

# Democracy & Education

Sam and Cristina

*A Critical Dialogue Between a Teacher and Student  
About the Commoditization of People of Color by Schools*

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## Abstract

This article was written by a white high school teacher (Sam) and a high school student of color (Cristina) in order to consider the harmful potential for schools in the United States to commoditize students of color at the expense of critical, antiracist work. It was written out of a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) study and uses a critical whiteness framework in order to examine how Cristina, in dialogue with Sam, came to theorize that her racial identity was commoditized as a cultural asset of their high school in exploitative ways. Her thinking, juxtaposed with Sam's consideration of his own whiteness, illustrates the complex ways that students of color can be exploited in ways that do not disrupt hegemonic white supremacy in educational contexts. It is our hope that sharing this dialogical interaction will contribute to the consideration of a more nuanced understanding of how whiteness can obstruct democratic practices, especially racial justice, in U.S. schools.

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**S**AM AND CRISTINA met in a drama workshop. Sam was Cristina's white high school teacher. Cristina was Sam's Indian student. *Here the authors admit that they worry about writing about racial identities in monolithic or fixed terms. Still, they worry more about not accounting for race, especially whiteness, out of fear of reifying these socially constructed racial categories. Also, they choose not to capitalize the word white or whiteness in the text because it was never meant to refer to an intentional community grouping in the United States.*

Anyway, Sam was in his thirties when he met Cristina. He had been teaching high school English and drama for nearly 10 years. Sam's first job was at Cardinal High School<sup>1</sup>—an urban and racially diverse institution. He was recruited to teach at a predominately white, suburban high school on the other side of the city. This

second school was Primville Area High School (PAHS).<sup>2</sup> He was drawn by the opportunity to direct a more robust extracurricular theater program. Sam was trying to balance the demands of being a teacher with his recent enrollment in graduate school at the time he met Cristina. Sam's grandmother was a first-generation Russian Jewish immigrant but Sam identified racially as white.

SAM TANNER taught high school English and drama in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, before accepting a position in literacy education at the Pennsylvania State University in Altoona. His research is concerned with matters of race—specifically whiteness.

CRISTINA CORRIE attends Babson College in Massachusetts.

Cristina was a freshman when she met Sam. She came to PAHS after attending a private Catholic school. Cristina was one of the few South Asian students at the high school. She wanted to be involved in the drama program at PAHS. Cristina had experience as a performer and even managed her own theater company before meeting Sam. Cristina's parents were both from India—they came to the United States before she was born. Cristina identified racially as American-born Indian. But she also considered herself kind of white too because she had been raised in mostly white environments.

Cristina thrived in her curricular drama workshop. Sam appreciated her willfulness—especially her passion for social justice. Cristina once convinced the entire class of nearly 40 students to listen to a live stream of the Dalai Lama's speech on her iPad when the Dalai Lama visited a city near PAHS that fall.

Sam cast Cristina in the production of *Skin of Their Teeth* that he directed that winter. She was the Fortune Teller. Cristina struggled to get along with other members of the cast—an almost exclusively white group. She told Sam that students in the extracurricular drama program at PAHS acted like they were in a cult that did not accept outsiders.

Cristina learned about Sam's dissertation research—the Whiteness Project—the following fall.

This complex teacher-research project was meant to inspire a group of mostly white high school students to investigate whiteness. It was voluntary and involved nearly 40 students. In the fall of 2012, Sam organized a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) collective so that students could create research projects to consider whiteness. Students came up with their own ways to research whiteness. Some students designed social justice theater workshops for the elementary students in the school district to explore what they knew about race at different age levels. Only two of six of the schools they contacted in the district allowed them to do this work. Other students took a journal and pencil and camped out in predominantly white spaces in the school to take ethnographic notes. These white areas were identified by students in discussion and included the music wing, the auditorium, or the woodshop.

Ultimately, student findings were used as the source material for a play-building collective. Students spent that winter writing a collaborative script entitled *Blanchekreist: A Collaborative Play About Whiteness*. The script was 82 pages long and concerned a fictional community that was afflicted by a virus that caused blindness. People infected by this virus claimed that it made them superior and began to oppress those without the virus.<sup>3</sup> The students' work was performed for the community as the school's spring play in May. Sam directed the play. He also led question-and-answer sessions with the audience after each performance.

