



**Choosing Gender or Race:
Portraits of Female, White Ally Higher Education Administrators Committed to Making
Socially Just Spaces for BIPOC Women in their Institutions**

by
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Abstract

Racism in the U.S. is systemic and has relied on centuries of deliberate practice to create a White male hegemonic (White supremacist) power structure. Being systemic, racism is reproduced in all of our defining institutions, including higher education. In addition, White women have consistently contributed to the reproduction of racism by choosing race and enduring sexism in all areas of society, including higher education. However, there are women in academe who choose to deliberately be antiracist and actively seek to create socially just spaces for women of color in their institutions. Filling a gap in the literature related to female White ally higher education administrators, this study inquires into the experiences of five female higher education administrators identified through Community Nomination (Foster, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1989) as White allies by Black women. Through extensive interviewing and via Portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) these women revealed the “goodness” of their work as they talked about themselves as 1) aspiring allies, 2) women in higher education, and 3) human beings in this world. Themes that emerged from the creation of the portraits mirror the extant literature on allyship, including 1) allyship is a continuous journey, 2) effective allyship requires humility and curiosity, and 3) being a White ally should be a moral obligation for anyone with White privilege. Filtered through the theoretical framework of Patricia Hill Collins’s Black Feminist Epistemology (2002), this study harnesses the power of storytelling and honors the thinking and scholarship of women of color.

Keywords: racism, sexism, female White ally, higher education, Portraiture, Black Feminist Epistemology, Community Nomination

Dedication

For my mom, my wife, and my daughter. You all make me smart.

Dad and Grandma, I hope you can see this. I miss you.

Acknowledgements

As anyone knows who has taken on a journey as large and as scary as pursuing a degree (of any sort), pretty much no one does it alone. My deep, heart-felt thanks to the following:

Lisa Hall, the best wife ever, for listening to me read out loud, cry about it, then read some more. You never faltered, never waivered in your support. This is on your shoulders as much as mine.

Dr. Lynn Murray-Chandler, for saving the day. Someone having my back made all the difference.

Dr. Gretchen Generett, for sticking this out with me, and for helping me see what is really important work for White folks to do.

Dr. Ken Nivison, for catching my Hail Mary pass and coming in at the last, but just in time, minute.

Dr. Gwen Britton and Jaymes Walker-Myers, for helping me navigate work and school.

The Blue Angels 2015 Cohort, they know why.

Last, but not least, the five brave, generous women whose stories appear here. They are really the champions

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Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

Introduction

This study explored the convergence of race and gender. More narrowly, it looked at that convergence in an institution this is historically controlled by White males but purports to be a place for open thought, American higher education. It explored topics related to female White allies confronting issues of racism and sexism in higher education. What happens when she finds both synergy and conflict in the issues she's confronting? What choices may she be forced to make?

I explored these and other topics through the uniquely human approach of storytelling, utilizing Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) Portraiture methodology. As will be shown in Chapter 3, this methodology is not prescriptive. Its aim is to "capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv). To do this, portraitists "seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of the people they are studying.... placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue..., negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv).

This infinite space of telling stories in dialogue is the crux of this approach. In speaking about oral narratives, Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis (1993) notes that people's stories "[preserve] an individual's own words and perspectives in a particular, authentic way" (p. xii). In confirmation of Patricia Hill Collins' (2002) Black Feminist Epistemology (the framework upon which the study rests), Etter-Lewis (1993) explains that the patriarchal assumption that only *some* groups are capable of producing meaningful stories about themselves has turned women, and especially

BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) women, into an “invisible other” in traditional scholarly work. However, “recovering women’s words” (Gluck & Patai, 1991, p. 1), is exactly how we can “revise received knowledge” (p. 2) about the invisible other.

Donald Polkinghorne (1988) further tells us that human behavior must be understood by exploring human meaning-making systems, most importantly narrative. He defines this as a “cognitive process that organizes human experiences into temporally meaningful episodes” (Polkinghorne, p. 1). When seen through a Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2002), this means using “lived experience as a criterion of meaning” as the basis of women’s stories, including all the narrative forms in which those experiences may manifest (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 2002).

Everyone has a story. We make sense of our world through stories (Bruner, 2002; Iser, 1978; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1988). *History* is the telling of a thing, ultimately, through someone’s interpretation. This study is a story made up of a series of stories or word portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) about a group of women in higher education at this moment in time that may allow an interpretation of the complex and nuanced fight against racism and sexism.

Statement of the Problem

In broad strokes, the problem is the systemic racism that maintains an unequal and discriminatory distribution of societal awards, both material and non-material, in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2020; Davis, 1983; Feagin, 2013; Kendi, 2016). Throughout the history of the U.S., race has been used as an institutional, economic, social, and moral tool to divide human beings by elevating the benefits and privileges of people with White skin color over the benefits and privileges of people with not-White skin color. In particular, the deliberate denigration of

people of African ancestry by people of Western European ancestry has shaped the very fabric of the country (Davis, 1983; Feagin, 2013; hooks, 2015). This country was founded by and for the benefit of elite White men from a philosophy woven into the most fundamental aspects of our documents, laws, behavior norms, language, and cultural expressions (Kendi, 2016). Because of that “White Racial Frame” (Feagin, 2013), we are experiencing the immoral, divisive, unfair, and violent racism of modern America.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2020) identifies three aspects that make up systemic racism. First, it is historically specific to the society, the region, the nation, and the time period in which it operates. By that he means that systemic racism changes its “face” depending on those factors, and he notes that while Jim Crow racism may no longer be allowed to operate explicitly, other types of less explicit racism move in (Bonilla-Silva, 2020, 9:32). Second, systemic racism is structural in that “collective practices, behaviors, and culture...reproduce disadvantage for some and advantage for others *at all levels*” (Bonilla-Silva, 2020, 9:40). And finally, Bonilla-Silva (2020) says, systemic racism is materialist because we have created an incentive structure that gives White people privileges we will fight to keep, leaving disadvantaged people to fight to change it (10:05).

Joe Feagin (2013) defines racism as systemic because “oppressive racist realities have from the early decades been well institutionalized and manifested in all of this society’s major parts” (Preface). This includes 1) “oppressive White practices targeting Americans of color;” 2) “resource inequalities along racial lines;” and 3) “the dominant White racial frame” (Feagin, 2013, Preface). And Ibram Kendi (2019) explains that racism “is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities,” using “racist policy” as a more concrete way of expressing “systemic racism” (p. 17).

This systemic nature of American racism manifests in the following statistics:

- Of the 85.3 percent of students who graduated from high school in four years in 2017-2018, 89.1 percent were White versus 79 percent were Black (Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019b)
- In 2019, 40.1 percent of Whites aged 25 and up had at least a bachelor’s degree versus 26.1 percent of Blacks in the same age group (United States Census Bureau, 2020);
- Black Americans are currently the least likely to own their own homes. With ownership rates overall at 64.6 percent, 73.3 percent of Whites own their own homes versus 42.1 percent of Blacks (*Homeownership by Race*, 2020);
- Since 1972, Black unemployment rates have averaged two times the unemployment rates of Whites (Ajilore, 2020);
- Finally, in 2020, the Federal Reserve system found that “the typical White family has eight times the wealth of the typical Black family” with median family wealth for Whites at \$188,200.00 versus \$24,100.00 for Blacks (Bhutta et al., 2020).

These are just some of the ways that systematization of racism in all institutions and facets of the U.S. privilege White people. An example of this is the application and results of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, or The G.I. Bill.

In order to avoid the economic devastation veterans faced returning from WWI, the G.I. Bill of Rights “almost single-handedly built the American middle class by addressing core social needs—unemployment, education, and health care” (“Postwar Housing Boom”, 2018, para. 3). However, that middle class, and the wealth associated with it, was almost entirely White (Blakemore, 2019; Callahan, 2013; “Postwar Housing Boom”, 2018). According to D. Callahan (2013), “family wealth can take generations to build” (para. 6), and that wealth is highly

dependent on homeownership. A person whose great-grandparents were able to buy a home at this time probably was able to benefit from the wealth inherited by their grandparents, which in turn could lead to education without loans, help with home loans, and the ability to buy in a neighborhood with good schools in subsequent generations. This cyclical and additive cycle was denied to most Black veterans because they were barred from the pivotal requirement of homeownership (Callahan, 2013).

Other aspects of the Bill were used to deny benefits to Black veterans, also. E. Blakemore (2019) explains that Southern Democrats fearful of losing their Jim Crow laws successfully argued for the program to be administered by each state rather than federally. This gave those Jim Crow states the ability to help as few Black veterans as possible. In addition, only those honorably discharged qualified, and Black veterans were disproportionately dishonorably discharged. Schools continued to be segregated, Black veterans were intimidated for daring to move into White spaces, unemployment benefits were inequitably distributed, and most importantly, banks engaged in redlining. The result of White veterans getting full advantage of the Bill's benefits was that "White veterans flowed into newly created suburbs, where they began amassing wealth in skilled positions. But Black veterans lacked those options" (Blakemore, 2019, para. 14).

"Redlining" happens when banks and insurance companies mark maps by race and use that geographical and demographic information to grant or deny loans (Blakemore, 2019). This, combined with racist covenants that impacted real estate deeds, resulted in suburban housing growth to be almost entirely White ("Postwar Housing Boom", 2018). The move to the suburbs for those who could get the housing benefit left urban areas mostly non-White: "By the early '50s, only 2 percent of homes built with government-backed mortgages since World War II were

occupied by African Americans or other minorities” (“Postwar Housing Boom”, 2018, para. 8). Since then, various programs have looked to improve housing situations for those left in low-income urban areas, but those have centered on “clearing the slums” so that White people could benefit from gentrification or on rehabilitating existing neighborhoods and putting them under government supervision (“Postwar Housing Boom”, 2018). None of these approaches actually helps the people living there get closer to homeownership. By the end of the 1950s, average household income was 57.9 percent higher than it had been a decade before with homeownership over 60 percent. What this translates to in dollars is that a small home bought with G.I. Bill funds for \$8000 in 1950 would sell for \$297,500 in 2015, a 3600 percent return on investment (“Postwar Housing Boom”, 2018, para. 19). “Virtually, an entire generation of African Americans missed out on their 750-square-foot piece of the American dream” (“Postwar Housing Boom”, 2018, para. 21).

The denial of the housing benefit also disproportionately impacted the college tuition benefit, thus keeping Black veterans from the education and networking required to obtain skilled jobs (Blakemore, 2019). Because the benefits were doled out inequitably, as well as the racism that held over from before the War, many Black veterans could not afford the time to go to school. In addition, the segregated public school systems provided mostly substandard education to Black-populated schools so that many Black G.I.s were unprepared for college (Blakemore, 2019). Finally, with Northern schools hesitant to admit Black students, and Southern schools barring them altogether, all-Black colleges were overwhelmed with applicants and turned many away. Concurrently, the Veterans Administration encouraged Black veterans to apply for vocational training rather than a university education or arbitrarily denied them benefits altogether (Blakemore, 2019).

This tie between homeownership and future wealth is compounded by the tie between educational attainment and wealth. A 2017 report (Asante-Muhammad et al.) notes that it will take 228 years for the average Black family to reach the wealth of the average White family, and that “only Black and Latino households with an advanced degree have enough wealth to be considered middle-class, whereas all White households with a high school diploma or higher would be considered middle-class” (p. 5). Thus, the systemic participation of our controlling institutions (governmental, financial, educational, and cultural) works together as a system to protect the racial status quo.

Higher Education.

If the broad problem is systemic racism, a narrower facet of that problem is racism in higher education. Higher education is a significant part of the system that produces and reproduces systemic racism through the maintenance of a White supremacist ideology. A combination of the belief in White racial superiority and White male patriarchy, White supremacy is the system that drives the United States (Davis, 1983; Feagin, 2013; hooks, 2015). Our institutions of higher education were established to inculcate and reward the perpetuation of the thinking bell hooks (2015) calls imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy, yet society often perceives them as bastions of equality and high intellect that can shine light on hidden questions (Bell, 1993; Bonilla-Silva, 2020; Feagin, 2013; Katz, 1983). This paradox puts institutions of higher education in a unique position to effect change.

History shows that from the beginning, American higher education has served to promote the maintenance of White patriarchy in all influential areas of society. In American Colonial times, the first universities were established to train ministers and promote the teachings of the church (Katz, 1983). Throughout the 1800s, both Protestants and Catholics opened up many small

colleges that mostly focused on the sons of clergymen who planned to be ministers, lawyers, or teachers. Each of these professions allowed men to perpetuate their philosophies and to expand their influence through the institutions that shape and control thought and action in society: religion, the legal system, and education. They prepared young men to move from farms to cities, thus creating a Northeastern elite that perpetuated its great power by increasing admissions exclusivity for sons of wealthy families and ministers (Katz, 1983). With the explosive growth in K-12 education during this time, teachers' colleges were established that were for the most part, stood up and staffed by the religious, legal, and educational institutions that already protected the White patriarchy (Katz, 1983).

The concept of academic freedom leads us to think about universities as places of unfettered research and thinking in which the promotion of the public good and the open, "free" exchange of ideas and speech are paramount and pursued without worry of repercussion. However, this cherished ideal also functions to protect the privilege and status of the White (mostly) men who set up this societal institution to begin with (Bell, 1993; hooks, 2013; Lorde, 2007). Critical race scholars like Derrick Bell (1993) document how traditional hiring and tenure practices protected under the auspices of academic freedom forward the current hegemony and why arguing over the details of affirmative action policies hides real compliance with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In addition, the backlash on faculty, especially faculty of color, speaking up about White privilege, White supremacy, and the idea of Whiteness is rampant.

Once people of color do obtain faculty and administrative positions, their treatment and the expectations of them are different than of their White counterparts. Multiple collections of essays and studies document patterns of unequal expectations around: teaching load, teaching quality, committee and other extra-curricular work, quality of scholarship, treatment in the

classroom, and ability to communicate universally (Dace, 2012b; Mitchell, 2014; Stockdill & Danico, 2012b). Brett Stockdill and Mary Danico (2012a) show that “All too often, the expectation of working-class people, people of color, women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people in academe has been that they will assume the politics, values, and ideals of their upper-middle-class, White, male, heterosexual peers” (p. 2). They also point out that there is a rich dissident tradition in higher education when directed *outside* the institution; however, the “central paradox of the academy” is that this critical mindset is “promoted only to the extent that it [does] not call into question biases and bigotry *within* the department, classroom, or the university” (Stockdill & Danico, 2012a, p. 3). This belies the romanticized view of the ivory tower and helps focus us on how higher education is a powerful driver of systemic racism.

A brief look at some statistics helps illustrate the lack of representation of BIPOC people in the academy:

- In Fall 2018, 53 percent of full-time faculty were White males and 27 percent were White females (meaning 90 percent were White); Black males and Black females accounted for 2 percent of full-time faculty each (meaning 4 percent were Black; NCES, 2019a);
- In the same reporting period, 34 percent of full-time assistant professors were White males, 39 percent White females, and 5 percent each were Black males and females, with similar numbers holding true for lecturers (NCES, 2019a);
- A 2021 report by the Eos Foundation found that women make up 60 percent of all professionals in higher education and have outpaced men in degree attainment, yet less than 25 percent are top-earners, with women of color being virtually nonexistent in this

category; in addition, male faculty and deans in traditionally male-dominated disciplines earn the highest pay (Silbert et al., 2021).

Therefore, since predominantly White institutions of higher education have been historically, and continue to be, purveyors of White male American thought and culture, and since those who run them and teach at them have great influence on this thought and culture, it should be imperative that all aspects of American thought and culture are represented in order to change this thought and culture. Clearly, this is not the case. As Bonilla-Silva (2020) who works at Duke University states:

The academy has this reputation of being a liberal place where equality rules, except that's not the case. We are a reflection of the social, socio-racial order in America...so that the academy is not beyond race. And it cannot be because we're not out of the social, structural determinants of life. (14:46)

Convergence of race and gender in higher education.

If the problem writ large is the systemic racism endemic in the United States, and a location of that systemic racism and sexism is higher education, we can zoom in even further to examine the historic struggle between White and Black women that continues to play out in higher education. Historically, White women have chosen to protect our race privilege over our gender solidarity, as multiple scholars have documented.

Beginning in slavery, White women colluded to protect themselves against husbands, fathers, and brothers by positioning themselves in power over slave women (Davis, 1983; hooks, 2015). The emerging “cult of domesticity” in the 1800s required White women to be “pure” or be completely rejected, thus casting Black women as the opposite. In both cases, these hegemonic narratives locked women into being inferior and under the control of all men, White

men in particular. The idealizing of White womanhood not only objectified White women but also removed most of their agency. However, “the economic arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles in the new ideology,” and further widened the divide between women who were owned and the women who, by proxy, owned them (Davis, 1983, p. 11). However, because White women had race privilege, they could choose whether or not to ally with their Black sisters or with their White male oppressors, and most chose the latter.

It may seem as though White women in the slave period had a forced choice, but this pattern continues through the suffrage era (Davis, 1983; hooks, 2015; Kendi, 2016). The battle over the vote pitted White women against Black men. Many Black women felt that any enfranchisement of Black people was necessary to combat both slavery and other results of racism, which took precedence over the rights of White middle-class women. The vitriol White women turned toward Black women who supported enfranchisement for Black men revealed the underlying racism endemic in the suffrage movement (Davis, 1983; hooks, 2015) and resulted in a women’s movement that up to this day excludes the specific needs of both Black women and White working-class women (Davis, 1983; hooks, 2015; Kendi, 2016).

Feminism.

As history shows, sexism and racism work together in preserving the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy, as bell hooks (2013) describes the social structure. The patterns created in slave times and through the abolitionist and suffrage movements continue (Anzaldúa, 1987; Davis, 1983; Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 2015; Lorde, 2007; Rich, 1997) in what bell hooks (2013) calls “racialized sexism.” The Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) emerged in the late 1960s out of the Civil Rights Movement and was focused on the economic, political, and social freedoms necessary for women to gain parity with men in all areas of life.

The focus on sexism to the exclusion of other areas of subjugation and to a single-minded way of defining “woman” and “women’s struggles,” eventually lead Black women (and other women of color) to break off from mainstream feminism (hooks, 2015; Hurtado, 2010; Lorde, 2007).

Lorde (2007) posits White women in the women’s movement focused on their oppression and assumed it was the same across all groups of women. “As White women ignore their built-in privilege of Whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become ‘other’” ...leading to a “reluctance to see Black women as women and different from themselves” (p. 117). It allowed White women to proclaim a common oppression. And the insistence on this proclamation furthered the historic animosity between White and Black women.

This is the historical backdrop against which White women in higher education operate. Considering the extreme marginalization of BIPOC women in higher education (Dace, 2012b; NCES, 2019a; Silbert et al., 2021; Stockdill & Danico, 2012b), a White woman committed to creating socially just practices must determine how to contend with this historic dilemma. This study sought to learn how White women in this situation respond to the work in front of them with a focus on the “goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) that emerges from their work and examples of ways forward for us all.

Conceptual Models and Theoretical Framework

White people operate continuously, consciously and unconsciously, under a protective umbrella of White privilege conferred upon us by the mere fact of our White skin/European heritage (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; DiAngelo, 2018; Feagin, 2013; McIntosh, 1988). The first step in dismantling this inequity is to name that privilege and to dig into that name. Eve Ensler (Ensler & Siegler, 2006) states,

“Naming things, breaking through taboos and denial is the most dangerous, terrifying, and crucial work. This has to happen in spite of political climates or coercions, in spite of careers being won or lost, in spite of the fear of being criticized, outcast or disliked. I believe freedom begins with naming things. Humanity is preserved by it.”

The concept of “privilege” has been recognized for at least a century. W.E.B. DuBois (1999) wrote about the psychological toll White skinned people paid and took from themselves and others. More recently, Peggy McIntosh (1988) brought the idea into popular mainstream consciousness. She states,

As a White person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, White privilege, which puts me at an advantage (p. 2).

Her iconic list of 46 things she can do without thinking merely because she is White has helped to make White privilege tangible, and name-able. But simply naming can also be reductive, so Critical Whiteness scholars and others dig more deeply into privilege, trying to dismantle it (Cabrera, 2017; Lensmire et al., 2013). When White people believe that naming and confessing their privilege is all the antiracist action that is needed, then no antiracist action actually happens. This study talked with White women who go beyond simply naming their privilege.

To do this, I relied on Patricia Hill Collins’s (2002) Black Feminist Epistemology to create a framework against which I analyzed the experiences of female White allies in higher education. By choosing an epistemology as both theoretical and conceptual framework, the study was grounded in alternate ways of knowing to the hegemonic imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2015). In purposefully choosing participants who are simultaneously privileged (White) and marginalized (female), intersectional lenses were clearly

required (Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1991). That means that the framework had to support what it means to be “White” and what it means to be “female” validated by research and thinking from the marginalized group so as not to put forward only the hegemonic mindset. However, intersectionality was created to surface invisible and unheard voices, and it is questionable as to how invisible and unheard White women are (Collins, 2002; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Therefore, I relied on the term “convergence” while being informed by the rich intersectional work done by female scholars of color. When the data analysis and interpretation was funneled through the dimensions of Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2002), I was better able to understand how female, White ally higher education administrators experience the decision point between gender and race as they seek to create socially just spaces for BIPOC women in their institutions.

Epistemology “investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or *why* we believe what we believe to be true” and also the ways power shapes what we believe is knowledge and what we believe we know (Collins, 2002, p. 252). Collins points out that Black women intellectuals encounter two distinct epistemologies: “one representing elite White male interests and the other expressing Black feminist concerns” (Collins, 2002, p. 252). Because one tenet of Black Feminist Thought is praxis (Collins, 2002; Collins & Bilge, 2016), this investigation grounded the analysis of female White ally experience at the convergence of race and gender in Black Feminist Epistemology for the purpose of supporting the outsider within paradigm and what that might mean for antiracist action.

Collins (1986, 2002) offers the concept of a special kind of knowing that comes from being an “outsider within.” This can be defined as a position in which someone is part of a larger, hegemonic structure but is not accepted as belonging or valued for the differences they

can bring, for instance a White woman in higher education administration. Black Feminist Epistemology is the foundation on which Black Feminist Thought is articulated. Collins (2002) also believes that coalition building is required praxis for change. Therefore, while “Black women’s experiences highlight the tension experienced by any group of less powerful outsiders encountering the paradigmatic thought of a more powerful insider community,” any variety of people can learn from and occupy an outsider within standpoint, including White women (Collins, 1986, p. S29). She encourages disciplines and researchers to “conserve the creative tension of the outsider within status” and “to trust their own personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge” (Collins, 1986, p. S29). This is important to explain in a study by a White woman that used scholarship created by Black women and based on their experiences to talk to White women. “Black women must be in charge of Black Feminist Thought, but being in charge does not mean that others are excluded” (Collins, 2002, p. 18).

It’s important when White people do race research that we do not co-opt the work of scholars of color by either not using the theory/research for the purposes it was created or by using it to elevate or victimize White people. For instance, Collins and Bilge (2016) discuss how intersectionality has been criticized as mere “identity politics” when, in fact, it was developed to give voice to those who have been marginalized and silenced through oppression. In addition, Collins (2002) describes that Black Feminist Epistemology is centered on Black women’s voices and ways of knowing. Therefore, it is important that this study was grounded in ways of knowing that honor and promote people of color, as true White allies should, as we investigate that decision point between race and gender.

Black Feminist Epistemology is based on ways of knowing that traditional American/Eurocentric paradigms and methodologies do not necessarily validate (Collins, 2002).

However, this study validated the wisdom and knowledge of the participant White allies through criteria valued by Black feminists: lived experience as a way of knowing, use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, an ethics of caring, an ethic of personal accountability, and Black women as agents of knowledge (Collins, 2002). By determining what is known and what is truth through these means, the study is imbued by and owes gratitude to the scholarship and thinking of Black women, one of the United States' most marginalized groups, both historically and today.

Definition of Terms

- **BIPOC** – Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
- **Racism** – “When a racial group’s collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism, a far-reaching system that functions independently from the intentions or self-images of individual actors” (Feagin, 2013, p. 20)
- **Systemic Racism** – Throughout the history of the US, race has been used as an institutional, economic, social, and moral tool to divide human beings by elevating the benefits and privileges of people with White skin color over the benefits and privileges of people with not-White skin color (Bonilla-Silva, 2020; Feagin, 2013; Kendi, 2016).
- **Social Construct** – “A concept or perception of something based on the collective views developed and maintained within a society or social group; a social phenomenon or convention originating within and cultivated by society or a particular social group, as opposed to existing inherently or naturally” (OED.com, 2019)
- **White ally** – “a person who consciously commits, attitudinally and behaviorally, to an ongoing, purposeful engagement with and active challenging of White privilege, overt

and subtle racism, and systemic racial inequalities for the purpose of becoming an agent of change in collaboration with, not for, people of color” (Ford & Orlandella, 2015, p. 288)

- **White Supremacy** – “the belief, theory, or doctrine that White people are inherently superior to people from all other racial groups, especially Black people, and are therefore rightfully the dominant group in any society” (Dictionary.com, 2021)
- **Whiteness** – “a set of characteristics and experiences that are attached to the White race and White skin. In the U.S. and European contexts, Whiteness marks one as normal, belonging, and native, while people in other racial categories are perceived as and treated as unusual, foreign, and exotic. Sociologists believe that what Whiteness is and means is directly connected to the construction of people of color as ‘other’ in society. Because of this, Whiteness comes with a wide variety of privileges” (Cole, 2019)

Research Question

How do female, White ally higher education administrators experience the convergence of race and sex as they seek to create socially just spaces for BIPOC women in their institutions?

Significance of the Study

While there is truly a mountain range of work and study on racism, racial identity development, White ally development, and racism in the academy, there appears to be a dearth of work on White administrators, especially those who are also female, and that is not autobiographically reflective. This study fits in that gap by highlighting the convergence of being female and White in the academy from the point of view of non-teaching administrators. In addition, it identifies a narrative arc structured by Black Feminist Epistemology that can help

inform, inspire, and support other White people who may look to take on the work of fighting racism.

General Procedures

This study employed Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's Portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to co-create the portraits (stories) of female White ally education administrators as they experience the convergence of race and gender in seeking to create socially just spaces for BIPOC women in their institutions. To do this, followed these steps:

First, I identified the participants by using the voices and wisdom of Black women and other women of color in higher education who have experienced first-hand White women they consider allies. Using Michèle Foster's (1991) sampling method of Community Nomination, I sought recommendations of White women to approach directly from BIPOC women (Foster, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1989). I asked my personal network of BIPOC women working in higher education and gained five participants in this manner.

Second, in keeping with Elliot Mishler's (1986) view of the interview as an interactive speech act grounded in context and the variability of language, I scheduled four, 90-minute conversations over video conferencing with each participant. While the conversations were wide-ranging, they nonetheless focused on the research question by investigating allyship, being female, and being a human being in the world today. I analyzed the interviews in keeping with the minimal strictures of Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) which resulted in three over-arching themes:

1. Life as a female, White ally in higher education administration is a continuous, winding journey full of switchbacks; there is no end destination.

2. To undertake this journey authentically and meaningfully as a female, White ally in higher education, you need to simultaneously humble and curious.
3. White people have a moral obligation to use our privilege to make the world more equitable in the ways that we can.

Third, I constructed portraits of each participant that are divided into four parts each. These are “On Being an Ally,” “On Being a Woman,” “On Being Human,” and a last section personalized with a metaphor specific to each woman. These portraits were provided to the participants to review and co-create, resulting in stories that validate the wisdom of the participants.

Finally, I analyzed the stories and themes in relation to the extant literature and to the tenets of Collins’s (2002) Black Feminist Epistemology.

Researcher Positionality

I am a female, White, higher education administrator. Before that, I was a female, White, high school teacher. From an early age, the devaluation of women in the U.S. was made apparent to me. Growing up with a single mom in the 1960s meant I had to watch her be ineligible for a car loan because she was divorced and had no husband to co-sign. Being an adolescent girl in the 1970s meant I was inculcated by a White feminism that I certainly would never have understood as limited at that time. My mom brought me up to value everyone, but not necessarily to understand how much harder it is for some groups of women to be recognized and valued by society than it is for White women. Being a young professional in the 1980s, I didn’t for one second understand that the fact that I had so many choices in college and beyond had anything to do with my race. I was supremely aware of racial inequity but not of my own privilege beyond what was obvious, not of the systemic nature of that inequality.

And then in the 1990s I became a teacher, one driven by an awareness of racial inequity to specialize in teaching first and second generation LatinX immigrants, especially those who claimed gang affiliations. In working with these families and with migrant families in Southern California, I became what Patricia Hill Collins (2002) calls the outsider within. And it is not an exaggeration to say that a veil lifted and many of my privileged assumptions and ways of being were shredded (thank goodness).

My move in the 2010s into higher education curriculum and assessment during our modern-day version of what Bonilla-Silva (2018) calls the new racism has led me to see even further into the systems that conspire to conserve White hegemony, especially in the academy. I work for an institution that, from its deeply embedded mission, seeks to, and has the means to, open access to education to any who seek it. But even here, the racial frames, sexist hegemonies, and inability for people to see and understand them create barriers to achieving this mission. to feel helpless to be antiracist. In seeking to be someone who confronts this system, I undertook this study.

Summary

In summary, this study uncovered the successes and struggles of female White ally higher education administrator who have committed to antiracist work. Identified by BIPOC women in higher education who have experienced them as allies, the participants co-created their stories with me. These portraits described the goodness (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) in their work and also their struggles and challenges in navigating the complexities of their institutions, of society, and of their individual circumstances. The portraits also shine light on the interplay of racism and sexism and how this insidious “partnership” works to conserve the White

patriarchy. What emerged are vivid reproductions of commitment, bravery, and sacrifice—all gladly taken up in service to creating a more socially just world as best they can.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To begin to understand how White, female higher education administrators experience the convergence of sex and race in their efforts to create socially just spaces in their workplaces, it is important to first understand the insidious reality of racism in modern-day United States. This country was purposefully founded as inegalitarian both in race and gender, manifested in the still-bleeding gash of slavery that actively supported the inequalities (Feagin, 2013; Kendi, 2016). These historical “moments” have embedded themselves in our psyches so that United States’ people of all races see through a frame of racism (and the sexism that supports it) which denigrates people of color while protecting and uplifting White people (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Feagin, 2013). U.S. higher education, which reproduces this frame but which operates under a narrative of equality and opportunity, is a background for how this frame operates and for what it is like to work against that frame for the betterment of everyone. Given that this study is comprised of the participants’ stories, and is a story in itself, this chapter helps explain the conflict and the setting in which the “characters” act.

Race is a Social Construction

The beginning of the history of racism in the U.S.

The amount of literature on the history of race in the United States is daunting. In researching why race is such a ubiquitous way of categorizing people, and in trying to understand how race is socially constructed, I learned that the foundation of racial separatism, discrimination, and institutionalism was deliberately embedded in the foundation of our country (Feagin, 2013; Kendi, 2016; Smedley, 2007). What Ibram X. Kendi (2016), Joe R. Feagin

(2013), and others call structural or systemic racism is the result of our country being created on the idea that White people are superior.

In fact, Kendi (2016) and Audrey Smedley (2007) go all the way back to Medieval Western Europe to document the colonial expansion of the Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and eventually English “explorers” in their quest for gold and other commodities and in their zeal to convert or kill all non-Christians. The first permanent English settlement of Jamestown, Virginia, was established in 1607, mostly by young men looking to make their fortune and return home. According to Smedley (2007), “They planned to emulate the Spanish; to obtain wealth by conquering and enslaving native peoples, and forcing them to produce gold and silver” (p. 2). It is the institution of slavery, put into place for the economic and social advancement of White people and the growing colonies, that led the country to be explicitly founded on racist principles and beliefs.

The first Africans in Jamestown were not slaves, but the imbalance of labor to planters lead to unrest. As Kendi (2016) explains, “Rich planters learned...that poor Whites had to be forever separated from enslaved Blacks” (p. 53), which they did by creating more privilege for White people. “Poor Whites had risen into their lowly place in slave society—the armed defenders of the planters—a place that would sow bitter animosity between them and enslaved Africans” (Kendi, 2016, p. 53).

The Declaration of Independence.

Realizing the requirement of African slaves for the economy and luxury of the planters and the emerging country, but also under criticism from Europe for claiming freedom for all while still maintaining a slave system, the founders had to create a scenario that justified slavery. Kendi (2016) uses Thomas Jefferson to explain the conundrum facing the nascent country.

Being a slave-owner and successful Virginia planter himself, and also being an influential intellectual, Jefferson exemplifies the struggle of the White elite of his time to establish a government that would free them from colony status and elevate them in the minds of Europeans (Kendi, 2016).

Jefferson and other slaveholders like him depended on the land and their slaves for their wealth and power. “For these rich men, freedom was not the power to make choices; freedom was the power to create choices.... Only power gave Jefferson and other wealthy White colonists freedom from England” (Kendi, 2016, p. 105). Despite Jefferson using the metaphor of slavery to characterize the relationship between the Colonies and the Crown, he “only really handed revolutionary license to his band of wealthy, White male revolutionaries. He criminalized runaways in the Declaration of Independence, and he silenced women” (Kendi, 2016, p. 106). Thus, the document that forms the very basis of our government and philosophy was created intentionally to protect the rich, White, male elite from “slavery” to England and from actual slaves at home.

Give with one hand, take away with the other.

Advances in women’s rights have been historically met with social, cultural, and political reverses that curtail any real challenge to the status quo. Some small advances seem to stick, but, overall, the White male elite power structure responds in ways that even women buy in to. The struggle between White and Black feminists will be discussed later; however, this roller coaster of give-and-take that the literature shows happens when the White patriarchy is threatened is a pattern all too familiar in relation to race as well as gender equity struggles (Anderson, 2016; DiAngelo, 2018; Feagin, 2013; Kendi, 2016).

Carol Anderson's (2016) *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* offers a cogent analysis of this racial backlash that is corroborated by the history of Kendi (2016). In focusing on key turning points in U.S. racial history that provided clear opportunity for this country to make real strides toward social justice, Anderson (2016) shows how the hegemonic White male political, cultural, and social structure coalesced to make sure those strides were not made. She examines these turning point decisions (during Reconstruction, in relation to The Great Migration, and concerning *Brown vs Topeka Board of Education*) and supports the claim that the U.S. actively creates and recreates itself in opposition to racial equity (Anderson, 2016; Kendi, 2016).

It is crucial to have a view of the deliberate and relentless efforts to preserve White hegemony in the U.S. and how this intentional institutionalization of racism has shaped every aspect of our lives.

The history of "White" as a racial designation.

The literature reveals that any explanation of how race is socially constructed rather than an inherent marker of people into hierarchical categories would be lacking without a discussion of the concept of "Whiteness" and how the "White" race came to be named (Kendi, 2016; Painter, 2010). Nell Painter's (2010) *The History of White People* helps with this.

Similar to the necessity to go back to Medieval Europe to understand America's racist beginnings, the journey to understand the reification of "White" in Western thought and U.S. action goes all the way back to Antiquity. As Painter (2010) points out, "race is an idea, not a fact" (Introduction). She contests that we have wrongly assumed that all slavery is racial when, in fact, it is more about class. She supports this by showing that slavery helped construct the White race through 1) equating freedom with Whiteness and slavery with Blackness, and 2)

tracing that “caucasian” concepts of beauty emanating from the White slave trade through Eastern Europe have resulted in Whiteness being embedded as the standard of beauty still today (Painter, 2010).

