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## Confronting Becky: An Autocritographic Examination of White Women's Gendered Racism in Higher Education

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CONFRONTING BECKY: AN AUTOCRITOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION OF WHITE  
WOMEN'S GENDERED RACISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Education and Organizational Leadership

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by  
Rebecca Lynn Morgan  
May 2021

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Rachel Wagner, Committee Chair  
Dr. Robin Phelps-Ward  
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Dr. Erin Goss

## ABSTRACT

This study examines how I, as a white woman social justice educator at a southeastern public university, practiced gendered racism and was supported in these practices by administrators at my institution. White women have been socialized throughout history to use our gender subordination as a defense when confronted with our racism. I built a theoretical framework with intersectionality as a baseline to investigate of how white women are complicit in gendered racism. I then intertwined idealized objectification standards and racial gatekeeping to reveal how white women use practices such as innocence, embodying goodness, and protecting white men, to gain and maintain power and restrict access from People of Color.

I used autocritography, a self-study methodology focused on the telling and retelling of stories, to examine how my idealized objectified practices protect and insulate me from addressing my active racism. Through five tellings detailing an event in my role as a social justice educator, I explained how one of my programs came under scrutiny and revision from upper administrators at the institution. Using dramaturgical and theoretical framework-based coding, I found three areas where my practices helped me maintain my reputation as a good white woman. I also discovered ways I faced consequences for not upholding this reputation.

I then discuss how these findings revealed the everyday subtle ways that white supremacy maintains its presence and operation in our society as well as the way it is tied to our norms and expectations. I also outlined how racism is practiced at all times and that, if white women want to make change, we must let go of our reputations as good

white women. I finish with a discussion of how this study relates to and further supports studies regarding the negative experiences of People of Color in higher education spaces. Finally, I connect these findings to implications for students, staff, and faculty both inside and outside of the classroom.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the three people in my life without whom I would have never made it through this experience. For Charlie and Sammy, the lights of my life, I am so thankful to share this achievement with you. Your honesty invites me to take stock of my own truths, even those I don't want to investigate. Your sweetness reminds me of all that is good in this world. Your hopefulness reminds me why the work matters: making a better world for you and all who come after you. Thanks for letting me be your mom.

And for Jim, the love of my life and my very best friend, thank you. You knew I was capable of this achievement long before I did and reminded me of it every step of the way. Thank you for the late night discussions as I worked through every step of this process. Thank you for believing in me, encouraging, and motivating me when I wanted to give up. But most of all, thank you for loving me exactly as I am. In doing so, I feel empowered to take risks and make mistakes, knowing that I always have you in my corner. I love you.

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Throughout my time in this program and my life I have had some incredible mentors and educators. To Drs. Croom and Cawthon, thank you for believing in me and preparing me for this work. To Dr. Kendra Stewart-Tillman and Altheia Richardson, you invited me into your work family and constantly pushed me to be a better professional every day. I carry your friendship and guidance with me always. And Dr. Jeff Kenney, thanks for taking a chance on me during that first interview and everyday following. I'm honored to know you.

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To my group of white women who are working to be better accomplices and change makers in the world, I am continually in awe of your commitment to this work. Dr. Leasa Evinger, Sara Hanks, Amber Lange, and Dr. Janna Magette each of you remind me of the importance of connection as white supremacy works in so many ways to isolate us. And to Ciera Durden, Rachel Kline, and Kate Radford, thank you for being my community every week for the past year. You push me to ask those difficult questions and then work to answer them with me. So thankful to have you in my squad.

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## CHAPTER ONE

White women's racism has been underestimated and under examined, particularly in how our racism plays out in the context of higher education. Though several Black feminist scholars and historical researchers have commented on these practices (Collins, 1990; Combahee River Collective, 1977/2015; Hartman, 1996; hooks, 1994; Jones-Rogers, 2019), their voices have been largely ignored, dismissed, and/or co-opted in white dominant spheres such as higher education. These scholars have called for further investigation of how white women's unique combination of dominant and subordinate social identities work together to both mask our racial privilege and protect us from naming our active racist practices and beliefs (Broeck, 2002; Lorde, 1984; Rowe, 2000). As a white woman social justice educator (SJE), I am taking up this call by investigating how white women's historical and socialized roles in higher education as both idealized objects and racial gatekeepers allow us to actively perpetuate racism while also avoiding accountability for our actions.

### **It's Not Me, It's Everyone Else**

Across all areas of higher education, white women are becoming the largest represented demographic. As students (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013), post-graduate degree earners from a marginalized group (H. Johnson, 2017), and in specific fields such as education and student affairs (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018; Robbins, 2016), white women are carving out our unique place in this institution. As our representation increases, however, many scholars have failed to distinguish how our methods of resistance to acknowledging and confronting our intentional racist practices differ from

those perpetuated by white men (Case, 2012; Linder, 2015). Studies of white women in higher education have documented common fears that are uniquely tied to our socialization as both white and women such as: being labeled as racist, making mistakes, or causing harm to and for People of Color (Dalpra & Vianden, 2017; Linder, 2015).

White women often use these fears as excuses to avoid engaging in cross-racial conversations. Such fears stem directly from our socialization as white women who are taught to be conflict avoidant (Gillespie et al., 2002), and innocent harmonizers (Ozias, 2017) who work to make sure that everyone can get along. For white women, being associated with racists or racism connects historically (Brückmann, 2012; Dalpra & Vianden, 2017; hooks, 1994) to the assumption that racists are bad (Thompson, 2003) and, if we are to maintain our façade as good white women, we must protect our innocence at all costs (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017).

Since the 2016 presidential election we have seen an uptick in searches regarding white women through sites like Google (Google, 2019), as well as more blogs, articles, and posts on how to navigate white women and our specific practices of racism (Cargle, 2018; Dace, 2019; Maxwell, 2016; Valentine, 2019). Stories pour forth of “Beckys,” white women who often identify as liberal and/or feminists (Cargle, 2018), who use racism as a weapon and gender subordination as a shield. These Beckys who refuse to stand in solidarity with Women of Color (Valentine, 2019) and actively serve as barriers of racial justice - in all areas of society but particularly in education - abound (Dace, 2018). Many of these stories are written by Women of Color and many of the comments following them are of white women decrying their messages and meaning. There is

clearly a disconnect between how white women are experienced and how we experience ourselves.

Constant reports emerge of white women calling the police on people of color, usually Black people, of all ages as they go about their daily lives (Farzan, 2018). The reports are so commonplace that the white women they describe earn alliterative labels that circle through social media: BBQ Becky, Golfcart Gail, Permit Patty (Farzan, 2018), just to name a few. In each situation, the white woman in question felt she had the right to interject herself into the situation and confer her racist assumptions onto People of Color.

Higher education institutions are not immune to this behavior. In November 2018, a white woman University of Texas at San Antonio professor called the campus police on a Black woman student who had her feet on the chair in front of her (Martinez & Imam, 2018). In May 2018, a white woman student at Yale called campus police on her Black woman peer for sleeping on one of the couches in the Black woman's own residence hall (May, 2018). Though the nicknames may inspire a level of joviality, there is a real and dangerous power dynamic occurring (Farzan, 2018). In each of these cases, the Black women were interrogated by the police until they could prove their innocence while the white women who made the calls went without any form of punishment for false reporting. Every time we call the police, we put the lives of people of color in danger (Farzan, 2018). Every time we refuse to stand in solidarity with our peers of color, we are further adding to their oppression and discrimination (Dace, 2019; Valentine, 2019).

Given the fluid and invisible nature of whiteness (Bondi, 2012; Withers, 2017), it is often difficult for white women to identify and grapple with our own racism. However,

numerous scholars have critiqued white women's racism throughout history including both our racist practices and racial ignorance (Collins, 1990; Hartmann, 1996; hooks, 1984; Jones-Rogers, 2019; Lorde, 1984). This disconnect between how we are viewed versus how we view ourselves is not new. In a telling speech given at the World's Congress of Representative Women in 1893, Anna Julia Cooper outlined Black and African American women's progress since the abolition of slavery and named a core difference between Black and white women. White women had a far easier route to freedom (Cooper, 1893). By the sheer power of whiteness, white women were granted access, privileges, and power in a racist society that found value in and assisted us in our advancement. In calling for a shared investment in our progress, one where "woman's cause is one and universal" (Cooper, 1893, para. 5), Cooper highlighted the experience gap. The need for a call speaks to the depth of the division between the experiences of Black and white women.

Though the critiques may have shifted, their general tenor remains the same. This call for white women to stand in solidarity with Women of Color continues more than a century later. The Combahee River Collective outlined in their "Black Feminist Statement" how Black feminists have and will "continue to speak to and demand accountability" (Combahee River Collective, 1977/2015, p. 218) from white women to dismantle the racism we weave into white feminist movements. White women perpetually choose our relationships with white men over women of color (Collins, 1990; DiAngelo, 2018). We ignore and/or actively advocate for and partake in the atrocities against communities of color from slavery (Hartman, 1996; Jones-Rogers, 2019) through

today. We protect our own interests (Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1994) and our own holdings of social and political power (Botting, Wilkerson, & Kozlow, 2014; Brückmann, 2012) rather than acknowledging the truth that, as Anna Julia Cooper noted, “woman’s wrongs are thus indissolubly linked” (Cooper, 1893, para. 5).

### **What Do You Want Me to Do About It?**

The consistency of this call for white women to take responsibility for our racism throughout the span of US history offers a telling image of ourselves. We are perpetrators of the gendered racism that skews every aspect of our socialization. As white women we must meet the ideals of niceness and innocence (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017); ideals that cannot be maintained if we want to address our racism (Thompson, 2003). So, we call the police on Black women students while maintaining that we just did not know any better and it was really their fault for appearing suspicious (Martinez & Imam, 2018; May, 2018). We work against our Peers of Color by advocating for our own white dominant needs and interests such as centering our own emotional needs (Cargle, 2018) and backing down in the face of discomfort (Dace, 2018). We counter the calls of accountability from Women of Color over and over again claiming that we are doing the best we can and demanding that it be enough already (Cargle, 2018; Valentine, 2019).

So now, I want to ask why. Why has this gone unaddressed? Why, throughout all of the social change since the beginning of U.S. history, are we still having this same conversation? I want to examine how our unique social location as white women, offered to us through our interlocking dominant and subordinate identities (Collins, 1990; Ozias, 2017), encourages us to avoid true accountability. In this avoidance, I argue that white

women not only fail to stand in solidarity and build coalitions with our Peers of Color, but that we also isolate ourselves from other white women who truly wish to work towards anti-racism in our personal and professional lives.

In order to heed the call, we must first, as white women, face our truths: our whiteness grants us the power we desire and our gender offers us tools to protect that power (Daniel, 2019). The purpose of this study was to investigate the everyday practices I engaged in as a white woman SJE that enabled me to avoid addressing my racism while also encouraging me in my racist practices within an institution of higher education. By examining myself at this intersection within this context I dove into how my socialization and social position as a white woman work to insulate and support my racism.

White women, in particular, are not just oppressive in our racism OR oppressed by our gender but are rather both and more at the same time (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). We utilize both and all of our identities in various situations to gain access to these oppressive systems and/or work in solidarity with other marginalized groups (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). This ability to flex and fluctuate requires an interlocking analysis process as opposed to an additive one (Collins, 1990). By analyzing how people who possess various combinations of subordinate and dominant identities interact in these larger interlocking systems, we can see how oppressive systems such as patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, etc. establish, maintain, and defend against critical disruption and transformative change (Collins, 1990).

This complex view of white women makes studies of our dominance and subordination difficult. Most studies of white women in higher education look primarily



at our specific racist actions (Accapadi, 2007; Daniel, 2019) or our passive and ignorant racist practices and beliefs while attempting to develop racial consciousness (Linder, 2015; Robbins, 2016) rather than how our intentional and incidental racism intersect and interact (DiAngelo, 2018; hooks, 1994). Examining complexities of ignorance and awareness within the context of higher education helps us better understand the cultural practices and boundaries of white women in these contexts. Many of the studies investigating white women's racism discuss specific white women seeking to learn more about and act in transformative and inclusive ways (Case, 2012; Linder, 2015; Robbins, 2016). Therefore, by better understanding who we are at these intersections, we can develop our capacity to stand in solidarity and build coalitions with communities of color (Case, 2012; hooks, 1994).

### **But I'm Just One Person**

In her work outlining *White Institutional Space*, Gusa (2010) highlighted how systemic oppression in higher education systems mirrors our larger social context. Colleges and universities are not set apart from the larger society but are rather concentrated microcosms that, when critically analyzed, allow us to recognize specific practices patterns of larger oppressive systems (Gusa, 2010; hooks, 1989). In higher education environments, white students are exposed to different and challenging world views and life experiences (Cabrera, 2012). However, these environments, given their historical roots in white supremacy and colonization (Bondi, 2012; hooks, 1989) are also environments where racist practices go unchecked and unchallenged (Gusa, 2010; hooks, 1989). In these environments, white women are able to dismiss their learning in those

moments of exposure and instead continue in their racist beliefs under the assumption of their rightness and “truth” (Gusa, 2010).

These unchecked racist practices inhibit learning for Students of Color and perpetuate hostile campus climates keeping students from learning and faculty and staff from reaching their full potential (Gusa, 2010). Simultaneously, what appears to be a positive environment for white women, is in fact deeply harmful. Oppression does not just hurt the oppressed, but the oppressor as well (Freire, 2000; Swalwell, 2013). To have the privilege and the power may appear beneficial however, the oppressors “suffocate in their own possessions and no longer are; they merely have” (Freire, 2000, p. 58). By dehumanizing others in order to maintain our power and possessions, we lose a piece of our own humanity and, in turn, dehumanize ourselves.

As white women continue to enter into and graduate from colleges and universities at higher rates and climb higher on administrative ladders, we are in, and gaining access to, more positions of power and influence (A. Johnson, 2017; Robbins, 2016). For white women to reach our full potential not just for ourselves as individuals but as members of our campus communities, we must recognize the systems we influence, how we influence them, and what we can do to influence them in positive, sustainable ways (Swalwell, 2013).

### **Definitions and Key Concepts**

Within higher education, two main stereotypes or cultural roles are expected of white women: idealized objects and racial gatekeepers (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). Each of these roles are rooted in historical practices and flourish under current methods of

instruction. Patterns emerge throughout history that white women have inherited and internalized as the good and right ways to be which we in turn practice in our everyday lives. These current practices mean that internalized objectification and racial gatekeeping also have direct implications on our relationships with communities of color and systems of power.

I will first define certain common terms and phrases for the purpose of this study. Then, I outline specific nuances and writing practices I will use throughout this study. Finally, I will give a brief outline of key concepts that I weave together to construct the theoretical framework for my argument. Finally, I will detail how these concepts connect to higher Education and my work as a Social Justice Educator.

### **Definitions**

To begin, it is important to first define and expand upon specific terminology for this topic. I pull first from Critical Whiteness scholars (CWS) and Critical Race Theorists (CRT) to define whiteness as both a sociocultural construct accompanied with privileges, resources, and access for all in-group members, or in this case white people, (Bondi, 2012; Garner, 2007) as well as a racial category that many white people attribute to biological features (Frankenberg, 1993). Though race is not a biological but rather a social construct (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), it is often taught and viewed as strictly biological within white communities. Therefore, in order to better understand the context of white women, we must remember how white women are taught to see and not see race (Frankenberg, 1996). Racism, then, is the practice of in-group members, white people, drawing on ideologies, policies, and norms that uphold systemic practices of denying

People of Color access to resources.

Gender, similar to race, is a sociocultural construct that provides privilege, resources, and access for all in-group members, or, in the U.S. and most global contexts, men (Butler, 1999; Gianettoni & Roux, 2010). I recognize that gender in the U.S. is often assigned based on biological and physical characteristics at birth which then results in different socialization patterns, norms, and expectations (Butler, 1999; Gianettoni & Roux, 2010). Gender, then, is a learned and performative process that can flex and change based on other aspects of our identities, our social locations, and our ways of seeing and presenting ourselves (Butler, 1999). Despite how we conceptualize our gender, however, we are still subject to the dualistic and hierarchical framing inherited through our customs, stories, policies, and institutional practices (Butler, 1999).

Understanding this, I use white women to signify any people who see themselves as women and identify as white in their racial identity and are subjected to the socialization that accompanies these identities within our social context.

In her work on intersecting identities, Collins (1990) outlined the varying power dynamics at play in every person. Each person possesses identities that grant them power and access and identities that do not. For this study, dominant identities are those which are attributed by U.S. society with privileges, power, access, and resources (usually identified as cis-gender men, white, Christian, middle to upper socioeconomic classes, able-bodied, and/or heterosexual). Possessing subordinate identities then, are those which, result in individuals and groups being denied access to privileges, resources, and spaces (usually identified in the U.S. as any identities but of the previously listed). Every

person operates with a combination of subordinate and dominant identities complicating the ways we move in and out of spaces and the accessibility or denial of access to resources in the various oppressive systems operating in our culture (Collins, 1990).

### **Some Things to Note**

As I introduce this study, I want to first organize a few rhetoric practices that may differ with expectations of APA citation and/or cultural assumptions. First, in this study, I followed Crenshaw's (1991) practice of not capitalizing white as it is not a cultural category in the same way that other racial groups are such as Black, Asian, Indigenous, etc. Second, most of my work talks about the relationship between white women and Black people, often Black women. Though white women's racism is not directed solely towards Black people, so much of our historical roots in Higher Education in the U.S. stem from our relationship and incorporation of slavery into our foundation (Gusa, 2010). Therefore, many of my literature examples speak directly to this relationship.

Finally, at various points throughout the writing I refer to my connection to the study as a white woman using pronouns such as us, we, my, and/or me. In doing so, I aim to continuously connect myself to the internalized dominance and racist practices I outline in this study. I recognize that not all readers may identify as I do and offer that my practice of identifying in such a way is not meant to discriminate but rather remind myself and other white women that we are subject to the same inherited patterns of white supremacy and are not immune to racial prejudice.

### **Key Concepts**

My first acknowledged understandings of myself as a white woman did not

emerge around my race, but around my gender. However, I was taught how to be white simultaneously and in collaboration with how I was taught to be a woman (Frankenberg, 1993). Every context—familial, communal, institutional, and cultural—had and has messages for me around both of these and all of the rest of my identities. These messages come with rewards and punishments, ways of correcting and nudging my understandings. In this study I will look at the power dynamics that emerge when these socialization processes intersect for me as a white woman.

### ***Intersectionality***

Though white women experience our own forms of oppression, our whiteness allows us different access and privileges that are denied to Black women (Crenshaw, 1991; Gianettoni & Roux, 2010). Given its focus on complexity, intersectionality offers a necessary lens for the study of white women. Its very history rooted in the study of Black women's oppression tasks us to examine, as researchers, our potentially problematic and oppressive perspectives (Carbado et al., 2013; Dill & Zambrana, 2009). As a white woman, my socialization influences how I see myself in combined racialized and gendered ways. Only by investigating how these identities interact and engage with each other can I better name and disrupt how these power dynamics hinder and support my and all white women's complicity in racism.

### ***Idealized Objects***

We cannot assume that all white people experience privilege the same and that all women experience oppression the same. Intersectionality allows us the chance to dissect the complexities and challenge the larger systemic issues. For this study, I want to look at

how white women participate in and benefit from racialized sexism. When examining the intersections of race and gender it is clear that the treatment of women is different depending on racial identity. Historically we see this in how, though all women were and still are at risk of sexual assault, laws regarding the assault of white women existed and were exercised whereas Black and enslaved women had no protection under the law (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1993).

Though all women are subject to objectification in our society (Gill, 2007; Wollstonecraft, Abbey, & Botting, 1792/2014), the process looks very different when examined at intersections of race. This objectification does not merely dehumanize women but operates from a hierarchal order of women based on our bodies, our sexual appeal, our usefulness, and our ability to manage ourselves and each other (Crouse-Dick, 2012; Gill, 2007). This order is, of course, a very white ideal in which white women have perpetually maintained the top of the hierarchy (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1994). The closer we women model this ideal, the more access to power we gain. In this tenuous power relationship, white women are set as the ideal objects and moderators of the idealized state. We decide who does and does not meet the standards, further upholding this hierarchy. In this set-up, women of color are fetishized and/or dismissed because of their physical characteristics as well as the ideologies attributed to their racial identity whereas white women are held up as the standards of what is beautiful in our society (Uwujaren, 2013; Wilcox, 2009).

**Historical Objects.** This objectification is not new by any means nor is white women's willingness to submit to and seek power through this objectification process.

Mary Wollstonecraft's (Wollstonecraft, et. al, 1792/2014) *Vindication for the Rights of Woman* became a founding piece of literature for Feminist movements in England and later in the US as she called for equity in education for women (Wilcox, 2009). As I outline in Chapter 2, her arguments played on the balance of women maintaining their objectified status as good helpmates for their men while also challenging the poor standard of education that they received from those men (Wilcox, 2009). By vouching for betterment in education so that women could be better wives, mothers, and daughter, Wollstonecraft created an argument that was palatable to those in power while also furthering her cause. Though the rhetoric transitioned over time, the format of the argument remained: bettering white women's situations in ways that did not challenge the overall hierarchical structure (Gill, 2007).

**Everyday Ideals.** Despite the passage of time, these inherited socialization standards still ring true. Today, white women's arguments for equality have expanded past education into all areas of our lives both private and public, yet the use of objectification standards in order to gain and maintain the power our whiteness offers us remains. White women are still expected to maintain an image of innocence, purity, and naivete (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017; Thompson, 2003). Because white women are positioned as the ideals of what a woman should and can be, we are often the first and loudest voice on what is right, good, and decent (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). The relationship between our gender and racial socialization allows us to maintain access to power denied to People of Color but it comes at a cost. In order to hold on to a semblance of power we must hold on to antiquated ideals and expectations. Higher education, with



its origins and current practices of white supremacy (Bondi, 2012), is just one microcosm where we can see these intersections play out. Given the prevalence of white women on college and university campuses (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013), focusing on the experiences of white women in this context can illuminate where and how white women use our gender subordination to maintain our racial dominance to reinforce harmful campus climates for Students, Faculty, and Staff of Color (Gusa, 2010).

### ***Racial Gatekeepers***

For this framework, I offer gatekeeping as a way to organize the practice white women use to maintain racial power through our gender objectification. Organizations often have gatekeepers – loan officers, executive assistants, factory foremen – people who exist in the mid-level positions of the hierarchical structure and possess great access to power yet are often overlooked or dismissed by the organization’s members (Corra & Willer, 2002). As I detail in Chapter 2, white women often hold these types of positions in higher education organizational structures (H. Johnson, 2017; Pritchard & McChesney, 2018) controlling access to power and gifted with the loyalty and trust of the administrators who are often white men (Daniel, 2019). Because of our gender, white women are often seen as loyal, trustworthy, and harmless therefore we are granted unfettered and unsupervised control over those below us – usually People of Color (Daniel, 2019). Our perceived innocence combined with the lack of oversight enables our racist practices to run rampant.

**Advocates and Organizers.** Again, I argue that this racial gatekeeping role is not a new position for white women in the US. Various events throughout history highlight

not only the behaviors white women used to maintain their power but also how history has overlooked or dismissed white women's complicity due to our gender objectification. Even though the 1850 and 1860 censuses both found that around 40% of enslaved peoples were owned by white married southern women, many historians have claimed repeatedly that white women could not possibly be capable of practicing slavery (Jones-Rogers, 2019). The assumption that white women possess nothing but kindness, compassion, and goodness has led to historians overlooking and underestimating our complicity in the dehumanization of an entire race of people.

Carrie Chapman Catt used Wollstonecraft's argumentative structure to further her own interests and that of white women in the suffrage movement in the U.S. (Boetting et al., 2014). Instead of advocating that white women needed the right to vote in order to be better women for their men, she highlighted that "if the South is really in earnest in its desire to maintain white supremacy, its surest tactic is to indorse" white women's right to vote (Catt, 1918). Separating and elevating white women from our Sisters of Color demonstrated our allegiance to white men first as long as they were willing to share a little power with us, and only us, in the public sphere.

Similar practices were occurring in the realm of higher education. As the role of Dean of Women gained validity as a professional position on campuses around the country, national organizations formed to further support their credibility (Nidiffer, 2000). Even within these structures, racial divides continued driven by white women's racial gatekeeping practices. Lucy Diggs Slowe, a prominent Dean of Women at Howard University spoke often of her frustrations with National Association of the Deans of

Women (NADW). As the first Black woman member, she often found it impossible to attend national gatherings due to their being held at segregated hotels and meeting centers (Nidiffer, 2000) or at places where “colored people must ride in the freight elevator and cannot eat in any room in the hotel” (Slowe, 1936). These restrictions allowed white women to maintain a sense of innocence as they could not control the rules of the hotel, white also prohibiting the engagement of their Black women members.

Later, white women used our influence to attempt to bar access to Black students during integration. The Mothers’ League, an anti-integration group founded in 1957 with the sole purpose to stop the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, played a pivotal role in instigating and escalating protestors when nine Black students attempted to attend the school (Brückmann, 2012). Using evocative emotional displays on any and all news sources, these white women urged the white men in their communities to come to their aid and help defend their innocent white children against the supposed invasion of these Black students (Brückmann, 2012). Their call to action was so successful that the National Guard was called in and the start of the school year was delayed. Though their goal was eventually unsuccessful, the tools they used to manipulate the situation were strikingly powerful. As we saw in the instance of Amy Cooper calling the New York City police on Christian Cooper, a Black man, directly intending to mislead them on the level of threat she experienced (Schuman & Waldrop, 2020), this practice is still with us today.

**Silencers and Emoters.** Each of these historical events offer ways to understand how white women are using our status and roles in higher education institutions today to

serve as racial gatekeepers (Daniel, 2017; Ozias, 2017). Many of us refuse to work in solidarity across marginalized groups so that we can continue to support the white men who grant us our gatekeeper roles (Daniel, 2019) and we fall back on the assumptions that we are innocent, ignorant, and meek in order to maintain our racial privileges (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). In Chapter 2 I explore the existing literature about how silence (DiAngelo, 2012) and emotions (Accapadi, 2007; Daniel, 2019) become tools to protect us from challenges to our power while also hurting anyone – People of Color – who would question our authority.

### **Institutions as Encouragers and Protectors**

Institutions of higher education are steeped in white supremacy, from their initial establishment to their current structure (Bondi, 2012; Cabrera, Watson, & Franklin, 2016; hooks, 1989). Therefore, the culture, physical, emotional, social, and learning environments of campuses are often designed around white values. In fact, “to recognize the institutionality of whiteness remains an important goal of antiracist work, as does the recognition of institutional racism” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 44). White women have been the most common beneficiaries of these systems for decades (A. Johnson, 2017). It is important to note that, despite the way we commonly speak of them, higher education institutions are not passive entities but rather living, breathing organisms that are both created and in the process of being crafted (Ahmed, 2012). White women are uniquely positioned because of our identities and our representation to influence the direction in which these institutions grow.

The power we possess in higher education is seductive. By positioning ourselves

as gatekeepers we are able to operate freely with a sense of control that counters our gender subordination. By refusing to address our privileges, we are able to continue the facade of equality while maintaining our power (Torres, 2012). When our racism is questioned, our whiteness allows us to control the narrative. Whiteness holds the ability to define truth, therefore, as white women, we can be perpetually found innocent of racism (Dace, 2012). Given that this is merely one study on the endemic nature of racism in higher education, I want to narrow down my focus to a particular part of the institution.

### **Positioning Diversity and Social Justice Educators**

My role within higher education primarily focused on SJE work. SJE are those within the institution positioned to not only push a message of diversity and inclusion to the entire university but to critically analyze and disrupt oppressive systems at play in these places (Landreman & MacDonald-Dennis, 2013). Social Justice learning differs from other academic areas because it asks its participants to critically analyze and reflect on the oppressive social systems at work in their lives, their roles and responsibilities, and plan ways to act to change those systems (Landreman & MacDonald-Dennis, 2013). As bell (1997) notes, Social Justice work needs people who are both self-determining and interdependent.

The work takes many forms and occurs in many ways (Goodman, 2011). Most often, SJE are those responsible for leading sessions and workshops for all members of the campus regarding different systems of oppression (Ahmed, 2012; Goodman, 2011). These educational and experiential spaces are often focused on “explor[ing] power, privilege, and oppression to create truly just campuses” (Landreman & MacDonald-

Dennis, 2013, p. 14). In these roles, we are positioned as content experts meaning that, not only do we carry the weight of educating an entire campus, but also, if we do not do this work, no one else will (Ahmed, 2012; Goodman, 2011).

Though the positions and the practitioners vary widely across higher education in the U. S., some common qualities include: (a) one or a small group of people working to educate an entire campus, (b) little to no direct training on how to lead these conversations in helpful and intentional ways, and (c) focusing primarily on individual experiences of oppression as opposed to larger systemic practices (Goodman, 2011). The social justice educator is often at odds with the institution because they are not just working for a college or university but are actively working on them (Ahmed, 2012). Given that the goal of the social justice educator is to push an agenda of inclusion and equity at a place where, by the existence of this position, these conversations are lacking, the social justice educator and the institution are consistently at odds (Ahmed, 2012). It is this point of conflict between a social justice educator and their institution that I will examine in this study.

This unique position within the institution adds an additional complexity to my exploration of white women. As a social justice educator, I constantly felt that my goals were at odds with the institution. My trainings were based in anti-racist methods and ideologies that were met with pushback from my university. What I learned how to do in professional development experiences were in constant states of pushback when I attempted to apply them at my university. Questions and suggestions were quickly followed with accusations of troublemaking yet not practicing what I was being trained to

do was labeled as my internalized racism and dominance showing again. My training encouraged me to push, my institution rewarded me for being still. It is this complex relationship, one example of which I chronicle next, that I want to analyze through the intersections at play in my race and gender.

At the same time, I was constantly aware of how my identities as a white woman influenced how I was able to perform my duties and how others perceived me in my work. I often felt that white people looked to me as the good or correct example of what Social Justice work should be. However, Participants of Color were sometimes skeptical or more hesitant in these spaces. I did not easily gain their trust and was more likely to receive critical feedback. This dynamic matters in that the Participants of Color were more ready and willing to surface instances where I expressed internalized dominance and active gendered racism. Whereas the white participants were more willing encourage me in my practices.

*The intensity increased in the room as the silence stretched on. I felt the weight of it on my shoulders as I struggled to keep my back straight and hear over the thunder of my heartbeat in my ears. This white man's casual use of the "n" word felt like the eerie silence after a storm. As we waited to see how vast the destruction truly was, I saw Ruth, my co-facilitator, take a deep breath across the dialogue circle. She tightened her hands around the mangled facilitator outline sheet, her hands dark against the stark white paper. "Can you tell me," she began quietly, "why you felt the need to say the whole word rather than shortening it?" All of us, ten participants and two facilitators, flicked our eyes to John as we waited for a response. As he scanned each of our faces I saw the*

*realization sink in. He had made an error, he had done something wrong.*

*As his face paled and then burned red, I already knew this was going to be rough. “In the end it’s just a word. If we can’t talk about it we can never get past this... this.. –” he waved his hands, gesturing haphazardly around the circle, his breath stuttering in sharp gasps. As he continued to try and find the words, I began trouble shooting in my mind. How do we get out of this? How do we move on? What can I say to wrap this up? John is never coming back if I don’t fix this and we need him. But should it be me? I’m not Black so should I be the one to address this? What would it look like? Would they switch their anger to me instead? Locking eyes with Ruth, I nod, silently encouraging her to finish her challenge and then move us along. Even as I hear her speak I know I’ve missed something.*

*Later, in our processing, Ruth seems distracted, fiddling with her hands and refusing to make eye contact. I have a feeling about what’s coming. The rock in my stomach is always a giveaway that something is up, even when my brain fails to pick up on it.*

*“Why didn’t you say anything?” Her deep brown eyes finally meet mine, and I see anger etched all over her face, the tension in her eyebrows, the firm set of her jaw.*

*“I... I didn’t think that... I don’t...” I hear the heightened tenor of my voice as I struggle through the excuses I had constructed. I am desperate for an out but her silence and expression are not those of a life raft. Instead she waits, watching how I handle this moment not just as her supervisor but as a white woman.*

*“I was afraid.”*



*“Afraid of what?” She responds.*

*“Afraid that John wouldn’t come back and our program would lose the validation of an upper level administrator,” which is true, but as I listen to the words drop I know they are not the complete story. “And, I was afraid of the room looking at me the way they looked at him.”*

### **Autocritography**

As the above story demonstrates, my position as a white woman social justice educator at a predominantly white southern institution had everything to do with the intersections of my race and gender. Everyday my context and my identities collided in complex ways. What I learned about performing my white womanness, how I learned to be a social justice educator, and the roles and responsibilities the institution envisioned for me were often in conflict. It is this relationship between self, group, and context that I want to examine in this study. By telling and re-telling the stories of specific events throughout my time in this role, I can surface the power dynamics playing out in these intersections.

