



eCOMMONS

## Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs

---

Volume 3

Issue 3 *Resilience, Resistance, & Reclamation:  
Changing the Narrative of Higher Education*

Article 8

---


October 2018

### Holding onto Dread and Hope: The Need for Critical Whiteness Studies in Education as Resistance in the Trump Era

Brittany A. Aronson  
*Miami University - Oxford*

Kyle Ashlee  
*Miami University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.luc.edu/jcshesa>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Aaronson, B. & Ashlee, K. (2018). Holding onto dread and hope: The need for critical whiteness studies in education as resistance in the Trump Era. *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, 3(3), 50-61.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs* by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact [ecommons@luc.edu](mailto:ecommons@luc.edu).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).

# Holding onto Dread and Hope:

## The Need for Critical Whiteness Studies in Education as Resistance in the Trump Era



**Brittany Aronson**  
Miami University



**Kyle Ashlee**  
Miami University

**O**n November 9, 2016, many White<sup>1</sup> progressive liberal Americans woke up with a sense of dread and disillusionment that Donald Trump was the President-elect of the

United States (Mei, 2016). *"How could this be? How could this be happening to our country?,"* they wondered. After all, *"Make America Great Again,"* a phrase whose 'great,' widely heard as 'White,' was not some-

thing White liberals supported" (Irvin Painter, 2016). As the news circulated social media, 'progressive' Whites broadcasted their trepidation and their shock became evident. Voices from marginalized communities were far less surprised, given their everyday lived experiences in a heteropatriarchal White supremacist society (Chang, 2016; Parker West, 2016). Critiques of White liberal dismay escalated even further when it was discovered that the culprits responsible for electing Trump were not just working-class, uneducated White men, as was sold by the liberal media. A total of 53% of the vote for Trump came from White women.

These figures led some progressives to believe that White women had 'sold out' by negating an allegiance to feminism (with Women of Color) and aligning with the patriarchy (behind White men) (Lett, 2016). This is not to suggest White women acted alone, as 62% of Trump's votes came from White male supporters. The common denominator among these voters was their Whiteness (Coates, 2017). And while many White liberals quickly began labeling Trump supporters as 'racists' in an effort to demonstrate their own racial piety, critical race scholars remind us that all White people are complicit in perpetuating White supremacy, regardless of their political affiliation, awareness, or intentions (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Mills, 2007).

It didn't take long after Donald Trump's election for educators to see the backlash of a newly (re)empowered White America. For example, in P-20 spaces there was terrifying evidence of Whiteness being re-centered and racism moving from the covert to the overt (e.g., the "Make America White Again" dugout with swastika symbol (Wallace, 2016) and the banning of courses

teaching 'White privilege' (Saxena, 2017)). Alt-right leaders, like Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos, descended upon colleges and universities across the country, challenging campus free speech policies and recruiting students for their cause (Arriaga, 2017). Emboldened movements of White supremacy and White nationalism have swept college campuses since Trump's inauguration, including a horrific display of hatred, violence, and death in August 2017 at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Despite the rise in overt White supremacist movements after the election, Whiteness is and has always been embedded within the fabric of education in the United States. Indeed, all educators must consider how teaching practices, both subtle and overt, might influence people susceptible to racist ideologies (Chatelain, 2017). As racialized White educators and scholars, the authors of this essay belong to the population that they critique. Aronson is a racially White, ethnically Latina, cis-gender, heterosexual, female teacher educator. Her students are predominantly White female preservice teachers with whom she shares many similarities and experiences. Ashlee is a White, cis-gender, heterosexual, male, doctoral candidate who teaches master's level student affairs courses. His students are predominantly White student affairs graduate students. While Aronson and Ashlee come from teacher education and student affairs backgrounds respectively, they are both charged with the task of preparing future educators who work directly with students in P-20 settings. Through their teaching, they also strive to work against the systems that have historically established and continue to perpetuate White dominance in education.



