

Working to Heal White Supremacy:  
Spiritual Ontologies and Anti-Racist Activism

By

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### *Prologue*

On August 11, 2017, I stepped off the plane from a summer dedicated to studying collective liberation struggle in Mexico and returned to North Carolina, 200 miles out of earshot from the growls of white nationalists in Charlottesville reminding the country of its ugliest roots. I was arriving home from a summer-long experience in a Zapatista autonomous zone, known as a *caracol*<sup>i</sup>, which are the sites of a new iteration of the Zapatista uprising that galvanized anti-globalization movements across the world in 1994.<sup>ii</sup> After being exposed to their movement, I was captivated by the Zapatista's armed insurrection they organized against the neoliberal Mexican state to take back their indigenous land. After more than two decades, they had commanded the world's attention by implementing their own community governance systems on the land they reclaimed, centered women as the forefront of their decision-makers, and compellingly related their struggle as a community of indigenous and dispossessed peoples to struggles of oppression around the world. As a young activist myself, I hoped to learn from them and bring those lessons back to organizing at home. Thankfully, for that same reason, the Zapatistas allowed us to study in the *caracol*, as long as we were committed to dismantling capitalism and building a world *donde quepan muchos mundos* – a world “where many worlds fit.”<sup>iii</sup>

My expectation to learn anarchist and anti-capitalist organizing methods based in leftist struggle was met almost entirely with something more revolutionary and more radical than I had ever anticipated: the Zapatista *promotores*' primary lessons focused on imparting spiritual

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<sup>i</sup> Here, in keeping with Chicana Feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's subversive tradition, I will not italicize words that are not in English. Anzaldúa's explanation was that “such italics have a denormalizing, stigmatizing function and make the italicized words seem like deviations from the (English/ ‘white’) norm.”

wisdom rooted in the Mayan cosmovision illustrated by the Tzotzil word that centers their resistance: ch'ulel. Ch'ulel, they taught us, means every natural being is a subject, every subject is sacred and should be treated as such. The promotores would usually tell anecdotes to explain the practice of Ch'ulel – such as asking a tree if it was ready to be cut down to be used for firewood, and for its sacrifice, what would it like in return? Ch'ulel expanded beyond beings' everyday interactions. The spiritual practice of honoring other beings and seeing the Zapatista struggle as interconnected with those beings emphasized fighting for, empathizing with, seeing the sacredness of, *conviviendo* with the land and all of its subjects. Our group of USians,<sup>2</sup> all of whom were meant to learn to adopt Zapatista philosophies in our home movements, were constantly paralyzed by the spiritual way of being we lacked. While I had expected to learn tactics for anti-neoliberal campaigns, the principal lesson I learned was the centrality of seeing all beings as sacred and interconnected with each other. As the promoters instilled in me this spirituality, they helped facilitate a wake-up call that asks for a spiritual reckoning with the struggle around which I had done most of my organizing: dismantling white supremacy. This reckoning did not ring loudly enough until I arrived home to the piercing juxtaposition between the Zapatista's ch'ulel and the snarls of white supremacists in Charlottesville. The Zapatistas' spiritual ways of being, or what I call a spiritual ontology, awoke a sleeping part of both my life and my activism, a timely and vital awakening that buoyed my reveling in the agony of white supremacy this racist rally in Charlottesville uncloaked—a reckoning that the majority of white people in the US, including myself, have evaded for so long.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I use USians to describe what is usually called “Americans” to refer to people from the United States. I use this in an effort to combat the domination of the United States as the sole country of importance on the American continent, so as to not erase peoples who live on the continent, but not in the US.

<sup>3</sup> In an effort to be transparent about my own positionality and connection to the subject, I will often refer to white people as “we” or “us” in this chapter as I introduce the concept. I will explicate this decision briefly in the section on my engagement with feminist research principles and methodology.

*The Whitelash: Situating Contemporary White Supremacy*

As Trump's election and the overt white racists flexing in his shadow have actualized a public discourse about whiteness and white supremacy beyond academic studies and activist spaces, the emboldened "whitelash"<sup>4</sup> has demanded a national query: What does it mean to be white in the United States today?<sup>iv</sup> Impeding an era that was meant to be marked with an embrace of 'inclusivity' and 'diversity,' the 'color blind' hopefuls' platforms have been disrupted with viral videos and news stories turning a public, pained eye on white supremacy. Manifestations of today's white supremacy rarely shift in plot, exchanging locations and names for the same horrendous headlines: everyday white people calling the police on Black people for doing everyday things, police killings and beatings of unarmed Black people, and a president codifying his hateful words about immigrants of color into policies that at their worst separate migrant Latinx<sup>5</sup> children from their parents and ban Muslims from entering the country.<sup>v</sup> While the last couple decades have been marked by progressive liberals emphasizing a politically correct culture and scratching the surface on abstract conceptions of racism (like many scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, whom I reference later, have emphasized), the stark contrast with the white violence these stories expose is shaping a new national discourse imploring some white people to deal more profoundly with white legacies of violence in this country.<sup>6vii</sup>

I will use an examination of the Charlottesville white nationalists' rhetoric as an entry point to probe the connection between spiritual deficiency and white supremacy. The white nationalists who violently rallied for white supremacy in Charlottesville in August of 2017 used

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<sup>4</sup> A term popularized on the night of Trump's election and coined by *CNN*'s Van Jones.

<sup>5</sup> I use Latinx here as a gender-neutral descriptor, as opposed to Latino or Latina. I use it for the reason it was popularized: to be inclusive of Latinx people of all genders.

<sup>6</sup> I want to clarify here that I am referring to the national consciousness around whiteness and its novelty in the public discourse, as the centuries-old critique of whiteness in anti-racist activism and scholarship is nothing new; James Baldwin and W.E.B. DuBois being some notable pioneers.

racist and dehumanizing rhetoric demonstrative of an overwhelming spiritual deficit accompanying their racism.<sup>7viii</sup> One of the most widely known rhetoric marking the rally was a chilling chant: “you will not replace us,” the word “Jew” used interchangeably with “you.” In her article “Discourse and Discrimination in Charlottesville,” Anna Szilágyi analyzes the construction of a polarized ‘Us vs. Them/You’ division between people of color, Black people specifically, Jewish people, and the white nationalists.<sup>ix</sup> Beyond the explicit racist implications reinforced by this chant, as they distinctly separate and other Black people and Jewish people, it also denies any value of interconnectedness. More than distinguishing themselves from other human beings, they use metaphors that dehumanize and demonize Black people, as one white nationalist speaker calls the ‘other’ or ‘them’ of the last example a “parasitic class of anti-white vermin” which Szilágyi explains is indicative “that they indeed conceptualized the people whom they insulted via these metaphors and other speech strategies, in non-human terms.”<sup>x</sup> The sheer brutality and degradation of the Charlottesville white nationalists’ rhetoric is demonstrative of something vaster than an ideology — which informs a set of ideals or values — it is instead a way of being that creates a white supremacist reality. That is, the white nationalists not only believe in a particular set of racist values, they are producing and reproducing a reality where their humanity is wholly disconnected from the people they target. However religious some of the white racists claim or believe themselves to be, the white supremacist ontology they bolster un.masks a crisis of spiritual impoverishment that implicates more than just them.

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<sup>7</sup> It’s important to note here that there is no concrete, unified spiritual or religious identification these white nationalists in Charlottesville claimed. USian white nationalism has roots in a diversity of religious or non-religious beliefs, but as scholar of religion and white nationalism Damon T. Berry shows, white nationalists’ modern-day appeal to the religious Christian right is a strategy for unification into mainstream conservatism. To some extent it seems to be working, as Berry writes “Even as some of President Trump’s Evangelical advisors defended his response to Charlottesville, others offered the unambiguous condemnation of white nationalism he failed to provide.”

The whitelash we are experiencing is marked by the egregious and telling destabilization of the belief in a predominately tolerant and color-blind society that facilitated a distanced conception of whiteness and white supremacy for white people. Now, beyond the academic discussion and the violent realities Black and Brown people have endured for centuries at the hands of it, such examples of toxicity in whiteness are compelling white people to be reflective about the system of white supremacy in which we are complicit. Of course, the white supremacists of the Charlottesville riots in 2017 do not represent the entirety of white people's beliefs. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes in his book *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, white supremacist-identified people like the ones in Charlottesville are not necessarily the sole or even most of the executioners of white supremacist violence and the inequality it generates.<sup>xi</sup> His argument corresponds with that of leading critical whiteness scholar David Roediger's conclusion that the ideas of overt white racists have been socially ostracized in the last few decades and are thus less responsible for the white supremacist society in which we live.<sup>xii</sup> As white supremacy manifests through exploitation and subjugation of Black and Brown people and, importantly, through the privilege and power of all white people, this thesis inspects the personal and spiritual implications for activists undertaking the overwhelming task of dismantling it.<sup>xiii</sup> Throwing up our arms, joining organizations, protesting, and other traditional routes of activism, in mine and other more significant activists' experiences, still overlook key parts of reckoning with white supremacy. The journey on which we must embark involves understanding the spiritual poverty inextricably associated with the white supremacist ontology, or ways of being, we live, create, and re-create. I assert that anti-racist activists must conceive of white supremacy as an ontology, a world in



which we live and contribute to, in order to deconstruct the totality of white supremacist ontologies.

*Introducing Ontologies of Whiteness and White Supremacist Ontology*

Here, I introduce the terms white supremacist ontology or ontology of whiteness to describe the hegemonic worldview and creation of white supremacist realities. Academic debates on political ontology or ontological conflict, as a leading scholar on the subject Mario Blaser describes, “are gaining unprecedented visibility,” as they portray “conflicts involving different assumptions about ‘what exists.’”<sup>xiv</sup> As Blaser underscores, political ontology “is concerned with reality making, including its own participation in reality making,” which is relevant to this thesis because it involves the construction of white supremacist realities. I argue that the issue of white supremacist ontologies (instead of ideologies) is significant because ontologies “manifest as ‘stories’ in which the assumptions of what ... make up a given world are readily graspable,” such as the story and reality of race and whiteness. But, as Blaser illustrates, while myths or constructions like white supremacy, are a “good entry point to an ontology ... [they reveal] only half the story.”<sup>xv</sup> As ontologies are the “enactments of worlds,” ontological conflicts implicate a discussion or exposure of such stories which “are neither true nor false; they just engender different worlds which have their own criteria for defining the truth.”

Issues of ontology are specifically significant to this thesis because they assist with questions of problematizing and offering? alternatives to these different truths — in this case the “truth” of the white supremacist in which we live. As the term ontologies helps us to understand that there are multiple stories, truths, and worlds, it instrumentalizes for us “how to operate in a terrain dominated by conceptions of an all-encompassing modernity” – or “an all-encompassing,” inescapable white supremacy.<sup>xvi</sup> Of course, this is not to demean or depreciate

the immense danger of white supremacy and its reality, rather it is a project to find the truths and worlds that are wedges to resist it. Ontological conflicts and questions help equip us with “shrinking modernity [or in this case, white supremacy] to make it something more specific and contrastable, thus liberating the conceptual-ontological space for something else to exist.”<sup>xvii</sup>

This statement is arguably the most crucial part of the ontological projects discussed in this thesis: not only am I attempting to shrink white supremacy down to the “specific and contrastable,” but I am also examining the creation of other ways of being and thinking that are not white supremacist, and in fact, offer alternatives to white supremacist ways of being.

Throughout this thesis, I use the works of activists to illuminate that there are multiple realities, worldviews, or ontologies – a radical claim in the first place – and additionally that these multiple realities may work to diminish the strength of others. As a reader, you will be presented with the terms: white supremacist ontology or ontology of whiteness in order to “[shrink]” and “[liberate] the conceptual-ontological space for something else to exist” – and in this thesis’ case, that “something else” is a spiritual ontology, a term that will be explored in the following section.<sup>xviii</sup> I contend that anti-racist activists working against white supremacy must be understood to be working at a level of ontology to dismantle ontologies of whiteness and to propose the creation of alternative ontologies to white oppression. This thesis inspects spiritual ontologies as the alternative.

### *Defining Spiritual Ontology*

In this thesis, I define spirituality as a sustained understanding of the innate interconnectedness, meaning, compassion, and love for oneself and other beings. I build my denotation from Claudia Horwitz and angel Kyodo williams, spiritual activists whose work I analyze in the substantive chapters of this thesis. In her book *The Spiritual Activist*, Horwitz

writes that spiritual rituals help us “find compassion, tranquility, love, strength, and a sense of ease” which she says “allows us to develop our power from within, the power that makes real change possible.”<sup>xix</sup> Because it is sustained and lasting, spirituality empowers a contemplative ability to pause, to be with what is, and to be reflective. angel Kyodo williams — a Zen priest, the second Black woman recognized to as a teacher in Japanese Zen lineage, and the founder of the Center for Transformative Change — offers in her book *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living With Fearlessness and Grace* the ways spiritual rituals act as clearing agents that enable us to “[see] things as they are.” She writes: “When we are very, very still in the way that meditation allows us to be, we can find space to let everything be as it is. It is from that space you will find the room you need to see who you are and how you fit in the world.”<sup>xx</sup> When one’s reality and world is formed and informed by these values and practices, they, she, or he are or is realizing an ontology of spirituality. A spiritual ontology is a pervading worldview and way of being that is shaped by the aforementioned values of loving interdependence and the inherent value and sacredness one sees and acts upon in others.<sup>8</sup> It is notable to this thesis to label a spiritual way of being a spiritual ontology for the same reasons I noted when discussing a white supremacist ontology. Ontological projects work to articulate the various and contrasting realities that may exist at once, asserting the possibility of different and other ways of being that contrast with and or challenge the dominant or hegemonic ontology – in this case, the hegemonic ontology of white supremacy may be subverted by spiritual ontologies.

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<sup>8</sup> Understandably, there is no widespread consensus about the denotation of spirituality, which is indicative of its ambiguous and inclusive capacity for anyone who identifies as spiritual. For the purposes of this thesis, I do not intend to investigate the specificities of what are valid spiritualities and what are not – though as I use the term in this paper, I am referring to the characterization of interconnectedness and compassion I described earlier.

Given that so many white supremacists ground their arguments in religion, it is important that I explore the distinction between religiosity and spirituality. Although religion is viewed as a framework to express and enact spirituality, according to some scholars, religious practices and worldviews differ in that they refer to the adherence of particular practices and principles institutionalized religions expect of believers, and these original religious teachings are usually adjusted to match cultural contexts.<sup>xxi</sup> Notably, distortions of religious principles have been used as a method of abuse and oppression by the powerful, and sometimes can be transformed into instruments of exploitation and abuse, thus conflicting with the values of spirituality mentioned earlier.<sup>xxii</sup> Although the two are not mutually exclusive, some scholars have concluded that there are people who identify as spiritual and not religious, and conversely, there are those who identify as religious but not spiritual.<sup>xxiii</sup> In this thesis, the spirituality I explore includes those who identify with a religion or those who do not, but I do not see those who are religious as spiritual necessarily nor do I equate spirituality and religiosity. Again, the emphasis on love and interconnectedness are key to my own definitions.

### *Why Spirituality? A Path for Transformation against White Supremacy*

Through an analysis of contemporary spiritual activists who practice different spiritual traditions, I intend to evaluate the impacts of activists' spiritual foundations of a personal spirituality and what it means for anti-racist movement-building specifically in the United States. As spiritual ontologies emphasize a worldview of sacredness in other beings and interconnected relationship between all of us — while white supremacist ontologies subtly and overtly dehumanize and disconnect Black and Brown people from white people — I contend that spiritual ontologies conflict with white supremacist worldviews, or what we can consider white supremacist ontologies. As such, my research queries: what is the relationship between the

creation or illumination of spiritual ontologies and anti-racist activists working to dismantle oppressive systems. In my first substantive chapter, Chapter Four, I evaluate activists' proposals for the elucidation of spiritual ontologies to challenge contrastable ontologies. Secondly, I inquire how activists' spiritualities address questions of activist participation, organizing principles, and movement direction. In my final argument chapter, Chapter 5, I consider the ways spiritual activism informs movement building, both in principle and in practice.