Autoethnography, an autobiographical research method that allows a researcher to examine the personal and how it connects to culture (Ellis, 2004), has been adapted to fit a variety of fields and studies over the years (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Baylorn, & Orbe, 2016; Ellis, 2004). Autocritography emerged from this reframing as a form of autoethnography that uses rhetoric and autobiography to critique the relationship between one person and systems of power (Awkward, 1999; A. Johnson, 2017; 2014). As stories are told and re-told, autocritographers and their readers analyze these various

interpretations to unearth the power dynamics and oppressive systems influencing our behaviors, feelings, and thoughts (A. Johnson, 2017; 2014). This intentionally critical approach to autoethnography requires an examination of systems steeped in oppressive historical and current policies and practices such as higher education (Awkward, 1999). By using autocritography to investigate how one university insulated and encouraged my racist practices as a white woman social justice educator I will be able to better understand the relationship between institutional gendered racism in higher education and white women.

Through this methodology, I can better examine my unique positioning while also build from critical narratives to critique the higher education system that has both benefitted and blocked me at various times throughout my five years as a full time professional. Analyzing these practices could reveal how these experiences are comparable to those of other white women educators and students as well as other minoritized students, staff, and faculty. However, the impact of this study may span far beyond my own knowledge development.

### **Implications**

There are a number of implications for higher education research and practice if we white women are willing to accept our active roles in racism by acknowledging the positions we hold and the tools we wield. Throughout my study of literature in which white women are called to develop anti-racist perspectives, the reasonings behind the call remains the same. Black women scholars asked that white women take responsibility for our racism so that we can stand in solidarity with them (Chang, 2007; Lorde, 1984). By

addressing our racism, the coalitions we enter into with Communities of Color could be far more fruitful and impactful in changing our institutions (Chang, 2007; Combahee River Collective, 1977; Lorde, 1984).

Personally, I have felt strained in my relationships with People of Color, particularly with the Black women supervisors, professors, and peers in my life. My hope was that, by digging through the complex relationships of my gender and race I can understand that strain. By doing so, perhaps I can serve as a stronger amplifier, a more aware advocate, and a trusted accomplice as we work towards change.

At the same time, white women scholars acknowledged that we lack mentorship and community in our anti-racist work (DiAngelo, 2018; Ozias, 2017). Without white women to look to as examples, we often put the weight of our education and guidance on People of Color (DiAngelo, 2018). And, in our efforts to prove our own goodness, we compete with other white women to prove ourselves to be the best (Thompson, 2003). Rather than finding unity in our shared attempt to understand our specific racist practices, we isolate each other.

Personally, I have often felt lost and isolated on this journey of grappling with my internalized racist practices. I too seek a community of white women that can relate to my experiences and call me to levels of accountability I might overlook or ignore on my own. Perhaps, by approaching this issue through self-examination and vulnerability, other white women will want to join me on the journey.

## CHAPTER TWO

As outlined in the preceding chapter I am not the first person to investigate white women as a unique group with specified behaviors and patterns of development. The call posed by many Scholars of Color (Collins, 1990; Combahee River Collective, 1977/2015; Hartman, 1996; hooks, 1994; Jones-Rogers, 2019) was taken up again and again in ways that revealed new conceptualizations of white women. In this chapter I first examine previous literature looking at white women specifically in higher education naming the advancements and gaps revealed by these scholars. I then outline my theoretical framework, using racial gatekeeping as a way to examine how white women's gender subordination acts as a defense against examining our racist practices. Finally, I position this framework as one that builds on previous research as well as tie it to both historical and current events.

### **Past Frameworks**

Scholars have attempted to conceptualize the complexity of white women's intersecting dominant and subordinate identities as a way of both understanding white women's unique experiences in this area but also to understand how we use our gender subordination to mask our specific racist practices. Some examined this issue strictly through a single identity lens focusing on either our gender (Gilligan, 1993) or our race (Ringrose, 2007; Ropers-Huilman et al., 2013), but not the relationship between the two. Others took a more developmental approach by examining how white women grow and change over time in our racial and gender identities (Frankenberg, 1993; Robbins, 2016; Linder, 2015; Case, 2012). And some focused in on white women's intentional racist

practices both over time (hooks, 1994; Collins, 1990) and in current higher education settings (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017; Srivastava, 2006; Accapadi, 2007). Each of these scholars used their studies changed the way we understand white women while also suggesting new and different study designs that could help us answer the call for white women to address our own racism.

### **Single Identity Focus**

Gilligan's (1993) focus on women's identity development was a crucial piece of scholarship that allowed women, specifically white women, to truly be seen and heard in scholarly literature in a new way. For Gilligan, women's attachment to relationships, concepts of care and goodness, and perceptions of justice offered insight into women's unique position in society. In particular, Gilligan (1993) highlighted how women constantly vacillate between societal expectations and obligations and their own desires. This back and forth unearthed strong periods of dissonance related to women's development. Gilligan's (1993) study offered a necessary critical perspective highlighting some women's marginalized voices, though her study only included the voices of white identified women.

Her study, focused on a small group of white women considering an abortion in the 1980's, gave voice to a particular population that was often overlooked and misrepresented. Gilligan's (1993) lack of an intersectional framework hindered the overall sustainability of her model. Gilligan gave detailed examples of how these women were pigeonholed into caregiver roles in our society but did not examine how those roles differ across racial groups. Intersectionality highlights the innumerable ways Women of

Color's experiences differ from those of white women (Crenshaw, 1991; Hartman, 1996). But, by not delineating between racialized gender experiences, Gilligan essentialized what it means to be a woman by the predominantly white standard presented in this study (Crenshaw, 1991; Frankenberg, 1993).

In the same way, studies of white women that look predominantly at our race while overlooking our gender both add to and offer further areas of study of white women's racism in higher education. Ropers-Huilman et al. (2013) and Ringrose (2007) both investigated the patterns of whiteness demonstrated by white women in their classrooms. Ropers-Huilman et al. (2013) found four discourse pattern groups that ranged from white women refusing to discuss their race to those expressing a desire to make change in racist systems around them (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2013). Each of these pattern groups highlighted common ways that white women spoke about their racial identities and how they understood racism as a whole.

Ringrose (2007) examined how white women students performed their whiteness through their resistance behaviors when white privilege was challenged in the space. By relying on calls for unity, dismissing critiques of their white privilege within feminist spaces, and retreating into emotional outbursts and avoidance patterns, her white women students not only perpetuated racist practices but also were dismissed as resistant and incapable of doing any investigative work into their actions. Their resistance was treated as an impossible hurdle of which they were never asked to climb.

Both of these studies added greatly to the understanding of white women's racism in college classrooms. Ropers-Huilman et al. (2013) identified transformative

experiences both before enrolling in and during their time in college that had drastic impacts on the way these students phrased and discussed their racial identities and racism. They also found a correlation between a student's ability to articulate the impact of their racial identity on themselves and those around them and that student's interest in taking responsibility for changing racist practices in the world (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2013). By noting a connection between exposure experiences and changes in language and communication practices, Ropers-Huilman et al. highlighted the value of educating white students about their race as it could lead to a lasting impact on their interest and ability to make change in the future.

The work of Ropers-Huilman et al. (2013) informs my study in a number of ways. First, it stresses the need for educating white students on their racial identity. Second, this work speaks to the impact of whiteness in the ways students communicate and interpret messages in and out of the classroom. Finally, these scholars found that education largely influences how students learn about their own race, the ways racial power and privilege operate in the world, and methods of creating change. This work is closely related to my study as I reflect on my position as a white woman in higher education while also seeking to work in anti-racist ways.

Ringrose's (2007) examination highlighted problematic ways of conceptualizing privileged-based dissonance—the resistance we feel and defensive behaviors we engage in when tasked with confronting our own oppressive practices. Defensiveness can be more than a resistance behavior that needs to be dismissed. Rather, it can be viewed as a natural reaction of white students' discomfort that can be anticipated, identified, and

addressed. Ringrose (2007) challenged practitioners and faculty members to find ways to help white students work through their dissonance rather than viewing it as an automatic barrier to learning. She offered a view of white resistance as something to cultivate and build off of so as to help students become more familiar with the practice un-learning internalized narratives of dominance. My study is an attempt to build off of my own dissonance rather than dismissing it.

Despite their great strides, both Ropers-Huilman et al. (2013) and Ringrose (2007) struggled to conceptualize the full intersectional experience of their white women students. Both of these studies focused primarily on the race of their students, which, though meaningful, did not include an in-depth examination of why and how these behaviors and discourses occurred specifically in white women. The studies selected women as a unit of analysis but did not address gender as a category. We know that white women experience the world differently given their combination of identities (Frankenberg, 1993) but these studies did not highlight how their findings impact their participants not only as white people or as women but specifically as white women.

### **Developmental View**

Not all studies of white women's racism took a single-identity approach. Some scholars intentionally examined this population from either a longitudinal (Case, 2012; Frankenberg, 1993) or developmental approach (Linder, 2015; Robbins, 2016) all while attempting to capture the complexities at play for white women. Both of these approaches dove into the unique experiences of racial privilege and gender subordination that white



women face, though in different ways and with different impacts on the larger field of study.

Frankenberg's (1993) study of white women's conceptualization of our racial identity was a game changer in scholarship because it was one of the first times that a white woman scholar blatantly and willingly took up the challenge to understand how white women's behaviors, actions, and beliefs regarding race were unique and uniquely problematic. She noted that white women's failure to recognize and address the systemic underpinnings of racism and white supremacy from which they benefit allows racism to "be conceived as something external to [white women] rather than as a system that shapes our daily experiences and sense of self" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 6).

Through in-depth interviews of participants from varied backgrounds, ages, careers, interests, and identities, Frankenberg (1993) found four common ways white women understood and/or spoke of their race: (a) essentializing race and racism, (b) evading color, (c) evading power, and (d) race recognition (Frankenberg, 1993). These four finding areas aligned with much of Critical Race scholarship and what Scholars of Color had been naming for years. Frankenberg (1993) ended her study with a repetition of this call: a challenge to understand "white complicity with racism... in the complex, multifaceted terms in which it operates" (p. 242).

Case (2012) also investigated white women's conceptualizations of race and racism but from within a higher education setting. Her work with two White Women Against Racism (WWAR) groups at different universities allowed her to examine white women graduate students, faculty, and staff as they processed through "... white racial

identity, confronting white privilege, and taking anti-racist action for social change” (Case, 2012, p. 82). The insular nature of this group allowed the participants to practice vulnerability as they excavated some of their most problematic racist exchanges and interactions. Their experiences led Case (2012) to make four recommendations for white women attempting to address racism in higher education: (a) self-work is a requirement and never-ending, (b) invisible and visible racism both need to be challenged in ourselves and other white people, (c) privilege can and should be used to promote justice, and (d) despite their best intentions, participants will still behave in contradictory and problematic ways that need to be addressed.

Case’s (2012) findings offered powerful insight into the experiences of white women attempting to develop anti-racist skills. However, in her analysis, very little attention was directed towards how her participants’ struggles addressing their racial privilege aligned with their socialization as women. So much of the study focused on racial privilege while overlooking the gender socialization practices that supported their racism. In doing so, it is difficult to know how the findings in her study relate specifically to white women as opposed to any and all white people.

Instead of focusing on simply describing white women’s perceptions of race and racism over time, Linder (2015) sought to place these changes (or lack thereof) into a developmental model. Linder’s (2015) model of antiracist white feminist women examined allied behavior in white women college students and stemmed from the assumption that “when students understand ways in which their own guilt, shame, and fear get in the way of action, they may be able to move through these emotions to action”

(Linder, 2015, p. 548). She constructed her study from an intersectional framework to explore the allied behavior of people at the intersections of dominant and subordinate identities using theories such as Helms' White Identity Development Model, a number of models looking at allied behavior in college students, and Frankenberg's (1993) examination of white women to construct her conceptual model (Linder, 2015).

In this model, Linder (2015) described what happened to white women after a moment of exposure to racism in some way. She found that these first exposure moments were often filtered through their own marginalized experiences in gender. However, this relational filter, though intended to be a source of connection, allowed white women to redirect the conversation away from their racial dominance. It is only when white women are encouraged and/or challenged to recognize this form of deflection that they stepped into the second stage by responding with defensiveness, resistance, and/or anger. As the exposure and education continued, however, white women began to accept the fact that not only does racism exist but that they themselves possess internalized racial dominance.

Once white women accepted these realities a new stage of emotional reactions began. The main focus of Linder's (2015) model discussed how guilt, shame, and the fear of being perceived as racist keeps white women from engaging in transformative action. Guilt and shame are common responses for white people and often relate to the fear of not being known as a "good" white person, being named as racist, and the fear of hurting people of color. Linder (2015) described this stage as inescapable cogs in a machine resulting in a sense of resignation. To break free of the cycle, white women began to

accept a healthier definition of their whiteness while also seeing how they could use their privilege to make change.

By focusing strictly on white women in higher education, Linder (2015) added depth to a previously understudied group and created a model that could aid university faculty and staff to design programs and curricula to assist white women through their struggles with guilt, shame, and fear. As with Case's (2012) study, however, Linder's (2015) examination focused almost entirely on racial development rather than examining the complexities white women experiences in their racial development because of their gender socialization. Though she did comment on the use of gender subordination as a deflection tool, the investigation did not delve further into the reasonings or processes of this practice. Even in her limitations and future recommendations, Linder (2015) called for a deeper examination of the role of gender in navigating whiteness for white women.

Robbins (2016) also looked at white women's development, but rather than using a model, she investigated how white women master's students in higher education and student affairs programs responded to and were influenced by their course curricula and extracurricular experiences. Similar to previous scholars, Robbins viewed her participants' dissonance towards their whiteness as a necessary and important part of the developmental process. Her study determined that when her participants were presented with certain experiences through their program's coursework, extracurricular experiences, and intentional education and training on race and racism, they were often more willing to engage in these topics and integrate their learning into their personal and professional lives (Robbins, 2016). Participants highlighted that an important element of

their racial dissonance was spurred by intentional conversations about white privilege, race, and racism. However, these opportunities were subject to great variance across classes, programs, and institutions.

Each of these scholars added to our understanding of how white women in higher education understand, articulate, and navigate their racial privilege within a larger racist system. However, their work revealed further gaps to be addressed. Each scholar talked about white women's racism but did not highlight the intentional choices their participants made to perpetuate their own racism or maintain their positions of power in a racist environment. Frankenberg (1993) and Case (2012) both named specific ways that their participants were behaving in racist ways but they did not discuss how those participants understood their choices in those moments. Participants named their past racism but struggled to see their current racist practices and beliefs. Also, each of their participants made active choices just by participating in this study to acknowledge their racial privilege. If these studies were directed towards white women who did not recognize and/or acknowledge their whiteness as being a source of privilege, the findings might have looked quite different.

Linder (2015) and Robbins (2016) both discussed the patterns of change and development in white women's understandings of racial privilege and racism but they did not discuss how their participants intentionally held on to their racial privilege in order to maintain a place of power in their environments. Linder's (2015) model assumed that white women will experience a moment of racial exposure that they will then seek to understand. This may not always be the case.

Robbins' (2016) study named program materials and opportunities that impacted students but we do not hear from the white women students who had the same experiences as these participants but were unaffected or maintained their same problematic views. These findings investigated either white women's former racist practices when they were ignorant of what they were doing or focus more on areas of privilege rather than intentional actions. If we are not examining white women's daily, intentional complicity we are not seeing the full spectrum of the problem. My study focused on the intentional, everyday choices I made that supported white supremacy and whiteness narratives through practices dictated by my gender subordination in order to maintain power.

### **Intentional Racism**

Some scholars chose to investigate white women's intentional racist practices and power maintenance. Historically, scholars highlighted how white women slave owners maintained power over enslaved women through direct ownership (Jones-Rogers, 2019) as well as creating and spreading stereotypes and stigma (hooks, 1994; Collins, 1990). In each of these situations, white women worked to hold on to their own limited areas of power in the face of patriarchy. By placing themselves above enslaved women, white women maintained a sense of distance and elitism (hooks, 1994). Instead of joining in solidarity with our sisters who could have benefited from our support and assistance, we protected our own power, our own domination.

Current research in higher education tells a similar story. Maintaining a sense of distance and betterment over People of Color, particularly Women of Color, is a common

study topic. Accapadi (2007) examined the emotional practices of white women as a means of avoiding our racial privilege and isolating Women of Color in higher education spaces. In her case study, a white woman is challenged in a meeting for perpetuating racism and her response is one of tearful defense. Accapadi (2007) highlighted the power of white women in these moments to distance themselves from their own problematic practices by maintaining a sense of victimhood and placing the blame on the Woman of Color who made the accusation. This case study's banality is what makes it most impactful. Accapadi (2007) directed attention to countless meeting rooms across countless campuses where similar exchanges occur. And yet the story must be told again in order to make a point. White women are not blameless, we only pretend to be.

Daniel (2019) told a similar story, even building on Accapadi's (2007) work. Her study is predicated on the assumption that white women's persona as innocent and powerless is what allows us to act in racist ways without repercussion. Her study on the experiences of Black faculty engaging with white women students and peers outlines our active racist practices and responses. Daniel (2019) noted that white women do not only choose to act in racist ways but are supported in these methods by the larger racist system through racial gatekeeping practices. By regulating access to those in power and dictating standards of behavior, white women perpetuate racist practices and maintain systems of power. It is these systems of power, such as higher education, that insulate and empower white women to continue unchecked and protected in our racism. Daniel's (2019) examination of the relationship between white women and their larger context serves as a theoretical building block for this study.

Ozias (2017) is one of the few white women scholars discussing white women's intentional racism in higher education. She works from the assumption that white women must maintain our distance from Women of Color because it is the main way we come to know ourselves. Whiteness is so normalized in our society that, when white women are asked to define our race we often end up outlining stereotypes and assumptions about women of Color as opposed to speaking about our own socialization (Collins, 1990; Ozias, 2017). White women learn to be calmer in temperament to counter the assumption that Black women are loud and angry. We are taught to be more reserved in sexuality to avoid being seen as the sexualized stereotypes we are offered of Black women. Inevitably, a white woman will often only know herself in how she is different from a Black woman (Collins, 1990).

Ozias (2017) noted that systems of higher education are places where “white women learn and participate” (p. 9) in racist systems. She found that white women students commonly communicated their racism through their discussion of feelings, their silences, and their conversation shifts; each element tied to their role not only as white people but as white women. Ozias's (2017) examination of the connection between white women's intentional racist practices and their gender socialization offered an example for shaping this study's theoretical approach.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study builds on the gains and gaps from previous studies, in order to add to this field of scholarship. Considering the inadequacy of single-identity focused studies, I built the framework for this study first and foremost



on intersectionality. Second, the longitudinal and developmental perspectives helped me to understand that white women's racism is not a current practice but one with ties throughout US history. For this study, I examined how white women conceptualize our race and gender and their influence on our lives today. By examining both white women's active racism and our unique intersections of both race and gender, I aimed to build upon studies such as Daniel (2019) and Ozias (2017). This framework allowed me to examine how intentional gendered racist practices are supported and encouraged in higher education.

### **Intersectionality**

Crenshaw's (1991) groundbreaking work in Legal Studies surfaced how Black women are particularly vulnerable in systems of oppression due to their combined subordinate racial and gender identities. Her work illuminated for some, lived realities, and for others, often overlooked and avoided truths. Our white, patriarchal, capitalist system here in the U.S. creates unique barriers, struggles, and trials for people possessing multiple subordinate identities (Crenshaw, 1991). Her work also called into question presumably progressive and liberal perspectives and the well intentioned-ness of white women as problematic areas in these systems (Crenshaw, 1991).

Over time, intersectionality expanded past Legal Studies and is now an analytical tool utilized in many fields and areas of study (Cho et al., 2013). By examining the unique power dynamics at play in all of our lives given how we identify and the contexts in which we find ourselves, intersectionality provides a lens to critique all oppressive systems (Cho et al., 2013). It is a lens through which we can surface oppression with the

intention of critiquing and disrupting it (Carbado et al., 2013). Through intersectionality we can see: (a) historic and current contributions to systemic inequities, (b) cultural practices and their connections to oppressive systems, and (c) the unearned advantages we all receive in our dominant group memberships (Dill & Zambrana, 2009).

Given that systems of oppression are not new, but rather built on generations of discriminatory practices (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991), investigating the origins and development of racism and gender subordination allowed me to connect white women's racist practices throughout history through today (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Often oppressive actions are treated as cultural norms and standards (Dill & Zambrana, 2009) therefore, this study examined how mundane verbal and nonverbal actions connect to oppressive systems. Given that white women so often focus on our gender subordination as opposed to our racial privilege (Lindle, 2015; Robbins, 2016), this study used an intersectional lens to examine the unearned advantages that we earn as white women (Dill & Zambrana, 2009).

### **Idealized Objects**

As a white woman, my first intentional scholarly examination of gender identity and development occurred in my undergraduate English program. My interest in Regency and Victorian era fiction meant I spent most of my four years of college immersed in Austen, Dickens, Eliot, the Bronte sisters, and many others all of whom had very distinct and explicit perceptions of white women. Poovey (1984) discussed the gender stereotypes of this era of literature where the rigidly defined roles and stereotypes of middle-class white women characters had a shadow effect for all women in British society. As these

works integrated and infiltrated into white women's ways of being, femininity as defined by these works became a social and psychological force (Poovey, 1984). The objectification of these roles was distinct but white women found, and continue to find, ways to insert their own power within these confining systems.

### *Historical Objects*

White women, throughout history have both cooperated with and attempted to circumvent the depiction of ourselves as idealized objects. In 1792, when Mary Wollstonecraft penned her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she offered a visualization of both white women's current state as well as our potential. Though she did not outline white women specifically in her writing, it is possible to argue that she wrote her work with white women in mind as her calls to men of the time (Wollstonecraft et al., 1792/2014) could only have been directed to power-wielding white men and the women with whom they had publicly legitimized relationships: white mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, etc.

Her work was sensational at the time given her demand that we gain access to quality and comprehensive education (Wilcox, 2009; Wollstonecraft, et al., 1792/2014). She presented an image of white women, through men's critique, as frivolous, ignorant, flighty, and purposeless individuals with little sense and even less skill in our domestic duties. She used these images as the main reason change was needed (Wollstonecraft et al., 1792/2014). By granting white women access to education, white men would get what they desire most: a rational, productive, obedient, and godly woman who kept a

well-tended home and is worthy of their respect and love (Wollstonecraft et al., 1792/2014).

Wollstonecraft's (1792) work highlighted the power of the idealized woman in history serving to both challenge and support the hierarchical nature of objectification (Wilcox, 2009). Even though her work is considered by many as the beginning of feminist movement, it also operates to further the entire patriarchal relationship between white men and women. Education served as a means for white women to better themselves in the service of and to white men (Wollstonecraft et al., 1792/2014). We could be better managers of our homes, better caregivers to our children, better helpers for our men (Wollstonecraft et al., 1792/2014). This denotes a common assumption that white women's overall purpose was to serve men. We were meant to meet their needs, their expectations, and their wishes (Wollstonecraft et al., 1792/2014). Wollstonecraft did not attempt to dismantle those expectations but rather grant women more access by better fitting them.

If white women are meant to better ourselves in order to be better for men, then the ideal which we are called to meet must retain a strong level of influence in our lives. Betterment based on someone else's measuring stick means that we spend so much time focusing on the needs, wants, and wishes of others that we fail to see the ways we are being restrained by this same system (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1994). This same argument connects through the centuries, directly to this study in that white women are still striving to position ourselves for the approval of white men and the access to power that they grant us.

As white women accessed education, they also accessed more resources, privileges, and power. Over time, however, this image of fitting the needs, wants, and wishes of white men remains (Gill, 2007; Woolf, 1942). Virginia Woolf (1942), a popular and strong voice of the white feminist movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century wrote of her constant need to fight back against the idealized objectification of her gender. She noted how, no matter how often she fought back against the socialized image of women as idealized objects, she could not fully put its oppressive presence away. It continued to influence her writing and be a source of distraction, agitation, and anger (Woolf, 1942). Even for feminists like Woolf who worked so diligently to separate themselves from the bounds and restraints of this idealized standard found themselves constantly struggling against it. This struggle is one that I began to understand throughout the course of this study.

### ***Everyday Ideals***

In today's culture the battle continues. White women are still objectified and measured by our worth to white men: (a) our bodily presentations, (b) our role as sexually appealing objects (Gill, 2007), and (c) our domestic sensibilities (Crouse-Dick, 2012). Our bodies are in constant states of examination and dissection held in comparison to each other in a perpetual competitive state (Gill, 2007). Not only are we expected to meet this ideal but we are also “the monitors of all sexual and emotional relationships” (Gill, 2007, p. 151) policing what is and is not appropriate to white men. Home management and childcare still predominantly fall to women of all races and ethnicities, and we are constantly measured and evaluated by our success in these areas (Crouse-Dick, 2012). A

woman who cannot manage her home and/or her children is not meeting the ideal standard, a standard that is again monitored by other women. Women who do not meet this standard are deemed as unsuitable partners to white men and denied access to their places of power.

The argument often countering this objectified status highlights how today's woman can make her own choice, to follow her dreams as she imagines them. This individualism which, on the surface presents as an indication of cultural progress, actually works to restrict women from organizing around patriarchal oppression (Gill, 2007). We are encouraged to focus on our individual dreams while overlooking the oppression of the woman next to us. Her oppression becomes her own fault rather than a product of the overarching patriarchal system. If white women, who have fewer barriers to practice individualism than women of color (hooks, 1994), are free to make our own choices than we have no reason to advocate for the rights and resources of all women. By creating a system in which white women separate and attempt to distinguish ourselves apart from Women of Color, we fail to see the similarities connecting across of our gender subordination experiences. In doing so, we ignore and reject opportunities for coalition building that would make our advocacy work far stronger against the larger patriarchal system.

These practices of objectification, policing, and the facade of individualism overlap with and support our racial socialization. White women are often positioned as the determiners of what is good, nice, polite, and decent (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017) with our whiteness offering us the position of authority and our gender subjecting us to the

standards of objectification. Higher education, offers a unique context in which to critique this symbiosis. It is both an organization steeped in white supremacy (Bondi, 2012) while also one of the first and most consistent places for white people to experience racial exposure moments (Cabrera, 2012). The exposure moments indicate white women will be confronted with our racist practices. The legacy of white supremacy implies we will be shielded and protected from ever having to make changes in our lives.

White women's presence in higher education is growing rapidly. We are the most common demographic of enrolled students, more likely to pursue post-graduate degrees than any other marginalized demographic group, and dominate fields of education, liberal arts, and caregiving (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Robbins, 2016). However, despite our overwhelming presence and the surety that at colleges and universities we will most likely face challenges to our racial awareness (Cabrera, 2012), white women's methods of resistance to these challenges tie directly to our socialization as idealized objects.

White women in higher education settings often report fears of being seen as racist, making racially-motivated mistakes, and harming people of color (Dalpra & Vianden, 2017; Linder, 2015) as reasons why we do not engage in cross-racial conversations. We are socialized, as women, to avoid conflict (Gillespie, Ashbaugh, & DeFiore, 2002) in order to maintain our status as nice, as harmonizers, as innocents (Ozias, 2017). Racists are bad, therefore we nice, innocent white women who just love everyone, can in no way be racist (Thompson, 2003). These fears of confrontation and losing our innocence are not ones we created for ourselves, but are tied directly to our socialization as white women over generations. And while they do restrict us and inhibit

our ability to navigate our patriarchal system, they also shield us from acknowledging our own racism.

### **Racial Gatekeepers**

Though white women have been historically forced into objectified roles, we have also actively chosen to support and use these roles to our own advantage particularly in situations that support racism and white supremacy. In order to fully investigate these active choices, I want to first introduce the concept of white women as gatekeepers.

Corra and Willer (2002) define gatekeepers as people who hold a certain type of power positioning them in a role that grants and denies access to non-group members. This person could be the loan officer at a bank that makes the final decision on a loan application or the bedchamber attendant that controlled access to the monarch at their most vulnerable time (Corra & Willer, 2002). The role of gatekeeper seems innocuous because, on paper, they are not at the top of the hierarchical chain and are subject to the rules of those above them. However, they often operate with high levels of independence and with little management given the specificity of their position's responsibilities and the perceived limit of their impact on the larger system (Corra & Willer, 2002). The loan officer may not directly touch someone's money and the bedchamber attendant may not declare edicts, but they still decide who does and does not access those places of power, and they do so influenced by their own values and without oversight.

I argue that white women serve as racial gatekeepers (Daniel, 2019) and have throughout history. As of 2018, white women made up about 51% of student affairs employees (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018) yet white men still hold the lead in all areas



of top management in higher education including faculty and staff positions (H. Johnson, 2017). This demographic make-up positions white women as the go-between of white men and Communities of Color. Given the roles we hold of assistant professors and directors (H. Johnson, 2017; Pritchard & McChesney, 2018), we are often positioned to both report to white men while also having Employees of Color report to us. In these positions, our subordinate status as women prohibits us from the top of the hierarchical chain where white men hold most, if not all, of the positions.

However, because society views us as idealized objects rather than calculated power holders, we are able to lull society, and often ourselves, into viewing us as inconsequential to the deeper workings of white supremacy (Daniel, 2019). Similar to the loan officer and bedchamber attendant, white women operate in spheres either out of the public eye, such as the home, or at levels with limited authority like untenured or adjunct faculty in a classroom or mid-level employees (Daniel, 2019). In these areas, we are left to our own devices, trusted to make decisions, purport certain ideals and values, and manage specific responsibilities by those who position us there, usually white, upper class men. In these places, our racism goes mostly unchecked (Daniel, 2019). When we are challenged, usually by people of color and/or those from other marginalized groups, we, as the gatekeepers, decide how far the conversation can go and when to shut it down (Daniel, 2019).

### ***Advocates and Organizers***

We can see these practices in a number of movements throughout history. In her work, historian Jones-Rogers (2019) examined the legal and economic practices of many

married white southern women slave owners. She focused on both their practices towards enslaved people as well as their efforts to protect their “property” from white men. Her work is especially powerful because it highlights how historians protect through dismissal and minimization the role white women played as racial gatekeepers during slavery. She argued that white married women were not oppressed bystanders during slavery constrained by their objectified status as so many historians have surmised, but rather active and capable slave owners who managed, disciplined, and defended their rights to enslaved people (Jones-Rogers, 2019). Our society’s historical and current assumptions that women are innocent and nice keeps historians from seeing our powerful positions in history, further perpetuating both the false ideal of innocence that white women must maintain in order to hold power and the ability for white women to hide behind our gender subordination in the face of our racist practices.

White women also protected their status during slavery by ignoring and dismissing the Black women in their homes and communities, including their treatment at the hands of white men (Hartman, 1996; hooks, 1994). White women chose to view sexual relationships between enslaved women and their white men owners as the fault of Black and enslaved women, painting them as promiscuous temptresses (hooks, 1994). These white women actively worked to maintain a social standard where white women were pure and virtuous and Black and enslaved women were dirty and depraved. By doing so, they could provide reasons as to why Black and enslaved women should not have access to more resources that might be provided by white men (Hartman, 1996;

hooks, 1994). White women then, gained some social status and standing by separating ourselves from Black and enslaved women.

Wollstonecraft (1792) advocated for white women, differentiating us explicitly from slaves and brutes. Her calls to ease the oppression of women are predicated upon the access and situation of white women (Wollstonecraft et al., 1792/2014). She built her argument again and again on the imagery of slavery, white women the slaves and white men their masters. However, at no point in her analogy does she advocate for the rights and freedoms of actual enslaved people. Instead, she appropriates the physical, emotional, and psychological experiences of enslaved people to further her own work for her own people.

White feminism and social change movements for white women were strongly influenced by Wollstonecraft (Wilcox, 2009). Carrie Chapman Catt used Wollstonecraft's work as a means to further her own interests and that of white women in the suffrage movement in the U.S. (Botting et al., 2014). Catt positioned herself and white women advocacy organizations pushing for the right to vote as gatekeepers putting their own interests and needs over that of people of color (Catt, 1918). She advocated for education for white women in order to separate us from "barbaric" (Botting et al., 2014, p. 26) people such as recently freed people as well as people from new U.S. territories like Puerto Rico.

Educated white women would be better mothers, better wives, of course, but, even more so, Catt argued to white men that "if the South is really in earnest in its desire to maintain white supremacy, its surest tactic is to endorse" (Catt, 1918, para. 3) women's

suffrage. If given the right to vote, white women could better serve white men in maintaining a segregated and white-dominant society. And, in the end, her cause gained power and authority by giving the women's rights movement "a common history and an ideological purpose" (Botting et al., 2014, p. 27; Catt, 1918). Using her access to the ears of white men, Catt built on their fears of losing power to the freed people they had so recently enslaved in order to advance white women's interests.