The project received local and national media attention.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Sam documented the project with the help of his volunteer research assistant, Natalie. Natalie and Sam kept detailed field notes, filmed teaching sessions, and collected ethnographic artifacts (for more details about the Whiteness Project, see Beach, Johnston, & Thein 2015; Tanner, 2014, 2015).

Cristina started participating in the Whiteness Project the fall after the YPAR collective had already started. She began attending the group's weekly meetings before school. Cristina was one of the few sophomores involved in the collective that was made up mostly of juniors and seniors. Cristina was also one of four student participants who identified as people of color.

Sam and Cristina's relationship that began in the drama workshop spilled over into an unruly dialogue about race as the Whiteness Project unfolded. They talked—sometimes daily—about their frustrations, beliefs, and experiences with race, namely whiteness. Cristina was not pleased with what she described as the evasive ways that her white peers avoided considering their privilege. Sam was trying to explore how a critical whiteness approach to whiteness pedagogy (see the upcoming explanation of critical whiteness) could facilitate more generative considerations of whiteness by white students.

Sam and Cristina's relationship continued to develop in unique ways. Sam had lunch with Cristina and her father after the project was over to discuss what each of them had learned through the project. Cristina's father was proud of both his daughter and the project and wanted to discuss what they had learned.

Cristina interrupted another section of Sam's drama workshop one afternoon because she was upset about an interaction she had with another teacher at PAHS. Sam's students were busy working, so he had a moment to talk with her. Their conversation lasted beyond the bell. Both of them were brought to tears as they heatedly discussed race. Cristina succeeded in making Sam feel her belief that white people at PAHS *actually thought* they were superior to people of color. Cristina listened empathetically as Sam tried to put words to the ways that he had avoided learning middle-class, white values because of his mother's emotional abuse and subsequent abandonment of him when he was seven. They hugged when Sam had to leave for his next class. Their talks continued into Cristina's senior year even though the Whiteness Project had come to an end. The topic of these talks usually returned to race and to whiteness.

It was these interactions across the complex time and space of four years at PAHS that created the context for Sam and Cristina to engage in a critical discussion about race.

Sam and Cristina have used third person here to render our relationship to our reader in sanitized ways for the purpose of this piece of scholarship. We let that fall away now, except when we need to distinguish something using our names.

Please note: There was nothing sanitary about our talks. These interactions were emotional, contentious, and jolting. At the core of our relationship was a shared agreement that racism was painful for both of us—it was detestable. But that meant extremely different things to each of us. Still, we wanted to do something *together* to resist unjust racial positioning. So we kept communicating. These difficult talks resulted in our conclusion that people of color were serving as a commodity to the almost wholly white staff at PAHS.

This troubled both of us deeply.

Lozenski (2014) wrote that YPAR is difficult to document in objective ways because the participants and the researcher—if the

work is successfully democratic—began to share what he described as one voice.

We take Lozenski's claim seriously. So we write together here—a high school student and a high school teacher, a person of color and a white person—to honor the power and potential of *our once voice*. We hope that voice can contribute to more racially just and humane schools and societies.

### Commodifying Color in Schools

Much work has been done to show the importance of valuing students and communities of color in schools. Yosso (2005) and Ladson-Billings (2000) have made compelling arguments about the importance of eliminating deficit views of communities of color in order to achieve social and racial equity in US education. Specifically, Yosso wrote of “the need to restructure US social institutions around knowledges, skills, abilities and networks—the community cultural wealth—possessed and utilized by People of Color” (p. 82). The importance of understanding that communities of color are assets to schools cannot be understated. Still, we worry that uncritical commitments to multiculturalism—especially in predominately white systems—might actually result in superficial practices of multiculturalism standing in for critical, antiracist work.

Leong's (2012) work about the commodification of people of color proved extremely helpful to us as we began to unpack our dialogical relationship and subsequent observations about PAHS. We relied heavily on her work that described racial capitalism before sharing our argument.