Image by Mark Patton

The purpose of this article is to critically examine how White higher education instructors work through the tensions of dread and hope while supporting and preparing educators during the Trump Administration. Through critical autoethnographic methodology (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014), Aronson and Ashlee demonstrate that White higher education instructors have a responsibility to critically teach about Whiteness and White supremacy in the classroom. Although racism has never been dormant, the current political climate featur-

<sup>1</sup> Language is powerful. We have intentionally chosen to lowercase White. While this is a small effort in the fight against White supremacy, we can make this discursive move as our small act of resistance (Matias, 2016b).

ing overtly racist discourse from the highest elected officials in government, must compel White educators to take responsibility for dismantling White supremacy now more than ever. Using their own experiences



### Context and Background

Aronson and Ashlee's own university campus equally felt the realities of the "Trump Effect" impacting educational spaces nationwide (Costello, 2016). Located in Ohio, a crucial state whose 18 electoral votes went to Trump by a slim margin of 51.3%, their mid-sized public university voted 61.1% in favor of Donald Trump. Situated in rural community, this university consists of a predominantly White undergraduate, graduate, student, faculty, and staff population. Needless to say, the overwhelming Whiteness of this college campus did not help students of Color, the LGBTQ community, international students, or students who were undocumented feel safe before, during, or after the election.

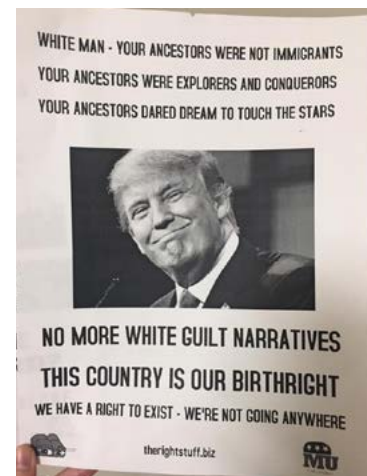
Prior to the Trump's victory, the surrounding community outside of Aronson and Ashlee's university was filled with signs in support of Trump/Pence as well as signs supporting 'Hilary Clinton for Prison.' A few miles away from campus, this bumper sticker [Photo 1] was posted on a vehicle.

Alt-Right leader Milo Yiannopoulos also spoke on campus just prior to the start of the Spring 2016 semester.

Shortly after Trump was elected, Aronson and Ashlee began seeing images such as Photos 2, 3, and 4 posted around their campus:

The website associated with these advertisements, called 'The Right Stuff,' is self-described as a blog dedicated to diversity dialogue, but the site's content unapologetically favors White supremacy and White nationalism (<http://therightstuff.biz/about-us/>).

of teaching Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) in the classroom as sites of generative possibility, the authors juxtapose the ideas of dread- acknowledging Derrick Bell's (1992) argument that racism is permanent; with the idea of hope- believing that solidarity movements of collective action can lead to racial liberation. Ultimately, Aronson and Ashlee find pedagogical possibilities for preparing students to be critical educators by remaining critical while also rejecting a fixed state of despair.



Evidence of burgeoning White supremacy leading up to and following Trump's election left many marginalized students on campus feeling isolated, scared, and unwelcomed. As White educators on this campus, Aronson and Ashlee believed it was their responsibility to address the rise of White supremacy in education happening around the nation, and at their institution. Despite a call from university administration to remain politically neutral in the classroom, they felt the need to address students' escalating dread about the campus political climate and perceptions of safety. Additionally, they felt a responsibility to remain positive, orienting students toward effective strategies for taking action, resisting, and moving forward. Guided by a theoretical lens of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), the authors use their own critical autoethnographic narratives of teaching to illuminate the need for higher education instructors to maintain critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) as they prepare students to be racially-just educators during the Trump Administration.

### Theoretical Framework: Critical Whiteness Studies

As White educators working with White students, Aronson and Ashlee occupy a troubling positionality which lends itself to problematic outcomes when left unexamined. While it is crucial to center the experiences of racially-minoritized students, exclusively doing so enables White educators and White students to leave their privilege on the shelf. Indeed, when educators confront White students with the realities of racism from the perspective of people of Color without addressing the systemic constructions of Whiteness, marginalized voices are dismissed and learning is delayed (Leonardo, 2004; Reason & Evans, 2007). Incorporating elements of CWS (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997) into their curriculum, Aronson and Ashlee sought to examine the socio-historical construction of Whiteness, White privilege, and White supremacy in the United States.