Even when not appealing to white men directly, white women relied on the policies instated by white men to maintain their racial gatekeeping practices. Lucy Diggs Slowe, Dean of Women at Howard University, wrote of these practices within the National Association of the Deans of Women (NADW) of which she was the first Black-identified member (Nidiffer, 2000). The NADW conferences were consistently held in places where "colored people must ride in the freight elevator and cannot eat in any room in the hotel" (Slowe, 1936, para. 3). This practice remained common in NADW into the 1950s (Nidiffer, 2000). The NADW, which was led by white women until that time, refused to hold large gatherings or conferences in places that allowed access to their Black members. However, because they did offer attendance generally, they could write their discriminatory practices off as something beyond their control (Nidiffer, 2000).

Instead of using their power to create an organization that worked towards equitable inclusion for all of its members, the white women in charge of NADW hid behind racist policies that white men held in their parallel organizations. It was so rare for women in higher education to have such a powerful voice and place of advocacy and change making. And yet, in the face of Slowe's critique, these white women claimed an

argument of “this is just the way of the world” as opposed to using their positions of authority and control to craft a different kind of organization, one that challenged racist norms and created space for all Deans of Women.

White women were particularly influential in the Civil Rights protests of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. In 1957, white women gathered together to form the Mothers’ League to protest the integration of central High School in Little Rock, AK (Brückmann, 2012). In just three short weeks, white women leveraged our positions as gatekeepers using our assigned roles as idealized objects to further our anti-integration agenda. The Mothers’ League members used tactics such as crying, hugging, and hysteria in public spaces to draw attention to our issues (Brückmann, 2012). Because white women are perceived as fragile, delicate beings, white men would be inspired by these emotional moments to want to help, to intervene. What could have been a peaceful integration process became one of the most infamous attempts in US history (Brückmann, 2012) with white men leading a protest so violent that the National Guard had to be removed from state governance by President Eisenhower and the opening of school delayed by weeks.

The narratives pushed by this group spoke of the need for white men to be true men and protect their women and children from potential assault and the stereotype of the Black male predator (Brückmann, 2012). By doing so, women capitalized on white men’s fears of miscegenation and the assumption that white women could not defend ourselves. This protest led to violent actions by white men all the while presenting white women as victims asking for peaceful resolutions to these issues. White women were able to

maintain our idealized facade while also causing the stir we wished. Meanwhile, the entire country witnessed the lengths white people would go through to prevent the desegregation, striking deeper fear into Communities of Color.

### ***Silencers and Emoters***

Leveraging our idealized object status to protect our roles as racial gatekeepers is not an outdated phenomenon. In fact, higher education institutions offer specific insight into how white women learn how to practice this intersection of status and role (Ozias, 2017). It is more common today for white women to speak from and to their subordinate identities of gender and to strive for equity (Dalpra & Vianden, 2017). However, though white women are more likely to recognize the marginalized experiences of people of color (Daniel, 2019), we are more likely to essentialize those experiences (Chang, 2007) and avoid discussing our own complicity (Gillespie et al., 2002). Instead of working in coalitions with people from different marginalized groups, white women in higher education protect our own power as racial gatekeepers through the use of our objectified status (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). Using our socialization as fragile, innocent, kind, harmonizers, white women avoid discussing racism and maintain the privileges afforded us by our whiteness.

The two most common ways white women defend our position as racial gatekeepers are through our silence and our emotions. In many ways, our objectified status gives white women an opportunity to just avoid saying anything about race and racism. As stated before, in order to maintain our presence as nice, as innocent, as harmonizers, white women must refrain from any association with racist actions and

beliefs. Many studies of white women college students have highlighted the hesitancies white women feel about speaking up on racial issues (Case, 2012; Gillespie, et al., 2002; Linder, 2015; Robbins & Jones, 2016). The fear of being wrong, of being classified as racist, of hurting someone, all of these influence our willingness to speak up, or lack thereof. I would push this farther, however. I argue that we often intentionally choose not to speak. No one in these spaces made these women remain silent. There were no actual punishments in place for speaking up, for saying something others disagreed with. Instead, I argue that silence is one of our weapons. Silence allows us to maintain our facade as ideal objects while also controlling the conversation as a whole (DiAngelo, 2012; 2018). If no one speaks, the conversation and its potential education and development, cannot occur. We do not have to learn of our racism and simultaneously maintain the façade that we do not look unkind or racist.

When our silence cannot keep us, our emotions work just as well. In order to protect our facade of being innocent and kind we cannot resort to direct and aggressive tactics of defense. Instead, white women more commonly respond to fights and disagreements with relational and emotional violence (Daniel, 2019; Morash & Chesney-Lind, 2007). This can look like verbal bullying, spreading rumors, and emotional manipulation that results in social ostracization (Morash & Chesney-Lind, 2007). We see this practice in higher education through the use of white women's tears.

White women are known to cry more often and more intensely in cross-racial settings than others (Accapadi, 2007; Srivastava, 2006). These tears, often triggered by racial dissonance (Accapadi, 2007), immediately calls group participants in to protect and

defend the white woman from whoever caused the tears (Srivastava, 2006). We, as racial gatekeepers, use these tears as a weapon and a shield. They call the room to our defense and direct the challenge back on the person who issued it, usually a person of color (Dace, 2012). Because higher education spaces and educators are not prepared to navigate these moments of emotional redirection, the conversation becomes strictly about the emotional exchange leaving the white woman's racist assumptions and beliefs to go unchecked and further marginalizing people of color (Ringrose, 2007).

Because it is often people of color who challenge white women in their racist assumptions (Accapadi, 2007), they become the ones positioned as harm-doers. Instead of challenging white women to account for the harm they cause People of Color in higher education spaces, white women become the victims and People of Color the perpetrators. This can occur in classrooms (Ringrose, 2007; Ropers-Huilman et al., 2013) when Students of Color are asked to check their tone to protect the comfort of their white women peers. Or in staff and faculty spaces (Accapadi, 2007; Srivastava, 2006) when white women claim innocence and stress when challenged or critiqued by their Colleagues of Color. As more colleges and universities approach diversity and inclusion work in and outside of the classroom, this issue will only continue if left unaddressed.

### **Social Justice Educators and Higher Education**

My identity as a white woman in this study is further complicated by my status as a social justice educator (SJE) at a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the Southeast. The role of SJE is constantly and necessarily at odds with the university (Ahmed, 2012; Swalwell, 2013). As all colleges and universities in the US are rooted in



systems of oppression and ties to slavery (Bondi, 2012; Garner, 2007; Gusa, 2010), they all operate with an inherent level of discrimination towards People of Color (Bondi, 2012; Garner, 2007; Gusa, 2010). Therefore, the role of SJE is to address and disrupt these oppressive acts within the institution (Ahmed, 2012). The SJE is required to critique the university and the university works to protect itself from the very critique it asks for (Ahmed, 2012).

My relationship to the practice of critiquing the university in my role as an SJE is complicated by my socialization as a white woman. This socialization is influenced by the gendered racist practices outlined throughout this chapter (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). What I deem worthy of critique, how I share that feedback, and the changes I recommend are all influenced by the gendered racist practices I have inherited and internalized as a white woman. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how my role as a white woman influences my intentional racist practices within my role as a SJE.

### **Connecting to the Larger Purpose**

Throughout history and today, white women hold a unique position at the intersection of dominance and subordination. This study adds to this area of scholarship by building on the work done before to understand white women's racism and addressing some of the gaps offered by previous studies. Using an intersectional approach, I better understand how my combined gender and racial identities interact with my role as a social justice educator at Southeastern University (SU). Building on developmental approaches, I investigate how my practice of my whiteness in this current environment carries with it the echoes of gendered racism throughout history.

Understanding that racism is not only a by-product of development but an intentional practice that I actively engage in everyday, I analyze the relationship between myself and the larger campus context and how I am insulated and supported in my racism.

## CHAPTER THREE

The purpose of this study was to take up the call Scholars of Color have voiced again and again throughout history: the people best situated to understand and investigate white women's racism are white women (Combahee River Collective, 1977/2015). When looking through the studies of white women in higher education, one methodological gap appeared. Very few white women have analyzed our own personal and professional experiences at the intersections of race and gender within higher education (Doyle, 2018). Seeing this gap, and finding a voice through autocritography, I chose to examine my relationship with higher education as a white woman social justice educator and how this context supported and encouraged my racism as well as served as a barrier in my attempts to disrupt my own and others' intentional racist acts. In this chapter I: (a) explain my reasons behind this methodology, (b) position myself as both the researcher and the researched, (c) detail the data sources I used, and (d) outline my collection and analysis processes.

### **Critiquing to Transform**

*I see students clustered on the hard marble steps of the administration building, some crouched over their textbooks trying to prepare for their upcoming finals, others taking in the warm April sun, all of them trying to manage the underlying tension in the air. The sit-in is on its 3rd day and the arrests last night of five of their peers who refused to vacate the lobby of the building when asked weighs on all of them. It's in the forced smiles, the hushed voices, the continued glances at the armed officer standing on the corner. I search the crowd for familiar faces, students from my dialogue class or my*

*LGBTQ advisee group members. A few of them sitting in a cluster look up and smile, welcoming me over to their steps. There are two students I don't recognize. Both of them stop smiling when they see me, faces locked in what I interpret as hesitation and mistrust. And I wonder how I must appear to them, this white woman in a deep purple pencil skirt and white collared shirt, her high heels clacking across the brick walk as I stroll up to a protest of our campus' racist environment. I want to scream "I'm on your side, I swear!" Instead, I sit quietly as the students from my class update me on their experience sleeping outside last night. Yes, it was cold. No, they don't need anything. Yes, they're trading off tonight so they can go get some work done. No, they haven't talked to their classmate who was one of the students arrested. Throughout our conversation, I see the two students I don't know starting to relax. The comfort that exists between me and my students seems to ease their shoulders, relax their hands. My discomfort remains, caught between the urge to further separate myself from other administrators and the understanding that the need to legitimize myself is a product of my own internalized privilege.*

*Thirty minutes later when I'm driving home to my fully stocked kitchen, to my accepting environment, to my warm bed, I am surprised by the emotions that rip through me: anger, fear, frustration, impotence, and so many others cycle faster and faster through my body as my breathing becomes ragged and my vision starts to blur. Somehow, I make it home, staring at the beige garage door in front of me as I take deep breaths. In, one, two three, four. Out, one, two, three, four. Forcing myself to unclench my white knuckled hands from the steering wheel, I realize that the overwhelming feeling,*

*the one that I just can't shake, is shame. I am ashamed of myself, my reliance on the institution for a paycheck, my refusal to do more than listen and quietly advise the students on their next steps, my association with the administrators who stood by while students were arrested on trumped up trespassing charges merely to prove a point. And beneath that shame, one persisting question remains: what the hell can I do?*

Most of my time as a social justice educator at SU was marked with moments similar to this. Moments spent agonizing over my role in making change, my authority as an employee of the institution, my influence as a white person; while also feeling restrained as an entry-level employee and a young woman. It is these moments of dissonance, these places of conflict, that I wanted to better understand through this study.

Critical research allows the researcher an opportunity to not only call into question current practices, policies, and beliefs operating all around us but also to identify methods and avenues for taking transformative action (Crotty, 1998). Freire (2000) defined human beings' positions as being both in and of the world simultaneously. We cannot operate within our contexts without being influenced by our history and crafting some form of future. Education, Freire (2000) reminds us, is a political act. Higher education, influenced by the white supremacy ideals that crafted and continues to control it, influences the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the education process (Freire, 2000; Lyle, 2013). Therefore, I as an education researcher, must take responsibility for how I interpret what has come before and how I influence what will follow. To comment on the world without taking some form of responsibility for our current state and engage in transformative change is to miss the calling of being critically conscious (Freire, 1972;

Yep, 1998). Instead, we must reflect on what we experience and then take actions on those reflections.

Lorde (1984) calls on white women in a similar way. In her letter to Mary Daly, Lorde (1984) names Daly's failure to consider the differences in experiences of white women and Women of Color. Daly's critique of patriarchal systems failed to "recognize that, as women, those differences expose all women to various forms and degrees of patriarchal oppression, some of which we share and some of which we do not" (Lorde, 1984, p. 70). By doing so Daly erased the depth and severity of injustices towards Women of Color, replacing them with a white narrative. Daly, an outspoken researcher and scholar accepted her history as truth and failed to reflect on the differences around her, failed to enact a form of change that built a more unified connection between Women of Color and white women. Lorde (1984) understood and expressed the transformative power of critique. By calling Daly into a new awareness, a new perspective, she opened an avenue of change. A critical approach for this study allowed me the opportunity to both understand and make change.

### **Autocritography**

In his memoir on his experiences as a Black male academic, Awkward (1999) defined autocritography as "an account of individual, social, and institutional conditions that help to produce a scholar" (p. 7). By combining rhetoric and autoethnography, researchers are able to self-reflexively examine and critique our positioning within a larger system of power such as higher education (Awkward, 1999; A. Johnson, 2017). Where autoethnography allows researchers to study "the relationships between humans

and their sociocultural contexts” (Hughes & Pennington, 2017, p. 6), autocritography assumes a critical component in which systems of power will be exposed and potentially transformed through the course of the study (A. Johnson, 2017). By building on autoethnography’s ability to analyze the complexities in our everyday lives (Baylorn & Orbe, 2016; Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Raab, 2013), autocritography helps us surface how our areas of dominance and subordination are positioned in our larger context (Awkward, 1999; Spry, 2001). Through this methodology I am called not only to feel a sense of empowerment through my gender but also recognize how my socialization in higher education around my gender has influenced the lack of accountability I assume for my power as a white person.

Researchers using autocritography and autoethnography acknowledge the importance of building a relationship between the researcher and the reader (Ellis, 2004; A. Johnson, 2017; 2014; Raab, 2013). This relationship contributes weight and legitimacy to these methodologies. By connecting to the researcher’s stories, readers better understand themselves (Baylorn & Orbe, 2016; Ellis, 2004). My position as a white woman social justice educator at a predominantly white southern institution was both unique and commonplace. My combination of identities, my socialization process, and the way I experience, interpret, and engaged with my context cannot be replicated. However, given the large presence of white women in student affairs and higher education in general, I am not the first nor the last one to hold this position at an institution like mine. By analyzing my stories, my experiences, I hoped to better understand my connection to gendered racism in higher education. And perhaps, in the

process of reading my journey, other white women might see themselves in these systems as well.

It is not uncommon for autocritographic studies to be devoid of explicit research questions (Awkward, 1999; A. Johnson, 2014; 2017). Instead, many of these studies speak to the purpose and intent of the study itself. With this study, I wanted to examine how I practiced gendered racism as a white women social justice educator at a predominantly white institution and how that institution insulated and empowered me in my practices. In order to further focus my purpose, I used the following questions:

- How have I practiced gendered racism as a white woman social justice educator at a predominantly white institution?
  - In what ways do my practices align with the idealized objectification imposed on white women?
  - In what ways do I practice racial gatekeeping as a white woman?
- How has the institution insulated and empowered me in those practices?

In this analysis I examined how the sexism I navigate in my life as a woman also gifted me tools to mask my racism as well as operated as a defense against taking responsibility for my actions. The stories that I relayed describing specific experiences between myself and the institution allowed me a place to examine the power dynamics that occurred. They also allowed me to create complex interpretations (A. Johnson, 2014; 2017) that encompassed the breadth of the systemic oppression at play.



## **Narrative as Method**

Given the role of storytelling in this methodology, using narrative inquiry as a method offered me a way to craft my experiences intentionally that aided in surfacing those complex power dynamics playing out between myself and my context. The stories we tell of our experiences provide rich frameworks that researchers can use to investigate how we interact and relate to our larger social contexts (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Our stories are never shallow. Instead, the stories we tell and how we tell them reveal our values, our beliefs, our thoughts and feelings (Bochner, 2012; Lyle, 2013; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Reading and interacting with the interpretations of our stories as researchers changes the way we see our past, how we understand ourselves in the present, and what we desire for our future (Bochner, 2012; Lyle, 2013). By analyzing how we position ourselves within certain contexts, we can better understand the influential relationships at play (Lyle, 2013; Webster & Mertova, 2007).

These revelations are not just discernible to the researcher, but to the reader as well. In fact, a well told story can help readers understand not only the mind and life of the researcher but challenge them to evaluate their own lives as well (Bochner, 2012; Lyle, 2013). Scholarly works are often perceived as dry, impersonal, and/or inaccessible to those in and outside of the scholar's field (Bochner, 2012; Ellis, 2004; Lyle, 2013). Narrative methods, however, create accessible ways for readers in and outside of academia to connect to the research. Understanding how white supremacy lives and works in me as a white woman is not something only a few people should or can

understand. Even white women outside of higher education can benefit from seeing how our whiteness and gender interact in our various contexts.

### **Setting the Scene**

Southeastern University is a medium-sized public institution in the Southeast of the United States. It was built on land originally stolen from people of the Cherokee Nation before being used as a slave plantation. As the institution grew and aged it remained a predominantly white institution (PWI). Remnants of this history remains in the structures and naming practices of the campus. All of this history weaves together to create an institution steeped in white supremacy.

Strands of continued racist practices and incidents remain prevalent today. Much of my work as a social justice educator on this campus was influenced by racial events that occurred years before I came to SU. In the late 2000's racial tensions erupted, reaching national attention. Following this event, the then-President, spoke out against the event and the campus organized a chance for members of the party to apologize to the university. Though I was not present for this meeting, when I arrived on campus years later, I heard two versions from those who were present. Some (mostly white people) spoke of the bravery of the white students as they came forward and apologized in a public space. Others (mostly People of Color) spoke of the surprise they felt at how little the students really understood why what they had done was unacceptable. It is the gap between these two positions that social justice education was asked to address. Following this event, all first year undergraduate students were required to complete some form of diversity training during their orientation to SU.

At that point, one office, the Diversity Center became responsible for almost all of the diversity programming on campus: students, staff, and faculty alike. When I stepped into my position in the Fall of 2012, I inherited a campus-wide first year student program along with several different educational and dialogue-based workshops. The curriculum and structure of these programs, and new ones developed during my tenure, became the main points of contention between me and the institution. How we interacted with each other in various points of time over the next five years provided the location of analysis in this study.

### **Positionality**

Given autocritography and autoethnography's ties to the "I" (Awkward, 1999; Ellis, 2004), continually positioning oneself as the researcher and participant in the study is a necessary step in the process (Baylorn & Orbe, 2016; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). I wanted to first offer my positionality as it stood before the study began recognizing that I did not emerge the same person on the other side of this experience (Bochner, 2012; Ellis, 2004). In social justice education work we use many different prompts and activities to help participants express who they are beyond a listing of their names, hometowns, and type of employment. One of my favorites has always been the question "who am I and who are my people?" For my positionality statement, I want to elaborate on this a little bit.

I am Becky Morgan, originally born Rebecca Lynn Siegert. I am the lone Texan born of Michiganders. My people are those who know the feeling of being baked alive in a hot dry August in North Central Texas after 30 straight days of 100+ temperatures. I am

a person with a large family: 4 parents, 12 grandparents, and more aunts, uncles, and cousins than I can remember or have ever met. I am a younger child of a single mother who worked two to three jobs most of my childhood. My people are those who were latch key kids earlier than they should have been and grew up on canned, boxed, and frozen foods. My people are those that know the hard work and absence of their caregivers reflected their deep level of care for us. My people are those who have the unconscious flinch when voices get too loud because their caregivers' divorce was fought in front of them for years after the court documents were signed.

I am a white cis-woman named Becky. My people are those who constantly feel the push and pull between living up to the racist stereotype associated with our name and the desire to constantly want to separate ourselves from "all those other white women." I am a burgeoning critical scholar focused on dismantling whiteness in its many forms and practices. My people are those who constantly ask questions such as "but why," "who decides that," and "who benefits here" knowing that the answer will most often sound a lot like my own privileged positionings in the world. I am a Christian by choice, not upbringing. My people are those who are constantly trying to reconcile the oppressive history and current practices of our faith with the inspiration we feel to build a more just world. I am someone living with depression. My people are those who constantly fight an inner monologue that demeans, devalues, and berates us. I am a wife of 12 years and a mother of two children. My people are those whose homes are never clean, whose laundry is never put away, whose walls ring with laughter, and tears, and whose hearts

are never free from the worry of how to raise children to be thoughtful, compassionate, engaged citizens.

### **Data**

Before, during, and following my five-year tenure as a social justice educator at Southeastern, I experienced many interactions with my institution and its administrators that highlighted my gendered racism and the gendered racist practices of the institution and its constituents. For this study I wanted to process through a series of experiences related to one specific event. In my role, I oversaw the required social justice education program that all new undergraduate students experienced upon their arrival to Southeastern. The program, Peer-to-Peer Dialogues (P2P) was dialogic in structure and peer-facilitated by trained students called Peer Dialogue Leaders (PDLs). The PDLs, after a full semester of training, would partner up to design and facilitate 2-hour intergroup dialogues for 30 undergraduate students at a time. These dialogues focused on a specific social identity such as race, gender, sexual orientation, belief system, etc. and its relationship with oppression. For example, some of our most popular sessions looked at the harmfulness of racial stereotyping, the experiences of sexism in the media, or problematized our public university's Christian influences and practices.

### **Reflexive Journaling**

Reflexive journals are frequently occurring reflections that allow the researcher to process the physical, mental, and emotional influence and impacts of the research (Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Raab, 2013). In these journals, I tracked my reactions and interactions with my data collection, my analysis,

and the writing process. I kept a standard journaling practice with bi-weekly entries. Twice a week I wrote in a working document saved on a private google drive about my experiences with the research process, using standard prompts each time (Appendix A). This journal offered a way of tracking theories and findings as they developed as well as outlining potential influences on my learning and growth from internal and external sources (Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013).

### **Artifacts**

Throughout my life, and particularly during my time as a social justice educator at Southeastern University, I have kept a number of artifacts that captured a variety of my thoughts, feelings, and actions at specific points in time. These artifacts illuminate not only the details of an event but also my thoughts, feelings, and reactions at the time of the event (Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Raab, 2013).

Artifacts that helped me understand myself better at the time included journal entries and social media posts. Other artifacts like news stories and email exchanges helped me conceptualize the impact of these events on my larger context. All of these artifacts served as pieces of the puzzle to expand my understanding and analysis of events in my life past simple recollection to a critical analysis of the larger system. For this study, I tracked the artifacts that I used as well as a brief description of the artifact and the event with which it connected (Appendix B).

### **Interviews**

Memory recall serves as an important part of autocrigraphic studies yet memory recall is by nature limited and skewed (Ellis, 2004). In working with memories, Ellis

(2004) tasks researchers to take a critical approach that both investigates the emotional memory as well as the physical experience itself. Intentionally questioning the memory allows more details to surface and more ways of analyzing the experience outside of our initial interpretation to become apparent (Ellis, 2004). Interviews served as a data collection method that allowed me to analyze my own memories in intentionally critical ways by interrogating my understandings of these events and speak to those who experienced them along with me. For this study I performed four self-interviews throughout the data collection process. Each of these interviews focused on a different experience within the larger event and helped me unearth as many details of the events as possible as well as my associated reactions.

I performed these semi-structured interviews (Appendix C) that practiced critical reflexivity (Hughes & Pennington, 2017) and helped me uncover oppressive assumptions and beliefs I operated with during these experiences (Ellis, 2004). Each of these interviews included both written answers as well as any potential artifacts that helped me express the full breadth of my answers. Each of these were self-interviews (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Hughes & Pennington, 2017) administered in written form.

### **(Re)Assembling my Stories**

Though triangulation is a positive tool in qualitative research, it does not always allow for the rich stories that autocrigraphy requires. Instead, I used assemblage as a way of narrating my experiences and layering them together to tell these stories.

Assemblage involves collecting many different kinds of data of the same time, place, and/or event (Hughes & Pennington, 2017) which makes the outline data collection

methods all the more meaningful for this study. The researcher takes these different data sources and layers them together to tell a detailed and dynamic story revealing the multifaceted aspects at work in even the most mundane areas of our lives (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Combining data in such a way offers insight both into the data but also into the researcher themselves. Layering data highlights the potential discrepancies between how the researcher tells a story and how others interpret and tell the same story. By using assemblage, I both told my story and saw areas where my privilege as a white woman influenced my perceptions. Given the insidiousness of white supremacy (Garner, 2007) in higher education, this layering process helped me see past my normalization of whiteness and its practices to the underlying gendered racist actions I engaged in.

### **Generating Stories**

Given that the crux of autocritography is the telling, re-telling, and interpreting stories (A. Johnson, 2017), there were many different ways I could have collected and compiled data in order to craft these stories (Raab, 2013). In fact, many autocritography scholars used general auto ethnographic data collection methods such as: (a) journals, (b) artifacts, (c) field notes, and (d) interviews as materials from which they constructed their narratives (Awkward, 1999; A. Johnson, 2017; 2014). I chose each of these data collection methods in this study for specific purposes as I constructed my own stories.

Using each of these collection methods, I crafted two tellings of each of these experiences detailing these specific events that I then analyzed to understand the relationship between myself and the institution and identify the practices of gendered racism we engaged in at the time. The first telling was in prose format such as one would



read in a book. These first person glimpses detailed each experience in the event including dialogues between myself and others and my own inner perspectives.

Each event received a title associated with the theme or guiding action of its contents. The initial awareness event, a string of email communications predominantly between myself and the Academic Advisor overseeing this program, was called “Something’s Not Right Here” (Appendix E). The initial and follow-up meetings with administrators were titled “The Ambush” (Appendix F) and “Fighting Back” respectively (Appendix G). The fourth telling that touched on the aftermath of fighting back was dubbed “Gathering the Pieces” (Appendix H). The final telling which was a timeline of events that set the other four occurrences within a larger context both locally and nationally was called “Timeline” (Appendix I).

After completing each of these tellings I returned to them from a different perspective. Using a voice recorder, I envisioned myself telling these same stories to a group of master’s student affairs students in a classroom or advisory setting. In doing so, I was able to analyze any discrepancies in how I told the stories.

### **Five Events**

The experience outlined in my five events began in the Fall of 2015 when this program was called into question and almost cut from operation by upper administrators. In the first event, I described the initial conversation exchange I had with the Academic Advisor (AD) in charge of this program where he informed me that the university intended to cut the program. The AD served as the coordinator of the first year programming that all undergraduate students were expected to complete, of which the

Peer-to-Peer Dialogues (P2P) was one component. The second event detailed a meeting I was invited to with upper level administrators where I was asked to share more information about the program and then expected to agree to its cessation. In the third event I, along with my direct supervisor and the executive director of my department, were called to a meeting with upper administrators where we all finally agreed to strong changes to the P2P program. The fourth event outlines the approval process for the new curriculum we drafted, changing the program to Diversity Dialogues (DD). In the fifth and final event I offer a timeline connecting the three months of these events to both the preceding actions of the university as well as future incidences I saw as a directly related to these events. In this timeline, I draw on both local and national events to create a larger picture of the systemic issues occurring at the time.

### **Data Analysis**

Spry (2001) and Ellis (2004) both highlight the importance of: (a) engaging writing, (b) reflexivity, and (c) vulnerability in crafting autoethnographic studies. Awkward's (1999) memoir and Johnson's (2014; 2017) autocritographic studies each exemplified these components. Their thorough and extensive critical reflections provided meaningful tellings and retellings of their stories (A. Johnson, 2014; 2017) which illuminated how power dynamics influenced their interpretations of events (Awkward, 1999). Their vulnerability allowed readers to connect on deep levels so that, even if their lived experiences were far different than that of the researcher, the readers were able to understand the concepts through their emotive and evocative expressions (Lyle, 2013; Raab, 2013). Finally, writing and re-writing their stories in engaging ways revealed

layers of internalized and experienced power dynamics for the researcher and the reader simultaneously (Ellis, 2004; Raab, 2013).

Data analysis in autocritography requires a willingness to be exposed, to be seen beyond the facades of status, position, and persona (Awkward, 1999; Raab, 2013). It is the process of analyzing the many stories and their multitude of interpretations in search of themes (Saldaña, 2016), common practices, and underlying relationships to systems of power. Specifically, Saldaña (2016) highlights the usefulness of dramaturgical coding when analyzing the intra and interpersonal experiences of participants captured in vignettes or performances. This form of coding works to analyze not only what is being shared in the story but its purpose in the overall narrative (Saldaña, 2016). By analyzing participants' stories for objectives, conflicts, emotions, attitudes, and tactics, the researcher is able to identify the complex dynamics occurring through and beyond the words exchanged. In addition, this coding method also allows the researcher a space to intentionally code for subtext, or the participants' tie to the extended world in which the story occurs (Saldaña, 2016). Following this first round of dramaturgical coding, Saldaña (2016) notes that it is possible for researchers to categorize and begin searching for themes similar to more conventional coding methods. By coding for these specific elements in my stories, I better understood how my gendered racist practices were influenced and encouraged by Southeastern during each of these events.

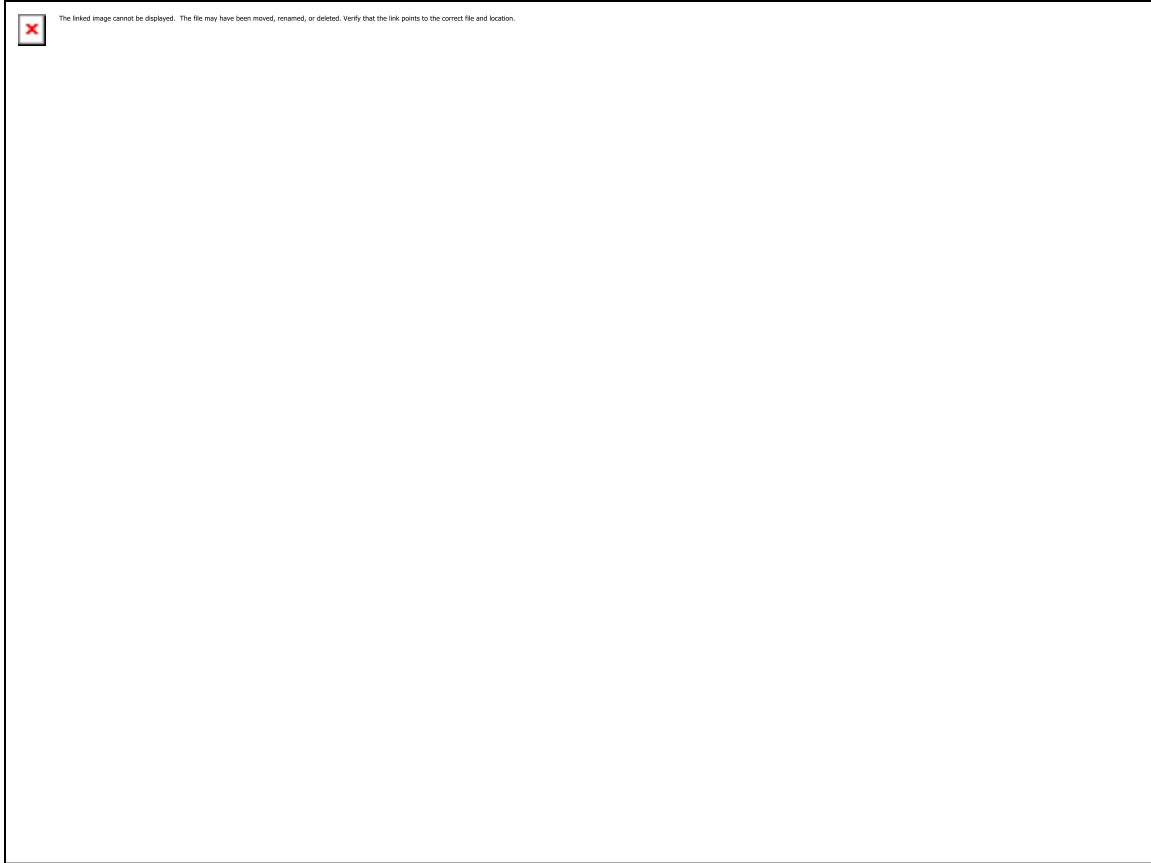
After noting the patterns in the dramaturgical codes in my tracking codebook (Appendix D), I wanted the second round of coding to be through the lens of my theoretical framework. Therefore, I went back through my reflexive journal looking for

areas where I noted connections to idealized objectification and racial gatekeeping. In doing so, I was able to create two codes for idealized objectification and racial gatekeeping as overarching occurrences and eight codes that connected to specific practices upholding both of these tenets. These codes included: (a) ignoring, (b) dismissing, (c) etiquette practicing, (d) retelling, (e) separating, (f) redirecting, (g) silence, and (h) emoting. In my codebook I listed out each code as well as a definition developed from my theoretical framework that I referred to as I reviewed my tellings.