Starting with the Greeks and the Scythians, Painter (2010) notes that “neither the idea of race nor the idea of ‘White’ people [had] been invented, and people’s skin color did not carry any useful meaning” (chapter 1). Because “power affixes the markers of history...finding the history of light skinned people is reliant on the documentation left by the rulers and conquerors; in this case ancient Greek literature” (chapter 1). Further, she notes that people were known by their place, relying on climate to make sense of human differences. In ancient hierarchies there is no ambivalence about slavery, and “a ruling class quite easily judges the lower orders to be innately servile” (Painter, 2010, chapter 1). As behaviors and attitudes of people from various places became more commonly understood, stereotypes began to be instilled in psyches, and the view of the enterprising, individualistic European solidified into fact. This is a pattern Painter shows repeats across millennia.

Painter (2010) and Kendi (2016) parallel in detailing the history of “scientific” race classification and the history of the founding of the U.S. on racist principles, in addition to the social, cultural, and political ramifications of multiple waves of immigration. Further, the “Anglo-Saxon myth of racial superiority has permeated concepts of race in the United States and virtually throughout the English-speaking world. To be *American* was to be *Saxon*,” and to be *Saxon* was to be *White* (Painter, 2010, chapter 10). However, this conception proved to be too narrow, and across time, there were expansions of American Whiteness. “Rather than a single, enduring definition of Whiteness, we find multiple enlargements occurring against a backdrop of the Black/White dichotomy” (Painter, 2010, chapter 14). For instance, an enlargement happened

when property qualifications were removed from voting requirements, thus including Irish immigrants for the first time as White.

Whiteness as a hegemonic construction.

Stressed in the literature is the point that, despite racial designations being made up in relation to class and gender power structures, the fact of race as a designator and the real results of that cannot be conceptualized away (Allen, 2012; Anderson, 2016; Kendi, 2016). For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to explore this concept of “Whiteness” in more detail.

Theodore W. Allen (2012) provides another detailed history of how the White race has been invented. In addition to corroborating the history of both Kendi (2016), Painter (2010), and Anderson (2016), he believes that Whiteness was institutionalized as a method of social control that allowed slavery and which has continued to this day through color-blind social, political, and economic policies and beliefs. In explaining how the U.S. was able to control such a vast number of laborers in chattel slavery, Allen (2012) posits the White race was

invented as the social-control formation whose distinguishing characteristic was not the participation of the slaveholding class, nor even of other elements of the propertied classes; what distinguished this system of social control, what made it ‘the White race,’ was the participation of the European-American laboring classes: non-slaveholders, self-employed smallholders, tenants, and laborers (Editor’s Appendix G).

Through meticulous primary-source documentation, he lays the foundation for how, unlike in other countries and even other English and European colonies in the West Indies, the concept of Whiteness came to represent all that is good and beautiful and how the reality of Whiteness creates an institutionalized, collective power structure that has been reproduced over generations and still today.

This historical explanation is backed up by other disciplines. In 1993, sociologist Ruth Frankenberg wrote a seminal work on how Whiteness is constructed. *The Social Construction of Race: White Women, Race Matters* argues that White people and people of color live racially structured lives, noting that “any system of differentiation shapes those to whom it bestows privilege as well as those it oppresses” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1). She calls the shape that race creates “Whiteness” and explains Whiteness as a cluster of linked dimensions: 1) a social location of structural advantage; 2) a standpoint (toward self, others, and society); and 3) a set of unnamed and unmarked cultural practices (Frankenberg, 1993). It is paramount to name Whiteness because it refers to “a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 6). Overall, she posits, race is socially constructed rather than inherent, and its meaning changes over time.

Frankenberg (1993) believes that the very term “race” presupposes a difference and that the three eras of historical racism created corresponding discourses that feed our discourse today: 1) essentialist discourse in which race is an actual ontological and biological marker of difference; 2) color-evasive/power-evasive discourse which is dominant today and built on assimilation theories; and 3) race-cognizant discourse which shows an awareness of structural and institutional inequity in opposition to the previous two discourses (pp. 138–140). Moreover, because essentialist racism marked the beginning of the race conversation,

it continues to be the framework...*because* race has been made into a difference, [so that] later discursive repertoires cannot simply abolish it, but must engage it. And because race difference was produced in *essentialist* rather than any other terms, it is to those essentialist terms that later critique remains accountable (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 189).

The invisible materialism of Whiteness is taken up in American Studies scholar George Lipsitz's (1995) discussion of our "possessive investment" in Whiteness. He details the way our cultural practices have created Whiteness, including our art, entertainment, and visual representations and stories. Lipsitz (1995) argues that since Americans seem ignorant of the possessive investment in Whiteness, we produce cultural explanations for structural social problems.

A multi-disciplinary focus on the hegemony of Whiteness can be found in *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society* (Fine et al., 1997), a compilation of essays from across academia. Several of the essays underscore and advance the points made by Frankenberg (1993) and Lipsitz (1995). As the editors point out in the preface, "Whiteness has come to be more than itself; it embodies objectivity, normality, truth, merit, motivation, achievement, and trustworthiness; it accumulates invisible supports that contribute unacknowledged to the already accumulated and bolstered capital of Whiteness" (Fine et al., 1997, p. vii). This compilation brings together scholars from varying disciplines who are willing to analyze "the ways in which social institutions carry and voice multiple discourses of race" (Fine et al., 1997, p. ix). Excellent examples of this come from Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997), Howard Winant (1997), and Leslie Roman (1997).

Other Aspects of White Hegemony.

Four other aspects of White hegemony emerge frequently in the literature: Whiteness in relation to capitalism and democracy, Whiteness in relation to habitation, Whiteness across the aggregated group of Whites, and Whiteness as a deliberate choice. There is no dearth of literature, but these examples serve as representatives of these topics.

- Peter McLaren (1999) discusses Whiteness in relation to capitalism and its incompatibility with democracy. He posits that “capitalism nourishes political forms of repression in the way that it organizes power through rituals in schools, in the workplace, in churches” (McLaren, 1999, p. 11). Therefore, capitalism nurtures Whiteness.
- Eduardo Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006) illustrate how White people protect their privilege by geographically locating themselves together (see also Anderson, 2016; Feagin, 2013; Wilkerson, 2011). Drawing on social identity theory to prove that Whiteness is indeed an identity that is actively protected, the authors state that Whiteness is a “set of deliberate practices used to coordinate and advance the interests and positions of Whites” (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006, p. 232).
- Matthew Hughey (2009) adds insight into the group solidarity of Whiteness in studying how White men across multiple and varied demographics adopt the same behaviors when racially challenged. Concerned that the focus on disaggregating sub-groups of Whites subtracts from the reality of the unifying strength of White hegemony, Hughey (2009) posits that “failure to synthesize how seemingly disparate White identity formations are constituted by, and help to reinforce, strategies of social control and domination threatens to rob the study of White identity of critical, conceptual and explanatory purchase” (p. 1290).
- Finally, Dreama Moon (2016) challenges the idea that Whites don’t know much about race because we aren’t exposed to early racial discourse or that we aren’t aware of our privilege or raced status. Calling this “White ignorance,” Moon (2016) posits that while Whites may be unwilling or unable to talk about their Whiteness, that doesn’t mean we

aren't producing and reproducing the hegemonic identification processes required to maintain dominance.

White Hegemony and Feminism

Establishing that race is socially and deliberately constructed, that Whiteness/being White is also about being raced, and that Whiteness is a hegemonic construction that has shaped and guided U.S. history, politics, culture, and society from the beginning, paves the way to look at how this dominance plays out in different segments of society. Since this study focused on how White women experienced the convergence of patriarchy and race in creating socially just workplaces, so reviewed another corpus of literature regarding how White and Black women experience race separately and in relation to each other through a feminist lens.

Brief history: slavery.

As explained by women who have devoted their lives to understanding and illuminating the power struggles of race and gender in our patriarchal U.S. society, Black and White women have struggled to find common ground because of the privileges of Whiteness. Angela Y. Davis (1983) and bell hooks (2015) see the foundation for this struggle as having its roots in the U.S. enslavement of Black people.

Because the institution of slavery was based on forced work/labor, materialist Marxist Davis (1983) believes work is a good way to explore the conflict between White and Black women. She points out that while most people believe that female slaves were mainly used as house servants, in fact the majority of them worked in the fields.

When it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles (Davis, 1983, p. 6).

It is important to understand this dual perception according to Davis (1983) because it was happening in juxtaposition to the 1800s ideology of the cult of domesticity being imposed on White women. As opposed to the exalted sense of motherhood that was becoming popular in the dominant White culture, enslaved Black women were seen as “breeders” (Davis, 1983). “As the ideology of femininity...was popularized..., White women came to be seen as inhabitants of a sphere totally severed from the realm of productive work” (Davis, 1983, p. 11). This ideology helped establish the notion of women of all races being inferior and it locked their proper place to the domestic sphere as mothers and housewives. However, “the economic arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles in the new ideology,” and further widened the divide between women who were owned and the women who, by proxy, owned them (Davis, 1983, p. 11).

hooks (2015) details effects of the cult of domesticity to show the interaction of sexism with an already racist system. She notes how the churches that spearheaded domestic ideology also condoned reprehensible treatment of Black women as scape goats. Although the growing prosperity of the 19th-century lead to a change in image of woman from sinner to goddess, this “idealization of White women did not change the basic contempt White men felt toward them” (hooks, 2015, p. 31). Moreover, as “American White men idealized White womanhood, they sexually assaulted and brutalized Black women” (hooks, 2015, p. 32).

The idealizing of White womanhood not only objectified White women but also removed most of their agency. Therefore, White women rarely involved themselves “with a slave’s plight for fear of jeopardizing their own position” and often “regarded Black women who were the objects of their husbands’ sexual assaults with hostility and rage” (hooks, 2015, p. 36). The impact of this religious, political, and cultural ideology on the relationship between Black and

White women resulted in resentment and distrust between White and Black women. Being witness to their men's brutality "served as a warning" of what would happen "were enslaved Black women not available to bear the brunt of such intense anti-women male aggression" (hooks, 2015, p. 38). They were able to ally racially with White men and so ignore the anti-woman fuel that drove them. Slave women "bitterly resented that they were not considered 'women' by the dominant culture and therefore were not the recipients of the considerations and privileges given White women" by men of all races (hooks, 2015, p. 48).

Brief history: abolitionists and suffragists.

Combining Ibram X. Kendi's (2016) historical lens with Angela Davis's (1983) feminist lens and Angelina Grimké's (1838) first-hand experience provides representation for how the abolitionist and women's suffrage movements worked together to further complicate White and Black women's perceptions of each other (Grimke & Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women). The abolitionist movement (1830-1870) overlapped with, but ended before, the women's suffrage movement (1840-1920).

Davis (1983) explains how the abolitionist movement gave White women who were increasingly undervalued by White men a sense of purpose. Many White women compared married life to a kind of slavery, and while the comparison may be grossly overstated, it is notable that White middle-class women were developing an affinity for enslaved Black women and men. "As they worked within the abolitionist movement, White women learned about the nature of human oppression—and in the process, also learned important lessons about their own subjugation. In asserting their right to oppose slavery, they protested...their own exclusion from the political arena" (Davis, 1983, p. 38). In contrast, hooks (2015) believes that "No 19th-century White woman could grow to maturity without an awareness of institutionalized sexism;"

however, they “did learn via their efforts to free the slaves that White men were willing to advocate rights for Blacks while denouncing rights for women” (p. 126).

Activist Angelina Grimké (Grimké & Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 1838) expressed these ideas directly to abolitionists at an Anti-Slavery Convention for American Women. Exhorting Northern women to actively fight slavery, she explains why women in particular should be involved. Responding to the charge that slavery is a political issue and women should have nothing to do with politics, she asks, “Are [women] bereft of citizenship because we are the *mothers, wives, and daughters* of a mighty people? Have women no country?” (pp. 5–6). As one of the first people to attempt to show that Black women were *women* just as White women were *women*, she attempted to create solidarity between *women*. In addressing the brutality inflicted on slave women, she presses that “in a country where women are degraded and brutalized...it is very natural that *women* should wish to know the reason *why...*” (Grimké & Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 1838, p. 13). Grimké is shown in the literature to be an important figure in that she is one of the first White women to call out this convergence of race and gender as working against White women and for White men.

In fact, the battle over the vote pitted White women against Black men. hooks (2015) points out that, “White suffragists felt that White men were insulting White womanhood by refusing to grant them privileges that were to be granted to Black men. They admonished White men not for their sexism but for their willingness to allow sexism to overshadow racial alliances” (p. 127). Davis (1983) corroborates by explaining that a glaring weakness in the abolitionist campaign in the North was a failure to promote “a broad anti-racist consciousness” that carried into the women’s movement (p. 59). Kendi (2016) states that many of the early suffragists had

also been abolitionists and therefore recognized the “interlocking nature of American racism and sexism,” (p. 191). This underscores hooks’ (2015) argument that White women did not oppose slavery from a racial standpoint but from a moral or religious standpoint, which did not promote an equality of the races.

With the main argument being whether all men (including Black men) would get the vote or whether that also included women, Black men sided with White men in keeping women disenfranchised. Many Black women supported this, believing that any opportunity at enfranchising any Black people would strengthen the emancipation campaign. However, White women, who had taken to likening their marriages and lot in life to the chains of slavery, saw the alliance of men as entirely unacceptable, with all parties virtually ignoring Black women (Davis, 1983; hooks, 2015; Kendi, 2016). “By supporting Black male suffrage and denouncing White women’s rights advocates, White men revealed the depths of their sexism—a sexism that was at that brief moment in American history greater than their racism” (hooks, 2015, p. 3). The vitriol White women turned toward Black women who supported enfranchisement for Black men revealed the underlying racism endemic in the suffrage movement. Even though Black women had been crucial in the early emancipation and women’s rights movements, their support of Black male enfranchisement over White women’s enfranchisement erased them from a women’s movement that did not include or recognize their needs and illustrates a pattern between White and Black women that continued into the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s (Davis, 1983; hooks, 2015; Kendi, 2016).

Brief history: women’s liberation movement.

As the literature shows, sexism and racism work together in preserving the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy as bell hooks (2013) describes the social structure. The

patterns created in slave times and through the abolitionist and suffrage movements continue (Davis, 1983; Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 2013, 2015; Lorde, 2007; Rich, 1997), what bell hooks (2013) calls “racialized sexism.” The focus of the Women’s Liberation Movement on sexism to the exclusion of other areas of subjugation and to a single-minded way of defining “woman” and “women’s struggles,” eventually led Black women (and other women of color) to break off from mainstream feminism.

Audre Lorde (2007) posits that White women in the women’s movement focus on their oppression and assume it is the same across all groups of women. “As White women ignore their built-in privilege of Whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become ‘other,’” leading to a “reluctance to see Black women as women and different from themselves” (Lorde, 2007, p. 117). Lorde (2007) further discusses how racialized sexism leads Black women to ally with Black men on issues of racism. Noting White women view oppression in terms of sex only, she explains that “Black women fight racism in a White world and sexism in their community and often have to choose which they will fight” (p. 119).

bell hooks (2015), writing originally in 1981, refers to the “college-educated White middle and upper class women” who wanted to create a new energy around women’s rights (p. 121). She states that in the process of organizing, these women revealed that they “had not undone the sexist and racist brainwashing that had taught them to regard women unlike themselves as Others” and that “the hierarchical pattern of race and gender relationships already established in American society merely took a different form under ‘feminism’” (p. 121). hooks’ (2015) argument is that by insisting that racism is part of White male patriarchy, White women could abdicate responsibility for racial oppression. Furthermore, White women did not challenge

the use of the word “woman” to refer solely to White women, especially in the eyes of the White patriarchy, because it allowed them to focus on sexism alone and to make it seem like all women (of all races) were allied, thus deflecting attention away from their classism and racism (hooks, 2015). It allowed White women to proclaim a common oppression. And the insistence on this proclamation furthered the historic animosity between White and Black women.

Multicultural feminism.

It is important to note that the literature shows that Black women were not the only group of women who felt a lack of sisterhood with White feminists. Black women, lesbians, Mexican-American women, Asian-American women, third world women, and other marginalized feminist groups coalesced around the idea of multicultural feminism. Represented by Aida Hurtado (2010), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), and the seminal *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002), multicultural feminism expands the themes expressed by their Black sisters.

Hurtado (2010) explains that multicultural feminist theory is concerned with the “web of social relations [in which] feminist production takes place” (p. 29). Noting that “If the ultimate goal of feminist theorizing and political mobilization was to deconstruct and abolish patriarchy, then the multiple manifestations of patriarchy as they vary across cultures should be addressed in all feminist production” (p. 29). Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) writes about the concept of borders between cultures in her classic *Borderlands: La Frontera, the New Mestiza*. She defines the Borderlands as occurring whenever two or more cultures (racial, ethnic, psychological, sexual, spiritual, etc.) come into contact with each other. Articulating the multicultural feminist idea that false “borders” have been created that need to be crossed and eliminated, she holds women in our society responsible for the transmission of cultural norms that maintain borders. Finally, the recurring experiences of White feminists misunderstanding or rejecting the importance of

borderland realities that underlie the need for multicultural feminist thought and activism is an important theme in the seminal collection of essays, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga & Anzaldúa , 2002). The writings focus on the loyalty of White women, the devaluation of the issues of women of color as personal rather than political, the accountability of White women, the role of the patriarchy in this schism, and the reliance of White women on White men for power (Moraga & Anzaldúa , 2002).

White women's responses.

The literature does document White women's varying reactions to these other feminisms and the complexity of argument. The reactions tend to fall into two main categories: agreeing with their sisters of color and advocating for more understanding and inclusion (Frankenberg, 1993; Rich, 1997); and making a case that women as *women* do have a common subjugation that requires solidarity, not separatism (MacKinnon, 1981). In addressing the National Women's Studies Association in 1981, Adrienne Rich (much as Angelina Grimké did in 1838 to female abolitionists) reminds the participants that women's studies is about being disobedient to White male patriarchy and that, by excluding the particular experiences of women of color, patriarchy actually wins. Rich (1997) points out that White women "as victims of objectification have also objectified other women," have "reaped reward from [that] obedience," and must identify what "our future and present responsibility must be" (p. 276).

In 1991, Catherine A. MacKinnon published her controversial "From Practice to Theory, or What is a White Woman Anyway?" to address what she terms "woman, modified," which argues against the idea that different experiences of women negate a unified approach to feminism. Much as racism is described as institutional and systemic, she illustrates that the reality of the "subordination of women to men is socially institutionalized, cumulatively and

systematically shaping access to human dignity, respect, resources, physical security, credibility, membership in community, speech, and power” (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 15). Despite, she notes, that individual experiences manifest differently, the overall experience of being a woman is the same for all women. Therefore, she advocates that if “we build a theory out of women’s practice, comprised of the diversity of all women’s experiences, we do not have the problem some feminist theory has been rightly criticized for” (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 22).

Then in 1993, 12 years after Rich’s address but only two years after MacKinnon’s paper, Ruth Frankenberg, in her seminal study of White women’s views of racism, explains how the universalizing of women’s experiences is problematic. She articulates that two key epistemologies of theorizing from experience are 1) a critique of objectivity/distance as the best way to generate knowledge, and 2) a belief that the oppressed can see material and structural oppression with the greatest clarity. These tenets, she posits, uncover the problems in using White women’s experiences as the default for all women (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 8). Frankenberg (1993) observes that deep examination of race/gender is often lacking in the work of White feminists, noting that “increasingly theorists of color speak from concrete conceptualizations of what that multiplicity means to them [while] for White women visions of ‘difference’ and ‘multiplicity’ may remain abstract” (p. 10).

Intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought

Intersectionality.

It seems clear in the literature that this lack of understanding “multiplicity” is at the heart of what is seen as the inability of White feminism to be inclusive to the needs of women of color. Thus, delving into the literature on what has come to be known as “intersectionality,” as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is useful.

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), in critiquing current antidiscrimination legal arguments, posited that the practice of treating race and gender as mutually exclusive influences supports a single-axis framework prevalent in both feminist theory and antiracist politics. She labeled the need for multi-axis thinking “intersectionality.” She notes that we are conditioned to think about subordination along one axis at a time which limits our inquiry to the experiences of privileged groups and marginalizes those who are multiply burdened. Using three legal cases involving Black women, Crenshaw’s (1989) call to action is

for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating ‘women’s experiences’ or ‘the Black experience’ into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast (p. 140).

For both feminists and critical race theorists to not grasp Black women’s intersectional experiences is to “deny both the unique compoundedness of their situation and the centrality of the experiences to the larger classes of women and Blacks” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 150).

Furthermore, when White women speak as all women and Black men speak as all Black people, “Black women are caught between ideological and political currents that combine first to create and then to bury Black women’s experiences” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 160).

The literature also shows that, as intersectionality has gained a broader place in the race and gender conversation, its conflation with identity politics has become problematic. Crenshaw (1991) analyzes this by articulating the tension between individual identity politics that focus on difference and dominant conceptions of social justice that are group-based. “The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference...but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences.... [Ignoring] difference *within* groups

contributes to tension *among* groups” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). She reminds us that “categories we consider natural or merely representational are actually socially constructed..., [and the] most pressing problem...is not the existence of the categories, but rather the particular values attached to them and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies” (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1296–1297).

Employing intersectionality as a heuristic or as an analytical tool for social change rather than a way for individuals to “plot” their intersecting identities is also expressed by Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016). In their book *Intersectionality*, Collins and Bilge (2016) set out to re-center intersectionality. They acknowledge that identity politics can be fraught because an overuse of personal identity can ignore the analysis of class and power. Also, when people are overly concerned with conceptions of identity they do not always acknowledge difference, leading to a sort of essentialism. They explain that arguments which support intersectionality as being solely about identity politics only work within narrow understandings that emphasize intersectionality as a form of abstract inquiry and not as critical praxis, which is how Crenshaw intended it to be used (Collins & Bilge, 2016, pp. 123-131).

However, Collins and Bilge (2016) do see intersectionality as a tool for critical inquiry in concert with its use in critical praxis. As critical inquiry, intersectional frameworks can be employed to study a range of social phenomena, while as critical praxis this study can be used in ways that explicitly challenge the status quo and attempt to transform power relations. In that sense, intersectionality is not simply a heuristic of intellectual inquiry but an important analytical strategy for actually doing social justice work.

This narrowing of intersectionality in a way that removes its ability to produce counter-hegemonic knowledge is a theme in the literature. Charmaine L. Wijeyesinghe and Susan R.

Jones (2014) stress that intersectionality is not only about identity; it does not seek to explain how each person in a marginalized group develops a sense of self in systems of oppression, nor does it focus on individual identity narratives. Rather, it highlights how people experience marginalization and inequality (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014, p. 10). Additionally, Allison D. Anders and James M. Devita (2014) caution against the White cooptation of intersectionality which can lead to much of the conflation with identity studies. In particular, they point out that intersectionality rose out of critical race study, critical legal study, and was initially centered around the voices of Black women and their multiple intersections of disempowerment.

Patricia Hill Collins and Black Feminist Thought.

The underpinning of this raced and gendered study is Black feminist thought, as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins (2002), and how it can inform any social justice-related project. Even though this study will investigate the experiences of White women, “[exclusionary] definitions of Black feminism” that indicate that only Black women can participate in Black feminist thought “are inadequate because they are inherently separatist” (Collins, 2002, p. 33). What is important is that a study that uses Black feminist thought, in this case the epistemological stance, centers the voices of Black women and employs the tenets of Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought “cannot flourish isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups” (Collins, 2002, p. 37). Furthermore, “Black feminist thought fully actualized is a collaborative enterprise.... [that] must be open to coalition building with individuals engaged in similar social justice projects” (Collins, 2002, p. 38).

In her seminal work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins (2002) explicates the aspects and underlying assumptions and principles that make up Black feminist thought. This review will highlight those aspects that are

germane to the study and that support the literature reviewed to this point. She is first and foremost concerned with what the voice of Black women is comprised of and how it is validated. “Theory...often excludes those who do not speak the language of elites and thus reinforces social relations of domination...[which] educated elites often use...to uphold their own privilege” (Collins, 2002, p. vii).

Collins outlined the three key themes in Black feminist thought. Stating that Black feminist thought “consists of ideas produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women” (Collins, 1986, p. S16), she identifies the first theme as the “affirmation of the importance of Black women’s self-definition and self-valuation” that challenges externally defined stereotypes and knowledge validation (Collins, 1986, p. S16). The second theme is the linked or interlocking nature of oppression and the Black feminist “aim to develop new theoretical interpretations of the [interlocking] interaction itself” (Collins, 1986, p. S20). Finally, “efforts to redefine and explain the importance of Black women’s culture” focus on how interpersonal relationships and creative expression help illustrate the relationship between consciousness of oppression and the ways oppressed people deal with that (Collins, 1986, p. S22).

Collins (2002) articulates the politics of oppression that Black feminist thought seeks to change. Topics she focuses on are the power dynamics in knowledge production which play out as a dialectic between oppression and activism; the economic, political, and ideological dimensions of African-American women’s oppression as forms of social control; patterns of omission, lip service, and depoliticization as forms of oppression of Black women in mainstream feminism; the situating of Black feminist thought as critical social theory, which incorporates praxis; and the concept of what an “intellectual” is in a paradigm of intersecting oppressions and

the collective experiences of diverse and individually located Black women. “African-American women’s social location as a collectivity has fostered distinctive albeit heterogeneous Black feminist intellectual traditions that...I call Black feminist thought” (Collins, 2002, p. 17).

Distinguishing Features

The six distinguishing features of Collins’ (2002) Black feminist thought are also relevant to this study because they underpin the epistemological stance.

1. “As a critical social theory, Black feminist thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (Collins, 2002, p. 22)
2. “There is no essential or archetypal Black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic.... Instead it may be more accurate to say that a Black *women’s* collective standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges” (Collins, 2002, p. 28).
3. “In contrast to the dialectical relationship linking oppression and activism, a *dialogical* relationship characterizes Black women’s collective experiences and group knowledge” (Collins, 2002, p. 30). This means “Black feminist practice requires Black feminist thought, and vice versa” (Collins, 2002, p. 31).
4. Black women intellectuals are central to this dialogical relationship because of their “outsider within” status (Collins, 1986) in the Academy and because “experts or specialists who participate in and emerge from a group produce a second, more specialized type of knowledge” that facilitates the “expression of a Black woman’s standpoint” (Collins, 2002, p. 34).

5. Black feminism must be dynamic and willing to change with changing social conditions (Collins, 2002).
6. "...political actions...[are] a *means* for human empowerment rather than ends in and of themselves...Black feminism is a recurring humanist vision" (Collins, 2002, p. 42).

Matrix of Domination and Domains of Power

Because Black feminist thought rests on a paradigm of intersections of oppressions, as does the study, it is important to understand how Collins (2002) structurally explains oppression in U.S. society. First, she explains that domination is organized through matrices of domination which are "the overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained" (Collins, 2002, p. 228). Moreover, it is social institutions that regulate the patterns of intersecting oppressions, and, just as these take on different shapes throughout history, so do the patterns of domination. Any particular matrix is organized by four interrelated domains of power. Individual experiences are situated in these domains and reflect them. "By manipulating ideology and culture, the hegemonic domain acts as a link between social institutions (structural domain), their organizational practices (disciplinary domain), and the level of everyday social interaction (interpersonal domain)" (Collins, 2002, p. 284).

Black Feminist Epistemology

This study will employ Collins's (2002) Black feminist epistemology as its theoretical framework. The literature shows that who in a society controls the validation of knowledge determines which knowledge becomes the dominant ways of thinking and which becomes subjugated. Because Black women are subjected to intersecting forms of oppression that has kept them from both access to knowledge and from being seen as credible thinkers, they have had to create alternate ways to both produce knowledge and then validate it in their efforts to

self-define and self-validate (Collins, 2002). Epistemologies investigate “the standards used to assess knowledge or *why* we believe what we believe... [and point] to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why” (Collins, 2002, p. 252). This includes which questions merit being asked and which interpretive frameworks and methodologies are deemed credible. As Collins (2002) points out, Black thinkers usually encounter two distinct epistemological paradigms: one representing the elite White male and one expressing Black feminist concerns. Therefore, attempting to distill features of both that rise above the differences might unveil a more common version of “truth.”

Collins (2002) reminds us that in a Western, Eurocentric cultural approach to knowledge validation, two political criteria drive processes. The first is that “knowledge claims are evaluated by a group of experts ...[who] bring with them a host of sedimented experiences that reflect their group location in intersecting oppressions” (Collins, 2002, p. 253). In most cases in the U.S., that group of experts is a “scholarly community controlled by elite White avowedly heterosexual men holding U.S. citizenship” and the people who support them (Collins, 2002, p. 253). The second criterion is that this community of experts maintains its credibility by aligning with its associated outside population to avoid risking challenging the basic beliefs on which that population positions its taken-for-granted knowledge. The result of these two criteria functioning together to maintain the status quo is that Black women are excluded from access to the knowledge or are expected to help legitimate the system that devalues them to avoid their knowledge claims being rejected all together (Collins, 2002).

There are five dimensions of Black feminist epistemology:

1. Lived experiences are a valued and are a legitimate criterion of meaning.
2. Dialogue is central in assessing knowledge claims.

3. Knowledge that reflects an ethics of caring is deemed more credible, along with the attendant emotion that may result.
4. Knowledge that reflects an ethic of personal responsibility is deemed more credible.
5. Black women are agents of knowledge. (Collins, 2002, pp. 257–268)

All in all, Collins explains, the “significance of a Black feminist epistemology may lie in its ability to enrich our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters both their empowerment and social justice” (Collins, 2002, p. 270). This is important because alternate epistemologies employed by any group with a distinctive standpoint can share their own knowledge as objective truth, thus allowing people to better understand each other without giving up their own unique standpoints. It is this dual individual/collective nature of the truth that is threatening to the dominant group. “Alternative epistemologies challenge all certified knowledge and open up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth” (Collins, 2002, p. 271).

Theories of Racism

The literature on racial theory seems to grow exponentially. For the purposes of this study, theory that sees race as socially constructed, as systemic and institutionalized, as intersectional, and that sees Whiteness as something real that operates hegemonically is theory that should support the research question. The qualities also support the Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2002) that shapes the study. Because the study is about the experiences of White women, I have focused on theory that explains how White people perceive, create, and react to racism and that also centers the standpoints of people of color in their theory. These qualities then lead me to Pierre Bourdieu (1979/1984, 1986), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2018), Joseph Feagin (2013), and Robin DiAngelo (2017).

Pierre Bourdieu

Though it seems French sociologist, philosopher, and public intellectual Pierre Bourdieu did not specifically address racism in his work, his foundational concepts underly much social constructionist theory on racism and, therefore, on the theories that support this study. In addition, many scholars have adapted Bourdieu's ideas to race theory. It is important, therefore, to provide a brief overview of this foundational work.

In wanting to understand the logic of everyday life, of social actions, and of the relations of power and domination, Bourdieu articulated several concepts relevant to race study (Bourdieu, 1979/1984, 1986; Cui, 2015; Institute of Development Studies, 2011; McKnight & Chandler, 2012; Power, 1999). Bourdieu envisions power as culturally and symbolically created and constantly re-created through individual and group agency and social and cultural structures (Institute of Development Studies, 2011). One of the concepts he uses to explain this is "habitus." Elaine Power (1999) posits that habitus shows how people develop social strategies based on, and that adapt to, the structures of the societies they belong to. It explains the regularities of behavior seen in specific social structures but does not hold those structures as deterministic. It is created through a social process and results in behavior and thinking patterns that are "enduring and transferable from one context to another, [and] that also shift in relation to specific contexts over time" (Institute of Development Studies, 2011). This assumes that all meaning is socially constructed and culturally arbitrary and that the habitus only exists in relation people's interactions with each other and their environments (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Cui, 2015). Because of the habitus we are predisposed to act in conformity to the social structures we carry within us; they are inculcated in early childhood. Habitus is a product of structures, a producer

of practices, and a reproducer of structures. It generates the practices that match the conditions that created it, but it does not determine those practices (Bourdieu, 1979/1984).

Two other concepts relevant to race theory are “field” and “capital.” The field is the physical setting and the forces at work there from which the habitus emerges. Fields are places of competition among groups that serve to create and reinforce hierarchies in relation to the amount and type of “capital” the agents hold (Bourdieu, 1986). Because people bring different types and amounts of capital to a field, they can have power in one field but not in another. Cultural capital consists of the knowledge, behaviors, and skills people bring to a field that show their cultural belonging and status (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital is the power of who we know and how those institutionalized relationships and mutual acquaintances are used to maintain or expand our social status (Bourdieu, 1986). Finally, symbolic capital is “unrecognized as capital and [therefore] recognized as legitimate competence” or authority (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 11). To sum, a person’s habitus is formed in relation to the specific and various fields in which they interact, and capital interacts with that habitus. Capital creates a person’s position in the field, and their habitus creates their dispositions towards the field and their interactions in it.

Dan Cui (2015) and Douglas McKnight and Prentice Chandler (2012) explicitly tie Bourdieu to race studies. Cui (2015) brings the idea of “racialized habitus.” She points out that “social agents’ power and positions within a field depend on the interaction of capital at their disposal, the habitus in which they are inculcated, and the rules of the field” (Cui, 2015, p. 1155). Since a field contains people who dominate and people who are dominated, everyone in a field brings whatever power, in the forms of capital, they can muster to the competition. Because of the nature of habitus, past racist history is preserved while the dispositions are reinforced by their interactions with field and capital. Thus, “racism not only perpetuates itself through social

institutions and structures but also through individual actions as a function of the racialized habitus” (Cui, 2015, p. 1162).

McKnight and Chandler (2012) illustrate the intersections of Bourdieu’s framework with Critical Race Theory (CRT). They note that Bourdieu “has constructed a powerful meta-theoretical framework that can be brought into complex interplay with other theories that have a more singular focus on one part of human existence” (McKnight & Chandler, 2012, p. 77). Habitus allows for collective thought, and race as an organizing construct also operates this way—it is socially constructed with no rational basis for existing even though its history gives it power and meaning. Because all people in the U.S. are complicit in sustaining White supremacy, the concept of habitus helps explain how racist thought and action are continually reproduced. CRT posits that racism is a normal outgrowth of living in the U.S. and plays a central role in all social settings (McKnight & Chandler, 2012, pp. 79–80). In meshing the theories, McKnight and Chandler (2012) correlate habitus to the naturalization of race discourses, field to the constituted socio-historical meaning of race, and capital to race/Whiteness (p. 82). They conclude that the tenets of CRT that explain U.S. racism are all reproducible and adaptable because of Bourdieu’s concepts (McKnight & Chandler, 2012, pp. 93–94).