Critical Whiteness Studies is a field of scholarship dedicated to identifying and deconstructing the racial construct of Whiteness. Broadly, CWS is a theoretical framework employed to analyze the historic, social,

political, and cultural elements of White supremacy. Emerging from African American intellectual traditions, CWS began with observations about what it means to be White in the United States from Black scholars including W. E. B. DuBois (1920), James Baldwin (2010), and bell hooks (1994). Additionally, CWS draws further origins from Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theoretical framework that aims to prioritize and center the experiences of people of Color through personal accounts which challenge the hegemonic narrative of White supremacy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Within education, CWS emphasizes that "[w]hiteness, acknowledged or not, has been a norm against which other races are judged" (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, p. 1) and works to equalize that

power. CWS as an educational approach examines the ways in which history, law, culture, and pseudoscience have contributed to the construction of Whiteness, racism, and White supremacy in the United States. The establishment of these systemic mechanisms result in several privileges for White people, including the ability to achieve upward social mobility despite class disparities. Ultimately CWS offers an educational imperative, namely that "[w]hites may – and should – study race, including their own" (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, p. 605).

### Literature Review

In addition to serving as a theoretical framework guiding pedagogy, many scholars have used CWS to interrogate Whiteness in the classroom. For example, researchers such as Christine Sleeter (1992) and Alice McIntyre (1997) examined how White pre-service teachers avoided conversations on race and racism, which contributes to the oppressive influence of Whiteness within education. Although scholars have begun to address the need for educators to critically examine Whiteness, there is a dearth of research related to CWS in higher education (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017). Much of the CWS analysis in higher education has looked at the ways White college students make meaning of Whiteness. For example, a national study which surveyed over 1,000 college students, found that most White students ultimately held underlying racist beliefs and attitudes (Picca & Feagin, 2007). Reason and Evans (2007) found White college students

Ultimately, the most insidious form of White privilege that can easily escape any classroom is the ability not to have to think or talk about race.

who strive to be racial justice allies, on the other hand, must continuously and critically examine their Whiteness. Both these findings suggest that educators must (or should) bring college students' racial interactions to the forefront and create an environment where White students can hold each other accountable for racist behavior.

Ultimately, the most insidious form of White privilege that can easily escape any classroom is the ability not to have to think or talk about race (Reason & Evans, 2007). Colorblind racism is commonplace among White students at predominantly White institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), but even more alarming are White higher education instructors who either choose not to engage in the topic of racism with students or do not feel they know how. For both White students and White instructors, White fragility leads to White silence, White comfort, and White supremacy in the classroom (DiAngelo, 2011). On the contrary, White educators might also reinforce White supremacy through discourses encompassing 'morality' (Applebaum, 2005). By situating moral responsibility as an 'action' that focuses on the individual, this relieves a [White] educator from ever acknowledging how they are situated and complicit in the system of White supremacy.

CWS requires that White educators reflect on the hegemonic control Whiteness holds on the imagination and study the ways White people "deflect, ignore, or dismiss" their role in the permanence of racism (Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon, & Galindo, 2014, p. 291). Indeed, simply acknowledging individual White privilege not enough for educators to be anti-racist and socially just. Educational conversations about race, racism, and White supremacy in the classroom are not easy. Higher education instructors who employ CWS may find themselves and their students steeped in feelings of guilt, shame, and dread. Aronson and Ashlee share their autoethnographic narratives as reflexive windows of critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) for White educators to navigate the difficult, but necessary, conversations about race and racism in the classroom.

### Critical Autoethnographic Narratives

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) explain personal narratives are a form of critical autoethnographic research, which allow researchers to view themselves as a part of phenomena, and write "evocative narratives" relating to both their personal and professional lives (para. 24). Indeed, critical autoethnographic narratives offer "a means to enhance existing understandings of lived experiences enacted within social locations situated within larger systems of power, oppression, and social privilege" (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 19). Ar-

onson and Ashlee crossed paths early in Fall 2016 after they learned of their similar shared research interests. Casual conversations regarding issues of race and Whiteness lead to something more formal when they decided to embark on an independent study together. Studying critical autoethnography led them to explore their experiences teaching during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. It was through the development of this relationship that they began to trust one another and share their goals for deconstructing Whiteness in the classroom.