By looking at the alignment between the dramaturgical and racial gatekeeping and idealized objectification codes in my third and final review of the tellings, I was able to note behaviors and descriptions that connected with the practices of idealized objectification and racial gatekeeping both in the descriptions of the tellings and the choices I made in crafting them (A. Johnson, 2014; 2017). During this thematic development stage, I began to see connections between my tellings and my internalized attachment to concepts of reputation. Reputation, as I understood it within this study, connects to other people's conceptions of me based on their perceptions of my actions, beliefs, and values. Throughout my analysis I noted again and again my attempts to preserve and protect that reputation. Positioning this concept at the center of my analysis process, I developed a conceptual organizer (Figure 1.1) to depict the relationships between what assumptions, tactics, and actions I took to protect myself while upholding racism as well as how the university supported and encouraged me in my practices. This graphic organizer details the elements that serve as my findings and is detailed in Chapter 4.

Figure 1.1

*Concept Mapping*



**Trustworthiness and Validity**

Trustworthiness, reliability, and validity, are always under scrutiny in autocritographic and autoethnographic research (Baylorn & Orbe, 2016; Ellis, 2004; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). This methodology is often viewed as subjective and soft when approached from a more traditional or post-positivist research perspective (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). However, we also know that these strict definitions of what is and is not research come from an oppressive perspective in the academy that devalues and

diminishes the voices of many people and communities (Smith, 1999). As Bochner (2012) notes, autoethnographic research in its many forms, including autocritography, challenges the classical notion that there exists a single, identifiable truth. When researchers let go of the single, objective truth idea, we can begin looking for the truths in our experiences, our emotions, and the truths we build through collaboration (Bochner, 2012). Smith (1999) calls for all researchers to better understand the power relationship at play between researcher and the participant. This call, I believe, expands into autoethnographic works as well. Autocritography is designed to uncover power imbalances (Awkward, 1999; A. Johnson, 2017; 2014) and critique oppressive acts by individuals, communities, and institutions (Baylorn & Orbe, 2016). This process of disrupting power calls for a different view on what is and is not valid, reliable, and true in research.

When we let go of the objective truth ideal, we can then revisit what makes research valid. Within this methodology, validity is not about the researcher but rather about the reader. When a reader is challenged by the researcher's journey to engage in their own reflexivity, the study clearly has validity (Ellis, 2004; Raab, 2013). A valid autocritographic study is one that invites the reader to not only critically analyze the experiences of the researcher but to turn that investigation inward (Ellis, 2004; Raab, 2013). By doing so, the researcher's examination has a transformative impact on the reader, validating the original purpose and of the study.

This is not to say that researchers working from an autocritographic perspective are not held to ethical standards. Ellis (2004) warns scholars against writing what we

cannot know. Stories should come from the researcher's perspective, telling a full story but limited to what the researcher could think, know, or feel. Autocritography also requires data to be comprehensive and clear (Ellis, 2004; Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Raab, 2013). As with all forms of research, data should be trackable and well organized so that the reader can understand why the researcher shaped the story in the ways that they do. Finally, a well done autocritographic study should demonstrate for the reader how the study transformed the researcher (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Through the process of telling and re-telling their stories, researchers emerge from the study changed with a new way of understanding their position within their larger context (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Bochner, 2012).

In terms of organization, I kept clear lists and organized files in a private google drive to track the data I gathered as well as how I gathered it and its relationship to the study as a whole. I tracked my coding and assemblage processed in this drive to highlight how I made connections between my data and the themes. I gathered as many different sources of data as possible to build my tellings in order to relay the complex rather than the simplified story. Not only did this help others see how I came to my conclusions but it helped me understand the many dynamics at play in each event that I experienced. In order to add accountability to my gathering and organization process, I stayed in constant contact with my dissertation chair. I reviewed my steps weekly and also granted her access to my materials for deeper review when necessary. Our conversations aided me in my collection process and held me accountable as I used my analysis methods. Thanks to

her insight, I was able to track where I followed my initial analysis plan and highlight time when I changed course.

### **Conclusion**

Autocritography offers me the best way to examine how I as a white woman interact with and benefit from my position in higher education. In this chapter I connected my use of autocritography to the purpose, significance, and theoretical framework of this study. I then outlined the types of data I used, my collection and analysis methods, as well as my efforts towards trustworthiness in this study.



## CHAPTER FOUR

When constructing the stories for this study, instead of pulling from events across the span of five years in which I served as a social justice educator, I instead narrowed down to a specific event spanning about six months of time. In 2014, upper administration at my institution asked me to drastically change the program which constituted 70% of my job description. In the Peer-to-Peer Dialogues (P2P) program, all new undergraduate students were expected to participate in a one-time, two-hour dialogue session facilitated by their peers in order to complete the diversity component of the orientation experience. The process by which this change occurred comprises the focus of my study. Reflecting on this event I was able to craft five different stories detailing specific moments throughout the span of time as well as giving the reader insight into the larger context of the story.

### **The Events**

The five events I crafted told the story of how I first learned that upper administration had an issue with the program to the final approval process of the updated curriculum. In the first event, entitled “Something’s Not Right Here,” I outlined my email exchanges with the AD. I then used the second event, “The Ambush,” to tell about my first meeting with upper administrators where I was first asked to cut the program entirely. Following this conversation, my two supervisors, my program design partner, and I attended a meeting with upper administrators where we argued against cutting the program, which I described in the third event. This event was titled “Fighting Back”. Following this conversation, I outlined the approval process for the drastically changed

curriculum in the fourth event, “Gathering the Pieces”. The fifth and final event, “Timeline,” is a just that, a timeline of occurrences in the local, regional, and national news that occurred concurrently with this process. I used this timeline as a way to situate the experience within a larger sociopolitical context.

Given that this is an autocritographic study that focuses not only on telling the story, but retelling and analyzing how multiple tellings shift our interpretations of the story (Awkward, 1999; A. Johnson, 2017), I retold each event after I completed the initial five. The first set of events were told from an experiential perspective, as though the reader was viewing the tellings in a story. I conveyed my emotions and inner thoughts, dialogic exchanges between characters, and settings in which the experiences occur. The retellings of these events had a different delivery method. I spoke the stories aloud, as though I were telling a class of master’s students in a Student Affairs program. I then transcribed each recording and analyzed them with the same coding system as the first set of tellings. By using the same coding method, I hoped to determine commonalities and differences both across each of the five events as well as across the two different formats. As I detail my findings, I refer to the events both by title and by their telling order.

### **Defining Reputation**

As a child I internalized many messages about my race and gender from every facet of my life. Each of those messages had an impact on how I saw myself, how I engaged with others, and how I positioned myself in the world. As I grew older I wanted to believe that I shed those messages and started to shape my own perspective. But, in reality, the things that shaped me will always remain a part of me. As I dove into my data

I started noticing a pattern I did not anticipate. In my tellings, my analysis of them, and my memos, I kept returning again and again to the concept of reputation.

Given that reputation can mean many things to many people, I want to operationalize it according to my personal definition. Reputation, as I speak of it in this paper, is how someone is perceived or interpreted based upon a measurement of their beliefs, actions, and values. As I attempted to understand why I kept circling back to this word, I suddenly heard it like my caregivers had whispered it in my ear: “all a woman has in this world is her reputation.” This statement is one that I was told repeatedly as a child beginning around the time of middle school and as I began to navigate increasing levels of independence and romantic interests. Though it was never tied specifically to my identity as a white woman, it definitely guided my interpretation of this position in the world. It became a mantra that guided my choice of friends, my desire to pursue romantic relationships, my educational activity decisions, and so much more. Given its formative influence on me, it makes sense that it is still so embedded into my ways of experiencing the world that I cannot break from it, even now.

So instead of avoiding this emerging organizer, I leaned in to it. I wanted to investigate how the way I interpret reputation as a white woman connected to the ways I practiced gendered racism in this study. I returned to my guiding questions for this study:

- How have I practiced gendered racism as a white woman social justice educator as a predominantly white institution?
  - In what ways do my practices align with the idealized objectification imposed on white women?

- In what ways do I practice racial gatekeeping as a white woman?
- How has the institution insulated and empowered me in those practices?

Given the narrative nature of this study, it is reasonable that the analyzation process also flows from the narratives that define my life and understanding of myself. This phrase, and the ways I interpreted and practiced it all tie together to make up how I perceive and position myself as a white woman, even to this day. Reputation was not taught to me as a singular, isolated concept. Instead, it was a performance, a way of presenting myself in various places and stages to receive in return a positive opinion from those with whom I interacted. Reputation connected to how I presented myself, the communities I kept, and the ways I acted (Figure 1.1). The practices of this study at their base level, are no different than those I began using over 20 years ago. When presenting myself I worked to maintain standards of goodness, used nonconfrontational tactics, and centered my own needs and feelings. I used my community as a way to model behaviors I deemed as good, dismiss those I deemed as bad, and to protect me when I felt unable to protect myself. Finally, the actions I chose such as silence, supporting those in power, and relying on the thoughts and words of others rather than my own knowledge and experiences, protected my reputation.

### **Power as Presentation**

Reputation, as I learned it, is a form of presentation. With the phrase “all a woman has in this world is her reputation,” I am instructed not only to define what a reputation is for me but also decide how best to protect and defend it. As a child, and even now, much of that definition is tied to performance; how I present a positive perception of reputation

to the world. When the only examples of what it means to be a woman stem from these idealized objectified standards, it seems only fitting that my definition of reputation begins to form around achieving them as best as I possibly can at all times. When analyzing data, I identified a section of codes and themes that described my efforts to maintain a specific self-image. The image I worked to maintain stemmed from idealized objectification standards I had internalized as a white woman in order to retain a level of acceptance, authority, and/or protection in spaces and organizations structured around white masculine norms.

And there is a form of power in this presentation practice as a white woman, if done “well.” The idealized objectification that accompanies me as a white woman, also carries its own form of perceived power. If I can act within the standards set for me, I can gain favor, access, and resources from those who really do hold the power: white men. By presenting myself according to a certain standard, I can maintain a position nearer to white, patriarchal power than if I act against the expectations laid out for me. Maintaining this positive self-image requires different practices: (a) ensuring that I am perceived as innocent, kind, and nurturing, (b) using non-confrontational tactics when engaging with others, and (c) centering myself at all times. These practices were clearly apparent throughout all of the events.

### ***Sugar and Spice and Everything Becky***

As discussed in Chapter 2, white women are held to standards of goodness that involve presenting ourselves as innocent, nice, and harmonizers (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017; Thompson, 2003). This historical standard has in no way minimized over the

course of time. In fact, I found throughout my events that I worked extremely hard both in the experiences and in the telling of them, to present an image of myself that aligned with these ingrained standards. This image is maintained through various levels of presentation. I attempted to control how I was perceived throughout the events both by participants in the story and the reader, by garnering sympathy through my physical, verbal, and emotional expressions.

**Setting the Goodness Standard.** As part of being both the author and protagonist of this autocritographic work, I described anecdotal situations that created a sense of closeness and familiarity between myself and the reader (Smith, 2011). The anecdotal situations, the glimpse into my thoughts, beliefs, values, and everyday life, explained who I am as the protagonist and how the reader might expect to respond in various situations as the story progresses. But more than that, the reader became familiar with me on a deep level (Smith, 2011). They learned of my fears, my insecurities, and my shortcomings. In sharing these pieces of myself, I offered a glimpse into how I maintained my reputation as “good”.

The most common way I worked to establish for the reader a view of myself as a good person was through the sharing of my mental and emotional state. In the first round of coding, I used emotional, physical, and verbal codes from Saldana’s dramaturgical method (Saldaña, 2016) often throughout each of my tellings. Looking deeper in to when and how these codes were applied revealed ways that I worked to validate myself and my status as a good person.

***Becky the Innocent.*** If the idealized objectification standard for white women is

to be innocent (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017), then my emotional, verbal, and physical responses needed to reflect that standard in every situation. Throughout “Something’s Not Right Here,” I engaged in email exchanges with the Academic Advisor (AD) overseeing this program who used vague and cryptic communication methods to ask questions about the program I coordinate.

“The AD? Why is he emailing me? And why on a Saturday?” I shifted Emmett [my 8-month-old child] into a more comfortable spot and unlocked my phone, shifting the bright light away from his face. The Academic Advisor and overseer of the SU100 program usually didn’t communicate with me much after the Fall semester ended. I wondered if I had submitted something incorrectly.

*Becky,*

*Can you let me know what P2P programing you have planned for spring? What will take place on Jan. 6?*

“Huh. Seems easy enough.” I put the phone down and began the tricky performance of placing a sleeping infant into a bed...

*I’m following our normal plan. 10 sessions of dialogues, 30 students each. Sign ups outside of Memorial Auditorium from 12-2pm. Dialogues from 3:30-5:30pm on the 6<sup>th</sup>. Those who are unable to attend have until the beginning of Spring Break to complete the alternate assignment. All assignments due by then.*

I chewed my lip as I reread the message. Emailing [the AD] always felt a little nerve-racking and I swear I remembered telling him all of this already. Maybe I missed an email somewhere? Maybe there was a problem with something?

(Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 1)

Throughout this exchange I expressed a sense of unease with the situation. The verbal questions to no one in particular about the timing of the email, physically “chew[ing] my lip,” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 1), and the emotional unease all worked together here to create a sense of foreboding. Something felt off, yet, instead of naming that directly, I simply answered the questions I was given like I believed a good girl should.

This one scene is a snapshot for how I used my emotions, verbal exchanges, and physical positioning to create my standard of goodness throughout the events.

Emotionally, instead of being angry or frustrated at the work interruption on a weekend, I was confused and uneasy. I worried over the interruption's form and content, but I never externally projected negative emotions at the person who chose to contact me outside of the bounds of the work week. When I noted the AD was acting out of character, I did so with a sense of internal analyzation, automatically shouldering any potential blame, even before I know any information. My emotional responses at this point and throughout most of the events, drifted inwards.

Verbally, I posed questions to myself rather than directly to the AD. Yes, I was doing so because I was still attempting to understand what was happening, but this action of naming a problem but not actually addressing it with someone else was a common occurrence. Instead of offering direct and detailed feedback, I chose to keep my doubts and questions to myself and instead, simply provided the information that was asked of me. I did not push back but merely went along. The physical act of biting my lip was a further extension of this. Rather than speak up for myself, I forcibly kept my mouth shut.

Combining these emotional, verbal, and physical responses together demonstrates how I attempted to act out my internalized standard of good. Instead of directing negative emotions at others, I internalized blame and responsibility. Instead of speaking up about things that might be problematic, I kept my concerns to myself both by never asking the harder questions of the AD and by physically forcing my mouth closed. In doing so, I prioritized his comfort and protected my reputation as someone who would not provoke him or cause problems. These behaviors are ones that I used to guide me throughout the events and tie directly to my desire to be seen as innocent, nice, and a harmonizer. If I am



to perceive myself and be seen by others as a good girl, I must act within these internalized objectified standards of what is good. This becomes even more apparent as the events continue.

**Feeling Good.** I often directed my emotional responses to people and situations internally rather than externally. During the initial exchanges with the Academic Advisor (AD) I was never angry or frustrated at him for his behavior or actions. Instead, I was confused, worried, and constantly dreading the continued exchange (Something's Not Right Here:1). After realizing that maintaining the Peer-to-Peer Dialogues (P2P) program in its current form was futile, my emotional responses were consistently mild and internal (The Ambush:1). I was confused, distracted, and numb, but never was I angry or frustrated at the events occurring around me (The Ambush:1). Even when the situation should have resulted in anger or frustration at other people, I was more likely to respond with shock or confusion. In fact, the first true expression of externalized anger that I describe is not until after the second administration meeting, detailed in 'Fighting Back,' when all of the decisions were finalized. It was only with the AD's accusatory email regarding his negative perceptions of my behavior and that of my colleagues when I was finally able to shift my feelings outside of myself and reach a level of intense anger (Fighting Back:1, p. 6). This delay demonstrated how externally-focused negative emotions are only used and expressed as a last resort when all other efforts have failed.

**Saying Good.** My verbal presentation in these events supported my desired image of meekness in that they were perpetually mild in nature. I often felt the need to clear my throat "hoping to hide the shake in my voice" (Fighting Back:1) or to demonstrate

hesitance (The Ambush:1). Both of these efforts worked to modulate my voice to appropriate levels of politeness according to my self-imposed standards. I never worried about sounding too confident or too angry. But rather, I often had to push myself to even use my voice at all (The Ambush:1; Fighting Back:1). In fact, in the second administration meeting, even when I wanted to interrupt, I engaged in self-talk instead.

“And we need it to be shorter,” the AD jumped in. “Two hours is just too much time. I would prefer to see this program and the wellness program combined and finish in less than 75 minutes. That way the students have finished their responsibilities and also walk away with something to think about for later.”  
*75 minutes for both? Are you serious? I thought to myself. How could we possibly cover anything important in that amount of time? I mean maybe something could happen in 75 to 90 minutes of our own time but definitely not in less than an hour. (Fighting Back:1, p. 4)*

Rather than voicing my dissension I kept my mouth shut. In doing so, my colleagues carried most of the burden of arguing our case while I appeared mild and hesitant.

**Acting Good.** Physically, throughout the events, I worked tirelessly to hold in any expression of negative emotion when working with upper administrators. My hands were constantly clenched to constrain “shaking fists” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 6; The Ambush:1, p. 3; Fighting Back:1, p. 2). I often cleared my throat before speaking and made a physical effort to keep my voice in a neutral tone (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 2; Fighting Back:1, p. 3). I worked hard to craft an image of myself that did not betray any resistant, disagreeable, or non-compliant emotions I felt towards the administrators with whom I disagreed.

It is only when I was with my supervisors or my partner that I truly expressed what I was feeling without altering it in some way. With them I openly cried

(Something's Not Right Here:1, p. 3) and revealed my fears and hesitations (Something's Not Right Here:1, p. 6). I even brought myself to ask the hard questions I was thinking (Fighting Back:1, p. 6). I felt a sense of relief when I was "box[ed]" (Fighting Back:1, p. 2) in from all sides by my colleagues. Knowing that I could express myself when I felt safe enough to do so allowed the reader to see the differences in behavior between environments where I was attempting to maintain a sense of goodness and those where I felt I could be myself.

### ***It's Just Little Old Me***

Another way that I was able to support my presentation as a "good" white woman was my ability to present a non-confrontational front in each of these experiences. Any time that I wanted to disagree or express a different opinion than what was presented, by measuring my tone, controlling my facial expressions, and speaking in passive ways allowed me to progress through the conversations with minimal direct pushback. Also, by assuming responsibility and attempting to appear helpful, I could navigate each exchange with little negative impact to my own image. Each of these actions may not have helped me advocate for my program but they did help me maintain an image of myself with those at the table of someone who is only there to help.

**Hedging my responses.** My verbal exchanges in these events supported my presentation of meekness in that they were perpetually hedged within passive language. Rarely did I offer direct counters or challenges to opinions and perspectives I disagreed with, but rather couched my responses in clarification questions or suppositions. Beginning with phrases such as "I would offer" (The Ambush:1, p. 4; Fighting Back:1, p.

4) and “I hear what you’re saying” (The Ambush:1, p. 5) allowed me to counter the offered perspectives without appearing to directly dispute the position of someone in authority.

**Questions instead of critiques.** When I was not hedging my counter statements, I was asking questions. When I was initially confused as to why the program was being questioned I did not directly ask the AD what was happening. Instead, I asked clarifying questions in our exchanges about particular elements of the program, in hopes he would share more openly about his concerns. In fact, the most direct question I asked was “is there something in particular you’re looking for” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 2) and only after we had exchanged multiple emails. This round about form of questioning allowed me to express my confusion without presuming any malfeasance on his part.

**Assuming Responsibility.** In fact, I was more likely to presume that I had made a mistake before grafting that on to someone else. In my initial exchanges with the AD, I found myself wondering “if I had submitted something incorrectly” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 1) and questioning whether or not I had “missed an email somewhere” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 1). Even when others encouraged me to be direct, I still viewed the problem as my fault instead.

“Something seems weird about this,” I said to Lawson as he finished changing out of his work clothes. I made the mistake of peeking at my phone during the Sunday morning service and found [the AD’s] newest email. The knots in my stomach returned and I was unable to focus on the rest of Lawson’s sermon. With Emmett down for his afternoon nap, I could finally focus a little bit, making the nerves just jump to a new level.

“Maybe you should ask him what he wants to know?” Lawson suggested.  
“Fair. I don’t always know the best ways to talk with him but maybe I’m missing something in what he wants,” I replied. (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 1)

Despite the anxiety I presented here, I was still unwilling to believe that this situation was anyone's fault but my own. If everything was my fault, then I could avoid confronting the AD about his behavior.

**Helpfulness as Appeasement.** Even when I did offer a challenge in some way, I still felt the need to be helpful. In one of my email exchanges with the AD, I both named the places of tension and immediately followed up with solutions.

[AD],

I'm wondering if you would be willing to meet to talk more about this. The conversations I've been having with leadership suggest that this is one of the few programs that won't get the axe given the climate at the moment. So I would like to hear what you have been hearing.

In terms of the dialogues, though we have 17 topics we have about 5-6 identities that those topics speak to. It would be hard for me to have them do new topics because they won't have a chance to meet between now and then to develop the new curriculum for those dialogues. However, I can be particular with the identities that I have them focus on. Our most popular sessions tend to be ones on race/ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. Would it be helpful to offer a narrowed down selection of identities they can choose from in their topics?  
Becky (Something's Not Right Here:1, pp. 3-4)

In this exchange I directly addressed the differing conversations we had with upper administrators about this program and named the difficulties of changing the program with so little notice. However, I followed these counters with prepared solutions, rather than leaving the planning up to him. By presenting options, I presented myself as less of a burden.

### ***All About Becky***

At the base of my reputation is me: how I position myself, view myself, and offer myself to the world. Each of these elements of my reputation tied directly to my desire to be seen as a good white woman. Therefore, each tactic was designed to further that image

of myself. I argue that my establishment and maintenance of my reputation existed as a means to keep my wants and fears at the forefront in every situation. Though autocritography demands a level of self-centering (Awkward, 1999), it also provides a way of highlighting how we practice that centering as well as how it helps and hinders us (A. Johnson, 2017). By investigating both what I wrote in my events but also how I wrote them and how I wove the story around myself, a number of self-centering practices surfaced: inner monologuing rather than external processing and viewing everyone and everything according to how they treated me.

**Holding It in For Goodness' Sake.** As the events continued, there were a number of moments where the reader was subject to my inner thoughts either voiced aloud to empty rooms or just in my mind. In these moments I shared much of the conflict and negative emotions I felt without actually sharing them with anyone. In “Something’s Not Right Here,” after I learned that administrators had decided to cut the P2P program without speaking to me, I finally shared that “just knowing that people were somewhere talking about me, about my work, was infuriating” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 5). This was the first time I expressed an emotion other than shock, worry, and confusion; an emotion directed at others rather than myself. And the way I described that moment, matters. I did not share this feeling with anyone else but myself and the reader. I internalized it, dwelled on it, but did not send it back to those who elicited it from me. To do so would have been a level of confrontation that threatened the reputation I hold dear. Instead, I shared it with the reader so that the two of us knew, deep down, how I really

felt. This vulnerability, this shared secret, further cemented the bond between myself and the reader.

Opening up to the reader, and the reader alone, served as an opportunity to justify why I attempted to save face with those in power in the story. It was not that I agreed with what was occurring, it was that I was unable to share my disagreement. Centering my fear, my hesitancy, and my concerns acted as my excuse. In “The Ambush,” I learned that the fate of the P2P program was pre-determined before I entered the room as its advocate.

I stared from face to face, looking for some sign of disagreement or at least discomfort. But 5 variations of pity stared back at me.

“So what do you suggest that we do?” I asked hesitantly. Even allowing the question to leave my mouth felt like a betrayal.

“I think we need to scrap it,” the AD jumped in almost immediately. “Let’s start from scratch, really build something the kids can relate to.” Four heads nodded in agreement.

“I hear what you’re saying,” I said hesitantly, hoping no one called my bluff on that statement. (The Ambush:1, p. 5)

The reader knew my hesitancy and guilt, the administrators in the room did not. The reader experienced the corner I believed surrounded me while the administrators carried on without a worry or care. By noting the fear of being seen as bluffing, I named to myself and the reader the hesitancy I felt. The administrators remained clueless, experiencing only my acquiescence. However, by sharing my inner struggle, I revealed that I was actually helpless to stop the change from occurring. So, what initially looked like acquiescence then became helplessness.

**Policing the Standard.** Because no other characters were allowed their own voice in these stories, I became the only lens through which they are viewed. Those that

agreed and supported me in my moments of need became “good.” However, those that disagreed with and took advantage of me became “bad.” For example, the AD was the first character I assessed in these events. He was automatically positioned as an antagonist to my protagonist given his interruption of my tranquil moment with a sleeping child within the first few moments of the first event. Each character, as they are introduced, are assessed in similar ways.

My supervisors were automatically sorted into the “good” group given my description of them as people with “calm[ing]” affects (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 4) and their ability to “always know what to do” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 5). As the events progressed, I commented on both women’s competencies and advocacy skills (Fighting Back:1) as well as how they offered me comfort and support (Fighting Back:1; 4:1). Positioning them as helpful and kind to me was what demonstrated their “goodness.” And, by assessing them in this way, I too was seen as good. I was capable of valuing and noting good characteristics in those around me, therefore I must be of good character too for these women to support and care for me.

Other characters were not so lucky. The President’s Team Member (PTM) was in almost automatic receipt of my negative assessment. She refused to read through my handout (The Ambush:1, p. 2), was the first to counter my positive assessment of the P2P program (The Ambush:1), and voiced the most specific racist statements in all of the events.

“I don’t understand why we’re talking about privilege like this anyway,” the PTM chimed in. “White privilege isn’t really even a thing anymore. There are just a few students saying mean and hurtful things. But mostly our students are good people trying to learn and grow. Trying to force them to feel bad about who they



are and what they have is just as discriminatory.”

My fingers were so tightly fisted around the table ledge by the time she was done speaking that I had to mentally force myself to let go. (The Ambush:1, p. 3)

No one else voiced these specific tropes so directly in any of the events. In fact, the PTM was given no positive assessment at all. By positioning her statement against my intense physical reaction, I controlled how the PTM was experienced here. Given her reaction, the reader might have concluded that, not only were her statements wrong but that the PTM herself was not a good person for believing such things that made me uncomfortable. In this vein, I was then assumed to be a better person for seeing the flaw in her argument.

Even the Senior Administrator did not slip past my judgements. Though our initial exchanges were fairly neutral or even positive at times, eventually even he failed in my assessment. After deciding that the program would be cut, he dismissed the remainder of the conversation as unimportant. ““Oh, well you all can figure that out, can’t you,’ the Senior Administrator asked, standing from the table. ‘I’ve got another meeting that I need to get to. I look forward to seeing you all soon.’ And with that, he was gone” (The Ambush:1, p. 5). His quick dismissal and exit denoted his lack of care and concern for something that mattered so much to me. By devaluing this program and its future in that moment, the Senior Administrator lowered in my assessment.

### **Power as Community**

A large part of how I maintained a reputation had to do with the company I kept. As a child, my parents stressed the importance of the friends that I kept and their influence on my life. If I surrounded myself with “good” people, I would be successful

and happy. If I hung around “bad” people, though, I would risk walking down the wrong path. As with the overall concept of reputation, there were no parameters offered on what made someone good or bad. So, yet again, I was tasked with defining these standards for myself based on the actions of those that looked like me.

Over time, I learned that keeping “good” company looked like building, protecting, and/or prioritizing relationships that both benefit my professional and personal goals and aims while also protecting my image as a white woman upholding idealized objectified standards. This perception of community played out in a number of ways throughout this study. I found myself prone to modeling the behaviors and wording of those I deemed as “good” as a means to relate and connect to them. I found myself positioning people as my protectors or guardians when I felt scared or unsure. And, when I could no longer see someone as “good,” they became subjects of my judgment and condescension.

### ***Am I Doing This Right?***

Role modeling became a strong resource for me throughout these events. The experience of having my program under such deep scrutiny was new and intimidating so I often found myself questioning how to properly engage in a space. Often, throughout the events, I would look to those I respected for guidance. However, instead of directly asking these individuals for assistance, I would simply mimic their words and actions. My supervisors were the most common sources of this practice. In “Something’s Not Right Here” when I am unsure how to write an email that pointedly speaks to the issues occurring in my communication with the AD, I note how my supervisor “always knew

what to say and how to get to the point of an issue” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 5). In fact, reading through her emails with the Assistant Administrator (AA), I found myself inspired; “maybe that was something I could model for myself” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 5). As I worked to create a more direct response to the AD I even strived for a “more assertive” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 6) closing in order to emphasize my intentions.

In “Fighting Back,” as I found myself in increasing levels of stress, I also found myself modeling the behaviors of my supervisors even more, even down to their body movements. Given my heightened levels of stress and anxiety, I compensated by matching their “long, confident strides” as well as “straight shoulders and raised chins” (Fighting Back:1, p. 1). I followed them into the meeting room, sat where they sat, following along in their wake even though the program we were there to discuss was mine in creation and implementation. I watched their responses as they spoke in the space, admiring their “steady” (Fighting Back:1, p. 2) voices and how they “never missed a thing” (Fighting Back:1, p. 3) when analyzing the space. At times, it seemed as though I spent more energy in the event describing their amazing engagement skills rather than the conversation themselves, indicating my deep levels of admiration and awe. When I finally do take the initiative to counter the AD directly, I do so only after “tightening my shoulders and raising my chin” (Fighting Back:1, p. 5), similar to how I had seen my supervisors behave earlier. By mimicking their actions and watching their engagement patterns, I was able to find a way to engage independently in the space.

My supervisors were not the only people I modeled myself after in these events. In “The Ambush,” I did not have my supervisors there to support me or to provide guidance on how to navigate the space. Therefore, I looked for other “good” people to follow. The Senior Administrator, an older white identified man with the highest position in the room, seemed to fit the bill nicely. When we first met the Senior Administrator, he pulled up to the building that I was locked out of and already late to the meeting. As he approached the building, “I smiled. If you’re going to be late to a meeting, be late with the highest ranking person in the room I guess” (The Ambush:1, p. 1). Though I did not know him personally before this moment, I positioned him as someone worth knowing.

When the Senior Administrator showed interest in the program’s structure and content, I “brightly” (The Ambush:1, p. 3) responded. When he wanted to know more about the facilitators’ selection process I “perked up” and “lean[ed] forward” (The Ambush:1, p. 4) as I shared our detailed approach. At every opportunity I met his curiosity and enthusiasm with more of my own. Later, as it became obvious that the Senior Administrator was not keen on advocating for the program, I still looked to his actions and words for guidance.

“In times like these we need to find a way to focus on things like our core values: honesty, integrity, and respect.” He emphasized each word with a tap of his hand to the table.

“I would like to offer that I think this program does support those values,” I said, carefully trying to conceal the growing shake in my limbs and voice. “We offer a chance for students to honestly reflect on who they are, learn how to respect each other’s differences, and act with integrity when engaging across difference.” I too added emphasis with a tap of the table. (The Ambush:1, p. 4)

In this exchange, not only did I share examples of the concepts he claimed were missing from my program by copying his words, but I also mimicked his taps on the table to make sure he was paying attention.

By modeling his words and behavior, I clearly wanted him to notice what I was saying and find credibility in it. This role modeling practice offered a way for me to find a steady anchor in a stressful space. I used this individual's actions and communication patterns as a guide in order to successfully navigate my environment. Modeling myself after the Senior Administrator allowed me to fall in line with what I considered to be "good" behavior. As a white woman, I feel drawn to embody and model authority figures in my environment. The Senior Administrator, having the most authority in the room, was the best person for me to position as a guide for the right and wrong behaviors in the space.

***In Front of Every Good Becky is...***

When role modeling did not help me navigate the stressful situation I was in, I looked for the people around me best suited to serve as protectors or guardians. By hiding behind "good" people either physically or metaphorically, I separated myself from the negative events happening around me. In "Something's Not Right Here," during my initial email exchange with the AD, I became aware that the problem he was investigating with the P2P program was far more serious than I first assumed.

*Leadership is nervous about P2P due to campus climate. If we can't deliver one universal topic, or maybe 2 or 3 that apply directly to core values, I suspect it will get the axe. I figure doing less is harder because your facilitators aren't necessarily crosstrained. (Something's Not Right Here:1, p. 3)*

It was this moment where the conversation shifted from one of confusion and worry to frenzy and dread. My first reaction was to “rush[] into my bedroom and [pull] up my supervisor’s phone number” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 3).

Though bringing in a supervisor when a message like this is received is not out of the ordinary, the way I described the action matters. Just hearing her voice “calmed me a little” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 3). This phone call was not just about reporting out, it was about seeking support, safety. At a point in the call I “sniff[] back tears” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 3) in order to continue the conversation, forcing my supervisor to change the conversation from planning to care. Though I apologized for my emotional state and the weekend interruption, I did not ask her how she felt about all of this. Despite the fact that this program was not just mine but a portion of her job responsibilities as well, I did not investigate how this potential judgement impacted her. I merely thanked her for the support, “let out a steadying breath and close[d] the call” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 3)

After speaking with my supervisors and learning that I would be attending the administrative meeting alone, my hesitations were clear (Something’s Not Right Here:1). My supervisor had to ask more than once if I was up to the task. Though I responded in the positive, my physical demeanor indicated otherwise, causing her to provide me with multiple affirmations as I left the room (Something’s Not Right Here:1). My hesitancy indicated how much I disliked the idea of going to this meeting alone. Despite her support, her encouragement, and her hard work that allowed me to attend in the first place, I still presented an emotionally unsure front.