Winona LaDuke, an activist and environmentalist of the Mississippi Band Anishinaabeg of the White Earth reservation in northern Minnesota inquires "How does a community heal itself from the ravages of the past? I found an answer in the multifaceted process of recovering what is 'sacred.'"<sup>xxiv</sup> Here, LaDuke refers to the process of facing and healing the trauma her community has endured by "recovering" or reigniting an understanding of "the sacred," which for the purposes of this thesis merits a spiritual discussion, as she elucidates the path that I venture in this thesis. Despite a widespread acceptance of the social and economic effects of white supremacy on people of color, grappling with the sheer violence (or ravages) white supremacy authorizes means something much more profound than solely acknowledging the bloody structures of white supremacy; it asks activists to be reflective and thoughtful about in fact generating realities that create justice for and do not reproduce the violence of white supremacy. Anti-racist activists attempting to heal the ravages of the past may be tasked with recovering, or rediscovering, what is spiritual and sacred to align their anti-racist direction.

*Spirituality for Collective Interdependence, Solidarity and Reflection*

Spirituality as a method for individual healing and liberation around oppression is synergetic to the other process it initiates and elicits: collective liberation struggle. By no means does being equipped with this spiritual foundation make engaging white supremacy easier, but it

may lift the common understanding of oppression as a problem individual people have the responsibility to fix. Instead, spirituality helps to re-conceptualize an interconnected world of beings who each have a collective and communal commitment to one another. I also assess how spirituality can work to negate worldviews defined by oppression and exploitation and facilitate transformation from societal ills. According to Black feminist scholar bell hooks, current U.S. society, for example is culturally focused on consumerism, self-absorption, and materialism which creates a “spiritual void.” She goes on to describe that the sense of connection and transcendence of seeing beyond one’s own needs and environments is part of a rich spiritual worldview.<sup>xxv</sup> By hooks’ analysis, as spirituality offers a ‘transcendence’ from one’s consideration of their own feelings to others’, it offers a sense of solidarity.

I aim to study the reflexivity and introspection today’s political atmosphere demands for anti-racism and the call for a spiritual, paradigmatic shift in what an engagement in anti-racist activism looks like. Transformative change activist angel Kyodo williams outlines how a radical spiritual dharma can be prevented or even negated by racism and white privilege.<sup>xxvi</sup> In accordance with her assessment, I found that the spiritual ontology I was adopting in my own life assisted my own inspection of the subconscious dimensions of white supremacy that prevented me from accessing such spiritual values. Importantly, I have by no means reached an enlightenment that comes anywhere near ridding me of the acutely embedded white supremacy internalized by each of us. Spirituality has instead enabled an acceptance in me that anti-racist work is a collective and enduring burden that cannot be undone in any one individual in any one lifetime. As this time compels white people to ask *how* we can begin to dismantle white supremacy, this topic is meant to investigate the *how*, and asks if spirituality might be one of the answers.

More than an avenue for engaging the pain of white supremacy, spirituality can act as a tool to resist what some call activist burnout. As the daughter of two white anti-racist, anti-capitalist activists who have dedicated their lives to disrupting such systems, I know profoundly that my blood urges me to follow in their path. The exhaustion, defeat, and compromise they carried along with the movements they fought for was also passed on to me. Scholars and activists alike have written extensively about this issue and the ways those who experience burnout feel isolated and exhausted due to outside forces and in-movement causes.<sup>xxvii</sup> I consider how spiritual remedies could affect or change pervasive burnout among activists — especially that of activists who fear undertaking the responsibility of white violence. Anti-racism for white people can often petrify us when we are forced to face the trauma we have perpetuated, as feelings of grief, shame, and guilt rarely work to inspire and discover truth and healing.<sup>xxviii</sup> As I will explore further, spirituality does not evade the pain of white supremacy, but it compels us to face and bear witness to the trauma of it and redirect it in more enduring ways.

### *Thesis Roadmap*

In the next chapter following the introduction, Chapter Two, I will review literature to contextualize my project within a scholarly, multi-disciplinary conversation around anti-racism, activism, spirituality, and a connection between all three. I will review the literature of the foundations sustaining the theoretical frameworks I explore, namely: critical whiteness studies and feminist epistemologies and spiritualities. The primary academic discourse around white supremacy and work to dismantle it is known as a subset of Critical Race Theory (CRT), where theorists have begun to consider ‘whiteness studies’ as an academic path to call for new paradigms for understanding racial injustice and white supremacy. Next, as a feminist researcher myself, I look to feminist ways of knowing in its relationship to spirituality and Gloria

Anzaldúa's spiritual activism specifically. This conversation is tangential to the subject of spiritual activism and transformative organizing, which comprises my Fifth Chapter and consists of activists' and scholars' new theories about effective organizing strategies. Lastly, I look to critiques of spirituality and its connections to appropriative New Age Spiritualities.

In the third chapter, I will provide an elaborate description of my feminist methodology. I intend here to explicate how I realized and conducted my research through feminist principles that grapple with ethical problems in traditional research. I also clarify the substantive organization of this thesis.

The substantive part of my thesis consists of a content and textual analysis of activists' proposals and assertions about engaging the work of dismantling white supremacy. In Chapter Four, "Re-conceptualizing Whiteness and the Self: Facing White Supremacist Ontology," I evaluate the work of Ruby Sales, John Powell, and Claudia Horwitz who all emphasize that what I call a spiritual ontology works to subvert ontologies of whiteness. Chapter Four provides an in-depth analysis on the ways spiritual ontologies create worlds undermining worlds of white supremacy by reconceptualizing whiteness as a deprivative and spiritually destructive concept. Spiritual ontologies, Sales, Powell, and Horwitz suggest, create space for values of love and interconnectedness to be enacted. Chapter Four comprises the "what" element of this thesis' topic, while the following chapter, Chapter Five, constitutes the "how." In Chapter Five, "Spiritual Activism and Transformative Organizing: Spiritual Ontologies in the Making," I thus assess the ways activists have incorporated the spiritual ideals of love and spiritual practice to create a paradigm shift in both activism and society at large.

Finally in the conclusion, I will deliberate about what conclusions might be meaningful about this research; what themes and conversations could importantly supplement this thesis'



topic but were not in the scope of the thesis; and what moving forward with this research on spiritual ontologies and spiritual activism could entail. I lastly provide a brief reflection about my processes and conclusions from writing this thesis.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

In this chapter, I review the literature of the several foundations buoying the theoretical frameworks I explore, namely: critical whiteness studies and feminist epistemologies. First, I will discuss critical whiteness studies that have informed the academic dialogue of racial construction and racial identity. Next, I will delve into feminist epistemologies, or feminist ways of knowing and knowledge production, and the ways they situate the spiritual values of interconnectedness, compassion, and empathy I aim to explore in this thesis. Because the conversation on feminist epistemologies is multi-disciplinary, the areas I explore include works written through lenses of psychological education, feminist theory, and Black feminism among other frameworks. Weaved into the discussion of feminist thought is a consideration of critiques of New Age spirituality, as white feminists have often been the reproducers of the appropriative nature of New Age. Feminists and scholars of color have alternatively worked to simultaneously invest in feminist spirituality, while holding appropriative and problematic spiritualities accountable. All of the works I evaluate — which have evolved from multidisciplinary studies — have mostly originated from questioning and challenging the academic canon of traditional disciplines.

### *Critical Whiteness Studies:*

I begin with critical whiteness studies – a discipline grown out of critical race theory – to situate the conversation I have around activism that specifically struggles with and looks to dismantle white supremacy. Studies in whiteness, which officially began in the 1990s, are an intersection of a relatively new theoretical or academic field. But for generations, Black scholars and other scholars of color like James Baldwin and W.E.B. DuBois have written and maintained that whiteness and white identity is central to hegemonic white supremacy, and thus these studies are not novel in many ways. Critical whiteness studies itself diverges from the traditional

academic tendency to look to the “other” — in this case the racialized “other” — for answers about a hegemonic worldview like white supremacy. It instead asks the academy to reflexively problematize whiteness, white identities, and white privilege and white peoples’ stake in white supremacy.

*Race and White Supremacy in the US: A Brief Historical Overview*

Beginning in the colonial era, “white” European immigrants (many of whom were displaced peasants leaving oppressive and desperate conditions) emigrated to the colonies. Even while many of these immigrants spent years as indentured servants or poor laborers, colonial leaders convinced them to partake in racial hierarchies and identify and ally with the white upper class over enslaved and free Africans.<sup>xxix xxx</sup> It was this belief in whiteness that became a source of value and pride despite the impoverished conditions of the white working class. Of course, the upper class responsible for inventing race and whiteness codified racial hierarchies in laws and social order to prevent whites from building coalitions or alliances with free or enslaved Africans, so as to not threaten the elite’s political rule.<sup>xxxi</sup> The Civil War was defined by the same deceitful narratives shaped by the emerging construct of whiteness, where poor Southern whites were persuaded to again ally with the white Southern elite over their own economic interest.<sup>xxxii xxxiii</sup> The South’s loss incited rage and resentment among whites, establishing the legal practices of discrimination, racist violence, and segregation in the Jim Crow era of white supremacy that persisted through the 1950s. While Northern white supremacy was embodied by more covert social orders than Jim Crow, Northerners instituted practices that excluded Black people from job hiring processes and purchasing homes in white neighborhoods, forecasting the next iteration of color-blind white supremacy.<sup>xxxiv</sup> As several legal victories out-ruling segregation and Jim Crow laws in the 1950s and 1960s galvanized anti-racist resistance and the

Civil Rights Movement, overt white racism quickly became less fashionable and white supremacy assumed a new shape.<sup>xxxv</sup> This new iteration of racism emerged through racial resentment, subtle prejudice, and proved to be furtive and more difficult to identify, much less dismantle.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

### *Workings of Whiteness*

Leading and traditional critical whiteness scholar David Roediger's many books on whiteness begin with *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (1994), in which he writes that there are virtually no positive traits in a white racial identity, arguing that the nature of whiteness is inherently supremacist and privileged, writing "it is not merely that whiteness is oppressive and false; it is that whiteness is *nothing but* oppressive and false."<sup>xxxvii</sup> Of course, the term positive should be problematized in that there are certainly advantages and privileges associated with whiteness, but in essence Roediger is asserting that no parts of white identity should be preserved. His assertions are echoed by other leading whiteness scholar, Noel Ignatiev, who argues that the only legitimate and positive expressions of whiteness are acts of resistance to white supremacy.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Roediger articulates there are many forms whiteness takes on, most of them normative and embraced by society, but he concludes that there are overt white racists that are societally demonized and ostracized.<sup>xxxix</sup> He also coined the term "wages of whiteness," which speaks to the ways working class whites invest in whiteness at their own expense.<sup>xl</sup> In his book, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (1998), George Lipsitz draws on the socio-political and colonial history of the US to its present, which he argues that working class whites, extremist whites, and middle-class liberal whites have all accrued wealth, resources, and power through an investment in whiteness. Lipsitz pointedly implicates the state in constructing whiteness as a powerful identity investment

especially in the twentieth century, ranging from housing policy and real estate practices to the behavior of the courts, though he also indicts white people's failure to be reflexive about what they have been unfairly provided. Beyond public policy and the material rewards of whiteness, Lipsitz also discusses private white racism and public media events to reveal the ways social investment in whiteness determines a white supremacist social hierarchy.<sup>xli</sup>

### *Becoming White*

Among migration-to-integration narratives of groups like the Irish, Jewish, and Italian, critical whiteness studies has relied on expansive analyses of immigrants' racialization as white to exemplify the ways groups initially considered ethnic lose such a status and 'become white' with assured white privilege. Noel Ignatiev, in his quintessential book *How the Irish Became White* (1995), offers an important contribution to the ways "white" immigrants assimilated to whiteness in order to gain socioeconomic mobility and power in the US. Ignatiev shows how the Irish immigration experience is emblematic of the racialized assimilation immigrants engage in abandoning features of their religious, ethnic, and cultural identities, and thus "become" white by mirroring ways of thinking, practices, and appearances of the "already whitened." In the Irish's case in particular, Ignatiev argues that in order to gain social mobility, they became supporters of slavery of Black people despite their recent emancipation in Ireland.<sup>xlii</sup> Surrendering ethnicity meant losing any form of their cultural heritage that was at odds with dominant whiteness, including their language and names. The assignment of whiteness to Italian, Irish, and Eastern European Jewish people came only after they assimilated as white USians and newer immigrants occupied the racialized space of other. In her groundbreaking work *How Jews Became White Folks and What that Says about Race in America* (1998), Karen Brodtkin further invigorated the conversation about white racialization in a similar way to Ignatiev, in which she says race-

making in the US can be represented in the process of Jews becoming white. Brodtkin ascertains that the whitening of Jews was realized through “changes in national economic, institutional, and political practices, as well as by changes in scientific and public discourses about race in general and Jews in particular.”<sup>xliii</sup> Ultimately, as Ignatiev and Brodtkin emphasize, Jews and the Irish did in fact undergo a similar process in that they were accepted as white and contrasted with Black USians in the Black-white racial paradigm, and thus generally deidentified with the struggle against white supremacy – and in fact implicitly embraced white supremacy.<sup>xliv xlv</sup> Brodtkin and Ignatiev invoke an analysis of the Irish and the Jewish rejecting identification with Blackness, and Brodtkin describes the undertaking of the “model minority” in racial discourse, where “whiteness, to understand itself, depends upon an invented and contrasting blackness as its evil (and sometimes enviable) twin.”<sup>xlvi</sup> As described earlier, whiteness itself was constructed in order to be binarily juxtaposed with Blackness, creating the Black-white paradigm of race we create and perpetuate in the US.<sup>9</sup>

For groups who became white in the US as demonstrated by Irish and Jewish people, assimilating a white identity meant a notable sacrifice of values and cultural traits that did not fit into whiteness. For example, Eric Goldstein, a historian in Jewish Studies, complements Brodtkin’s arguments about the trade-in of becoming white for Jews in the US. In his book *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity* (2006), he offers that the racialization of white Jewish racial identity was also a choice made mostly on an individual by individual basis

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<sup>9</sup> Here, it’s important to acknowledge that the manifestations of whiteness and global white supremacy have complexities that are similar to the US’ white supremacy, but do not always operate in the same ways. whiteness’ operation is temporally and geographically contextual, and for the scope of this thesis, I only consider its implications in the United States. The Black-white paradigm of US-based white supremacy is specific to the United States, and the geographical scope of this thesis is specific to the United States.

because Jews' membership in whiteness forced them to observe and adhere to anti-Black racism.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Being or becoming white, whiteness scholars argue, requires a type of training to accept and assimilate white beliefs, forms of thinking and feeling, and behavior. Rev. Dr. Thandeka, a Black Unitarian Universalist scholar, enters into whiteness studies discourse from a perspective of pastoral care in a book called *Learning to be White (1999)*. Training to be white is realized by all socialization agents like family, schools, peers, religious institutions, and media – as with any skill, white people learn to be proficient in whiteness by observing, being taught and practicing until it is automatic.<sup>xlvi</sup> Social pressure like pressure to speak English over other languages exemplifies that the 'becoming white' training that is conspicuous and evident, though scholars show that there are ontological, invisible, and unconscious instructions of assuming whiteness from parent to child. Distinguishing between the process of becoming and the way of being white is convoluted because of the distinct amount of nonverbal and unconscious directional cues white people receive to be white.<sup>xlvi</sup> Exhibiting whiteness and the directional cues that accompany its learning are significant to name because of the extent to which it is normative and unmarked, while non-whiteness is so clearly and heavily marked as unwhite. Because traits of whiteness are normalized and non-whiteness is considered 'abnormal,' it can be considered transgressive to its dominance to name its operation. While it is possible for white people to articulate or identify some facets of whiteness' operations, such as behaviors and characteristics, Black scholars and scholars of color have determined that it is clear that white culture is distinct and obvious by those who observe it from outside its dominance.<sup>1</sup>