Leong (2012) drew from Harris's (1995) compelling analysis of how whiteness has served as property in the United States—both historically and contemporaneously—to argue that, in the name of forwarding multicultural agendas, institutions and social organizations in the United States are actually profiting by exploiting nonwhiteness as a particular resource. Leong wrote:

*We have internalized the idea that racial diversity is a social good, and as a result, we assign value to the inclusion of nonwhite individuals in our social milieu, our educational institutions, and our workplaces. Nonwhiteness has therefore become something desirable—and for many, it has become a commodity to be pursued, captured, possessed, and used. (p. 2155)*

Leong's found what she described as two ironies with this relationship between commodification and nonwhiteness. First, diversity is only valued “in terms of its worth to white people” (p. 2171). Second, this “diversity rationale confers on white people and predominantly white institutions the power to determine the value of nonwhiteness” (p. 2171). The underlying principle of this social order troubled Leong for two reasons. First:

*The value of nonwhiteness is contingent on its worth to white people and predominantly white institutions. So even when white people and predominantly white institutions highly value nonwhiteness, they retain control over the assignment of value and may increase or diminish that value at will (p. 2172).*

Second, Leong worried that

*the thin conception of diversity creates a system in which white people and predominantly white institutions derive value from nonwhite racial identity. As a result, the value of nonwhiteness depends on its benefit to white people and predominantly white institutions (p. 2172).*

Leong's (2012) writing concisely named the hollow commitment to anti-racist work we were seeing at PAHS as a “thin conception of diversity.” White faculty and administrators at PAHS continually talked about the need to increase participation by students of color in particular programs. They believed this to be a socially just endeavor.

Sam constantly faced pressure from his principal to recruit students of color for the theater program. The number of students of color in his productions was the way his administrator evaluated his effectiveness as a theater director.

A friend in student council told Cristina that the white activity director at PAHS explicitly told the group that they needed to get a student of color on the council so that they would—in his words—look good. Indeed, Cristina's involvement on the mostly white extracurricular competitive speech team became an asset to both the school team as well as the larger speech community—Cristina often felt her skin color made the team look good.

Our experiences frustrated us because our experiences led us to see the “thinness” of our school's commitment to diversity. Nonwhiteness was something to be accumulated or possessed to benefit the institution. Historical or contemporary logics of white supremacy resisted scrutiny or disruption because nonwhiteness was accepted only so long as it benefited white people or the predominately white institution. This was how we began to understand racial commodification—it is a way that allows systematic white supremacy to flourish despite the sincere belief by white people and white institutions that they are contributing to multicultural agendas.

We now share the method that we used to unpack and understand our theorizing. First, we explain critical whiteness studies because it was how our conversation was positioned to notice the “thinness” that Leong (2012) described. Second, we move on to our dialogical interaction after this comment on theory and method.

### Critical Whiteness Studies

McIntosh's (1992) work on white privilege has accounted for much of the way that whiteness has been understood in education over the past two decades. Thinkers like Thandeka (1999), Leonardo (2013), and Lensmire (2010, 2014) have begun to worry that positioning white people as *only* a smoothed-out embodiment of racism limits our understanding of the profound ambivalence that comes from identifying as white in the United States. Lensmire (2014) described this ambivalence as the result of “a conflict” in white people “between democratic ideals and the obvious betrayal of those ideals, evident at every moment in U.S. history and society” (p. 419). Lensmire (2010) argued that failure to account for this ambivalence in favor of accusations of privilege has “. . . too

often hurt rather than helped our critical pedagogies with white students” (p. 159). Furthermore, Lensmire et al. (2013) argued that focusing solely on asking white people to acknowledge their privilege in race pedagogies might actually get in the way of helping them learn how to take antiracist action that disrupts hegemonic white supremacy. Jupp (2013) has gone so far to call for a “second wave” of whiteness studies in education. A critical whiteness approach has inspired scholarship such as that of Tanner (2014, 2015), Berchini (2014), and Miller (2015) that works to theorize ongoing constructions of white identity in more nuanced ways than a white privilege framework has historically allowed. This scholarship accounts for (a) what identifying as white means for white people, (b) the new ways that whiteness continues to matter, and (c) how whiteness works at institutional and social levels. Simply put, critical whiteness studies means to account for complexity and nuance in social justice work by understanding operating logics of both white individuals and white contexts.

Critical whiteness frameworks have also inspired work that considers how communities of culture are commoditized in education. Namely, Lensmire and Snaza (2010) used an analysis of blackface minstrelsy in relation to teacher education to illustrate a historical tradition in the United States in which “White people have used Black people not only for their labor and economic gain, exploited as amorally as the soil and climate, but also have used them as a human natural resource to work out who they are as White people” (p. 418). Here Lensmire and Snaza acknowledged the explicit material and physical exploitation of people of color by whites but they also point to the way that whites use people of color as a “human resource” in order to work out what their own race means.