In writing critical autoethnographic narratives, Aronson and Ashlee intended to "collaboratively cope with the ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions" in their work (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011, para. 23). At the end of the Fall 2016 semester, they each wrote a narrative account of their teaching experiences. They shared these narratives with one another and provided questions as well as feedback. These narratives undergird the authors' overarching argument for CWS as an essential tool for higher education instructors in preparing racially just educators. It is through personal reflections, memories, and dialogue with each other that the authors present their data in the form of autoethnographic narratives, which ask readers to enter the world of the researcher and join in this process of reflexivity.

### Brittany's Narrative

Fall 2016 was a contentious time to be in any class-

**More than ever, the work for racial justice and radical love (hooks, 2000) was needed, and as a privileged racially White woman I had to shake myself out of my misery and regain perspective as to my role in this battle we would inherently face these next four years.**

room, especially one that was centered on justice-oriented ideologies, pedagogies, and frameworks. For three consecutive years, I taught an undergraduate course for preservice teachers in a required Teacher Leadership class. To explicate, this course was designed to "challenge and shape each student's conceptions of school organization, school culture, professional development, teaching, curriculum, and school leadership for teachers committed to social justice" (EDL 318 Course Syllabus, Fall 2016). Mirroring the racial demographics of teachers nationwide (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2016), my courses consisted of predominantly White, female, Christian teachers from rural or suburban communities in Ohio. There were some other forms of identities represented in that I had three White male students, three students who identified as Jewish, and one Black female who identified as Muslim (of my 28 total students).

As part of my personal commitment to work for racial justice, I used CRT and CWS as part of an explicit framework. On the first day of class, I tell students they will more than likely be uncomfortable, and this is a part of the learning experience. In my experience, it is usually by week three that students start to resist and become angry with me after I have them watch *White Like Me* by Tim Wise and read "Why Do You Make Me Hate Myself?" by Cheryl Matias. However, as we continue to work through the semester, they lead projects on social justice topics and create a positionality project interrogating themselves that allows for them to continue to work through their own *emotionality* (Matias, 2016a, emphasis added). This past semester, I had some unexpected challenges, when I mistakenly thought several of my students were "buying in" to what we were talking about in class, yet on the mid-semester evaluation, I had been accused of "White-shaming" and not creating a "safe space" for others to express their views. This wasn't the first time

I had heard feedback like this before. But, for some reason, I took this feedback extremely personally. As I read these words, I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. Perhaps it was the political climate. This was right before the election in late October. Perhaps it was also me. I got overconfident in my abilities to reach the privileged. I had grown to know enlighten-



Image by Natalie Battaglia

ment, not rejection of these topics.

I ran out of time. My students would be in their field placement the next week and between the conference I was attending, and them being in schools, it would be two weeks before I would see them again. I responded to their feedback and I wrote them a letter trying to affirm their feelings while still not giving in to the White fragility they were expressing (DiAngelo, 2011). One of the things I shared in their letter spoke directly back to "safe space":

*I'd like to contest this idea with you as I did on the first day of class as it reads in the syllabus. If you have never been in a classroom where you haven't felt "unsafe" then you more than likely have been privileged to be in that space or you never have been challenged before. Particularly in teacher education,*

<sup>21</sup> I would like to note that I acknowledge as a racialized White female teacher educator. I am ethnically Latina but can and have often benefited from White privilege my entire life. While I believe identity is complicated and Whiteness is not monolithic, most of my White female students can relate to my process of understanding Whiteness which grants me a privilege that my Colleagues of Color or from other marginalized identities do not have. It is beyond of scope of this paper to argue this here, but something I am working on in future publications. Therefore, my acknowledgement of being racially White is meant to recognize the privileges I have been granted.

