) article in teacher education has diminished the anti-racist work necessary in these programs to confessions of white privilege by White people. Another critique of first-wave scholars is focused on the lack of attention to the complexities of Whiteness as a racial identity (Casey, 2021). Second-wave scholars have engaged with these nuances placing White supremacy alongside and within other oppressive social structures to work towards anti-racism. Placing whiteness, White supremacy, and anti-racism in these structural spaces provides insight into the systemic assimilation and reproduction of racism in the United States and globally (Applebaum, 2016). It also creates a muddy hope for White people to become as Sleeter (2015) states, "antiracist racists" (p. 79). To Sleeter (2015), this means that although White women will always be complicit in White supremacist ideology because of their White privilege, they must learn to become active allies in dismantling racist structures. The following section builds upon this past work by taking a closer look at how White women have engaged in anti-racist work.

White Women and Anti-racism

An essential part of dismantling White supremacy, for White women, is understanding how, when, and in what ways we hold privilege and are complicit in maintaining systems of White supremacy. Making sense of our complicity is not enough to dismantle social structures. While we must dismantle these structures in our hearts, collectively we must work together to dismantle these structures socially. I articulate the work of transforming the heart as a starting point to changing White women's actions. When we, as White women, understand and grapple with our complicity, we can respond to racism through action. The road to anti-racism is not singular; it is difficult and often full of mistakes. As Sleeter (2016) explains, "White identities are not monolithic, but rather laced with spaces for learning..." (p. 1067). These differences connect in various ways with dominant social structures and a linear path toward becoming an anti-racist racist can become muddled. Here I highlight the grappling White women do through anti-racist work.

White women should fight against racism because, as Fellows and Razack (1997) declare, without fighting racism, White women cannot disrupt other systems of oppression (i.e. capitalism, class, race, sexuality, etc.) that uphold and contribute to White supremacy. Ann Russo (1991) asks White women to "analyze their relationship to race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality" (p. 299). Okun (2010) situates this relationship to White supremacy through socialization to color-blindness,

“where centuries of racism have left a toxic legacy felt by Communities of Color across the country, we are socialized into an ethic of ‘colorblindness,’ a twisted reconfiguration of the justice fought for by a culturally appropriated Civil Rights movement” (p. 18). Oftentimes White people overlook their White race because Whiteness is not seen as different or other. When White women are forced to examine racism as White supremacy, the narrative shifts from a focus on people of color to White people and a White problem (Russo, 1991).

For White women engaging in anti-racist work, Sholock (2012) proposes a “‘methodology of the privileged’ for White women that offers strategies for an effective coalition across racial and geopolitical inequities” (p. 703). White women must work on themselves, but also work together to dismantle systems of oppression. The privilege Sholock (2012) is referring to is the unearned benefit of being judged by a different set of standards based on white skin. The work Sholock (2012) proposes is for White women to rely on the stories and wisdom of women of color creating global solidarity. In addition, Sleeter (2015) asks White women to do anti-racist work “...beginning with the principle of complicity in maintaining racist systems rather than White privilege alone” (p. 180). Simply engaging with one’s privilege can lead the learner to think that racism is defined by individual acts of oppression and that by doing the work as an individual, we can dismantle racism. Instead, White women must look at systems as perpetuating racism, acknowledge their role(s) in these systems, and move forward from there.

The realization of being complicit can be challenging because this enlightenment leads White women to question their actions and sense of self – everything they knew about themselves to be true can come into question. As Baldwin (1963/2000) clearly articulates, “what passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one’s heroic ancestors” (p. 128). Denial, cognitive dissonance, feeling uncomfortable, and dealing with conflicting feelings are part of the journey of anti-racism (Linder, 2015). Okun (2010) argues that “...denial operates to preserve white supremacy” and therefore focuses her work on how White people, in denial of their privilege or even how systems of power function in their lives, begin to understand their role in White supremacy (p. 34). Matias (2016) emphasizes “the role white guilt plays in obtaining an antiracist white racial identity” and how White people in these spaces try to ignore feelings of discomfort (p. 60). This argument reinforces Lorde’s (2007) argument that “guilt is only another way of avoiding informed action...” (p. 130). Anti-racism is about addressing the feelings of complicity and taking informed action. Lorde (2007) teaches that when guilt leads to action for justice, it is no longer guilt, it is becoming knowledge. Denial and guilt are the driving forces that Sleeter (2015) emphasizes as “less on what it means to *be* White and more on what it means to act while White” (p. 79). For White women, anti-racist work is embracing discomfort and it is complicated. For those who choose to do the work it can be uncomfortable (Matias, 2016; Thompson & White Women Challenging Racism, 1997).