Recall Leong’s (2012) argument. This same way of making racial meaning could explain how whiteness is worked out in mostly white institutional settings—namely predominantly white US schools. By holding up the success of communities of color without questioning the racial values that produce particular notions of success, schools might facilitate a process that allows a mostly white teaching force to “work out” their own whiteness without having to participate in difficult, critical antiracist action. Of whiteness, Morrison (1992) reminded us that “the subject of the dream is the dreamer” and that “the fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive” (p. 17). Morrison’s claim suggested that white people mediate or work out their own racial identities through an “Africanist persona,” or what she described as real or imaginary people of color. According to Morrison, whiteness is meaningless to white people or white institutions unless it is positioned in terms of this racial other. Morrison’s idea could explain how white teachers or schools showcase the success of students of color without disrupting white supremacy. Doing so would allow them to feel safe that they are not racist without ever having to question or even acknowledge *their* racial identity or its underlying racial values. Critical whiteness studies in education means to account for this racial complexity in examining how whiteness is worked out by white people—whether they realize it or not—and how that process causes them to function in white supremacist contexts.

Acknowledging that the majority of educators continue to be white, we find that it is essential to take careful consideration of the white ambivalence that Lensmire (2010) argued results from what Morrison (1992) described as the conditioned internal and external conceptions of both real and imaginary people of color. White educators committed to forwarding social justice agendas run the risk of unintentionally contributing to the commodification of people of color that results in reaffirming inequitable racial systems because they do not understand how the way that they work out their own race. Critical whiteness studies framed Sam’s dissertation work, and so it was also the backdrop of Cristina and Sam’s talks.

### **Blurry Methods: We Talked, We Thought, and We Wrote**

Our dialogical method was unique and requires some explanation. Yes, we talked, thought, and wrote. But we did so in rigorous, particular ways.

As previously mentioned, we began considering race together in a YPAR collective that was researching whiteness. YPAR is a democratic approach to education designed to facilitate the sharing of power between teachers and students around investigating topics that usually concern social justice (see compelling examples of YPAR work such as that of Appadurai, 2006; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Morrell, 2004). YPAR often results in a complicated amalgam of teaching, learning, research, and political agendas that is difficult to isolate and describe. Indeed, Cammaroto and Fine (2008) wrote that participatory action research “blurs the line between pedagogy, research, and politics” (p. viii). Sam was committed to facilitating a YPAR collective in which (a) youth designed research practices in collaboration with adults, (b) power was shared by all participants, and (c) there was no predetermined outcome of the inquiry. This approached challenged traditional practices of teaching and learning at PAHS—especially as related to whiteness. Cammarota and Fine wrote that practices of YPAR are “a radical *epistemological challenge* to the traditions of social science, most critically on the topic of where knowledge resides” (p. 215, emphasis in original). Their claim proved true for us during our YPAR collective as youth and adults grappled with the realization that they were *creating* knowledge about whiteness rather than *consuming* it. Simply put, YPAR was a pedagogical framework as well as a methodological practice for us that combined collective data generation with collective data analysis as a way to conduct democratic, open-ended inquiry.

Our dialogic interactions became more intense as Cristina shared her frustration with Sam about ways her white peers struggled to recognize the harm that the construction of whiteness caused people of color. Sam’s concern about Cristina’s response led to many long and contentious conversations about the nature of antiracist pedagogies.

“This project isn’t working. The white kids don’t get *it*,” Cristina told Sam about her white peers in the winter of 2013.

“They don’t get what you get,” Sam responded, “but they get something else” (Sam’s field notes, February 2013).

At first, Sam was worried that he was doing something wrong because of Cristina's disapproval of the Whiteness Project. hooks's (2003) writing provided him with help. She wrote that "anti-racist white folks recognize that their ongoing resistance to white supremacy is genuine when it is not determined in any way by the approval or disapproval of people of color" (p. 65). hooks's claim helped Sam understand that the Whiteness Project *was* achieving potentially antiracist conditions for its white participants, despite Cristina's frustrations. Sill, Cristina's experience was altogether different for complicated reasons. First, she was one of the few students of color trying to participate. Second, she *did* identify as sort of white. Cristina's unique positioning meant her work in the project was rife with complexity. This realization made Sam curious as to how he could help Cristina continue to theorize her unique perspective. This led to daily conversations during passing time or before or after school in which we discussed the pros and cons of using YPAR in high schools as a way to consider whiteness. Ultimately, we agreed that YPAR *was* an effective means of conducting whiteness work but that it was an extremely difficult process.