While leading whiteness scholars focus deeply on the larger systemic construction of white identification and its role in creating what I call an ontology of whiteness, or a pervasive

white supremacist way of being, in the US, these scholars of whiteness have investigated the developmental impacts of whiteness identification on individual white people. Roediger and others published *The Construction of Whiteness* (2017), from which I focus on a chapter called “Theorizing White Racial Trauma and Its Remedies,” that explores a similar assertion to Thandeka’s.<sup>li</sup> Authors Veronica Watson and Becky Thompson argue that beyond the overt violence enacted in the name of white people, white people must undergo traumatic racial training that is indicative of “mental anguish” such as “untethered guilt, shame, panic, anxiety, a sense of betrayal, and/or a feeling of abandonment.” Watson and Thompson argue that the traumatic experience of whiteness exists on a continuum that implicates both the white collective and white individual, as they use this chapter to elucidate a rationale for white people’s personal psychological stake in dismantling white supremacy.<sup>lii</sup>

The process of becoming white, Thandeka (whose work is looked at above) concludes from her research, is determined by white parents’ defeats that damage the psyche of the child, and thus compel children to invest in whiteness to earn the approval of their caretakers. She describes stories where white children initially shared intimacy and trust with people of color, but as they would try to combine their communities they would receive both subtle and overt rejection from their caretakers who would communicate that this relationship was unacceptable or intolerable behavior. Thandeka asserts that the white racial identification process for white children is dangerous, writing: “The induction process of the Euro-American child into whiteness is costly. The child must begin to separate itself from its own feelings.” Many other scholars who study whiteness are now investigating this psychological effect Thandeka insists is perilous – not only in upholding a system of white supremacy that is violent towards people of color, but also in that it developmentally harms whites.<sup>liii</sup> While these authors provide reflexive



conversation on white identity, they only lead to vague conclusions about how to assume the grand undertaking of dealing with the privilege and trauma of whiteness these authors explore.

Though it may not be an exact derivative of critical whiteness studies, I finally look to Peggy McIntosh's classic piece on "White Privilege" (1988) as another significant deliberation on whiteness and white identity. McIntosh, a gender studies academic, reflexively explores her own unconscious and internalized racism, as she offers an extensive list to exemplify the ways white people are bestowed unearned privilege. Her enumeration ranges from violent, covert examples like not having to represent their race in public situations or not being afraid of being stopped by police based on racial profiling, to convenient privileges like the color tone of makeup or panty hose offered in most stores.<sup>liv</sup> At her work at the Center for Research on Women, McIntosh's developed this list because of her examination of the unique ways of how women learn and produce knowledge, prompting her to embark on a feminist investigation of how she has learned and reproduced white supremacy. McIntosh's timeless heuristic inquiry is useful in that it helps situate how feminist epistemologies, or ways of knowing and learning, affect reflexive thinking about whiteness.

### *Feminist Epistemologies*

Following a discussion of whiteness, I discuss the feminist epistemologies – which can be described as ways or forms of knowing and producing knowledge – of which I have a particular interest because they have a propensity to overlap with spiritual values of interconnectedness and compassion. Indeed, feminist epistemologies often root these spiritual values which I use to base my research as they necessarily conflict with values of white supremacy.

Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1993) is a primary work that galvanized broad inspection of women's unique sensibilities that

determine different psychological (and moral) capacities compared to men's. Gilligan's compelling argument that the academic discipline of psychology had systematically neglected investigating how women make ethical judgments and how their relational, feminine, and emotional "different voice" affected moral reasoning.<sup>lv</sup> Another similar book that animated conversations around women's knowledge production is Mary Belenky and others' *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (1997) as it digresses from the traditional academic discipline of educational psychology.<sup>lvi</sup> By situating women's cognitive development and types of knowledge, such as 'constructed knowledge.' The authors suggest that women's constructed knowledge requires an extensive "empathetic potential." Beyond having an extensive capacity for empathy in the way women learn, women also experience 'connected knowledge' that seeks to understand others' truths and points of view.<sup>lvii</sup> The works of authors Belenky and Gilligan work to emphasize that women's ways of knowing specifically look to relationship-building and inner/self-reflection, both of which are pivotal to the spiritual reflexivity that pertains to my research.

Both of these books, however, have received and merit significant criticism for their essentialist depiction of a monolithic experience of women, using 'diversity' as a tool to divide instead of depict the richness of what diverse racial and cultural background experiences can offer. Some feminist epistemologists have noted that there are significant problems in claiming, as Gilligan does, commonalities in child-rearing that are inclusive of all classes and races.<sup>lviii</sup> While the authors do emphasize that the women they interviewed come from both white and non-Anglo Saxon cultures, they merge the data of the women from 'ethnic minority' backgrounds into a melting pot of responses, demonstrating a lack of appreciation of the fullness and complexity that diversity in identity offers. Beyond this critique, postmodernist, non-

essentialist feminists have criticized the work for its issue of essentializing men and women and reproducing gender as fact instead of as a social construct — these books have the tendency to claim that women unilaterally use reason differently than men. Postmodernist feminists have used the virtues of these books by problematizing what may account for the difference in gender epistemes.<sup>lix</sup> Ultimately, though, both offer important foundations to the value of women’s psychological and cognitive development, ways of knowing or epistemologies.

*Standpoint Theory, Black Feminist Thought, and Epistemological Spirituality*

In the 1970s and 1980s, around the same time as the two works discussed immediately before this, standpoint theory emerged out of feminist critical theory to scrutinize the relationship between knowledge production and value and practices of (patriarchal) power in research. Standpoint theory affirms that knowledge producers who are oppressed are better equipped to understand and create knowledge because of their personal experience with oppression. As it was originally developed in the social sciences — by Dorothy Smith in sociology and Nancy Hartsock in political sciences, it began as a methodology that asserted that people with marginalized identities are in a certain position of “epistemic privilege” due to their unique experience navigating social and political structures of oppression.<sup>lx</sup> Feminist standpoint theorist thus argue that individuals on the “outside” of systemically authoritative positions are engendered with the knowledge of both operating in their own worlds of lesser systemic privilege while also maneuvering the worlds of dominant social and political groups.<sup>lxi</sup> In many ways this discussion is reflected above in the section on whiteness studies, as Black scholars and other scholars of color have articulated that through an “outsider” status of the dominance of whiteness, they are equipped with the ability to inspect what dominant (white) society deems ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal,’ thus seeing and assessing things those with “insider” status cannot see.

Postmodernist theorists and feminist theorists have similarly objected to standpoint theories as they did to the gendered categorizations of cognitive development. Some argue that standpoint theories appeal to an essentialized experience of being marginalized or being a woman, and thus legitimize or imply that there is a “naturalness” to an experience of marginalization — even when such an identity is socially constructed. Suspicious of the capacity for this standpoint theory to monolithize the category of “woman,” these theorists call for nuances within standpoint theory.<sup>lxii</sup>

Ultimately, though, standpoint theorists importantly provide an avenue for esteeming different types of knowledges that transcend traditionally accepted forms. Distinct from the traditional knowledge-power nexus that determines what is valuable knowledge and whose knowledge is deemed legitimate, standpoint theory resists normative and positivist views of ‘objective’ and third-party knowledge producers. Standpoint feminist theorists argue that standpoint theory rejects the notion that any knowledge production can be rid of bias, and sees the bias that those who experience what is being researched are better equipped to understand their own experiences than outside positivist researchers.

Among other feminist theorists, Black feminism pioneer Patricia Hill Collins presents standpoint theory as a way of valuing oppressed groups’ knowledge production by pointing a way toward what she calls “oppositional consciousness.”<sup>lxiii</sup> Black feminist thought is rooted in the fact that Black women, for example, should be the primary assessors, experts and “specialists” of Black women’s experiences, because “subordinate groups have long had to use alternative ways to create an independent consciousness.”<sup>lxiv</sup> Black feminist theory crucially informs feminist epistemology as well, as Hill Collins emphasizes the significance of emotions as knowledge. In her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics*

of *Empowerment* (2000), she discusses engaging the concept of epistemology and its necessity in questioning hegemonic power.<sup>lxv</sup> In a chapter called “Black Feminist Epistemology,” Hill Collins explains that “epistemological choices about whom to trust, what to believe, and why something is true are not benign academic issues,” in fact, they are “the fundamental question of which versions of truth will prevail.”<sup>lxvi</sup> Whose knowledge is deemed truthful or knowing is especially important to Hill Collins, because as she asserts, Black women’s knowledge has been systematically omitted from traditional canons of academia or other sites of dominant knowledge production. Hill Collins underscores the significance of the knowledge Black women offer and produce, and she demonstrates the ways Black women produce and value knowledge in unique and important ways that traditional epistemes do not. She writes “the sound of what is being said is just as important as the words themselves in what is, in a sense, a dialogue of reason and emotion.”<sup>lxvii</sup> Hill Collins introduces here that there is valuable knowledge in the sound and affective components of expressions, thus underscoring forms of knowledge that are not strictly deemed important by what she calls traditional dominant ‘Eurocentric masculinist epistemology’. The stress on emotion and tone that Hill Collins proposes is a deviation from the traditional Western and patriarchal episteme of rational, verbal articulation as knowledge, and informs my investigation of spirituality, empathy and connectedness as precious and undervalued forms of knowledge.

Feminists of color like bell hooks in her book *All About Love: New Visions* (2000) and Gloria Anzaldúa, who advocated for a Chicana feminist “spiritual activism,” have embraced spirituality as a form of feminist epistemology.<sup>lxviii</sup> In her book *This Bridge Called My Back* (2015), Anzaldúa queries: “What part does feminist spirituality have in taking back our own power?”<sup>lxix</sup> Anzaldúa enhances feminist conversations of epistemological issues because of her

transgressive insistence on spiritualities as a form of knowing, as she underscores how spirituality is valuable to the cause of feminism. She emphasizes that spirituality, indeed, is valuable to the cause of being a feminist and healing oppressive systems. In one of her essays called "now let us shift... the path of *conocimiento* ... inner work, public acts," Anzaldúa offers a necessarily relational and feminist spiritual activism to do the harmoniously spiritual and political "work of healing." She writes:

*"With awe and wonder you look around, recognizing the preciousness of the earth, the sanctity of every human being on the planet, the ultimate unity and interdependence of all beings—somos todos un país. Love swells in your chest and shoots out of your heart chakra, linking you to everyone/everything. . . . You share a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label. This *conocimiento* motivates you to work actively to see that no harm comes to people, animals, ocean—to take up spiritual activism and the work of healing."*<sup>lxx</sup>

Anzaldúa's work on spiritual activism is deeply rooted in questions of interconnectedness, as she highlights "the sanctity of every human being on the planet, the ultimate unity and interdependence of all beings."<sup>lxxi</sup> In Chapter Five of this thesis, I exercise Anzaldúa's definition of spiritual activism and her proposal for organizers to pair spirituality and its practices with traditional forms of movement building. Anzaldúa's expression of spiritual activism is central to this thesis in that she highlights the principles of interconnectedness and love to inform anti-oppression and anti-racism.

#### *Critiques of Spiritualities and New Age Spirituality,*

I wanted to pre-emptively respond to the broad circumspection that comes from both the religious right and the secular left in regards to spirituality, as they both associate such abstract or varying belief systems with a certain suspicion, and in particular dismiss spirituality as irrelevant to politics or activism.<sup>lxxii</sup> From the camp of religious conservatives is a *Time Magazine* op-ed, in which Rabbi Wolpe writes "Spirituality is an emotion. Religion is an

obligation. Spirituality soothes. Religion mobilizes. Spirituality is satisfied with itself. Religion is dissatisfied with the world.”<sup>lxxiii</sup> It is my intention in this thesis to consider, of course, the multi-dimensional and nuanced ways spirituality is practiced to both ‘soothe’ and ‘mobilize.’ In that same vein, I also want to engage and give voice to the valuable critiques and wariness of New Age spiritual movements and appropriative spirituality. Aforementioned feminist bell hooks has critiques of New Age spirituality, although she comes from another end of the political spectrum – she articulates that New Age spirituality is associated with the narcissism and individualist egotism, asserting that it limits itself to complacency and has a goal to make oneself feel better without merit.<sup>lxxiv</sup> In Karlyn Crowley’s *Feminism’s New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism* (2011), she inspects the ways New Age spiritual culture in the last few decades have captivated many white women. She heavily investigates the trajectory of New Age spirituality, as it timely aligned with “when women of color [were challenging] feminism and women’s and gender studies for its racist foundations in the 1980s and 1990s, [so] many white women turned toward New Age spiritual practices that ‘allowed’ them to live out fantasy unions with women of color that were disrupted in the public, feminist political sphere.”<sup>lxxv</sup> Crowley ultimately argues that her “book uncovers a genuine mode of spirituality that can foster agency and empowerment for women even as it rests on suspect racial logics,” indicating that she might find some feminist merit in the spiritual expressions of white women-dominated New Age spirituality.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

As I explicated above, there have been several critiques of New Age spirituality, including issues of appropriation and racism realized by careless and ahistorical white women’s exploitation of cultural traditions, and feminists and academics of color have been principled in holding those forms of appropriation accountable and still practicing and investing in their own

spiritualities. As opposed to embracing the appropriative aspects of New Age Spirituality, in her book *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women (2001)*, Black feminist Akasha Gloria Hull asserts that Black women turning to a new, alternative spirituality that still incorporated several New Age practices.<sup>lxxvii</sup> In AnaLouise Keating's article "'I'm a Citizen of the Universe': Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," she importantly differentiates between Anzaldúa's feminist call for spirituality "from the mainstream 'New Age' movement and from conventional organized religions." Highlighting similar concerns of individualism as bell hooks, Keating writes: "Unlike the ['New Age' spirituality], which focuses almost, if not entirely, on the personal and thus leaves the existing oppressive social structures in place, spiritual activism's holistic approach encompasses both the personal and the systemic."<sup>lxxviii</sup>





### **Chapter Three: Feminist Research Methodologies**

In this section, I will elucidate the feminist principles and methodologies that have guided my research methods and the style with which I write and convey my analysis. Feminist research principles are grounded in researcher (or self-) reflexivity, the intentional legitimizing of all forms of knowledge and all knowledge producers, and the understanding that those who are most vulnerable to oppression are equipped with a “double consciousness” to know the experience of both the oppressed and the oppressor – a view scholars Patricia Hill Collins and W.E.B. Du Bois have put forth which is further articulated in the “Standpoint Theory” section of my literature review. This “double consciousness” allows for people who experience oppression understand and examine the world in ways those with systemic privilege do not. Not only are these concepts foundational to my research process and the expression of my conclusions, but they are also essential to the design of my research, which includes surveying various forms of knowledge production such as a variety of activist works written either by or about anti-racist activists. These works range from interviews, podcasts, books, articles, essays, and activist or organizing manuals as I investigate the significance of spiritual ontologies and spirituality to anti-racist activism.