Epistemic uncertainty is a critical part of anti-racist work for White women because of how it contributes to the inner transformational process that occurs when White women grapple with and understand their complicity in a White supremacist society. Sholock (2012) describes epistemic uncertainty as “an important skill within anti-racist and transnational feminist movements for worldwide justice” (p. 704). Epistemic uncertainty is complex because it resides in a complicated socialization for White women under the structure of a White supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Like cognitive dissonance, epistemic uncertainty is a challenge for privileged White people to deal with especially when confronted with their own participation in White supremacy; however, “Whiteness itself must be resisted” because whiteness is the structure (Sholock, 2012, p. 706).

Epistemic uncertainty also occurs when White women come to terms with their own racism. Linder (2015) found that White anti-racist feminists experienced guilt, shame, defensiveness, and anger when confronting their White privilege. Okun (2010), describing a time when her mom told her she was racist, turns her epistemic uncertainty to reflexivity, highlighting how anti-racist work does not follow a single path or trajectory. This non-linear path is an important illustration for White women to remember and consider as they engage with the work. These emotions: denial, anger, guilt, etc. also helped White women engage with their identities and led them to take action toward anti-racism (Linder, 2015).

Methodology

I use a feminist theoretical lens to ground my work as it is gendered and raced to understand Whiteness as a cultural, political, social, economic construct. I rely on Hawkesworth's (1989) ideas about critical feminist knowing as situated in diverse and complex political dimensions to understand that antiracist processes are not homogenized nor identical. Antiracist education has complex political dimensions given the evolution of critical whiteness studies. Hawkesworth's (1989) theory allows me to situate my learning and meaning-making in the present moment (2021) as racism takes new forms and right-wing media seeks to censor and/or change the definition of critical race theory.

Using autoethnography as a method of inquiry, I engaged in weekly live virtual workshops and discussions with the Anti-Racism Every Day White Allyship Group. Every Tuesday at 6:30 pm, I sat with my computer and gathered in dialogue and learning with anywhere from 23-55 people. Of the participants each week, only 2-3 did not identify as female and all identified as White. Each week we worked with a different theme around White privilege and White supremacy that we unpacked, processed our complicity as individuals, and discussed in small and large group settings. I narrate my epistemic uncertainty using prose and poetry to dive deep into the inner processes of the transformative possibilities of anti-racist education. This autoethnography also draws attention to the transformative work women are doing in anti-racist spaces to disrupt White supremacy culture.

Autoethnography "intends to expand the understanding of social realities through the lens of the researcher's experience" (Chang, 2016, p. 108). Grounding the work of anti-racist White women through my journey and activism allows me to critique with the perspective of someone who has shared cultural beliefs and practices. Although being a White woman does not grant me automatic acceptance or inclusivity into White spaces, I draw on my narrative, experience, and workshop artifacts to understand my experience in relation to others' experiences. Through autoethnographic inquiry, I see myself in the representations of Whiteness, complicity, and activism in society as much as I see myself reflected by these representations.

Each week the facilitator offered a different theme around White privilege and White supremacy that we unpacked and discussed in small and large group settings. We moved from active allies/anti-racist thinkers to co-conspirators – people committed to an anti-racist lifestyle. Committing to this lifestyle, we were learning how to be White people who are willing to take action for racial justice. There was a sense of solidarity and a safe space to be vulnerable, make mistakes, and be corrected. To illustrate the epistemic uncertainty within the learning processes of anti-racist work, I engage with the data in various forms of analysis, including poetic analysis. I use excerpts from my research journal, personal blog, and field notes during workshops to make meaning of my experience within the context of the current cultural moment. I use prose and poetry to communicate my learning process within the virtual space of the anti-racist allyship group and beyond.