*we note that often when you are not feeling “safe” really this means “uncomfortable.”*

I gave them some additional resources and they went on their way. I felt depleted. I felt like I had failed. Then the election happened.

I was one of those people we wrote about in our introduction. As I sat in my small apartment watching the live coverage of the election on November 8, 2016, I was not too worried about it. But as the hours passed and state by state turned red, I was in dismal shock. I woke up the next morning feeling a dread I had never experienced before. I didn't know this feeling as I had lived in the “safe space” mentioned above that I critiqued my students for craving. I left with a colleague to go to the National Association of Multicultural Educators (NAME) conference hosted in Cleveland (which sickeningly was held in the newly constructed Hilton Hotel that had been built for the Republican National Convention the summer before). I had hoped this would be a space for rejuvenation, for inspiration, for comfort. But I imagine everyone was feeling this way. I felt little hope at that moment. Some of my previous students from both K-12 and former college students reached out to me. They were coming to me for some sort of comfort, but I felt I had so little to give them. This made me feel even worse. I sifted through my Facebook page torturing myself by devouring everyone's comments and posts, until I came across one of my former 5th graders who was now in college who had posted something about love. Almost symbolically, as I was reading her post, I looked to the silver bracelet made up of hearts on my wrist (that she had given me back in 2008), and had an epiphany that woke me up, and brought me back to reality. More than ever, the work for racial justice and radical love (hooks, 2000) was needed, and as a privileged racially White woman I had to shake myself out of my misery and regain perspective as to my role in this battle we would inherently face these next four years.

Two weeks flew by and I was about to see my current

students again. I was anxious and nervous. I wasn't sure what I was going to say to them. I decided that because we had so much to do end semester, I would write them a letter telling them how I felt and what I had learned these past two weeks. I shared with them the story of my former student who had jolted me back to life and passed around pictures from that former 5th grade class. I told them how she reminded me of the need to center love and that this is always where I come from in the work that I do with them. My pushing them into discomfort comes from a place of love not only for them, but their future students. I shared my fears in what had been happening in



Image by Heather Eidson

schools around the country post-election. I had planned to share my letter with students and then move on into our objectives for the day to discuss curricular perspectives next. That never happened.

One student raised her hand and asked me what I was talking about- she knew there were a lot of protests after the election, but with being in her field placement and staying so busy with her own school work, she hadn't been following social media as closely. Before I could even open my mouth, others started sharing the many hateful events happening in schools all across the country. And then, the ones they had witnessed in their school buildings the past week. One student shared, *yeah we heard the build a wall chanting several*

*times this past week.* Another shared how their cooperating teacher was very pro-Trump and saying derogatory things about Hilary Clinton, such as *now we can lock her up.* I sat there in disbelief as I had realized I had been mulling in my own shock and they were out in schools witnessing these realities. We never got to our lesson.

What was needed in that space was an opportunity for healing in the best way I knew how at that moment. Students talked. I listened. I talked. They listened. Those who felt comfortable shared their political views. No one explicitly stated that they voted for Donald Trump, although they talked about how their families had. I could relate as I had family members who did as well. We worked through our confusion about this. They asked me what to do, how to handle what they were seeing happening in schools. I didn't have answers as I sat there vulnerable *with them* in this moment. The only thing I could muster up was *don't stay silent.* I did ask the class to be aware of what was happening on our campus. I sent them several emails the next few days about events organized by students' who had been and will continue to be marginalized under the Trump Administration (and their allies). None of these dialogues or lessons that we had the last day of class was a part of my syllabus or my objectives. I was very aware that I could have easily offended a student or been scrutinized on my end-of-semester evaluations for these political conversations (which I was not). But when the personal is political, this doesn't always matter.<sup>2</sup>

#### Kyle's Narrative

In the fall semester of 2016, on the cusp of one of the most divisive presidential elections in recent history, I began co-teaching the first ever graduate-level course at my institution on the topic of critical Whiteness. Located in the heart of “Trump Country,” the Mid-West university where this class was held is home to mostly White, upper-middle class students. Through exploring the literature and observing race dynamics on my historically White campus, I discovered that White students were ill-equipped for conversations about race in the classroom and as a result, students of Color are often forced to put their own learning aside to teach about race (Linder, 2015; Reason, 2015). As a Ph.D. student, I designed the Whiteness course alongside a faculty mentor with the hopes of engaging future educators in critical conversations about race and racism in the United States. The goal of the course was “to explore individual, historical, and systemic conceptions of Whiteness” and “consider how critical perspectives on Whiteness impact the development of equitable communities within higher education and student affairs” (EDL660 Course Syllabus, Fall 2016).