This hesitancy was one of the driving forces that led me to position the Senior Administrator as my protector in “The Ambush.” With every interaction, I attempted to charm him in order to gain his support. When he was confused about my identity and why I was in his building, I offered him smiles, handshakes, and my formal title (The Ambush:1, p. 1). My positive attitude stayed directed on the Senior Administrator despite the critiques offered by the AD and PTM. My goal: to make sure he saw me as someone worth defending. His praise made me “blush” (The Ambush:1, p. 3) and “preen[]” (The Ambush:1, p. 4). I did not begin to accept defeat in the meetings until I realized that the Senior Administrator was no longer a viable protector in the space.

“You know, you really have something special here,” the Senior Administrator said. He smiled kindly and I couldn’t help but smile in return, preening under his praise. “You’ve built a strong program and are trying to do something very brave and bold. It’s well crafted, well thought out, and well researched.”

“Thank you,” I responded quietly.

“But unfortunately, it’s just not working.” He added.

My brain came to a screeching halt.

“I’m sure you can understand how hard it is to have to cut a program like this but it just doesn’t seem to be reaching the students,” he continued. (The Ambush:1, p. 4)

The shock of losing his support in that moment was so jarring I lost almost all will to advocate from that point on.

I stared from face to face, looking for some sign of disagreement or at least discomfort. But 5 variations of pity stared back at me.

“So what do you suggest that we do?” I asked hesitantly. (The Ambush:1, p. 5)

Without a guardian in the space, I felt I had no option but to acquiesce to their demands.

And, in that moment, I not only sided with them but I showed solidarity by saying “we” (The Ambush:1, p. 5). It stopped being me against them but a unified group beginning to move in the same direction.

Also, when I lost my protector in the space, I felt that need to call in reinforcements. When I asked that my supervisors be included in conversations moving forward, I found a way to delay the inevitable just a moment longer. Though “be[ing] hesitant to make any sweeping decisions without first talking to my supervisors” (The Ambush:1, p. 5) was a logical next step, I did not do it solely for that reason. Instead, it provided me with an opportunity to garner support in a place where I felt I had none. I knew my supervisors were my protectors, they had already proven so. Therefore, by bringing them into the conversation, I hoped to have others there to advocate for me and the P2P program without further opening myself to disapproval from the upper administrators.

### ***Bless Their Hearts***

At various points throughout the event, actors moved from “good” to “bad” in my appraisal. When that happened, the language I used to describe and position them in the story changed drastically. As people hurt or opposed me, they were dismissed throughout the events. The AD began the story without much of my support or admiration. The reader was introduced to him as someone who invaded my weekend and family time, caused me stress that kept me from enjoying my personal life, and was unclear in his communication skills. His very name in my inbox incited “knots in my stomach” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 2) and his short and vague emails elicited more confusion and dread (Something’s Not Right Here:1). The only descriptions he received from me in “The Ambush” were his short and direct critiques in opposition to my well-



rehearsed defenses of the program (The Ambush:1). And in “Fighting Back” he was the first and only one to make me express any externally-directed negative emotions.

*How could he? How could he write this now? Today? How could he say that he understood and then chastise me for not falling in line? I couldn't remember being so angry in my life. I couldn't remember anything outside of those words repeating indefinitely before my eyes. (Fighting Back:1, p. 6)*

His critique of my behavior and that of my supervisors drew out of me an intense negative reaction, one that reflected on him. Rather than focusing on his critique, I wrote it off merely by describing how unjustified it felt.

The PTM did not fair much better in my descriptions. She was the first to openly critique my program and did so using stereotypically racist arguments (The Ambush:1). The combination of her refusal to read my information, constant critiques, racist statements, and dismissal of my supervisors all led me to be completely write her off in these tellings (The Ambush:1; 3:1). One of the most poignant moments of my dismissal came in the form of my direct critique of her. The PTM was the only person whom I assertively counter in any of the events.

“Well why don't you look over the dialogue topics and pick some that we can use,” I looked up to see the AD addressing the PTM. My fists clenched even tighter as I tried to maintain my composure.  
“Sure.” She turned to look at me. “Please send me a list of the topics and I'll let you know what I approve for January.”  
“The topics are on the list in front of you,” I said automatically before realizing how bold that sounded. “But I would be happy to email them if you would like.”  
“I will just look over these, thanks,” she responded with an extra layer of sweetness in her tone. (The Ambush:1, pp. 5-6)

This exchange showed a side of me I had not yet written, one that was almost sassy in response. I dismissed the PTM so fully that I did not even question the level of snark that

I offered her in this moment until after I said it. By momentarily ceasing to worry about my reputation in this moment, I indicated how little I value or respected her opinion of me.

In a way, I presented the PTM as a white woman who violated the good behavior I expected of myself and other white women. Her refusal to validate my efforts by reading through my materials and her lack of acknowledgement of my hard work as the Senior Administrator noted created tension for me. Instead of attempting to win her to my side, I dismissed her, invalidated her opinion. It was as though her refusal to see my goodness meant that she was lacking in goodness in the first place. And because she was not acting within my frames of goodness she was no longer worth my time. Holding to the standard of goodness, I found her lacking and treated her as such throughout the rest of the events.

### **Power as Choice**

The final part of creating and protecting a reputation stemmed from the way I chose to act. As a child, my caregivers often pointed out that how I acted said a lot about what I valued and what I wanted people to remember about me. If something was important to me I would put it first in my interests and daily focus. And what I chose to focus on would be judged by those around me so it must stand up to the scrutiny of others. Therefore, I learned that I need to constantly act in ways above reproach. This took the form of electing when and how to engage in situations that both benefit my professional goals and aims while also protecting my image as a white woman upholding

idealized objectified standards. The choices I made to act, or not to act, often fell in alignment with how I believed a good white woman should behave.

In this study, the choices I made or avoided making spoke not only to what I felt was most important in the moment but also indicated which self-image I felt was the most crucial to present for others and which relationships were of the most value to me in that moment. As I sorted through this portion of the data I noted how sometimes I chose silence, or to remain silent rather than risk myself. Other times, I acted when it was required of me, such as when I was asked to speak by others. Finally, when I did choose to speak of my own accord, I did so only when I could justify my statements with evidence in order to appear more credible to those with whom I was speaking. This section in particular connected closely to the research question: how has the institution insulated and empowered me in my practices of gendered racism.

***If You Don't Have Something Nice to Say...***

As I child I learned that often not speaking was a better choice than saying the wrong thing. Those that spoke up but were deemed “wrong” often ended in being censured for their actions. Whereas, if I remained silent, I could progress through the conversation without being noticed, avoiding any association with wrong doing. This held true at various parts in the study as well. Part of protecting my reputation in this study revolved around times I chose to hold my tongue. At times when I chose not to speak out or to overlook and ignore things I saw, I was rewarded by white upper administrators with the continuation of a pristine reputation.

I shared earlier in this chapter of my hesitancy to show any negative feelings towards the white upper administrators with whom I interacted. This action not only helped me maintain a positive self-image and obtain protectors and guardians when need be, but it also helped me contain my negative thoughts so as not to incur judgment from others. Throughout my initial email exchange with the AD, I constantly expressed confusion and worry, but not anger (Something's Not Right Here:1). In the retelling of this event, however, I described my exchanges with him in a much more negative light.

So he asked me about that and I was a little confused, but I just like responded a quick, you know, we're doing our usual schedule. It's not a big deal. Um, the, is there something that you need to know specifically, like a date or a deadline and he wrote me back and was like, um, are you doing like a bunch of different topics or are you doing a couple of topics? And again, I was a little confused because one, I didn't understand why he was asking me in the first place when all the information hadn't changed from the last year. Two, I didn't understand why he was asking me that on a Saturday. It seemed like he could have asked that during a weekday. And three, um, I felt like, have you ever been in one of those conversations where you feel like somebody's looking for something, but they're not telling you what it is and they're waiting for you to say it or not say it? That's what it felt like. It felt like digging. And I was confused. (Something's Not Right Here:2, p. 2)

Though the emotion I name here is still confusion, the critique of the process and my discomfort with it are much clearer. In this assessment of our conversation I noted the oddities, the misalignments with how things should go, and the sense of foreboding with which the conversations left me.

However, in neither telling of this event did I share any of this discomfort with him directly.

*Two or three topics? Talk to me about the number. Is there something in particular you're looking for?*

I hesitated over the informality of my approach but my building dread and

frustration got the best of me and I hit send before I could think of a rephrasing. (Something's Not Right Here:1, pp. 2-3)

Instead of pointing out his incomprehensible communications or naming that all of this is happening over a weekend rather than during business hours, I merely asked for a little bit more clarification. By doing so, I intentionally chose silence over confrontation. The silence allowed him to continue unchecked and unaware of the inappropriateness of his actions. In this way, my silence represented consent.

There were some moments that I simply refused to call something out. In "Fighting Back," I noticed that the Senior Administrator, when responding to our group, would only look at me when he spoke. Though my two supervisors who identify as Black women were the ones he was responding to, "his eyes stayed fixed on me" (Fighting Back:1, p. 3). And, though "I began to track that and watch that as the exchanges went on" (Fighting Back:2, p. 3), at no point in the event did I name this for the room. I chose to hold on to the action until I brought it up to my supervisors later in the privacy of our office space. In doing so, the behavior went unchecked and my supervisors were tasked with helping me understand it later (Fighting Back:1, p. 5). By not addressing it in the moment, I stopped myself from potentially harming my reputation in his eyes. By bringing it up later, I attempted to look "good" in the eyes of my supervisors for noticing his actions.

### ***The Adults Are Speaking...***

At times I could not slip through an exchange without speaking. Times when I was asked to speak or expected to respond, I found ways to act that supported the

hierarchical structure in play. One place this occurred was in how I acted towards my supervisors versus the AD in “Something’s Not Right Here.” I spent an agonizing amount of time thinking through how I would respond to the AD.

I pulled up his email again trying to think of a response, something I could say that could remind him that this work had value. That my work had value... As I drove into work I formatted a response over and over in my head. (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 5).

I spent large portions of the “Something’s Not Right Here” drafting responses, analyzing emails, and questioning his motives. When I did finally send responses, they were often more detailed than what I had received from him.

*I’m wondering if you would be willing to meet to talk more about this. The conversations I’ve been having with leadership suggest that this is one of the few programs that won’t get the axe given the climate at the moment. So I would like to hear what you have been hearing.  
In terms of the dialogues, though we have 17 topics we have about 5-6 identities that those topics speak to. It would be hard for me to have them do new topics because they won’t have a chance to meet between now and then to develop the new curriculum for those dialogues. However, I can be particular with the identities that I have them focus on. Our most popular sessions tend to be ones on race/ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation.  
Would it be helpful to offer a narrowed down selection of identities they can choose from in their topics?  
Becky (Something’s Not Right Here:1, pp. 3-4)*

In my responses I would do much of the work for him, outlining conflicts, offering possible compromises, and even predicting possible issues he might have, all phrased in a respectful and passive tone. By doing so much work, I hoped to make his job easier.

However, I did not offer this same effort for my supervisors. My first exchange with them was a tearful Sunday phone call in which the only I offered in the way of help was “is there something happening that I don’t know about?” (Something’s Not Right

Here:1, p. 3). Every time I interacted with them I offered no suggestions or recommendations. I merely looked to them for all of the answers and then followed their lead. In this comparison, the person with the most power yet treated me with the least respect received my best efforts. Whereas, those with less power yet much more respect and care for me, were positioned to do work for me. The goodness standard I attempted to uphold throughout this experience did not seem to apply to my supervisors in the same way. In fact, I was often much more concerned with how the white upper administrators perceived me than the perceptions of my two Black women supervisors.

This same respect for authority slipped into the administrative meetings as well. Though I shared in my events that the Senior Administrator, PTM, and AD all treated me with disrespect in some way, it was the AD and PTM that received the full negative impact of my telling. The Senior Administrator, however, remained fairly unscathed in my summaries. The PTM was positioned as racist (The Ambush:1) and the AD as inflammatory (Fighting Back:1). However, even though I detailed how the Senior Administrator underestimated me (The Ambush:1; 3:1), I never directly blamed him for his actions. Therefore, the person at the top of the power structure in space, received the least amount of blame.

### ***It's Not Just Me Saying This...***

When I could not remain silent but instead felt the need to counter or critique, I did so in very intentional ways. Most of the counter responses I offered were phrased through the words and beliefs of others, rather than myself. When I phrased my careful email replies to the AD, I noted the importance of showing that “this work had value.

That my work had value” (Something’s Not Right Here:1, p. 5). In order to obtain this value, I often chose to hide behind others.

“I would offer that anything less than 75 minutes would not be worth the effort we give it.” Tightening my shoulders and raising my chin, I went on. “I still believe that discussing the bare minimum around social identities is the key to having a conversation about respect. All of the research that I have read on diversity education supports that. And any conversation about social identity without some time to do a learning activity would turn into a lecture. And we know that lectures are often the least effective teaching method for students.” (Fighting Back:1, p. 5).

I was the expert in the room on this program, yet I found myself relying more on the perspectives of research and other experts than I did my own experience.

Even though I mentioned earlier how I chose to dismiss the PTM in these events, I still felt the need to justify my dismissals. In my retelling of “The Ambush,” I summarize her remarks as “a minor rant about how, um, white privilege wasn't really a thing anymore. And how we really shouldn't be saying that phrase or talking about it in that way” (The Ambush:2, p. 2). The way I describe my response differs in the two tellings of this event. In the retelling, I specifically name the concepts of “racism and white privilege and whiteness” (The Ambush:2, p. 2) and my understandings of her problematic statements. However, in the initial telling, my response is critical from other people’s perspectives rather than my own.

“Actually,” I reply, clearing my throat and checking my tone at the same time. “There are a number of scholars who would disagree with that. There are even entire programs at different institutions across the US that teach classes specifically on whiteness and how it operates.” (The Ambush:1, p. 3).



Though I offer critique, I only do so through the thoughts and perspectives of “scholars,” those positioned as more knowledgeable than me, and therefore more trustworthy. I did not recognize my own expertise, my own value in that space. To do so, would be to place myself in a riskier position. Instead of critiquing concepts, they would be critiquing me. I instead put forth my ideas in the form of someone else’s so that, if they were not positively received, I lost nothing.

### **Releasing My Reputation**

The downside of maintaining a reputation is that, eventually, whether I intend to or not, I do something that hinders it. When I act outside of the bounds of idealized objectification and standards set for me, I threaten the reputation I strive to maintain. When a violation occurs, I lose a form of credibility with those I am trying to impress. My sense of authority may be questioned, my status as “good” may be in some way tarnished. I am knocked down the ladder and must work to climb back up again.

Examining when I jeopardized my reputation throughout the course of these events, I noticed what I lost. I became seen as someone who betrayed the standards of practices held dear by the university. As someone who could potentially betray the process again, I was seen as problematic, a nuisance to the system. These perceptions made it difficult for me to trust myself and operate in spaces with the level of comfort and ease that I previously enjoyed. Despite all of these losses, however, I also experienced gains. I moved on from these experiences with a deeper and richer perspective of the systems of power at play and the people playing them out. And my choice of community

over my own reputation encouraged a more trusting relationship between myself and my supervisors.

During the process of the P2P program transition, I committed two grievous offenses against my reputation. The first one came in “The Ambush” where, when it was determined that the program should be cut entirely, I advocated that I bring in my supervisors to the conversation to get their perspectives as they had been unable to attend the meeting with me. The ensuing confusion and pushback indicated that I had crossed over a line in some way. The second offense was that, following this meeting with administrators, I joined my supervisors in attempting to advocate for the program’s continuance in its original form. By doing so, the violation moved me from a one-time troublemaker to a problematic person.

### **Becky the Nuisance**

As I mentioned previously, the initial push to include my supervisors in the conversation following my first meeting with the administrators was not a selfless act. I was in search of advocates, people who would fight for me and alongside me as we attempted to keep the P2P program unchanged. However, the act of advocating for more voices had an unintended consequence for everyone involved.

“So what do you suggest that we do?” I asked hesitantly. Even allowing the question to leave my mouth felt like a betrayal.

“I think we need to scrap it,” the AD jumped in almost immediately. “Let’s start from scratch, really build something the kids can relate to.” Four heads nodded in agreement.

“I hear what you’re saying,” I said hesitantly, hoping no one called my bluff on that statement. “I would like to talk this over with my supervisors, though.” Pleasant faces turned puzzled and no one spoke. (The Ambush:1, p. 5)

This moment was really the first time in the event that I requested something of the group. Up until this point I offered perspectives and counterpoints, but I had not asked for nor expected anything from anyone. The transition from pleasantries to puzzlement indicated the level of confusion this act inspired in the administrators but also in myself. My own confusion bloomed as I continued to explain that “this program affects a lot of people” (The Ambush:1, p. 5) so “it would be something that [my supervisors], I think should be a part of” (The Ambush:2, p. 4).

As the conversation continued, the PTM attempted to negate my request by assuring me that “they already know about all of this” (The Ambush:1, p. 5). This was the true turning point. Two things occurred in this moment: (a) I knew she was wrong given that I had just spoken to my supervisors and they had no more information than me and (b) my trust in my supervisors outweighed my trust in the PTM.

“Um, actually, I don’t think any of us were really aware of the desire to cut the program entirely. And, either way, this is something I would need to talk with them about before we start making any changes.” The PTM pursed her lips and remained silent at that. (The Ambush:1, p. 5)

Given our interactions previously in this meeting and the fact that I had already dismissed her as not “good,” I was much more willing to push back in this moment. Upholding my standards of reputation here also led to their downfall. As the door to making requests opened, I continued to walk through it, further injuring their perceptions of me.

“Why don’t we,” the Senior Administrator interjected, “plan a time for us to meet so we can figure out what this looks like moving forward?” Everyone nodded slowly.

“I think that would be good,” I agreed. “However, there are a couple of immediate issues including the dialogues we have scheduled for January orientation and the fact that I am about to start training a new cohort of PDLs in just a few weeks.

What would you recommend between now and then?” Under the table my hands clenched my pen in a death grip, striving to channel any and all tension out of my face. (The Ambush:1, p. 5)

Though I still practiced a form of image maintenance — fixing my face and maintaining an approachable demeanor — I did not keep myself from challenging the hierarchy around me and advocating for myself. In doing so, I became a problem. The request for more details, especially surrounding such a dramatic shift, should not have been an unexpected ask. However, given the threat to my reputation that had just occurred, now every request became a form of defiance.

### **Becky the Betrayer**

Following my violation of standards in the first meeting with administrators, I walked into the second meeting with a different outlook. No longer did I assume that everything was going to work out fine. Instead, it felt like we were “marching into battle” (Fighting Back:1, p. 1). The us versus them perception became reflected in the way all of us entered and settled into the space.

So as the meeting started, I remember that the Senior Administrator, the President’s Team Member and the Academic Advisor, who was also there, that I forgot to mention. Um, he, they came in together from the president's suite rather than everybody else who came in from the hallway entrance. And I remember feeling very nervous about the fact that they were together, because my uh, my assumption was that they had had a conversation before our meeting had started, that they had had, um, some kind of exchange, um, about this meeting. I don't know that that happened, but that was my assumption. Seeing them come together and they all sat on the opposing side of the table from us. So it felt very, um, uh, like we were at some kind of arbitration or something like that. (Fighting Back:2, p. 2)

Not only did I feel discomfort as these three individuals entered together through an alternate door, but we, my team and I, ended up seated on opposite sides of a table in a line as though we were in some kind of legal arbitration or organizational censure process. Clearly my mistrust of the space was far higher than when I had been in the same room before.

Though I offered challenges in this meeting, most of my energy was spent tracking the conversation, following the insights offered by my team members and the counters from those across the table. When I did speak, I echoed the statements of my colleagues and offered additional data to support their statements; often doing so only after being positioned to speak or looking to my team for support (Fighting Back:1, p. 3). As we met each counter argument, the tension in the room seemed to grow. At one point, when I shared that the program was operating at the entry level of social justice education practices and was accessible to all students whether or not it made them comfortable, the PTM reached a point of deep frustration.

“Well if that is the baseline, than we need what comes before that,” the PTM responded.

On either side of me, the shifts and tensions told me that my colleagues were not impressed with this response.

“Do you have an idea of what you would like that to be?” [My supervisor] asked, her voice dripping with politeness.

“I don’t know, something!” The PTM responded, her hands waving around her in emphasis. “You’re the experts.” (Fighting Back:1, p. 4)

This exchange revealed the limits of their complaints with the program.

They did not like what it was and wanted something new that could be seen as legitimate. Yet when we laid out the legitimacy of the program in its current form we

were met with unspecific resistance. We were labeled experts yet our expertise was not valid. The argument loop revealed that the discussion was not about finding a way of making things work. It was about giving us a space to voice our concerns before having an agenda pushed on us. When I stood in the way of that agenda, when I chose to side with my colleagues, I moved from being a nuisance to a betrayer.

Immediately following this meeting, I received an indication of my new status via email from the AD.

*I want you to understand that I think what your former supervisor started, and what you've continued, has value. But it was a big experiment. I think we've learned that it is not right for our population as a \*mandatory\* activity. I realize that the natural inclination is to argue the value of continuing with no change. "Students are philistines, they just don't get it." If it was my program I'd probably do the same. I don't fault you for that, but it's time for us to join together... Do I think you need to retain an hour on identity? Only if it is required for the message on core values in the second hour. I'd happily trade your hour on identity for an hour on financial health. If I had the power as instructor to make that change I'd do it immediately. I'm sorry that this transition seems so antagonistic. If [your supervisor's] eyes had been nail guns I'd be a bleeding corpse right now. From my perspective I think the meeting failed. I was hoping that when the Senior Administrator and your VP said we need to move another direction that your response would be "I'm happy to do that." (Fighting Back:1, p. 6)*

Through this message he confirmed my developing assessment of the meeting. It was staged to make us feel like we had done all we could to save our program. His dismissal of my advocacy as merely an emotional attachment refuted the expertise we brought to the space. The fact that he spent so much time in the email trivializing our resistance demonstrated that perhaps they had not expected nor anticipated such a unified front. He minimized the importance of the program by comparing its value to others and, by doing so, minimized my efforts and role by association. And finally, that I had chosen a side and

he determined it to be the wrong one. By standing by my supervisor — who he labeled as a threat — I had failed in his estimation. My refusal to fall in line seemed to be the height of my betrayal.

### **Becky Who?**

Much of “Gathering the Pieces” reflected the down side of losing my reputation. In this event I outlined the timeframe between the final decision to change the curriculum and the final approval and dissemination process. I also detailed much of my internal feelings at the delay of the approval process as well as fears of how this experience would continue to impact my reputation.

I spent most of the event sifting through the remains of the experience, looking for some shred of who I once perceived myself to be.

How am I supposed to do my work now? How am I supposed to get rid of this feeling of being watched and judged from the university? I can't trust myself anymore. I reread everything I send 10 times. I ask for [my supervisor's] advice on little things that I should be able to decide for myself. I just can't seem to make a decision. What if I make a mistake? What if the next time they take the PDLs? What if they take my job? (Gathering the Pieces:1, p. 1)

By choosing to work against the administration on this issue, I became aware of the tenuous state of my position as a white woman. I searched myself for the previous freedom I experienced doing my work only to realize that the freedom was actually just naivety. The truth was, I had only felt safe because I had never pushed against the boundaries set for me in such a direct way. The cost of my betrayal was a glimpse at the real system operating under and around me at all times. In that system I had no securities, assurances. And I spent a long time reeling from that newfound awareness. I found myself unable to trust my own judgment or rely on my expertise earned through both

structured education and real world experience. The potential of being without a safety net was debilitating.

### **Becky Has Joined the Chat**

Despite the losses, however, what I gained was far more important. The punishment of losing my sense of security in my work also served as a reward: (a) I learned about the power of conflict and its importance in social justice education work, (b) I started to understand more of the underlying systems at play than I had ever seen before, and (c) I gained a deeper relationship with my supervisors.

As noted earlier, once I started to challenge white upper administrators in these meetings, the practice became easier. When the PTM dismissed my request to inform my supervisors of the potential program changes as something they were already aware of, I had a sort of awakening. The truth was, they did not know. She, as my supervisors' supervisor knew that. I, as the person who had been in close communication with them, knew that. Whether or not it was an intentional lie, the deceit was apparent. Operating from the sense of right on the issue, I was able to really push back for the first time. Insisting that my supervisor's to be included made me incredibly "uncomfortable because I was very much aware of the power level in that room and that I was not even close to the pay grades of people in that space" (The Ambush:2, p. 4). The risk was not lost on me. But in doing so I learned that the first step into conflict was difficult but once I started, it was easier to continue. I had already threatened my reputation, what was one more challenge? So I continued to push back. I learned more about conflict from this exchange than I had in my previous two years in this position.



Throughout “Gathering the Pieces,” I described the experience of getting the new version of the program approved. There was a clear difference between how the program was treated when we were advocating for keeping it in its original form and when we had agreed to make changes.

So we sent [the updated curriculum] out, um, a day after we put it together. Um, and three weeks later we hadn't heard anything... we didn't hear from the Senior Administrator. We didn't hear from the PTM. We didn't hear from the AD, nothing. (Gathering the Pieces:2, pp. 1-2)

For a group that initially rushed to cut the program entirely, the process of making the requested changes seemed exponentially longer. Suddenly the program seemed to be of little import. When we were finally able to get the administrators to review our drafts, there was confusion as to who was actually in charge.

“So from what I am hearing, you will look at drafting a curriculum for this program that focuses more on respect and happens in less time, correct?” He looked around the table to gauge affirmatives...

“Great, I look forward to what you come up with.”

The rest of the meeting wrapped quickly with a tentative time frame to meet again and an agreement on the approval reporting line. (Fighting Back:1, p. 5)

Initially, the Senior Administrator assumed the role of final approver. However, after we sent in our draft three days after we were asked to create it, no one knew who was approving it. After back and forth with the AD, I finally received an email from the PTM four weeks after we submitted our draft. In this exchange her questions seemed to indicate that, either, she did not remember what we had decided to change or “she hadn’t read any of it... and was just speaking off of the general text of the email that I sent and not looking at the attachments” (Gathering the Pieces:2, p. 2).

Two weeks following this exchange, we were informed through the Diversity Advisor (DA) — who had been previously quiet during all of these conversations — that the AD was the approval person and that he would pass that on to the PTM and the Senior Administrator (Gathering the Pieces:2, p. 2). A process that began with four days of intensive emailing and meetings elongated into three months of back and forth and redirections.

So what went from an in-person planning meeting devolved into a multi-change, multi-occasion change of reporting structure, and, um, basically just disappeared from people's minds or at least that's what it felt like to me. Um, but we finally got our approval. (Gathering the Pieces:2, p. 2)

My ability to recognize and analyze this dissonance demonstrated my developing understanding of how the larger system operated. Before this experience, I might have chalked it up to people being busy or the chaos of a spring semester. But, after experiencing this process, I recognized an emerging pattern. When there was a potential for dissonance and disruption, there was a rush to engage and a high level of scrutiny. When we were following along with guidelines and acting as anticipated, it was easier to bury us under hierarchical structures and reporting lines. By refusing to even help us understand how information could be passed up the chain of command, we were slowed down even more in our ability to implement a quality program.

The most important gain, in this process, was my relationship with my supervisors. When I witnessed the Senior Administrator avoiding eye contact with them even when responding to their comments and questions, I realized I was witnessing something that they, as Black women, had told me was a common occurrence.

“[Supervisor], why did everyone keep talking to me?” I asked in a quiet moment.  
“What do you mean?”  
“I mean, of the four of us that they were talking to, you did most of the talking. Yet every time they looked at me.” Her jaw tightened as I spoke, confirming my observation. (Fighting Back:1, p. 5)

Instead of an answer, one of them asked me to consider the reason for myself. In doing so, she revealed both the weight I was placing on her to educate me but also trusted me to be able to decipher the experience for myself. As she left and I remained behind with my other supervisor, I felt as though I was seeing them both for the first time.

“... how often does that happen to you? To her?” I couldn’t look at her so I fixated on the nameplate on the front of her desk, my eyes tracing the letters of her name over and over in the silence.  
“I stopped counting a long time ago,” the exhaustion in her voice had me finally meeting her eyes.  
“I’m so sorry,” I blinked against the burn of tears threatening to fall. She didn’t need this from me. Not right now.  
“Don’t be sorry,” she said, holding my gaze steady. “Be different.” (Fighting Back:1, pp. 4-5)

This call to action gave me new purpose in my work as a social justice educator.

I began the interaction with guilt and shame, unable to meet her eyes even though the questions I asked were about the very same action from the Senior Administrator. I was, in real time, practicing the same kind of harm. Initially, I started to switch my approval seeking patterns from white upper administrators to my two Black women supervisors. However, knowing and valuing her as I did forced me to reevaluate my intention. The exhaustion in her voice and her trust in me to actually follow through with her request caused a paradigm shift of sorts. I began to seek out a way of living my life

without furthering gendered racist practices that would inevitably put more work on her. I did not want to cause her more harm. I wanted, in that moment, to act differently.

Later, when the AD mentioned that this same woman was threatening him during the meeting in such a way that “if [her] eyes had been nail guns I’d be a bleeding corpse by now” (Fighting Back:1, p. 5), the reference struck a far deeper chord than it might have originally.

... it also struck me that the only references that he made to my supervisors being in the space, um, was about feeling threatened from [my supervisor] as a black woman. Um, and that line about the nail guns, um, I think is really impactful because I was in that room. She wasn’t sending any hate in his direction. She wasn’t speaking negatively to him. She was kind. She was, um, like she was stern, but she wasn’t aggressive in any way. She was just speaking from her experience and her knowledge. Um, and she was advocating for her work and her colleagues, and he saw it as a threat. I wasn’t a threat, even though I probably looked at him more strongly than she did... And I think that really matters that he tried to coerce me and convince me even then, but he didn’t even look at her. (Fighting Back:2, p. 6)

This woman who I valued, admired, and modeled my work after had been wronged and positioned as a threat just for doing her job. The gendered racism he practiced with her versus the sexism he directed towards me clearly indicated that, though my supervisor and I were both women, we clearly did not navigate the world in the same way. And, even though we were not on the same side throughout this entire experience, he still seemed to think that I would relate to and even commiserate with his perception. By speaking of her in this way he framed her as a threat and me as an ally. This awareness was life changing for me. As I continue to move through the world I hold this exchange in my mind as an example of both the expectation of loyalty from my white peers as well as the call of change from my Peers of Color.

## **Conclusion**

There are a number of striking outcomes from this study including: (a) the importance that reputation played on how I operated in each of these events, (b) the reliance I had on idealized objectified standards in order to maintain my self-image, (c) the choices I made to both perpetuate norms as well as challenge them, and (d) what I lost and gained when choosing to act against the flow of power. Connected across these findings is the reality that I perpetuated gendered racist practices whether or not the situation involved People of Color. In fact, my very ways of operating throughout the process relied on gendered racist standards in order to ensure that I successfully navigated every event.

## CHAPTER 5

The truth is, very little in this study is new. In fact, most of what I discovered during my research journey adheres to what many Critical Race, Black Feminist, and Critical Whiteness scholars have already named: racism is systemic (hooks, 1989; Leonardo, 2004; Roediger, 1998), endemic (hooks, 1989; Leonardo, 2004; Medina, 2013), and often invisible to those who practice it (hooks, 1989; Leonardo, 2004; Roediger 1998) while overly apparent to People of Color (hooks, 1989; Leonardo, 2004; Medina, 2013). And white women are at the forefront of this problem (Collins, 1990; Daniel, 2019; Frankenberg; 1996; Lorde, 1984), practicing racism every day in our own unique ways (Collins, 1990; Frankenberg, 1996; Ozias, 2017). What makes this study different, however, is what it adds to the overall body of literature: further evidence of discrete practices embedded in everyday white woman's experiences.

The mundane nature of these events highlights how evidence of racism is not found solely in viral videos and top news stories. It is also in our meeting rooms, our office exchanges, our email correspondence. Because it is wrapped up in our socialization processes and how we see ourselves as individuals and members of larger collectives, there is not a single aspect of our life that remains untainted (Bondi, 2012; Frankenberg, 1996; Garner, 2007). White supremacy is not only overt racial epithets and drastic practices of violence (hooks, 1989; Medina, 2013) but also, "those acts, decisions, and policies that white subjects perpetrate on people of color" (Leonardo, 2004, p. 137). It is the everyday practice of domination actively engaged in by all white people in order to maintain power.