Autoethnographic Narrative

The journey begins in 2014 when I engage in learning about education and deconstructing my identity as an educator during a university class. After the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, I find myself with other White people in Denver, Colorado marching for justice and seeking to learn more about anti-racism as a way of life. Under the restrictions of a global pandemic, I sought education through virtual spaces – ultimately deciding to participate in the weekly workshops with @antiracismeveryday. Finally, in 2021, when my academic conference presentation about this work is exposed, torn apart, and decontextualized, by Fox News and other conservative media outlets, my poetic analysis illustrates my own epistemic uncertainty and that of others as they disparage my work.

The subject of Whiteness, complicity, and activism is personal. As a K-12 teacher in the United States, I have been embedded in a system that some scholars have identified as reproducing social injustice (Anyon, 1980). I have been complicit, albeit unconsciously, in upholding structures of White supremacy/colonization as a teacher in the educational system and as a White woman benefiting from White privilege. While I believed I was non-racist and socially active as a union representative, I cannot say I was actively anti-racist—or that I knew the difference between non-racist and anti-racist. In a Master’s program in Educational Leadership and Societal Change in 2016, I started on the journey to become an anti-racist White woman. In 2020, after the murder of George Floyd and attending protests, I wanted to do more, so I decided to join an anti-racist White allyship group through @antiracismeveryday. I liken my experiences to gazing at myself in a mirror and describing the woman who appears at various points in her anti-racist journey. As I recount my journey toward anti-racist co-conspirator I have divided these accounts of various moments in my life by the following themes: the woman in the mirror, polishing my mirror, my reflection in a broken mirror, marching on, onward to anti-racist. In the final section, I choose to include sub-themes based on the norms of the virtual Anti-Racism Every Day White Allyship group I attended.

The Woman in the Mirror

The woman in the mirror is where I begin. The person before beginning anti-racist work. I started teaching middle school Spanish in 2004. Before that, I worked as a Spanish language interpreter for the school district where I grew up. The people I interpreted for were often shocked when I started speaking. Looking at me, one family said they thought for sure there was no way I could interpret for them. I have blonde hair, blue eyes, and my skin is very light. My Spanish, however, is near fluent. I began studying Spanish in 7th grade, I studied and traveled and became bilingual/biliterate in late high school and majored in Spanish eventually earning a Master’s in Spanish Language, Literature, and Culture, early in my teaching career. My parents sacrificed to give me these opportunities, but at the time it was lost on me. When I started teaching Spanish in the same school district, I taught mostly white upper-class students.

When I started to teach high school in 2008, I had more Black and Brown students, but my classrooms were still mostly White. Looking back on my career, I have to think about what it meant for my students, especially the Latinx students, to have a White woman teach them Spanish – educating them in the “proper Castellano.” (A Spanish organization called the Real Academia Española decides the proper use and construction of the Spanish language or Castellano). I wonder what my practice as a teacher would look like in 2022 if I went back to teaching Spanish. Would I be able to make it a decolonizing practice, knowing what I know now?

Polishing My Mirror: A Clear Reflection

I still have vivid memories of a day in the fall of 2014 while sitting in class during my Master of Arts program in Educational Leadership and Societal Change. We were talking about the theory of social reproduction and the role of schools in reproducing societal values (Anyon, 1980; Bowles and Gintis, 2011). Our professor was a young, enthusiastic, White woman. But, that day was dark. In a simplistic way, she showed an image of a house-like structure – like a children’s drawing, describing the basics of Marxism. She used the image to illustrate how the base shapes the superstructures and the superstructures maintain and legitimize the base or how the bourgeois exploits the proletariat and influences discourse, hegemony, and values in society.

We were six students in the cohort, from around the world – an Indian woman, a Ghanaian man, a Latina woman, an ethnically ambiguous woman, a White man, and me, a White woman. Five of us had experience teaching in the classroom, all of us left that day – three hours later with a new understanding of the role of schools in society. We ate lunch together. I think my words were “What the f*ck?!” I could not stop; I just kept questioning, trying to understand the cognitive dissonance felt throughout my body. The White man was crying. A few weeks later, as a class, we joined a small protest that some undergraduates had organized after the police officer who murdered Michael Brown (2014) was not indicted.