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Because this study seeks to empower humans to transcend the constraints placed on them by race and gender, it can be considered a critical study (Creswell, 2013). And because the topic explores the convergence of race and gender using a Black feminist epistemology, it is useful to review literature on Critical Race Theory. According to John Creswell (2013), CRT “focuses theoretical attention on race and how racism is deeply embedded within the framework of American society” (chapter 2, Critical Race Theory section). He identifies three major goals: 1)

present stories about discrimination from the perspective of people of color; 2) eradicate racial subjugation and recognize that race is socially constructed; and 3) address other areas of difference, such as sex. He notes that the researcher using CRT foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the process and challenges traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories while offering transformative solutions (Creswell, 2013, chapter 2, Critical Race Theory section).

Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2018b) explain that CRT appeared in legal studies and journals over 20 years ago and that it is characterized by scholarship and activism. They detail that CRT is a “set of theories...[that] rely on intersectionality...a critique of liberalism, the use of critical social science, a combination of structural and poststructural analysis, the denial of neutrality in scholarship, and the incorporation of...‘counternarratives’ to speak back against dominant discourses” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018b, p. 100).

Relevant to the current racial climate in which the study takes place, Jamel Donner and Gloria Ladson-Billings (2018) address what many race theorists refer to as the “postracial imaginary” and the role of CRT in relation to that. The postracial imaginary is a belief that American society has transcended racism. It stems from Civil Rights Era and subsequent reforms making it socially unacceptable to be publicly racist, and it culminates in the U.S. election of a Black president, Barak Obama. But as Donner and Ladson-Billings (2018) illustrate, the U.S. is not in a postracial epoch, and race is still the primary determinant shaping the life fortunes of people of color (p. 195). They note that the conservative perspective of denying the primacy of race is colorblindness in which equality is achieved by denying the impact of and removing race as a social category. The leftist approach is to claim that we are postracial, but this thinking denies that race in America has always been what the most powerful groups wants it to be. Both of these thought paradigms decontextualize “the symbiotic

relationship between race, opportunity, exclusion, marginalization, and exploitation” and hold that efforts to explicitly redress inequality are forms of racism (Donner & Ladson-Billings, 2018, p. 195). Importantly, they point to the counternarrative aspect of CRT as one of the most important strategies in addressing the postracial imaginary. Finally, they position CRT as “about dispelling notions of colorblindness and postracial imaginings so that we can better understand and remedy the disparities that are prevalent in our society. It is one of the tools we can use to assert that race still matters” (Donner & Ladson-Billings, 2018, p. 209).

Because this study rests on Collins’ (2002) Black feminist epistemology which calls out epistemological power and privilege, it is instructive to read Devon Carbado and Daria Roithmayr (2014) as they expand on the idea of creating a better collaboration between the social sciences and CRT. Although core tenets of CRT, such as centering the voices of the marginalized and a focus on the lack of neutrality in research, seem to be antithetical to the quantitative approaches to social science, they posit that social scientists can offer empirical data and theoretical frameworks that can support core CRT ideas. In detailing the risks of merging CRT with quantitative social science, Carbado and Rothmayr (2014) suggest that we must recognize that some forms of social science research are more compatible with CRT than others and that we should explore way to connect existing social science models of individuals to the structural claims of critical race theorists.

Finally, relevant to this study being conducted by a White woman, Amy Bergerson (2003) explores how White researchers can approach studies on race without co-opting CRT from those whom it is meant to serve. Bergerson (2003) explains that she was “attracted to the tenets of CRT” but wondered, considering that she is White, if she could consider herself a critical race theorist (p. 52). Colleagues of color led her to think about “the notion that for

Whites to move into the area of CRT would be a form of colonization in which we would take over CRT to promote our own interests or recenter our positions” (Bergerson, 2003, p. 52). She concludes that she does not need to don the title of critical race theorist to use CRT tenets to inform her work; CRT arguments support her work. She is brought to remember that “Whiteness is a race..., [that] all other colors are considered relative to Whiteness,...[and] it is impossible to ignore that privilege” (Bergerson, 2003, p. 57). She ends by listing three ways White scholars can be informed by CRT without co-opting it: 1) center race, recognize and challenge White privilege, and challenge racism whenever and wherever we can; 2) since CRT is about people of color, be strategic and careful about how we apply it and its tenets; and 3) fight to legitimize alternative methods of research that may challenge the status quo (Bergerson, 2003, pp. 59-60).

Colorblind racism.

One of the most ubiquitous concepts in current literature on racism emerges from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s (2018) *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, first published in 2003 and now in its fifth edition. In support of the idea of the postracial imaginary (Donner & Ladson-Billings, 2018), colorblind racism explains the contemporary post-civil rights era as new racism. Noting that Jim Crow racism is no longer acceptable, colorblind racism explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics. Colorblind racism allows Whites to ignore and deny the fact that race structures every aspect of U.S. society and to maintain our privilege and hegemony without feeling bad in the face of clear inequality. Bonilla-Silva defines three important terms:

- While **race** as a social construction is accepted by social scientists at its face, distinct interpretations lead to the devaluation of race as a significant construct since it is constructed and not real;

- “A society’s **racial structure** [is] the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce White privilege;”
- **Racial ideology** is the racially based frameworks that explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race) the racial status quo and express the commonsense way of being in the world (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, pp. 7–9).

Drawing on Bourdieu (1979/1984), Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006) and Bonilla-Silva (2018) define the concept of “White habitus” that is both created by and creates racial structure and racial ideology. Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006) explain that habitus is not about individual character or morality but the “deep cultural conditioning that reproduces and legitimates social formations” (p. 233). While it does not determine action, it does orient action. When looking at this in relation to White racial action, Bonilla-Silva (2018) explains the White habitus as a “racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates Whites’ racial tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters” (p. 121). By promoting in-group solidarity, it also promotes negative views of non-Whites. This is an important part of the new racism because it helps shun overt racist actions in favor of covert racist attitudes and behaviors.

Bonilla-Silva (2018) defines the four central frames of colorblind racism. He reminds us that ideologies are “expressions at the symbolic level of the fact of dominance...[and] are central in the production and reinforcement of the status quo” (pp. 53–54). Central to ideologies are their frames, or ways to interpret the information we receive. The first frame Bonilla-Silva (2018) identifies as liberalism: “the philosophical, economic, cultural, and political challenge to the feudal order” whose features are individualism, universalism, egalitarianism, and meliorism (p. 54). This allows Whites to seem reasonable and moral while opposing any real changes that would address racial inequality. The second frame is naturalization: this “allows White to

explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 56). White people can abdicate responsibility by believing that life just naturally sorts out the way it does for everyone. The third frame is cultural racism: which “relies on culturally based arguments...to explain the standing of minorities in society” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 56). And the fourth frame is minimization of racism: “that suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 57). Taken together, these frames allow White people to not “see” race and, therefore, to neither feel guilt nor an obligation to act. Bonilla-Silva (2018) also notes that the frames are supported by linguistic and rhetorical strategies that reinforce White habitus and racial inequality that he calls the “language of colorblindness” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 77). In addition to linguistic strategies, Bonilla-Silva (2018) points out that the stories we tell underscore White habitus and White racial ideologies and frames that absolve White people from responsibility

Expanding colorblind ideology, Uma Jayakumar and Annie Adamian (2017) suggest a fifth frame that has grown in our society since Bonilla-Silva’s first iteration in 2003. Calling it the disconnected power-analysis frame, it allows people with “limited but growing awareness of racial inequality to more strategically engage with and benefit from an environment where race is salient, while preserving White privilege in the process” (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017, p. 1). In particular, the disconnected power-analysis frame describes “Whites’ ability to align with racially progressive theoretical understandings of structural racism, and counternarratives that challenge racial hierarchy, while disconnecting from a critical analysis of their own positionality, personal narratives, experiences, and/or actions” (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017, p. 7). Importantly, they note, this emergence signals the ability of colorblind ideology to shift as society shifts and so maintain White supremacy.

Finally, Bonilla-Silva (2019) applies colorblind ideology to what he calls “Trump’s America.” He believes it is important to challenge some of the dominant narratives of Donald Trump’s election as being the product of overt racism or class anxieties, both of which obfuscate the continued presence of a controlling colorblind racist ideology. “Despite the rise of old-fashioned racism in Trump’s America, the new racism and its ideology of color-blindness are still hegemonic” (Bonilla-Silva, 2019, p. 14). He is concerned about the reversion to seeing racism as the extreme and overt actions and behaviors of a specific type of person which “prevents us from analytically and politically tackling the collective practices, mechanisms, institutions, and behaviors that reproduce racial domination” (Bonilla-Silva, 2019, pp. 17–18).

Other versions that support colorblind ideology

Colorblind ideology has influenced and is influenced by contemporary research on race, resulting in nuanced lenses and labels. Some examples that appear often in the literature follow.

- Nina Eliasoph (1999) writes about what she calls “everyday racism” as a result of studying speech. As Bonilla-Silva (2018) identified how White people talk about race, Eliasoph (1999) talks about why understanding how Whites talk about race can help us understand structural racism. What she found is that is that Whites’ “conversational etiquette made it impossible for participants to learn [about race] from each other in frontstage settings, and relegated expressions of anti-racism or curiosity or doubt to ‘backstage’ whispers” (Eliasoph, 1999, p. 485). Supporting the idea of White solidarity, Eliasoph (1999) concluded that the speech situation was more important than an individual person’s beliefs; thus, structural racism is maintained even by people who might question it otherwise.

- Barbara Trepagnier (2001) writes about “silent racism” that results from Whites identifying themselves in the binary categories of “racist” or “not racist.” Just as Bonilla-Silva (2018) explains that the abolishment of Jim Crow era attitudes and behaviors have led to the new racism, Trepagnier (2001) posits that Whites labeling themselves as “not racist” upholds racial inequality. By narrowing the “racist” category to blatant acts of racism and racist speech, White people can label racism as deviant behavior, when evidence shows it is not. Trepagnier (2001) proposes that we locate racism on a continuum of more or less racist, rather than the binary extremes that not only obfuscate silent racism but also hide the fact that “no one is literally ‘not racist’” (p. 159).
- John Dovidio and Samuel Gaertner (2004) identify “aversive racists,” a reaction to the old-fashioned, blatant forms of racism that describes those who sympathize with people who have experienced injustice, who support racial equality, who believe themselves to be not racist but who nonetheless possess racist feelings. Similar to Jayakumar and Adamian’s (2017) fifth colorblind frame and Bonilla-Silva’s (2018) explanation of colorblind racism as a manner of protecting White solidarity, aversive racism creates a “conflict between Whites’ denial of personal prejudice and underlying unconscious negative feelings toward and beliefs about Blacks” (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004, p. 4). The conflict has led them to the emergence of a framework for understanding when aversive racists will engage in discriminatory actions that maintain White solidarity.

White Racial Frame

Another influential theory found in much of the literature is Joe Feagin's White racial frame (WRF). Detailed in his 2013 *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*, sociologist Feagin's theory combines intersectionality and Black feminist thought, critical race theory, habitus, colorblind racism, U.S. history, and empirical social science to "examine why so many Whites believe what is in fact not true about important racial realities" (p. 2). Also seeing racism as systemic, Feagin (2013) identifies aspects that protect the system by maintaining: oppressive White practices against Americans of color, resource inequalities in relation to race, and the WRF (Preface).

Feagin (2013) calls for a new paradigm through which to understand racism. Noting that traditional social science approaches do not explain the deep and persisting structural elements, he posits that concepts such as bigotry, bias, and prejudice are used in social science in de-contextualized and non-systemic ways that view racism as just another social problem. Drawing on the cognitive, neurological, and social sciences, Feagin (2013) defines a frame as a perspective that becomes imbedded in individual and collective memory that help us make sense of our daily lives. Frames are "form-giving and [make] meaningful what otherwise might seem meaningless to the people involved. A particular frame structures the thinking process and shapes what people see, or do not see, in important social settings" (Feagin, 2013, p. 9). The WRF in particular destructively overarches White class, gender, and age across time and has become the country's dominant "frame of mind" and "frame of reference" regarding racial matters (Feagin, 2013, p. 10). The WRF consists of well-developed aspects that build and rely on each other: 1) a beliefs aspect (racial stereotypes and ideologies), 2) an integrated cognitive aspect (racial interpretations and narratives), 3) a visual and auditory aspect (racialized images

and language accents), 4) a feelings aspect (racialized emotions), and 5) an inclination to actively discriminate. In addition, it incorporates both pro-White and anti-others subframes. It structures events and performances that feed on each other. Importantly, it does not exist on its own apart from daily interactions, and the racist practices it supports and creates are essential for supporting and creating the overall system of oppression. Moreover, the WRF is connected to other collective frames, including social class and patriarchal ways of perceiving society (Feagin, 2013, pp. 10–14). Calling on William James' concept of character structure, Bourdieu's habitus, and Bonilla-Silva's White habitus, Feagin (2013) states that the WRF "re-creates, maintains, and reinforces the racially stratified patterns and structure of this society" (p. 16).

Feagin (2013), like Kendi (2016), situates the beginning of the WRF in European capitalism, colonialism, and the racial oppression that accompanied that. Noting that symbolic capital has and continues to be a central aspect of Whites' racial framing (see also Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Bourdieu, 1986), Feagin (2013) identifies that the frame is maintained by friendship and kin groups and serves to link White acquaintances and strangers in White solidarity.

What Feagin (2013) calls the contemporary WRF corresponds with ideas of postracialism (Donner & Ladson-Billings, 2018) and colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva) as well as aversive (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004) and everyday (Eliasoph, 1999) racism. He notes that "the contemporary frame's accent on most Whites as 'no longer racist,' 'post-racial,' and 'colorblind' provides new language for what is in fact an old view of Whites as a highly virtuous racial group" (Feagin, 2013), p. 95). Furthermore, Feagin (2013) posits that from the beginning and continuing today, the anti-Black subframe has been at the heart of the WRF, Black Americans being the central reference point "against which most Whites have consciously institutionalized racism and unconsciously defined themselves" (p. 99). This anti-Black subframe consists of

highly gendered racist views and discriminatory actions and is supported by tropes of animal imagery and criminality. The contemporary WRF and the anti-Black subframe operates not only between people but institutionally. Specifically, this highly organized system laid on the WRF foundation operates “in tandem with our modern economy, strong national government, extensive private and government bureaucracies, and a complex legal system” (Feagin, 2013, p. 141).

White Fragility

Robin DiAngelo (2018) gathers together multiple theories and perspectives on race in her concept of White fragility, explaining why White people react the way we do when our perspectives on race are challenged. Acknowledging race as socially constructed, she states “like the rest of race, Whiteness is a fiction...a social construct, an agreed-on myth that has empirical grit because of its effect, not its essence...a category of identity that is most useful when its very existence is denied” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. ix). Also noting that identity politics focuses on the barriers groups of people experience in relation to equality, excluding the White identity allows White hegemony to continue to operate unnamed. When that unnamed White identity is challenged, it is perceived as a challenge to our goodness and morality as people. Thus, “White fragility” happens when the smallest amount of racial stress creates a range of defensive responses (anger, fear, guilt, argumentation, silence, and withdrawal) that function to reinstate White equilibrium; these behaviors arise from feelings of superiority and entitlement and are a powerful way of controlling hegemony and protecting privilege (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 2).

DiAngelo (2018), like Feagin (2013) and Bonilla-Silva (2018), draws on the social forces and historical concepts that support the U.S. racist hierarchy. In specific, she calls out the American fascination with individualism and meritocracy, as well as narrow and repetitive media

messages, physical/geographical segregation, Whiteness as the human ideal, truncated historical teaching, jokes that act as warnings, the taboo on race talk, and White solidarity (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 8). Differentiating between prejudice, DiAngelo (2018) states that “when a racial group’s collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism, a far-reaching system that functions independently from the intentions of self-images of individual actors” (p. 20). In the fashion of Bourdieu (1979/1984, 1986), DiAngelo (2018) believes that in this manner, racism becomes a societal default, is reproduced automatically and systemically, is ideological, and is reinforced through social penalties (see also Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Feagin, 2013).

DiAngelo (2018) explains the importance of focusing on Whites when studying racism because to examine Whiteness is to focus on how racism elevates White people and establishes Whiteness as the standard and not-Whiteness as a deviation from the standard. A central tenant of White fragility is what she calls the good/bad binary. Echoing Feagin (2013) and Bonilla-Silva (2018), she posits that framing racist acts as simple, isolated, and extreme acts of prejudice perpetrated by bad (racist) people, results in someone perceiving that the suggestion of racism is a moral blow against a good (non-racist) person. Challenges to good people trigger layers of White fragility behaviors. “White equilibrium is a cocoon of racial comfort, centrality, superiority, entitlement, racial apathy, and obliviousness, all rooted in an identity of being good people free of fascism” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 112).

Finally, in regard to the gendered nature of White racism and fragility, DiAngelo (2018) addresses the concept of White women’s tears. Considering the fraught nature of White women’s relationships with people of color and their complicity in maintaining their privilege in the racial hierarchy, White women’s reactions to racial challenges are important. Crying is a

common reaction that DiAngelo (2018) describes as “one of the more pernicious enactments of White fragility” (p. 131). When a White woman cries in response to being racially challenged, the attention is drawn to her, and the conversation becomes about White distress, suffering, and victimization. In addition, these tears are often driven by feelings of guilt. “Tears that are driven by White guilt are self-indulgent; ...guilt functions as an excuse for inaction. Further...our tears do not feel like solidarity to people of color we have not previously supported” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 135).

Overall, the theories that best support the study focus on the systemic and constructed nature of racism and the endless permutations White people go through to maintain our hegemony. In particular, the focus on how and which actions and beliefs are racist, as well as who is racist, has shifted, which has made it easier for White people to abdicate responsibility for real action.

Allyship

This study focuses on White women in higher education administration who have been identified as “allies.” Reviewing the literature on allyship and its role in addressing some of the theoretical aspects of racism is helpful. Intertwined themes that emerge from the literature revolve around identity development of White allies, the definition of allyship, and constructive behaviors of White allies.

Identity development.

There is a corpus of literature on the identity development of White social justice allies. Even though this study is not about identity development, Janet E. Helms’ (2013) model, and Beverly Tatum’s (1997) use of it, is mentioned often in the literature about definition, behavior, and White women’s particular obligations and so will be explained here.

Janet E. Helms (2013) articulated in 1990 a process by which White people could develop a positive White racial identity. Positing that the development of a White identity in the U.S. is tied to the development of racism, and that the “greater the extent that racism exists and is denied, the less possible it is to develop a positive White identity,” Helms (2013) delineates a six-stage cognitive and emotional progression (p. 207). She explains that in the history of U.S. race interactions, “Blacks and/or Black culture have been the primary ‘outgroup’ or reference group around which White racial identity issues revolve” (p. 207). Articulated in two Phases, she identified these stages because the existing explanations were typologies that that did not explain how people could shift from one identity to another.

Phase 1 is the Abandonment of Racism which consists of three stages (Helms, 2013, pp. 214–218). The Contact Stage begins “as soon as one encounters the idea or actuality of Black people,” and how we move through this stage is dependent on our environment (Helms, 2013, p. 214). We are oblivious to ourselves as raced, believe being White is normal, take our privilege for granted, have limited contact with people of color, and our knowledge of them is limited to media stereotypes and our family and friends. If enough socialization with people of color takes place, we move into the Disintegration Stage, which “implies conscious, though conflicted, acknowledgement of one’s Whiteness. Moreover, it triggers the recognition of moral dilemmas associated with being White” (Helms, 2013, p. 216). The strong feelings that accompany our heightened awareness lead us to attempt to develop new beliefs, but the pull toward privilege and status quo of Whiteness often leads to resistance or over-compensating racial evangelism. In Reintegration, the last stage in Phase 1, the pull of Whiteness is so strong that, while we finally consciously acknowledge a White identity, it is in the context of White superiority and Black inferiority. Our guilt and denial turn into fear and anger, we blame the victim, and we avoid the

struggle to abandon racism. “A personally jarring event is probably necessary for the person to begin to abandon this essentially racist identity” (Helms, 2013, p. 218). But if that happens, we can move to the next phase.

Phase 2 is Defining a Non-racist White Identity (Helms, 2013, pp. 218–224). In the Pseudo-Independent Stage, we begin to actively question and acknowledge our responsibility. We are “no longer comfortable with a racist identity and begin to search for ways to redefine” (Helms, 2013, p. 218). This is a largely intellectual stage, and we seek out people of color to learn. In the Immersion/Emersion Stage we “replace White and Black myths and stereotypes with accurate information about what it means to be White in the United States” with the goal of changing White people (Helms, 2013, p. 219). This stage is emotional as well as cognitive, and we look for support from other allies and White activists. The last stage is Autonomy in which we find ourselves “internalizing, nurturing, and applying the new definition of Whiteness evolved in the earlier stages” (Helms, 2013, p. 219). We accept a positive White racial identity and live life committed to antiracist activity.

This is the identity development model noted scholar Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997, 1999) espouses in her discussions on White allyship and its importance in fighting racism. Tatum (1997) describes the role of “White ally” as a person who beyond the role of victimizer. She notes there is a history of White resistance but that these people are mostly invisible in history. However, she believes that “these are the voices that many White people at this stage in the process are hungry to hear” (Tatum, 1997, p. 108). She also notes that many White allies stay in the background for fear of “being yet another White person who was shining the spotlight on herself in what might be seen as a self-congratulatory way” (Tatum, 1999, p. 56). She goes on further to say, “What do we call a White person who has rejected White supremacy, who has

lived/is living a multicultural life, who is seeking to subvert racism in an ongoing way?...I call such a person a White ally” (p. 60).

What is a White ally?

Definitions of “White ally” can be found in both scholarly and popular literature. Kristie Ford and Josephine Orlandella (2015), often cited in the ally literature, examined the efficacy of intergroup and intragroup dialogues in studying White people’s journeys toward allyship. They define a White ally as “a person who consciously commits, attitudinally and behaviorally, to an ongoing, purposeful engagement with and active challenging of White privilege, overt and subtle racism, and systemic racial inequalities for the purpose of becoming an agent of change in collaboration with, not for, people of color” (Ford & Orlandella, 2015, p. 288). The defining characteristics they surfaced parallel the identity development models:

Table 1. Themes.

<i>(1) Defining Characteristics of White Allies</i>	
•	Developing awareness of white racial identity and learning about oneself
•	Recognizing the invisibility of one’s white racial identity
•	Acknowledging privileges inherent in whiteness
•	Identifying racism in oneself
•	Taking responsibility for creating social change
○	Move beyond guilt
○	Break the silence
<i>(2) Approaches to Becoming White Allies</i>	
•	Helping narrative
○	“Good white person”
•	Collaborating narrative
○	“Working with, not for, people of color”
<i>(3) Challenges of Becoming White Allies</i>	
•	“Traitor” status
•	Emotional burnout
<i>(4) Support Systems Needed for White Allies</i>	
•	White role models

(Ford & Orlandella, 2015, p. 293).

Activist Paul Kivel (2017) reinforces the idea that allyship requires action that should be influenced by what people of color express that they want. For Kivel (2017), “*ally* is not an

identity, *it is a practice*” (p. 133). He believes allies challenge those who are disengaged to work and be accountable.

Acting as an ally to people of color is an ongoing strategic process in which we look at our personal and social resources, evaluate the environment we are in, and in collaboration with people of color and other White allies, pursue justice (Kivel, 2017, p. 134).

In addition, Kivel (2017) derived his list of characteristics directly from Black people:

3.1. What People of Color Want from White Allies	
Respect us	Take risks
Listen to us	Make mistakes
Find out about us	Don't take it personally
Don't take over	Honesty
Stand by my side	Talk to other white people
Provide information	Teach your children
Don't assume you know what's best for me	Interrupt jokes and comments about racism
Financial support	Don't ask me to speak for my people
Check your privilege	Don't be scared by my anger
Don't try to save or rescue us	Your body on the line
Interrupt white silence	

(Kivel, 2017, p. 135)

The sheer amount of literature on this subject is impressive, and it seems to be added to continuously in today's racial climate. What a review of this literature shows, however, is that the same conclusions seem to be drawn in relation to slightly different aspects of the question. Between Helms (2013), Tatum (1997), Ford and Orlandella (2015), and Kivel (2017), the definition and characteristics seem to be covered.

In line with this study's theoretical framework of Black feminist epistemology it is vital to explore the literature written by Black women about White women allyship (see also Davis,

1983; hooks, 2013, 2015). Audrey Lorde (2007) specifically addresses the issues of anger and guilt in both Black and White women. Showing that both Black and White women respond with anger and fear of anger, she posits that “my anger and your attendant fears are spotlights that can be used for growth” (Lorde, 2007, p. 124). She takes special care to point out that the spotlight is meant to correct, not to result in self-indulgent guilt. “Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve none of our futures” (Lorde, 2007, p. 124). Lorde (2007) suggests that women harness their anger and turn it to action:

anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies (p. 127).

She reminds women that racism and sexism were created in a profit system, and that mainstream (White male) society does not want White women to respond to racism. In further detailing the uses of anger for women fighting oppression of all kinds, but especially racism, Lorde (2007) communicates to White women allies how to engage and not be afraid.

Lorde (2007) made these comments in 1981. In 2020 Ivirlei Brookes posted a 12-minute video on Instagram passionately explaining to White women how to behave better in the face of racism and explaining what female White allies can do. She outlined actionable steps White women could make and ended up reaching five million viewers. What she counsels parallels other descriptions of White ally behavior, but in this case a Black woman is talking directly to White women as someone who wants her sons to be able to jog safely at night and who doesn't want to be afraid of reaching for her identification too quickly if she gets pulled over by the police (Brookes, 2020). She exhorts White women to understand and admit their privilege and

educate themselves about racism and their part in it, to use their privilege and individual strengths to take action against racism, to actively and deliberately make room for Black people in their personal and professional lives, to diversify their friendship circles, and to be patient with themselves while they engage in the uncomfortable and painful self-realizations and confrontations that are required for racism to be eradicated (Brookes, 2020).

Similarly, Catrice M. Jackson (2015) speaks directly to White women in the belief that “it will be the unification of women that will break down the systems of oppression, transform the human condition, and cultivate world peace” (p. xxii). Stating that women were created to love and nurture, that women are by nature collaborative, and that together women can change the world, she also believes that, even as adults, women engage in versions of the school yard games that defined our existence as girls in a boy-centric environment. Applied to race issues, Jackson (2015) defines three responses to racism women can choose: The Antagonist, the Advocate, and the Ally. Most importantly, she makes it clear that White women “should NOT self-appoint [themselves] an Ally: the title of ‘Ally’ is one that must be earned, and it is bestowed by people of color to White people” (Jackson, 2015, p. 158). And, finally, Jackson (2015) repeats a theme prevalent in the ally literature written by Black women: “You’ve got to want to do this because it’s the right thing to do, not because you are feeling guilty about the social and racial injustices that are happening in the world” (p. 203).

Allyship in the academy.

The literature on allyship in the academy relevant to this study falls into two categories: the necessity of challenging the conserving nature of the university in the pursuit of social justice, and people of color, especially Black women, talking to and about White women in the academy (Chamblee, 2012; Dace, 2012a, 2012b; hooks, 1990; Lorde, 2007; Villegas & Ormand, 2012).

Two compilations of essays and musings are excellent representatives of this large body of literature.

First, Brett Stockdill and Mary Danico (2012b) edited a collection that focusses on the necessity of transforming the academy from its historical origins of defining and preserving the hegemony of what bell hooks (2013) calls the imperialist capitalist White supremacist patriarchy to a place of thought and resistance that challenges the status quo. Stockdill and Danico (2012a) talk about an “ivory tower paradox” in which conventional pedagogies, research, and theories that have perpetuated race, class, gender, and sexual inequalities exist side-by-side with a “rich legacy of utilizing education in the pursuit of liberation” (p. 2). Calling these the “dialectical forces of oppression and resistance,” Stockdill and Danico (2012a) maintain that scholars and educators who work for social justice must work together to build coalitions and alliances that can address these paradoxes (p. 4). Themes covered in the volume support this and the ally discussion: 1) allyship is needed to disrupt the conserving nature of the academy and create momentum for change; 2) if the academy exists to generate knowledge that enriches everyone, then we must include everyone, especially those who have been excluded; 3) the need to resist the hegemonic forces in researchers’ fields; and 6) the unfair burden on faculty of color to be everything White faculty are plus the expectations put on them because of their race. The idea of needing to build coalitions and allyships to both fight the conserving nature of the academy and advance the free and open intellectual purpose of it is pervasive in the literature.

Another theme in the White allies in higher education literature consists of women of color in the academy, particularly Black women, writing to and talking about their White women colleagues. Audre Lorde’s (2007) 1981 address to the National Women’s Studies Association Conference exhorts White women in the academy to draw on their anger as women to come

together and fight in common cause. She distinguishes between hatred and anger: “Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change” (Lorde, 2007, p. 128). Noting that if women in the academy truly want to address racism, they need to recognize the needs and situations of women not like them.

To those women here who fear the anger of women of Color more than their own unscrutinized racist attitudes, I ask: Is the anger of women of Color more threatening than the woman-hatred that tinges all aspects of our lives? (Lorde, 2007, p. 128).

In 1990, bell hooks wrote about living in the margin and distinguishes between “that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance” (p. 153). Relative to how White feminists in the gatekeeping academy have attempted to ignore and silence locations of resistance, hooks (1990) discusses how academic language is perceived and how Black women who want to be accepted must use the oppressor’s language. She reminds academicians that the “oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves” and asks, “Dare I speak to oppressed and oppressor in the same voice?” (Hooks, 1990, p. 140). She also takes to task those White women scholars who were unable to hear her when she spoke with the voice of resistance but would meet her in a language they were comfortable with. Lastly, she addresses those who aren’t “other” writing about “the Other” as a way of talking about difference. She suggests that these White women scholars stop that and enter the marginal space of resistance instead. When White women listen to and write about Black women’s stories “[they are] still the colonizer, the speaking subject” (hooks, 1990, p. 152). Rather, come into the margin to be greeted by liberators in a site not of domination but of resistance and listen to what people who live in this space see.

Finally, in 2012b Karen Dace initiated the compilation of essays from White women and women of color in the academy about allyship. An overview of the themes from the Black women scholars follows:

- Malia Villegas & Adreanne Ormand (2012): While much research exists on the challenges of women of color entering the academy, little exists on what sorts of relationships to build once there. White women inhabit three possible stances in relationships with women of color: 1) victims who compete for oppressed status; 2) voyeurs who are intrigued by difference; and 3) experts who speak on behalf of women of color but who are not interested in collaborating with them. Often relationships with White women end up in those women leveraging them for professional gain. Importantly, the distinct culture of argumentation, competition, and isolation in the academy is contrary to the cultures that most women of color come from, which could be overcome if all women united. “We are too careless with each other’s ideas and with one another in the academy,” and “we need sister-scholars in White women academics” (p. 36).
- Dace (2012a): Truth in the academy is still arbitrated through a White lens, so the way White women own that truth negates the realities of women of color in the academic setting. To get closer to a shared truth, White women must work against the silencing of women of color by including them in the discussion and supporting their credibility. “White women dedicated to becoming our allies will have to resist giving in to and participating in these well-established systems designed to silence and discredit women of color by portraying their dissension as inappropriate and threatening” (p. 51).

- Marquita Chamblee (2012): In seeking out White women allies, women of color need to be aware of the cost and/or risk to both women in determining who can really be supportive. She details what women of color should look for: 1) How beholden is the White woman to White men for her position and, therefore, how able is she to resist? 2) Is the White woman in a position of leadership that will allow her to advocate? 3) Does she possess the personal commitment to do the work and the self-work? 4) Is she committed not only to the person but to the whole issue of antiracist and social justice activism?
- (Dace, 2012c): The common reaction of White women crying when confronted with their racism is very problematic to women of color. For one, they seem inconsequential in relation to the tears women of color have cried at the hands of White women. In addition, crying shifts the attention away from the pain of the woman of color to the emotional experience of the White woman. In particular, Black women who cry are seen as weak, whereas those who don't are emotionless and hard. To move beyond this and form alliances we need to acknowledge each other's humanity and create spaces where we can all just be who we are and to remove the stigma of emotion in professional and academic settings. Mostly, "White women must 'woman up'" and assume responsibility for our bad behavior and for our complicity in White supremacy (p. 87).

While the requirements of becoming a White social justice ally seem to be the same regardless of a woman's profession, the unique characteristics of the academy create both additional challenges and unmatched opportunity to create meaningful and purposeful alliances.

Storytelling

This study being both raced and gendered lends itself to a storytelling approach. Therefore, a brief review of the literature on the purpose of storytelling and narrative research is important. Because the body of literature here is capacious and far-ranging, I will focus on aspects that support the Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2002) on which this study rests.

There is a common thread in much of the literature that storytelling is a basic human function for making meaning. In an interview conducted shortly after the election of Donald Trump, contemporary writer and social commenter Roxane Gay (Stosuy, 2016) explains why she tells stories, both fiction and non-fiction. She states, “Stories offer reflections of who we are, how we could be, and also offer escape. We need these things...[especially] in times like these” (n.p.). In talking about how we need stories even more in times of struggle and tribulation, she notes that art can often respond well to current events and that novels addressing hard contemporary topics help us process as much as nonfiction does. In congruence with Black Feminist Epistemology’s focus on lived experience and dialog as meaning-making, there is also much literature about the centrality of stories and oral narratives for all women and especially for women of color. Award-winning journalist and storyteller Andrea Collier (2019) writes about the centrality of storytelling for Black Americans. She notes that while story is part of every culture, for Black people, “It’s the way we witness” and “was the first opportunity for Black folks to represent themselves as anything other than property” (Collier, 2019, para. 2). She explains that Black people engage with stories that illuminate who they are in this country, the ties they share, and that they matter. They communicate “deep and authentic and share truth through storytelling,” reminding her readers that it was illegal during slavery for Blacks to read or write, thus storytelling was the “only way they could bear witness to what they’d been

through” (Collier, 2019, para. 12). The importance of storytelling for Black people today remains much the same: “Tell our truth. Witness and give testimony” (Collier, 2019, para. 17).

In writing about oral narratives, Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis (1993) notes that people’s stories “[preserve] an individual’s own words and perspectives in a particular, authentic way” (p. xii). In confirmation of Collins’ (2002) Black Feminist Epistemology, Etter-Lewis (1993) explains that the patriarchal assumption that only *some* groups are capable of producing meaningful stories about themselves has turned women, and especially BIPOC women, into an “invisible other” in traditional scholarly work. She reminds us that an individual’s account of their life is social, historical, and political as well as personal and that the hegemonic idea of who makes the rules about what is worth telling and who is worth telling it frames “theory in such absolute and discriminatory language [that] reflects a concealed agenda that is neither innocent nor harmless (Etter-Lewis, 1993, p. xv). While she acknowledges that all women are othered in this manner, the unique intersectional reality of Black women’s lives and identities can be found by listening to how they talk about themselves and their experiences so that we can learn from an otherwise invisible group (Etter-Lewis, 1991, 1993). Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (1991) compiled essays on the issue of capturing women’s words as feminist practice, especially those women who are multiply marginalized. They note that their “innocent assumptions that gender united women more powerfully than race and class divided them” were put asunder as they put the collection together (Gluck & Patai, 1991, p. 2). This power dynamic, they observe, was particularly relevant in interviewer/interviewee relationships. Even so, they strongly advocate for using women’s word about themselves to understand any woman or group of women and that “recovering women’s words” (Gluck & Patai, 1991, p. 1), is exactly how we can “revise received knowledge” (p. 2) about the invisible other.