In this chapter I process through each of these additions to the literature: (a) the everyday subtleties of racist practices highlighted throughout the study, (b) how idealized objectification standards support and encourage my racial gatekeeping, (c) the practices of white supremacy in in all settings, (d) the tension I felt between self-preservation of my power and status as a white person and seeking freedom, and (e) the everyday barriers to People of Color in higher education. I then offer both practical and research applications for this study as well as potential directions for further inquiry.

### **Everyday Subtleties**

Though everything in this study felt deeply personal and radical to me, I realize that much of what occurred in the events I shared as well as their analysis is, in fact, mundane. Critiques of a diversity-based program are common and expected in social justice education work (Ahmed, 2012). None of these communications would go viral. Nothing I told here would likely lead to anyone losing their job or even being censured for their behavior. Everything described occurred within the bounds of the rules and procedures of a higher education workplace. It is the commonplace nature of this study, however, that makes it all the more meaningful.

One of the barriers to acknowledging and naming whiteness and racist practices is subtlety (Applebaum, 2016; Leonardo, 2004). There were very few moments of overt and explicit racist practices in all of the events I shared. Without moments to shake our fingers at and say “this part right here,” the racism is instead up for interpretation or even debate. Instead of derogatory terms or images, I describe verbal nuances. Instead of racist practices, I examine passive oversights. It is in the minute details where the real weight of

white supremacy thrives; the everyday practices that allow whiteness to remain dominant and make the flow of racism so strong that to disrupt seems akin to trying to swim upstream.

### **Naming the Nuances**

A large portion of my findings focused on the subtleties of communication and interaction with others. In some places, I noted how I used my emotional and physical responses to support a white supremacist system. Stifling my voice, adjusting my tone, and controlling my physical movements during meetings with upper administrators helped me maintain an image of myself as someone who did not challenge the status quo, who supported the system as it played out. By placing my reputation and corresponding (self-)image above the program I was advocating for as well as the needs of my colleagues, I buttressed the problematic practices already in place.

### **It Takes All of Us**

Because so much of this study exists in the nuanced spaces of everyday interactions, it quickly becomes clear how crucial we all are to the continuation of racism and racist practices. If I had simply been acting on my own, in my own isolated racist patterns, my behaviors would have seemed odd or out of place. They would likely have been named by my supervisors and/or the administrators with whom I engaged. Instead, my actions were treated as standard behaviors.

Mills (1997) outlines the insidiousness of the racial contract among all white people. In order to maintain our power and privilege we must work together in subtle and unified ways to continually support a system directed to our own advantage and to the



detriment of People of Color. And I acted accordingly through my gendered and racist practices of innocence and conflict avoidance. In doing so the white administrators gave me compliments and patted me on the head. I was doing my part and so were they. In fact, it was only when I stopped adhering to these, that I even realized that I was supporting the larger white supremacist system. The moment I acknowledged the lack of representation and insight from my supervisors in the decision-making process I broke the contract. The affirmations ceased and the censure began in an effort to remind of my place and responsibility in the system of white supremacy. This agreement and the ensuing momentary rupture demonstrate that, not only does racism operate in our everyday nuances but that it demands all of our (white people's) participation to continue.

### **Going with the Flow**

Tatum (2013) discussed the power of the flow of racism. That concept was never more transparent for me than in this study. Not only does racism demand all of our participation (Tatum, 2013) but it creates an intense current, indistinguishable from our everyday actions unless we suddenly try to swim in the opposite direction. It is when I acted outside of the bounds of expectations that things started to go awry.

When I participated in the initial meeting with administrators and inevitably agreed to consider cutting the program, I was treated with compliments and sympathy. However, when I suggested that my supervisors be brought in to the decision-making process, the conversation came to a halt. Where I once received kind looks, I was met with puzzled expressions. When I continued to push for their participation, the puzzlement changed to disappointment. By failing to go along with their plan, I caused a

disruption in the space. Not only did my failure to acquiesce to unspoken demands to harmonize result in withdrawal of their approval, but it also revealed their own culpability.

I also want to note that, though this moment seems small and insignificant, it was, in fact, incredibly taxing. I left that room emotionally drained, confused, and deeply distraught. Actively choosing to disagree with authority figures, facing their disapproval rather than fold under pressure was my own personal Everest. I say this not to romanticize or praise my actions but rather to highlight the immense effort it takes for even one small defiance. If the simple act of naming who was and was not in the room took that much emotional and physical energy, why would I want to continue to disrupt it? And how long could I possibly last against the force of the flow? The desire to give in and regain their approval continued throughout these events, never ceasing in its insistency.

### **Manipulating Norms**

The racist and problematic practices in this study did not occur on the overt level, but rather on the ingrained, everyday occurrences that are often so normalized that they are easy to ignore (Bondi, 2012; Tatum, 2013). I connect these occurrences to the behavioral legacies I have inherited from white women throughout history. These legacies set the stage for the normalized practices that I and others manipulated in order to maintain white supremacy throughout every email and meeting. As mentioned before, it takes all of us to maintain and police these roles.

## **It's Time to Own Up**

Though I would like to point to everyone else's racist actions as opposed to my own, through this study I was forced to struggle with how I embody white supremacist belief, values, and practices (hooks, 1996). Using autocritography as a form of looking back and then relooking (Awkward, 1999) made my complicity unavoidable. Just like the white women I examined throughout history (Brückmann, 2012; Catt, 1918; Nidiffer, 2000; Wollstonecraft et al., 1792/2014), I used my gender subordination as a shield and a weapon in order to secure some modicum of power guaranteed by my race. And, in doing so, I was actively complicit in the same issues I advocate against every day.

**Flexing my Shields.** Gender subordination acts as a shield for white women when we do not wish to address our racial power and privileges (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). This is glaringly apparent in this study as so much of my performance and image maintenance focused on presenting myself in ways that aligned with who I thought I was supposed to be as a white woman.

I adhered to the idealized standards of goodness that have been ingrained in me throughout my life. If a "good" woman is one who will go along to get along (Gillespie et al., 2001), I definitely fulfilled that role throughout most of the study. When faced with difficult situations, I constantly worried about how I was being perceived rather than focusing on the best thing for my program and my students. At almost every turn, the deeper issues I struggled with were about me: how I was being perceived and how I was perceiving others. This self-centered focus is the crux of the idealized standard. Maintaining my reputation, in the end, had nothing to do with anyone but me: the

approval I craved, the gold star that said I was good at my job and an overall good person. I avoided advocating for my program and for those around me and, instead, worried about myself. This individual focus is, in itself, an inherently white practice (Ahmed, 2007; Frankenberg, 1996). One that allows us to focus on our own wants and needs rather than consider the community around us. In doing so, we advocate for ourselves first, leaving the rest to sort themselves out.

I hid behind my naivety. The truth is, I should have done better in my actions because I know better. Anti-racist work was not new for me at the time, and the dissonance I felt and expressed throughout the study revealed the level of awareness I had of the events. However, one of the key shields for white women, and only white women, is our innocence, our naivety. Because we are constantly treated as unaware and child-like, this trait is hardwired into our socialization process (Wilcox, 2009). And it is a trait that I fully embraced throughout this study. Emotionally, I leaned towards shock and confusion. Verbally, I preferred clarification questions over declarative statements. Each of these actions enabled me to look innocent, potentially garnering me pity and protection from those around me. And, each step towards ignorance was one step away from accountability and action.

I positioned myself as meek and mild at almost every turn, investing wholeheartedly in that escape route reserved solely for white women (Collins, 1990; Daniel, 2019). Innocence often went hand in hand with my presentation of meekness. Physically, I often made myself smaller and less distracting in meeting spaces. I focused on controlling my body movements and facial expressions so that no one would take

notice of my conflicting emotions. In doing so, I avoided direct conflict and confrontation. I was able to maintain a space at the table with the administrators because I did not push back. Instead, my meekness enabled the flow of racism to continue undeterred.

**Testing my Weapons.** I was and am allowed gatekeeper status because of the intersections of my gender subordination and racial privilege. I am able to access positions of power because I am white. I am able to maintain my place in these positions because, as a woman, I do not pose a threat to the white men in charge. This was apparent throughout the study.

**Controlling the Information.** I decided what information was important. Despite my adherence to a presentation of naivety and innocence, it was clear that I was an expert in these spaces. I say expert because, most of the administrators had no idea what I did or how I did it. They did not understand how social justice programming was designed or implemented, nor did they seem to know much of anything about this particular program despite it being implemented on campus for three years. I was allowed to operate with little to no supervision by the administration, despite this being a mandated, university-wide program. It was only when the program came into question by those with influential power that the program suddenly gained attention. They were the ones seeking information; I was the gatekeeper. However, because of my perceived innocence and meekness, the information I did share struck them all with surprise. It seemed as though I was constantly underestimated and undervalued so that, when I presented myself as an expert, they did not know what to do with me anymore.

***Controlling the Invites.*** My first and most prominent moment of defiance in these events occurred when I advocated for my supervisors to be brought into the space before decisions were made. This moment, though a turning point in my behavior and the way I was treated in the space, also was as a demonstration of power. By advocating for the involvement of those outside of the room, I made it clear to the room that the direction our conversation was heading was not appropriate. Even though I invited them more for my own sense of security than out of concern for the correct process in decision-making, the action still served as me flexing my power. I not only felt secure enough to make the suggestion, but I then used my position to ferment my request. If I was lacking in power in the space, I would not have been able to make the request. They could have denied me. They could have moved forward without my supervisors' input. However, the administrators decided instead to go along with my suggestion, indicating that I had some foothold of decision-making power in that space.

***Controlling Goodness.*** My descriptions of administrators in both the events and their retellings as well as my analysis, connected directly to the white woman's ability to determine what is right and good (Wilcox, 2009). Given that white women are often the evaluators of what behaviors are good or appropriate (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017), I used that weapon to cast different administrators in good and bad lights depending on their treatment of me, my supervisors, or the situation at hand. Because I did not care for his persistent interruptions and his communication style, I wrote the Academic Advisor (AD) as bad from the beginning. When he President's Team Member (PTM), refused to look at my materials and used combative responses, I denied her credibility. The Senior

Administrator (SA) ceased to be impressed with me and, instead, decided to cut my program, so I cast him in a negative light. I decided that each of these actors were problematic and defensive throughout the events mainly because they acted in ways I did not like. They lost my good judgment, and, in conjunction with that, my loyalty.

My supervisors, however, retained my good favor throughout the events. I determined they were good and kind people because they listened to and supported me. Every mention of them included references to their kind expressions, empowering body language, and welcoming demeanors. Most of these references were in situations where they chose to be good to me. In return I gave them positive assessments and continued loyalty.

I even legitimized myself as the arbiter of goodness. By crafting the events strictly from my perspective, I prioritized my assessments of others as the most important. Throughout the events I detailed my emotional struggles, centering my own problems as the most important. The entire event structure that I created was designed to examine how others measured in comparison to me, centering myself at every turn. By making myself the measuring stick, I policed goodness as a means to get what I wanted or needed out of the situation.

The question then arises, would these events have taken a different turn if the white administrators had shown kindness and support and my supervisors, two Women of Color, had not? My measurement of goodness was not based in an understanding of a white supremacist system but rather how people treated me. I did not defend my supervisors because I saw the systemic practice of working outside of and around their

control as Black women. I did it because they were kind to me and the white administrators were dismissive and minimizing of my hard work. If the roles had been reversed, I would most likely have sided with the white administrators.

**Hitting the Snooze Button.** Another way that I maintained racist practices was simply by doing nothing. The flow of white supremacy and specific racist practices was so strong that, in order to maintain my positions of power, I merely had to do and say nothing (Tatum, 2013). There were several times throughout the events where I chose to swallow my inner thoughts rather than speak them. In each of these moments, there was a risk analysis occurring where I had to decide whether it was more important to speak clearly and decisively, naming the problematic practices at play, or keep my mouth shut and maintain a spot at the table. And the keeping my mouth shut part came with far less emotional turmoil and much more credibility in the space.

When I noticed that the SA refused to look my supervisors in the eye, I said nothing to him. I chose to literally look away from the occurrence rather than name it. Later, when I did name it, I did so in an environment where I felt more comfortable. Never mind the comfort of my supervisors who were the ones being treated terribly in the space. I prioritized my own needs, my own comforts, in order to keep from being confrontational in front of white administrators. I made the choice to go along in order to get along and, in doing so, I allowed a racist practice to continue unchecked and put the burden of explanation yet again on the shoulders of my supervisors, two Women of Color.



## **The Great Exchange**

Each of these examples from my own actions, outline the greatest unspoken exchange for white women: our loyalty and obedience to white men in exchange for their protection of our comfort, safety, and a sliver of their power (Daniel, 2019). Because we do not stand on solid ground in terms of social power due to our gender subordination, we need external sources of access to power. White men, and the programs and institutions that center around their wants, needs, and wishes, offer us more positions of authority and spots at the table, but we must always work to support their institutions if we want to maintain that access.

### ***Granting Safety, Expecting Obedience***

This exchange was never clearer to me than in the AD's final response to the events that took place. Following the second meeting I had with administrators, the AD emailed me a response which included both his assessment of the meeting as well as his evaluation of mine and my supervisors' actions. In this exchange, he made it clear that I had lowered in his estimation and expectations. Because I did not jump in line as he intended, I was a source of disappointment. Because I worked to maintain the program in its original form, I failed. But mostly, because I sided with my supervisors, one of whom he named as a threat, I lost my good standing in his estimation. By not responding to the administrators' wishes with "I'm happy to do that" (Fighting Back:1, p. 6), I caused a serious disruption in the system and, in doing so, jeopardized my reputation as a good, white woman.

The truth is, white women's power is tenuous at best (Lorde, 1984). We do have higher and more frequent access to systems than other marginalized populations (H. Johnson, 2017; Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). We do exist in a system designed to insulate and protect us (Daniel, 2019). But that access and protection comes at a serious price. Any step outside of the expectations of those in power, jeopardizes our protection and limits our access. Any choice to pursue our own wants, wishes, or needs puts us at risk of exposing this arrangement we operate under. And to defy this agreement leaves us exposed and vulnerable. This email, for me, served as a reminder of the fragility of this relationship. I entered into this chain of events with relatively little oversight and the freedom to operate the program as I deemed necessary. I left it with more oversight, more attention, and less flexibility in my work. By pushing against this oppressive system, I jeopardized my safety and access.

### **Racism No Matter Who is in the Room**

This exchange white women make to access power through pledging our obedience only succeeds because racism and systems of white supremacy exist at all times, no matter who is in the room. In fact, given the way white people conceptualize society around our own ways of thinking, being, and knowing, systems are designed with white people's expectations imbedded into everything that we do (Picca & Feagin, 2007). This frame of seeing the world means that inter-racial spaces are not a required setting for racism to occur (Picca & Feagin, 2007). In fact, insulated spaces such as meeting rooms with only white people present, are perfect places for white supremacist systems to flourish. Positioning racism as something that can only occur in certain spaces, at certain

times, and with certain people, is one of the strongest tools white people have to maintain and perpetuate racism. This became glaringly apparent for me throughout the course of these events.

### **What's That Over There?**

Putting parameters around when, where, and how racism occurs serves as a distraction white people can hide behind in order to continue in our problematic ways unchecked and unchanged (Bondi, 2012; hooks, 1989; Leonardo, 2004). One of the underlying truths throughout all of these events is that I should not have been the only person in the room representing this program. As an entry-level employee in a strongly hierarchical organization, I should not have been alone in this. My supervisors, two women with many more years' experience, more degrees, and more direct access to upper administrators should have been the first to be notified that there was an issue with this program. However, they were left unaware until I decided to grant them access.

When I broached the idea of bringing in my supervisors to this conversation, my suggestion was met with dismissal. The PTM stated they already knew, that it was not necessary. It was this claim that changed my understanding of the situation. Knowing that they had not been included, speaking with them about the process so far, had made me clearly aware of what they did and did not know up until this point. My more open and communicative relationship with my supervisors gave me insight into the system that I would not have had otherwise. If I did not know and trust these women, and if they did not share with me, I could have assumed that the PTM was correct and the point of bringing in more people to the conversation was moot.

## **The Racism Behind the Curtain**

During my second meeting with administrators, one that included both of my supervisors, the curtain hiding these underlying racist systems was pulled back in a way. When the PTM insinuated that students were not comfortable, I realized she was speaking of white students. My supervisor was able to uncover the assumption that white comfort was being prioritized. Though I had previously attempted to clarify this in our first meeting, my hesitancy to counter an administrator as well as my lack of trust in my own expertise held me back. However, hearing my supervisor voice these things made the truth that much more apparent. And it made this truth undeniable and unavoidable in the space.

Though I spent much of this meeting hiding behind my supervisors and avoiding direct conflict, the times I did step forward were with more confidence. At the AD's suggestion for dramatic changes in the structure of the program, I voiced how those changes would only benefit the students who did not want to learn. I pulled from my own expertise as a social justice educator and as a participant and facilitator in these spaces to speak on the harm such changes would cause to the program's learning outcomes and purpose. Alone with these administrators I was hesitant to disagree so directly.

When the SA refused to look my supervisors in the eye, I noted the action internally because I was afraid to address this issue with him in the moment. This realization profoundly impacted me throughout the rest of the events. My own racist practices were again apparent for me. A white man denied a Black woman the respect of

meeting her gaze when responding to her. I watched this happen and chose to say and do nothing. In doing so, I supported the action (DiAngelo, 2012; Levine-Rasky, 2000).

Later, I tasked this same woman with the responsibility of educating me on something I was already pretty clear on. Not only did I allow the situation to continue unchecked but I also added to it. I failed to acknowledge and act upon the white supremacist values at play (hooks, 1989). In doing so, I revealed my own involvement (Leonardo, 2004; Roediger, 1998) in the imbedded racist practices occurring all around us at all times.

### **Putting a Spotlight on Whiteness**

If whiteness is entrenched in every aspect of our society and works fluidly and effectively behind the scenes (Leonardo, 2004; Medina, 2013; Roediger, 1998), then we must continually bring it to the forefront wherever we are (Frankenberg, 1996; hooks 1989). By this, I do not mean to center whiteness or the needs of white people (Ahmed, 2007). Instead, I offer that we as white people must design our work and lives intentionally in ways that keep our whiteness and its associated privileges and access from being overlooked or forgotten (Ahmed, 2007). By keeping the curtain pulled back, systems of white supremacy are more likely to be surfaced and disrupted.

As I outlined previously in this chapter, this study is not about the overt practices of racism or white people operating in glaringly racist ways. Rather, I practiced and witnessed other white people practice racism within the subtleties of everyday life. It was only through an intentional deep dive into these common interactions and nuances that the ingrained racism became apparent (Frankenberg, 1996; hooks, 1989). We must

continue to highlight these practices both for our own awareness as well as the betterment of our systems and situations.

It should not be dependent upon the presence of POC to reveal the problematic practices of white people. However, ensuring that our organizations have people from marginalized identities in high levels of decision-making offers a level of accountability that all-white spaces do not (Garner, 2007; hooks, 1989; Picca & Feagin, 2007). With the arrival of my supervisors, the entire tenor and focus of our conversations in these meetings changed. Their presence and participation highlighted the problematic behaviors and beliefs of all of the white people in the room.

Both the AD and PTM grew more frustrated with my supervisors than they did with me in “The Ambush.” In our first meeting, the tone was consistently condescending. There were no raised voices or dramatic body language. It felt almost like a teacher telling me I was failing the class rather than senior officials discussing a problematic program. In “Fighting Back” however, both the PTM and the AD jumped in and out of the conversation as though in a back and forth fight. There was a shift in inflection and body language that created tension for all of us. As they realized we were a unified front ready to present reasoned and theoretically-based arguments, their responses became more emotionally driven. My supervisors’ presence began to reveal “white lies, maneuvers, and pathologies that contribute to the avoidance of a critical understanding of race and racism” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 141). Rather than change their stances or begin a more collaborative-style conversation with the two Black women before them, the white administrators only became more emotional and forceful in their responses.

The longer my supervisors remained in the space, the more the white administrators' tactics moved from covert to overtly racist. During "The Ambush" everyone entered separately and the administrators and I clustered around one end of the table. During "Fighting Back," the white administrators entered the room as a group through the private access doors and sat across the table from us as though in some form of legal mediation or intimidation technique. This time they came with their own handouts and resources including written critiques of the program. When those critiques were reframed by my supervisors as demonstrations of the further need of this program, the cross-table engagement continued to shift. Though none of the administrators had any difficulty looking me in the eye both in "The Ambush" and "Fighting Back," I did note the SA's avoidance of meeting my supervisors in the eye while they spoke back and forth. This refusal to acknowledge my supervisors with even mere eye contact is an example of a domination practice (Leonardo, 2004) used to demean, devalue, and even erase the very presence of People of Color. The choice to look only at me, a white woman, even when directly responding to my two Black supervisors, was a refusal to even acknowledge their presence in the space.

Their presence also inspired me to act differently in the space. In "Fighting Back," there were no efforts to sway us or move us with coaxing terms or the pretense of solidarity. It seemed as though this program was doomed to change no matter what we did or said in defense of it. This led to far more back and forth between the two sides. My supervisors constantly reframed and questioned, challenging the administrators to see their perspectives for the problematic arguments that they were: upholding the comfort of

white students above all else. My supervisors' advocacy empowered me and encouraged me to join in. I named the problems with the changes being suggested, and, in speaking up, unintentionally signed my allegiance entirely with the Black women beside me in the eyes of the white administrators. The AD's email at the end of "Fighting Back," noting my failure to say "I'm happy to do that" (Fighting Back:1, p. 6) to the white administrators demanding change was an indication of my betrayal. Until that moment, I had not seen my solidarity with my supervisors as a racial issue but rather a personal one. I got a glimpse of how deeply ensconced I was within this white supremacist system (Yancy, 2008) only when I lost my power within it.

### **Leaving Safety, Seeking Freedom**

Operating in a more accountable system as a white woman means that the previous agreements we entered into with white men must change. White women cannot continue to maintain our socialized standards of goodness and reputation if we want to stand in solidarity with WOC specifically and POC in general. If my goal is to be an amplifier for the voices and issues of marginalized population, I cannot continue to buy in to systems that support the needs and wants of white men above everyone else. And with change there is a both a sense of loss and the potential for deep and meaningful gains.

### **What's There to Lose?**

I want to take a moment here to seriously reflect on what saying no to this agreement with white men means for me. White femininity feeds into this agreement in that we trade our sense of safety for obedience (Collins, 1990; Lorde, 1984). When white



women choose to work against the institutions that support us, we reveal this unspoken contract and therefore threaten its conditions. This disobedience comes with its own form of punishment: questioning, scrutiny, lack of access to name a few. Though I do not wish to aggrandize white women's feelings here, I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to speak to the loss I experienced. In my life I have always found that change, even exciting change, comes with a sense of loss and even a period of mourning. This experience was no different.

My fourth event was a testament to discovering the loss that comes from turning against the unspoken agreement of protection that I have with white men and their systems and institutions. In this event I detail my sense of confusion as well as my paranoia at how I am now perceived by administrators. I worry about being watched. I fret about making mistakes. I mistrust my own abilities. For what was one of the first times in my professional career I realized how tenuous my relationship with higher education is and how easy it is to step out of favor. Up until this point I had been left mostly to my own devices. As long as I stayed within the bounds of the institution's desires and expectations of me, I went unnoticed. However, after coming under scrutiny, I no longer felt the same sense of trust and security from the institution. In advocating against the wishes of these administrators, I forfeited my comfort.

### **What Could We Gain?**

If I only looked at myself from a deficit perspective, as someone in need of the protection of white men and their institutions, I would never find the incentive to violate this unspoken agreement again. The weight of the disobedience still sits with me today.

However, if we decenter my own needs and the systems of white supremacy, there are benefits to disobedience. The system that white women buy into, one of security in exchange for loyalty and obedience, works mainly to keep us separate from other groups also harmed by systems of white supremacy (hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1984). If we white women spend all of our energy focusing inward on presenting ourselves in accordance with unmeetable standards, we will not have the time or energy to push against these norms. And we will not see the benefits of joining with others outside of these standards in order to upend the entire system itself (Lorde, 1984).

In the end, it was not my sense of virtue or some noble white savior-oriented feeling that encouraged me to push back against the administrators. Instead, it was my relationship with my supervisors. These two women had shown me nothing but respect, encouragement, and support in my first full time professional position. They created a family-like environment in our work space that gave me space to develop and grow as a young professional. They were honest and open about every aspect of my job and they trusted me to do good work. And when I made mistakes or failed, they held me accountable. My relationship with them was far more genuine and worth protecting than maintaining my reputation with the administrators as a good white woman.

The secret is that, the sliver of power we receive in systems of white supremacy inevitably comes to nothing. We risk our humanity by dehumanizing others (Freire, 2000) through our loyalty and our own actions. However, when we choose the side of liberation that Women of Color have been advocating for throughout history, we open ourselves up to deeper relationships, stronger partnerships, and more sustainable work

(Gianettoni & Roux, 2010; Tatum & Knaplund, 1996; Villegas & Ormond, 2012). If we can let go of our ingrained racism that stems from our need for protection, our inherited legacies of goodness and innocence, and our aspirations of power, we make space for the self-work necessary to stand shoulder to shoulder with Women of Color.

### **Examining Barriers from the Inside**

The last finding from this study looks at the continued discrimination of Women of Color, particularly Black women, in higher education spaces. I offer this finding not as new data but rather continued evidence of a glaring issue. What is unique about the perspective this study offers on this issue, is that it comes from an insider's perspective. As a person in the room to which two Black women were not invited, and were treated poorly when they were finally granted entrance, I witnessed and participated in this discriminatory practice from a different angle.

White women must speak up regarding the oppression that we witness, even when we are participants in the moment. It is not enough to do private sidebars after the fact (Dace, 2012). Rather, we must speak up in the moment or, better yet, before the moment can come to pass. I did not initially request my supervisors be brought into the conversation for their benefit, but rather my own. My concern in that moment was not for their experience in a white supremacist system denying them access to power and decision-making capabilities. I was focused on me, on my comfort. I wanted to be saved, to be rescued. I wanted someone I trusted to fight for me because I was afraid and unsure of how to fight for myself.

Upon deeper examination, it is apparent that my presence in that meeting was, in itself, a set-up. I was an entry level employee who was being asked by administrators far above me in our reporting structure to make a decision without the approval or even knowledge of my supervisors. The PTM, who had a direct reporting line with one of my supervisors chose to ignore that and seek my buy-in instead. The SA, clearly aware of reporting lines and supervisory relationships, did not even ask where my supervisors were and why they were not meeting with him instead of me. The AD, who had been in conversation with my supervisors about this program before, still proceeded to position me as the primary decision maker. Each of us were active participants in the harmful and demoralizing system of white supremacy (hooks, 1989; Leonardo, 2004). We knew there was a gap, that these two women needed to be in the room, but we continued on anyway. My choice to advocate for their presence, though self-focused, ruptured the white supremacist bubble we had entered into together. The effect on the administrators appeared to be confusion and annoyance, on me it was freeing. In the moment I was free of having to make the decision alone. In the long run, I was more able to explore the way white supremacy determine[d] how I [saw] the world” (hooks, 1989, p. 115).

As white women, we must fully acknowledge the power we have in spaces like these. Our perceived goodness and innocence means we are heard in ways that Women of Color are not. It is our responsibility to address this before, during, and after in public and prominent ways. Only in leveraging the power that we have can we be the accomplices that we are called to be by Women of Color (Collins, 1990; Lorde, 1984).

## **Implications**

In order to dive into the connections between this work and different areas of higher education, I crafted three different artifacts: (a) a response email to a faculty member, (b) a case study, and (c) a twitter thread. Each of these artifacts suggest ways to and examples of disrupting and interrupting our white supremacist higher education system while also reimagining how we operate and position ourselves as white women in this system. With each artifact I want to address one particular implication area such as suggestions for responses to administration and supervisors, ways to analyze the work that we do as white women in higher education so we can do better moving forward, and calls to action and accountability for white women regarding the importance of self-scrutiny and reflexive examination.

### **Disrupting**

Higher education continues to be a system where “white supremacy continues to shape perspectives on reality and to inform the social status of black people and all people of color” (hooks, 1989, p. 114). The harm my supervisors endured throughout this process highlights the risk Black people and all People of Color are under to assimilate or else (hooks, 1989). In fact, the mundane nature of the occurrences only served to mask the threat waiting underneath (Medina, 2013; Roediger, 1998).

This study highlights ways this threat occurs specifically within, through, and by white women. The nuances uncovered in my analysis are not isolated to my own experiences. All of these events took place in common, everyday environments for student affairs and academic professionals. It is important that all people, and particularly

white people, take an analytical eye to the meeting rooms, the classrooms, and the various campus spaces we enter every day. By turning an inward and process-oriented eye, white professionals can begin to disrupt the body language, words, and manipulative practices operating in these spaces through ourselves and others (Levine-Rasky, 2000).

I crafted this case study (Appendix J) as a means of surfacing the gendered racist practices white women use in these everyday spaces to maintain power and control. In this study there are examples of many of the behaviors I practiced myself throughout the events outlined in this study. One of the white women characters throughout the case protects her own reputation as a good white woman by appearing nonconfrontational, policing how best to navigate through the hiring process, and using her emotions as shields to protect against analyzing her bias as well as a weapon to force the two Women of Color to stop questioning her authority. This case study also sheds light on the roles other members of the committee play in supporting and protecting this white woman in her behaviors. I offer this as a tool to use for self-analysis as well as an opportunity for a committee or team to begin discussions about these particular actions and how they appear in their own environments.

### **Interrupting**

Though acknowledgement is a key point in disrupting systems of power, it is only a starting point. Knowledge must translate into action for it to make a difference. After surfacing these nuances, we can connect them to the larger system that enables, expects, and often encourages these engagement practices. This is where change can occur: a) creating equitable hiring practices, b) crafting environments steeped in collaboration,

rather than assimilation threat, c) reckoning with the white supremacist roots of our institutions and their current forms, and d) allocating funds and resources towards programs and people that help us learn and grow individually and institutionally.

In each of these places of change we must intentionally interrupt the system as it currently operates. I crafted an email response (Appendix K) in order to illustrate what interruption could look like. As part of the data collection and analysis, I highlighted in detail an email I received from the Academic Advisor following our second meeting with administrators.

*I want you to understand that I think what your former supervisor started, and what you've continued, has value. But it was a big experiment. I think we've learned that it is not right for our population as a \*mandatory\* activity.*

*I realize that the natural inclination is to argue the value of continuing with no change. "Students are philistines, they just don't get it." If it was my program I'd probably do the same. I don't fault you for that, but it's time for us to join together... Do I think you need to retain an hour on identity? Only if it is required for the message on core values in the second hour. I'd happily trade your hour on identity for an hour on financial health. If I had the power as instructor to make that change I'd do it immediately.*

*I'm sorry that this transition seems so antagonistic. If Angela's eyes had been nail guns I'd be a bleeding corpse right now.*

*From my perspective I think the meeting failed. I was hoping that when the SA and your PTM said we need to move another direction that your response would be "I'm happy to do that."*

I wanted to detail a possible response when engaging with someone holding on to and holding you to gendered racist norms and standards.

In my response I wanted to interrupt his narrative with a counter perspective that both held true to the facts while also being purposeful, direct, and free of my aforementioned gendered racist practices such as subjecting to his authority or minimizing myself and my experiences for his benefit. In doing so, I hoped to show the

power of directness and intentionality when naming problematic behaviors. My response here was so different than any of my previous interactions with this person. I was able to advocate for my program, my students, my colleagues, and myself in a way that could not be ignored or misconstrued.

Interrupting takes time and practice. The process of writing it was, in a way, extremely cathartic. It also helped me practice a new way of communicating that I will continue to utilize in the future. I would encourage this process for anyone seeking to determine how best to respond in situations like this. Draft it out, take some space away, and re-read it. By doing this, I was able to trim down the pieces where I worried more about protecting his opinion of me than I did about saying what needed to be said. Now that I know how I exhibit these behaviors I can catch them sooner and incorporate different behaviors

### **Reimagining**

Examining my own racism as a white woman opened up levels of inherited and ingrained racist practices that I had yet to understand or investigate. In doing so, I came face to face with many facets of my problematic ways of being that were difficult to address. But the process of doing so has aided me far more than harmed. This self-scrutiny, the action of unearthing and reconciling with intentionally avoided areas of my life, is one that I highly recommend for all white women. Taking up the call to know ourselves (Collins, 1990; Combahee River Collective, 1977/2015; Cooper, 1893) and to address our behaviors and beliefs is one that I will never finish. Rather, it has become a life-long endeavor, one that will shift and sway along with the ever-developing changes



of my life. I know I will never eradicate racism from my being. But rather, I will “recognize and continue looking rather than turn away” (Frankenberg, 1996, p. 14). I commit and recommit every day to actively investigate my actions and beliefs before, during, and after they occur in order to continue on the journey of Anti-racist work.