To investigate if spiritual ontologies and spiritual practice are significant to the endurance of anti-racist activism, I am interpreting several feminist ethical principles in my examination. Feminist ethical principles ask researchers to address issues of power that inherently arise in research, and the engagement of “what is considered to be good, moral conduct” when faced with such issues.<sup>lxxix</sup> While I am not working directly with human subjects or conducting research beyond textual assessments, feminist ethical principles are still evoked in my analysis of written work by anti-racist activists. These principles include issues of my own reflexivity as the

researcher and issues of textual analysis research of existing documents—these concepts can overlap.

In inspecting texts that are informed by prevalent discourses, my subject position as a researcher “inevitably influences which discourses receive greater attention and which ones may be disregarded.”<sup>lxxx</sup> In order to combat research’s propensity to disproportionately focus some discourses over others, one must apply feminist ethical principles of reflexivity. In my particular case, I have to use a critical amount of reflexivity about my own values, attitudes, and experiences in terms of the subject of anti-racist activism and spirituality. I hope to adopt the reflexive leadership of a variety of feminist researchers, such as Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Angela Davis, who acknowledge in their piece “Women and Prison: *Researching Race in Three National Contexts*” (2000) a need to balance their activist perspectives with their role as scholars, which meant “not withholding information about their political motives and goals.”<sup>lxxxi</sup> I assume a similar effort to balance the different spheres of activism and academe. I unequivocally acknowledge that my motives in writing this thesis include political and personal goals, as I hope to broaden anti-racist activists’ understandings of the ways spiritual ontologies work to strengthen anti-racist objectives.

In order to underscore my stake and biases that are unquestionably present in this thesis, I intentionally use the self-reflexive “I” to communicate the understanding that I am responsible for what is expressed in this thesis. Beyond responsibility, I aim to emphasize that I experience whiteness and white privilege and am not excluded from my analysis of the subject. In the first chapter, as I am situating my relationship to the project, I use “I,” “we” or “us” to emphasize transparency about my positionality as a white person.

As the voices and discourses of the dominant delegitimize the knowledge production of the oppressed, I use critical theories informed by Black Feminist theory and intersectionality which authorize and prioritize discourses that illuminate traditionally invisibilized and subjugated experiences. As Patricia Hill Collins asks “critical questions about knowledge and the role of power constructing knowledge,” she confronts the ethical concerns involving material produced out of an academic canon of conventional research methods.<sup>lxxxii</sup> The integrality of this issue to my research is not solely due to a systematic omission of marginalized voices with which researcher should be concerned, but also because much of the scholarship and leadership around anti-racist spirituality have been produced by those very voices. The omission of Gloria Anzaldúa’s — a Chicana feminist scholar who coined the spiritual activism I discuss in this thesis — expertise being a primary example of what AnaLouise Keating calls “academic spirit-phobia,” which subjects women academics of color to experience “difficulty publishing such [spiritual] explorations” that are not as deemed as valuable knowledge productions.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> In order to “set the table” or explicate the underpinnings of anti-racist spirituality such as Anzaldúa, I must look to the women of color who both founded the tradition and are silenced in research.

Beyond the spotlighted ethical matters of research involving human subjects, there are several inconspicuous ethical questions of textual analysis. Operationalizing my research chiefly includes an investigation of scholarship to inform my literature review on activist spirituality, as well as the essays and other written work that comprise the case studies I analyze. One of the primary apprehensions I have also concerns Collins’ discussions of knowledge production, as those whose knowledge has been prioritized and valued—and thus determine a lot of what I have access to—are often those with the most power. In my research, I have seen this trend exhibited by the scholarship centering predominantly Christian voices or spiritualities. More than

estimating what and who counts as knowledge production and producers, written word itself amplifies only certain voices. I attempt to acknowledge and transcend this potential issue by using many interviews and non-traditional or academic formats of knowledge. For example, much of the content on Ruby Sales explored in Chapter Four is derived from interviews, radio appearances and talks on which she is featured. In Chapter Five, I chiefly use accounts from activist manuals and reports which are written for general public use, not necessarily for the academy. Not only does reliance on written word signify that the information is already being esteemed as knowledge, but it also implicates the perspectives of the author—that is, whoever is writing it. Just as I will inevitably stain my evaluation with my own biases, everything I read will also be written with bias. This problem arises as a layered complexity; I am dealing with both my own prejudices and the partialities of those who wrote the documents I am reviewing—the resulting ethical tribulations of which are inescapable. Ultimately, as the researcher, I must assume the onus of understanding and clarifying that every text I am assessing is written with its own predispositions and motives, and my choice of using that material and my selections of what I share of it are equally laced in my bias. I cannot evade the bias with which all of these works are laced, and am comfortable with the understanding that not one work will preclude bias and judgment.

As I construct a textual case study of pieces by authors—some of whom I’ve followed, worked with, and have relationships with—I am facing several issues of entry and rapport. An important figure in both Chapter Four and Five is Claudia Horwitz, from whom, for example, I have received a facilitation in a workshop she led in a class I took. Having met with her and studied her work in several classes of mine, I recognize how I have been influenced by my exposure to and experience with her. Because “every avenue of gaining entry opens some

possibilities for gaining access to information and closes others,” I am also compelled to inspect the doors my developed rapport with authors and access to them has “[closed].”<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

My personal, political, and academic journeys have been entirely interconnected as quests toward collective liberation—that is, creating worlds where people were free from oppression. A crucial impetus for the genesis of my research project was the disconnect between my academic study of liberatory social movements and my personal, political exposure to them: the social movements of which I was a part studied up at the powers and across, but the majority of the academic texts I was reading for my academic focus of collective liberation were studying down. Roberto J. González and Rachael Stryker’s introduction “On Studying Up, Down, and Sideways What’s at Stake?” explains the original queries of the concept, asking anthropologists to “study the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless.”<sup>lxxxv</sup> In this project I aim to “study up” by scrutinizing the ontology, systems, and culture of white supremacy, and subsequently, ways people can disinvest in whiteness and conspire against a system that facilitates white power and violence. My project asks me to not only “study up” at the power structure of white supremacy, but also to study comprehensively across, “down and sideways,” as I observe its relationship to those who are privileged by it (including myself, which necessitates a sideways, reflexive study) and those who are most impacted by it. For this reason, the activists from whom I construct my analysis constitute a variety of religious backgrounds and racial identities, as each experience white supremacy and oppression in their own distinct ways.

Lastly, to conclude the fifth chapter that focuses on spiritual activism and practice, I invoke my own experience to highlight the ways my research for this project has inextricable links to my own political objectives and practice. Self-reflexivity for me as an activist and academic is

paramount to this thesis, and necessitates that I include my personal experience with the subject to shoulder the onus of and understand the ways in which I am implicated and biased. Feminist methodologies have equipped me with a responsible and conscientious way to approach my contribution to scholarship and research, as they have shaped both the substantive and methodological elements of this thesis. Substantively, I have intentionally chosen to evaluate works that are written by and accessible to people who have been traditionally marginalized and excluded from the academe. I have also written about and studied this topic with the conscious understanding that I have personal motivations and stakes in this project, which immeasurably inform what I produce.

## **Chapter Four: Re-conceptualizing Whiteness and the Self: Facing White Supremacist Ontology**

In this chapter, I examine activists Ruby Sales', John Powell's, and Claudia Horwitz's beliefs on creating spiritual worlds or spiritual ways of being as a primary avenue for realizing anti-racist activism. Their emphasis on the creation of spiritual ontologies are projects to create alternative realities to white supremacist worlds or ways of being. This chapter will consider the ways anti-racist activism through a spiritual lens demands a re-conceptualization of dominant understandings of whiteness and the separate self. As Powell explicates further in this chapter, notions of individualism and rational thought engendered by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and bolstered today by modern, Western thought create prevailing assumptions about human's inherent self-interest over collective interest. Powell and Horwitz connect the ontologies of whiteness with this problematic perception of the separate and egoist self, and they suggest that spiritual ontologies hearten our abilities to expand individualistic perceptions of the self towards relational and collective understandings of the self.

As I explore the ideas and experiences of these activists, I claim that there is an insufficient comprehension of the effects of white supremacist ontologies and whiteness, and therefore subsequently inadequate tools to address them. I aim to exhibit in this chapter, as these activists do, that spiritual worldviews of relational suffering offer to anti-racism a more comprehensive and useful framework than traditional understandings of activism. I contend that calls to reimagine or re-conceptualize conventional notions of whiteness and the self are necessarily and inherently ontological projects, in that they require an entirely different value system and understanding of reality in order to truly do the reimagining at hand. Through an analysis of texts or recordings of activists' thoughts on spirituality as an integral component of



their activism, I argue that spiritual worlds are significant to anti-racism in that they emphasize a sacred interconnectedness that challenges the operationality of white supremacist ontologies.

In the introductory chapter, I defined “spirituality as a sustained understanding of the innate interconnectedness, meaning, compassion, and love for oneself and other beings.” In this chapter, I follow that same definition in my evaluation of spiritual anti-racist activists Ruby Sales, John Powell, and Claudia Horwitz — each of whom articulate or demonstrate these spiritual qualities in their analysis of anti-racism. They each convey a spirituality that is in line with this definition, or explicitly discusses the values of interconnectedness and love as integral components of dismantling oppressive systems of whiteness and white supremacy. In each activist’s section, I will introduce and contextualize their relevance with a brief biography illustrative of their connection to anti-racism. Then I will examine their respective assertions about how to problematize dominant understandings of whiteness and power through lenses of spirituality. I will lastly conclude the chapter with a synopsis of the ways their conclusions interact and may be woven together, as all three regard anti-racist activism as an ontologically spiritual endeavor that foments a new perception of whiteness and the self.

*“Where does it hurt?” Ruby Sales and the Spiritual Death of Whiteness*

Ruby Sales began her civil rights organizing trajectory in the 1960s as a teenage student at Tuskegee University, joining the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and working as a freedom fighter in Lowndes County, Alabama. After facing a traumatic experience in 1965, Sales shaped her activist career around spirituality. She founded and presently serves as the director of the SpiritHouse Project, which is a “national nonprofit organization that uses the arts, research, education, action, and spirituality to bring diverse peoples together to work for racial, economic, and social justice, as well as for spiritual maturity.”<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Sales, a nationally

recognized human rights activist and social critic, also serves as a public theologian and uses Black theology to inform her movement involvement, critiques, and work.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

When Sales was a young Black 17-year-old, a white man attempted to assassinate her when she was working for the SNCC in the 1960s. Sales often recounts in interviews, speeches, or sermons the following experience to elucidate the genesis of her commitment to anti-racism.

*“It was hot, one of those Southern days where you could literally feel the pavement – the vapor seeping out of the pavement. And the group of about 14 of us selected Jonathan Daniels, Father Morrisroe, who had recently come to the county, Joyce Bailey, a local 17-year-old girl and I to go and get the drinks. When we got to the door, a white man was standing in the doorway with a shotgun, and he said, ‘Bitch, I’ll blow your brains out!’ And before I could even react, before I could even process what was going on, Jonathan intentionally pulled my blouse, and I fell back, thinking that I was dead. And in that instant, when I looked up, Jonathan Daniels was standing in the line of fire, and he took the blast, and he saved my life.”<sup>lxxxviii</sup>*

After telling this story, she relates to her audiences that she was so traumatized from this experience that she was unable to speak for six months, describing it as her awakening to the “deadly trauma of racism” and sacrifice that freedom fighters challenging white supremacy face.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Unable to speak and find sources of hope, Sales’ silence corresponded with a waning of the conscious spiritual faith with which she was raised, which she describes as “Black folk religion” that dates back to spiritual institutions for enslaved Africans in the US South. In an interview with Krista Tippett’s *On Being* Podcast wherein Tippett asks her interviewees about their spiritual background or upbringing, Ruby Sales spoke of the “spiritual genius” of the elders in her childhood, but was compelled to stray from religion for a while as she was muted by this traumatizing depression of fighting and experiencing white supremacy. She “slowly became a Marxist ... [and] materialist,”<sup>10</sup> and rejected for a long while what she calls the Black folk

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<sup>10</sup> Here, Sales is referring to a common experience among orthodox Marxists that often reductively comprehend Marxism as distinctly anti-spiritual. Sales is asserting that the dominant values of the Marxist and activist Left that interpret the human condition as secular are missing a hugely significant spiritual understandings of suffering.

religion as a part of movement organizing — though she highlights the spiritual and soul music of Bernice Johnson Reagon and Sweet Honey and the Rock kept her spiritual consciousness afloat until she was able to identify it again.<sup>xc</sup> It was not until she had another enlightening experience re-awakening her spirituality that she began to accept that it informed her activism. A conscious renewal of spirituality returned to her in a defining moment that propelled the rest of her commitment to civil rights:

*“ I was getting my locks washed, and my locker’s daughter came in one morning, and she had been hustling all night. And she had sores on her body. ... So something said to me, ask her: “Where does it hurt?” And I said, “Shelley, where does it hurt?” And just that simple question unleashed territory in her that she had never shared with her mother. ... She talked about all of the things that had happened to her as a child. And she literally shared the source of her pain. And I realized, in that moment, listening to her and talking with her, that I needed a larger way to do this work, rather than a Marxist, materialist analysis of the human condition.”<sup>xcii</sup>*

In this quotation, Sales begins her maintenance of my argument that traditional frameworks of anti-racist activism — such as “a Marxist, materialist analysis” — are devoid of vital ways to profoundly dismantle the “ deadly trauma of racism.”<sup>xcii xciii</sup> Sales describes that “something said to [her],” invoking a spiritual tone of a consciousness other than her own, helped to hold and address the pain Shelly was holding.

Today, over 50 years later, Sales says “we are still, as a nation, mired down in the quicksand of racism,” and her act of resistance is defined by a succinct but complicated question for those experiencing the trauma of racism. “[E]verywhere I go around the nation, I see and hear the hurt. And I ask people everywhere, ‘Tell me, where does it hurt?’ ‘Do you see and feel the hurt that I see and feel?’” Sales emphasizes the different ways all people in the United States hurt from white supremacy.<sup>xciv</sup> She first illustrates how Black and Brown people are targeted and violently dispossessed: “I feel and see the hurt in Black and Brown people who every day feel the vicious volley of racism and every day have their civil and human rights stripped away.”

Sales goes on further to specify the ways that white supremacy also impacts the perpetrators and beneficiaries of it:

*“I hear and feel the hurt of white men at the betrayal by the same powerful white men who tell them that their skin color is their ticket to a good life and power, only to discover, as the circle of whiteness narrows, that their tickets have expired and no longer carry first-class status.”<sup>xcv</sup>*

Here, Ruby Sales is making various substantial assertions that draw on the discourse of whiteness studies described in the literature review of this thesis. Sales does not only think of white supremacy as a severe and negative consequence for those who are not white as “their civil and human rights [are] stripped away,” she also describes how white supremacy causes white people to have a distorted identification with whiteness, believing their whiteness should warrant them “a good life and power.”<sup>xcvi</sup> The depravation Sales asserts white people experience due to their whiteness is not only a historical question about the changing ways racism and whiteness materially benefit white people. By implicating this issue of depravity, Sales also alludes to a value-based question, asking her audience to contemplate what the “good life and power” means when it is associated with racism and whiteness.