Narrative/Storytelling as a way of making meaning in the human sciences

The literature bears out that the study of narrative/storytelling as a way of making and studying meaning in the human sciences has been an area of intense focus for decades. For the scope of this study, I will provide a brief review of some of the literature that recurs frequently and which supports both a Black Feminist Epistemology and the race theories previously reviewed:

- Donald Polkinghorne (1988) believes that “the study of human behavior needs to include exploration of the meaning systems that form human experience,” and narrative is the primary form (p. 1). He posits that narrative meaning “works to draw together human actions and events that affect human beings” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 6). Narrative study is particularly central to those disciplines that study human experience.
- Riessman (2008) believes that the central place for the use of narrative approaches is when personal and social institutions intersect in the areas of society that Collins (2002) would call sites of domination. Riessman (2008) notes that narratives are composed for particular audiences at a specific moment in history and therefore rely on the current discourses and values of that time and place. She defines stories as the “consequential linking of events or ideas” that impose a “meaningful pattern on what would otherwise be random and disconnected” (Riessman, 2008, p. 5). She explains that narratives construct identities, encourage others to act, and are strategic, functional, and purposeful.
- Barbara Czarniawska (2004), in her survey of narrative in the social sciences, offers that social life is a narrative and that it is impossible to understand human conduct while ignoring intention and impossible to understand intention by ignoring the setting/context of the narration. She points out that we are never the sole authors of our own narratives,

and when someone creates a story about us without including us in the creation, that is an act of power. “Stories do not lie around—they are fabricated, circulated, and contradicted;” moreover, “the story collector...listens selectively, remembers fragmentarily, and re-counts in a way that suits his or her purpose” (Czarniawska, 2004, loc. 711).

- Jerome Bruner (2002) believes that narrative occurs when events in our lives, in society, happen differently than expected. Using the literary term “peripeteia,” he posits that it is at this turning point that the commonplace is transfigured. He explains that narrative is a dialectic between what was expected and what happened and that “it is the conventionalization of narrative that converts individual experience into collective coin” (Bruner, 2002, p. 16). As stories are passed from person to person, their believability depends on the circumstances and the teller so that the “sharing of common stories creates an interpretive community” which promotes cultural cohesion (Bruner, 2002, p. 25). Moreover, narrative functions to construct and re-construct ourselves to meet our situations: selfhood is a verbalized meta-event that gives coherence and continuity to experience and that is shaped by language and narrative (Bruner, 2002, p. 73). Finally, Bruner (2002) posits that narrative is our preferred and perhaps obligatory medium for expressing our aspirations. “Through narrative we construct, re-construct, in some way reinvent yesterday and tomorrow. Memory and imagination fuse in the process” (Bruner, 2002, p. 93).
- Wolfgang Iser (1978) explains why it is important to include the function of the reader/receiver in thinking about narrative. In explicating reader-response theory, Iser (1978) posits that inherent meaning does not lie in the text alone or in the person reading

but in the convergence of the two. It is a moment of construction that happens when the text and the reader collide. On one side of this process is the artistic object, or the text created by the author, and on the other side is the aesthetic object, or the final experience/meaning the reader comes away with. In the middle are the concepts of the implied reader for whom the writer creates the text and the narrative gaps the reader fills in in the experience of reading. In this way, Iser (1978) explains that meaning from text is constructed in multiple and varied ways, dependent on who is reading and the context they are reading in.

To sum up the themes of the literature review that undergird this study, it is most salient that interactions among human beings result in meaning that is constructed by the internal/personal and external/societal and cultural contexts in which they occur. As a country, the U.S. has purposefully and diligently constructed a race hierarchy that maintains White mostly male hegemony. While the concept of race may be a construction, the reality of this concept in practice is real in the denigration and marginalization of millions of people. This hierarchy rests on centuries of power-building and has become inculcated in every aspect of American life. Race hierarchy is so influential in people's behaviors that they often choose race loyalty over other choices that could benefit themselves and others. In particular, race conflict has impacted the ability of White women and women of color to collectively fight the White capitalist patriarchy that controls this country. While some White women have learned to be allies to women of color, exactly what that means is contextual. Because meaning is constructed between and among people and the artifacts they produce, the creation of narrations/stories can be a powerful means of communication about people's experiences with issues of power.

Chapter 3—Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will describe how I conducted my inquiry of how female, White ally higher education administrators experience the convergence of race and gender as they seek to create socially just spaces for BIPOC women in their institutions. This study lent itself to a qualitative methodology, in particular Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) Portraiture methodology. Wertz et al. (2011) state that "qualitative research addresses the question of 'what?'" (p. 2) and may also involve the conceptualization of "how," the context, and significance in the larger world. They note that quantitative measurement "tells us only magnitude" (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 2), and despite the sophistication of the measurement, there still needs to be "research about what a subject matter is in all its real-world complexity" (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 2). In addition, Miles et al. (2014) point out that "qualitative data are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of human processes" that can help researchers "get beyond initial conceptions." They also state that qualitative studies have a "quality of 'undeniability'" in that words as constructed in narratives, and stories "have a concrete, vivid, and meaningful flavor" (Miles et al., 2014, chapter 1). Finally, Denzin and Lincoln (2018a) explain that "qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (p. 10). Through practices that "make the world visible," the world is transformed into representations that allow us to "make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a, p. 10).

Importantly, both Denzin and Lincoln (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a) and Greg Dimitriadis (2016) discuss research as inquiry, especially in regard to social justice work. Denzin and

Lincoln (2018a) discuss “a historical present that cries out for emancipatory visions...that inspire transformative inquiries...that can provide the moral authority to move people to struggle and resist oppression” (p. 1). To get away from the association with positivism that the word “research” can evoke, like Dimitriadis (2016), they believe that “inquiry implies an open-endedness, uncertainty, ambiguity, praxis, pedagogies of liberation, freedom, resistance” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a p. 11). Dimitriadis (2016) discusses how qualitative research has been bounded by the constraints of positivism, which has restricted investigators from “[getting] on with the work of producing knowledge differently” (p.142). If we are to adequately investigate phenomena and people who exist at the margins of the “new orthodoxies in critical, qualitative work” (Dimitriadis, 2016, p. 143), we must challenge those orthodoxies, in particular around who gets to define them and to what ends. He suggests that we should “more fully embrace ‘inquiry’ as a basic disposition” (Dimitriadis, 2016, p. 145).

These reasons support this study as qualitative. To address issues of race, we must acknowledge its real-world complexity and go beyond the measurement of magnitude only. I inquired about what my participants experience and the context in which they operate in the hope of finding significance in the larger world (Wertz et al., 2011). In addition, I not only heard stories (data) but then told stories using the data that are made up of rich descriptions anticipating that I would find more than my initial conceptions (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I sought, in hearing and sharing these women’s words, to create Miles’ quality of undeniability (Miles et al., 2014) in a concrete, vivid, and meaningful way. Also, I sought to make a world visible that is not well-represented in the literature and that can only be made so by surfacing the meanings people make of their worlds and their experiences in them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a).

Most importantly, a qualitative approach supports Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2002; Collins & Bilge, 2016). This is especially evident in the focus on “inquiry” rather than “research” supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2018a) and Dimitriadis (2016). I shifted some of the strictures of orthodox qualitative approaches, relying on the tenets of Black Feminist Epistemology to focus on my participants’ lived experiences, to use their dialog to assess knowledge claims, to operate through ethics of caring and personal accountability, and to use Black women as agents of knowledge. To do this required a mindset of inquiry, of “open-endedness, uncertainty, ambiguity, praxis, pedagogies of liberation, freedom, resistance” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a, p. 11) not hindered by rules that support orthodox thinking, thinking that has often kept people at the margins.

This way of thinking about qualitative research included a focus on storytelling and its central meaning-making purpose in human interactions and identity creation (Bruner, 2002; Czarniawska, 2004; Etter-Lewis, 1991; Gluck & Patai, 1991; Iser, 1978; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008). Three aspects of storytelling were relevant: the telling of it (creation of the narrative by the teller), the writing/interpreting of it (creation of the narrative by the listener), and the reading of it (interpretation of the narrative by others). In speaking about oral narratives, Etter-Lewis (1993) notes that people’s stories “[preserve] an individual’s own words and perspectives in a particular, authentic way” (p. xii). In confirmation of Collins’ (2002) Black Feminist Epistemology, Etter-Lewis (1993) explains that the patriarchal assumption that only *some* groups are capable of producing meaningful stories about themselves has turned women, and especially BIPOC women, into an “invisible other” in traditional scholarly work. However, “recovering women’s words” (Gluck & Patai, 1991, p. 1), is exactly how we can “revise received knowledge” (p. 2) about the invisible other.

Polkinghorne (1988) further tells us that human behavior must be understood by exploring human meaning-making systems, most importantly narrative. He defines this as a “cognitive process that organizes human experiences into temporally meaningful episodes” (Polkinghorne, p. 1). When seen through a Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2002), this meant using “lived experience as a criterion of meaning” as the basis of women’s stories, including all the narrative forms in which those experiences may manifest (Collins, 2002).

Methodology

To support storytelling within a Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2002) in addition to bringing a mindset of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a; Dimitriadis, 2016), I employed Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot’s Portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Because I sought to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of female, White ally higher education administrators, to document their voices and visions, authority, knowledge, and wisdom, this method is appropriate (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). One of the purposes of Portraiture is that is it “written, composed, developed, and presented to...multiple and diverse audiences. It is intentionally inclusive...” beyond the Academy (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 19). When pursuing work on race and gender, it is imperative that we not write just for an intellectual elite (Collins, 2002; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Therefore, merging the science of rigorous, empirical study with the accessible, aesthetic production Portraiture calls for supported my inquiry.

Another focus of Portraiture is its focus on “goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot created the methodology in part because she was “concerned...about the tendency of social scientists to focus their investigations on pathology and disease rather than on health and resilience” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 8). She notes that focusing on

what is wrong can lead to four distorting results: 1) magnifying what is wrong while neglecting evidence of promise and potential; 2) a tendency toward cynicism and inaction; 3) a focus on victim blaming rather than a complicated analysis of the coexistence of strengths and vulnerabilities; and 4) a leaning toward facile inquiry (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). “Goodness” is not an idealization or romanticism of human experience or social reality, but rather a validation that documents what is strong and worthy “so that we might figure out ways of transporting those ‘goods,’ that goodness, to other settings and transforming them” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 20). It is important to understand that in “examining the dimensionality and complexity of goodness there will, of course, be ample evidence of vulnerability and weakness,” the counterpoint of polarities being central to the expression of goodness (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). In addition, Portraiture is also concerned with how the participants define goodness in their settings, focusing on their voices, wisdom, and experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Part of my purpose in inquiring into my participants’ experiences was to uncover what is “good” in what they do in the hope that this might inspire others to do “good” work. In addition, discovering the polarities and how they balance the good is important to moving antiracist work forward.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) also focuses on the aesthetic purpose of Portraiture. The artistic aspect produces narratives that are complex, provocative, inviting, holistic; they are revealing and dynamic interactions of values, personality, structure and history (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 11). Davis (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) discusses the aesthetic aspects that make something go beyond simple representation so that “their own properties have significance in themselves” (p. 28). It is the aesthetic, creative production of the emergent findings of the inquiry that make Portraiture unique in social science

methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This means that the portraits are composed as literature, with literary intention and expressive content: keen descriptors, dissonant refrains that provide nuance, and complex details that converge into emergent themes, the interrelationships of which are woven together by presenting their content against the backdrop of their shared context (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 29). Part of that is attending to the aesthetic whole of the portraits, which relies on four dimensions: 1) conception (the overarching story that reflects the weight of empirical evidence expressed through repetition, reflection, reiteration and underscored through contrast and listening to the deviant voice); 2) structure (the scaffold of the narrative; the organization and threaded metaphors and themes); 3) form (provides complexity, subtlety and nuance to the text and animates the structure elements); and 4) coherence (logical, aesthetic consistent relation of parts; this brings the other three together; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, pp. 247–259). In this vein, I co-created empirically rich, aesthetic portraits of my participants which focus on the goodness they both encounter and create and that appeal to diverse audiences, thus making the work of antiracists visible and transformative.

This squares the study within a Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2002) in several ways. First, Portraiture relies on the participants' lived experience as a way of knowing. I relied on their descriptions and explanations of events, people, experiences, and feelings as they talked about their lives as female White allies in the Academy. Second, I relied on our dialogue with each other, in addition to their reports of their dialogues with others, in assessing and representing their knowledge claims. We made meaning together even beyond their initial words in the stories we co-created so that their experiences may be transforming outside of their context. Third, the search for goodness endemic in Portraiture can be seen as commensurate

with the ethics of both caring and personal accountability required in Black Feminist Epistemology. Understanding that women communicate and make moral meaning through relationships and connections (Gluck & Patai, 1991), each participant and I built mutual, trustworthy relationships with each other in order to support the vulnerable spaces needed for us to do this work. We were accountable to each other in this process that allowed for the transparency necessary to reveal the stories.

Research Question

- How do female, White ally higher education administrators experience the convergence of race and gender as they seek to create socially just spaces for BIPOC women in their institutions?

Participants

Five White women identified by BIPOC female higher education staff and administrators using a version of Foster's (1991) sampling method of Community Nomination participated in this study. In filling a literature gap about what makes a good African-American teacher, Foster (1991) went directly to the Black community to ask them. She explains that this sampling method "is an attempt to gain what anthropologists call an 'emic' perspective, an insider's view: (Foster, 1991, p. 230). Gloria Ladson-Billings (1989) also used Foster's (1991) sampling method to identify teachers who met her criteria of excellence by asking the parents. While Ladson-Billings (1989) connected this sampling method to her quest for describing Black cultural excellence, this study used Community Nomination (Foster, 1991) to adhere to Collins's (2002) Black Feminist Epistemology by honoring both the experiences and voices of BIPOC women when determining who they believed exhibited ally behavior.

The community I engaged to find participants was my network of female, BIPOC education staff and faculty. The parameters I imposed in my outreach were that the identified female White ally 1) is someone the community member has experienced as an ally; 2) spends all or most of her time in non-teaching assignments; and 3) does not work at my institution. I deliberately focused outside the classroom since I sought to understand how these White women experienced the sex/race convergence in relation to creating safe spaces for the BIPOC women they work with rather than with and for their students. I put no parameters on geographic location, type, or size of institution. The advantage of casting such a wide net in relation to Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) is that it allowed me to listen to the experiences of White women in varying higher educational contexts to see if there were commonalities in investigating what works, what is “good” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In contrast to investigating the common experiences of women in a narrowly-defined context, Portraiture seeks diverging and diverse voices in relation to a common inquiry (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). Once I obtained the names and contact information of the potential participants, I contacted each one, explained how I was led to them, explained the study, the time commitments and the “deliverables,” and asked if they would be willing to give me their time and active participation.

My hope was to find five to seven women willing to agree, so I am grateful to have found five. I targeted this number based on conversations with advisors and from studying other Portraiture approaches. Portraiture Methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) does not explicitly state the number of participants required. However, if we situate Portraiture in the narrative forms of qualitative research, we can get some guidelines. Creswell (2013) states that narrative approaches are best for investigating the life stories of one individual or a small group of people. Timothy Guetterman (2015) surveyed narrative studies that ranged from one to 34

participants. Considering this information, and considering the time required to conduct this kind of study, a sample of five seemed reasonable. In keeping with a Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2002), I wanted to make sure I had time and space to understand my participants' lived experiences as a way of knowing.

Setting/Interviews

Because of the wide geographical locations of the participants, in addition to the prevailing health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the interviews took place on conferencing platforms (Microsoft Teams and Zoom). This was impactful on the creation of the Portraits as the more commonly accepted idea of physical "setting" was confined to a computer monitor. Since this is an important aspect of Portraiture, I created setting through descriptions of what I could see: participants' actual physical "offices," what they were wearing, and our "warm up" meanderings that consisted of wide-ranging topics which just came up in polite conversation. Examples of these are the dissertation process, the state of online education, and mundane but essential activities related to family life.

I interviewed each participant four times in a manner that privileges Mishler's (1986) concept of the interview as speech act. Mishler (1986) explains that "the shared assumptions, contextual understandings, common knowledge, and reciprocal aims of speakers in everyday life are not present in the formal [structured] interview" (p.1). People use the ordinary flow of discourse to make shared meaning, and so each of my conversations focused on investigating the research questions but were also allowed to "flow" as they may. This supported a mindset of inquiry (Dimitriadis, 2016) and surfaced the information I needed to craft the portraits that resulted from this inquiry. Mishler (1986) sees interview situations as narrative/storytelling events in which the interviewer and interviewee are in a constant negotiation for meaning. He

discusses the contextualized nature of what is said, what is heard, and what is interpreted and believes we should listen for structure, coherence, and interpersonal aspects. Therefore, in my conversations with my participants, I followed threads that led from the research question and engaged with them in the co-creation of their stories. To do this I employed specific techniques and mindsets.

First, it was important to *develop rapport*: getting the most out of conversations with women requires a less structured, more relational approach in which the participants' feel a sense of control and ownership in the conversation (Anderson & Jack, 1991). Through conversation about how we got to this place to be talking with each other about White allyship, we shared very personal and often intimate information and experiences about our lives. Women's ways of being in the world are relational (Anderson & Jack, 1991), and we communicate through and about relationships, so I shared enough about myself to prompt them to tell me about themselves. This surfaced authentic and brave reactions to how they felt about being identified as a White ally in relation to their converging identities as "female" and "White" in the Academy.

Second, I needed to *be empathetic* to the experiences I heard. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) explains, a portraitist's research relationships are shaped by empathy for the actors and the subject matter. Empathy is "the vehicle for gaining a deep understanding" and is the opposite of egocentricity (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 145). To do that, I had to be self-reflective and self-analytic so that I could connect my "personal experience or intellectual background that connects with what the actor is saying" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 148).

Third, I maintained a listening stance focused on the *search for goodness*: As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) points out, the search for goodness does not preclude uncovering what may not

seem good. Rather it is a deliberate moving away from seeing social issues as pathologies that need to be cured to a focus on what is strong, healthy, and productive. Therefore, “the portraitist’s inquiry must leave room for the full range of qualities to be revealed” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 142).

Lastly, I needed to *be reciprocal but set boundaries*. I have ethical and empirical responsibilities to protect both the participants and the work. This meant that, despite our wide-ranging conversations, I maintained focus on the research question and the central themes that emerged so that I could be accurate and authentic in creating the portraits. Together, we negotiated the duration and times of the conversations and shared the responsibility of making sure each participant was able to say what she wanted to.

These techniques and mindsets created a setting of mutual trust, story sharing, and co-creation that resulted in five individual Portraits bound by some common themes but each unique as the woman who told them.

Data Analysis/Constructing the Portraits

Because Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) does not require a specific approach to data analysis, and because I was guided by the conceptual framework of Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2002), I employed the elements and modes of Portraiture to create the portraits. Considering the postqualitative comments of Dimitriadis (2016), Denzin and Lincoln (2018a), Wertz et al. (2011), and Miles et al. (2014), the data analysis must preserve the voices of the participants and allow me to co-construct their stories.

Using the transcripts generated from the conferencing software, I read and re-read, simultaneously listening to and watching the interviews, multiple times. I often went back to specific passages in one interview to see how they related to similar passages in another

interview. I notated and color-coded information according to the aspects of Portraiture, journaling, outlining, and sticky-noting in relation to these aspects.

I listened to and for the *context* of our conversations, not just the physical setting, but for whatever was going on in participants' lives that was impacting our work and flavored their responses. For some of them, their frustrations in their workplaces provided needed context in which to situate their narrations, especially in counterpoint to what was uplifting them, the *search for goodness*. Documenting that juxtaposition allowed for the emergence of themes and sub-themes. The construction of these emergent themes proceeded from Lawrence-Lightfoot's "modes of synthesis, convergence, and contrast," which I notated and color-coded on the transcripts and in my journaling (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 193). First, I listened to and for *repetitive refrains*. Noting that there is a language to aspiring allyship and antiracist behavior, these refrains were remarkably consistent across the five participants. Second, I listened to and for *resonant metaphors* beyond the refrains. While some of these echo the refrains, each participant ultimately inhabited their own metaphoric milieu. Third, I noted *institutional and cultural rituals* in higher education that framed much of the participants' conversations and which underscored the emerging themes. Lastly, I documented *revealing patterns* that emerged from dissonant and divergent information both within the individual interviews and among them. By analyzing where information seemed to *not* converge, I was able to put depth and nuance into both the portraits and the resultant themes.

Validity/Trustworthiness

For Lawrence-Lightfoot, Portraiture is the convergence of art and science, an aesthetic representation of a social phenomenon (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The validity of an aesthetic expression can be very relative. Therefore, Lawrence-Lightfoot describes a valid

portrait, an aesthetic whole, as one that is credible and does not “misrepresent the complex reality we are documenting” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 246). It is the creation of this whole portrayal “that is believable, that makes sense, that causes that ‘click of recognition’ [or *resonance*]...authenticity” with three audiences: 1) the participants who see themselves reflected; 2) the readers who are given no reason to disbelieve; and 3) the portraitist “whose deep knowledge of the setting and self-critical stance allow her to see the ‘truth value’ in her work” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 247). Portraits were co-created with me by each participant (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Participants were asked to feedback on and help frame the emergent themes and then to check the completed portraits for resonance, authenticity, credibility, and the creation of an aesthetic whole that did not misrepresent the complex topics discussed. I then revised the portraits based on their feedback, making sure that their words and the meanings behind them were authentically represented.

Consent and Compensation

Each participant signed a consent form giving me permission to use their words, as well as assuring them of ethical data collection practices and their choice of how to represent their identities. Participants were not compensated for participation in this study.

A Note on Data Analysis

In the proposal for this study, I identified Barbara Pamphilon’s (1999) Zoom Model as an appropriate data analysis approach. In the proposal stage, it seemed to dovetail well with both the conceptual framework and with Portraiture. However, I quickly found that the proof was in the pudding and that I was over-complicating the work in such a manner as to feel like I was molding the data into artificial and unnecessary buckets. Realizing that Portraiture is a methodology that encompasses data collection, data analysis, and data reporting, layering Zoom

on top of it was skewing what I had heard and experienced from the participants. Therefore, after trying to shoehorn the data into macro, meso, and micro buckets (Pamphilon, 1999), I decided instead to use Lawrence-Lightfoot's modes of synthesis, convergence, and contrast, which resulted in analyses that were more authentic and representative of the participants' stories and time.

Summary

This Portraiture study developed portraits of the experiences of female, White ally higher education administrators as they described the convergence of sex and race in their creation of socially just spaces for BIPOC women in their institutions. I gathered and analyzed interview data in support of Lawrence-Lightfoot's Portraiture method interpreted through and guided by Collins' (2002) Black Feminist Epistemology.

The chapter that follows offers the portraits of all five participants and concludes with a thematic analysis. Each portrait is presented in five sections: 1) Beginnings; 2) On Being an Ally; 3) On Being a Woman; 4) On Being Human; and 5) a brief thematic summary based on an individual metaphor. The three overarching themes are: 1) aspiring allyship is an unending journey; 2) aspiring allyship requires a mindset of curious humility; and 3) antiracist actions and mindsets are a moral obligation. Each of these themes is nuanced with participants' gendered experiences as White allies in higher education.

The final chapter presents an analysis of the themes in relation to themes uncovered in the literature and in relation to the conceptual framework of Black Feminist Epistemology. The study concludes with opportunities for further research and limitations on this study.

Chapter 4: Portraits and Themes

What follows this introduction is the product of five brave women in higher education who have dedicated themselves to advocating for social justice for BIPOC people by using their racial privilege to try to impact systemic change in their institutions. They risked vulnerability in sharing with me their experiences of being both female and white in one of the pillars of American society that helps control and instantiate Whiteness and patriarchy but that purports to be an arena for free thought and social change. In particular, the hierarchical structures that support White patriarchy and the practices that show whose knowledge counts and whose doesn't are reflected in much of these women's stories; however, they also recount positive influences working with areas in their universities that do actively advocate for racial justice.

While all five women have experienced barriers and personal challenges in their advocacy, one even choosing to leave higher education, what is most obvious in their stories is the "goodness" they have found and created in their social justice work. This is apparent from the six or more hours of conversation each one gave me and the honesty with which they approached those hours. The conversations were wide-ranging but ultimately centered around the question, "How do female, White ally higher education administrators experience the convergence of race and gender as they seek to create socially just spaces for BIPOC women in their institutions?" To that end, each participant's story is told in five parts: 1) Beginnings; 2) On Being an Ally; 3) On Being a Woman; 4) On Being Human; 5) On *a metaphor specific to each woman*. In Part 5, I have assigned, through co-creation, a metaphor specific to each woman that allows me to talk about how she embodies the common themes that emerged from analyzing our conversations. Those themes are 1) aspiring allyship is an unending journey; 2) aspiring allyship requires a mindset of curious humility; and 3) antiracist actions and mindsets are a moral

obligation. These themes mirror the extant literature on allyship and antiracism. What brings their stories beyond “how to be an ally,” however, is their concomitant experiences with sexism while inhabiting a privileged race position.

Lastly, several of the participants have chosen pseudonyms while others have not. This was a topic of much thought for all of them as part of being antiracist is being honest and transparent. However, the intimacy with which they shared their fears and hopes, successes and not-successes, has led some of them to want to protect the people around them who might be identifiable. Therefore, some names and other identifying details have been anonymized.

Portrait of SB

Beginning:

While SB was my first interview, she was the second woman who agreed to participate in this study. On my second go-round with soliciting participation, I had hoped I’d be less nervous, but I’d begun to realize that being turned down might feel like someone didn’t think I should be doing this work. So it wasn’t any easier. In addition, before we ever got to an introduction call, we had multiple back and forth emails trying to find a date. She seemed so professional.

What appeared before me on Teams was an office-casual 30-year-old woman who coordinates the Women’s Studies department of a large public university in the Northeastern United States, as well as, I was to learn later, multiple DEI initiatives and organizations. SB has long, voluminous red-blond hair that she alternately pulls into a messy bun or releases in cascades multiple times during our conversations. She looks petite, although over Teams, who knows. She moves with restless energy while we talk. She seems a bit cautious, about herself, about me, about the time commitment, I’m not sure.

SB exudes intense but gentle energy. She is entirely absorbed in the conversation, and the constant need to tame her mane or shift her body toward the camera or to emphasize her words with her hands seems unconscious. At the same time there is a reticence that I'm starting to feel, and I wonder if it comes from questioning if she's the right person for this study and if I'm the right person to hear her stories. She uses the word "grassroots" several times, hinting at what I would come to learn is a deep belief about power and organizing.

Our introduction is relatively short and to the point. I spend time telling her how I got to this study, and she interjects at times with her stance on antiracist work. Top of mind is that "everyone has a voice" that they should employ commensurate to their ability to influence antiracist action. In the R1 institution that employs her, getting the "right people the right seats at the table" can be challenging. And I will come to learn that the power dynamics she encounters are rough waters, especially for a woman so young in her career.

Significantly, however, she chooses to focus on the "good drops" in the bucket, knowing that confronting systemic racism is a long, long fight, an approach Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot calls a "focus on goodness." SB is also, at this point in her life, searching for boundaries and negotiating life as a woman, one who is committed to feminist-fueled antiracist work. I recognize a huge vulnerability behind her competent professionalism. I am appreciative and intrigued when she agrees to participate.

SB informs me in our last interview that she wonders if she needs to leave higher education in the next year. The power struggles have worn her down, and she no longer sure if these cultural bastions of learning are the best places to effect change. Her journey throughout our time together illustrates the heart of the work all five participants engage in and how

hegemonic power structures work to tear down what threatens them as well as the amazing work that goes on anyway.

On Being an Ally:

There's no getting around it. This is the first interview of the first round of interviews for this study, and I am all of a sudden full of doubt about exactly what I'm supposed to do.

Planning, thinking, and training be damned—imposter syndrome flares. However, I don't want SB to know this, so I sit up straight, put on my best professional demeanor, and click “start meeting.” Up pops Teams, and I let SB in, excited and grateful to interact with this brave young woman, who is almost exactly my daughter's age. True to the limitations of remote interviewing, I can see part of what looks like a living room, sun coming in the windows, cozy furniture that looks 50s-retro from my vantage point, and a big, fluffy dog clearly enamored of her person. It's hard to extrapolate without actually being there, but I imagine the house is warm and smells like cookies baking. That's pure imagination, but that's the vibe I get.

We start out with “housekeeping” issues that, in SB's case, help situate her perspectives. In particular, we talk about anonymity. She struggles with the idea that to be the best social justice warrior she can be, she needs to name herself deliberately in her reality, but her position in the politically fraught system she works in might be jeopardized if she's “too honest.” I assure her that she will see anything I write and can decide at the end how she'd like to be represented. That satisfies her, and I feel that we've successfully navigated our first trust hurdle. As I noticed in our introductory meeting, she is attentive and present—I can feel through her body language and direct (at the camera) gaze that she is ready to engage. Alternately pulling up and letting down that mane of hair that literally has a life of its own continues to be how she punctuates our conversation.

We start out talking about what to her is a socially just space and how she creates them. As I experience now, and will come to learn more, SB will make every attempt to answer my question succinctly and directly with a definition of some sort. And then I will need to lead her to unpack these definitions and take her down sideroads to flesh them out. The concept of a “socially just space” is a difficult one, and she needs to ground her answer in her reality, so she begins by explaining to me what she does in her work role. She “holds two hats.” One is as an administrator in the women’s and gender studies department of her university, as well as being the academic advisor there. The second is running a brand new “grassroots initiative” through the dean’s office. It is already proving to be stressful wearing these two hats. Her first role is a “very socially-just-centered, feminist, intersectional, awesome fucking workplace.” How does she feel about her second role? Still to be determined. It’s very important to her that she explicitly names for me what she’s struggling with during our conversations: “I think that during our time together I will be bringing the stress of running a grassroots organization. I don’t want to apologize, but I’d like to name it.”

This brings her to centering the discipline and history of women’s studies in socially just spaces. Noting that the study of women’s issues “has been around since the ‘70s,” she explains how women “have fought to take up space in the ways that we should and the ways that we need to. And we took up space over time.” When I press her to get more specific to what this means to her, she tells me, “It means that we are going beyond, making sure everyone has a seat at the table to be able to ask questions. If I have this seat here, who doesn’t have it?” Further, she says it’s crucial that the spaces are run by “a diverse group of individuals and that leadership’s mission and vision line up with” those of the diverse group. Women’s studies, she says, has already gone through how to do this, how to “focus on minority individuals because they aren’t

the focus elsewhere.” Her department, therefore, has become the contact point for people who want to know, “How do we talk about race? How do we talk about social inequality and adding that extra layer of burden on faculty who, yes, specialize in that, but also have taken the time to educate themselves?”

This leads her to an interesting discussion on the state of women of color as faculty. SB works for a large, public R1 in a state in the Northeast not known for its racially diverse population. Nevertheless, she estimates that in the last 10 years, her department has hired 12 women of color into tenure track positions, and every one of them has moved on to other universities. While she believes responsibility for this lies in multiple places, she most squarely places accountability on the “campus and university climate. These women could be treated better elsewhere, so they left, and they got better paying positions.” Bringing this back to the conversation about space, she notes that the state she’s in is losing people of color overall, hence one of the reasons for the grassroots initiative she’s being tasked to stand up. Hiring staff of color is also one of the student demands the university has uncovered and so is one focus of the initiative.

However, SB does struggle with being a White woman standing up a racially-focused initiative and also with the power dynamics of the university hierarchy. I learn that the initiative is the result of a grant that was awarded to the White people who wrote it. “The White people were given the resources to give out grants and to fund people. And then the people of color were tasked with the work. How can you look at this team and go, ‘oh yeah, this is socially just?’” Moreover, the ostensible democratization of the organizing group reflects the university politics and organization she’s slightly referenced earlier. “I’m the lowest one on the pole since I don’t have a PhD; I’m a staff member. The White people call me the little admin instead of

assistant director. The people of color are the only ones that actually respect my work.” SB brings up hard questions and observations to the group anyway. When the group asked faculty what they needed to be able to teach better about race and social inequality, one issue that rapidly surfaced was the inability for certain categories of faculty to vote in their departments, thus marginalizing their voices. “So even with the greatest of intentions, there are so many layers of privilege and oppression that don’t allow us to be 100 percent there.” She references, not for the last time, Sara Ahmed’s (2017) *Living a Feminist Life*. “If you state the problem, you become the problem. That’s what I’m struggling with in this work.”

I am starting to understand that SB comes at her work through deep personal relationship and empathy. She wants to create connection, to provide direct support, to create for everyone the sense of the cozy living room I imagine she’s in. We drill down into smaller ways she creates space. She remembers that when they did have faculty of color, the department hosted monthly lunches to provide time for connection and collegiality. They hold “emergency meetings” during times of urgency, most recently to “open up a space for anybody that wanted to talk about the sexual assault cases on campus.” Specific to her is work as an academic advisor in which she fosters one-on-one relationships with women’s studies majors and can direct them to resources they may need. Lastly, she has brought up a suggestion within her department “to get together and bring anything you’re worried about. We’ll make a list of things you can do something about, the things you can’t and also list the oppression, and we’ll validate that together. So identify the barriers but focus on what you *can* do.” The idea of “space” and its relationship to creating connection and bringing empathy she admits is “very intriguing.”

It is not surprising, then, when we shift to talking about allyship, that she frames her definition and approach in terms of personal connection and accountability. “An ally is someone

who is an empathetic listener who does not try to understand because [White people] won't understand. The best we can do is validate someone's experiences." She notes that while all women have had to survive the White patriarchy, White women's experiences are "very different from a person of color who's a survivor. They're not compatible." Personalizing it to herself, "I just have to understand my own limitations and accept them. There's nothing I can change about it, and that's OK. The best thing I can do is listen up." Her reaction to being identified as an ally by a woman of color is, "imposter syndrome. Oh, if this person really knew all the things that I still need to learn and work on maybe they wouldn't have identified me."

What I will come to recognize is that I have just been introduced to SB's confronting her feelings of unworthiness she's carried since childhood. These feelings simultaneously make her a compassionate, relationship-builder in her fully committed antiracist actions and a relentless perfectionist in pursuing "personal work." Immediately after admitting to her lack of confidence, she follows with, "And then I'm like, that's just shame talking. Brené Brown came into my head. I was touched and grateful [to be identified]." Brown, whose studies and research in social work have led her to become an influential lecturer and author in human connection and how it happens, plays a central role in SB's personal work. SB explains how she is drawn to being an ally through connection. She knows she can't be everything to everyone, but she might be able to "be of service to someone. I just want to serve people. I just want to love on people and try to make somebody's day just a little bit better by being actively present in a way that, you know, maybe I didn't have."

It is vitally important to SB that she makes a difference in people's lives, even if it's just five minutes of active listening. "There's a lack of seeing people as people in this world." Moreover, people, as "perfectly flawed beings," are a "really beautiful complex of feeling and

emotions and passions that I want to know. I don't want to have a conversation about the weather. I want to know what makes someone feel alive." Then, in what is starting to become a recognizable pattern, she qualifies her own passion. "If they are willing to share, that is. Sometimes people aren't ready for the firehose of love from [SB's nickname]. And that's OK." Therefore, the way she knows to be the best ally and committed antiracist is to be present, to listen, and be ready to do what she hears someone needs.