Despite the content and timing of the course, I can only recall one instance during the semester when Donald Trump's name entered the class discussion, and it was brief. The topic for the week was related to the historical construction of Whiteness in the United States. One of the readings for this class was Bacon's Rebellion and The Advent of Whiteness by Terrance MacMullen (2009). In this chapter from his book, MacMullen outlines the exact time and place in history when race and White supremacy were firmly established in America. Jumping back to 1676, MacMullen (2009) describes a scene in colonial Virginia when Nathaniel Bacon, a newly-arrived settler, led a small resistance effort against the English bourgeoisie. Bacon successfully leveraged the collective frustration of poor European indentured servants and African slaves. Fearful of the threat posed by Bacon's unifying activity, wealthy landowners began to grant privileges to the White indentured servants which enabled European settlers to elevate themselves from the Black slaves. In exchange for their new-found privileges, the lower-class Whites were required to patrol the area for runaway slaves and return them to their masters.

**Before I could even open my mouth, others started sharing the many hateful events happening in schools all across the country. And then, the ones they had witnessed in their school buildings the past week.**

Sitting around a large oak wooden table, nearly all fourteen students in my Whiteness class were buzzing with excitement about this reading. They had never heard the story of Bacon's Rebellion and were unaware of the specific ways in which Whiteness and race were created out of thin air. Many commented that having this historical context finally explained what is meant by the “social construction of race,” which was vague



Image by Terence Guider-Shaw

sations at the dinner table to bitter feuds over social media, the divide between Americans was palpable. Some may argue that connecting the course material with current political events was a risky decision because the classroom should be a neutral space where educators refrain from subjecting their students to political rhetoric. In following pedagogical perspective of hooks (1994) and Freire (2000), however, my co-instructor and I believed that our classroom was an inherently political space. Instead of ignoring political issues and the impact they have on students' lives, we sought to create a space

where students could share their lived experiences and the political context of their lives. Her comment about the similarities between Bacon's Rebellion and Trump's campaign was the first time the class discussion ventured out of the intellectual and into the political.

Much to our dismay, my co-instructor's comment fell flat. Like a college campus on the last day of classes, the energy in the room went from dynamic and lively to quiet and still, in an instant. Looking around the table and then at each other, we allowed the silence to linger for a few moments to see if anyone would muster up the courage to engage. Rather than reflecting on Trump's racist campaign strategies or even offering a different political perspective regarding Hillary Clinton's racist "Super Predators" comment and the support of her husband's racist policies, which have enabled the most violent mass incarceration of Black bodies in American history (Alexander, 2012), our students remained silent. After the awkwardness of the silence set in, one of the students redirected the conversation by noting that she had never really found history to be very interesting until this reading. Disappointed, my co-instructor and I allowed the students to return to their intellectual conversation, leaving the political issue in the corner of the room like an unacknowledged elephant standing next to an unacknowledged donkey.

Sadly, we never revisited the conversation about politics and the Trump campaign. The course finished before the election occurred, but I have a feeling that

and confusing for them before the reading. Additionally, they said, it demonstrates how White privilege does not result from intentionally oppressing People of Color, but rather from granting special opportunities to White people. Still early in the semester and unsure about how the White students in the class would react to a class on critical Whiteness, my co-instructor and I were thrilled that the students were making the connections from the reading that we'd hoped they would.