Beyond inquiring “Where does it hurt?” as Sales goes everywhere asking those to feel and touch the hurt they are experiencing, she also asks that they look radically (at the root) for the cause of this pain: “Now that we've touched the hurt, we must ask ourselves, ‘Where does it hurt and what is the source of the hurt?’ I propose that we must look deeply into the culture of whiteness.”<sup>xcvii</sup> The “culture of whiteness” Sales speaks of is, generally speaking, a different way of formulating the ontology of whiteness I am interpreting in this thesis.<sup>11xcviii</sup> The hegemonic

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<sup>11</sup> The question of culture vs. ontology is a heated debate among academics, but for the purposes of this thesis, I am choosing to use ontology as a framework to assist in conceptualizing different worldviews or worlds themselves, while culture can refer to traditions and rituals that are more simplistic. It is significant to my contention that we view whiteness as an ontology because of the way issues of ontology implicate the acknowledgment of multiple worlds and the necessity to assert alternative ones.

ontology of whiteness in the US or the culture of whiteness that Sales refers to, she underscores, is in her estimation not about white people but instead about “a systematic and organized set of beliefs, values, canonized knowledge and even religion, to maintain a hierarchical, over-and-against power structure based on skin color, against people of color.”<sup>xcix</sup> While the “culture of whiteness” Sales articulates is semantically different from the ontology of whiteness I discuss in this thesis, I make the case in the introductory and chapter and in this one that viewing hegemonic ways of being as ontologies and not cultures is beneficial for a variety of reasons — namely because it offers alternative realities to the hegemonic ones, or as anthropologist Mario Blaser writes of the uses of political ontologies is that it “[liberates] the conceptual-ontological space for something else to exist.”<sup>c</sup>

Although Sales uses “the culture of whiteness” to describe the reality of white supremacy, I contend it is more useful to understand whiteness as an ontology – that is not just another view of or on the world, but its own world entirely, meaning that other worlds can also exist. Sales is asserting that envisioning and scrutinizing “the culture of whiteness” as the reality we live in, but she insists that there are alternative realities or ways of being which we can illuminate. For this reason, we can consider what she designates as “the culture of whiteness” as an ontology to generate space for the alternative realities that are not prevailing white supremacist worlds or realities. As Sales describes that acknowledging the painful culture of whiteness or the painful world of white supremacy has worked to galvanize her journey into spiritual activism, she underscores my contention that anti-racism and the dismantling of worlds of whiteness can be considered a spiritual task.

In April 2018, when describing a sermon she would give at the Festival of Faiths, Sales said in an interview that her intention was:

*“to really raise a different challenge of how to look at racism, not as work we do to heal Black people but work we must do to heal ourselves and to have us understand that racism is not a privilege but is spiritual malformation and social pathology that requires all of us to diminish our humanities and become peril images of who we are as human beings.”<sup>ci</sup>*

Here, Sales introduces a more extensive alternative view of the operation of whiteness and its culture, altering our normative conceptualization of it as solely beneficial to and privileging white people. Instead, she insists, it is a “spiritual malformation and social pathology” for white people. Furthermore, she goes on to clarify her understanding of different worldviews that substantiate these competing conceptualizations of whiteness: “I am asking people to understand that while you might think that racism is a privilege within a material world, ... within a spiritual world it is a death sentence of the soul.”<sup>cii</sup> Sales assertion here is crucial to my argument: According to Sales, there are multiple realities that conceive of whiteness’ operation in stark contrast. Indeed, through the ontology of white supremacy or whiteness that is steeped in the valorization of capital or material gain, the perception of what whiteness affords (specifically to white people but also to all) people is advantageous and expedient. Alternatively, however, through the lens of a “spiritual world” — or for the purposes of this thesis through the lens of a spiritual ontology — whiteness can be imagined or considered a detrimental, or even lethal identification. In her sermon, Sales accentuates that her spiritual anti-racist activism is an “offering for the twenty first century a redemptive pathway that removes all of us out of the pitfalls of moral nihilism into the opportunity to become more fully human and to become more relational with each other and also with God.”<sup>ciii</sup> Sales not only affirms my claim that realizing a spiritual ontology is a project of anti-racism because it helps us to conceive of whiteness as a “death sentence of the soul,” but she also offers the subsequent necessity of a spiritual and

relational atonement in to reject the “nihilism” of whiteness and “to become more fully human and to become more relational with each other.”<sup>civ</sup>

In her interview for the *On Being* Podcast, Ruby Sales furthers her analysis on the spiritual paralysis that whiteness manifests for white people specifically. She queries the ways activists often study and center anti-racist conversations on questions of Black theology and spirituality, when white people — as whiteness literature and many anti-racist activists assert — are the perpetrators and stakeholders in racism. She says “it must be more sexy to deal with Black folk than it is to deal with white folk if you’re a white person,” insinuating that white people (especially activists) need to reflectively engage the difficult questions about what whiteness means for them and other white people as well as for people of color.<sup>cv</sup> Sales’ spiritual proposition as a Black theologian is for the creation of a liberating white theology for activists: “a theology that gives hope and meaning to people who are struggling to have meaning in a world where they no longer are as essential to whiteness as they once were.”<sup>cvi</sup> While she does not use the term “whitelash” used to describe the racism that fortified and secured Trump’s election, Sales claims there is “a spiritual crisis in white America” indicative of the conspicuous absence of public spirituality to alleviate and pacify white people’s cries about the changing meaning of whiteness. “What do you say to someone who has been told that their whole essence is whiteness and power and domination, and when that no longer exists, then they feel as if they are dying?” she asks. Her question is an interpretation of white racialization as a spiritual and relational deficit when the identification of whiteness rests on being disconnected and oppressive towards other beings. Sales answers her own question, responding: “that’s why Donald Trump is essential, because although we don’t agree with him, people think he’s speaking to that pain that they’re feeling.”<sup>cvi</sup> Sales stresses my assertion that spirituality specifically addresses the marked

effects of whiteness (painful disconnection and perverted investments in selfish power and control), and that spirituality answers the necessity in anti-racism to account for such effects.

Ruby Sales' contributions to the larger discourse around spiritual conceptions of white supremacy are especially significant to this thesis and anti-racist activism at large. Sales not only re-conceptualizes whiteness to be spiritually impoverishing for white people, but she also articulates the ways spiritual ontologies or worlds work to re-conceptualize whiteness and its implications. As she substantively calls for a re-imagining of whiteness through a spiritual ontology or worldview, she offers an alternative to the ontology of white supremacy and thus enacts or articulates a different "kind" of anti-racist activism: a spiritual anti-racism. Finally, her elucidation of the whitelash behind Trump is timely, as his election evidences the paradoxical demand for a "liberating theology" for white people who are crying for answers about the false promise of whiteness' power — and what it means for white people to be invested in the promise of power over others. Ruby Sales provides illustrative explanations of my arguments that spiritual anti-racism challenges normative and insufficient approaches to activism, and that calls for paradigmatic shifts introducing spirituality to refine and sharpen anti-racist activism and is a project of challenging ontologies of whiteness.

*Love and Interconnectedness: Re-conceptualizing the Self through a Spiritual Ontology*

*"I come from a large family. And my father and mother were sharecroppers in the South. My father's a Christian minister. He's celebrating 95 this year. He really is an amazing person, as is my mom. And if I were to chronicle their lives, it would sound like, wow, what a hard life. Having lost his mother at a very early age, he was forced to leave school in the third grade to start working full-time, and worked ever since then. He'd lost limbs. He's legally blind. I remember being 12 years old in Detroit: He, like most people from the South, he did everything himself. So, he's fixing a furnace, and it blew up. It cindered all the hair on his body, so he had burns all over his body. We're driving around the city, trying to find a hospital that would accept a black man, and getting turned away, and then going to the next hospital, getting turned away. And as I tell these stories, again, they are sad stories. But when you meet my dad, he just radiates love. He*



*literally attracts people. And he has this quality of appreciating life, and I feel like a little of that has fallen to me. My interest in social justice — I don't know where it comes from really, except, I would say, part of it's the family, part of it's — to me, it's an expression of caring, just caring about people and saying that you are connected to people and other life forms, and then giving it voice. And I think, if we do that, we not only lean into what's called social justice, but deeply into spirituality and religion, as well.*"<sup>civiii</sup>

For John Powell, being an anti-racist activist and scholar has been necessarily paired with the “quality of appreciating life” that he inherited from his father, which has manifested as an understanding that he is inherently “connected to people and other life forms, and then giving it voice.”<sup>cix</sup> Today, as the values instilled in him as a child have run their course, Powell is recognized internationally as a social justice scholar and activist, and he holds the position as Director of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at the University of California, Berkeley. The institute identifies itself as a center “that brings together scholars, community advocates, communicators, and policymakers to identify and eliminate the barriers to an inclusive, just, and sustainable society and to create transformative change toward a more equitable world.”<sup>cx</sup> Powell’s long career as an anti-racist activist has been widely regarded as visionary, as he emphatically proclaims that values of interconnectedness and love – values reflected as the definition of spiritual values in this thesis – are instrumental to the quest for a freer and more just society.

In his book *Racing to Justice: Transforming Our Conceptions of Self and Other to Build an Inclusive Society* (2012), Powell principally delineates his argument that in order for a white supremacist society to address its subsequent violence, we must expose and challenge dominant conceptions of “the self.”<sup>cx</sup> Through an evaluation of feminist, post-modernist, queer, and critical race theorists’ response to Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment that normalized

modern notions of individualism and reason, powell illustrates his aims around critiquing such notions:

*“my goal is not to advocate any particular notion of identity, but instead to demonstrate the existence of a consensus among those who think critically about the self that the modernist self — the Western, unitary, autonomous self- is ill conceived, or just an illusion.”<sup>cxii</sup>*

Subverting normative conceptions of the self is for powell a principle step in transcending the paradigmatic individualism of which we conceive today, especially as it related to social justice work.

Beyond identifying its roots and labeling it “ill conceived, or just an illusion,” powell decries the harm such conceptions of the “self” enact, proclaiming that the “very existence of a separate self or self-consciousness causes a split and suffering that is difficult to heal,” which essentially signifies that he believes a wound is caused on individuals as we conceptualize ourselves as such.<sup>cxiii</sup> Here, powell argues that modern ontologies connected to whiteness are associated with individualism and can be understood as detrimental to spiritual health and wellbeing, “[causing] a split and suffering that is difficult to heal.”<sup>cxiv</sup> He uses an example that when “one person beats up or kills another, or a group of people discriminates another group,” we tend to use individualistic and human terms that inculcate in us beliefs that “any effort to address [this suffering] has led some to assume that it must also be on individualistic or human terms.”<sup>cxv</sup> Alternatively, powell proposes the effects of institutions this kind of “suffering is caused not by individuals directly, but by structures and institutional arrangements” based off of philosopher John Rawls’ conclusions.<sup>cxvi</sup> At first glance, this specific analysis appears to be a simple replica of what many activists and social theorists have proclaimed — that social suffering is instead due to (and therefore must be approached with) systemic under footings and consequential systemic analyses. However, powell proposes that the process of

reconceptualization of the self towards an interconnected way of being is not just a systemic or institutional remedial project, but also a spiritual endeavor:

*“Moving beyond a view of the self as separate and unconnected is a profoundly spiritual subject. It is the urge and yearning for connection that lies within us all. Often, we are not comfortable mixing our spiritual yearnings and our secular work for social justice, but this is a false and problematic separation.”*<sup>cxvii</sup>

The opposition to combining spirituality (and the spiritual notion of interconnectedness) to what we understand as secular social justice work was underscored by Sales when she discussed her disconnect from her spiritual upbringing as she began her activist trajectory. Though Sales and Powell may be coming to this conclusion for different reasons — Sales because of trauma she underwent — they both underscore my contention that spirituality and social justice work are necessarily synergistic. Powell writes that through alternative discernment of the self where “we recognize ourselves in others or the divine in others,” it would be “inconceivable that we should be indifferent to suffering just because it is called secular.”<sup>cxviii</sup> Here, Powell indicts not only ontologies of whiteness that comprehend of beings as separate and individual actors generally disconnected to the suffering of others, but he also criticizes activists’ propensity to adopt secular language (and ideologies) that reject the spiritual, interconnected understanding of humans. Ultimately, as Powell writes, the “[recognizing] ourselves in others or the divinity in others” would more effectively prompt people to act against suffering, which epitomizes my suggestion that spiritually relational views of suffering work to realize objectives of anti-racism as they subvert dominant conceptions of the separate and self-interested individual associated with ontologies of whiteness.<sup>cxix</sup>

As Powell is not merely talking about institutional remedies to institutional problems, he is in fact discussing ontological remedies (which to him take shape as spiritual values of interconnectedness) to the ontological suffering associated with white supremacy. Powell is first

charging the current ontological framework of white supremacy, which is rooted in what he criticizes as the conceptualization of humans as separate selves and beings, and then offers spirituality to enact and assume interconnectedness, writing:

*“Spirituality is the practice of addressing ontological suffering by relating to something more authentic or larger than the egoistic self. It is informed by suffering on one hand — particularly but not exclusively ontological suffering — and love on the other.”*<sup>cxx</sup>

Here, powell relates that spirituality is not only informed by interconnected suffering with one another, but it is also related to loving — a term that connotes a similar abstraction to spirituality, but powell sometimes uses in tandem with it. powell’s point is especially significant in the way he similarly regards white supremacy as an ontological suffering that can be addressed through ontological spirituality. Ultimately, powell stresses accentuates this thesis’ insistence that spiritual anti-racism is a necessarily ontological project, writing that progressive struggles for social justice and racial equity “must not only tell stories about economic and political belonging, but of ontological (or spiritual) belonging as well.”<sup>cxxi</sup>

Deepening his appeal for love in the spiritual project of effecting spiritual and interconnected ways of being, powell writes that “we must end by talking about love ... [w]e must draw on love's power to free us from separation and its accompanying sense of loss.” In an interview with Krista Tippett (the same podcast from which I cite Sales), he clarifies how love necessitates feelings of interconnectedness and compassion: “if you suffer, it does not imply love. But if you love, it does imply suffering.”<sup>cxxii</sup> To love as powell believes we should means “to suffer with ... compassion, not to suffer against.”<sup>cxxiii</sup> Indeed, spiritually interconnected loving is not only a means through which we collectively suffer from systemic and interpersonal ills, but it creates space for other joyous parts of life — “to have a space big enough to suffer with, and if we can hold that space big enough, we also will have joy and fun, even as we suffer.

And suffering will no longer divide us.”<sup>cxxiv</sup> As powell associates this spiritual project of love with both the project of naming and seeing the interconnectedness among beings, he also comprehends love as a radical instrument in racial justice organizing. In the same podcast, powell maintains that especially in movement or organizing strategy:

*“Right now, ... we don’t have confidence in love ... We have much more confidence in anger and hate. We believe anger is powerful. We believe hate is powerful. And we believe love is wimpy. And so, if we’re engaged in the world, we believe it’s much better to organize around anger and hate.”*<sup>cxxv</sup> But instead, he offers that love prompts us to strengthen our capacities to “[bring] something new into being, but I do not know exactly how this space can be created... Can we imagine a self beyond isolation and whiteness? Can we imagine Dr. King’s beloved community? Perhaps we can start this imaginative process in our dreams.”<sup>cxxvi</sup>

As spiritual ontologies marked by values of love and interconnectedness support objectives of anti-racist activism, powell helps to demonstrate that new paradigms of activism could do the radical work of “bringing something new into being” by organizing around love.

<sup>cxxvii</sup> While in the following chapter I will consider more activists call to do so, I want to emphasize the proposition of this thesis that building movements for social change through spirituality and around love and interconnectedness manifests a truly alternative worldview to white supremacy, and therefore works to materialize anti-racist objectives of undermining it.

#### *Introducing Practice: Spiritual Activism and Seeing Anew with Claudia Horwitz*

According to her personal website, Claudia Horwitz had been intensively organizing around socio-economic justice issues when she “began to notice a whole slew of unsustainable patterns, both within [her]self and [her] colleagues,” prompting her current and decade-long trajectory of working “explicitly at the intersection of spiritual practice and social justice.”<sup>cxxviii</sup>

A white anti-racist spiritual activist, Horwitz has realized her yearning for this intersection as a leader in activist circles with various roles: author, facilitator, director or consultant of various social justice organizations, and a yoga practitioner and teacher.<sup>cxxix</sup> Horwitz’s work is often

cited to define spiritual activism, indicating that her work introduced the terminology and definition of spiritual activism. In this chapter, Horwitz offers a departure from theoretical analyses about conceptualizing the worlds of whiteness and spirituality, as she instead turns to the instrumentalization of spirituality and its part in creating new worlds. Her work serves to illustrate the overlaps and connections between the frameworks with which Sales and Powell provide us, and the practical application and creation of spiritual ontologies.