SB's passionate openness to how she creates relationship and connection in her life makes me think that, even at this early stage of our work together, I can get a little personal. So I ask her how she got this way, did she grow up in a diverse situation. Her answer is fascinating. "No. No. I was homeschooled. I was kept, like, completely outside the world. I describe it as like growing up Amish because that's probably the best way people can relate." She further explains that she was "raised by Republicans," in particular by her father who "preached that Jesus loved everyone, but we're supposed to hate people who are different from us." I wait to see if she wants to divulge more, but she takes a deep breath and says, "So I had a lot of unlearning to do." And we move on.

She brings us back to higher education and how her first experiences as an undergraduate were liberating and opened up permission for free-thinking. However, as an employee, she's not finding it to be particularly so. She shares how she talks with advisees when they feel like something isn't working for them. She likens us all to puzzle pieces, but pieces that change shape over time. In that sense, someone or something may not be the right piece for the puzzle right now, but pieces can change, the puzzle can change—we may not always connect. We may just be pieces until we find a different puzzle or until shapes change around us as we change, too.

This is illustrative of SB's worldview of connection. We seek it, and we are responsible for creating it. Marginalizing people is antithetical to that.

Ultimately, it's clear that SB believes it is her job to carry the burden and reward of service, and that is where she situates her antiracism. It is not service in the sense that she is saving people from something. She identifies "work that needs to be done by White people." All of what she characterizes as venting, pontificating, and "getting dumped on" that often results when interacting with her mostly White faculty around issues of social justice she firmly believes is the responsibility of White people to hold. She does not believe people of color should have to facilitate that. Instead, do all the listening, sort out the wheat from the chaff, and then support those who have expertise and lived experience to drive a constructive conversation. This conversation rolls us into talking about how to support students who are not persisting or completing, who are more often students of color or other marginalized identities. The "massive pain points" struggling students encounter that are supported by traditional higher education narrative around what students "should" be able to do are things she doesn't have purview to get around. It makes her angry. It "comes down to who's accountable. Where are the freaking leaders? Who's helping?" Nobody, she believes, wants to truly take responsibility, even her new org. "If we're not responsible, who is?" To that end, she has set up a student-driven group that each year takes on a problem at the university they identify as something they can impact, and they create and deploy a year-long campaign to address it. Anyone can join, any major, any age. Engagement in this activism by those who fully participate, in whatever way they can provide, is "so high, so fantastic. It gets rid of the faculty/student power/privilege dynamic."

I am surprised we are so near the end of our time and also find I am exhausted but eager to learn more. SB's passion and conviction and requirement to be present feel almost physical,

even though we are talking to each other through computer screens. I am intrigued by her, so very grateful for her honesty, and she thanks me for “inviting me into this space.” I know she’s headed into a meeting on her new initiative: “Wish me luck. I’ll need it.”

On Being a Woman:

It’s been a couple months since our last meeting. Between the ending of her semester and the winter holidays, finding a good time to talk was challenging. I am so looking forward to reconnecting with this vibrant, authentic, intense woman. Our topic centers on feminism and being a woman, especially in higher education—and especially as an antiracist. I eagerly let her into our Teams meeting and find her in a new space. She seems to be in a small room, perhaps off her living room since I can see the lamp I noticed in our last conversation. This seems like a workspace or office. As far as I can see on my boxed-in screen, one whole wall to my right is a mural of a window looking out on a willow tree, blue sky, a pastoral landscape. While I would think that my made-up baking cookies fragrance from our last meeting might waft in here, this room might more appropriately smell of fresh air and open spaces that surround and protect her home. In any case, before I let my imagination run to too far afield, I note that what looks to be a pattern is that she creates nurturing spaces in her home.

We start the meeting with that cascade of auburn hair falling around her face and what I can now say are characteristic dangling earrings. These look to be handmade and perhaps a Tree of Life design. I can’t tell if they are the same ones she had on last time, but they are similar enough. They are silver or bronze and draw attention. She is wearing a light blue button-down shirt, but it is open to a bright red and White printed t-shirt. This is that mix of professional/casual dress remote work has brought us to, especially clothes that can look

different simply by buttoning up. Two and half minutes in, her hair is up in a messy ponytail—this signals she's ready to get down to business.

We start our time together talking about how busy our jobs seem. SB shares that she has just finished attending a meeting her university convenes annually for collaboration and interaction of groups who have received grants. In the past, she has helped organize it but not this year. The things that were missing, the things that mean the most to her, are indicative of systemic hegemonies at her university. She found that the meeting was self-congratulatory, and that people were unwilling to “acknowledge where we're at,” illustrating her focus on taking accountability and moving forward. The conversation, she believes, came from a privileged standpoint and did not make space for all voices: “We're supposed to be addressing global, racial, and social inequality, and there was no land acknowledge, no pronouns,” examples of the level-setting an antiracist, social justice activist considers to be basic practices. The missed opportunity for real engagement, meaningful talk to move forward, makes her feel like her time was wasted. In addition, she does not feel empowered to give her opinion. “How do you tell, how do you look at [a woman] who's three decades older than me with a PhD and say, ‘this sucked?’” And true to her practice of naming her moment in this space, she says, “Sorry, that was venting, but that is 100 percent where I'm at, so I'm excited about this conversation.”

I remind SB that we are talking today about being a woman, being a woman in higher education, and feminism. Her previous comment about not being able to say what she thinks leads me to ask her about age privilege from the point of view of someone new in her career. She is 29 at this time. She says she has observed that it seems to her that women in their 40s and 50s are the most insecure because it feels like the world is pushing them aside, that they are not as valuable as women who are 20 or 30, “which is absolute baloney, like women have some sort

of expiration date.” But she feels she’s also observed, and learned from Glennon Doyle, a podcaster she follows, that women in their 60s experience the most joy. As someone who is literally three decades older than SB and almost 60, I listen to this with real interest. I tell her that professional women in their 50s can feel vulnerable in that our bodies are changing and so is our social capital, whereas professional men in their 50s are often seen to operate at the height of their accomplishments. We both agree that using age to wield power is simply another form of oppression. She shares an experience where she received an email from an older, more highly positioned female needing something from the dean in 20 minutes; however, SB has made it clear that anything needing clearance from the dean requires a four-day turn-around. The pressure she received to provide that clearance in 20 minutes was formidable. We agree that we can have compassion for people undergoing all stages of life, but we shouldn’t have to suffer disrespect. She shares that often she won’t even take credit for the work she does because crediting someone else who has more prestige is “the only way the outcome’s going to happen.”

SB then shares with me that she only takes jobs on teams where “a woman held the leadership role, and I knew they would hold it for at least three years.” This very deliberate choice stems from SB knowing how she wants to be mentored: “as a young professional, I just don’t feel like spending the emotional energy educating [a man] on how to work with a woman. I don’t want to have to establish my worth as a person. I’ve found that when I walk into a room with a female leader, that’s already established.” I ask her if she can describe the difference in how she’s treated. She notes that women look her in the eye, that she is “physically acknowledged,” her work is “received and responded to instead of pushed aside for two weeks.” She goes further to say that in another equity-focused project she’s joined primarily made up of men that she has “taken a back seat” and works behind the scenes, allowing the men to lead,

noting that if she sent the email, it would take weeks to get a response, whereas if the man sent it, the turnaround would be 48 hours. Because she's committed to this cause, she's accepting of this arrangement. What we both shake our heads about, however, is that this is a "thing" at all.

Currently, and for the first time, there are two men on her team, and one at least is not passing muster. Her usual way of working is team-oriented, and if someone can't get something done, everyone chips in. However, in this man's case, things are "falling through the cracks," and she has had to rescue things. It's not team-oriented; it's her covering his work, and he doesn't seem to mind. "One of my New Year's resolutions is that I will no longer do work that is assigned to a man that they are getting paid to do." The negative result of her keeping her resolution impacted 13 people, despite her "persistent emails to this man that he needed to do this work." She is very proud of herself that let the accountability for this sit with the right person. "I was excited to share that with you." True to form, she needs to qualify her stance by differentiating helping from enabling: "If this man was to come to me and say, like, 'my kid's in the hospital, can you help me?' That's different than it's just not getting done, and nothing is being said, and I step in and start doing it."

Overall, SB is frustrated at the politics that have to occur to assuage everyone's egos. "For things to be pushed through, sometimes it almost feels like a game. What tone do I need to use? What outfit do I need to wear?" These are the kinds of things SB doesn't want to spend her time on. She wants honest, authentic, and sometimes difficult conversation and approach so that the social justice topics at hand can be transparently addressed. She shares that she doesn't "plant" questions before meetings. She wants "people to have their own thoughts and feelings" and to have "everybody hear all the same information at the same time." While this is not explicitly about women, it is about the hierarchical and patriarchal culture that pervades her

university, including how people feel they need to put a shine on things that really aren't very shiny.

As is common in this new "remote" world, we experience some connection issues that seem to be mostly on my end. I share that my daughter and son-in-law live in an apartment attached to our house and they sometimes start gaming, which can impact bandwidth. Apparently, my mention of my children spurs her to take another leap of faith with our conversations. She thanks me for the previous talk and then says, "I don't share this with a lot of people, and another thing I don't share much at work, that I had a kid at 21. That was super uncommon." This was a challenging situation because "I was just an admin, and I knew I wanted to grow my career." First, I am grateful that she trusts me with this. A quick second reaction is to be somewhat outraged that, at this time in history, a woman would feel she has to hide this. "I didn't tell people if I didn't have to. I feel like sometimes if you do tell people, especially people who don't have children, you get put in a box." I ask her if she is a single mom. Since she definitely shares her life in layers, I want to be respectful of allowing her to peel those back as she is comfortable, but I think this is a reasonable and safe question to ask at this point. She tells me that, no, she's very lucky to not be a single mom and that her child was "100 percent wanted." She moves on to how she will be "child-free" at 38, and I note that she clearly is not ready to talk about her partner. At the moment, she just loves having a seven-year-old.

This leads her into a conversation about how she wants to mother different from previous generations (she identifies herself as Millennial). She wants to model different ways of thinking for her daughter. "I think the difference is that I'm not buying into the drudgery." She gives examples of female friends and family members who are in their 50s who recount the "torture" of working "60-plus hours a week and not taking any time for yourself" as "almost a badge of

honor.” She definitely doesn’t understand that sort of self-denial, especially since it depletes these women’s emotional and physical availability to their families. “The idea that women have to do it all and feel like we are failing when we don’t is definitely a driver of women my age.” SB clearly thinks this is nonsense, and wants to make sure her daughter thinks so, also. I am learning that SB plants responsibility for people’s choices about how we spend our time directly on ourselves, within the bounds of our social and economic privilege, or lack of. Listening, I hear the refrain of “responsibility and accountability” again. These are echoes of her mindset that we are all responsible and accountable for ourselves and those we impact.

This provides a natural segue into talking about feminism and the word “feminist.” To address this, she glances by her upbringing again. “I was brought up super conservative. The first time I heard this word [‘feminist’], it was not something that was a good thing. It was not something that stood for equality. It stood for the suppression of men.” She then makes the jump to graduate school, so I make a note that next time we talk, I want to find a way for her to be comfortable talking about her childhood. But for now, I want to hear about her journey with these concepts.

In graduate school, SB started learning more. “I always cared about diversity and cultures and identities, but I hadn’t brought that back into the word ‘feminism.’” It was her exposure to intersectional feminism that opened this aperture. She cites Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks. “We should all be feminist. That’s when I really started identifying as a feminist according to [their] definitions, advocating for equality for all. Who wouldn’t want that?” She acknowledges that people are scared of this level of equality, especially as framed in feminism. She believes that because it’s hard work, and because White women are concerned about “messing up,” that they “go toward what they feel is safest.” As an

example, she offers, “so, like, every White woman ever is jumping on sustainability because it’s easy. You don’t have to talk about a lot of hard things, and with sustainability it’s like, ok, yes, let’s take care of the Earth. We don’t want it to burn. It’s much harder to talk about equity and justice.”

She brings the conversation back to antiracist standpoints. Acknowledging that as a White person she has the privilege to ignore the intersectional aspects of feminism, she notes that for her Black colleagues there is no way to separate and no privilege to ignore. White women have the responsibility to at least acknowledge and be aware of it, “even if you can’t solve it.” She also points out that another way to actually dodge the hard conversations is for White women to “jump on everything that says feminism” and “hide behind it,” regardless of their good intentions. She is addressing the tendency for many White women to claim the sovereignty of the sisterhood of being women over the acknowledgement that our racialized experiences are significant enough to belie that sovereignty. She follows this indictment with the qualifications that I am learning are her way of making sure she doesn’t come across as judgmental of any person’s journey. “People are still learning. I’m always going to be learning. In this work, you learn in waves.”

SB then takes us into talking about feminist leadership. She doesn’t believe that it is modeled or that there’s much to read about what it is, so I ask her what she thinks it looks like. Not surprisingly, her answer sounds much like her thoughts on what antiracist leadership looks like. “To me, it looks like a lot of listening versus talking, developing things together based on everybody at the table.” She acknowledges that this takes time and so can be a challenging approach. We have to be willing, SB believes, to “say the hard thing even when it’s unpopular.” For the second time she references Sarah Ahmed’s idea that the person who states the problem

becomes the problem, which leads me to believe that this is something she experiences in a significant way in her work. In her wave of learning about being a feminist leader, and in her focus on responsibility and accountability creating feminist, antiracist spaces she shares how she leads people into hard conversations. “My favorite thing to do is say, ‘hey, this doesn’t look right.’ Acknowledging that and saying, ‘I’m not the problem. I’m just making us aware. But I have solutions. Do you want to hear them? What are your ideas?’” This approach in her new, grassroots org can make her the “unpopular person” in pointing out that the three people of color who are on the new team aren’t always invited in to make the decisions. In particular, she doesn’t think feminist leadership is top-down, “which is what makes it beautiful,” but also what makes it run counter to the culture in which she works.

I take her back to our earlier conversation about the woman who demanded the 20-minute turn-around from the dean. I ask her what it might look like if she confronted that woman with these ideas of feminist interaction and leadership. “I think she would put on a good face, but you never really know what’s going on in somebody’s heart.” SB acknowledges that this is a powerful woman in the university, in her 50s, has been a chair—all the accoutrements of power in traditional academia (other than her sex). It’s a frustrating situation for her. “I don’t know if there would be a good way to do that. But I also feel like why do I have to do this? Why can’t it be safe for me to say, ‘you have room for improvement?’” So much of it is about the “chain of command” that SB is caught in the middle of, where she gets the brunt of this woman’s frustration by enforcing rules the dean has articulated. This is another example of how the traditional academic hierarchy creates hegemonies that are barriers to people coming together in the way SB believes is a path toward social justice.

These traditions and hierarchies are apparent in other conversations SB finds herself in. An example she provides is about where to publish the work of the various committees and initiatives she's part of. Acknowledging bias is important to SB and something she believes everyone should state transparently. Part of some people's unexamined biases center around open publishing versus publishing in journals that have pay walls and other restrictions to access. Some people "choose" open publishing because that's all they have access to. What journals "count" and whose knowledge "counts" is something in which SB cannot seem to engage some of the women with whom she works. The idea that "it has to be reviewed by two other privileged people to decide if it's important enough" is anathema to her. And even worse, it's not something about which she has been able to effect change.

To help her manage all the emotion she manages from other people at work but also her own, SB is reading Brené Brown. Because Brown's work, she says, is based on social scientific research, SB finds it helpful. Always wanting to create connection that she believes can pave the way for more common and accountable understanding, SB believes it's "helpful to know the language of what we're feeling." She gives an example that deep work which creates racial connections wouldn't be effective "unless we actually know what our shame triggers are."

The last thing we touch on is how she herself has experienced that convergence of unprivileged sex with her privileged race as a committed antiracist in her institution. Her response to this doesn't seem to be much different from her approaches to and philosophies of antiracism. She talks about making seats at the table, about listening, about stepping back and supporting—all the things she does to create socially just spaces and live an antiracist life. In relation to this specific question, however, she makes a comment that, at core, choice is the crucial difference. "We get to choose," meaning that when sex and race converge, White women

get to choose how they respond. Black women, and other women of color, are reactors to that choice. SB just hopes White women make those choices in concert with the voices of women of color.

On Being Human:

A little over a month later, SB and we connect a third time to flesh out what I characterize to her are the pieces that make her who she is and that support her antiracist, feminist standpoint. I am curious to see how this conversation goes because our previous interviews have been wide-ranging and spiral; she has shared so much, and the branches of our talks are fascinating, but following interesting idea after interesting idea has left me with gaps about her that I want to fill in.

When Teams connects us, I am met with her resonant voice saying hello, her red mane piled up in a poof on top of her head, and a new meeting space. This one is completely neutral. I can see a sliver of what might be a bedroom door across the hallway behind her, but she is in front of a cream-colored, bare wall. This puts my focus entirely on her: red and green plaid flannel over a mustard-colored blouse with a keyhole collar and without her characteristic earrings. It is first thing in the morning—we've barely had our coffee or any other warm up meetings. We dive in.

We start out with meandering conversation about the perils of returning to in-person work after the COVID-19 lockdown. Neither one of us is required to be back in our offices full time, but occasional face-to-face interactions are ramping up. I share with her some humorous stories of my recent time in the office. I work in an old Mill building; it is cavernous, and before the lockdown, was abuzz with the constant activity of 2000 people on site every day. We all showed up for this meeting in professional garb, some of us complaining about having to

uncomfortably squeeze into it (with many jokes about having gained the ubiquitous “covid 19”). The humorous part, however, was a colleague laughing about how strange (and annoying) it was to feel her clothes actually touching her. SB and I laugh together as we are both clearly wearing clothes that don’t touch us much, admitting that we just might also be wearing yoga pants. But then, in wonderfully typical fashion, this leads us into a real conversation about equity.

This time, it revolves around professional dress, most particularly the business suit. She states that at her institution, wearing a suit denotes that the person makes at least \$150,000.00, a clear sign of status and power. She declares that she purposefully will not wear a suit because it symbolizes a type of leadership she does not aspire to. “I feel like I’ve developed a lot of leadership and influence, and I don’t want to give the wrong impression...there’s nothing bad about it. I just don’t aspire to that type of leadership I’ve seen modeled at [name of institution] by those who wear suits.” That “type of leadership” I learn centers around the traditional, hierarchical (and patriarchal) structures that exist in her institution. They can be characterized by the minimizing and devaluing practices we’ve talked about previously and can be illustrated by a sort of panicked, chaotic approach to getting work done. It then clearly dawns on her that she doesn’t know where I stand in the leadership hierarchy of my institution, outside of knowing my title. She didn’t look me up on our university website or on any social media. “I didn’t want to psych myself out and be thinking, ‘Oh, well, I’m here, and she’s grown in her career, and I just want to be able to be me for her.’”

This is an opportunity to learn more about how she interacts with females who “outrank” her, at least by title. “My tendency is to look at leaders that inspire me and wonder why I can’t be like that.” She acknowledges that she reminds herself that she is only 29 and is where she is supposed to be at this point, but it doesn’t stop her from that kind of toxic comparison many

women can engage in. I remind her that I was led to her for the expertise she has. We talk about how younger generations seem to compare themselves to older generations as if that comparison were a straight line, not really seeing that someone like me wasn't in my current position when I was 29. And then we extrapolate this to people beyond ourselves and agree that if we were comparing apples to apples, we would need to investigate what privileges were attached that might allow one person to achieve in the professional world more quickly than another.

In our spiralized way of talking, this leads SB into a discussion of privilege in accessing higher education. She has recently experienced a family member applying to college and has realized "all those privileges that are available to people who can afford them. I've gotten a whole new insight into basically how you can pay your way into academia." She is referencing the sort of support high school students get (or don't get) in relation to the focus on college the high school has, as well as services prospective college students can buy: admission testing and tutoring, admission essay coaching, application guidance, tutors throughout high school, time and access to volunteer, extra-curricular activities, etc. "Oh my gosh, we're raising the perfect college applicant instead of raising perfect people." It's clear that SB will want to raise her daughter to follow a path that supports her growth as a person and not merely as "the perfect college applicant."

We are now warmed up, so I jump into our first question. Who her most influential person is elicits a typically thoughtful SB response: "honestly, I don't feel like there's one person in particular. It's like different people at different moments shining their light a certain way." However, she has noticed a trend of gravitating toward older female figures, whether through study (bell hooks) or experience. "I think that's because I am an adult child of an alcoholic who is an adult child of an alcoholic who was an adult child of an alcoholic...I came from a place of

love, but the love that was available at the time.” Because of the draw to “any female leader who will pay attention to me,” she has learned to stop and evaluate first. “Do this person’s values align with mine? Is this someone I want to listen to?” Always self-aware, SB notes that “it’s my strength and weakness just to listen and be inspired.” These tendencies are apparent in what she’s shared about her antiracist standpoints. In particular, she calls out her current boss. What SB most wants to learn from her echoes her focus on accountability: “she’s super empathetic but no bullshit. That’s what I’m working on right now. How can I be empathetic but also call bullshit and hold accountability in different places?”

This is becoming more and more important to her in her work as an advisor and in her work with a new sexual violence initiative on campus. She is struggling with how to support and have empathy for students who are struggling with the aftermath of sexual violence against them or those they care about. How does she validate their pain, support how they choose to move through it, hold them accountable to figuring out how to grow through the pain, and not lose herself in their pain at the same time? This is doubly hard because she’s not a trained counselor. Her job is to help the initiative get stood up and help individuals in the group make action plans to address the larger issue. She directs students who are in crisis to other services on campus with trained staff. But in the meantime, there’s a “balance between listening and supporting and being there and driving them to an action plan.” This work also leads her to “bring things into perspective a little bit” in that her stress and overwhelm about how she will support a grant seems less important. We then talk about what happens when we devalue our own pain and stressors because they don’t seem as impactful as someone else’s. Here is that concept of comparison again. I share that in my life, I have come to learn that pain and stress are pain and stress for everyone—that we feel what we feel and need to honor that. However, we can also be

grateful for what we *aren't* struggling with. So we can acknowledge our own struggles and move forward with gratitude simultaneously. I hope that gives her another way to achieve the balance of empathy and accountability she's looking for.

SB connects this to needing to learn to set better boundaries and brings up another influential person, Brené Brown. "I've read all of her books, and I'm looking up to her as a White woman who is in a position of leadership." SB admires her for her independent and forward-thinking attitudes toward self-publishing and feminist leadership. "Often times, when I'm down and frustrated, it's her words that will pop into my head." Brown's focus on trusting ourselves and not listening to the "peanut gallery" or those who "aren't getting in the ring with you and getting dirt on their faces" resonates with SB who is working hard to find the balance of trusting herself, having empathy for others, and holding everyone, including herself, accountable. Her face literally lights up with appreciation for the guidance Brown has provided. In particular, "she's given me a lot of language I didn't have before." As an antiracist, SB points specifically to how Brown called out Spotify, with whom she has a podcast contract, for its racist policies. She told her listeners that she couldn't break the contract, but she could use the time for direct antiracist conversation that might lead to action. This is exactly the kind of behavior SB wishes to emulate.

In thinking more about who's influenced her, SB then meditates a bit on the idea of being influenced at all. What I continue to appreciate so much about SB is her willingness to bring higher level topics to her specific experiences. This requires vulnerability and trust, and I don't take that for granted. She moves from conversation about Brené Brown to "I wish I had known that I'm easily influenced. It feels stupid to say at 29, but what does SB believe in?" I assure her that in my experience, this isn't at all stupid to be asking at 29. She wants to explain more to me

about her family in this regard, reminding me that she grew up sheltered and homeschooled, “a complete bubble until I was 18.” She was “raised to be a wife, and I am good at it,” but she wonders what her life would look like if she hadn’t been raised to be a “good little soldier.” She wonders what kind of leader she would be had her early life been different, implying that what she’s doing now isn’t good enough. She looks down and away during this conversation, which is different from her usual demeanor of looking directly at the camera. Clearly something she’s struggling with, she adds, “I wish I had known that I am easily influenced and a people pleaser and that not all things are what I want, for myself and for others.” While these thoughts are deeply personal, I can see the through-line to previous conversations about what is good leadership, how women should behave toward each other, and what being an antiracist ally really means. These positive and negative interactions with others, in addition to her almost ruthless pursuit of self-improvement, have a chicken-and-egg origin in her personal journey of self-identity. Again, I am humbled by this depth of sharing.

We turn next to another overwhelmingly influential person in SB’s life, her daughter. At seven-years-old, SB finds her to be that combination of sugar and spice those of us with daughters understand completely. The reciprocal learning relationship between mother and daughter fascinates SB. “You know, growing up in the Christian home I did, it was all about breaking the will to get obedience. And so I’m raising a daughter whose will does not need to be broken.” This is clearly part of what is leading her through her current existential journey. “I think seeing a version of myself without a broken will has really, really changed me.” And then she shares something very vulnerable. “If I could go back, I don’t think I would have a kid. I don’t love parenting. I love being her parent, but I don’t love parenting—it’s awful, it sucks.” In our world that has very clear “standards” for how mothers should act and feel, this is risky to

admit. I am actually floored that this mirrors exactly how I feel personally about parenting my only child, also a daughter, so SB and I know exactly what she means. Nothing of how we feel about the responsibilities of parenting has anything to do with the love and devotion we feel for our daughters—we wouldn't wish to exchange them for anything in the world. "You love something so much, and then the goal is for them to leave." SB works extra hours during the year so that she can take the summer off with her daughter. "The version of ourselves that my daughter and I get to be in the summer is magical." We connect on the overwhelming sense of obligation that accompanies being a parent, the expectations for what a good mother is, and the responsibility for raising an actual human being. These are the same expectations SB has for holding herself accountable for being a good ally, for being a good woman, a good leader—a good anything.

This conversation leads her to an interesting observation—that everyone is a mother in their own way and that everyone mothers something. "Now that I know more about myself, I have learned that I love mothering other things more [than mothering my daughter]. That is the version of motherhood I want to teach her." SB sees her daughter hearing and responding to the societal pressures women much have children when, as an only child, she expresses that she will need to "carry on the family line." SB tries to teach her that babies aren't the only way to do that. She tells her, "You are enough, and whatever you touch someday is going to be a version of you out there in the world." For example, she tells me, people can mother nonprofit organizations, they can mother other people's children, "there are just so many beautiful ways to mother in this world." She says that she used to judge people who called themselves cat or dog moms because of how difficult it is to raise an actual human, but she's changed her mind.

“That’s mothering for them, and we all have the need to nurture something. It doesn’t need to only be a kid.”

This conversation ends in a bit of silence. We have just admitted to each other things women often aren’t willing to talk about. There are a couple heartbeats, a few deep breaths, and then I ask her what she would be doing right now in her life as a profession if she wasn’t doing what she is? “Oh! I think I would be an herbalist!” As she continues explaining, it becomes obvious that this choice is another illustration of how she wants to position herself in the world, no matter what she’s doing. She’s just started reading about feminist ecology and indigenous healing studies. “We have access to all of these answers and resources in plants,” which is intriguing for someone who purposefully pursues knowledge of herself and the world around her. “I find it fascinating how we can heal, how basically we already have everything we need to heal our bodies.” Moreover, as someone looking to give of herself, she asks, “how can we turn those gifts [the plants] into more gifts?” She thinks about it as a “plant therapist who makes potions. There is a learning side and a creating side. I want to make tinctures that will help my body feel the best.” She then laughs and recalls that she has a mentor in another institution of higher education with whom she jokes when life is really stressful that she just wants to be a librarian. “You get to be around books, which is the best. And you get to talk to people about what they are reading, which is the best, also.” In addition, she says, librarians run community events that bring people together. She acknowledges, with her mentor, that this aspiration is her “happy, safe place to go when [she’s] had a bad day.” But however fanciful it may be, it’s very illustrative of her bent toward absorbing and sharing knowledge for the good use of herself and others.

This is a natural segue to what will be my last question, what sorts of stories does she like, in any medium? Her answer reinforces everything she's said in all of our time together. She likes stories where "people recreate themselves," not unlike the evolution SB is going through herself. She loves memoirs because "it's a privilege to read what someone else has experienced," another reminder of her listening standpoint and her respect for other people's journeys. And lastly, books about people who have made their own journey, fictional or real. She cites 1973's *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown and 1987's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* by Fannie Flagg and 1984's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde. There's a theme here SB is not addressing, and I'm on the fence about outright asking her. After all, we are all taught that people will come out to you when they are ready.

While I'm pondering, our talk drifts toward antiracist reading and who each of us has or has not read. We seem to be ramping down our conversation, so I ask if there is anything else she'd like me to know about her that she hasn't told me. A very brief pause, and then SB asks, "Have I told you I'm queer?" As a woman who identifies as lesbian, my internal reaction to this is, "Why no, SB. No you haven't." But I simply say, "Oh?" and SB continues on. She explains that she came out late in life, pre-pandemic three or four years ago, which would have made her around 25. I am again reminded of the different lifecycles: I was 35 when I came out, which must seem ancient to her! She explains that she came out to her male partner then but wishes that she had known much earlier in her life. Moreover, "I feel like that's a big part of me that is constantly being pulled in between the spiritual world where I was raised and this new version of myself that I'm building." She's still with her partner, who is the father of her daughter, but there are "a lot of boundaries. He's a wonderful man that literally said, 'Oh, well, I can't wait to love this version of you.'" And then the self-doubt creeps back in. This new her "is always

happening. And I'm always worried that I'm not doing enough or doing things right. It's constant, constant internals—and I'm working on that.”

It's time to be done, both by the clock and by each of our needs to process this amazingly vulnerable conversation. We have come such a long way from our first meeting where she shared two sentences on her upbringing. I feel a great responsibility to represent her respectfully, so I know I will need to circle back later. I leave that door open, and we both sign off, grateful to each other for the time.

The Wellspring:

Reflecting on my inspiring and humbling conversations with SB, I am struck by a consistent chord of renewal, of going to the source and being the source, of cycles of change. I keep coming back to the idea of a wellspring, the place where something begins, an original and bountiful source of something. A fitting metaphor for someone so young but committed to sustaining herself and others.

SB's *journey* to the wellspring has been transformative. From being sheltered in a fundamentalist Christian tradition she likens to being raised Amish or Mennonite to the fearless, openly queer social justice warrior she is now has required her to not only pull from her well of reserves but to also be that well for others. When we talk about the difference between being of service to others and being a martyr, this evolution becomes apparent. Service, she says, is “pouring from resources you have,” while martyrdom is “pulling on things you maybe don't have.” There's a sacrificial aspect to martyrdom that doesn't correspond to how she's learned to be of service, to be a source, to others who don't have the same privileges she does. This is a constant learning pathway for her: when to offer services, how to show up. Up until recently, she's believed that naming the situation outright, requiring people to confront it, was the way to

effect change. But in her current, traditionally hierarchical institution, she's wondering how effective this really is. Believing that the person who states the problem becomes the problem, living that in day-to-day work, is leading her to wonder if always being willing to be the problem is actually a form of martyrdom and not a form of service. Instead, she says, "I think I just have to start asking questions so that maybe collectively we can come up with an answer. Maybe it'll be better than what I thought originally. As long as it gets folks the resources they need, it's not about getting your ego stroked." In other words, she will lead people to the well, and there will be enough water in it for people to drink if they choose to.

She's come to this most recently as she's found herself temporarily in the role of single parent. Her "platonic partner" and father of her daughter has recently joined the military. Not only will the family be moving but while he's setting up in their first new location, she is staying in their current home. What she learned very quickly is that her "service capacity is way higher when I'm co-parenting," and she has had to draw a line around the three things that are most important to her: herself, her daughter, and her job. If she can't take care of those, she can't take care of anything else. Part of her journey has been to unlearn much of her upbringing, and that includes "martyr motherhood" behaviors because she deeply wants to be a source of support, respite, and renewal for people. It includes unlearning what it means to "mother" overall, what it means to be a wife, what it means to truly love and when hate is disguised as love. The resource that she wants to offer in abundance is love, but she's learned, and continues to learn, what love without expectations requires and how far she still has to go to be able to do that.

Part of what has enabled this unlearning is her *curiosity* about being human, in particular the *humility* she's learned from confronting grief. She is the first of generations of her family to not have a drug or alcohol addiction. The physical losses from this generational legacy are the

obvious losses. She used to think that if she worked hard enough, she could escape it all; she wanted to rise above it and felt like she couldn't be a place of solace for her family from the emotional desert substance abuse creates. The blame that went along with that did not allow her to be a source of healing for herself or anyone else, so she had to humble herself and grieve for the parents she wishes she had and accept the ones she does. "I do have two very loving parents. There's just a lack of capacity that comes from being an adult child of an alcoholic who is then a recovered alcoholic."

SB has also had to face her choice to become a young parent and grieve for the young life she didn't have. In this way, she has humbled herself to herself and opened up her capacity to love her daughter even more and to honor the kind of mother she wants to be. With the kind of curious, open-minded approach that underlies all of her learning, SB listens to experts, to older women, to her daughter, and to her own mother to gather the resources she needs to feed the source of her mothering. She also talks about the concept of mothering herself. This includes a clear focus on her identity, which she defines as a "cisgender female who is queer." It is central to her that, despite who she's attracted to, she is a woman, but not one that fits "into the confined boxes I was told to be in." How she goes about being in the world as a woman, a woman who is a mother and a wife, and a woman who does not conform to preconceived categories, is an integral part of how she fills herself up so that she can be filled up for others. Concurrently, she acknowledges, "I understand my privileges within each category [of sex, gender, and sexuality]. While I may be a minority in the sex/gender category, that does not erase my privileges in the race category." This ebb and flow between humble learning and curious information gathering is part of why SB has been identified as an ally, part of what makes her a source of trust for people when they need her.

Without a doubt, being a wellspring when people need to be supplied is a *moral obligation* for SB. She comes at this work with a sense of healing, not necessarily of correcting or putting right. The healing cycle, death and life, grief and moving forward, is exemplified in her nascent foray into herbalism. She wants to heal herself and others with substances that come directly from the earth and from traditions we tend to marginalize. Healers also have a deep-seated belief in their obligation to provide all the succor they can when they can. SB heads social justice initiatives, is on call to the students she advises, provides staff services to action committees, and takes up the mantle of holding people accountable for their decisions and language. To do this, she is on a continual search for what the right boundaries are to keep herself full so that she can be full for others. What she wants to offer people is what they need to heal or to move forward and heal others, thus healing herself. This could be different for different people, but SB's magic ingredient is listening. It fills her up with source material because, like a wellspring, SB wants to have an abundance and continual supply.

SB is young and at the beginning of understanding how to be that place where something begins without depleting it. She does have the benefit of women and queer people clearing the way for her to be able to live out loud the way she does. However, what she does with that is all on her, as her unwavering focus on responsibility and accountability illustrates. As a young woman, she can be a source of antiracist teaching and behavior. As she grows in her life experiences and continues to feed herself, what she has to offer will grow in abundance and make her own life full. As she embarks on this new expedition of military life, she will encounter people and places she never could living in her small, New England state. This journey will transform her even more, will drive her curiosity and make her even more humble,

and will strengthen the moral foundation on which she does her work. The wellspring will flourish.