I offer this poem as part of my reflection at this point in my life, when I felt my self-image begin to crack.

My Reflection in a Broken Mirror

In the fall of 2014, in a graduate class, I realized I was a colonizer.

At lunch, my stomach hurt, there was food on my tray that I couldn’t eat. How could I have done this to my students?

My Reflection in the broken mirror.

He tried to hide his tears

His sunglasses couldn’t contain them.

I could not stop talking,

yet words were not alleviating my cognitive dissonance.

Surely, I wasn’t a racist colonizer

What did it mean,

Social Reproduction?

Learning Spanish from a White woman

I wish I could go back and tell my students not to learn power and correctness from this

White woman. I would tell them to stand in their own power.

White isn’t right.

My cognitive dissonance did not end that day. I took a job teaching Spanish in 2016 in Tulsa. My students in my regular classes were mostly Black and Brown. I had two classes of students that came from bilingual schools—these students were mostly White. My classes were segregated. The Black and Brown kids were in regular classes and the White kids were in advanced sections. I could barely stomach it. I was a witness to and participant in everything I had learned.

I stopped teaching public school that year. I gave away all of my teaching materials. I could not continue down this path, no matter how badly I needed the money. My students rarely questioned my Whiteness or my expertise as a teacher. Their confidence in my abilities seemed to be ingrained or assumed in my role as an educator. While I decided to stop teaching Spanish in a K-12 setting, my activism did not end.

Marching On

On May 31, 2020, at noon, I met a friend (a White woman) near downtown Denver. We carpooled to participate in the third day of protests downtown in support of Black lives and to protest the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Elijah McClain. Before we began marching, we gathered in Civic Center Park—the heart of downtown. We raised our hands in the air toward the stage of the amphitheater offering affirmations to the young people who had walked to the center stage. I saw, out-stretched, more white arms than black or brown ones. There were hundreds of people, mostly physically distanced, and almost all with masks because of the pandemic. I looked around and saw White faces peering behind the masks, just like my White friend and I. I thought, what are all these White people doing here? The increase of White people participating in the movement was not limited to physical spaces – after all, as of this writing in 2021, we are still experiencing a global pandemic.

I wouldn't say I am an avid Instagrammer, but I do prefer the platform for social media consumption. Instagram is about pictures, short videos, or memes. This appeals to me because the user chooses the feed. I can follow friends and special interests. In April/May 2020, my Instagram feed took on a different tone. Where there had once been mostly memes, scenic photographs from friend's exotic vacations, or food – my friends really like taking pictures of their food - George Floyd, #BlackLivesMatter, and episodes of police violence began to fill the screen. I began to see friends declare their sentiment to move from non-racist to anti-racist, post pictures of themselves marching and relating their experiences with police violence. The change in my feed led me to look to Instagram to understand what was going on with anti-racism.

At first, I silently observed the various videos and photos, posting in solidarity. Soon, though, I started to follow a more diverse group of people. I was looking for information about anti-racism and began to follow accounts such as @antiracismeveryday and @antiracismdaily as well as @BLM5280—the Denver chapter of #BlackLivesMatter. It was through this renewed Instagram feed that I found a free nine-week seminar dedicated to anti-racist education and White ally-ship from @antiracismeveryday.

Onward to Anti-racist

@antiracismeveryday describes itself as a community organization and “A Guide for White Folks to Commit to Anti-Racism Created and Maintained by Rebecca Grodner (she/her)”. The posts on @antiracismeveryday include segments from “The White Folks Guide to Uncomfortable Holiday Conversations” to graphics about White privilege and transformative justice. On January 9, 2021, I saw a post about a nine-week, free, “Anti-Racism Every Day White Allyship Virtual Discussion Group” and I signed up for every session. I was feeling many emotions including excitement about talking to others who cared as much as I did about anti-racism.

Each week the facilitator presented a unique focus for learning about anti-racism and White privilege. The themes centered on unpacking our White privilege and moving from active allies/anti-racist thinkers to co-conspirators with an anti-racist lifestyle. We chose to show up each week to engage in The Work with each other. It felt like a safe space to be vulnerable and make mistakes because we all had the same goal—to become anti-racist. We dialogued in small and large groups opening up about our ignorance and figuring out how to do better. At the end of each session, the facilitator gave us homework that consisted of some questions and self-reflection to consider as we moved through the week.