In her first book *The Spiritual Activist: Practices to Transform Your Life, Your Work, Your World*, Claudia Horwitz is different from Sales' monologues and sermons in that she proposes the idea of a spiritual activism while also making more concrete how individual practices of spiritual activism may manifest. Horwitz maintains, however, Sales' general idea of activism as a specifically spiritual undertaking. A compilation of guided spiritual practices by various activists, Horwitz's *The Spiritual Activist* is divided into three sections. The first, called "Refuge: Turning Inward, Finding Strength," asks her readership to practice spiritual ritual to "find compassion, tranquility, love, strength, and a sense of ease" which she says "allows us to develop our power from within, the power that makes real change possible."<sup>cxix</sup> Here, Horwitz affirms that an individual's spiritual rituals must be self-reflective and activists must create the foundation for their spiritual nourishment.

*"I've also called for practice when it's so clear that talking has run its course and people need to drop down from their head into their heart or their gut. Many years ago, I was working with a high school program for students, it was a faith-based program, the topic of race came up, and a lot of things started happening at once. White students were sort of acting out of traditional stereotypes, and students of color were very frustrated and understandably angry. So, we met as a staff to try to figure out what to do, and we had a rich conversation, but it didn't lead to a lot of clarity. So, I just suggested that we take 10 minutes together to be quiet. After ten minutes were up and I came out of my own meditation practice, I looked around the room and I saw my colleagues: my friend Jason a white rabbi was standing at the window praying, my friend Liz whose Catholic and Latina was on her knees with her hands clasped in prayer, and Christian an African American Baptist had taken his Bible out. We regrouped and wisdom just flew around the*

*circle: we quickly came up with a plan to introduce a framework of oppression, center the voices of students of color, and give everyone a chance to speak. So, what I'm saying is this: I didn't learn the skills to cross boundaries when I was growing up — you probably didn't either — but we can learn them now and we have to. Our collective survival and our shared humanity — it depends on me and you breaking through the fears we have and literally repatterning our behavior so that these lines of difference don't become fault lines.*”<sup>cxxxi</sup>

The anecdote shared above encapsulates what spirituality, specifically spiritual practice, can contribute to anti-racist activism: she highlights the practicality spirituality offers in creating space for wisdom to engage the exigent challenges dealing with racism presents. Accentuating the argument of this chapter, Horwitz underscores similarly to Sales that spirituality offers a new way of “seeing” or conceptualizing of harm and oppression in the world, as it helps to ground activists in their ability to undertake discovering, feeling, and treating the “hurt” of white supremacy Sales discusses.

In her article “Civil Society and Spirituality,” Horwitz claims that spirituality is foundational to civil society and activism.

*She articulates that concrete daily rituals of spirituality coupled with an “inner work does not mean avoiding or transcending external difficulties – rather, the spiritual path serves as a way of turning towards society’s most pressing challenges with a willingness to see, to feel and ultimately to act from a place of wholeness. At its best, ‘spiritual activism’ harnesses the passion that arises from witnessing the world’s suffering, and redirects it in more effective ways.”*<sup>cxxxii</sup>

Seeing, or awakeness, according to Horwitz, helps those with privilege to engage what can be paralyzing to face. Anti-racist activism often asks white people to face the trauma they have perpetuated, but the feelings of grief, shame, and regret associated with such accountability rarely work to inspire and discover truth and healing. Like Horwitz proposes, spirituality does not allow for the avoidance of truth and reconciliation required from white anti-racist activists, but it offers instead a “[witnessing of] the world’s suffering ... and [redirection of] it in more effective ways.”<sup>cxxxiii</sup> Not only does Horwitz imply that spirituality allows those with privilege to

identify and sustainably observe the suffering white supremacy levies, but it also works to simultaneously provide the privileged with a revival and platform to address the harm of white supremacy. Horwitz has no illusions about spiritual practice as a tool on its own, as she writes that “if inner work is undertaken in isolation from the reflective mirror provided by real communities, the spiritual path merely bolsters individualism” – this conclusion is similarly emphasized by bell hooks and AnaLouise Keating in the literature review of this thesis. <sup>cxxxiv</sup>

Ultimately, Horwitz proposes that all freedom is dependent on the “[inextricable] link” between collective freedom and individual freedom — which relies on the understanding that any work of transformation (such as individual, collective, or spiritual) must have those who intend for it to? view themselves as part of a whole. Horwitz underscores in the essay previously mentioned that “[s]piritual wisdom sees beyond the mentality of ‘us versus them’ to engage with the potential of commonality and radical equality,” as it makes more concrete the ethical foundation of social movements and broader civil society. <sup>cxxxv</sup> She writes that activists must draw on the “golden rule” of all major faiths in her final section “Embrace: Turning Outward, Building Connection,” where she queries to her readership “how do we find the strength to turn toward struggle, instead of away from it?” <sup>cxxxvi</sup> Horwitz is building off of her previous assertion that activists have to find strength inwardly to face the trauma of the world, but then must also “reach beyond the self, beyond what is familiar, to find that we thought was separate from us is actually part of us” which she says “is a vital aspect of our spiritual lives.” <sup>cxxxvii</sup>

Claudia Horwitz emphasizes similar assertions to Sales’ and Powell’s, as she highlights the integrality of spirituality to activism and underscores the necessity for people to awaken towards spiritual ways of being. But Horwitz also contributes a new language of practicality around spirituality, as she writes that spiritual activism can help transform those with privilege



to transform their feelings of guilt and shame into a more effective and more profound activism. Horwitz provides this thesis a discussion with how spiritual values of interconnectedness associated with spirituality work to challenge the individualism with which some spiritual practices may be associated. She concludes, similarly to Powell, that spirituality necessitates this a reconceptualization of the self, thus substantiating the spiritual values of loving interconnectedness and relationality this thesis proposes as mechanisms for creating spiritual worlds alternative to white supremacist ontologies.

*Because Our Survival Depends on It: Spiritual Anti-Racism According to Sales, Powell, and Horwitz*

Though these learned activists are schooled in different academic disciplines and traditions, they each have reached similar conclusions about the consequences of white supremacist oppression, whiteness, and individualism. As Sales ominously portrayed the effects of whiteness and white supremacy – Sales explicitly using the word “death” – Powell echoes her tone. In an interview, when John Powell was asked “Why should a white person be concerned about their advantages?” he responded: “to live in a white enclave is not to live in the world. And I think, you know, it has a certain deadness to it; it has a certain spiritual corruption to it.” Indeed, Powell, too, conceptualizes “white enclaves” as nearly categorically “dead” and associated with “spiritual corruption.”<sup>cxxxviii</sup> Horwitz also discusses the spiritual imperative Sales and Powell accentuate – what Horwitz describes as “our collective survival and our shared humanity.” By using the term “survival” here, Horwitz elicits a similar feeling to understanding of whiteness as a “death sentence of the soul,” which is demonstrative of the parallel and reverberation in activists’ belief in the timely imperative of addressing whiteness for their own ability to live.<sup>cxxxix</sup>

The spiritual death in white supremacist ontology has directed Sales, Powell, and Horwitz to introduce what I call spiritual ontologies as alternatives to the lethality of whiteness and the disconnection that accompanies it. Spiritual ontologies, as they help exhibit, address the wounds of whiteness and separation by facilitating relational and compassionate ways of being. Sales primarily underscores the wounds created by ontologies of whiteness and white supremacy, describing several instances of suffering that she deduces were caused by the separative, violent, and isolative traits of white supremacy. She then suggests that in a spiritual world or ontology, whiteness itself is damaging for white people specifically because it hypnotizingly convinces them that notions of wellness are intrinsic to their whiteness — which inherently implicates whites' oppression of Black and Brown peoples. To remedy the isolation and wounding caused by the ontology of whiteness, Powell builds on Sales offering that a spiritual worldview that legitimizes the interconnectedness of all beings enables us to experience the suffering of one another and engage in the healing needed to challenge white supremacy. Ultimately, as she reiterates the contributions provided by Powell and Sales, Horwitz gives voice to the sustainability and practicality of creating spiritual ontologies as mechanisms against ontologies of whiteness. In the following chapter, I investigate contemporary strategies activists are using to materialize the spiritual, paradigmatic change the figures examined in this chapter present.

## Chapter Five: Spiritual Activism and Transformative Organizing: Spiritual Ontologies in the Making

In this chapter, I will evaluate spiritual activists' accounts from a burgeoning body of literature emerging from social change groups and individual organizers who are calling for spiritual activism and practice within anti-racist movement building. This contemporary demand is largely known as 'transformative organizing,' as it proposes a dual transformation of systems of oppression and traditional paradigms of activism. My discussion of spiritual and transformative change in this chapter is based on the concepts established and elucidated in the previous chapter, where activists Ruby Sales and John Powell furnish analyses of spiritual worlds that combat worlds of whiteness. As Sales conceives of whiteness as spiritual death and Powell supplements her explanation of the lethality through a critique of modern, white notions of the separate self, they conclude that spiritual ontologies work to venture a path of liberation and healing of the wounds ontologies of whiteness cause. Claudia Horwitz then provides an explanation of the effects and contribution to spiritual activism may have in implementing Sales' and Powell's ideas. All three activists maintain that the current dominant ontologies inflict suffering, implicating the spiritual survival of everyone, especially those who are "privileged" by whiteness.<sup>12</sup> The values of interconnectedness, love, and collective healing that are emblematic of the spiritual ontologies they propose in Chapter Four can be considered the "what" or the objective of the activism discussed in this thesis, while this chapter can be considered a deliberation of the "how."

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<sup>12</sup>Here, privilege is written with quotation marks to illicit the same problematization of whiteness Ruby Sales calls for when she says "I am asking people to understand that while you might think that racism is a privilege within a material world, ... within a spiritual world it is a death sentence of the soul."

In this chapter, I assert that as all ontologies are enacted through practice, the practices of spiritual activism work to create and illuminate the spiritual ontologies Sales and Powell envisioned in the last chapter. After explaining the nature and genesis of spiritual activism and transformative organizing, I intend to illustrate the significance of spiritual practice remedying the effects of activist burnout and embodying love and interconnectedness in movement building. I ultimately contend that these spiritual anti-racist activism works to subvert ontologies of whiteness (characterized by hate and isolation) by manifesting spiritual ontologies marked by contrasting values of interconnectedness and love.

Unlike the previous chapter, this one will focus on a variety of authors, texts, and sources to demonstrate what practical and applied methods anti-racist activists use to realize the spiritual ontologies Sales and Powell introduced. I thus stray from the narrative and anecdotal tone apparent in Chapter Four. Another note for this chapter is that much of the literature used to substantiate and comprise this chapter is written by anti-racist spiritual activists and transformative change organizers, but they do not speak as much to spirituality's relationship to whiteness with specificity — unlike Sales and Powell. I aim to illuminate this relationship with more clarity, as I assert that the spirituality these activists are incorporating into their social justice work operates distinctly in opposition to ontologies of whiteness and white supremacy.

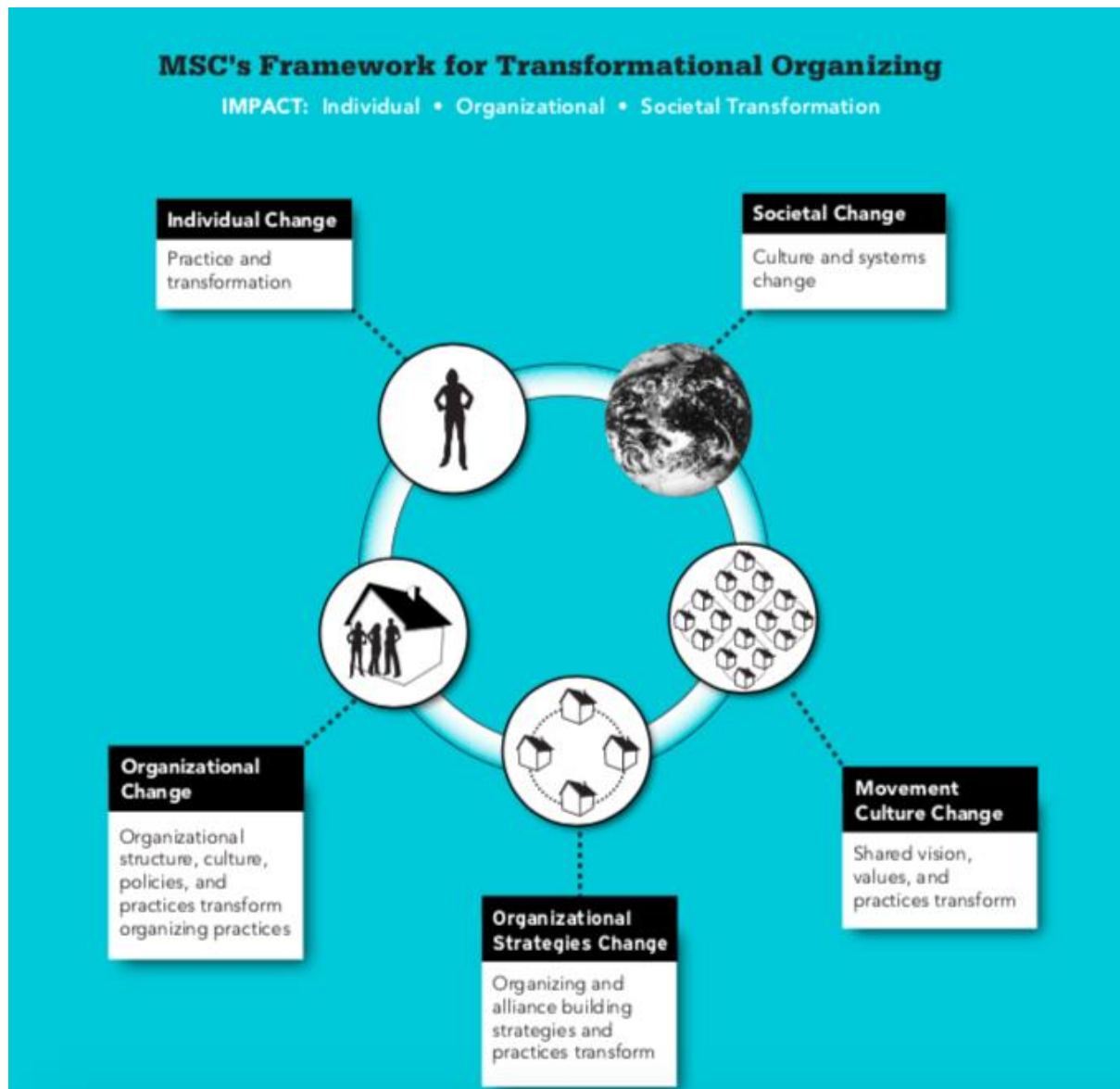
*What are Spiritual Activism and Transformative Organizing?*

A general consensus among contemporary activists is that current and traditional forms of social justice work are at best unsustainable for individuals and at worst reproductive of the harmful tendencies of the very oppressive systems activists are targeting. These conclusions are widespread, as activists highlight in articles, pamphlets, speeches, and social media the ways they are combatting the defeat and exhaustion of organizing — even some organizations that are

founded entirely on the premise of addressing the exhaustion and toxicity of Leftist activist culture.<sup>cxli</sup> While most activists are familiar with the discourse around activist burnout, the specific sect calling for a paradigmatic change in activist practice is called “Transformative Social Change” or “Transformative Organizing.”<sup>cxlii</sup> In their pamphlet “Out of the Spiritual Closet” the Movement Strategy Center (MSC) defines what Transformative Movement Building means to them:

*“Movement Strategy Center uses the term transformative movement building as an umbrella to describe the diverse efforts of groups and individuals to fundamentally change our political, material, social and spiritual reality. Transformative movement building links the process of individual transformation to group and social transformation. In this framework, inner change and outer change are deeply connected. Transformative movement builders seek to synthesize wisdom and practice from spiritual traditions (often focused on deep inner transformation) with social change traditions of the Left (generally focused on social analysis and systems change). Transformative movement builders share a deep commitment to holistic individual, group and social change, driven by a connection to something larger than themselves.”<sup>cxliii</sup>*

Considering this definition, this chapter will focus on transformative change — used interchangeably with transformative or transformational organizing, movement building, and activism. According to the image (Figure 1 below) that the MSC uses to illustrate their framework, the cohesive and synergistic effect of making societal change is inherently relevant and connected to the work that begins with the individual but then expands to the organizational, and movement culture at large. While in this chapter I focus on two of these entities — the individual and the larger societal change — each, of course, has their integral place in transformative organizing and the spiritual activism about which I deliberate. Significantly, transformational organizing considers there to be an innate correlation between the individual practices of activists themselves (practices which are meant to be to some degree spiritually informed) and the larger effect such activism has on the world or reality they are charged with creating.