Taking the conversation a step further, my co-instructor drew a parallel between the divide-and-conquer tactics used by the wealthy European colonists during Bacon's Rebellion and the political strategy used by Donald Trump to pit poor southern White people against Mexican immigrants. In his presidential announcement speech on June 16, 2015, Trump said, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you... They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" (Ye He Lee, July 8, 2015). Despite the lack of any factual evidence for this claim, Trump leveraged White peoples' fear of immigrants to effectively capture the allegiance of many White Americans.

My co-instructor's comment provided an opportunity to evaluate the mechanics of Trump's racially charged rhetoric in conjunction with content from the course. At the time of this class session, the election race was still underway and the racial tensions in the United States were at a breaking point. From heated conver-

our students would not have been willing to process their thoughts about Trump's victory even if it had happened while class was in session. There are countless reasons why our students may have been hesitant to discuss political topics in the course, including fear of disagreeing with the instructor, uncertainty about their peer's political views, or unfamiliarity with the topic. While these all likely played a role, I believe the core of our students' silence about Trump boils down to White fragility, or the feelings of fear, anger, guilt or frustration experienced by White people when exposed to racial discomfort (DiAngelo, 2011). When in a state of White fragility, White people often react with defensiveness, silence, or minimization.

Given the volatility of the political climate in our country at the time and the very real potential for any conversation about the presidential election to result in conflict, our students chose to remain silent. Assuming that the political is indeed personal, my co-instructor's comment about Trump's racist campaign rhetoric likely hit close to home for many of our students. Indeed, on numerous occasions throughout the semester, our students commented about how they struggled to talk with their family members about White privilege and racism because they held differing political views. Whether embarrassed to realize their relatives held beliefs that resembled White supremacist strategies of colonialization or simply afraid to say the "wrong thing" and appear racist, White fragility acted like a constraint, binding our students to their White comfort zones.

**Given the volatility of the political climate in our country at the time and the very real potential for any conversation about the presidential election to result in conflict, our students chose to remain silent.**

### Critical Whiteness Revisited

Aronson and Ashlee's understandings of CWS aided them not only in their curriculum development, but also in analyzing their experiences. In teaching, they both emphasized the importance of starting any conversation on Whiteness and White supremacy through a sociocultural historical lens and discussing how this impacts the material benefits and privileges White people still maintain (e.g., generational wealth through housing loans, Witt, 2017). Importantly, they also analyzed their own roles in complicating the individual from the systemic. As White people doing anti-racist work, it can be easy to fall into complicity of the us/them binary (e.g., overt racists from 'good Whites') created, that they too, so desperately want to separate themselves from. However, a CWS theoretical framework posits that White people working toward racial justice must continuously 'check' their own participation in Whiteness because they are not free from White supremacy until systemic racism is dismantled. This means White educators must continue to navigate feelings of hopelessness leading to dread. They must also grip tightly to the hope that a continuous critical examination of Whiteness may one day lead to racial liberation.

There will be ups and downs. As daunting as a reality this may seem, it obviously can never compare to the experiences people of Color face every day. White higher education instructors must always keep this relative truth at the forefront of their work, as a reminder of their privilege to ignore race and as motivation to continue the struggle. White anti-racist educators are still recovering from their own racism. However, in alignment with CWS, White educators must also hold onto the hope and belief in the humanity of people, including White people working toward anti-racism. As White educators who have been learning, unlearning, and relearning about Whiteness, the authors hold a sort of 'insider knowledge'- not to suggest they are experts - that might aid in ways other White educators teach about Whiteness and prepare future educators to dismantle White supremacy.

### Lessons Learned: Implications for Future Educators

*The idea that hope alone will transform the world, and action undertaken in that kind of naiveté, is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism. But the attempt to do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion. (Freire, 1997, p. 8, as cited in Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 181)*

Reflecting on the authors' narratives, which of course come from the perspective of racially-White educators, reveals the important tension between dread and hope. Aronson was left with a somber feeling about her role as an educator, actively working to refuel her reservoir amidst feelings of hopelessness after the election. Ashlee on the other hand, expressed learning from moments that "fell flat" in the classroom, fostering optimism about engaging students in political reflection and transformative action. The opposing realities of these two narratives demonstrate the complexity of being an educator in today's turbulent political climate.