In writing about my experiences within and outside of this group, I use the notes I took during the workshops. These “field notes” include details about the themes, homework, and general numbers about those participating as well as thoughts and questions that came up for me as I engaged with the work of the workshop and with the other participants (Weaver-Hightower, 2019). I am putting forth my experience in sections that relate to the norms of this group. The facilitator shared the norms on the screen, read them out-loud, and reviewed them before the start of each workshop. The following section examines my experiences with each of the norms of the workshop as I engaged and continue to engage in anti-racist work.

@antiracisimeveryday: Five Norms Towards Anti-racism

Anti-Racism Everyday: Norm 1—Be present: Come in ready to focus on the work and stay engaged when feeling discomfort. Discomfort, cognitive dissonance, epistemic uncertainty—I felt it all. In the first few weeks of the workshop I was struggling to make sense of myself with the other White folks. Working in small groups of three during each session I asked myself questions about my relationship to the people I was talking to. It was uncomfortable and difficult. I struggled to be engaged—to stay present. Did people not know about White privilege? What does the facilitator mean by perceived and actual risk? How are we all going to process this? We were engaging just like Sleeter (2015) argues we should—putting our complicity first. I was processing the process of becoming anti-racist and engaging in the process with others who were all coming from different backgrounds, points of privilege, and varying understandings of what anti-racism means in theory and practice. White supremacy has asked me not to talk about my positionality and my privilege. Being present became resistance. Being present became about my vulnerability and my compassion. I learned to honor the choice made by each of us who chose to engage with our messiness. This was difficult because I was distancing myself—others’ comments were rubbing me the wrong way—they seemed to be saying if we only fixed racism all our problems would be solved. Was fixing racism a cure-all? That wasn’t and isn’t my worldview. I think racism should be dismantled alongside other systems of oppression. It was through a conversation apart from the workshop that I was kindly reminded to find my compassion.

Anti-Racism Everyday: Norm 2—Be open-minded: Listen to others to understand (not respond) and assume they have good intentions. Finding my compassion for others helped me stay open-minded. I spent time before the fourth session in my Buddhist practice determining that I would show up to the session that night ready to listen and speak from my heart. That was the beginning of finding compassion for myself on this journey. In determining to speak from my heart, I brought my best self to the workshop. I got vulnerable. I disagreed. I could relate to everyone I spent time with in small groups. I felt comradeship. Opening my mind, opening my heart I asked myself, what is my resistance to what we are learning? I remind myself of Russo (1991)

“...racism originates with and is perpetuated by white people” (p. 300). Opening my heart is resistance. Solidarity in this work is resistance.

Anti-Racism Everyday Norm 3—Be thoughtful: Speak from “I” (your own experience), share the floor, and remember that words have an impact (even if it doesn’t match their intention). I really messed up one night. I was frustrated. We were deconstructing our emotions around acknowledging our Whiteness and White privilege through the lens of grief and the process of grief. We talked about *mourning our (White) morality* using the stages of grief created by Kübler-Ross (1973). I questioned the use of a Western lens for processing White supremacy—a structure born from western colonization. In speaking up, I was questioned by a woman of color about my assumptions and how that would have impacted the murder of Black folks at the hands of police. I tried to explain that I was not meaning to relate the two. My words had an unintended impact. I wrote in my notebook that I felt attacked, but it was not real. I related my feelings to my internalized White supremacist assumptions. I sat with these feelings and decided to show up again the next week—resistance. That night I wrote in my field notes “Audre Lorde, the Master’s tools” as a reminder to shed my internalized White supremacy. I was not giving up; if there is one thing about which I feel confident at this point in my life, it is my ability to be a learner. I am capable of change. Inner transformation is resistance to my learned White supremacy and a commitment to un-learning what it means to be White.