The conversations that began in our YPAR collective continued over the next two years in organic ways that were rooted in the method and theory already described. Our talks continued to happen before and after school. We talked during passing time. Our dialogue even infiltrated classes Cristina took with Sam or theater projects he cast her in. We shared stories with each other about our experiences with race or whiteness at PAHS. We interpreted these stories together. Without explicitly meaning to, we engaged in a rigorous, interpretive version of what Fram (2013) described as the constant comparative analysis in which data—in this case, our storied experience and subsequent writing—is dialogically examined to look for emerging themes. Erickson (1986) described deductive, interpretive research as cyclical process of data collection and analysis in which researchers generate and test assertions so as to "test the validity of the assertions that were generated, seeking disconfirming evidence as well as confirming evidence" (p. 146). The shape of our relationship after the Whiteness Project involved interpretive, constant comparative analysis of race and whiteness at PAHS.

The democratic values and subsequent practices of YPAR were essential to our dialogue. Ultimately, they led us to attempt this nontraditional writing project together. High school students rarely are given the opportunity to share power with teachers or researchers, and our choice to write *together* hopes to problematize that condition. Furthermore, we honor this writing as a space where a person of color and a white person worked together to theorize our experiences with race.

Sam helped Cristina with a variety of writing projects by providing feedback during their work together. Some of Cristina's writing was in relation to the Whiteness Project while other projects were for scholarships or admission into college. Those pieces of writing—in dialogue with Sam's feedback—are shared and discussed in the next section. We rely on this progression of writing to make a case that racial commodification was happening at PAHS. Our dialogue revealed much to us and led to a question:

How were uncritical white faculty and administrators at PAHS using Cristina to display a commitment to multiculturalism without disrupting or questioning systematic white supremacy?

### Listening In: Excerpts from Our Talks

There are two pieces of Cristina's writing that we chose to highlight in this section. The first is Cristina's response to the first two journal prompts that Sam gave all student participants in the Whiteness Project, asking them to define whiteness and locate themselves in relation to their definition. The second piece is a college application essay that Cristina wrote during her senior year. This essay summarizes how she came to understand the commoditization of her racial identity by the high school's speech team. Both essays include feedback from Sam.

This progression of writing shows how Cristina's dialogical relationship with Sam resulted in a complicated argument about the commodification of her color at PAHS. We provide some context before moving into this dialogue.

Cristina was invited to participate in a district advisory committee when she was a junior in part because she was a high-achieving student of color. This group was formed to deal with racial inequity in the school district. Cristina checked in with Sam after these meetings to voice her frustrations and discuss her perspective on the group. Cristina was also on the school's highly competitive speech team. Speech is an extracurricular performance activity where students compete in public speaking or acting and are judged in a variety of categories such as extemporaneous speaking, prose, or drama. Although Cristina was Indian, Cristina's white speech coach cast her as the Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai during her junior year. In his words, her Indian identity was "close enough" to Malala's background to make the piece—a short selection from the book *I am Malala*—a good fit. She had success throughout the season playing this role for mostly white judges. Though Cristina was an accomplished performer, other members of her team attributed her success to the fact that she was doing what they called a "race piece." During this time, she checked in with Sam once or twice a month to discuss the way that race worked in the local competitive speech community. Cristina was both happy that she was winning and frustrated by the way race circulated at tournaments.

These circumstances led to the argument about the commodification of people of color being considered in this piece. The two essays should reflect how this concept began to be understood by Sam and Cristina. An interpretive note follows both pieces of writing. We have identified the authors in our headings. Cristina wrote the first essay as a sophomore and the second as a senior.

### Cristina's Journal Responses—9/23/12

*The writing prompts were: A) What is whiteness? What are white people? B) How do you think of yourself, racially? How does that relate to whiteness?*

Simply put, I think that 'white people' are well, white people (Caucasian). Whiteness on the other hand is different. I think that whiteness can vary from person to person, even if one is not

Caucasian. Trying to write this down/actually trying to figure this out is actually rather confusing because I guess that I just do not know the answer. I guess I can use the example of myself to answer this & the next prompt:

First off, I am Indian. Both my parents were born in different parts of India, and they then immigrated here (My mom coming because my dad got a job). Fast forward. For about five–six years I have been a part of a class called SILC (School of Indian Language and Culture) and it basically takes place on Saturdays during the school year from 10–12:30 (First class is language, 2nd is Social Studies, and 3rd is elective). Almost everyone in this class is Indian or has an adopted Indian child, etc. Through this, I guess that I have realized that I am not a ‘typical Indian child’. As in all the people (parents) there consider me an ‘American-ized Indian’ or a ‘Indian who acts white’. I mean I know I don’t know why, I still get along with the others fine but I do notice a difference in behavior. It could be because my parents are Christian, not Hindu or maybe just because my parents have laid off on being so strict? I’m not sure. God this is actually so hard to explain. I don’t know if this is the kind of stuff you want, I mean I’m not black and that is kind of what everyone is focusing on so I don’t know. Maybe you would find this interesting: The people in SILC refer to their friends at school as their ‘white friends’ and people at SILC as their ‘Indian friends’ . . . and there is a huge difference. I guess you really can’t mix them unless you are mixing your ‘Americanized Indian’ friends with your white friends otherwise it gets really awkward? I guess that my main point for all of this is that I am considered ‘white’ or ‘americanized’ because I wear normal clothes (my parents finally let me start wearing shorts and tank tops a couple years ago), I have a lot of apparent ‘white’ friends, I am not socially awkward, and things like that? So I guess what I’m saying is that that’s what white people are? Sorry this is a really big paragraph, I’ll make a new one.

Anyways, just thinking about it now, I guess that when I think of white people it can honestly be anyone who is Caucasian, but when I think about Indians, African-Americans, I think of them a certain way, like there are no different interpretations. I think? I don’t know. I guess that is my answer for now.

Also, I do just want to say that this topic is extremely important to me and I think that this is a good way to explore it? Thanks for the opportunity.

### **Sam’s Feedback—9/23/12**

Cristina, this is exactly what we should be doing! You are doing some thoughtful, critical thinking about your own identity in relationship to whiteness. And I think there is room to explore here.

Here is a question. What does it mean to “act white” or to be Americanized? What are the specific traits (way people talk, dress, walk, think, etc.) of “acting white?” Is there a way to examine your friends, your self, your surroundings with that in mind? You started to think about dressing “normal” but, before accepting things as “normal” or “strange,” can you describe what “normal” is? Big questions but, the more we start trying to answer them, the further we could go. In fact, your research could really be just to look at a group of people (maybe the SILC folks) and examine specific traits of certain behaviors with the categories of

American-ized, white, Indian, normal, in mind. (Really, the categories could be anything.)

Also, this topic is extremely important to me (and to all of us). The hard part of this project will really be for you to imagine a way to start answering some of the questions I have asked about in terms of some research. Also, I think it would be cool to use some of the same questions with the theater program at RAHS.

Maybe for your next entry you could take up some of the questions I asked above?

### **Interpretation #1**

This first interaction between Sam and Cristina illustrates the type of dialogical relationship that was forming. There are three things about this pedagogical work worth considering.

First, it shows how YPAR created unique circumstances for Sam and Cristina to engage authentically in inquiry into race. Irby (2014) argued teachers with a mind for social justice “should adopt race-conscious and relevant curriculum that helps students understand their fears and desires and how these emotions shape their schools, social worlds, and their own identities (p. 793). The first two prompts were ways Sam and Cristina used YPAR to genuinely participate in Irby’s description of antiracist teaching and learning because they (a) designed their interaction together and (b) were purposefully conscious of race.

Second, it shows how Cristina and Sam were inquiring into race in a way that allowed for them to mine the confusing ambivalence that Lensmire (2014) argued accompanies whiteness. Unlike many processes in schools, YPAR does not presuppose correct answers and so it was appropriate for Cristina to write, “Trying to figure this out is actually rather confusing because I guess that I just do not know the answer.” It was also suitable for Sam to respond with “I think there is room to explore here.” These phrases both illustrate that Sam and Cristina did not have concrete answers to their questions, and so there was space for them to explore their own ambivalence.

Finally, the informality of this dialogical writing should be noted. The organic, informal nature of this assignment allowed Sam and Cristina to begin an honest academic relationship that developed in surprising ways over the next three years, in part because it was not formalized by predetermined, traditional expectations of school. This pedagogical partnership led to the next piece of writing.