Portrait of Karen Z:

Beginning:

While Karen Z is the second woman I official interviewed, she is the first participant I outreached. This initial outreach is first time I put my ideas and aspirations into the universe, outside my academic team and especially with a woman who's been identified as a real ally who has devoted herself to antiracist work. Nervously, I started the Teams call.

Imagine my surprise when on pops a young woman I will later find out is 29-years-old but who looks five years younger and who presents like the beloved college students she mentors and oversees as a residence director at a large state university in the Northeast United States. Karen Z has short, blonde hair that she wears in a long swoop over her forehead. This swoop almost has a life of its own and certainly allows its owner to use it as part of her expressive communication style. She wears oversized tortoise shell glasses that she pushes up on her nose frequently and unique hoop earrings that look artisan fair crafted. Overall, she looks easy and natural, and if she's as nervous as I am, she doesn't show it.

Karen Z is full of life. She engages wholly in conversation, with her mind and body. She punctuates her listening with finger snaps, hallelujah hands, and interjections of "preach" or "yes, sister." She has a calm, resonant voice and chooses her words with care so that she's saying exactly what she means. While I try hard to explain to her what this study is about, how I found her, and what would be required, I sense she is also sizing me up for my worthiness to address this topic.

Here's what I learn that will inform all our subsequent conversations. Karen Z considers her antiracist work and life orientation to be a "divine calling" sustained by various spiritual communities and relationships, including the Baha'i faith. She has lived in a South African village where she wrote an autoethnography on antiracist practices post-Apartheid. She is deeply involved in the Wimmin's Lakota community and has participated in their Sundance ceremony, the Kunsikeya Tamakoce. She was a nanny for a woman of color in Brooklyn, NY, where she was the only White person in the household, giving her what Patricia Hill Collins (1986) might call "outsider within" status. She has worked in wilderness therapy, residential rehabilitation, and done several international tours with students.

Antiracist living and activism is "soul work," it's "somatic," and she's very focused on "how we continue the work beyond the hype" that has come from the last two years of publicized racial atrocities in the U.S. She clearly has the perfect lens and life experience to enrich this study, and I am grateful that she decides to trust me and agrees to be a participant.

Karen Z leaves her higher education job during our time working together to pursue work that fulfills her more in an environment that isn't stifling. This is a journey all in itself that supports her life orientation and that helps illustrate how all five of these women are driven to make a difference and, thereby, fulfill their moral imperatives to "do better."

On Being an Ally:

I knew on meeting Karen Z the first time that this animated, open, whirlwind might be hard to pin down. Little did I know how true that would be. Our first scheduled meeting, which would have been my first interview of the study, never happened. I logged onto Teams and waited 30 minutes, sent emails in case she was having issues connecting and was trying to contact me—all to no avail. I left the call after half an hour, keeping my eye on notifications and

emails. Later that night, Karen Z sent an email explaining that she was called out of state to her great-aunt's deathbed. Having recently experienced several deaths, I let her know I was here when she was ready.

When we do connect, Karen Z looks like she's in her office. There are string lights behind her, glowing stars and orbs that frame a window and lamp outlining her head. The sculpture of a bird flies out of the wall. Karen Z is pulled up close to the camera, so my screen is filled with this full-of-life, always-in-motion presence. She wears what looks like a dark green, three-quarter zip fleece, pronounced fan-shaped earrings that look handmade, and her characteristic big, tortoise-shell glasses. Her hair is short, above her ears, and is brushed forward, including the characteristic swoop across her forehead. There is swirl and wave to her dark blond hair without it seeming particularly curly, a bit like her way of expressing herself. She smiles, despite our opening topic of her great-aunt's passing because, I will learn, that, like all experiences Karen Z has, she is grateful for what she has just navigated.

It's important in building our relationship that we take time to honor each other's situations. So we start out acknowledging the experience she had being with her great-aunt when she passed and supporting her aunt and father with all the aftermath death brings. As I will see, much of the language and approach she takes to this echoes what she will say about being an ally because of her standpoint of interconnectedness. She starts out talking about how she will incorporate the idea of grieving into her dorm newsletter. For her it's "an opportunity to acknowledge and honor how every single one of us has experienced grief," especially during the COVID-19 lockdown. She is focused on "the vast array of experiences and coping mechanisms" that surface for people when we have to acknowledge loss.

We talk about her great-aunt. They were very close, and Karen Z was concerned during lockdown that they would not be able to see each other before her great-aunt passed. Karen Z is gratified that was able to “collaborate on how [her great-aunt] went out” and was able to advocate for her wishes. This is the third older family member for whose death she’s been present. It makes her feel “grounded and balanced and filled.” Because of this, she’s looked into being a death doula: “I’m a Scorpio; I do really well in the darkness.” Moreover, I learn that her great-aunt passed on Karen Z’s thirtieth birthday. Instead of seeing this as a sad association, she is instead filled with wonder. “I turned 30 while she transitioned. Sharing this death-birth-day is so powerful.” Even more wondrous is that she is her great-aunt’s namesake.

She then moves to another aspect of death in our contemporary society. Karen Z refers to them as “life adulting lessons.” This is my first peek into the labor it takes her to balance her free spirit with life adulting. “Cleaning the apartment, editing the obituary, helping my dad—then to navigate coming back to work, having personal and professional responsibilities. How do you be gentle with yourself and also be responsible for your commitments? It’s just a really powerful dance.” The adulting conversation leads me to share that I have a 29-year-old daughter who is also becoming a fantastic, responsible adult but that the balancing act is difficult. We acknowledge that no matter how old we are in years, we all are constantly learning to adult. Karen Z brings up the intergenerational aspects of behavior and challenge. She talks about the “sacred contract” we have with our parents and our children, the “intergenerational elements of trauma that play out,” and how all these “imprints are interconnected.” These, for Karen Z, are “the ways that the universe creates opportunities for completion” because “if we don’t do the [inner] work, it’ll just come back harder and farther away from the root cause.”

Calling life a “beautiful, complex process,” she then connects this inner work to why people struggle with doing antiracist work. The trauma we all bring with us keeps us from understanding other people. “Regardless of identity and identities, each individual has karma they are navigating. I think this is the key thing that blocks a lot of people from being able to do the antiracism work.” She talks about how White people have to “flip the script” because, regardless of how much we struggle in our lives, it more often than not comes with more privilege than someone with marginalized identities has. She says that a White person can “see who’s in front of you, but you don’t see who’s there behind you.” As an example, she acknowledges that she was born into a family with intergenerational wealth that has allowed her to “access opportunities to get clear on some deep trauma” that leads her to be able to open up to antiracist behavior. She also points out that this economic privilege has given her access to education and time to work through that education in her own way. The gift of being able to do the inner work has created in her a “very dedicated purpose and meaning to utilize this place [in her life]” and to use her power and privilege to the benefit of others who don’t have it.

I ask where this life philosophy comes from, and I learn about Karen Z’s upbringing. Her mother is pagan and grew up on a small island, “very nature based.” Characterizing her as a “hippie,” Karen Z says they celebrated Solstice and other milestones on the pagan calendar. Her father she calls an “environmentalist Buddhist” who “builds zero energy homes in different agro-neighborhoods.” I learn that “he’s had a yoga practice for 40 or 50 years” and that her parents honeymooned in a Sivananda Yoga Ashram, while Karen Z was “in the womb.” Her mother’s non-traditional philosophy combined with her father’s non-Western philosophy has been deeply forming for Karen Z. Her parents encouraged her own spiritual search, teaching her to keep her mind and heart open for what her pathway might be. She read the Dalai Lama, Hermann Hesse’s

Siddhartha multiple times, did her “yoga teacher training with a lot of Hindu components,” and then in her senior year in college she dated a man of Bahá’í faith. This religion was somewhat new to her but aligned with her previous search, this “concept of an independent investigation of truth” her parents encouraged. In 2019, she joined the Bahá’í. What appeals to her most is “the concept of progressive revelation” in which each previous prophet (Moses, Jesus, Mohammad, etc.) has brought pieces of the whole to humanity. Baha’u’llah “just happens to be the most recent, and there will be more after him.” She admits that, as open-minded as she is, she struggles with other faiths that profess, “My lord’s the best lord.” She also admits that there are aspects of her own faith that she doesn’t agree with, such as, “marriage is only between a man and a woman, and that’s not my values or sexual identity.” And then, as we’re ready to move on to talking about being an ally, she concludes with, “Life is fascinating, and we’re constantly learning;” her refrain that life is complex and interconnected.

This is a great segue into how Karen Z creates socially just spaces, which is itself a complex and interconnected action. She approaches this like she seems to approach hard concepts: she acknowledges the question, and I can see her move her body and her head as the ideas and words form; she takes a moment to be thoughtful and then comes an outpouring of ideas, images, and connections. “I wonder if it’s even possible [to create socially just spaces]. I’ve been reading a lot of Ibram X. Kendi, and it probably isn’t. But how do we still continue to be in action, right?” She then offers characteristics of socially just spaces: “constantly, consistently checking ourselves, our viewpoints, our biases;” importantly, “who’s at the table, who’s not at the table, who are we trying to feed at the table?” When she was in South Africa, she studied in community health and social policy arenas and spent a semester learning about White saviorship and how globalization is harming communities. This gave her a lens to the

world outside of New England and helped her recognize both the global and local “systemic frameworks of injustice and oppression, the displacement in who has access and resources to be able to do the work, and who’s doing the actual work.” Moreover, she believes strongly that the world has been “negatively influenced by capitalism, consumerism, and media representation. We get so caught up in our own crap, in our own distractions. That’s what marketing does.”

I help her bring the conversation back to the spaces she can directly influence. She talks about the 100-plus people in her dorm where she’s been “incredibly intentional in cultivating an inclusive, socially just community.” I learn that each dorm has its own culture and ways of addressing the common university mores and rules. For her space, the focus is on creating an inclusive, accepting community. She believes she can be especially effective here because she’s an alumna who grew up in the area and is White, like most of her residents. To this end, she creates “safe zones” in the building, especially her office and her RAs’ rooms. She incorporates statements from the Black Lives Matter movement in all her newsletters, she includes quotes about social justice in her email signature, and both reads and lends books from a wide range of authors addressing concepts of social justice and inclusion. Mostly, she says, building socially just spaces is about “mindfulness and intention. The space is how individuals feel within it, and so the relatedness and the rapport amongst everyone is important. Having a space where dialogue is cultivated and people are held accountable is the key.” She gives an example of a resident who behaved in such a manner as to spur a Title IX investigation. For everyone to feel safe moving forward, and for that individual to grow from the experience, Karen Z helped the university employ a “growth and development model” for that student that focused on the mindfulness, intention, and accountability she believes is crucial.

This leads us to a conversation about the complexity of her job. Noting that it's an entry-level administrative position that really shouldn't be, the idea of balancing her personal needs with her professional obligations resurfaces. "It's almost impossible to do all the parts of this job successfully at one time." It's an emotional job. Most of the staff and management are women, and the low salaries and high expectations are commensurate with other careers and jobs led by women in what can be defined as "helping professions." The turn-over rate is high. She struggles with the traditional hierarchy of her particular higher education institution. She starts to define what about the leadership is uninspiring and ends up illustrating what she's trying to say with a personal example. In response to higher education's granting of privilege to people who have attained certain levels of formal education, a practice that is fraught with intersectional aspects of discrimination and gatekeeping, she says, "I have not gotten my master's degree. I graduated in 2014, and I have been working in a variety of fields for seven or eight years." She came to this position, she says, "as sort of a rogue" who has gathered her qualifications through the forging of disparate experiences. She questions the hyper-focus on higher education degree attainment as the standard: "It's tricky when one has access to gain the educational skills without necessarily the experiential skills. It's privilege. You were able to access higher education. Does that mean that you're the best qualified for the job?" We talk briefly about the focus in several of the large, on-line universities on skills-based curriculum, on-ramps and off-ramps, and the speeding up of time to completion, including credit for prior learning. Despite all this, we agree that you still have to be able to "do" school—which just isn't feasible for everyone, and, she questions, should it have to be?

I ask her about being identified as an ally and what that means to her. Karen Z is ready to address this because she's done so much work defining it for herself and talking about ally

behavior with her residents and the residence life staff. Her response to being identified is that “there’s a deep humbling. I feel gratitude and honor.” As she seeks to define what she thinks an ally is, she offers, “I believe ally is a verb. It is never done, it’s never a check box. I’m just continuously aspiring to it.” She also notes that while she may be perceived this way to the woman who identified her, another person may not see her as such. “It takes something to build and become” a White antiracist. As a White person, she feels “very committed to ensuring and holding accountable other White people in doing the work. I can show up in active allyship and take some of the emotional weight in labor” from people of color and other White antiracists. We talk about Catrice Jackson’s (2015) *Antagonists, Advocates, and Allies: The Wake Up Call Guide for White Women Who Want to Become Allies with Black Women*. Allyship is a “launchpad. A starting point.”

As she continues to spiral into this topic, she begins talking about her connection to the Lakota. She has been invited to be part of the Wimmin’s Lakota Sun Dance community, the Kunsikeya Tamakoce. Native American traditions and teaching have strong resonance for her. In particular is the sun spiral symbology in which all things are interconnected and turn back on each other as the universe progresses. She speaks of Unci Beverly Littlethunder (the grandmother) and her vision that “all individuals of the four directions” are needed at this time in history to bring unity. She talks about the 13 Grandmothers referenced in Carol Schaefer’s (2006) *Grandmothers Counsel the World: Women Elders Offer Their Vision for Our Planet*, and asks, “How do we create global unity and create allyship amongst other communities?” She also shares that she identifies as pansexual, and that she must constantly address the heteronormative influences of her upbringing and our society, something the Sundance ritual helps her address and move through. She’s worried antiracist actions will be “misconstrued” or that she’s being

“performative and just checking a box.” But despite the scattershot of ideas here, nothing feels performative to me. From my vantage point, this is a young woman making her way in the world and wanting to do so by connecting people, ideas, and behaviors. “I led a workshop last year on [allyship as noun and verb], and it was an hour and a half on accountability.”

It is nearing the end of our time, but she spirals back to an earlier comment about formal education with a comment on being a participant in this study: “I do not want to obtain a PhD. I do not want to have to do the research, and the reading, and the writing. That would take me away from being with people.” However, “since my voice and my stories have power,” she appreciates this venue for being able to share them. Then, in another turn of the spiral, she addresses the balance of work obligations that might not be very inspiring with spending her time pursuing things that ignite her passion. Antiracist work “lights her up,” and she would prefer to “spend a good portion of my brain space doing it.” But she does have administrative things she needs to get done and needs to be “mindful of that responsibility. I always reach toward having hard emotional conversations, and then I don’t have space to do the simple things.” We sign off, and I am grateful to this extroverted comet of energy for her honesty and engagement.

On Being a Woman:

Knowing how important Karen Z’s female identity is to her, I am very much looking forward to connecting for today’s conversation. However, one month after our first interview, I am again waiting on Teams for 30 minutes with no contact, and I begin to worry. Has someone else passed, or is she hurt? Is this work with me asking too much of her time, especially for someone who struggles with balancing the personal and professional aspects of her life? After emailing and waiting for some contact, I sign off, thinking that I will hear back soon. Sure

enough, an hour after our appointment, her email responses come in. She is neck-deep in evaluations here at the end of the fall semester, and the work has taxed her. So she started the day with a walk in the woods with her dog and lost track of time—more importantly, she recognized that she needed a day just to herself with no obligations. We settle on a day and time after all her evaluations are in, and I am relieved that nothing traumatic has happened. As we will uncover in our upcoming interview, she leads with her emotions, this being an example of how they dominate her thinking and behaviors.

We connect right before the winter holidays, and Karen Z is wearing a red, long-sleeved shirt with dangling, elf-shoe earrings—complete with curled up toes. The characteristic swoop of hair over her forehead is curled back and frames the side of her face without falling over her glasses. She's in her dorm office again, but at a different angle which allows me to see more of what's on her walls. The string lights are glowing behind her, but I make out a “well behaved women seldom make history” framed poster with thumbnail photos of historically “misbehaving” women. Half in the frame is a poster from a Maggie Rogers concert, and on the wall to her left is a print of what looks like a magazine cover for a New England state, and a license plate that has been retired. Clearly, Karen Z surrounds herself with images that connect her to the people and places that resonate with her.

We start out with Karen Z being very excited to share with me that, in the time since we last talked, she navigated a restorative justice session. In her case, this means addressing a dorm conduct issue from a restorative standpoint rather than a punitive one. How can all parties learn from each other, even while the offending person takes responsibility for what they learn is the harm they've done? As a community-building and growth-and-development approach to redressing harm, restorative justice practices underscore Karen Z's philosophies and her creation

of socially just and safe spaces in her building. She believes strongly that all participants went away feeling heard, that the consequences felt fair and acceptable, and that the sharing of harm and subsequent accountability strengthened the community.

This launches us into a small review of our last conversation that results in a joyful barrage of ideas that are the foundations of her worldview. She begins with some detail on the significance to the Lakota of the Four Directions: east is new beginnings, south is transformation, west is flow, and north is completion. She suggests doing things in fours to have this circle represented. Then she brings up her Bahá'í faith and its requirement that we are all responsible for making the world better. She references that all learning in life is spiral, based on her understanding of the Hindu concept of the yuga cycle which teaches that people evolve, devolve, and then evolve again as we progress through lifetimes. Finally, she informs me that she's really looking forward to our talk today, especially since it's a "bones day," an idea she gets from a TikTok video, meaning she has energy to do the things she needs to do today. She makes sure that I know she spends almost no time on social media—she has a love/hate relationship with it because she finds it can be toxic but also values it for its "powerful channels and ways to connect globally."

Now we are ready to talk about today's topics: being a woman, being a woman in higher education, being a White woman who is committed to antiracist action. Starting a conversation with Karen Z is like getting to the concert in time to hear the really good opening band. You feel like you got a bonus, and you're even more excited for the main act. So I start with asking her what it's like to be a woman today. She claps and leans forward: "I *love* being a woman. I am extremely feminine." She says she was brought to this understanding by doing identity work as an undergraduate Women's Studies major. When participating in activities that charted all her

identities, she found the one she most aligned with was “femininity, being a woman.” Her sex and gender are aligned; “being a woman is, like, being so deeply interconnected with the Earth, with community.” Moreover, being a White woman gives her privilege and access to resources and support so that she can, in turn, bring those to other people.

I am learning that when Karen Z is pulling her ideas together, especially about something that she is already passionate about, she starts out with a collection of unfinished ideas and concepts that eventually coalesce. It’s not chaotic or even difficult to follow; it’s more like an outpouring of ideas searching for cohesion that, taken as a whole, are cohesive in themselves. In this case, she glances off how all-girls schools are important because “we’ve recognized that this current state of consciousness is about honoring women reclaiming their voice and men reclaiming their emotion. Instead of aligning with the divine masculine, aligning with the divine feminine is literally the work every single human being on this earth is doing.” Then she swerves to the characteristics of being a woman she particularly appreciates: “awesome intuition,” “being connected to the natural caregiver,” “connected to the tide connected to the moon connected to my cycle,” and “the potential of being a mom.” This reminds her that as a Millennial woman in higher education, her experiences have been “so drastically different from most any women” before her, especially in relation to her being able to be independent and “out” in her sexual orientation. Her identification as pansexual is in fact a clear manifestation of her feelings of womanhood. She feels very aligned in her sex and gender and refers to herself as “hella fem.” She is attracted to androgynous women but also finds “grounding and balance” in being with men. Her initial hesitations to being with a woman came from her self-knowledge that she is “a lot of woman” and that her “strong feminine presence” would be difficult to balance in a same-sex relationship. Her last girlfriend was a Scorpio moon (to Karen Z’s

Scorpio sun), “so it was just, like, it was too much.” This entire interaction is animated: part of the fragmentation of her words is that she also communicates with her face, her hands, and sounds that communicate words. She often inserts ellipses such as, “yada, yada, yada” or “blah blah blah” to stand in for ideas she’s already communicated, in addition to clapping, sign language clapping, snapping, and holding her hand up in testimonial validation. What could seem distracting and fractured is actually an entire communication that makes sense as a holistic experience. Since life for Karen Z is a complex series of interconnected ideas and experiences, it seems logical that she would communicate in a way that reflects that.

In addition, this “warm up” sets the stage for a clear conversation about her experiences as a woman in higher education. I will learn that this is actually tied to some decisions she’s been facing, and her approach to this topic is very straightforward. Karen Z considers having graduated with her undergraduate degree and not continuing directly into a graduate program “leaving higher ed.” In the time between that in 2014 and getting this job in 2019, “I developed myself in all these incredibly deep, powerful, healing ways. And then I came back to higher ed for the financial benefit of getting my master’s.” Like many younger people today, Karen Z struggles with the societal assumptions underlying this benefit. She is frustrated by “these capitalistic structures of White supremacy” that dictate “the only way I’m gonna make enough in whatever career I have is if I have the feminine fucking strength” to complete another degree. She is cognizant that in the types of fields she’s interested in, she won’t make “more than \$40,000” without a graduate degree. “I don’t know if I’m going to stay in higher ed, but I definitely have been on a learning curve on getting here. And damn is it a frickin’ world.”

I ask her about that and learn how difficult it’s been for Karen Z to transition from five years of travelling and deep immersion in different cultures for the purpose of self-growth and

antiracist education to working in a very traditional New England university. Because she has such eclectic experience, especially as a White woman focused on diversity and inclusion, she did not anticipate how different this new job would be. “It took me over a year to recognize that I felt a lot of imposter syndrome and sub-conscious marginalization for not having the language of higher ed.” She felt looked down on for not having higher levels of formal education and excluded for not having the expected behaviors. Skills like how to behave in meetings, how emails should be written, and how to manage her administrative duties were things she had to actively learn. “It came along with a lot of shame that contributed to suicidal thinking during the COVID lockdown, in addition to being scammed for \$9000.00.” This is a shocking revelation that I know I want to push on but decide to see how she wants to reveal this to me. She notes that her first supervisor, while being supportive and understanding during this difficult and emotional time, was not always helpful to her learning the nuts and bolts of the job because “she was not tuned into the system and the tangible hard skills needed to do the job. She really wasn’t able to even know that I was behind on things.” The result is something she believes is common for White women. Rather than ask for help and show vulnerability, she “sat in silence and self-shame. I appeared as this White woman with verbal skills, writing skills, etc., but I didn’t even have the structure of how to do an eval.” Her current supervisor provides her with the structure she needs and helps her grow. But what’s even more important to Karen Z is that these structures she shamed herself over are created by a higher education system that privileges specific kinds of knowing, specific language and behaviors, to the detriment of diversity, equity, and inclusion. It reminds her that we need to ask, “Who’s making the structures? Who’s making the things?” Even more importantly, “how valuable would res life be for the people who

currently don't have access?" A crowning irony is that most of the people in her level of the university themselves can't afford their graduate work.

I ask her if she thinks that behaviors expected of her are the same as those expected of men in her job. She immediately answers that expectations for women are different. Explaining that the vast majority of the staff are women, the university works hard to diversify and is very careful of the men, especially the men of color, they hire. She believes that she was "almost disposable in people's minds" because it is so much easier to replace her than to replace a man. In addition, her emotional way of approaching her work led people to ignore how much she was actually struggling, another thing she believes many women struggle with. Being discounted when reacting emotionally is destructive. Therefore, Karen Z learned to not "portray myself as the female in distress," and no one actually recognized her dilemma. On top of all that, she shares that during the lockdown, she got scammed for \$9000.00 by someone who built her trust "parallel to the way my sexual abuser did when I was nine." All of this is what amalgamated into a three-day hospital stay for suicidal threat. But she sees all these things as interconnected to her learning journey. "You know, it was a full-circle journey. I look at it as a \$9000.00 investment to becoming whole." It's clear why Karen Z believes life is so complex.

I ask Karen Z about her reactions and experiences with the concept of feminism. She sits straight up, bright smile on her face, and expresses her excitement about this topic with a string of, "yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!" But first she wants to put some finishing touches on the previous conversation by tying her woman-identified self-concept to how she does her work. Her strengths are "building rapport" and "carrying the emotional labor." She notes that she will always choose supporting students over doing the administrative work, and that this is what leads to her "compassion fatigue" and to the burnout she felt when she left social work and "all the

jobs I've had before." She believes that this system of deadlines and administrative paperwork is a symptom of the patriarchal White supremacist system on which the university runs. This is a great segue into talking about feminism.

Karen Z was introduced to feminism as a "thing" as a first year undergraduate when her roommate introduced her to Women's Studies. Finding resonance there, she "really very quickly understood feminism from a third wave perspective." By her senior year, she was a teacher's assistant in an international women's studies course where the entire focus centered on the question, "Are you a feminist?" She is critical of second wave feminism while at the same time recognizing the work those women did to open up pathways for her generation. "I think [second wave feminists get] such a bad rap for the bra-burning, man-haters" that she believes is unfair. At the same time, she states that "White women just stopped there; they got access and then stopped." We talk about how historically White, middle-class women in particular have used and then excluded women from marginalized groups in their quest of "equality." I reference the exclusion of Black and lower-class women from the suffrage movement and women of color and lesbians from the women's liberation movement. She acknowledges that the term "feminism" is "triggering" and can have negative connotations. She believes herself to be grounded in Black feminism for many of these reasons. She moves on from this comment to talking about how her current supervisor is a Black woman who is teaching her about accountability and how to navigate the university system.

I turn the conversation toward the historically fraught relationship between Black and White women. With this language, Karen Z doesn't immediately connect to what I'm asking. But when I reference the toxicity of "White women's tears," she understands what I'm talking about and is eager to start the conversation, exclaiming of the topic, "ooh, very juicy!" What

jumps immediately to her mind are “resources and men.” As an aspiring ally, she questions, “you can be an ally to a Black man, but can you be an ally to a Black woman?” The difficulty of what it means for a White woman to support a Black woman, especially in higher education, is a struggle for her. “I haven’t asked for enough help from my Black supervisor because I don’t want to add to her plate, which then ends up adding to her plate.” Without directly stating that ally training and behavior actually makes it hard to interact with Black women, her actions and struggles seem to communicate that. She is “hyper conscious” of the burden she puts on her supervisor who has worked hard to help Karen Z understand where the boundaries are. She talks about the “weaponization of White women’s tears” in how they turn attention and empathy away from women of color in maintaining a racist status quo.

She then talks about how, because of this historical struggle, White women who do approach their lives emotionally and tearfully “can’t show up as their authentic selves.” At first, I wonder if she’s questioning the impact of White women crying when being confronted with their racist, privileged behavior. But as I listen to her, I think she’s commenting on all the ways this history is harmful to all women. She works with a woman who has had to “scale back” because of the feedback she’s gotten around her emotional and tearful responses to situations. It makes the woman feel, Karen Z says, repressed and makes Karen Z contemplate “the complexity of who has the social capital to express emotion, the access to be able to show weakness.” It’s clear now that she means all women and that the added complexity of race is compounding. I ask her if she’s experienced White women “testifying” to their antiracism without taking real action. “I think White women get stuck in their stories, their experience in victimization” with their varying identities. She tells of confronting a White female colleague who is gay who didn’t think she could be racist because she has marginalized identities. But Karen Z wanted her to

understand that her race privilege almost overrode other marginalized standpoints. White women, Karen Z says, “need to consistently check themselves and make sure they are stepping back.”

This leads us to talking about what happens when our race privilege converges with our sex marginalization. Karen Z considered applying for a position in a new program aimed at improving diversity-equity-inclusion at the university. A White female colleague (a friend with whom she has a reciprocal checks and balances relationship regarding their antiracist standpoints) asked her why she would apply for that position, noting that “if it was going to a White person it should be [you]” but that it should really be someone of color in that spot. She received the opposite advice from her current Black female supervisor who told her to “never regret applying for something you want.” In the end, Karen Z decided that she is more comfortable in the background, assisting others, “taking the emotional labor at different points.” It’s necessary, she says, to “know the importance of staying in our lane and utilizing the resources we have” to make life better for people. She believes she does just that in her current role. The university “should have aspiring allies in every single department, in every single arena.” These decisions, though, and the contemplation that accompanies them just highlight the “complexity of how *do* we show up for others?”

We are nearing the end of our time, and it’s clear from the slowed down pace of our conversation that it’s time to end. But before we sign off, she wants to share something. She’s received an inheritance that has changed how she looks at her current financial situation, which means she can take a wider view of what sort of work she needs to be doing. Further, she has applied to be on a reality show in which people are stuck together in an isolated environment (sort of like *Big Brother*). She has been approached by a producer to apply, and if she gets it, she

will need to quit her job and move all her things out three weeks before school is over. If she doesn't, however, it has led her to realize that she is, in fact, willing to leave what she's doing. So she's also investigating a traveling school in South Africa. "The casting possibility has been this launchpad. I've had reservations about starting my master's, especially the work-life balance of doing this job and school." She will use the outcome of being cast on the show to make a decision from there. I tell her I look forward to hearing more. It's all about "scheming and dreaming," she says. "Scheming and dreaming is a coping mechanism."

On Being Human:

One month later, Karen Z and I are back on Teams for what I anticipate will be a fascinating conversation about how Karen Z got to be Karen Z. She has offered so many references and, in her words, "juicy" comments that need the blanks filled in. I am so looking forward to learning more deeply how this mercurial, compassionate young woman has come to be such a committed social justice advocate. We had to adjust the original date to accommodate crazy work schedules, but when I log into Teams, Karen Z is there in the "lobby" waiting to click in.

As usual, we are in her dorm office, and the view of the walls is the same. It is morning, and she is drinking from a large, black mug that is round on the top and square on the bottom. Her "statement" earrings today are understated compared to the other two I've seen: dangling and sort of tear drop shaped, but not over-sized. She wears what looks like a stone-washed chambray button down over a round-necked, red t-shirt and looks ready to take on the day as the professional residence life administrator she is. From all outward appearances, she's conquered the imposter syndrome that has plagued her at this job.

We start out with the obligatory but never stale question: what did you do over (winter) break? I find out that Karen Z helped deliver puppies to their new families during the first half of the break. Not surprisingly, she found the most personal reward here in doing something that brings joy and fulfillment to people. For the second half, she spent time “decluttering and organizing” her cupboards and closets. We talk about how liberating it is to clear everything out and put things where they should be. COVID changed the world for us, at least the foreseeable world, and Karen Z states, “I can’t imagine that every single human isn’t going through some sort of existential, like, what am I doing with my life?” We share that the question is so layered, and also informed by our life stage. I can legitimately ask it looking at the downhill side, while Karen Z is on the uphill side.

At this point, it is easy to turn to our topic for today, which is getting to know Karen Z as a person, filling in gaps in my information, and connecting that to her antiracist standpoint. I am also looking for what supports her standpoint that everything is complex and interconnected. I start out with asking who she would say is the most influential person in her life. She puts her head back and breathes out a “hmmmmmm...my mom.” She shares that for most of her life she would have said that from a more negative lens, but in her most recent history, that lens has changed. What I will learn in this conversation is that her journey to understanding her mother’s life struggles parallel Karen Z’s journey to understanding and being less critical of her own struggles. While Karen Z is naturally compassionate, the more expansive acceptance of her mother has opened her up to acceptance of herself so that she is even more available for those who might need her.

Karen Z brings up the concept of “imprints” again in how our experiences with other people impact us. Her mother lives very close to the bone, entirely on disability, “with her dogs,

doing her thing, making artwork out of driftwood.” And she’s fine with this life. But Karen Z decided to “spoil her” this Christmas: “I brought up dog food, all her favorite foods, and the most gifts that I’ve ever gotten her for the holidays.” This was not about stuff but rather about gratitude and a newfound understanding for her mother’s challenges. “This was me finally recognizing how difficult it was for her to navigate bringing up three kids, navigating divorce, being a single mother.” She references her mother’s “free-spirited, artistic outlook” and that she’s “gone up against the grain her whole life.” But, Karen Z explains, this was not all as romantic as it sounds.

Despite her father being bipolar, he is also the more stable parent. While Karen Z did have to navigate her father’s mood swings, it seems to have been harder for her mother to do so. The couple tried very hard to make their marriage work but could not. Karen Z points out that there is a large class and education difference between them, and she believes this played a large part in breaking up their marriage. More directly impactful on Karen Z, this break up and the pressures of life led her mother to drugs and an inability to be a supportive parent. While Karen Z’s older half-sister tried hard to keep Karen Z and her younger brother stable, the emotional weight of the situation was psychologically significant, especially experiencing health and human services visits. As a young person, she says, she didn’t really understand how destructive this life was. “You’re swimming in the water, you know, and you don’t necessarily...you’re just like...this is what I’m working with. And then I got to college, and I thought, ‘Wait! Hold on! That wasn’t ok!’” Over Karen Z’s four years in college, her mother broke up with another partner, experienced major health issues, and attempted suicide. What Karen Z wistfully calls “mama drama trauma” are actually the imprints that have supported what up until recently Karen Z would have described as a negative narrative of her relationship with her mother. But, she

notes, “that is where perspective and story come in.” Change those, and you can change anything. Karen Z spent so much time “not wanting to be like her,” despite some clear similarities, that she missed what was positive.

In connecting this life experience to her antiracist work, she references her father and stepmother. While her father is “incredibly intentional,” there was also the underlying “subconscious, subtle energetic” of managing his bipolar behaviors. In the “unpacking work [she’s] done in the last few years,” she’s come to understand how she can be an “interpersonal chameleon” in her interactions between people, not just her family. That is a strength when wanting people to trust her but can be emotionally taxing if she can’t separate herself from what others are feeling. She credits her stepmother, her “fairy godmother,” with helping her “hold those really healthy boundaries” and supporting her progress and ambitions. This is the kind of “completion work” she’s been engaged in that has further validated for her that all things in a person’s life are interconnected. None stand on their own, nor are they created out of nothing. Moreover, the connections are complex and are impacted not just by a person’s local experiences but by broader societal energies.

In connecting this to her antiracism stance in particular, she talks about her experiences with Lyme disease. In college, she contracted it a second time, and her father took her to a Native American shaman who provided “soul retrieval practices and herbal protocols specifically for Lyme.” She considers this recurrence to be an “access point to heal the deeper trauma” and the beginning of the “spiral of uncovering” that has led her to her present. Her experience with shamanistic healing pointed her toward going to South Africa and studying “indigenous healing.” When she came back to the U.S., she worked in a holistic wellness center and was subsequently invited into the Wimmin’s Lakota community. Moving to Brooklyn, NY, as a

nanny and the “only White person in the house,” opened her eyes to the insidiousness of White privilege. Combine all that with having a degree in women’s studies and being able to name the frameworks of systemic oppression, and the stage for antiracist behavior was set. Karen Z’s life is a spiral of experiences that double back on each other, offering simultaneous learning and unlearning in ways that open her to human experience.

We take a collective deep breath, and I thank her for her vulnerability and for trusting me with this really sacred conversation. I ask her if we can continue on the antiracist thread a bit and wonder what her biggest personal fear is in her commitment to actively being antiracist. She doesn’t have to think long to find her answer: “taking up too much space.” I ask her to expand. “As a White woman who has access to the language and the teachings and the readings and the ability to be in the spaces and be at the table,” she has the opportunity to take positions, meaning both opinions and actual jobs, that should be done by people of color. She could get “a position that would actually continue to perpetuate racism based in my, you know, upbringing and White supremacist culture,” not intentionally but as the inevitable consequence of having a White person in an opportunity better inhabited by a non-White person. To mitigate for that, she dives a little deeper into our previous conversation about how she can best support. Firmly believing that antiracist work should “be in every facet of the curriculum, in every department,” she experienced a big shift in her psyche in deciding not to apply for different job that would have put her square in DEI leadership at the university. What she has been asking herself is, “What does it mean to cultivate my realm?” By this she means that she thinks she is more effective embodying antiracist behavior, teaching, and modeling into whatever she’s doing without having a specific title or job. What does it look like to “work alongside and collaborate” rather than lead?