Anti-Racism Everyday: Norm 4 - Be vigilant: Call others in if they make mistakes and help them understand. I made a mistake in the dialogue. I made a mistake and I fought every learned White supremacist behavior that was telling me to be defensive. We apply vigilance to ourselves and others. It is so hard to be reflexive with one’s self in the moment. I watch the local and world news with my mom in the evening as we eat dinner. I critique the way the reporting is done. I am critical of who is doing the reporting. I make comments about when someone’s misogyny is “showing” or how they are not addressing the structures of White supremacy and instead highlighting individual acts of racism. I am sure my mother is tired. It was one of these evenings in May 2020 that I tried to gently explain privilege—it didn’t go well. I wrote this narrative in the days following that dialogue.

I sat with my mom in her home, watching the ten o'clock news. We saw scenes of police, press, and citizens engaged in what was categorized by the media as rioting. However, the only violence on the screen was coming from the officers in blue. My mother and I began to talk about what was happening just miles from our home.

She grew up poor in a village of 800 people in Illinois. Her parents struggled just to have enough food for their three kids. We moved to a neighboring county of Denver in the 1980s. My mom and I started talking about White privilege as we watched the news. The conversation became a little intense, and I think we both went to sleep that night a bit unsure of our relationship.

My mom had not understood how she could have benefitted from her lighter skin color because of her economic circumstances, sometimes missing meals, working hard for every penny in her adult life. She was deeply offended that I brought up the possibility of White privilege. A week later, someone on a morning news show made the analogy that White privilege was like two fish swimming up the same stream with different currents running in opposition. This explanation resonated with my mom, the biologist. My mom reflected on our discussion when the subject was broached on the morning news. I believe

if I had never brought up the subject of White privilege that night, the dialogue could have never continued with her new understanding via the morning news.

Anti-Racism Everyday: Norm 5—Be accountable: Own your mistakes, practice apologizing, and learn from them. Engaging with my family has been a multitude of lessons both subtle and overt. Engaging in dialogue takes courage. Part of my accountability is to continue, to struggle, and grapple with my internalized White supremacy. Dismantling White supremacy in society looks like dismantling it in my heart. Policy can be legislated, but as a White woman, I must learn to feel the tension of the uncomfortable, the adrenaline of injustice. Change starts with my resolve in my community. My accountability is also healing what author, therapist, and somatic abolitionist Resmaa Menakem (2017) calls, “White-bodied Supremacy”. Menakem (2017) argues that regardless of race, “if we were born and raised in America, white-body supremacy and our adaptations to it are in our blood. Our very bodies house the unhealed dissonance and trauma of our ancestors” (p. 11). I do not know if my family enslaved others, but I know some of my ancestors caused harm with their beliefs and words. According to Menakem (2017), my White body holds the trauma that my White ancestors have inflicted on themselves and others. Liberation, then, occurs in the healing process, in healing the body and addressing the trauma—taking responsibility and holding myself accountable. I offer the following poem as a reflection of sitting in my White body, finishing the workshop without resolution, without a sense of completeness.

The dissonance

*I am sitting uncomfortably in the symphony of our society
Shoulders tense; Doing work.
Playing two notes together at the same time
F and A-flat: a minor third
It grinds on the ears, and resonates through my brain
My chest tightens when I feel the dissonance, this minor third with no resolution
I take a deep breath,
dissonance
epistemic uncertainty
There is work to be done.
and the dissonance remains
No conclusion, no findings, just more work
I sit
In dialogue
In thought
With the minor third
And more violence surrounds
Derek Chauvin’s conviction is a pause, a breath
And no resolution is in sight.*

Conservatives and Critical Race Theory

The summer of 2020, seemed to be one of protest and demands for police reform. The summer of 2021 seemed to be about critical race theory (CRT) or at least the definition given by

Republicans and Republican news media. On June 2, 2021, I received an email from a Fox News digital editor. Someone at Fox saw a video of my conference presentation at Southern Connecticut State University's Gender and Women's Studies conference. The editor referred to a previous poem: *My Reflection in a Broken Mirror*, and my desire to stop teaching Spanish. My lizard brain froze. Menakem (2017) describes the lizard brain, scientifically known as the amygdala, as the part of our brain that is reactionary. It is not a thinking part of the brain; the lizard brain tells us whether we should fight, flee, or freeze, and it is the part most connected to White-body supremacy (Menakem, 2017). I was scared, frozen. Did all my previous anti-racism work disappear?