(Figure 1)

Transformative change and spiritual activism (a concept cultivated by Gloria Anzaldúa and Claudia Horwitz, both of whom are considered to be of the founding thinkers on the subject) have significant parallels and are often referring to similar goals. As MSC suggests that transformative change is a “[synthesis of] wisdom and practice from spiritual traditions (often focused on deep inner transformation) with social change traditions of the Left (generally focused on social analysis and systems change),” we can see Anzaldúa’s definition of spiritual

activism offers a notable resemblance to the synergetic pairing of spiritual work and traditional activism. She writes:

*“Conocimiento urges us to respond not just with the traditional practice of spirituality (contemplation, meditation, and private rituals) or with the technologies of political activism (protests, demonstrations, and speakouts), but with the amalgam of the two—spiritual activism.”* <sup>cxliv</sup>

Conocimiento, what she defines as the “searching, inquiring, and healing consciousness” that galvanize spiritual activism, instigates Anzaldúa’s proposal for this “amalgam.” This chapter will consist of an evaluation of the themes and practices that comprise transformative organizing and spiritual activism which, for the purposes of this thesis, propose a generally analogous practical avenue for the creation of spiritual ontologies that act as wedges against ontologies of whiteness.

#### *The Crisis and Inception: From Activist Burnout to Spiritual Practice*

In her depiction of spiritual activism, Gloria Anzaldúa relates a narrative with which many activists are familiar, and the turning point many reach as they are compelled to find a “new” way to realize their movement building:

*“You reflect on experiences that caused you, at critical points of transformation, to adopt spiritual activism. When you started traveling and doing speaking gigs, the harried, hectic, frenzied pace of the activist stressed you out, subjecting you to a pervasive form of modern violence. . . . To deal with personal concerns while also confronting larger issues in the public arena, you began using spiritual tools to cope with racial and gender oppression and other modern maldades—not so much the seven deadly sins, but the small acts of desconocimientos: ignorance, frustrations, tendencies toward self-destructiveness, feelings of betrayal and powerlessness, and poverty of spirit and imagination.”* <sup>cxlv</sup>

Here, Anzaldúa portrays the varied experience of suffering, oppression, and “other modern maldades,” activists confront in their work — her description emblematic of the harrowing experience of activist burnout. As we were introduced to Claudia Horwitz in the previous chapter, she, similarly to Anzaldúa, articulates how after organizing for a significant amount of time, she “began to notice a whole slew of unsustainable patterns, both within

[her]self and [her] colleagues.”<sup>cxlvi</sup> Their experiences are reverberated in several anecdotes and organizational reports provided in transformative activism literature in which activists call for a new strategy for change. The Social Justice Leadership in their article “Transformative Organizing: Towards Liberation of Self and Society,” call for a reckoning with the two-fold ordeal of structural oppression and individual suffering that pervades society and social movements organizing spaces.<sup>cxlvii</sup> They name that the Left is losing the fight because “its focus on external, short term change has greatly limited its potential,” as it also tends not to acknowledge the internal suffering of many of its practitioners.<sup>cxlviii</sup> As Anzaldúa, Horwitz, and the MSC noted earlier, activist groups are being prompted to address the ways burnout is “[limiting] ... potential,” and are turning to spiritual activism and transformative organizing as a “‘new way’ to practice social justice — a way that can meet the challenges of our time, sustain our leaders and transform our movement and the world.”<sup>cxlix</sup> In this section, I aim to highlight the ways activists are using spiritual practice to address and alleviate the burnout and ills of traditional activism and become more effective. As activists employ spiritual practices as foundational instruments in their activism, I ultimately suggest they are materializing the goal of their activism by undermining oppressive ontologies and creating spiritual ones in their stead.

In “Out of the Spiritual Closet,” MSC asserts the necessity for progressive movements to address activist burnout through spiritual practice — which can take shape or manifest in a variety of ways. MSC describes that transformative organizing itself is comprised by a wide range of spiritual practices, “including contemplative practices like meditation, embodiment practices like martial arts, cultural ritual and healing practices, artistic and creative practices, and other forms of contemplative and spiritual practice.”<sup>cl</sup> In the previous chapter, Ruby Sales expounded how Sweet Honey and the Rock’s musicality provided her spiritual sustenance even



when she was not explicitly experiencing them with a spiritual purpose. Artistic and creative expression when paired with a spiritual dimension can often be used as a spiritual practice or outlet. In a report from a convening called “Spiritual Activism: Claiming the Poetry and Ideology of a Liberation Spirituality,” the writers underscore the assortment of spiritual practice and rituals observed and performed by activist participants:

*“There were optional sessions in the morning to engage in spiritual practice from multiple traditions. Ritual and song were woven into openings and closings. The gathering also included a “Sacred Slam,” a series of artistic performances from music to poetry that explored the theme of spiritual activism.”<sup>cli</sup>*

The practice of inner work can manifest in several ways, so much so that what I compiled is absolutely unexhaustive, but I do intend to challenge the abstraction of spiritual activism and its inner work practices by illuminating concrete ways they may occur.

The MSC booklet provides several individuals’ accounts that are demonstrative of the conspicuous absence of healthy and sustainable work ethic until activists began to implement spiritual practice. For example, “Out of the Spiritual Closet” features activist Jidan Koon, who “[l]ike so many movement builders, [experienced] ten years of organizing and activism [leading] Koon to burn out.” Koon explains the ways that she was compelled to begin recognizing the burnout as “[h]er personal life was falling apart ... [and she] felt no sense of identity outside of her work.”<sup>clii</sup> But as MSC exhibits in their pamphlet — as is their intention — Koon and others found that a personal, spiritual practice worked to guide them towards a more effective and profound activist approach. Koon specifically turned to Vietnamese Buddhist tradition to root her spiritual practice of meditating, writing in a journal, and creating art, which have in turn “nurtured Koon’s ability to experience what ‘freedom feels like.’”<sup>cliii</sup> As she describes the ways implementing spiritual practice in her life galvanized a new ability to sense what “freedom feels like,” she epitomizes Anzaldúa’s insinuation that traditional activism without spiritual practice

often leaves activists with a “poverty of spirit and imagination.”<sup>cliv clv</sup> With spiritual practice, Koon’s imaginary was augmented to illuminate the reality of freedom that existed for her in the present, as she asserts, “Meditation gave me a taste of liberation in the present . . . Now I know what I’m talking about when I talk about freedom.”<sup>clvi</sup> Koon’s experience with spiritual practice epitomizes my assertion that as activists adopt spiritual practice in their lives, they expand and ignite spiritual realities, worlds, or ontologies that offer alternatives to worlds of oppression and whiteness.

Transformative change activists also underscore the necessity for frequent and sustained practice. In their handbook called “The Activist’s Ally,” The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (CCMS) offers instructions for social justice organizers to incorporate spiritual practice in their movement building. Explaining that because CCMS has “learned that burnout is a growing trend in the social justice community and one of the most difficult challenges we confront,” they have strengthened their emphasis on the integrality of ritual or practice in organizing: “We believe that the best way to sustain ourselves while working for change is with the help of contemplative practices: activities that, when incorporated into our daily life, bring us strength, peace, and inspiration.”<sup>clvii</sup> Their proposal stresses the importance of frequent and routine practice to long-term social justice work, indicating that the sustenance of spiritual practice is integral to their mission because it is part of the “inspiration” that informs their work.<sup>clviii</sup>

### *Spiritual Activism: From Inner Work to Outer Work*

Gloria Anzaldúa discusses that the theories and praxis of spiritual activism begin with a “the path of *conocimiento*,” as she emphasizes that it is a synergistic coupling of “innerwork [with] public acts.”<sup>clix</sup> In “I am a Citizen of the Universe,” AnaLouise Keating teases out the

ways Anzaldúa illustrates spiritual activism and social transformation. Enacting transformation, Anzaldúa insists, is a progressive, then simultaneous process beginning with “inner work,” but inextricably paired with a focus on traditional, explicit forms of social activism with which most are familiar. The inner work Anzaldúa articulates is the often unseen personal transformation needed to remedy societal (and interpersonal) wounds. She writes:

*“The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian ... The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society.”*<sup>clx</sup>

Here, Anzaldúa specifically alludes to the “inner changes” she says we must undergo “before change” occurs outwardly. She also identifies the ways society has classified individuals in terms of their experience of racialized oppression, alluding to the relevant ways such oppression has affected each individual on spiritually internal levels — which in turn signifies that spiritual inner work is required as an antidote to the internal effects. Claudia Horwitz then echoes Anzaldúa, as she reminded us in the last chapter of the ways this inner work helps activists face the damage systems of oppression have inflicted both individually and societally: “inner work does not mean ... transcending external difficulties – rather, the spiritual path serves as a way of turning towards society’s most pressing challenges with a willingness to ... act.”<sup>clxi</sup> The report “Spiritual Activism: Claiming the Poetry and Ideology of a Liberation Spirituality” supplements Horwitz’s discussion of the ways spiritual inner work must be effectuated in unison with the external. They write:

*“We recognize that a spiritual journey begins with gaining knowledge of spiritual beliefs, but it is not enough. Deepening our spiritual practice and our social principles to better serve the world is the vital bedrock of our individual and organizational lives. We believe that action without reflection can lead to decisions based on fear, anger, and misperception. Reflection without action can lead to complacency, inertia, and acquiescence. This is as true for individuals as it is for groups. Our consistent embodiment of spiritual consciousness while acting in the service of social*

*transformation enlivens the bridge between the worlds of contemplative practice and social action. It is a clear demonstration of our values.”<sup>clxii</sup>*

As alternative, spiritual worlds or ontologies are necessarily created through practice, I demonstrate through these change-makers that practice must not only be frequently engaged and observed, but it also must help us align with the social justice visions activists have for the world.<sup>13clxiii</sup> The Center for Transformative Change produced a booklet called “Framing Deep Change,” in which various activists author essays on transformative organizing. In their essay “The Transformative Power of Practice,” Ng’ethe Maina and Staci Haines emphasize that as “we are what we practice,” as it realizes “changes [in] our minds, bodies and moods towards the new way of being” – as shown throughout this thesis, “ways of being” can also be understood as ontologies. As Maina and Haines query: “Are we practicing what is most aligned with our vision for the world, for justice?” they initiate the important discussion of the next section: how does the inner work of spiritual practice done by individual activists influence the broader effect they have in their goals of creating equitable and just worlds free of white supremacy?<sup>clxiv</sup>

*From Rage to Militant Love: Activism that Creates Spiritual Ontologies*

The spiritual values of love and interconnectedness are illustrative of “the vision for the world, of justice” for which the activists and organizers examined in this thesis are advocating. As the previous sections have established that transformative organizing and spiritual activism generate the space for activists to engage spiritual practice to rejuvenate their commitment to change-making, provoking an examination of the new themes and principles derived from such organizing practices. Maina and Haines inquiry about the translation of individual organizers’

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<sup>13</sup> As I use Mario Blaser’s definitions of ontologies to inform this thesis’ discussions of the subject, it is significant to specify here that ontologies are enacted through practice. He writes “ontologies do not precede mundane practices, but rather are shaped through the practices and interactions of both humans and nonhumans.” Indeed, the spiritual practices of these anti-racist activists realize and create spiritual ontologies.

spirituality to activism for the creation of spiritual worlds prompts us to consider: what are the broader implications spiritual activism has for the direction and principles of anti-racist movements? In this section, I aim to explore how spiritual ontologies are created through spiritually informed ‘outer work’ and anti-racist activism, generating fundamental values of love and interconnectedness within anti-racism. Practicing these values, I suggest, operationalize activists’ capacities for humanizing others, building commonality, and working with difference — which thus create spiritual ontologies that debase the disconnection, hate, and anger related to ontologies of whiteness.

According to spiritual and transformative change activists, the markers of this “new way” of organizing is its rootedness in love and compassion — which is resistant to the paralyzing rage and criticism that are short-term motivators in larger movement building. In “Out of the Spiritual Closet,” the writers maintain how “[m]ainstream culture often feeds on our anger, greed and competitiveness,” and while they acknowledge that “feeling the full extent of our anger against oppressive systems is an important part of becoming politicized” they assert that “stopping there can be detrimental.”<sup>clxv</sup> Jidan Koon, the activist discussed in an earlier section of this chapter, describes how “[a]t a certain point the anger that infuses organizing can get tiring. You get to a point where you say, ‘So what else?’ And that’s what gets to proactive visioning.” Through her spiritual activism, Koon strengthened a platform to practice and create the values of love and community for which she was fighting.