On the one hand, there may be an overwhelming sense of dread about the realities of racism and White supremacy, which White educators perpetuate despite their best efforts. On the other hand, it can be empowering to leverage the privilege White educators hold to dismantle systemic oppression through an active critical examination of Whiteness. Rather than an immobilizing duality, these disparate truths provide educators with an expansive opportunity to facilitate

profound learning and growth, for themselves and their students.

Duncan-Andrade (2009) offers a form of critical hope which rejects staying fixed in a state of despair by becoming committed to the struggle for justice. Building from Tupac Shakur's (1999) *Roses that Grow from Concrete*, he suggests a form of "audacious hope" that demands "solidarity to share in others' suffering, to sacrifice self so that other roses may bloom, to collectively struggle to replace the concrete completely with a rose garden" (p. 186). With this understanding, dread and hope combine and are transformed into action.

The perceived hopeless struggles faced by many communities of Color, including systemic racism and poverty, must first be acknowledged and understood by White educators. Only after this acknowledgement becomes a consistent practice can White educators attempt to align themselves in solidarity with people of Color (we cannot simply claim 'allyship'). This process of leaning into dread, which includes White educators confronting Whiteness, White privilege, and White

supremacy, leads to hope through collective struggle. CWS gives White educators a place to start in their own critical self-reflection and in turn, their teaching. White educators have a responsibility to foster "audacious hope," engaging future teachers and student affairs professionals in the process of suffering, solidarity, and struggle.

White educators cannot fall prey to singular narratives of either dread or hope. Despite the messiness, both worldviews are necessary to prepare future educators for a world that systemically oppresses Black and Brown students while simultaneously privileging White students. Replacing the concrete of White supremacy with the roses of collective struggle will not happen if White educators throw their hands up in despair and complacency. Nor will it happen if they evasively ignore the realities of racism and hope that mere good intentions are enough. Both dread and hope are necessary because either alone is insufficient. When White educators and their students feel discouraged, they must utilize hope to move forward. When hope clouds their ability to recognize their own complacency in White supremacy, they must recognize dread and be in solidarity with people of Color.

At a time when the President of the United States espouses "All Lives Matter" (Levitz, 2016) because of a willing ignorance and support of White nationalistic efforts (as evidenced by his selection of Steve Bannon and Jeff Sessions), along with his unwillingness to name the events in Charlottesville as acts of White supremacy, violence and rage, educators can no longer feign neutrality, pretending these conversations hold no place in classrooms. Nicole Truesdell (2017), the Director of Academic Diversity and Inclusiveness at Beloit College, recently argued there is a contradictory nature of being apolitical in classrooms by faculty who are hired to teach about institutional racism. Many higher education

instructors are hired to do this sort of 'work,' and others must recognize the contradictions caused when they are asked to 'stay neutral' in the classroom. This façade is unrealistic, and the authors' personal narratives are prime examples of the need to address political issues, especially those situated around race and racism, in the classroom. Despite the challenges that arise, White educators must persist in transgressing the dehumanizing depoliticization of the classroom, for their own liberation and the liberation of their students.

Aronson and Ashlee revealed vulnerability and failures throughout their teaching, which have led them to understand that both dread and hope are vital. In teaching future educators and through critical self-reflection, they are committed to creating space for the learning that can occur when the tension between dread and hope is foregrounded. Rather than cancelling each other out, these opposing truths build upon each other creating something new, something radical, and something audacious. Indeed, this new "audacious hope demands that we reconnect to the collective by struggling alongside one another, sharing in the victories and the pain" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 190). White educators must be committed to sharing the pain of and they must continue striving for the victories.

**\*References:**  
Can be found at the end of this special issue.

**Despite the challenges that arise, White educators must persist in transgressing the dehumanizing depoliticization of the classroom, for their own liberation and the liberation of their students.**

*Suggested Citation:*

Aronson, B. & Ashlee, K. (2018). Holding onto dread and hope: The need for critical whiteness studies in education as resistance in the Trump Era. *The Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, 3(3), 50-61.



Image by Natalie Battaglia