After reading two earlier drafts of an essay Cristina wrote while she was applying for college, Sam wrote the following note to her. In the same way that he prompted Cristina to think about what it meant to “act white” in the previous journal, which she wrote as a sophomore, he suggested that Cristina should focus on the commoditization that happened to her in speech because of the claims she had made in their lengthy discussions. Sam used Cristina’s own words to propel her thinking further, in the same way that a peer might do. This was starkly different than the ways students are often positioned to complete work that a teacher assigns. This is the email he wrote to her after providing feedback on her essay:

### **Sam's Feedback—12/31/14**

You might just lay it out and say that your skin color was the commodity. Because I think it was. Your ability to mobilize a certain version of Malala's culture that could be made visible to white people further added value to the commodity. (12/31/14, 6:47 AM)

With that note in mind, here is the essay that Cristina wrote.

### **Cristina's College Application Essay—1/13/15**

*The writing prompts: Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?*

The sound of clapping echoes off the lonely walls of the classroom that serve as my stage. As I begin my performance with my adopted Pakistani accent, my mind transitions to autopilot. I wonder if the audience can tell how I really feel. I wonder if they can sense the living paradox in front of them, the commoditized culture disguised under the façade of cultural awareness.

I had been performing a piece based off of the book *I Am Malala* (2013), which detailed Malala Yousafzai's life advocating for girls' education and standing up to the Taliban. This had been part of my involvement in Speech, a competitive performance extracurricular. When my Speech coach first handed me Malala's book, I was thrilled. The story was compelling, relevant, and inspiring. As I started to perform the piece, I didn't realize the influence that it would have on my identity.

Although both of my parents were born in India, I had always identified myself as *sort-of* Indian. Up until freshman year, I attended the School of Indian Languages and Culture (SILC) on Saturdays to learn more about Indian culture. My friends from SILC referred to me as "Americanized", but honestly, I was okay with it. Compared to them, I was *normal*. The girls at SILC only talked about their *Bharatanatyam* dance classes or how Indian they were. Compared to my friends at my predominately white catholic school, they were *weird*. Yeah, I was Indian just like them, but I wasn't *like* them. They went to temple, I went to church. They are different, I am normal. They are Indian, I am American.

Performing Malala challenged this belief. The meaning behind Malala's story vanished as I was tossed into a world where I was valued for my perceived identity. I was a commodity to my white coach; he worked with me because I could pass as Pakistani, not because of who I was. It didn't matter that I was Americanized, that I was Catholic, that I wasn't like my Indian friends from SILC. This became clear when he was ready to consign me to a different coach when I expressed interest in performing a piece that was not based on me exploiting my skin color. I felt less American, less Indian, less human. I started to feel ashamed of my identity.

Like Claudia in Toni Morrison's (1994) *The Bluest Eye*, I soon realized that I wasn't the problem. It wasn't my identity, my culture, or my religion. It was the system which valued the commoditization of my culture that allowed this exploitation to occur.

I recognized that this situation was a microcosm of the larger world: just like I was a commodity to my Speech team because of my cultural identity, there are countless times when minorities are

just commodities in the classroom. Just a statistic to keep up with the façade of a school's cultural competence. So I decided to do something about it.

I started conversations with my teachers and helped my principal create a workshop for them surrounding cultural awareness. I gave student perspective during District Curriculum Advisory Committee meetings to help address the achievement gap within my school. I stopped apologizing for my culture. When faced with a system aspiring to make me ashamed of my cultural identity, I retaliated. I started to have 'Bindi Mondays' at school where I wore Indian clothes accompanied with a *Bindi* as a reminder that I should never be ashamed of my beautiful culture.

Although I may have saved myself a period of cultural confusion if I wouldn't have questioned my actions, I am happy that I did. This questioning propelled me to make a change in the community that I am a part of, and consistently drives me to make a changes in the future. As Malala would say, "Let us make our future now, and let us make our dreams tomorrow's reality."

### **Interpretation #2**

In many ways, Cristina's college essay stands alone as a piece of theorization about how white people and contexts can commoditize students of color. Namely, this essay shows how she came to clearly identify structural white supremacy as well as articulate the complex ambivalence that came with trying to think through her own identity as somebody who was both a person of color as well as a student conditioned to "act white." It is important to note that Cristina was an active participant in the commoditization that she described. She benefitted from her success in tournaments even as she began to note the ways her identity was being used.