Connecting this to also being a woman, she acknowledges that White women can struggle here. She says we have to “separate the internal net narrative” of how we measure our worth. We have to examine our fear of being, or not being, “magnificent, extraordinary” and what that means. We seem to be driven to not hold back, especially when we should. But when we do, Karen Z says, when we work alongside rather than in front, that’s when we have impact. She gives an example of writing a letter of recommendation for a Black student. In their interactions back and forth so that she could have all the accurate information, she really helped him see his accomplishments and what could be in front of him. That helped her, in turn, have “confidence and validation” that she has impact just doing what she does every day, interacting in whatever capacity she has. She knows she’s a community builder and that she, personally, needs to be involved in many things at one time. “There’s so many ways of being in collaboration, of being in a community. I think I do better when I can spread myself out, planting different seeds. That’s a little bit more sustainable for me versus being in the thick of one project of the work, day in and day out.”

Karen Z seems distracted today, not necessarily by work or any specific interruptions. I wonder if this is just me feeling her general restlessness in her current position and how she seems to be working out, over these last few months we’ve been talking, what her path in life really is. She is present, she is paying attention, but there’s some disconnect, and I want to honor that maybe she just needs to move on. So I throw out a few more questions that I think will be easy to answer but will underscore our talks. Her favorite types of stories are “inspirational, kind of feel good” stories that have a “nuanced perspective,” especially around “identity and perception, and everyone deserving a second chance.” She acknowledges that she “tends to reach toward self-help books,” in particular by authors that challenge her “perception of this life

we're living." If she could, and she can if she chooses, she would be travelling right now, specifically to South America. She wants to "live out of a backpack" and immerse herself in the culture in perhaps Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, or Brazil and investigate "the magic of plant medicine" or maybe how climate change is uniting people in Patagonia or the Amazon. And if she could wave a magic wand and change one thing in the world, she would change how land ownership and wealth-building is controlled and how it has created and perpetuates the strangle hold of global White supremacy. Finally, Karen Z describes herself this way: "a soul who is continuing to become and seek and grow and transform and be humbled and recreate; who is just on a walk in this world to learn some lessons."

She has yet to hear back from the producers of the reality show to see if she's been cast, but it's pretty clear that, one way or another, she's on to her next adventure. She shares she's been sober exactly one year, and it's been one year since her hospitalization, and she's supremely grateful for the journey. She tells me, "These conversations we've had really help ground me in, like, my magnificence in all of these other realms that play into my job." And still the restlessness, the way she sort of loses her focus on this job, makes it clear change is ahead. "I think it's time for me to fly again."

Sun Spiral:

And fly indeed she did.

I find out weeks later when Karen Z and I meet for a final double-check meeting that she did not get cast in the reality show. But true to what she was uncovering during the time we spent together, she did resign her post before the end of the semester and contracted with an international exchange program to lead "a couple youth exchange programs" over the summer. In the meantime, she's taking the next two months to "recuperate, transition, and figure out what

the next chapter will be.” Important to our logistics, she will lose access to the university tools that have enabled our work, requiring us to switch to emails and text messages.

So the sun turns. So does Karen Z turn.

In fact, there may be no better metaphor to helping tell Karen Z’s story than the ancient sun spiral symbol. Across time and geography, this symbol crosses cultures helping indigenous peoples communicate their ideas about the motion and movement of the universe, in particular about a return to health and healing. In what is now the U.S., the symbol was first seen in the stone carvings of the Pueblo peoples of the Southwest and is tied to their shamanistic and healing traditions. Karen Z’s connection to indigenous American traditions, especially her membership in the Lakota Wimmin’s Sun Dance Community, helps illustrate her story.

For Karen Z, allyship, indeed anything important, is most definitely about the *journey*, about the path we traverse from one stage of being to another. For us all, but very explicitly for her, this path is not straight or even just winding. The switchbacks many people find challenging are the places on the journey where Karen Z finds the most fulfillment. She connects with arcane and ancient spiritual systems, such as identification with being a Scorpio, an astrological sign related to death, darkness, and transformation. Her experiences with her great-aunt’s death and the gratitude she found there is a good example. These are “sacred contracts” we are meant to uphold and grow from. Like any good tragic hero, Karen Z seems committed to travelling into the darkness, coming up for light, and travelling down again. But every switchback moves her that much farther along the path. The journey is endless; there is no “check box.”

Karen Z’s journey is also physical. She doesn’t seem to stay in one place very long and is not afraid to re-evaluate her initial plans when the world turns. Pre-pandemic, taking this higher education position that would help her attain a graduate degree was a good idea. Doing

the “expected” thing so that she could get a job with a decent salary seemed important. But the circular path to reconciling the aspects of traditional higher education practices and hierarchies, along with the isolation and fear brought on by a global pandemic, took her to a darker place than even she was ready for. Upon emerging, Karen Z feels different, life looks different, and the current circle feels complete. Time for a new journey that feels more authentic.

Many of these spirals teach and reinforce how much more receptive Karen Z can be to growth when she approaches with *humility and curiosity*. For Karen Z, this is summed up in the idea of White women needing to “check themselves.” As life doubles back on itself, she has learned to pay attention to her own angles, viewpoints, and implicit biases; to actively pay attention to whose voices are being centered and how those voices are being supported. She consistently references the need to be “mindful and intentional” in creating safe spaces for people. Her experiences as a White nanny in a Black home opened her eyes to the White privilege and discrimination, however subtle, people of color endure every minute of every day. She is grateful for what she has and believes deeply that it is her job to model antiracist behavior and hold other White people accountable for the same thing.

What has opened Karen Z up is an innate sense of curiosity about people and the world and her place in it. Her traveling is not mere restlessness. She chooses places where, to her, the learning is reciprocal. What can she bring that will help people, and what can she learn that will help her grow? How can she expand the circumference of her spirals? She is most interested in immersing herself in “places that are still actively navigating colonization” and in studying “traditional and plant medicine” and other shamanistic practices. It seems important to her, on this next turn of the sun, that she dive into this to open her up even more to how she can make a difference. She came into her higher education position as “kind of a rogue” and learned

firsthand the differences between experiential skills and educational skills—and which are privileged in which situations. Feeling obligated and curious to finish this cycle, she has. And at this point in time, it's not for her.

It is Karen Z's deep sense of *moral obligation* that keeps her focused and forces completion, even when it's hard. "The universe creates opportunities for completion," and if we don't take them, the lessons just come back around again—harder. She grounds herself in Lakota traditions of completion, in a "kind of ever unfolding, continuous growth." Moreover, her Bahá'í faith supports her determination that "it is our responsibility to do the work." The foundational tenet of this faith is the "oneness of humanity." God did not make divisions, hierarchies, or inequities, and when people do so, we harm ourselves and work against God's divine will. The more we open ourselves up to this view of humanity, the more highly spiritually attuned we become as we spiral to other spiritual worlds. While Karen Z's sense of morality and human obligation is certainly influenced by her mother's paganism and her father's Buddhism, the Bahá'í cohesion speaks strongly to her. It is clear that she feels obligated to herself to continue to grow by engaging in the universal orbit and that this personal growth supports her belief that she must use her lessons for the betterment of the people and the world around her. It's a constant obligation that can be recursive: she is a "spiritual seeker," and she will never be done; "this will never be something you will excel in."

This is how everything is "interconnected" for Karen Z. This is why everything is "complex." Nothing in this world just happens. Everything we do has meaning. And these meanings all circle back on themselves to inform each other. If we don't pay attention, we lose the opportunity to complete a cycle, and the lesson will come back again, maybe with a vengeance. Most importantly, Karen Z believes, we all have the ability within us to effect change. If we

would actually understand that, no one would be able to ignore their obligation to undertake the spiral journey toward personal and universal healing. We just have to be willing and brave because there's darkness in that journey. But the light at the end is worth it all.

Portrait of Leah

Beginning:

By outreach number three, I had pretty much accepted that approaching strangers and asking them for time and vulnerability is just nerve-wracking. In this case, I knew that I was approaching someone with a similar title level as mine who works in a university quite different from the one that employs me but similar to the one I attended as an undergraduate.

The woman on the other side of the computer screen presented the poised, professional demeanor one would expect from an associate vice president in a large state school system on the West Coast of the United States. Leah, who is mid-career, occupies a role not typically inhabited by women as she is responsible for the strategic planning and analysis around university effectiveness. In her institution, this role is in the office of information technology. Her medium-length wavy hair, stylish dark-rimmed glasses and professional/casual attire bespeak a quiet confidence.

Leah communicates openness, curiosity, and a willingness to participate from the beginning. As I will come to know, she approaches all new adventures and information as opportunities and expresses that she is "happy to learn from me," even though it is I who will learn from her. Her biggest concern is that she is in the final stages of completing her PhD and needs to make time for that for the next few weeks. We commiserate about doctoral work a bit.

Leah has chosen to blur out her background for this meeting, so our conversation is very focused on just our faces talking to each other. We start a conversation about data and its uses in

antiracist work, how it can be skewed in multiple ways to the benefit or detriment of groups. She sees part of her job in the university as having the “ability to raise awareness” around many of the sticky problems facing higher education, including persistence and retention, belongingness, time to completion, equity in enrollment, etc. We naturally gravitate into “shop talk” as we both deal with these problems, though from different areas of our institutions.

She tells me that she is a “service-oriented” person and sets up her team to operate that way in the university. It is imperative to her that she uses and reports on data responsibly and ethically and that people are educated about the data they both read and request. It is a goal of hers to uplift the “non-dominant narrative” that often isn’t obvious in the data but that can shape it nonetheless. I am thrilled to include a quantitative researcher in my participants, especially one who applies her research directly in her everyday world.

During our time together, Leah will have a car accident that results in a brain injury. Even so, she remains dedicated to this project and brings her passion and deep sense of learning and sharing. Like all the participants, she knows that being an ally means being open about confronting racism head on. This is one way they can do that.

On Being an Ally:

For our first official meeting, we connect on Teams, and Leah has chosen to present a beach background behind her. I learn that in her institution, it is standard to blur out backgrounds or present a Teams background as a leveler, “so that nobody feels an invasion into their space or so that we don’t learn more about someone than they plan to share.” Later on, her background will change, and we will talk about that.

In the meantime, we are two faces on a screen. We meet after work her time, three hours later for me than for her, and I grateful for the invigorating ensuing conversation. Leah looks put

together in a black tab-collared, v-neck top with a round pendant on a chain landing close to her neck and her on-trend tortoise-shell glasses. If she wears make-up, it only enhances her features and is not an end in itself. In our little more than an hour together this time, we uncover what it means to her to be an “ally,” how being an ally means creating space and community, in particular by listening and questioning and listening again.

We start out with Leah sharing that she has just successfully defended her PhD. We had purposefully scheduled around this, so I was very excited to hear about her experience. Of course, we had already bonded over this shared experience of pursuing terminal degrees in education, the toll and the reward. I share that someone finishing and feeling good about the accomplishment is inspirational to me. Because she looked at aspects of the First Year Experience, including race and gender, that impact student persistence, she sees participation in my study as an act of paying back (to me) and paying forward (by taking direct action to confront racism).

This allows me to bring up our first topic of conversation, and I ask her what her definition of a socially just space is, and for the first time in our four interviews, I get to experience the inquiry standpoint that defines her thinking and her activism. “Unless we question it, question things, and ask people to bring different points of view, then we can’t ever examine if it’s just or not.” As she works her way toward answering my question, she provides several examples of this standpoint. First and foremost, Leah believes that a socially just space is comprised of the time and physical space “to hear stories of where people come from that center the non-dominant narrative. So if folks come from a background that is very different than yours and others, people in the room can relate to that or create connections in a way that is not always centering the dominant.”

I begin to learn that Leah addresses concepts by first providing some explanation or definition and then providing examples that help her illustrate. It's a very logical expressive approach, and it will become clear to me that as she layers exposition with example, she's also making more precise sense of something to herself. In this case, she lets me know for the first time that she has two teenagers at home, and while I will learn much more about them as we get to know and trust each other, this is my introduction into two things. First, she believes that she has an obligation to her family and to the world to educate her children in an antiracist worldview. Second, her children, in turn, educate her about life and how to be a compassionate activist. For now, she makes a quick detour to let me know that she was talking to her kids about creating opportunities (space) for people to "feel comfortable arguing, disagreeing, and asking." Parenting, she says, is "learning to create space." And then she jumps back to work examples.

To do this, she heads into examples around using data in higher education, a topic both she and I have already perceived is a safe and relevant topic for both of us. While Leah's job focus is providing data and analysis for a multitude of purposes across her university, my job focus is to use and design learning in such a way that data that will show what students have learned and how they can move forward. In my university, Leah and I would partner to determine what data we need, how we will get it, and what it says. We both are keenly aware of the constructive and destructive power of "data." So in relation to socially just spaces, she talks about the need to disaggregate the data along relevant slices to be able to truly understand because there needs to be "equal and fair representation in the data." She shares that their student information system (SIS), which is common across the state-wide university system and governed by the state, still doesn't allow for a student to identify as anything other than the binary "male" and "female," nor does it allow for any name other than the current legal name.

She points out not only the lack of compassion and humanity around this but also that without this more precise and granular information about this particularly vulnerable population, we can't produce accurate data to know more about them, what they need, where they struggle, and where they succeed. I share with her that my university just recently adjusted the SIS to make this happen—and we agree that it should not be this hard, and it shouldn't have taken this long. In their case, they are convening committees that include students to investigate all the issues around what seems like a small fix but is part of a very complicated social justice issue.

Another example Leah shares about data disaggregation is around race and the tyranny of percentages. Her university is a designated minority serving institution, and their predominant population is Hispanic/LatinX. However, in one case, while investigating success and persistence, she noticed that Asian Pacific Islanders, which also comprise a significant slice of their enrollment, were included in the Asian category of the data. Since overall, those in the Asian category tend to be very successful, the success percentage hid the reality of the experiences for Pacific Islanders, who tend to struggle much more than the aggregated “Asian” category. “Disaggregation of data, better representation, really matters to people, and so I always like to connect not just to percentages but to the people.”

In another example, she shares that there was lots of conversation around the decline in the number of Black students on campus and the general call that “we need to do something.” But until she was able to slice the data, there was nothing to base a solution on. They looked at multiple factors that could be influencing this decline: “transition in demographics in the area, level of student preparedness, the types of schools they are coming from and who's recruiting them.” She focuses on the “student lived experience” and notes that if they slice even deeper into specific majors, “what's the likelihood that [other students] will even be in a class with

Black students?” She notes that “gets people thinking in a different way” which creates space for conversation and gives people information to create change.

I ask her how she more personally creates space as I wanted to hear about this outside the purpose of her job duties. For her this often means meeting space and how that can support or challenge institutional hegemony. To really dig in to understand what people need from her and her team requires a level of trust. “My practice is to go to other people’s spaces because I want them to feel like they are important enough to me that I would take myself out of my own space.” Further, “space is just creating, I think, the sense of where people feel they could be heard.” She has a rule that she also coaches her team on: “people who have positions of power don’t speak first,” no matter how good their ideas are; “write them down and wait.”

I am beginning to learn that Leah uses a combination of compassionate and collaborative approaches with a solid core of what she will and will not accept. When I ask where she finds the bravery to present her information in this way and to work in a non-hegemonic manner, she notes that it’s a clear and expected institutional mindset, supported by trainings and classes she requires her team to attend (with her). Her work and the way she does it is underscored by university strategic goals. Because of this, she feels supported (and has been trained) to have conversations with people about what they might have said or done that was offensive or just blind. She also notes that when she was “new in her career, I don’t think I spoke up when I could have as a young professional who was in a risky position: working with, you know, men who were twice my age and who were all doctors.” There’s so much to unpack here. Because I know we will come back to this in our next conversation about women in higher education, I leave it. What it does allow me to pursue, however, is how she got to this mindset.

Learning not only *what* the participants *do* that makes them allies but *why* or *how* they have come to inhabit this space is how we can focus on what Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot calls “goodness.” I am eager to start to understand what underlies Leah’s antiracist commitment. I ask her what calls her to this work, and while we will revisit this introductory information in detail when we know each other better, I get a good glimpse. First, she shares that growing up, she was active in her community, that “volunteering was really valued in my family.” That led her to her first career coming out of college as a social worker. “I think in order to do that kind of work, you have to listen, you have to create safe spaces and get innovative about how to bridge that huge divide in creating trusting relationships.” What she realized after three years working in a group home is that she wasn’t dispositionally cut out for that direct work: “It just really was not a good match for me because I think that I didn’t have all of the skills to do that work incredibly well.”

However, the systemic issues that lead to the need for group homes to begin with became clear to her. “As systems, the systems aren’t serving the people they’re supposed to be serving. And that’s what I was living day in and day out in trying to help them.” This began a commitment to understanding the systemic nature of organizations and how their structures and practices support the status quo. “I didn’t even know there was such a discipline as Organizational Behavior,” but she came across it and began her graduate work. Part of this discipline is conducting program evaluations “and this sense of, you know, how things are designed and implemented. How they are resourced and this whole kind of systems view about how much power there is in these decisions and how much each of these decisions has power over the people in the system.” For the first time, but not the last, Leah laughs and shakes her head and says, “I feel like the older I get, the more I know I don’t really know anything, and I

have so much to learn.” This continual, open-minded, curious approach to the world is a hallmark of Leah’s approach to her antiracist life.

We also have our first of several conversations about Leah being Jewish. At this point, we only briefly touch on it, but what she conveys is enlightening. “So, I’m Jewish. And one of the core values is *tikkun olam*, which is like healing of the world. That’s something we’re all responsible for.” I ask her if she practices currently, and she shares that Covid substantially impacted how her family could be involved but that they were figuring out how to rework it back into their lives. I learn that Leah attended Hebrew school as a young person but that her mother struggled with the patriarchal aspects of Judaism, and so Leah did not have a bat mitzvah. She made sure, however, that her two sons performed their bar mitzvahs because there was “so much community.” As she thinks back on listening to her “high-voiced young son who’s now 6’3”” read the Torah, she reflects, “I really learned first-hand about the sense of spirituality and how it helps through life’s natural transitions and how important it is to recognize milestones. [It] helps make sense of certain things that sometimes don’t make sense.”

Talking about *tikkun olam* allows Leah to reflect on *how* we should show up to help. She is very sensitive to the idea of White saviorism. She believes it is imperative to ask ourselves, “how do I make sure that I’m doing this work for the people I’m actually doing it for?” She ties this also to the concept of “White guilt,” in which White people try to take action to alleviate our guilt rather than out of a true sense of service. This mindset often leads to the “one and done” approach to race activism, the sort of check-box mentality that is antithetical to true ally behavior. She believes that we should not undertake antiracist activities to make ourselves feel better and be prideful or believe we have “done enough” once we’ve completed something. This often requires White people to work in the background to provide space for others to rise up.

“What I’ve learned is that we need to unpack things and just ask genuinely about what ways people would rather see things being done, what barriers are getting in the way. And then make sure that I make space for them to be part of the solution and that they get credit, write these responsibilities into job descriptions, advocate for them in the academic environment. Especially in relation to the number of teaching assignments given to people or how much advising they are expected to do.” Making is the foundation of allyship.

This provides us a natural transition from the socially just space conversation into talking about allyship. Her humility is evident when I ask her what her reaction is to being identified as an ally by a Black woman. She acknowledges that she is humbled, and true to her convictions, would rather move on from any accolade. Creating community, she continues, is also the definition of “ally.” Leah ties this to privilege. When she was a social worker right out of college, she “had as close to no money as possible and was living in a sunroom in a house that was built in 1912, working 80 hours a week and living below the poverty line.” But she also knew how many layers of privilege she had (and it takes) to get even there; she knew so many people who had so much less than she did. “How many layers of connection and network it takes to help people get to a point where they can feel that they have what they need to reach their goals or even dream about goals.”

As we continue to talk about what allyship is to Leah and what drives her, she also shares her experiences of marginalizing and outright violence. The area she grew up in only had one temple to serve five large cities, and she would lose credit in school if she took off for Jewish holy days that weren’t in the school calendar. “Teachers were outright anti-Semitic. We had, you know, neighbors who burned swastikas in our lawn and threw dog poop in our pool,” and then she characteristically underplays that with, “It is not really a big deal, but you felt not so

welcomed in that neighborhood.” Personally, I am horrified. But she puts her thinking into context with a conversation about the current conflict over teaching Critical Race Theory in schools. How can we ever give people a sense of belonging if we don’t talk about their experiences? “I’m sorry that you have to be uncomfortable for, you know, an hour while we talk about this, but some people have to live their whole lives like this. I didn’t experience anything like that.”

In talking more about allyship and what brings her to the work, she naturally comes back to how her job, and the data, allows her to do antiracist work and show up the right way. She acknowledges that it can be tricky to know when to drive a conversation and when not to. She goes back to her work on understanding the decline in Black student enrollment and that, after “15 or 20 different presentations” about it and people not identifying any real action items, she got together the cross-functional group that had been, for over a year, actively talking about their concerns. “I’m trying to learn when I can help bring data to the conversation, and I can bring ideas, but I can’t be the voice of certain things.” She shares that she felt conflicted about how to do this, so, in true Leah form, she asked them. In particular, she asked them to “call her out” if she was overstepping. “I want to be on this committee, to support it, to bring the data. What if I’m not being brave enough, or strong enough, not being ‘something’ enough?” So she helped create an environment of openness and inquiry that has led to some successful work that she supports, but she is not the “voice of the group.”

Then she does something that I will come to realize is very indicative of her inquiry mindset. She brings us back to an earlier topic that it’s now clear she’s been thinking about while we’ve talked about other things. It seems to be her brain’s way of tying all the pieces

together when something isn't connecting. In this case, she talks about continuing to read the most recent literature and research on race and systemic inequalities.

It's time to close, but it's really not comfortable just being done after such intense and personal conversation. Thanksgiving is coming up, so we talk about plans and how hard it is to continue to feel good about the origins of this holiday, about how what we learned in school as kids is so "White-washed." We also talk about the upcoming conference I will be attending in Coronado, CA, an opportunity for me to visit home. The conference is centered on how to address persistence and retention, in particular around expanding opportunities for Credit for Prior Learning. Now closing feels better, so we end, setting up our next meeting and promising to send each other references.

On Being a Woman:

It's January, and Leah and I haven't met since mid-November. In that time, so much has happened. For one, Leah has suffered a serious car accident that left her with a concussion severe enough to impact her working life. We don't talk much about it—I sense it was really frightening, including the aftermath, and she doesn't like focusing on it. Add to that the beginning of strategic planning season, and this was the first time we could find to meet.

In that time, Leah has cut her hair. Now shoulder-length hair, it still showcases the curls and waves around her face. In addition, she isn't wearing her glasses when the meeting starts, and her stylishly bold eyebrows frame her kind eyes and always welcoming smile. It's really good to see her. On Teams again, she still has her beach background on—a welcome sight for me in the middle of a New England winter. Today, Leah is wearing a burgundy shell underneath a black sweater studded with pearls—understated and professional.

For our work in this meeting, I want to talk about being a woman, especially being a woman in higher education—and on top of that, being an antiracist woman in higher education and what that means, especially in relation to women of color with whom Leah interacts. I also want to talk about the concept of feminism and what it means to Leah at this point in her life. True to her systems framework, she wants to take me back to how she started out her career in higher education so that I can better understand how she is positioned today. I really appreciate how she connects the pieces of our conversations and brings her thinking full circle. Therefore, when I ask her what her thoughts and experiences are around being woman in higher education, an historically un-privileged position, she takes me back to the job she had as a graduate student doing analytics in the medical school of a large university. “It was very hierarchical. The doctors were top and then came the PT. And then came the nurses, then came PA. And you know, if you’re an administrator, you’re pretty much at the bottom,” except for student services folks. She notes that the pecking order was palpable: “you could tell when ideas come up in meetings, you could tell by who sits where and who leads meetings and how conversations go and who makes decisions. She also notes that “policies, procedures, practices, cultural images and artifacts” all supported the dominant narrative of the school. And to the point, “there were not many women leaders, and women who were leaders were in student affairs.”

Except for the woman Leah actually reported to. She was a vice president in strategic planning, “but she was treated like a man, when I think about it.” Noting that in many ways this woman was a trailblazer, Leah also details behaviors that are counter to what she believes is good leadership which should open the door for many voices. “She was direct. She was matter of fact; she could hold her own in the boardroom.” But the idea of coming in with curiosity and humility, with an inquiry mindset, was not valued in the environment. In this space showing up

with confidence did not mean showing up with curiosity and humility: “those two things don’t go together.” This was not a satisfying environment for her, and she began to pursue places and experiences “where faculty interacted with students, and they wanted to help.” She looked for people who valued “nurturing characteristics” and “finding different ways of making meaning of the what the experiences were in higher ed. I was able to do work that created positive change.”

In this space, she found real value in being a woman and bringing ways of working that are commonly ascribed to females. The topics she gathered data for were less threatening to the faculty who were actively seeking help in understanding how, in the 1990s, students’ expectations of college were changing. Leah notes she could experiment, be humble and curious, and make change. Moreover, the leadership representation was somewhat more balanced between men and women. And now, she notes, in her current role the representation seems “pretty even.” There’s been a lot of effort to “bring different folks to the table and to train up people in the values that the institution is looking for. You don’t have to fight for your place.” Everyone is valued for the subject matter expertise that they bring.

This brings her back to a recurring theme in our conversations that she picks up from last time—how she creates safe spaces, as a woman, in her current analytics position. It is important to her to explicate how gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data with a curious and open mindset will help higher education meet challenges. She talks about how she brings the frameworks and theories of community-based research to her evaluation and assessment work on campus, including much more qualitative aspects than she used earlier in her career. Societal and hegemonic expectations in higher education dictate that, “everything has to come from a position of research and informed data.” She emphasizes to her participants that she can’t understand what she’s investigating by herself, that we have to uncover “how do you know what

you know?” Therefore, she has to create trust “because you can’t come in and just expect that people are going to share things with you. It’s not realistic.” On the other side of this is being able to stop the endless gathering of data without using it to do something. She often finds herself in situations of having to say, “we have enough data to start the conversation, and we can’t continue to put off having it.” She believes this is a big leap for the academics she works with and is grateful that she has earned their respect so that she can start the necessary conversations.

Leah’s methodologies are inherently feminist. “Centering representation, removing power imbalances, collaborating, being reflexive, are all elements that align with a feminist framework.” She explains that she has always “favored mixed methods and more of a case study approach using a theory of practice” rather than traditional experimental design. This is also the same sort of approach that supports her antiracist actions.

I ask Leah whether she’s experienced sexism as a struggle. In her current situation, she doesn’t “necessarily see it. It comes across sometimes, but I think it’s the best place I’ve been in terms of feeling like there’s a seat at the table, and it’s a lot more equitable than other places I’ve been at or other places I’ve seen.” This is the first time I’ve experienced Leah to be a little equivocal in her responses, “necessarily” and “more equitable than other” makes me feel like there’s more underneath, so I ask if she’s seen any disparity. As she begins to really think about it, she shares, “I think women are expected to be ok managing multiple things at one time, whereas men are working on one main project. So you have your goals, and then you have the 25 other things you’re supposed to be doing.” We talk about how women in our organizations in essence “bat clean up” and are expected to pick up the pieces of out-of-control projects and make

some sense out of them. This is not an unusual expectation both for us and the other women leaders we know.

These shared experiences lead Leah to feel comfortable talking about another line of subtle inequity she's observed. There is a group she interacts with regularly that is led by a man, and she notes that "he plays favorites with men who happen to be a lot like him, and they do a lot more together" than the women on his team do. She notices this across the university, actually. "You hear more about the men who go to the gym together and golf together." She laughs and says maybe she's just not invited, but she doesn't hear about women doing that. "And it's not that I want that, I just think it's different being a woman. Most of the women I know have family obligations. There's that boundary that they'll work a lot and then go home and work a lot, and there's not as much free time." It is interesting to me that when talking about women, Leah uses third person pronouns, even though she herself identifies as female. It just brings home to me how hard it is to talk about personal subjugation, about being in the unprivileged position, even when privilege exists in other aspects. We talk about how these concepts echo experiences of women of color in the university setting, but the burdens are multiply layered due to systemic racial expectations in the academy.

This leads us into an intriguing conversation about dress expectations, specifically business suits. She notes that in her experiences as a woman people feel like they can comment on her choice of clothing, including (maybe especially) men. "Nobody would ever say things like that to a man, whether he was wearing a suit or not." The topic of the traditional Western suit illustrates the nuanced sexism that, even in an institution like Leah's that is working hard to address systemic, hegemonic practices, pervades our world. Meeting with external people or people higher up in the hierarchy requires wearing a suit or the equivalent. And there are

unspoken expectations around everyday dress. “If you wear a shirt without a sweater, which I did a couple times because it gets hot in the summer, you get comments like, ‘What’s going on? That’s certainly looking informal today.’ But the men were walking around in golf shirts, and I didn’t hear anyone say anything about that.” She notes that *the suit* represents a centering of White norms and maybe no one should wear one. What feels culturally formal or professional is what people should wear in formal, professional situations. It’s risky for women, however, (and even riskier for people of color) to buck this cultural iconography because people in power can perceive that we “aren’t taking things seriously,” and use that perception in harmful ways.

Another observation she’s made in relation to sexism that can happen in “Zoom” meetings is what she calls the “code switching” as different people enter the call. She feels a palpable change when the people on the call are women and then a man enters. She can’t really articulate it, but it feels very real to her—a subtle shift in topics, unease in conversation, less openness. Having thought through the issue of sex discrimination during our conversation, she does now see that sexism has impacted her. “Honestly, the notions of feminism and sexism are things I’ve considered in working to address in my group, not necessarily for myself.”

But thinking aloud here has opened the aperture a bit. “When I came into this new job, there was definite posturing. A man who went to extreme measures to get rid of me.” Because she challenges systemic assumptions and ways of doing things, she came into direct conflict with this man who now reported to her because he “had certain ways of doing things that were the ‘right’ way to do things, the way we’ve always done things, or the ways they ‘should’ be done.” However, she had support from other people and areas on campus, and when he eventually made a human resources complaint against her, she successfully addressed it. “It came across as he just didn’t like having a female boss. It just creates a toxic energy.” Leah admits that it was

stressful but then in some ways minimizes it. “I think [sexism] is inevitable, but it’s not what shapes me. It has influenced the ways I do or don’t do certain things,” meaning she learned from the complaint things she could have done that might have made the confrontation easier. “It’s helped me to be a little more direct with things. You know, ‘I’m asking you this question because I just want to get to know you, not because I’m suspicious of you. I just want to get to know you as a person on my team.’”

Being able to step back now from this personal and painful experience, Leah relaxes and talks about her current team. She is clearly proud of them and has purposefully created a group in which each person brings a different lens. While she did this with an antiracist standpoint, it also supports a feminist one. “I intentionally created a team that brings people with different ways of thinking and knowing and doing so that we make sure we don’t run into group think.” While this unavoidably means people will disagree, Leah has created a space where it is safe for them to do so in a manner that centers dialog and respect. She also makes sure that each of her team members has opportunities to “shine in front of the group” and that questions that come to the group are addressed by the people with the specific expertise. “Now I realize conflict isn’t bad, it’s inevitable. It’s only bad if we choose to not deal with or deal with it poorly.”

I ask her about her perceptions and thoughts on the loaded word “feminism.” After thinking about it for a moment, Leah provides me with the systemic landscape of her perceptions of the word and the concept. “What the word means has changed for me over time. When I was younger, it meant something about fighting against and kind of being more extreme and bringing awareness in ways that were big.” When she wants to juxtapose this with her thinking today, she is quick to point out that she has never formally studied feminism and that she has “no subject matter expertise whatsoever, you know other than lived experience.” I find it interesting that

when it comes to other people's knowledge and expertise, she gives credence to their lived experiences, but she is willing to minimize hers as central point of expertise. It seems that making herself the center of knowing is an uncomfortable space for her. This is one of the reasons she is successful at creating socially just spaces and in being actively antiracist.

Now, she thinks feminism is more about "things that happen." It's crucial to "do no harm by living in my body every day." We also must create awareness in more intimate ways, with smaller groups to generate actual engagement. "It feels more about calling out when people say things that are hurtful or demeaning by being curious about it: 'Can you tell me what you mean by that? It didn't feel good to me, so I need to understand why you said that.'" She also notes that a focus on feminism has to be institutional for it to be centered, and it's not at her university right now. She notes that her campus doesn't have a lot of activism on it overall, and the people in power who would create the platforms are not focused on feminism. So she thinks that for her, "feminism" takes on three dimensions: 1) what is feminism in higher education; 2) what is the state feminism at her institution right now; and 3) what have her experiences been.

Moving to the third aspect, she brings her conversation around to her family. It is clear that any "system" that surrounds Leah is anchored in her family. "You know, in my own setting, I have a husband and two teenage boys, and so we actually talk about sex, gender, and sexual orientation." They talk about positionality and what's going on in the media: "I feel like it's my obligation to make sure they recognize when things are not fair, when things are not equitable, even if they can't do anything about it." We talk about how important it is to raise men who are aware because in our current society, White men get to be blind. This allows Leah to talk about another important focus for her, which is building community. In her job, in particular, she notes that "it's the women who do the hard work of bring the faculty together," leading student-

centered assessment work. The population of her university is significantly skewed toward Latinas—do they know that our curriculum and assessment practices center their experiences? “I think there’s more that we could do, so maybe it is a feminist perspective. Let’s highlight the work that’s been done that brings feminism into both pedagogy and practice.” She shares that she puts examples and conclusions from non-traditional research approaches on their website: “we need to feel what the people were feeling, and these images are powerful.” And then, with a confident laugh that also communicates her positionality in being able to take a risk: “But you know, I’m the leader of the unit, so I can put that on the website.”

I turn the conversation to asking about the historically fraught relationship between Black women and White women, and Leah admits she doesn’t know much about it. With a true inquiry mindset, she’s been thinking about the books we talked about last time and what she hasn’t read; as a matter of fact, she has just recently really been introduced to a deep understanding of the concept of reparations. This makes her believe that the first steps for White women is “defining our history, really understanding it, sharing it, talking about it, and then asking, ‘What are we going to do about it?’” She notes that in the last few years it has been hard to understand how to support her Black colleagues and team members in the right way at the right time. With true curiosity and humility, she has approached the challenge by asking them, listening, and responding to their needs and fears. Again, Leah’s deep belief surfaces that if she knows more, she can do better. It is important to her that she supports the insights and voices of the people the work is about. It is also important that while they should inform the work and be the face of the work, they shouldn’t bear the responsibility of doing all the work.