The process of life-long examination is one I hope to do in community. This study can serve as a potential guide both for myself and for other white women who are interested in doing similar work in their own lives. Whiteness operates and thrives on the myth that we are individuals, completely separate from other white people (Levine-Rasky, 2000; Roediger, 1998). Though we must forfeit our comfort as white women in order to make sustainable change in ourselves and the world, we do not have to do so in isolation. In fact, this study offers the potential of white women coming together to do our self-work in relationship. We can process our self-examination with each other, learn through the sharing process, and hold each other accountable for addressing our racism and doing differently in the future.

Examining ourselves is not often easy. I had the privilege of years of study where I could devote myself to this one topic. Through this space and the amazing community around me with whom I processed, I was able to surface many things in my life that would have otherwise gone overlooked or ignored. My hope is that this study will encourage other white women into these places of deep exploration as well. So, to start the conversation, I want to offer this twitter thread (Appendix L). This thread is an instigator, a piece to name directly what my research says and what the literature has

already found. By putting it out there in this informal format, more people in and outside of higher education can engage with it and apply it to their own lives and experiences.

### **Further Implications**

This study also offers ways to help students both in and outside of the classroom. Given the acceptance, attendance, and graduation numbers of white women at our higher education institutions it is probable that these racial gatekeeping practices nuanced through our idealized objectification are occurring wherever they are present. As educators, advisors, and mentors we must stop supporting our students in these practices. Continuing the narrative that white women are innocent, naïve, and unable to handle conflict only furthers harmful learning environments for Students of Color where they are continually demoralized, devalued, and pushed aside for the comfort of white students. Doing so also inhibits white women students from fully knowing themselves, their place in the world, and their potential as changemakers.

I would encourage educators reading this study to consider ways to work it into course curriculum, programming models, and mentoring and advising strategies. Find books and course materials that stretch white women's comfort and do not further support reputation protection practices. When white women students in our various spaces demonstrate discomfort along with a wide range of emotions, help them understand that they are welcome to feel but will not be allowed to hide behind them.

Instead, we can help our students name these practices, identify their socialized origins, and connect them to the larger system of white supremacy. We can help students understand that their subordination in a patriarchal system can actually aid their

complicity in systems of domination (hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984). Connect for them, and encourage them to make the connections themselves, between idealized objectification and patriarchy. Investigate how gendered standards differ across racial groups so white women students can see the privilege we have even in these places of subordination. In doing so, we can disrupt the practice as it occurs, expand the concept of racism beyond unearned advantages, and highlight the underlying system of dominance and domination (hooks, 1989; Leonard, 2004; Medina, 2013). From this place of understanding white women students can become stronger collaborative partners, joining with their Peers of Color to revolutionize their campuses.

### **Further Research**

In terms of research, this study's frame of intersectionality, racial gatekeeping, and idealized objectification provide a tool for examining white women's gendered racism both in and outside of higher education. Using this framework, future studies could look at experiences of individual white women in various areas of higher education, as well as potential group studies. It could also serve as a model for developing frameworks across many different subordinated and dominant identity intersections. Finally, autocritography is a powerful methodological tool that can be wider utilized in both this content area and many more.

Though intersectionality, racial gatekeeping, and idealized objectification are not new, weaving them together for this study offers a new perspective for future research. Together, these three pieces helped me surface how I use my gender subordination to protect and practice whiteness and where these practices fit into the larger system of

white supremacy. This framework could be used in a number of different studies examining white women both in and outside of higher education. Given the large number of white women students in higher education, this framework offers a unique analysis perspective for how they engage in specific social justice related curriculums and operate in cross-racial classrooms and activity spaces.

Studies examining white women in professional roles within institutions could also benefit from this framework. Scholars could examine how white women holding positions of authority over a program, department, or student group use these methods of racial gatekeeping to maintain and exert power over People of Color. Or how white women are rewarded or punished by the institution depending on their adherence to racial gatekeeping and idealized objectification practices. This framework does not have to be used in conjunction with autocritography, either. For example, throughout the analysis process I became intrigued by the idea of performing a discourse analysis on this same data set in order to hone in on specific language and word choices.

I am also curious to know how common or unique my practices of racial gatekeeping were compared to other white women. What influence did my other identities such as social class, sexual orientation, religious practices, or even my adherence to more traditional feminine norms have on both my racial gatekeeping practices as well as my relationship with the institution and administrators? Using this framework to analyze different experiences of white women who possess dominant and subordinated identities different and similar to mine would create a level of generalizability that one qualitative study cannot offer (Ellis, 2004).

Though this study focused on my experience as an individual, I hope to do a later study using this framework to look at white women in community. Ideally, I would examine the racial gatekeeping practices based in our idealized objectification as women with a long term group focused on anti-racism work in either our personal and/or professional lives. An accountability group, such as this, could offer a place to examine in each other those parts of our racist practices that we cannot or refuse to recognize in ourselves. It could also be a place to examine our change practices as we attempt anti-racist work. In what places do we take risks or hold back and how do we process our successes and failures in our changemaking efforts? I am curious to know how, as a group, white women can support and hold each other accountable while they work for change.

This framework can also serve as a model for pulling together ways to examine other unique experiences at the intersections of dominant and subordinated identities outside of white women. Given that our identities are socialized based on historical legacies (Collins, 1990), it is possible to look to trends over time to better understand how we use our subordinated identities to protect our dominant ones. Scholars could investigate the experiences of Men of Color, white trans folks, or Christian women, just to name a few. One of the beauties of Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality tool is how it can be used to understand how all intersections of subordinated and dominant identities work to support and maintain systems of oppression, the very systems that further add to the dual oppression of Black women and all Women of Color.

Autocritography was an incredibly useful methodology for this study. It allowed me the opportunity to see the process of telling stories and how it connects to my views and interactions in the world (Awkward, 1999; Ellis, 2004). More studies could benefit from this write and rewrite form of study. This methodology is empowering in its reliance on experiences as truth (Awkward, 1999; A. Johnson, 2014; 2017). It also offers a way for scholars to situate those experiences within larger systems through the retelling process. By analyzing not only our stories but how we frame and shape them differently depending on audience or purpose surfaces the social contexts at play in our everyday lives (Awkward, 1999; A. Johnson, 2017). Autocritography is a great choice for scholars looking to do deep dives into their own experiences in the world while also positioning those experiences as critiques of social systems and institutions.

### **Conclusion**

The completion of this study feels more like a starting point for me. If autoethnography requires that we emerge from our study as different people (Ellis, 2004), I would say I met this criterion. I thought when I reached this end I would know myself and the world better, and, in some ways, I do. But what I understand more than anything else is how small I really am. Doing this study, and doing it within the context of 2020, has made clear to me that the things I worry about like my reputation, mean nothing in the end (Lorde, 1984). What matters instead are the communities we create, the ones we work to preserve, and the stories we choose to tell. I am a white woman doing social justice work in a space designed to protect and insulate me. I can either choose to invest in those spaces as they are in order to maintain my own comfort or I can disrupt it with

my words, my body, my actions. The privilege of that choice is no longer lost on me. And “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one Person of Color remains chained. Nor is anyone of you” (Lorde, 1984, p. 132).

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Reflexive Journal Protocol

The reflexive journal will be either a handwritten or typed document updated every 1-2 days throughout the research process. Each entry will have similar prompts that I will answer every time as well as the space to write any additional items relevant to the research process that arise during my reflection time (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Given that I vacillate between hand written and typed reflection processes, any handwritten entries will be scanned into the private google drive folder along with all digitized entries. The standard prompts include:

- (a) What have you worked on since writing last?
- (b) What changes or shifts are you experiencing in your work?
- (c) What elements of your work have remained unchanged?
- (d) What current events on campus, in your personal life, and beyond are influencing your thoughts and feelings of your study right now?
- (e) What additional information and/or experiences are sitting with you today?



Appendix B

Artifacts Tracking Table

<b>Artifact Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Connected Event</b>	<b>Storage Location</b>
A1	USAToday article about Cripmas Party	Timeline	Study Drive/Artifacts/Newsarticles
A2	Medium article about Cripmas Party	Timeline	Study Drive/Artifacts/Newsarticles
A3	ABC article chronicling the #BLM movement	Timeline	Study Drive/Artifacts/Newsarticles
A4	Greenville News Article of Cripmas Party and campus response	Timeline, Something's Not Right Here	Study Drive/Artifacts/Newsarticles
A5	Greenville News Article of proposed diversity initiatives following Cripmas party and student protests	Timeline	Study Drive/Artifacts/Newsarticles
A6	Greenville News Article covering January student protest	Timeline	Study Drive/Artifacts/Newsarticles
D1	Meeting minutes from SU Connect after initial P2P meeting	Gathering the Pieces	Study Drive/Artifacts/Documents
D2	Final revised SU100 curriculum	Gathering the Pieces	Study Drive/Artifacts/Documents
D3	Faculty/staff organizing around student protestors - list of demands/grievances	Timeline	Study Drive/Artifacts/Documents
E1	Original request from AD regarding the P2P programming for the next year (12.13.2014)	Something's Not Right Here	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E2	Requesting more information about the administration's issues with P2P from AA (12.14.2014)	Something's Not Right Here	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E3	Upper administration recommends changes to the Spring P2P dialogue topics (12.16.2014)	The Ambush	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails

<b>Artifact Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Connected Event</b>	<b>Storage Location</b>
E4	Follow-up from initial P2P meeting (12.16.2014)	The Ambush	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E5	Request from upper administration for a meeting to discuss the P2P program	The Ambush, Fighting Back	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E6	Follow-up from initial P2P meeting to PTM regarding white privilege resources	The Ambush	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E7	Email from AD immediately following the upper admin meeting regarding P2P (1.29.2015)	Fighting Back	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E8	SU100 curriculum review exchange with PTM	Gathering the Pieces	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E9	SU100 curriculum review with AD initial feedback	Gathering the Pieces	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E10	DA edits to SU100 proposal	Gathering the Pieces	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E11	AA edits to SU100 proposal	Gathering the Pieces	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E12	SU100 curriculum change of approval process	Gathering the Pieces	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E13	SU100 final revisions from AD	Gathering the Pieces	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E14	SU100 final draft sent for approval by AD	Gathering the Pieces	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E15	SU100 curriculum approved	Gathering the Pieces	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E16	Board of Trustees updates for focus of 2014-2015 academic year	Timeline	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E17	Meeting updates regarding racist Yik Yak posts about student protests	Timeline	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E18	Notification of PTM change	Timeline	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E19	Student protest organized following Cripmas Party	Timeline, Something's Not Right Here, The Ambush	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails

<b>Artifact Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Connected Event</b>	<b>Storage Location</b>
E20	University President's response to the Cripmas Party (12.7.2014)	Timeline, Something's Not Right Here, The Ambush	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E21	Faculty/staff organizing around student protestors	Timeline	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E22	President's MLK week campus-wide email	Timeline	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails
E23	PTM campus-wide email	Timeline	Study Drive/Artifacts/Emails

Appendix B: This table tracks different data pieces used to assemble the events and their storage locations.

## Appendix C

### Self-Interview Protocol

This study will include 4-5 self-interviews for the purpose of recalling specific events throughout my career as a social justice educator at Southeastern University. These interviews will be a combination of audio recordings and note taking. In them I will work to recall emotional, physical, and psychological memories (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Ellis, 2004) about these events. These interviews will be administered either privately or in a processing format with someone who was involved in the events with me such as former supervisors, peers, and students. All interviews will be transcribed and additional participants or people named during the storytelling process will be made anonymous with pseudonyms and removal of identifiable information. Common interview questions include:

- (a) What is the setting of the event?
  - a. When was it?
  - b. Where did it occur?
  - c. Who was involved?
- (b) What are your initial memories of the event? (Tell the initial story)
- (c) How do you remember feeling before, during, and after the event?
- (d) What do you remember most about this event?
  - a. Why does this stick with you?
- (e) What were the impacts from this event?
  - a. What changes occurred for you, if any?

- b. What changes occurred for those involved in the event, if any?
  - c. Who else was impacted and what changed for them?
- (f) How has your perception of this event changed over time?
- a. Why have those changes occurred/not occurred?
- (g) How were racism and sexism playing out in these events?
- a. How do you know?
  - b. Why were they happening?
- (h) How did this event connect to other events happening both personally and professionally at the time?

Appendix D

Coding Table

<b>Guiding Research Questions</b>	<p>How have I practiced my gendered racism as a white woman social justice educator at a predominantly white institution?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways do my practices align with the idealized objectification imposed on white women?</li> <li>• In what ways do I practice racial gatekeeping as a white woman?</li> </ul> <p>How has the institution insulated and empowered me in these practices?</p>
<b>Round 1 Coding Descriptions (Saldaña, 2016, pp. 145-146, 149)</b>	
<b>Objectives (OBJ)</b>	Participant-actor objectives, motives in the form of action verbs
<b>Conflict (CON)</b>	Conflicts or obstacles confronted by the participant-actor which prevent them from achieving their objective
<b>Tactics (TAC)</b>	Participant-actor tactics or strategies to deal with conflicts or obstacles and to achieve their objectives
<b>Attitudes (ATT)</b>	Participant-actor attitudes toward the setting, others, and the conflict
<b>Emotions (EMO)</b>	Emotions experienced by the participant-actor
<b>Subtexts (SUB)</b>	The participant-actor's unspoken thoughts or impression management usually in the form of gerunds
<b>Physical (PHY)</b>	Participant-actor physical actions, the body's movements, gestures, appearance, conditioning, clothing, use of space, etc.
<b>Verbal (VER)</b>	Verbal aspects of the participant-actor's voice: tone, articulation, fluency, volume, vocabulary, etc.
<b>Round 2 Coding Descriptions: Racial Gatekeeping and Idealized Objectification Framework</b>	
<p>In this round of coding, the first two codes (idealized objects and racial gatekeepers) serve as overarching codes while the other 8 codes described ways that the racial gatekeeping and idealized objectification are practiced. All of these codes are pulled from the literature review and based in resources from Chapter 2.</p>	
<b>Idealized Objectification (IDEAL)</b>	Idealized objects: moments and exchanges where white women are objectified for our gender and the stereotypical norms associated with that socialization or police others by these same standards
<b>Racial Gatekeeping (GATE)</b>	Racial Gatekeeper: a white person standing figuratively and/or literally at a decision point controlling access for others (particularly POC)

<b>Ignore (IGN)</b>	Ignore: Ignoring the oppression occurring in front of us
<b>Dismiss (DIS)</b>	Dismiss: Dismissing the oppression or describing it as something else
<b>Etiquette (ETIQ)</b>	Etiquette: calling to rules of behavior and politeness that are steeped in oppressive standards and assumptions
<b>Rewrite/Retell (RE)</b>	Rewrite/Retell: Changing an oppressive narrative to benefit the person/people in power
<b>Separate (SEP)</b>	Separate: separating of distancing oneself from others who are practicing in oppressive ways
<b>Redirect (DIR)</b>	Redirect: Redirecting the conversation in a way that positions the person(s) with power as the victim
<b>Silence (SIL)</b>	Silence: refusing to speak or acknowledge the oppression happening in the space
<b>Emotions (EMOTE)</b>	Emotions: Using emotions as either shields or weapons to protect oneself from further scrutiny and gain sympathy

Appendix D: This table tracks the coding names and definitions used in both stages of the coding process.

## Appendix E

### Event 1: Something's Not Right Here

#### **Saturday Evening - December 13, 2014**

The Saturday evening chaos was dying down when my cell phone vibrated with an incoming message.

"Please don't be an email. Please don't be an email. Please don't be an email," I chanted in a half whisper as I blindly sift one hand through fuzzy blankets and plush animals in an attempt to unearth my phone from the chaos of the nursery floor in the dark. Emmett slept soundly in my other arm, finally giving in to sleep and I was determined to protect that silence at all cost.

"Ah-ha!" I whispered victoriously, and settled back into the rocking chair. I would just check and see what it was before I settled the 8-month-old back into his crib. Hopefully he would actually stay asleep this time.

"Of course it's an email," I added, my back already tensing in defense of whatever complaint students were about to throw at me as to why they hadn't completed their SU100 assignment on time. Classes and exams were over. There was no going back now.

"The AD? Why is he emailing me? And why on a Saturday?" I shifted Emmett into a more comfortable spot and unlocked my phone, shifting the bright light away from his face. The Academic Advisor (AD) and overseer of the SU100 program usually didn't communicate with me much after the Fall semester ended. I wondered if I had submitted something incorrectly.

*Becky,*

*Can you let me know what P2P programming you have planned for spring? What will take place on Jan. 6?*

"Huh. Seems easy enough." I put the phone down and began the tricky performance of placing a sleeping infant into a bed. After waiting quietly to make sure everything had transitioned peacefully I left the room, closing the door gently behind me.

*I'm following our normal plan. 10 sessions of dialogues, 30 students each. Sign ups outside of Memorial Auditorium from 12-2pm. Dialogues from 3:30-5:30pm on the 6<sup>th</sup>. Those who are unable to attend have until the beginning of Spring Break to complete the alternate assignment. All assignments due by then.*

I chewed my lip as I reread the message. Emailing the AD always felt a little nerve-racking and I swear I remembered telling him all of this already. Maybe I missed an email somewhere? Maybe there was a problem with something?

Hesitantly I added, *Would you prefer a different due date?* Before closing the email and hitting send.



“Everything alright?” Lawson’s voice from the kitchen startled me as I reread the AD’s email for the 4<sup>th</sup> time.

“I think so?” I wandered toward the sink while still looking at my phone. “Just lots of email.”

“Emmett go down ok?” Loading more dishes into the dishwasher as he spoke

“Yeah. Now we’ll just wait for the 10 o’clock grump and be set for the night.” He and I shared a smile before I headed to the living room to stretch out on the couch.

“Seriously, what is with the emails tonight?” I grumbled two hours later as my phone vibrated again. “I really need to turn off notifications over the weekend.”

“Who from work would be emailing at almost 10?” Lawson asked as he paused the show.

“It’s the AD, again.”

*What are the dialog topics? Different or all the same?*

“Why is he asking about this now?” I questioned quietly as the knot in my stomach began to harden. This wasn’t his usual form of communication and I don’t know what he’d ever questioned the dialogue topics before.

*We’ll offer 10 different topics from the list of 17 we offered this fall. I haven’t selected the finals though. That’s on my list for next week. You can see the 17 on blackboard.*

Frustrated at the weekend interruption I turned my phone off for the night just in time to hear a high pitch wail drift down the hall.

“Ah, the 10 o’clock grump. Right on schedule,” Lawson chuckled beside me. As he started to get up, I put a hand on his shoulder.

“I got this one,” I walked off down the hall.

### **Sunday afternoon - December 14, 2014**

*Is it possible to select two three instead of ten?*

“Something seems weird about this,” I said to Lawson as he finished changing out of his work clothes. I made the mistake of peeking at my phone during the Sunday morning service and found the AD’s newest email. The knots in my stomach returned and I was unable to focus on the rest of Lawson’s sermon. With Emmett down for his afternoon nap, I could finally focus a little bit, making the nerves just jump to a new level.

“Maybe you should ask him what he wants to know?” Lawson suggested.

“Fair. I don’t always know the best ways to talk with him but maybe I’m missing something in what he wants,” I replied.

*Two or three topics? Talk to me about the number. Is there something in particular you’re looking for?*

I hesitated over the informality of my approach but my building dread and frustration got the best of me and I hit send before I could think of a rephrasing.

*Leadership is nervous about P2P [Peer-to-Peer Dialogues] due to campus climate. If we can't deliver one universal topic, or maybe 2 or 3 that apply directly to core values, I suspect it will get the axe.  
I figure doing less is harder because your facilitators aren't necessarily crosstrained.*

I stared at the response, re-reading but not seeing, while a buzz filled my ears. *What does he mean about leadership? When were they even talking about this? How do I know nothing about this? How can they be talking about cutting my entire program without a single conversation with me?*

"Hey, you alright?" Lawson's voice pierced through the haze and I flinched.  
"They want to cut my program," I whispered.  
"They what? Why? That doesn't make any sense," he replied.  
"I don't know. I've got to make a phone call, I'll be right back." I rushed into the bedroom and pulled up my supervisor's phone number.

"Hey Becky, what's up?" Bernice's soft voice came through the speaker and it calmed me a little. She would know what to do. She always knew what to do. I rattled off the story, reading the email exchange as I went.

"Is there something happening that I don't know about?" I asked when I finished.

"You know as much as I do. It's possible Angela knows a little bit more given she's had a chance to meet with the PTM (President Team Member) since she started. Why don't you write a response to the AD asking him for more information and I'll check in with Angela," Bernice suggested.

"Ok," I responded, sniffing back tears. "Bernice, I'm sorry. I'm sorry this is taking up your weekend and for whatever I did to cause this."

"Everything's fine. We'll figure this out. You ok?" She asked.

"Yes. Thank you," I replied. I wiped my face as though she could see the tear streaks through the phone.

"Just copy me on whatever you send to him and then forward it on to Angela," she reminded me.

"Ok, bye," I let out a steadying breath and closed the call.

Three rewrites and two read-alouds later and I finally sent my response.

*AD,  
I'm wondering if you would be willing to meet to talk more about this. The conversations I've been having with leadership suggest that this is one of the few programs that won't get the axe given the climate at the moment. So I would like to hear what you have been hearing.*

*In terms of the dialogues, though we have 17 topics we have about 5-6 identities that those topics speak to. It would be hard for me to have them do new topics because they won't have a chance to meet between now and then to develop the new curriculum for those dialogues. However, I can be particular with the identities that I have them focus on. Our most popular sessions tend to be ones on race/ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation.*

*Would it be helpful to offer a narrowed down selection of identities they can choose from in their topics?*

*Becky*

Within two hours of sending to him and forwarding on to Angela, responses started appearing from the Assistant Administrator [AA].

*Angela,*

*Happy Sunday:) I cannot speak to the AD's comments specifically but The PTM and I have been invited (just yesterday) to a meeting with the Senior Administrator [SA] and the AD to review the content of SU100 this week – the SA initiated the meeting. I have no further details about which segments of SU100, or if all segments, are being reviewed. That said, following our meeting with the PTM, the Diversity Advisor [DA] and [omitted for confidentiality] last week, I reached out to the AD as discussed and shared our interest in exploring a more uniform (read: basic/introductory) diversity and inclusion component in SU100 followed by a second mandatory component during sophomore or later year with more in depth exploration of one or more identities. He was fully on board with that concept and thought that DA might be able to push that through as a mandate rather than having it get bogged down in curriculum committee or other mechanisms. I do now know what other conversations the AD has had or with whom he has had them as our conversation was cut short by a student emergency but am sure The PTM and I will know more post meeting.*

*Best,*

*AA.*

“Another meeting?” I asked myself. Angela had told me in passing about her previous one with our newly appointed PTM. Though they hadn't discussed P2P in detail, Angela had mentioned a generally positive vibe so where was all of this coming from?

### **Monday morning - December 15, 2014**

Huffing out a breath, I finally admitted defeat, threw off the covers and headed out to the couch. Four in the morning was a ridiculous time to be awake without reason but I couldn't pretend sleep any longer. Shaking in the chilled air, I grabbed the closest fluffy blanket and my laptop. Maybe today I would figure out what in the world was going on. Overnight, the AD's response had sat with me and I couldn't talk myself down from the growing dread.

*I've been summoned to a meeting myself, so I don't have more to offer.*

That's it. No more information. Just a hint that my program could be shut down and that people would be talking about it at some mysterious point in the near future and nothing else could be talked about. Just knowing that people were somewhere talking about me, about my work, was infuriating. I felt so helpless, so invisible.

I pulled up his email again trying to think of a response, something I could say that could remind him that this work had value. That my work had value. In the middle of draft number 3, another note came through. Angela always did have an early email start time.

*Thanks for the clarification. I do know that the SA was in the meeting on Thursday evening called by the faculty and heard one or more faculty calling for some type of diversity component during orientation (with neither him nor most of the faculty in the room being aware that we already have one). Just so I'm clear on what you shared with Jeff, when you indicated the sophomore initiative would explore "one or more identities" are you saying as a whole or much like we have now with students being able to opt into the specific identities they want to explore further based upon the offerings available that year (as Becky indicated below those usually include race/ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation)?*

*If you would like someone with more knowledge of the actual Peer-to-Peer Dialogues program to be present in your meeting, let me know.*

She always knew what to say and how to get to the point of an issue. Maybe that was something I could model for myself. The AD needed to know there was more to this program. As I drove into work I formatted a response over and over in my head. Rushing into my office, my keys skittered across the desk as I flung open my laptop and started writing. Maybe he just didn't know that I could make any meeting? Or that I wanted to be there? Maybe he would be more willing to talk with me if he knew I wasn't trying to be oppositional?

*AD,*

*I've been thinking more about our conversation and I would like to offer a couple of pieces.*

*1. I believe this program falls directly in line with the core values of this institution. Especially the value of respect. Every dialogue focuses on helping students have more respect for others and for themselves.*

*2. Please know that I am ready and willing to step into a meeting to provide more insight into the inner workings of this program. Just let me know.*

*Thanks and I hope to hear from you soon.*

Nope. Gotta be more assertive than that, Becky.

*Thanks and I look forward to hearing more from you regarding this.*

Before I could lose my nerve, I whacked the send button and immediately clenched my shaking fists together.

As I walked down the hall towards Angela's office, a response came through. Opening my laptop at her table, I read through it and then re-read it aloud.

*Thanks, Becky. I've been thinking about this, too, and I want to apologize. I should not have mentioned anything at this stage, and let you learn about any developments from your own leadership after the meeting.*

*I was just trying to get an idea if we could run in the spring with a revised format, as a potential compromise. As instructor I am expected to know more details than the others in the planned meeting. I needed to know the options.*

*I do believe that the spot that P2P occupies in SU100 will likely play an important role moving forward, but it will likely need to be retooled to fit the plan. I'm not developing that plan, so I really can't predict what it will look like.*

I searched Angela's usually open and expressive face but her mouth was pulled tight, her brow furrowed. Her dark eyes narrowed as she asked me to read it again.

"What meeting is he talking about?" I asked her.

"I think it's probably the same one that The AA mentioned in her response. Let me make some calls and I will get you in that space."

I sat quietly reading through the multiple email exchanges at this point, trying to gather as much information as possible as Angela began securing me an invite. In just 3 minutes she hung up the phone and turned to me.

"Got you in. The meeting was already scheduled for tomorrow morning at 7:30am. Are you able to do that?" Mentally calculating Emmett's daycare drop off and Lawson's work schedule, I nodded.

"I'm supposed to take the girls to the doctor tomorrow so I can't be in until 10 tomorrow. Do you want someone to go with you?" Her face softened, revealing the concern and care I had come to realize was just her natural expression over the last 4 years.

"I think I should be alright. I can speak about this program all day. Plus I know Bernice is out this week because of her grandfather's funeral," I smiled bravely. Inside my stomach was twisting into knots.

"Go ahead and have a schedule of the dialogue topics ready to go so they can look over it," Angela suggested. "You shouldn't have to do much but fill in the details. Nothing is being decided right now, you're there to provide some more information," she added.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, I nodded.

"Where's the meeting," I asked, pulling up a calendar tab on my computer.

"President's conference room, Admin Hall," she replied.

My fingers paused over the keyboard.

"You alright?" She asked.

“Yep. Yeah, just never been in that room before,” I answered quietly.  
She smiled kindly again and reminded me of how to get there.  
“You’ll be fine,” she added as I stepped to the door, my laptop clutched under my arm.  
“Thanks, Angela. I appreciate you being with me on this.”  
“Of course. We’re a team here. We’re going to figure this out.”

## Appendix F

### Event 2: The Ambush

#### **Tuesday morning - December 16, 2014**

“And of course it’s locked,” I whispered to myself as I gave another futile tug on the door to the administration building. No buildings on the campus unlocked until 8 am unless you had keycard access. Which of course I did not for this building. Scrolling through my phone, I hunkered deeper into my fleece jacket. The brisk December air chilled my lungs as I took another deep breath in an attempt to calm down.

“Maybe if I emailed Sandra she’ll see it before the meeting starts... in 5 minutes” I added checking the time again. I plugged in the Assistant Administrator [AA]’s email and typed a quick request to meet me at the side door. As the minutes ticked by I noticed a car enter the parking lot and park in the executive spots close to the building. The Senior Administrator [SA] stepped out of his car and I smiled. If you’re going to be late to a meeting, be late with the highest ranking person in the room I guess. He smiled cautiously back as he walked towards the door.

“Did you need to get in?” He asked quietly, pointing to the side entrance.

I blinked at him for a second before responding with a mumbled “Yes, please. Thanks.” Why would he ask that? We were going to the same place. He followed me down the hall to the elevator and smiled awkwardly as we waited for the doors to open.

*He has no clue who I am*, I realized.

The truth became more evident as he raised his eyebrows in surprise when I followed him to the double glass doors of the Presidential Suite.

“Can I help you with something,” he asked after again holding the door open for me.

“No, I’m good. Just heading into the conference room for our 7:30am meeting,” I pointed towards the door with my thumb for emphasis. “You’re coming too, right?” Maybe I was the one that was off here.

“Yes, for the dialogue program?” He asked.

“Yes, sir.” I replied, smiling widely. “I’m Becky Morgan,” I added after another long pause. “I’m the Associate Director for Social Justice Education in the Diversity Center and the coordinator of the Peer-to-Peer Dialogues [P2P] program.” He shook my offered hand slowly and I wondered if his eyebrows were actually going to lift off this forehead.

“Yes, of course. Well we’re meeting right in there.” He pointed towards the room I had just gestured to a moment ago. “Will you tell everyone I will be there in a minute?” He then walked towards his office door before waiting for a response.

I took a steadying breath and then pushed open the conference room door. Everything was wood with a dark finish and a high polish. Framed drawings and black and white photographs of the campus through the years covered the walls. The burgundy, high back leather chairs lined the table and I paused a minute to decide where to sit. Grabbing one on the end I pulled out my orange folder full of informational handouts, my pen, and my nice notebook for my serious meeting notes.

Greetings were exchanged all around as everyone entered. The President's Team Member [PTM], AA, Diversity Administrator [DA], and the Academic Advisor [AD] all chatted quietly with each other until the SA finally walked into the room around 7:45. Everyone's backs instantly straightened in their chairs. It seemed as though the meeting was now in session.

"Good morning everyone," he said quietly as he settled into his chair. "Has everyone had a chance to meet each other?" He looked pointedly at me as he asked and I nodded. I already knew everyone but I didn't think this was the time to mention that.

"Great," he said. "Now we're here to talk about this diversity component of SU100. I wanted to share with you that last week I was at the faculty senate meeting where I was asked about why SU100 did not have a diversity component. I then found out that we do and that it is this program," he paused, shuffling through his notes, "this Peer-to-Peer Dialogues."

"After learning more about this program I heard about some critiques and issues students have with it that seem severe given our current climate," he added. "Becky, I understand that you coordinate this program. Would you mind telling us a little bit about it and its current structure?"

"Of course," I took a moment to clear my throat before beginning. "Peer-to-Peer Dialogues is actually the third iteration of this diversity and inclusion component, starting in the Fall of 2011—"

"Wait, the third?" The SA interrupted. "What were the other versions?"

"Well there has been a diversity component for all new undergraduate students since the [national event] a few years ago." I went on to detail the program's beginnings with a national model and then a campus-designed format. I then outlined why both of those formats were ineffective and shared the origins of our current 10 dialogue topics facilitated for 30 students at a time for 2 hours by two undergraduate students.

"We've found that the identity-based dialogue topics are more impactful and informative than the other models and are more in line with research-based diversity training models," as I spoke I handed out information sheets about the structure of the program, the various dialogue topics, and the completion rates of the program in its current form. As I handed out the sheets I noticed the SA read through them while the PTM set them gently next to her portfolio.

"But these topics are not always informative of impactful," she offered. "I've heard several complaints from students over the past three years regarding these topics claiming that they are making white students feel bad about being white."

At her statement five sets of eyes again focused directly and solely on me.

"It's true, we have had pushback from our students, and predominantly from students speaking from dominant identities," I replied. "However, any and all research on diversity today will tell you that dissonance is a common and necessary part of the learning process. The discomfort expressed by these students is to be expected as many of them have never been in scenarios where they have had to grapple with or speak about their whiteness at all, much less in a cross-racial environment. However, with every complaint we have three more students share in their reflection vlogs that they appreciated the opportunity to talk and think about their identities in new ways. They



share that they are more aware of themselves and others because of having these conversations. The moment of exposure offered in these dialogues impacts them positively.”

“Yes but you can’t just say that these complaints don’t matter,” the AD chimed in.

“Of course they matter. I think they are an indication of growth. Dissonance is a requirement of learning.” I noticed his tightened mouth and knew my response had not been enough.

“I don’t understand why we’re talking about privilege like this anyway,” the PTM chimed in. “White privilege isn’t really even a thing anymore. There are just a few students saying mean and hurtful things. But mostly our students are good people trying to learn and grow. Trying to force them to feel bad about who they are and what they have is just as discriminatory.”

My fingers were so tightly fisted around the table edge by the time she was done speaking that I had to mentally force myself to let go.