It should be noted that she did not write this essay to portray her white coach as a villain. Recall Leong's claim about the comodification of nonwhiteness. The white coaches and judges in speech were doing what they were doing because of a commitment to create racially inclusive environments. Still, this thin commitment to multiculturalism was serving white faculty and the predominately white institutions of PAHS and the broader Speech community at the expense of the implementation of critical, anti-racist agendas. White coaches and judges could exploit the success of students of color as a way to work out their whiteness by pointing to their contributions to the success of communities of color. This allowed white people in these communities to show that they were not racist without ever considering how white values contextualize their behavior and participation in institutional structures. Cristina's speech coach aptly perceived how value circulated the speech context in order that Cristina could win tournaments. Making a scapegoat of that coach misses the way that the overall context created conditions for her commoditization. If anything, the failure to make hegemonic white supremacy visible is to blame for what Cristina noted in her essay and the failure of the judges and coaches is their lack of awareness as to how they are positioned by such a system. Cristina's essays shows how commoditizing people of color in schools becomes a way for white

people and systems to work out their own whiteness without ever actually questioning the normalized racial values they adhere to.

## Discussion

The majority of educators continue to be white. Educational institutions in the United States were created out of a historical context of hegemonic white supremacy. It is important for scholars to come up with better theorizations as to what whiteness is and how it operates systemically in order to conduct meaningful, antiracist work in our schools.

Sam and Cristina's dialogue has powerful implications for how people of color can be exploited by white systems. It is unlikely that normative logics of whiteness can be disrupted in the absence of a critical understanding as to how whiteness undergirds education. This has important implications for Sam as a white educational practitioner and researcher as well. Teachers and researchers need to be careful that they are not simply, as Leong (2012) described it, commoditizing nonwhiteness in the spirit of social justice as a way to work out their own whiteness. Seriously disrupting white supremacy necessitates that we understand how whiteness continues to be made so that we can move beyond thin or hollow multiculturalism.

Lensmire's (2014) extensive research into whiteness examined "White people's rather desperate and continual need for reassurance of their own superiority (exactly because White people simultaneously know that they are not actually superior)" in order to suggest that "perhaps the exhaustion and emotional costs of playing the role of White American are openings to critical work on race with White people" (p. 26). Sam's intense collaboration with Cristina that stemmed from YPAR, framed by critical whiteness studies, allowed a rich mining of his own whiteness as a teacher and researcher. Talks with Cristina did take an emotional toll on him, and this created an opening for him to consider how he was positioning Cristina as a student of color in his teaching project as well as in his own mind. This allowed him to become careful that he was not simply working out his whiteness through her but, rather, working with her to disrupt racism. This weariness led him to make a choice as a scholar. Rather than writing a piece *about* a high school student, he decided to invite her to write *with* him. Doing so allowed Cristina and Sam to identify a tool of white supremacy in U.S. schools together: Its potential to commoditize people of color. Writing specifically about teacher education, Picower (2009) argued: "Understanding how these tools of Whiteness protect dominant and stereotypical understandings of race can advise teacher education programs how to better organize to transform the ideologies of White teachers" (p. 197). Sam and Cristina hope that sharing the story of their own inquiries and findings might inspire other teachers, students, and researchers to consider whether their social justice projects are actually transforming ideologies or simply using people of color in order to continue working out a white ideal.

There is still much work to do in order to continue theorizing whiteness and the way it functions in education with nuance. Conducting research projects into the complex and varying ways

that white people or white contexts in education work out their own whiteness could provide valuable information about how to disrupt and ultimately bring down a racial order in the United States that continues to produce striking inequities between white people and people of color. Using tenets of YPAR to create instances where teachers and students work together in order to conduct social justice projects might be a fruitful way to create innovative interventions in K–12 contexts that could allow people to do what Ellison (1953/1995) described as the necessary "emotional, psychological and intellectual" work required to create conditions for Americans to "possess and articulate a truly democratic world view" (p. 91).

## Notes

1. The names of both schools mentioned in this report have been disguised
2. PAHS was a predominately white school during Sam's employment there. It served students in 9th–12th grades. Roughly 65% of students identified as white. It was located in a first-ring suburb of a major metropolitan area and had a student enrollment of nearly 2,500 students.
3. The full text of the play is available here: <http://bit.ly/1EypY0e>.
4. A local conservative radio host criticized the project by reading a newspaper article about it on a morning radio program. Also, a national blog associated with national conservative pundit Glenn Beck linked to a documentary that my colleague at PAHS created to critique the project as well (Jessup, 2013).

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