Together with a friend and the organizers of Southern Connecticut State University, I found out that Fox News was one of the last news media outlets to pick up on the story. The headlines followed the themes of addressing my Whiteness and my desire to stop teaching Spanish: "White Spanish teacher cancels herself because 'white isn't right'" (The Post Millennial, 2021), "Woman Quits Teaching Spanish Because Of Her Skin Color [sic]" (Perri, 2021), "Oklahoma State teaching assistant says she can't teach Spanish because she's White" (Street, 2021). In my personal blog I wrote about my internalized reaction, "...I felt like I shouldn't have said what I said. But I said it. 'White isn't right'... At least he [Jon Street] capitalized White" (Personal Blog, 2021). The articles related my work to critical race theory.

On May 7, 2021, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt signed a bill into law that would prohibit the teaching of CRT and among other concepts that argued: "that individuals, by virtue of race or gender, are inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously" (Murray, para. 4, 2021). Perhaps my work resides within the frame of prohibited content? My epistemic uncertainty was flowing freely and I began to question myself. I turned to those around me. I shared with my family about Fox News's portrayal of my conference presentation and my 10-year-old nephew declared Fox News's actions "diabolically evil". In conversation with other anti-racist scholars and practitioners, I commented that they can ban teachers from teaching CRT, but they cannot ban students from learning it. Me, a graduate student, addressing my racism and working to become anti-racist triggered some people.

Some of the readers of these articles appeared threatened by my work in anti-racism and expressed their outrage accordingly. I composed the following found poem from articles written by conservative news outlets, the comments sections of these articles, and an email I received in response to these articles (Mike Villano, personal communication, June 2, 2021; gearguy, 2021; Huber, 2021; Perri, 2021; rustyshackleford771, 2021; terrsgal621, 2021):

Intellectual Pedophile

You're a stupefied brainwashed moron...

Not to single you out but the profession you infest is likewise infested with intellectual pedophiles like you.

STUPID!

Resigns for diversity reasons.

Teachers are such toxic people now.

She probably can't teach Spanish because she is retarded.

Now-former Spanish teacher said she quit teaching that language to be a better "white ally" and "anti-racist coconspirator"

(In)conclusion

The journey does not end. I use my experience to highlight how I have experienced an important element in anti-racist work—epistemic uncertainty. If as White people we do not question how we benefit from unearned privilege or acknowledge how institutions perpetuate injustice, we are not creating change. From the Fox News experience, I can conclude that White people doing anti-racist work calls into question how others view themselves in society, causing epistemic uncertainty. I find the comments and the news articles refresh my determination for an anti-racist society and reflect on Okun’s (2010) words:

At its best, privileged resistance is an inevitable stage of development that those of us sitting in positions of privilege must move through in our desire and efforts to be both effectively engaged and fully human. At worst, privileged resistance is a way of life. (p. 42)

I know that privileged resistance can no longer exist as a way of life. Anti-racist work is ongoing education, and the results of this work continue to develop as the social, cultural, global context changes. In the current context, though, I am left with dissonance—an ongoing ringing in the ears as the work reverberates, resonates, and triggers those who come in contact. I find anti-racist education more misunderstood and more necessary than ever. I see anti-racist work transforming how White women understand the construction of race and how they choose to engage with and disengage from their privilege.

The hope for undoing the White supremacist seams in society lies in anti-racist work. Much like Sara Ahmed’s (2017) concept of the “feminist killjoy,” who disrupts patriarchy by giving voice to its oppression, perhaps we can become White supremacy’s killjoy – disrupting Whiteness, speaking truth to power, and calling out racism when we see it (p. 37). Maybe we need a White woman’s anti-racist army much attuned to Ahmed’s (2017) idea of a “feminist army” where in solidarity, we collectively fight and pull each other up when we are down, calling in, calling out, and never giving up (p. 84).

As critical whiteness scholars pointed out, systems of oppression are not separate. Patricia Hill Collins (2002) explains these systems are “interlocking,” and that “race, class, gender, and sexuality all remain closely intertwined with nation” (p. 229). I cannot help but take a moment and visualize the interlocking systems as a chain. A chain that physically ties one down, ties people together and tied Africans to ships as they sailed across the Atlantic. Unlocking a link in the chain weakens its hold. Dismantling one link, one structure means dismantling all.

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