“Actually,” I reply, clearing my throat and checking my tone at the same time. “There are a number of scholars who would disagree with that. There are even entire programs at different institutions across the US that teach classes specifically on whiteness and how it operates.”

“What do these dialogues look like?” The SA asked, interrupting the PTM before she can continue her line of questioning.

“I’m glad you asked,” I replied brightly. Ruffling through my folder I pulled out a stack of handouts. “Here is a detailed outline of the two hour session.” I passed the sheets across the table and everyone but the PTM flipped through them. Again, her papers went in the growing pile beside her portfolio.

After a minute of quiet, the SA raised his head and looked at me. “This is very impressive.”

“Uh, thank you,” I said quietly, feeling a blush begin to spread across my cheeks.

“I hadn’t expected anything so well thought out,” he added and my smile immediately shifted to confusion. “Tell me, how are these topics decided and planned out?”

“Um, well,” I hedged, trying to get my brain to move past his previous statement. “Our dialogue leaders pick their preferred topics and then they submit their plans for approval.” I went on to detail the class assignment from the preceding semester where the students present their topics and curriculum design for approval and then receive edits from me before putting their plans into action in the Fall semester.

“That is quite a vetting process,” the SA replied when I had finished speaking.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Though the students do great work on their own and need very little direction once they get started.” I would always take the chance to crow over the PDLs in front of administrators.

“Tell me more about these students. How are they selected and trained?” I perked up at the question, leaning forward as I spoke.

“The dialogue leaders are 18 students that are selected each Fall by a committee made up of faculty, staff, and students from areas across the university. They enroll in a three semester course with a different purpose for each semester. Their first spring is for training, the next is for facilitating their dialogues and learning more in-depth knowledge

about facilitation, and their final semester is a capstone project of their choice.” As I shared more specific details about the course I noticed not only the SA but everyone’s faces expressing surprise and interest. It seemed everyone was underestimating me today.

“You know, you really have something special here,” the SA said. He smiled kindly and I couldn’t help but smile in return, preening under his praise. “You’ve built a strong program and are trying to do something very brave and bold. It’s well crafted, well thought out, and well researched.”

“Thank you,” I responded quietly.

“But unfortunately, it’s just not working.” He added.

My brain came to a screeching halt.

“I’m sure you can understand how hard it is to have to cut a program like this but it just doesn’t seem to be reaching the students,” he continued. “In times like these we need to find a way to focus on things like our core values: honesty, integrity, and respect.” He emphasized each word with a tap of his hand to the table.

“I would like to offer that I think this program does support those values,” I said, carefully trying to conceal the growing shake in my limbs and voice. “We offer a chance for students to honestly reflect on who they are, learn how to respect each other’s differences, and act with integrity when engaging across difference.” I too added emphasis with a tap of the table. “This program matters to this campus, to the students who facilitate it, and to those who attend it.”

“I know you care about this program,” the AD chimed in. “We don’t doubt your commitment. But some students just are not capable of understanding things like this.”

“Exactly,” the SA joined in with an emphatic nod. “Your program is here,” holding out a hand parallel to the table. “And some of our students are here,” placing his hand flat on the table top.

“We all get it,” the PTM chimed in, gesturing around the table. “This conversation matters but we can’t force everyone to agree with us.”

I stared from face to face, looking for some sign of disagreement or at least discomfort. But 5 variations of pity stared back at me.

“So what do you suggest that we do?” I asked hesitantly. Even allowing the question to leave my mouth felt like a betrayal.

“I think we need to scrap it,” the AD jumped in almost immediately. “Let’s start from scratch, really build something the kids can relate to.” Four heads nodded in agreement.

“I hear what you’re saying,” I said hesitantly, hoping no one called my bluff on that statement. “I would like to talk this over with my supervisors, though.” Pleasant faces turned puzzled and no one spoke.

“This program effects a lot of people,” I continued. “And I would be hesitant to make any sweeping decisions about it without first taking this to my supervisors.” Why was everyone just staring at me?

“Oh they already know about all of this,” the PTM said, waving her hand absently.

“Um, actually, I don’t think any of us were really aware of the desire to cut the program entirely. And, either way, this is something I would need to talk with them about before we start making any changes.” The PTM pursed her lips and remained silent at that.

“Why don’t we,” the SA interjected, “plan a time for us to meet so we can figure out what this looks like moving forward?” Everyone nodded slowly.

“I think that would be good,” I agreed. “However, there are a couple of immediate issues including the dialogues we have scheduled for January orientation and the fact that I am about to start training a new cohort of PDLs in just a few weeks. What would you recommend between now and then?” Under the table my hands clenched my pen in a death grip, striving to channel any and all tension out of my face.

“Oh, well you all can figure that out, can’t you,” the SA asked, standing from the table. “I’ve got another meeting that I need to get to. I look forward to seeing you all soon.” And with that, he was gone.

I listened and nodded quietly as suggestions were thrown around, unable to hear anything over the buzzing in my ears. What just happened? Why did it feel like I got hit by a train?

“Well why don’t you look over the dialogue topics and pick some that we can use,” I looked up to see the AD addressing the PTM. My fists clenched even tighter as I tried to maintain my composure.

“Sure.” She turned to look at me. “Please send me a list of the topics and I’ll let you know what I approve for January.”

“The topics are on the list in front of you,” I said automatically before realizing how bold that sounded. “But I would be happy to email them if you would like.”

“I will just look over these, thanks,” she responded with an extra layer of sweetness in her tone.

“Great, and then we’ll schedule something within the next few weeks, right?” the APTM added, attempting to provide a buffer to the tense moment.

“That would be great. I’ll brief Bernice and Angela on our conversation so we can be prepared,” I offered, striving to seem helpful in some way.

With that everyone dispersed while I stayed behind, slowly gathering my things. It seemed like everyone had places to be and meetings to hold. As I trudged up the hill to my office, I couldn’t tell if my body was numb from the cold or the 40 minutes of adrenaline. I fumbled with my keys, missing the lock three times before finally inserting and turning it correctly. Dropping my stuff on the floor I sank into my chair and put my head in my hands.

*What in the hell just happened?*

## Appendix G

### Event 3: Fighting Back

**Thursday, January 29, 2015**

“Are you ready?”

I looked up from my notes to see Bernice peering around my doorway. Her deep brown eyes, always so warm and kind, took in my clenched fists and pale skin.

“Yes?” I replied tentatively.

“It’s alright. It’s going to be ok,” she soothed.

I gathered up my folder of handouts, rechecked my purse three times for my phone, keys, laptop, and charger before hoisting the bag to my shoulder and turning out the lights. Closing the office door behind me, I followed her down the hall where we waited for Angela to lock her office door. Together we headed towards the administration building.

As we walked I attempted to match Angela’s long, confident strides, and model Bernice’s straight shoulders and raised chins. I couldn’t stop the comparison of marching into battle, my hands tightening into fists in my jacket pockets.

*We can do this. It’s going to be ok. We’re ready,* I repeated to myself with every step.

As we entered the building, dry, hot air slapped me in the face. Everything felt so hostile today. Following Bernice’s lead, I entered the President’s conference room from the hallway this time, instead of the President’s suite. I guess that’s where I was supposed to enter last time. *Maybe that’s why I had confused the SA so much,* I thought to myself.

“Where should we sit?” I asked Bernice quietly. We were the first arrivals with many options before us. Angela grabbed a chair towards the middle, with Bernice and then me falling into line next to her. I swallowed a sigh of relief as I avoided the chair I had sat in just a month ago, the one where I had felt trapped and isolated into making choices I wasn’t prepared or even approved to make.

“Sorry I’m late,” a bright voice greeted us from the door. Faith rushed in, her blonde hair flying behind her. “Well I guess I’m not late,” she replied glancing around the empty room. She walked down the table and grabbed a seat on my left, officially boxing me in. Somehow being surrounded by my colleagues brought me more of a sense of relief than I had anticipated and my breathing stretched and slowed.

“Where is everyone?” Faith asked. All three of us shrugged our shoulders as the hallway entrance opened again. Slowly the room filled with our attendees: the director of the wellness program, the director of the transfer student program, the director of orientation, the Diversity Advisor [DA], and the Assistant Administrator [AA].

“Good afternoon, everyone!” The Senior Administrator [SA] greeted us as he closed the door to the President’s Suite behind him. Seeing him, the President’s Team Member [PTM], and the Academic Advisor [AD] enter from the same door sent a chill down my spine.

“Good afternoon,” we all responded quietly.

“So today, we’re here to talk about the SU100 program and its various components. Becky, last time we met you told us a little bit about the Peer-to-Peer Dialogues program. Would you mind refreshing that for us for a moment?” He scratched his white beard as he spoke, though his eyes never met mine.

“Of course.” I shared an abbreviated description of the program, its student leaders, and the curriculum. Everyone in the room either worked closer with SU100 or had heard me share this before so I skipped many of the details.

“I still am rather impressed with this curriculum,” the SA added, as I finished.

“Thank you,” I replied quietly, my clenched fists hidden in my lap. “Here you will see all of the details I shared written out for your reference,” I added. I palmed the paper clip, and passed the stack of papers around the table. Everyone flipped through them for a moment while I fiddled with the paperclip in an attempt to save my hands from the cut of my nails.

“Now the AD has shared with me some issues presented to him about the Peer-to-Peer Dialogues program,” he motioned to the AD sitting on his left. “Would you mind sharing those with the room?” With a sweep of his hand, speaking privileges moved across the table.

“Yes, well as you’ll see here,” he said as he handed out his own stack of papers. “There have been several complaints over the years with this program. Students find it to be isolating, negative, and discriminatory to their belief systems.” As I read through the email printouts, I noticed they were predominantly from students expressing frustration about being labeled as racist and discriminatory in their beliefs towards People of Color.

“Though I know we can’t and shouldn’t make everyone happy with our programs, these students present very problematic views here,” he said, gesturing towards the stack of papers.

“What I notice here,” Angela began, “is that most of these students seem to identify as white men. I also notice that nothing they are saying is untrue. Racism is real and these sessions they attended asked them to think about that truth.”

*How does she keep her voice so steady and level while staring at that man?* I asked myself, watching her response.

“The point of these workshops is to ask students to think about things that make them uncomfortable. It seems that was successful for these students. How we respond to that discomfort is more important.” Her eyes moved from the AD to the SA as she shared her thoughts.

“Agreed,” Faith said from my left. “Research tells us that dissonance is a critical part of the learning process. If the students are not somewhat uncomfortable, they are not being pushed to learn.”

“Yes, but we shouldn’t force our students into something they aren’t ready for,” the AD responded. On the right side of the SA, the PTM nodded her head in emphatic agreement.

“Exactly,” she added after a moment. “There are ways to talk about respect without isolating our students.”

“Most of the ways that talk about respect without also considering identity only work to isolate students who are not coming from privileged backgrounds,” Angela responded.

“When we avoid talking about things like race, only the white students remain comfortable.”

The room fell silent for a moment, minus the sound of Bernice’s pen scratching across her notepad. From the corner of my eye I saw her notes quickly filling up the page. She never missed a thing and I knew she was storing up so many thoughts, waiting for her moment to chime in.

“The work you all do is admirable,” the SA said, looking at me. “However, I see this program, though well done, as too much for our students when they first arrive here.” I didn’t miss that he was addressing me, rather than Angela’s response.

“Students aren’t prepared for these conversations when they first come to campus. They need to have time to figure some of these things out about themselves before they are ready to sit in something so complex.” His eyes stayed fixed on me as he spoke, only briefly including Faith in his gaze.

“I would have to disagree,” Angela replied. “Though I know not every student is prepared for these conversations, we cannot assume that no students are. And, from what research tells us about students, they are perfectly capable of engaging and learning from these conversations, whether or not it is their first time doing so.”

“It sounds like,” Bernice added, taking in the PTM, AD, and the SA in her quiet, steady gaze, “you have something in mind for the students to learn in these conversations. What do you want them to leave the room with?”

The SA and PTM turned to the AD in a silent indication for him to answer.

“What we need is something base level. We can’t assume that students ‘get it’,” he said, placing the phrase in air quotes, “and that they never will if they don’t respond positively to the material. The entire SU100 program needs to align with the core values of the institution: honesty, integrity, and respect. What we need is less hoops for the students to jump through and more intention placed on those values.” His clipped words spoke of frustration, though his voice remained steady and distant.

“I would like to offer,” I said slowly, hoping to hide the shake in my voice, “that what we present in this curriculum is the baseline of diversity education.” Glancing to my right I caught Angela’s steady gaze and felt emboldened to continue. “Naming social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc., is the first step in learning about ourselves and others. Our students may have never thought about these before, but it doesn’t mean that they can’t. In our curriculum we don’t ask them to agree to anything or admit to anything. We just ask that they listen and try to understand the experiences of people who differ from themselves and have different life experiences. We cannot learn to respect others if we first cannot admit that people are different and that those differences aren’t bad.”

Taking a breath, I looked around the room to gauge how my speech fell. The blank stares in return shook all the confidence I had gained while speaking.

“Well if that is the baseline, then we need what comes before that,” the PTM responded.

On either side of me, the shifts and tensions told me that my colleagues were not impressed with this response.

“Do you have an idea of what you would like that to be?” Angela asked, her voice dripping with politeness.

“I don’t know, something!” The PTM responded, her hands waving around her in emphasis. “You’re the experts.”

“What we need is something uniform,” the SA said, attempting to get us back on track. “I think that one of the issues with this program is the individual topics. Instead of focusing on so many issues at once, what would it look like to do something the same across all students. That way we can better ensure that they are all walking away with the same information.”

“And we need it to be shorter,” the AD jumped in. “Two hours is just too much time. I would prefer to see this program and the wellness program combined and finish in less than 75 minutes. That way the students have finished their responsibilities and also walk away with something to think about for later.”

*75 minutes for both? Are you serious? I thought to myself. How could we possibly cover anything important in that amount of time? I mean maybe something could happen in 75 to 90 minutes of our own time but definitely not in less than an hour.*

“What do you cover in the wellness program,” Angela asked the quiet end of the table. The coordinator of the program jumped in her seat having been addressed for the first time.

“Well we talk about consent, ways to stay healthy and well in body, mind, and spirit while they are here, and healthy choices around substance use,” she responded quietly. “We offer a 75 minute workshop and the students take a comprehension test immediately after.”

“Hmm,” Bernice said thoughtfully. “Listening to you makes it difficult for me to see how these programs could be combined. Your material is very important and deserves the time and focus the students give to it. Cutting in to that, or pairing it with material from a different perspective might hurt the students’ ability to properly take in what you’re trying to share.”

The AD’s brows pulled down at her response.

“I understand that you’re trying to minimize the time students have to commit to these events,” Faith added, directing the AD and his brow, “and perhaps there is a way to drop the time of Peer-to-Peer Dialogues a little. What do you think can be accomplished in that amount of time, Becky?” With her words and her body, Faith brought me back to the expert position and I both hated and loved her for it in that moment.

“I would offer that anything less than 75 minutes would not be worth the effort we give it.” Tightening my shoulders and raising my chin, I went on. “I still believe that discussing the bare minimum around social identities is the key to having a conversation about respect. All of the research that I have read on diversity education supports that. And any conversation about social identity without some time to do a learning activity would turn into a lecture. And we know that lectures are often the least effective teaching method for students. In order to retain their learning, we would need 30-40 minutes to set up a conversation and then time to actually have that conversation.”

“So from what I am hearing, you will look at drafting a curriculum for this program that focuses more on respect and happens in less time, correct?” He looked around the

table to gauge affirmatives. I noticed the AD's eyes locked on the shiny wood table surface despite his terse nod of agreement. He did not seem happy with this outcome in the least.

"Great, I look forward to what you come up with."

The rest of the meeting wrapped quickly with a tentative time frame to meet again and an agreement on the approval reporting line. No one made eye contact with our side of the table besides me. It seemed that all questions and planning were my choice though I was the least senior person in the room. The authority made me itchy and I constantly looked to my left and right before agreeing to anything.

As I sat in Angela's office processing with her and Bernice that afternoon, I noticed my cell phone ping with a new email. Seeing the AD's name, I immediately put the phone down. *Not right now*, I silently told myself.

"Angela, why did everyone keep talking to me?" I asked in a quiet moment.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, of the four of us that they were talking to, you did most of the talking. Yet every time they looked at me." Her jaw tightened as I spoke, confirming my observation.

"Why do you think?" Bernice asked, as she and Angela shared a knowing look. "I've got to close up for the day and head out. You did great in there, Becky." With a firm pat on the shoulder she walked out of the room.

"Angela, how often does that happen to you? To her?" I couldn't look at her so I fixated on the nameplate on the front of her desk, my eyes tracing the letters of her name over and over in the silence.

"I stopped counting a long time ago," the exhaustion in her voice had me finally meeting her eyes.

"I'm so sorry," I blinked against the burn of tears threatening to fall. She didn't need this from me. Not right now.

"Don't be sorry," she said, holding my gaze steady. "Be different."

Sitting at my desk, I finally opened the email I had been avoiding. I saw he had forwarded a new student complaint before sharing his assessment of the meeting.

*I want you to understand that I think what your former supervisor started, and what you've continued, has value. But it was a big experiment. I think we've learned that it is not right for our population as a \*mandatory\* activity.*

*I realize that the natural inclination is to argue the value of continuing with no change. "Students are philistines, they just don't get it." If it was my program I'd probably do the same. I don't fault you for that, but it's time for us to join together.*

He went on to talk about the SU100 planning meeting we had the next week and how important it was for the wellness and Peer-to-Peer Dialogues programs to be more efficient.



*Do I think you need to retain an hour on identity? Only if it is required for the message on core values in the second hour. I'd happily trade your hour on identity for an hour on financial health. If I had the power as instructor to make that change I'd do it immediately.*

*I'm sorry that this transition seems so antagonistic. If Angela's eyes had been nail guns I'd be a bleeding corpse right now.*

*From my perspective I think the meeting failed. I was hoping that when the SA and your PTM said we need to move another direction that your response would be "I'm happy to do that."*

My pulse was an aching drumbeat in my ears by the time I finished. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't stop reading it again and again. And with each pass the fire in my veins grew.

*How could he? How could he write this now? Today? How could he say that he understood and then chastise me for not falling in line? I couldn't remember being so angry in my life. I couldn't remember anything outside of those words repeating indefinitely before my eyes.*

With my third forced exhale of breath, I slowly reached up and pushed the laptop lid down. The definitive click of the closing latch brought the tears to the surface. Sliding out of my chair to the floor, I wept.

## Appendix H

### Event 4: Gathering the Pieces

Dear Journal,

Tonight I told the PDLs about the changes coming in the program and I feel like I need a shower. But then, what's new? Looking at their faces tonight I felt the weight of the last three months hit me even harder. I'm surprised I didn't crumble to pieces in my seat. After all of the back and forth, after all of the running around, our curriculum revision was finally approved and I have never felt more defeated in my life.

Watching their faces shift into anger, confusion, guilt, and frustration was so painful. But it was RJ that hurt the most. I watched his shoulders slump as the energy drained from him. "So that's it, they win. Again." His voice was so quiet I almost didn't hear him but the despair in his eyes said enough. That kid lived for this work in this program. It made him feel like he was making a difference, doing something positive to push back the racism and homophobia he'd been battling for his whole life. They took that from him. I took that from him.

How am I supposed to do my work now? How am I supposed to get rid of this feeling of being watched and judged from the university? I can't trust myself anymore. I reread everything I send 10 times. I ask for Bernice's advice on little things that I should be able to decide for myself. I just can't seem to make a decision. What if I make a mistake? What if the next time they take the PDLs? What if they take my job?

They went through all of the energy to change this program but then we couldn't even get it approved. Why? Why did it take a whole month to get someone to remember that we were even having this conversation? Does that mean they are watching me or they're not? I feel like someone knows the right answer but, instead of sharing it, they're just telling me no every time I try something different. It's maddening. And now that I'm on their radar I have to leverage what I risk and what I don't. What will they take next if I go too far?

Bernice and Angela tell me not to worry, that everything is going to blow over and it will be ok. They point out that the university has far more pressing matters right now and I should just keep trucking along. But in the back of my mind I have this nagging feeling that something else is coming. I'm on edge all of the time. It's exhausting. I'm exhausted. Maybe Lawson is right, maybe I need to go talk to someone. Maybe they'll at least give me something to help me find some balance.

I just have to keep breathing, I guess. Keep working. Maybe it really all settle down eventually. Maybe.

Becky

Appendix I

Event 5: Timeline of Events (Nationally and Locally)

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Related Event</b>
January, 2007	Racist event reaches national attention	Campus	
Spring, 2007	President mandates that all new undergraduate students will attend some form of diversity education upon arrival at Southeastern (this takes different forms over the next four years)	Campus, P2P	The Ambush, Fighting Back
Spring 2010	P2P and PDL programs begin to take shape	P2P	The Ambush, Fighting Back
Fall, 2011	P2P begins on campus	P2P	The Ambush, Fighting Back
Feb 26, 2012	Trayvon Martin is shot and killed by George Zimmerman in Sanford, FL	National	
Nov 23, 2012	Jordan Davis is shot and killed by Michael Dunn in Jacksonville, FL	National	
Nov 2, 2012	Renisha Davis is shot and killed by Theodore Walter in Detroit, MI	National	
Nov. 2013	Southeastern University names a new president	Campus	
April 2014	New president begins	Campus	
July 17, 2014	Eric Garner is killed by officer Daniel Pantaleo in Staten Island, NY	National	
Aug. 5, 2014	John Crawford is shot and killed by police in Beavercreek, OH	National	
Aug. 9, 2014	Michael Brown is shot and killed by officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, MO	National	
Aug. 11, 2014	Ezell Ford is show and killed by police in Los Angeles, CA	National	
Sep. 16, 2014	Senior Administrator [SA] begins at SU	Campus	

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Related Event</b>
Sep. 22, 2014	Student death on campus reaches national news	Campus	
Oct. 10, 2014	SU board outlines focus for the academic year: diversity initiatives not included	Campus	
Oct. 20, 2014	Laquan McDonald is shot and killed by officer Jason Van Dyke in Chicago, IL	National	
Nov. 23, 2014	Tamir Rice is shot and killed by officer Timothy Loehmann in Cleveland, OH	National	
Nov. 24, 2014	Grand Jury rules not to indict Darren Wilson in the death of Michael Brown	National	
Nov 24, 2014	Students organize a die-in event to protest the grand jury decision re: Michael Brown	Campus	
Nov. 25, 2014	Racist social media posts go viral	Campus	
Nov. 27, 2014	Grand Jury rules not to indict Daniel Pantaleo in the death of Eric Garner	National	
Dec. 2, 2014	New President's Team Member [PTM] begins	Campus	
Dec. 4, 2014	Students organize a die-in event to protest the grand jury decision re: Eric Garner	Campus	
Dec. 6, 2014	Fraternity hosts a racist-themed party	Campus	
Dec. 7, 2014	Student respond to the event with a march across campus, President suspends fraternity	Campus	
Dec. 8, 2014	Faculty and staff organize to support students who are protesting with a letter to campus	Campus	
Dec. 13, 2014	Academic Advisor [AD] emails me about a potential change to the P2P program	P2P	Something's Not Right Here
Dec. 16, 2014	I am called to a meeting with top administrators regarding the P2P program	P2P	Something's Not Right Here, The Ambush
Dec. 16, 2014	PTM edits the list of P2P dialogue options for	P2P	The Ambush

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Related Event</b>
	Spring sessions		
Dec. 18, 2014	President announces new diversity initiatives	Campus	
Dec. 20, 2014	Two officers are killed during a #BLM protest in Brooklyn, NY	National	
Jan. 7, 2015	Students organize a march and share a list of grievances regarding the Campus's responses to the recent racist events	Campus	
Jan. 15, 2015	President uses an email announcement about MLK events to make a statement about diversity	Campus	
Jan. 29, 2015	2nd meeting with administrators, P2P officially changed	P2P	Fighting Back
Feb. 9, 2015	Revised P2P curriculum submitted for initial review	P2P	Gathering the Pieces
Feb. 10, 2015	PTM sends a campus-wide email announcing diversity initiatives	Campus	
Mar. 3, 2015	2nd round of P2P curriculum edits submitted following feedback	P2P	Gathering the Pieces
Mar. 4, 2015	Order of approval changed for P2P approval	P2P	Gathering the Pieces
Mar. 6, 2015	Final revised P2P curriculum updated	P2P	Gathering the Pieces
Mar. 8, 2015	Final version of P2P curriculum approved	P2P	Gathering the Pieces
Mar. 10, 2015	PDLs informed of program changes	P2P	Gathering the Pieces
Summer 2015	PTM announces large scale restructuring that moves the diversity into a new reporting structure	Campus	

## Appendix J

### Implications Artifact: A Search Committee Case Study

You have been asked to serve on the search committee for the Associate Director of Leadership and Service Learning at Southeastern University with six other people:

- Committee Chair: Caitlin, Director for Fraternity and Sorority Life (a white woman)
- Amber, Associate Director for Student Engagement (a white woman)
- Sandra, Associate Director for Minority Access Programs (a Latina woman)
- Dan, Community Director for one of the Residential Communities (a white man)
- Beth, Community Director for one of the Residential Communities (a white woman)
- Lori, Graduate Assistant for Leadership (a Black woman)

This position is part of a restructuring of the student activities department with leadership and service learning being burgeoning areas of growth for the unit. The person selected will report to the Director for Student Life (a white man).

Throughout the resume review process, you begin to notice a pattern from some of your peers. The three members who identify as white women habitually make statements regarding the applicants' related experiences often dependent upon what experiences are being described. When the applicants describe service-related experiences within Communities of Color, these experiences are not evaluated as highly as those who serve predominantly white-serving communities or programs. After experiencing this discrepancy for several applicants, Sandra names this for the group, asking the committee chair, Caitlin, to explain why these are being rated differently despite them both describing service-related experiences. Caitlin has difficulty forming

words but eventually says that the situations “do not seem to have the same level of intensity. This applicant helped make some lunches for a backpack program for an inner city, school which is great. But this applicant actually worked with her sorority with kids in a local hospital. To me they seem different.” Sandra informed Caitlin that the first applicant was also serving with their greek organization, one associated with AAPI communities. At this, Caitlin becomes quiet and refuses to make eye contact with Sandra for the rest of the meeting.

Following the meeting, Caitlin sends an email detailing the importance of committee members working through their assessments and evaluations as they see fit. She notes that, this stage in the search process is meant to be only review and there are more opportunities to advocate for certain candidates as the field is narrowed. Sandra replies all to this email advocating for collaborative discussions in all stages of the review process. She points out that, it is only through group conversations that the committee can identify places where they are potentially practicing bias or overlooking a potential candidate. Lori, the student representative on the committee, replies all as well sharing support for Sandra’s recommendations.

At the next committee meeting, you enter a few minutes late to a somewhat tense-feeling space. Caitlin and Sandra are engaged in a back and forth regarding the appropriate ways to handle the review process. Lori is offering support for Sandra’s perspective whereas everyone else in the room is silent. After a few minutes Caitlin throws up her hands and says “what do you want me to do here? I’m just doing what the Director asked of me! It’s like you think I’m the bad guy for trying to make this easier!”

Caitlin then becomes quiet and clearly emotionally impacted. Amber, Dan, and Beth all offer supportive comments in an attempt to help Caitlin feel better. Dan suggests that the group try things as Caitlin is recommending in order to reach the selection deadline.

Caitlin then turns to you and asks, “What do you think about all of this?”

Questions:

- What issues are there related to race? Gender?
- How could socialization practices of race and gender be playing out simultaneously?
- How do Caitlin’s actions align with socialized expectations and historical narratives of white women?
- What influence do these issues have in this search process?
- How could you as a white woman intervene?



## Appendix K

### Implications Artifact: An Email Response

AD,

After reviewing your email, I have some reactions. Firstly, this “experiment” is a university-wide mandate, not an optional elective or special topics course. Diversity work comes with dissonance so the complaints you shared reflect what we expect. The students are doing exactly what they are supposed to do when we ask them to have these conversations. So, instead of backing away, we should assist them in navigating this dissonance.

This program provides students with necessary skills of conflict management and working with diverse people. Students would have a better chance to learn these skills if we took time to stress the importance of these lessons and prioritized this learning. Fully understanding, supporting, and advocating for this program would be a significant step forward so that, when critiques surface, upper administrators like you who were able to articulate the importance of conflict, critical reasoning, and diverse experiences.

You seem to significantly underestimate the work students are willing to put in to this. We claim to have the best students in the nation yet we assume they can't or won't try new things or meet new challenges when they focus on diversity and inclusion. Instead of these assumptions, let's set them up for the success they are more than capable of achieving; we prepare them, support them, and model for them how to thrive in diverse spaces and take in difficult information.

This process appears antagonistic because it is antagonistic. Instead of being clear in your communication, relaying necessary information, and inviting me and my team to the table sooner, we were left in the dark. We ask our students to model respect, integrity, and honesty, yet these were not offered to us.

In the future, please think about the way you conceptualize me and my supervisors. Asking me to stand in their place, making wide sweeping decisions including potentially cutting a \$20,000 program impacting 4,000+ people was out of line. At no other place in our organizational structure at this university would an entry level employee be asked to make such a decision when their supervisors were not included or even aware of the situation. My supervisors, two Women of Color, were avoided and overlooked despite their roles and responsibilities. This should not occur. Also, Angela was not and is not a threat to you. She has no control over you or what you do, therefore your perceptions of her reveal more about you than they do about her.

And me? I refuse to fall in line here. My job as a Social Justice Educator is to push Southeastern to do better, to be better. I will continue to critique this university so we can acknowledge our narrow fields of focus and the harms they cause. My hope is that you will recognize this moving forward. We all can benefit from learning, growth, and change. Perhaps the real experiment here was to witness how a university could rise to its own challenge of requiring students to navigate conflict and diverse conversations. I will leave it to you to assess the results.

Sincerely,

Becky Morgan

## Appendix L

### Implications Artifact: A Twitter Thread

Dear white cis-women (1/15): Before you scroll past naming reasons this won't apply to you, before you roll your eyes & shift your shoulders, before you peruse my other tweets to decide if I am someone worth listening to, stop. Breathe. Now let's chat.

First: We (you & me) DO have power but won't admit it. That'd be bossy or bitchy. We purposefully wield it but never own it. That'd be calculating or bitchy. We look innocent while harming others (re: BIPOC) but we'll never name it. That'd be terrible &, yep, bitchy. (2/15)

So let me say it for us: we are Beckys, Karens, and Amy Coopers. I don't care about your ally badges, the number of BIPOC around you, or your philanthropy. Each of us are complicit. And our survival depends on setting ourselves apart from and above BIPOC. Mine too. (3/15)

Historically we come from a long line of white cis-women who taught us three things:

1. innocence at all times to avoid accountability
2. we are the example of good & moral & we evaluate others
3. we cannot survive without the safety & protection of white men (4/15)

But I don't do those things! That's not me! So let me ask you this:

1. have you ever avoided or deflected a conversation about race by focusing on all your good traits and actions or how much you just don't notice things like race? (5/15)

2. have you ever compared yourself to other white women or white men to show how much better you are than them? Or talked about how the people who challenge you (most often BIPOC) are just being too harsh or too mean? (6/15)

3. have you ever stood in defense of white men because they're probably just misunderstood, really good people underneath, and/or they were just "having a hard day"? (7/15)

We call the police, we evaluate our coworkers to our bosses, we wield our emotions as weapons. BIPOC are literally dying because of our maintenance of these norms and expectations. (8/15)

Breathe. These practices aren't just about you. It's how we are taught to protect our white privilege. It's a combo only for us and it gets us through racial justice minefields without ever touching the ground. (9/15)

We must be innocent, good, & obedient & there are dire consequences when we aren't. Many of us have stories of what happens when we don't follow the rules. But we've also hid behind them to avoid our racism. & they are keeping us from standing in solidarity with BIPOC. (10/15)

Friends, this is not judgment but rather invitation. I'm not separate from this. This is me. But I want to say it loud and clear for the people in the back and as a reminder of what Audre Lorde already told us, these practices will not save us. (11/15)

By continuing this way we further harm to BIPOC & add to our own oppression. We cannot continue to maintain these norms of "good white women" if we truly wish to disrupt and dismantle white supremacy. (12/15)

So now take a review of your spaces. Who talks and who doesn't? Who do we speak well of/dismiss? Why is that? What judgements do we make about others? Who do we follow/cancel? What are we really sacrificing? What is fear of disapproval compared to fear of death? (13/15)

So read up on white fragility AND Authors of Color that make you uncomfortable. Share the article AND talk about it with your people. Send money to big orgs AND invest in smaller businesses run by BIPOC. Interrupt, intervene, AND push through your inevitable mistakes. (14/15)

SO a TL;DR: white cis-women further white supremacy using the survival tools ingrained in us through our oppression as women. When confronted: we get defensive, avoid, & lash out. But we can't continue if we want actual change. So stop. Breathe. Now try something new. (15/15)

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