Significant to practicing and embracing spiritual values of love and interconnectedness in anti-racist organizing is doing the uncomfortable work of engaging people and subjects with whom and which one might not always align. Another activist featured in “Out of the Spiritual Closet,” a gospel rapper and organizer for Black and Brown youth named Jermaine Ashley,

insisted that organizers “need to build relationships with folks who aren’t like [them].”<sup>clxvi</sup> Koon affirms that spiritual activism equipped her with the ability to “now work better with different kinds of people and be more compassionate ... [and] can see the worth in working across political difference and meeting others where they are at. I can have conversations about politics without making other people feel wrong or less advanced.”<sup>clxvii</sup>

As Koon and Ashley demand and integrate instrumentalized love in organizing, they uncloak a strategy and world of humanization and compassion that appreciates working with difference. In another essay of the “Framing Deep Change” manual, transformative change activist adrienne maree brown calls for a new type of organizing militancy that reflects the type of love Koon and Ashley envision: a militancy of love. She implicitly asks her readership to reconceptualize what activists regard as powerful organizing tools, querying if activists are “strong enough to default to trust” and invoking a similar question to powell’s in the previous chapter. brown writes:

*“what if what’s needed isn’t sexy, intimidating, violent...what if what is needed is forgiveness? The kind of forgiveness that seems unimaginable, miraculous, holy, unattainable. like forgiving those who hurt you, hate you, building relationship with those who kill your children? what if what is necessary is trusting people beyond their mistakes and shortcomings, trusting their best intentions — are we strong enough to default to trust at a community level? what if what is necessary is learning to see family where you have seen enemies? what if what is necessary is not strategy, not plans, not dollars — just unconditional love? are we able to be that militant? i want to be militant enough to admit i am changing and growing and don’t know the answers... i find a small but awe-inspiring hope in the realization that giving life and love is harder work than taking it.”<sup>clxviii</sup>*

As brown ponders the power of militant love in her essay, she expresses the difficulty associated with such “unconditional love,” and conspicuously envisions a love that transcends connotations of being amiably pious and naively optimistic. Instead, brown is writing of reckoning relationships with oppressors, of forgiving those “who kill your children.” angel Kyodo williams

— a Zen priest introduced in the first chapter, who is the second Black woman recognized to as a teacher in Japanese Zen lineage, and the founder of the Center for Transformative Change — evokes a similar deep and difficult proposal around love. In an interview with Krista Tippett, williams emphasizes that the spiritual dismantling of white supremacy is a project to expand our capacities for love and reclaim humanity. Kyodo williams reflects similar understandings of re-conceptualizing suffering, privilege, and power as Sales and powell, as she understands loving as the ability to recognize the suffering in those who enact violence. She says:

*“[D]eveloping our own capacity for spaciousness within ourselves to allow others to be as they are — that that is love. And that doesn’t mean that we don’t have hopes or wishes that things are changed or shifted, but that to come from a place of love is to be in acceptance of what is, even in the face of moving it towards something that is more whole, more just, more spacious for all of us. It’s bigness. It’s allowance. It’s flexibility. It’s saying the thing that we talked about earlier, of “Oh, those police officers are trapped inside of a system, as well. They are subject to an enormous amount of suffering, as well.” ... We leave out the aspects of their underlying motivation for moving things, and we make it about policies and advocacy, when really it is about expanding our capacity for love, as a species.”<sup>clxix</sup>*

Using the image of a police officer — a symbolic character of white supremacist violence evoking similar sentiments to the image brown uses of those “who kill your children” — she asks her listeners to engage the strenuous labor of living out spiritual values of loving. She characterizes the work of breaking down oppression and white supremacy as “the work of reclaiming the human spirit, which includes reclaiming the sense of humanity of the people that are the current vehicles for those very forms of oppression.” The project of loving and reclaiming the humanity of those who enact harm problematizes dominant understandings of demonization and punishment and instead offers a different reality through which we conceive of harm-doers. Under Kyodo williams’ new definition of spiritual, anti-racist love:

*“But for us to transform as a society, we have to allow ourselves to be transformed as individuals. And for us to be transformed as individuals, we have to allow for the incompleteness of any of our truths and a real forgiveness for the complexity of human*

*beings and what we're trapped inside of, so that we're both able to respond to the oppression, the aggression that we're confronted with, but we're able to do that with a deep and abiding sense of "and there are people, human beings, that are at the other end of that baton, that stick, that policy, that are also trapped in something. They're also trapped in a suffering." And for sure, we can witness that there are ways in which they're benefiting from it, but there's also ways, if one trusts the human heart, that they must be suffering. And holding that at the core of who you are when responding to things, I think, is the way — the only way we really have forward; to not just replicate systems of oppression for the sake of our own cause.*" <sup>clxx</sup>

Kyodo Williams' discussion here culminates intricacies of the societal, movement, and individual transformation I have pondered in this thesis. Spiritual ontologies and spiritual activism compel us to "respond to the oppression" with the power of love and forgiveness — such powers oppression and white supremacy have intended to eclipse from our hearts and strategies. Her insistence on the "only way forward" impresses the contention of this thesis chapter: Spiritual activism works to emphasize a sacred and interconnected experience of suffering, which allows for activists to challenge white supremacy while manifesting spiritual ontologies marked by love and interconnectedness.

#### *Conclusions: My Spiritual Activist Praxis*

The week of final exams fall semester of 2018, UNC's Board of Trustees (BOT) duplicitously released an offensive proposal to return to campus Silent Sam — a confederate monument erected in the name of white supremacy and celebrated by modern-day white supremacists whom UNC has showed no genuine intention to impede. The proposal did not just call for Silent Sam's return, but it also included a shrine for the statue and a militarized police force designed to target anti-racist student protestors. Just when we felt like the administration could not get any worse, the BOT etched in students' minds how much UNC would pay (to the tune of \$5.3 million) to sustain its legacy of white supremacy and endanger its own students, particularly Black students. <sup>clxxi</sup>



The outcry, rage, and betrayal were palpable on campus, and despite it being the most academically stressful time of the semester, many of us were compelled to protest the recommendation. As Black student activists have tirelessly led protests against UNC's white supremacy (and specifically against Silent Sam) for the last several decades, they put their studies on the line to do so again. Four women from UNC's Black Congress and I interrupted a faculty meeting to express the anguish UNC's administration was forcing on its students. Looking into the blank and uncaring eyes of our then-Chancellor and her team was painful, and when we left the meeting, we were in tears. We could not let go of each other's hands, communicating through our silence that we yearned to feel, to embody something more than sorrow and anger that fueled the protest we had just engaged. Three of us walked to safety (away from the likes of UNC's administration), arms linked, and sat in a circle. Angum, who has been leading anti-racist organizing on campus since she stepped foot on it, began to lead us in song, calling in our angels, ancestors, and spirits. I said for us a meditative prayer to center our hearts and our purpose, invoking our interdependence and connectedness with every being. Joyce gripped our hands, communicating through an energy that emanated through her palms into mine and Angum's. We breathed with one another and held each other, and together, we created an entirely different reality to the one in which we had just screamed and protested. We rooted ourselves in the love that motivated our action which juxtaposed the anger, betrayal and disdain we felt in the moment of interruption.

We are learning that these worlds of sorrow and oppression exist simultaneously (though contradictorily), and we must draw on spiritual foundations to inform our approach to making the oppressive reality with which we struggle more just. I am charged to remind myself every day that UNC's administration (among other exemplars of racist institutional leadership), as they

ignored to our sobs and voted against our safety, was another face of my own. Their humanity and suffering are bound with mine. As I work to hold accountable the systems that are enacting extreme suffering, I must bear in mind the spiritual, political, social, and personal work of healing and spiritual activism that Gloria Anzaldúa proposes as shown in the literature review:

*“With awe and wonder you look around, recognizing the preciousness of the earth, the sanctity of every human being on the planet, the ultimate unity and interdependence of all beings—somos todos un país. Love swells in your chest and shoots out of your heart chakra, linking you to everyone/everything. . . . You share a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label. This conocimiento motivates you to work actively to see that no harm comes to people, animals, ocean—to take up spiritual activism and the work of healing.”<sup>clxxii</sup>*

As the “[l]ove swell[ed] in [our] chest[s],” Angum, Joyce, and I tried to reach into our interconnectedness with every being, “[motivating us] to work actively to see no harm comes to” them. The spiritual activism in which we engaged helps to model some of what I have explored in this chapter: using the intersections of transformative organizing and spiritual activism, as they both call for a “new” form of organizing pairing traditional activism (like meeting interruptions) with spirituality; the relationship between spiritual practice and sustaining our commitment to our work over experiencing burnout; and the pairing of ‘inner’ spiritual work with public action. We have by no means reached the level of militant love that adrienne maree brown or angel Kyodo williams depict, but we are working to undermine the violence and hatred of white supremacy by manifesting anti-racist spiritual ontologies of love and relationality in our personal lives, organizing strategies, and movement building.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have primarily probed and prodded the significance of spiritual ontologies defined by inherent interconnectedness and love among all beings, as it is associated with anti-racist activism as they diverge and challenge the operation of worldviews of whiteness. In the introductory chapter I related the genesis of my project, which began with the stark and contrasting juxtaposition between the Zapatistas cosmovision that informed their revolutionary principles and the white nationalist attack in Charlottesville of 2017. I go on to explore larger questions about whiteness, its implications during the Trump-era whitelash, and the contemporary pertinence of spirituality in the face of white supremacy. This context situates my research questions about the spiritually informed sustenance of activism and its efficacy. I then review the literature of the academic frameworks on which my research is contingent: critical whiteness studies and feminist epistemologies and spiritualities. As a feminist researcher, my third chapter constitutes an exploration of feminist methodologies and principles that are relevant to this project.

In the substantive chapters of my thesis, I contend that spiritual ontologies work to theoretically and practically challenge ontologies of whiteness and oppression. The argument chapters of my thesis are comprised of content and textual investigations in activists' propositions about the need for spirituality and spiritual values within anti-racist organizing. In the fourth chapter, I consider activists deliberations on the conflicting ontologies of whiteness vs. spiritual ontologies, as these different worldviews conceptualize of whiteness and the self in opposite ways. Under an ontology of whiteness, whiteness signifies domination and power, and the individual is inherently separated from others and self-interested, while in a spiritual world, whiteness is a distorted and deadly concept, and all selves are interrelated through suffering and love. In the next chapter, I investigate a variety of activists' proposals around implementing

spiritual practice and love into their organizing, and argue that the spiritual activism they embody works to manifest the spiritual ontologies Sales and Powell envisioned in Chapter Four.

In this concluding chapter, I focus on what more research could be done on the subject of spiritual anti-racist activism, what nuances and ambiguities about the topic I think should be explored, and further reflections about my own research process. There are several tangential topics that arise with the subject of spiritual anti-racist activism for which the scope of this thesis did not account.

### *Omissions of Significant Spiritual Activists*

Spiritual teachers, philosophers, and theologians have a long history in civil rights and liberation movement building and certainly have shaped the dialogue around spirituality's place in activism. While I focused specifically on contemporary activists who are self-identified as spiritual, not necessarily religious, and anti-racist, there are assuredly activists steeped in long histories of religious traditions using their religiosity to motivate their anti-racist activism — such as Malcolm X, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to name a few. Additionally, there are countless contemporary spiritual activists who do not explicitly identify as anti-racist activists but are working towards reimagining conceptions of power and the self (themes explored in this thesis) to create fairer worlds. Activist and environmentalist Joanna Macy, for example, problematizes notions of innate individualism and self-indulgence similarly to John Powell. In her book *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy* queries “what if we could transform the expression of selfishness by widening and deepening the self for whom we act?”<sup>clxxiii</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese spiritual leader, peace activist, and spirit comparably offers in his book *The World We Have* an expansion of the self, writing that the “the suffering of one is the suffering of the other,” thus “causing harm to other

human beings causes harm to ourselves.”<sup>clxxiv</sup> There are countless more spiritual activists whom I was unable to include due to the sheer necessity of adhering to the scope of an undergraduate Honors Thesis, but I would be remiss if I did not name that Bishop William Barber II, Patrisse Cullors, Jardana Peacock, Becky Thompson and others whose embodiment of spirituality in their activism helped to inspire me to investigate this topic.

### *Coalition Building and Solidarity*

As I am looking at what could be interesting stones to turn over to continue this project, I find another significant limitation to this thesis is that it does not probe all the effects spiritual worldviews might have on activism. The subjects of this thesis could certainly be progressed through an investigation in the ways spiritual activism practically nurtures important aspects of movement building: namely, solidarity and coalition-building between organizations. As spiritual ontologies emphasize values of interconnectedness and empathizing with suffering beyond the self, these aspects could potentially translate into movement strategies of coalition building. For example, under the spiritual and political leadership of Bishop William Barber II, the Moral Movement saw political ally-ship and solidarity as an important tool for its growth. Barber, who calls this model a “transformative fusion coalition,” described how “each organization came to the coalition with a deep commitment not just to advance their own political priorities, ... but to advance the various causes of the other coalition members as well.”<sup>clxxv</sup> An important next step in research on spiritual activism could be inspecting the ways spiritual activists begin to invest in movements with priorities different from their own, but find themselves compelled by the issues of others.

### *Anti-Racist Spirituality for People of Different Racial Identities*

One of the topics I most wish I had been able to explore more thoroughly in this thesis is the subject of the various implications for people of different racial identities harnessing and investing in spiritualities that encourage them to disinvest in worldviews of whiteness. As I wrote this thesis, I decided with intentionality that I wanted to detail a conversation about spiritual ontologies that could materialize values of love and interconnectedness for all activists regardless of racial identities. But a significant hole in this thesis is the ways activists, due to varying racial identities, have different stakes in an anti-racist spirituality. As Ruby Sales mentions in the fourth chapter of this thesis a proposition for “a theology that gives hope and meaning to people who are struggling to have meaning in a world where they no longer are as essential to whiteness as they once were,” she asserts the different spiritual implications for people who are racialized differently.<sup>clxxvi</sup> Then, in the fifth chapter, angel Kyodo williams and adrienne maree brown invoke discussions spirituality equipping activists to forgive those who oppress them — which necessitates a conspicuously distinct spirituality from one that helps white people find meaning beyond their whiteness.<sup>clxxvii</sup> A crucial next step in the exploration of this topic is to identify the dissimilar and comparable ways people with different racial identities and backgrounds approach anti-racist spiritualities.

As I began incorporating spiritual practices and ways of living in my own life and activism, I realized that I was far from the only person who had thought of spirituality as a personal and collective foundation for transforming the anti-racist activism paradigm. I began to wonder what the abstract concept of spirituality was really doing in all of these movement spaces—and why had I not seen it before? It was within this context that I began to explore this quandary of spiritual dimensions in activism academically, leading me to an investigation that is the basis for this paper. In the process of writing and reflecting, though, I realized that I already

had a concrete answer in mind to my questions. I had also cast a belief that adopting whiteness and white identities disables all white people's capacity for spiritual ontologies and practices grounded in values of empathy and interconnectedness. A spiritual way of being grounded in such values would presumably help undermine whiteness and its ills, but I am learning to avoid being binarily concrete about whiteness directly nullifying any forms of spirituality and compassion. I would look to non-dualist and non-essentialist continuum of spirituality and its values. As most of us white people do not embody one extreme or the other (like overt white supremacists or someone entirely rid of whiteness), in moments and contexts people can be capable of empathy or values of interconnectedness. I currently can only make speculative conclusions, including that whiteness and white privilege, as they translate into white complicity, encourage white people to exchange what I will refer to as values of spirituality: compassion, empathy, and interconnectedness, for the promise of whiteness: entitlement and control.

### *Final Reflections*

In her book *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the 21st Century*, Grace Lee Boggs calls for a spiritual, paradigmatic shift in activism as she details the wisdom she cultivated in her half-century struggle for Black liberation. She writes:

*“Each of us needs to undergo a tremendous philosophical and spiritual transformation. Each of us needs to be awakened to a personal and compassionate recognition of the inseparable interconnection between our minds, hearts, and bodies; ... between ourselves and all the other selves in our country and in the world.”* <sup>clxxviii</sup>

In this thesis, I have intended to interrogate Boggs' sage advice for contemporary activists, as she underscores the significance of the inherent “inseparable interconnection” we have “between ourselves and all the other selves.” <sup>clxxix</sup> But beyond an investigation, I have worked in this thesis to shed light on the realities beyond white supremacy — and the toxic notions of superiority and separation it has engendered in us. It has been a personal process of

compiling and conjuring the most compelling, enchanting, and irresistible salve to soothe the wounds that are decelerating anti-racist activists like myself. But the activists I have introduced in this thesis inspire more than remedial properties, they remind us of our spiritually limitless capacities for the wonder of love. They are the torch bearers amid the violent disconnection, gloom, and obscurity of ontologies of whiteness, power and disconnection, shattering such illusions, reminding us of their futility and unscrupulousness. With tenderness and grace, these activists have connected their hearts with their minds, they have offered us an imaginative project of transcending the ills that feel all-encompassing, illuminating paths towards the subversive, spiritual underground realities of love, connection, empathy and support so many of us crave. I conclude this thesis reveling in the dreams to which I am awakening, extending with a tender and open heart an invitation to engage the spiritual imperative we are all being asked to undertake: investing in love, transforming and expanding our conceptions of ourselves to larger collectives, practicing our spiritual values, and participating in sustained “inner and outer” acts of love and justice.



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