I ask about situations where her privileged race confronts her non-privileged sex; has she encountered situations where she had to make a hard choice? Her answer supports what is

becoming apparent about her: this shouldn't happen if she's built the right relationships and people can have the conversations they need to have to hear and act on the information. This continues themes of community, building bridges, creating trust. If she perceives the moments of powerful choice, she knows how to confront them. I'm beginning to think that maybe someone with a truly antiracist stance finds themselves in these situations but knows how to confront and resolve them; therefore, the power dynamics are removed, and the "convergence" doesn't exist for them. Maybe it's only an issue for people who don't adopt true antiracist stances and practices.

We are nearing the end of our time, and as is becoming usual, we bring the conversation around to the shared interests of two people doing similar work. In this case, we talk about attempting to increase persistence through some sort of supportive on-ramp that addresses incoming students' struggles. We talk about that in relation to my open-enrollment, private, non-profit university, and her public system with rules that might restrict enrollment. In any case, the influx of students who are not academically and emotionally prepared to "do school" the way higher education conceives of school is a very big challenge we both are working at addressing. We end our session after a wonderful sharing of our best practices.

On Being Human:

A month later, Leah and I meet for our third session. Themes have begun to emerge about how and why she confronts life the way she does, and we have had inspiring conversations about allyship, antiracism, feminism, and higher education. I certainly have learned about situations that have influenced her, but I feel like I need to see what underlies the earlier conversations: who is Leah the human being who chooses to show up as antiracist and a woman?

I want to ask questions that just get us chatting as two women learning about each other with the foundations we've previously explored.

When we log on to the Teams call, her beach background is off. At first she doesn't realize it, and I learn that she's a bit embarrassed by the cubbyhole bookcase on top of a desk behind her. What she finds a bit embarrassing I find fabulous—I think it reflects her thinking perfectly. It is stuffed with books, binders, and papers, and it is clearly organized and tidy but in an almost creative way. Books are stacked vertically and horizontally; binders are stacked spine out for easy identification and interspersed with clamped bundles of paper that must relate to the binders. Between the top of the case and the ceiling, binders are stood upright and then a cacophony of boxes and things she clearly wants to keep but doesn't need to use are piled up. In front of one cubby is a small piece of art, pink background with a blue circle. This is such a clear illustration of the juxtaposition of clarity and creativity that characterize Leah's inquiry mindset, that willingness to interrogate and let things get messy but to then frame those things within the system that drives them to make sense of them.

Today she is wearing a rust-colored sweater that looks warm and cozy. I check the temperature and am reminded of just how far away we are geographically. Leah's sweater is protecting her from a "chilly" 66 degrees; my black and white flannel is keeping me warm against 43 degrees in New England. At this point in the year, New Englanders are pining for a "warm" 66-degree day! I'm also reminded how different the cadence of our years is. In my open, rolling-enrollment world, the traditional academic year is expressed more in strategic and budget planning. For Leah, it is that on top of the time-worn beginnings and endings of semesters—spring semester is just beginning, with all the chaos that surrounds it.

We start out as it seems we always do, sharing shop talk that is top of mind since we last met. This time, we start out talking about grants, the administration of them, the double-edged sword of winning one. Leah shares with me how grant seekers in her university often assume that any data and analytics a grant might require should live with her and how much time she spends helping people understand whether or not that's a true assumption. We also share what's top of everyone's mind in higher education: persistence/retention/completion. She is gratified that, although the numbers are disturbingly low, the reality of them matched her earlier predictions. She's hoping now that when people see her future predictions, they will be more likely to respond to them. I find this line of conversation interesting because it underscores her ways of working. She is a seeker of information that she puts into clear context to tell a story that she provides to motivate positive change. And often, she has to be patient while people come around to really understanding and accepting why she's trying to tell the story to begin with. She is now heading up a re-enrollment and engagement team, something new for her that she's proud to "add to her list" but that is another layer of work on top of the others. We talk more about on-ramping, remediation, COVID-19, and applying lessons from the trauma literature to understanding the needs of current students.

I move us to the plan for our time together today. I tell her I want to learn more about her as a person, and that I have some prompts that I might use but that she should feel free to talk about whatever comes to mind as we "flow." I explain to her that I'm finding from looking through our previous conversations like I'm missing a dimension of "who this person is," and this is just my way of getting to that. To that end, I start off asking her who the most influential person in her life is/has been.

As I have come to expect, Leah takes a good moment to really think about her answer. “So I would probably say it was my grandmother.” She has talked previously about her grandparents being guiding figures in her life, but now I learn much more about why. Her father worked a retail job that kept him busy “all the time,” and her mother was juggling her, her sister who is four years younger, and her brother who is eight years younger. If Leah wanted to go to Grandma’s house, which was very close, that just worked for everyone. “They were very cultured,” and took her to Temple, to museums, to the theater. “Their values are at the core of what shaped me.” She shares that they came from modest means but worked hard to make a comfortable life for their family. Her parents didn’t finish college, “so they didn’t necessarily understand it or really value it,” and she gravitated toward the people in her life who keep her focused on her plan. “They were the ones who would ask, ‘What are you doing? What are you studying? What do you want to be? How are you going to contribute to your community?’”

I am really starting to understand why the concept she has brought up earlier of *tikkun olam* (making the world better) resonates with her. Her grandparents brought the whole, extended family together for dinner every Sunday. “They were so giving with their knowledge and their time.” Her grandfather was very active in supporting a foster home and other things in the community “to try to give back and have that sense of belonging where they were.” In addition, her grandparents owned a house in Mexico, and Leah would spend all her school breaks there with them. She has fond memories of the place before the cruise ships converged and turned it into a tourist destination. They would walk on the beach, shop at the local market and swap meet; they felt like part of the authentic community. Although she has taken her sons there, she feels it’s not the same, that it’s no longer very possible to get to know the actual people

and create mutual relationships. It is clear to me that part of her larger world view has been influenced by her time in Mexico, a view among other views her grandparents afforded her.

I wonder then what she would identify as the biggest turning point in her life. I am led to this question because it is apparent that she was raised to a life of service, and I want to know how this has translated to her antiracist worldview. After a thoughtful pause, Leah identifies in her adult life it would be when she left social work for graduate school. She has talked about this before, so the decision to leave more direct forms of service for way to support the people providing and needing service is clearly definitive. Recapping a previous conversation, she provides a more personal account. Not for the first or last time, she uses the phrase “wasn’t a good fit” to talk about why she left social work. I sense this phrase is indicative of how important it is for her to “fit” into her community and to create communities in which people “fit.” She shares that the work “completely drained” her and that she couldn’t “separate” but that what would “resonate and stick with me was thinking about, you know, this system is broken. The system isn’t working for who it’s designed to be supposedly serving. This isn’t good for the kids, so why are we doing it?” And this, as I know, lead her to her graduate work in organizational behavior “and having jobs around that changed by trajectory in life.”

This drive to serve is also illustrated by why she doesn’t teach. She shares that when she did try teaching, it was also “not a good fit because I was working so hard to make sure they had everything they needed,” and the job sort of overtook her. She jokes that she and her husband speculated that, based on the way she was working, she was making “17 cents an hour,” a jest that shows the obligation she feels to be everything to people she’s expected to serve. This also shows why the more supportive, behind-the-scenes work she has found is the proper “fit.”

I ask Leah if there was a turning point as a child that stands out to her as formative of her current worldviews. This requires her to really take a minute to consider before she shares that when she was entering junior high, her family moved, not “that far away, but it was a different city in a different school.” At 12-years-old, going on 13, “everything is awkward and difficult anyway,” and she was faced with really figuring out how to “fit in” and what it meant to “not fit in.” However, validating how important developing community is to her, she does note that her new school was small, and she quickly found that she was in classes with mostly all the same people who were as academically committed as she was. This created a de facto cohort of people who experienced many of the same things and could rely on each other.

This leads Leah into thinking about how important it was at this time for her to develop her Jewish identity. Her mother struggled philosophically with the religious structure; she felt the Temple didn’t honor women and didn’t want to spend the minimal family time they did have together going to services. Leah did attend Hebrew school, “but the teaching wasn’t great.” However, “that part of my identity is really important to me and to my grandparents.” They paid for her to go to Jewish summer camps and helped her explore and define this other sense of belonging. It makes more and more sense to me why she would spend her adult years trying to create the same for others who are denied it in our society.

Interestingly, we both share something we embarrassingly called our “privileged unprivileged” experiences in moving to a new neighborhood. My family, too, moved the year before I entered high school. For both of us, our parents were able to get significant deals on houses in neighborhoods they couldn’t have otherwise afforded. So neither of us could operate in the world the way most of our classmates did, but we worked exceptionally hard to “fit in.” We see that now as a gift that taught us hard work and what is (and is not) important to us. Most

importantly, it began to teach us the concept of privilege and the relativity of it at some levels. We both knew at the time that, even while we faced challenges in these environments, we still had it good. We never then would have been able to use the vocabulary surrounding privilege and intersectionality, but we were absorbing the ideas through our lived experiences.

I wonder what she would be doing now if she wasn't doing her current work. I am curious to learn how this view of community, belonging, and *tikkun olam* would play out if she could do whatever she wanted. For Leah, everything connects to a piece of everything else. She first says that she's been thinking about this because her mother is retiring, her sons are getting ready to go off to school (the oldest will attend out of state in the fall), and she has been wondering about her path. She identifies a goal of "self-care," something she's lost in the scramble of motherhood, career building, and earning her doctorate. While she defines this in terms of physical and emotional balance, in particular, meditation, yoga, and being present, she then ties this to community building. The way to be present and to have balance is to be a part of something. She notes that she and her husband have talked about how "in this day and age, it's harder and harder to find and create community," most notably with her Jewish community. Now that things are opening up from pandemic lock-down, "we're being more committed to going to services and developing stronger ties to our local community." For Leah, this is a more balanced approach to living. "Giving back" is way to correct the hyper-focus on completing her degree and being a mother and an executive simultaneously. This also requires more learning: she can't be the best ally if she doesn't understand how and doesn't have the emotional space. So she's been "spending more time educating, unlearning, and re-educating" herself.

Leah also shares that she has a passion for art appreciation and art history because she believes these teach us so much about our history and ourselves. I ask her if "art" is mostly

visual for her and what types of stories she likes best to engage with in any medium. Not surprisingly, her first answer is “stories with context where I get to learn something new or learn how people apply something in a new or different way.” This supports her goal of re-educating herself, and then she immediately offers that she likes “stories about relationships between people in the context of something else going on.” She uses the example that both she and her husband enjoy watching the television show *CSI* together as the action that makes up the story line (and that her husband is entertained by) provides the context for the characters to develop their partnerships and relationships (which is what entertains her).

This leads us to a very telling conversation about Leah. We are commiserating that, in working on our doctorates, we have had neither time nor space to read for pleasure. She admits that “it’s only been more recently in my life that I understood that it’s really important to relax.” To spend more than thirty minutes in front of the television felt “over-indulgent and selfish,” and it’s only in the last year that she’s allowed herself to binge watch a show. I ask her to expand on why taking time to enjoy herself is selfish, and I am given insight into how Leah has allowed her obligations to unbalance her. She explains that growing up, there was always so much to do to prepare for the life she wanted. “And then for some reason in my mind, and I don’t know where this came from, I felt like, you know, I wasn’t always quite as smart as everybody else. So I better work really hard to make sure I was prepared or ready to deliver.” This drive is underscored by the fact that she appreciates “this sense of knowing everything.” She absorbed the societal litany of being a strong wife, a good mother, a good employee and agrees that you can do it all at once, but you can’t do it all well. She notes, “when something happens, you can’t always control that it happened, but you can control how you react.” This is how she takes a moment to calm any anxiety that comes up that can drive her to unbalance herself. “If you have

that feeling, you can sit with the feeling. It doesn't mean you have to act on it. You can choose how you want to act and think about possible scenarios." This allows her to be more present, to take time just to enjoy something, to be ok being "selfish."

This feels like a very natural place to end. I express my gratitude for her trust and appreciation for her candor. A more dimensional portrait of Leah has surfaced.

Tikkun olam:

Looking over my conversations with Leah, I am struck by her refrain of *tikkun olam*. Either the phrase itself or its meaning pervades her speech and her actions. It is a fitting metaphor for Leah and how she approaches being a woman in higher education committed to antiracist action.

As I learn from Leah, *tikkun olam* means "repair of the world." I learn that the roots of the term refer to how policy and legislation can protect those who need it. In that sense, it applies to the overall practice and focus of Judaism. However, it also has individual implications in that it is broadly understood to mean repairing the world through human actions. Further, each individual is responsible for working to better current and future lives. Clearly, Leah embodies these teachings, and so it serves as a powerful metaphor to illustrate her experiences.

Leah's *journey* has been profound. Driven by the call to repair, she dove into social work. What she took away from that experience was first-hand knowledge of the brokenness of the system and how it actually precludes the help it purports to provide. This led her to study organizations and the systems that control them, including what needs to be done to repair them. Since one controlling system in American society is higher education, it is not surprising she ended up there, even after she completed her graduate work. In that initial space, she experienced the layering of hegemony: level of education on race on sex. Realizing she needed

to work in a more collaborative environment where she could directly impact what needed to be repaired, she has ended up in her current role. She has come to understand that it is her personal responsibility, as a privileged person in the world, to take deliberate, explicit actions to confront injustice and to work toward eliminating it.

Leah has faced milestones in this journey that she has approached with a reparative mindset. Continued formal education focused on under-served and vulnerable college populations, listening to Janaya Future Khan every week (what Leah calls “going to church”), continual engagement with her sons about what it means to be White men in this world, workshops and trainings for herself and her team: all of these are indicative of a woman on a quest to be better. She has shared that she’s been reading a “critical action piece that was talking about intentionality and taking action.” This has led her to explore something she and I talked about earlier, that of White women’s tears and their strategic and destructive power. In addition, during the university’s strategic planning activities, she has come up against people being what she calls “fussy” with the data she’s presenting in relation to its accuracy. To address that, using Critical Race Theory, she discovered something she calls “quantcrit,” or Quantitative Criticalism. I learn that, in a nutshell, it is applying CRT to quantitative work and that there are five tenets. The reason Leah is so excited about this nascent methodology is that she can take those tenets and apply them to “the way our office does our work. I’m working with the team as a group to talk about what it means for us to follow these tenets as a group. What does it mean to follow the tenets as an individual? What do we feel each of us in our office has for strengths we can bring to the conversation?” In addition, she is working with outside experts to bring the tenets to the whole university, and the way it works. Her antiracist journey has taken her from

beleaguered social worker to influential higher education administrator taking direct action to address the systemic racial issues in her institution.

Tikkun olam is also apparent in her inquiry mindset that leads her to be *curious and humble*. Her commitment to aspiring allyship is apparent in her deliberate interactions with people, from meeting outside her own office, to centering the appropriate voices, to her insistence on asking questions and learning. Whether she's listening to podcasts, reading books others in the antiracist research space recommend, or digging deep to find better ways to address issues that seem to be blockers to reaching people, Leah is driven to learn and ask other people about what she's learned. She doesn't assume that she knows already. "To first do the work, you have to understand the work, which first means you have to do the research, which means you first have to make the relationships to be able to do the right research." Systems within systems, broken worlds within broken worlds, for Leah the only way to repair them is to ask questions, be curious and empathetic, and understand that, as a White person, her job is to facilitate and support as her privilege provides and as she is requested to. She can offer, and others can accept as they need to. In addition, with other privileged groups, or under the auspices of university initiatives, she can help drive conversations and provide data. But her whole purpose is to elevate those who tend to be marginalized rather than raise herself up.

As part of the system herself, she has a *moral obligation* to help repair it from the inside. This aspect of *tikkun olam* is deeply tied to her spiritual and religious roots and her closely held Jewish identity. What seems to have been a natural drive for her from the beginning was nurtured by her grandparents, and the entire trajectory of her life has been fueled by the belief that she is required to help make things better. What that has meant to her over time has evolved, and is still evolving, but commitment has never been the issue. It is apparent in the

ongoing work she does to be a worthy ally and in the curiosity and humility she brings to fulfilling this obligation to repair. Sometimes, this passion has landed her in situations that weren't good fits, such as social work or classroom teaching. But she used those lessons to help craft a space where she could bring her talents and her dispositions to doing the reparative work she knows she needs to do. For Leah, taking antiracist action is not a "should, it's a must."

I have learned over our time together that Leah finds solace and centering in the practice of yoga. Coupled with meditation, yoga has been a way that she can create balance in her life. She is a higher education executive, a scholar and student, a mother, a wife, an antiracist, a woman, and a Jew. That leaves very little room to just be Leah, and she has come to realize that she needs to adjust some things and rebalance the scales. That could mean "being selfish" and just doing something "for fun," or it could mean taking time out every week to listen to her favorite podcast, or it could mean starting each day centering her mind and body through deliberate practice. It's not that something has to stop—but priorities do need to adjust for her to be the best she can be so that she can continue to do the work that calls her in an effective way. What is she most fearful of in doing antiracist work? "Will it make a difference? Will people feel their voice was heard?" To confront those fears, she has to be present. Self-care, balance, and a good dose of fun are prerequisites.

Tikkun olam is both metaphor and practice for Leah. It is a way of approaching the world that allows her to connect systems and pieces of systems to effect change and provide support. It is a driver and a way of being. It is a foundation for continual evolution in how one person can do everything in her power to repair the world.

Portrait of Sharon:

Beginning:

The woman I was led to as a fourth participant has been addressing issues of social and economic justice her entire career, most of that being focused on advocating for educational leadership that is equity-based. In addition, she is a respected and published race scholar. Unlike the other women, Sharon has significant teaching responsibilities which might have put her outside the criteria I set for participation. However, her other experiences, responsibilities, and commitments also give her the administrative lens I have identified for the study. She has agreed to participate over email and wants to jump right into the first interview. I will come to learn that she is incredibly generous with her knowledge and advice borne of a lifetime educating, advocating, and learning.

Sharon suggested using Zoom instead of Teams because of her repeated bad experiences with Teams, so we agree on how I will get recordings and transcripts since we will use her Zoom room. What Zoom shows me when we connect is a smart-looking, 57-year-old woman with short greying hair, in vogue cat-eye-ish glasses, artisan crafted earrings, and oodles of bracelets. She looks fresh and natural and has a warm, inviting smile, and I am looking forward to our conversation.

Sharon presents her knowledge and experience in a clear, gentle, but no bullshit way. She neither lets herself off the hook for any lapses into blind Whiteness nor does she let others, including me. She offers her information in a respectful, clear manner: “If I may, I’d like to talk to you about how you might have handled that differently.” Or “I’ve found I need to be careful about how I speak when....” “Authenticity,” “honesty,” “openness,” and “curiosity” are words she uses frequently about herself and about antiracist work. Our conversations about race, sex

and gender, and life are heady and alternate between scholarly approaches and real-life experiences, even in our first interaction. She brings to this project the wealth of her experiences as an associate professor at a small women's college in the Midwest United States, a race scholar, a Fellow, and a consultant.

Being the closest in age to me of all the participants allowed for us to have in-depth conversations about life, age, race, being women, being mothers. She describes her theoretical background as “Marxist with a twist of CRT” and differentiates talking in a “practitioner space” from a “scholar space.” She writes in a field called social justice leadership and identifies as a critical race scholar, White scholar, and critical Whiteness scholar. All of this she intersperses with examples from her life growing up and her evolution in moving from k-12 education to higher education that has resulted in an understanding that “race is always present...in a way that I didn't see before.”

On Being an Ally:

Our first, non-email introduction is also our first interview. Sharon is a teacher deep in her soul in addition to being a committed antiracist and so wants to take opportunities to help others and to advance the scholarship. She is also very, very busy, so as soon as she has enough information through email exchanges to assure she would have enough time to participate, we went straight to our first meeting. Because of this, the first 20 minutes of our meeting were spent talking about methodology, research questions, data analysis, etc. Since Sharon spends a significant amount of her time teaching master's students, this was a lively discussion, rife with useable advice for me on things to think about as I proceed. Not only am I appreciative of the actual information, but I am also introduced to how Sharon is always primed to find the “teaching moment,” something that makes her a particularly effective ally.

I jump into her Zoom link as Teams has historically been untrustworthy for her. She is sitting at what seems to be a high-top table in front of a window that looks out on a deck. Behind her is some sort of blackboard with paper clamps stuck on it, an art piece above her I can't completely see, and off to the side is a plaque that reads, "Love is always the answer." Below that is a basket full of face masks, as well as a box of them atop the part of a cabinet that's in view—a necessity in our post-pandemic new world. The view I have of the room looks cozy and home-office-like, painted what on my screen comes across as a calming dove gray/sage green. Sharon herself is wearing a gray, heathered, cowl-neck top that is appropriate to staying warm on this late November evening. Her very short pixie haircut frames an open, intelligent face wearing tortoise-shell cat eye glasses in front of large, welcoming eyes. This is all set off by long, dangling earrings with a silver disc on the bottom and a clear bead atop that. She looks easily, casually stylish and gives off an air of engaged listening.

We start talking about what a "socially just space" is for her. As with all of her discussion, she is thoughtful with her answers and provides deep contextualization. "This raises an interesting question for me. When we hear the word 'space,' we think about it physically, geographically." But this is not resonating for her through a social justice or antiracist lens. "I think about it more...liminally...and that's the first time I've ever used that word!" I will learn that, in general, Sharon's devotion to antiracist actions and education takes her past the current language common in our post-George Floyd world. Without devaluing talk about "safe spaces" or how to conduct inclusive meetings (she coaches on just these sorts of things in one aspect of her work), she would rather dig further into the ways she thinks about and embodies antiracist work. "A socially just space can be a moment. Then of course it's linked to a location, a moment in time that happens in a location," but it isn't a particular office or lounge. This is

important because the socially just aspect of this point in time “can turn on a dime; it’s moment by moment.” While we will talk throughout our work together about multiple times where Sharon created a socially just space, or supported one, or even wrecked one, we don’t go back to a “definition” again. This liminal space that can be socially just and empowering one moment can shatter with a single gesture or word—or lack of a word. The transmutable nature of antiracist actions underlies Sharon’s ally behavior. The liminality of a socially just space leads us to talk about more tangible aspects of antiracism that, as their end result, can create that space.

The concept of the vulnerability of space provides Sharon an onramp for talking about how she has come to inhabit her antiracist standpoint. She shares that her original conceptions were Marxist-informed. Reminding me that rather than being a proponent of Communism, Marx was actually a critic of Capitalism, she explains that his critique opened her mind to the structural aspects of injustice and inequality that we’ve created in our economic and social systems. She sees Marx as a “very early critical scholar” and describes her Marxism as having a “strong CRT twist.” Our society is set up so that it “breeds inequality and relies on inequity, and that has been manifested through identity.” Through her career, she has become more of a critical Whiteness scholar because of her engagement and open-minded work with scholars of color. Her understanding as a White person has evolved into seeing how “race is always present...in a way that I didn’t see before.” As both a published author in leadership for equity in schools and as a social justice leadership consultant, Sharon does use different terms with different audiences. In her academic writing she uses the term “social justice” because in her field of social justice leadership, it has an agreed-upon meaning. But in her work with education and leadership practitioners she uses the term “equity” because that is something people can see and strive for. She focuses leaders on the ways we have “[figured] out how to exclude and

marginalize people” and how those ways intersect. She talks about what she calls “officially sanctioned serving systems” that are “acceptable ways we sort people and distribute resources” in what are supposed to be equitable approaches. Pointing toward Special Education systems, she notes that the *idea* is to create equity; the *practice* may not.

From here, we turn to the concept and practice of allyship and how Sharon feels about being identified as an ally. “Honored and humbled,” she also makes it clear that, “you can’t say ‘I’m a White ally.’ You can say, ‘I strive to be a White ally,’ or ‘I’m a learner of how to be,’ but you can’t call yourself that.” It’s important to her that she exhibits ally behaviors as much as she possibly can, so this identification is gratifying. At the same time, she notes that “it’s a tremendous responsibility for White people to strive to be an ally.” Part of what makes it particularly hard for us is because of our Whiteness. “We don’t know how to be [allies] because our Whiteness teaches us to fix everything, that we know all the answers, that we know how to be in front, to be competent and smart. And that we *are* those things.” This zeitgeist doesn’t leave room for actual ally actions and just continues to center White people in everything we do.

To underscore this, Sharon shares that she grew up in a politically progressive and liberal home with a music professor father whose work and performing provided “interactions with people with all sorts of differences,” even though her father’s college and the town they lived in was overwhelmingly White. They were aware enough that “we could look down our noses at [people] we said were racist. We thought other people were racist. I never learned that racism was this thing that was systemic.” Even though she remembers as a very young girl driving past housing projects where “the windows were all out, and they were full of Black people—there weren’t any White people there,” she didn’t quite grasp what she was really seeing until grad school in her early 30s. She was studying poverty and its effects on education when she heard a

Black woman in class who shared an experience that just hit her: “I was devastated. I was full of empathy for her. All these things came together and converged to say, ‘holy shit, it’s set up this way!’” And then, true to her honesty about herself and her antiracist evolution, she pokes gentle fun at her reaction to this realization which she describes as “so White”: “And my first thing was, like, I need to do something about this. I discovered it, and if I learn enough, I can fix it!”

Sharon is laughing while she says this, but the message is clear. We are programmed, as White people to believe we can and should fix everything in the ways we believe things should be fixed.

This leads us into a conversation about the continual learning and unlearning required to commit to an ally mindset. While she teases about her commitment to “fix” racism, this memory in fact leads her to some self-reflection. “That was 27 years ago, and I have been all over the place, and you know, I’m astounded at what I don’t know.” She has a favorite story she tells to illustrate how Whiteness is always with us. Sharon co-authored her book on social justice leadership in education with a Black woman, a Black man, and a White man. During this, she notes, she tended to write using “we” as a pronoun. While she was smack in the middle of writing, the female Black collaborator simply asked, “Who is this ‘we’?” Sharon shakes her head at the unconscious assumption of a universal “we.” “Yeah, there it is. I just come to expect that [Whiteness] is going to keep showing up. It goes everywhere with me.” But what her experiences have shown her, and what she has come increasingly to embrace is how crucial it is to own that and then to use it in ally and antiracist behaviors. “If there’s one thing I know a lot about, it’s Whiteness. I know how White people think; I know why we do what we do. I know that White people say things to other White people they don’t say to people of color.” Therefore, she believes she has a duty to use that knowledge to help promote social change.

She admits that she has done and said things, especially when she was a k-12 administrator, that were really problematic. “Now I call them mistakes. I wish I could go back.” But instead, she uses them as points of growth and opportunities to do better. Importantly she feels strongly that she’s “been so gifted by the people of color” who have been willing to tell her when she’s making a mistake, what she’s missing, what she could have done that would have been helpful. She uses these lessons to help teach other White people because that’s how she can “pay back the investment that my friends and other teachers have made in me.” Part of that pay back is being able to try to “pick up some of the load” for people of color. But she is quick to expand on that to differentiate what she means from what can be perceived as White saviorism. For example, she says, when she’s in a situation where she knows a microaggression is taking place, she knows she wants to address it. She has learned from her friends of color how to do that, knowing full well the person who’s experiencing the aggression “is fully capable of thinking for themselves but shouldn’t always have to bear the responsibility of calling it out.” She offers an example of what someone striving to be an ally could say: “While I know that so-and-so is perfectly capable of speaking for themselves, I want to note that...” In addition, she says, it’s also really important to “name that something is making *me* uncomfortable when I hear something racist or deficit oriented.” As a committed racial justice advocate and someone striving to be an ally, she always has her mind, eyes, and ears open to what’s happening (and not happening) around her. “I watch people of color as they combat racism. What can I learn from that that would be authentic? What action could I take that could have an impact, make someone feel supported? I have been gifted with people telling me their stories.”

Sharon talks about the social contract that allows White people to behave the way we do. She points out that we collude to keep people of color in their place while still maintaining what

good (White) people we are. We talk about a situation I was in where a White man was condescending to a Black woman. In order to correct a racist and sexist comment he made to her, he tried to fix his gaff by pointing out that the Black woman was indeed a wonderful person. She was so wonderful, in fact, that he would hire her to work for him any time. When he did this, he invoked the part of the contract that says, “if I say you’re a good person, then you don’t get to say that I’ve said anything offensive.” He puts the bond on the contract by saying he would hire her. What he is communicating is, “I’m in this body, I have this position, and I have this authority, and I’m going to use it in this way to tell you how you can fit in. And when I do that, I’m benevolent, and you’re not supposed to question the way I did it.” Whether he was conscious of his actions or not, his *modus operandi* was clear.

This line of conversation also involves how I reacted to this situation, which I learn from Sharon and from others, I could have done much better. True to her ally stance of standing next to and not standing up for, we talk about how my reaction of not saying anything in the moment wrecked the opportunity for growth and for real ally behavior. I approached the Black woman (a friend of mine) after the fact and told her that I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to embarrass her, and I asked her if that the way she wanted me to do that. I hear from Sharon a better way. She calls this a “very typical White woman thing to do” that puts the responsibility of making me feel better on my friend. Instead, I could have spoken up in the moment and named that I was very uncomfortable with this line of interaction. I could have stood up on behalf of gender alone if I was unsure how to approach the racial aspects. “I think becoming better at this as White women is recognizing that this is just offensive talk. We need to be as offended as our sisters of color and name that. Say in the moment, ‘I want to just stop for a moment because I’m really uncomfortable with what’s happening.’” I am grateful for this

review of my behavior as it is an experience that I have revisited and acknowledged that I could have done much, much better. Sharon believes that we get better at this when we actually practice it and when we put ourselves in situations where we have to practice it.

The comment about practice over time opens the opportunity for me to ask Sharon what drives her to antiracist commitment and mindset. She brings me back to her epiphany about the systemic nature of racism in grad school and notes that she was “morally insulted” by the injustice she was hearing and that “ultimately, this is moral for me, and that can be a dangerous place. It can quickly lead to self-righteousness, which I have no business being.” Instead, she says, it’s about people. When you “humanize the people who are affected,” even the indefensible White people, you can start to make a difference. She doesn’t believe she can make earth-changing contributions, but she doesn’t feel capable of ignoring racist action, either. Likening racism to a conflagration, she says, “Even if all you can do is get a bucket of water, even if I don’t have all the equipment that would blow the fire out, I still need to do something rather than just sit and watch it burn.”

The focus on moral obligation, I learn, derives in many ways from her spiritual upbringing and practices. Although I will learn much more in subsequent conversations, an introduction to Sharon’s internalized truths helps illustrate her ally mindset. She grew up in a fundamentalist, evangelical church. And “the explanations of the way the world works and what happens if you don’t—there’s actually a very narrow path to heaven. All the rest is fear and threat.” While her life growing up centered around going to church multiple times a week, her father did not attend, and this mixed message is what ultimately helped enable her to see past the dogma she was immersed in. She has done a lot of “undoing” of what was done to her and shares, “It’s only in the last 10 or 12 years that I don’t have a panic attack when I think about the

Rapture.” She and her family joined an open and affirming Christian church and attended regularly when her children were young. Learning new ways of understanding the Bible and having the space for challenging questions “helped me kind of get past some of the trauma” of Christian fundamentalism. Now, her spiritual contemplations and growth occur more often through a devoted yoga practice and her study of Buddhist philosophy. These together have helped her “figure out how to take my ego out of it” and to avoid the human “propensity to get hooked on things that are not about the present moment.” This spiritual road has helped her to not worry so much about what people think about her, an anxiety she had found to be almost paralyzing to being able to behave authentically.

She ties this to antiracist and ally behavior. By looking past the need to be accepted by everyone, Sharon can be the best ally she strives to be in any moment. “If I try to be a good person, and I am conscious of being compassionate and empathetic, then I will have everything I need” to go forward in the world constructively. Her spiritual evolution has allowed her to be able to create boundaries and make decisions about spending her professional and personal time in reciprocal relationships that are honest and supportive: “I just won’t be in relationships with some people, and I can focus on being in settings that are more affirming.” Since she’s no longer worried about saving the feelings of all people, she can position herself to “do good work, my best work,” work she feels morally obligated to pursue.

And now, the explanation of socially just spaces as “liminal” and her belief that antiracism and allyship are internalized and externalized mindsets and behaviors brings our conversation full circle. Everything ties together: her teaching, her philosophy, her scholarly and intellectual path. As an always-growing, ever-evolving human being walking through this

world, she seeks to embody the work of fighting racism, even though the body she inhabits is White.

On Being a Woman:

I am very much looking forward to my second conversation with Sharon as a woman of my generation who may have experienced some of the same things I have in relation to growing up White, female, and middle-class in the 1970s and 1980s and becoming an educator. I'm looking forward to another layered conversation about the intersection of identities and how White women should navigate them.

Today when we jump into Zoom we are in the same room as last time, and I can see more of the art piece above Sharon's head. It looks like a wood block print or some other dark-and-light contrasting medium of a small-town street, possibly a downtown. Sharon today is wearing a black-on-black animal print long sleeved top over a black shell. Large, silver open-tear-drop shaped earrings complement the black, and her short hair is brushed to the side in an easy, efficient style. We start out opining about having to remember to record our Zoom and Teams meetings. She reports that she successfully remembered to record from first to last word of every single final presentation from her grad students. We agree that is, indeed, a feat worth mentioning!

I preview that our conversation will be about the wide-ranging topics of being a woman, a White woman, in higher education, and in the world. In a narration pattern I am coming to recognize, Sharon begins with some history about her path to the position she holds now through the lens of being a woman. She begins at the end and then will take me through the milestones. "So you know I'm at a women's institution. And it has been life changing for me." Being in an environment that is woman-centered, albeit primarily White women, has been profound for her.

To grasp why this is so requires going back, and I learn more about her family and young years. “I grew up in a family with a mother who favored men,” especially her brother, and with a father who could be very challenging. She was implicitly and explicitly taught that male bodies matter more. “And it takes a really long time to dial that back,” she notes of the fallout of growing up that way.

She uses experiences from her career that serve as progressive pieces of insight that have gotten her where she is today. They explain the often painful opportunities she’s had to unlearn. In her first job in K-12 education, she was beset by rumors of a relationship between her and a district administrator that were untrue. The administrator nurtured her and other women’s leadership and professional growth, and Sharon thinks of him as a “wonderful man who did so much for my career” and that of other women in his intentional focus on diversifying his leadership team. But even so the rumor mill churned. She reported the rumors to both him and to another male supervisor, but they were never addressed constructively. When she first reported the rumors to him, the administrator laughed and said he was flattered; the third time she reported them, he distanced himself from her, creating “a difficult place to work, in the end.” His ability to ignore the problem did not match Sharon’s experience of others’ suspicions. His gender and professional position allowed him to handle the situation in the way that made him most comfortable, despite the impact on her and despite him actually caring about her career and wanting to support her advancement.

In her next job, which resulted in relocating her family, she recounts being recently postpartum and having to interview for a building administrator position. She had two children in two years and encountered difficulties with the second pregnancy, birth, and postpartum. Even though it was widely known that she was a top candidate, the search went on while she was

on leave. “I literally said in the interview that my brain was mush and that I had some significant postpartum issues,” but it proceeded anyway. In retrospect Sharon says, “it’s a blessing that I didn’t get the job, but this is a very real thing that would only happen to a woman and not a man. There was no dispensation made for [her condition].” She ultimately is glad the job went to the person it did because he was quite skilled, and her family responsibilities would have made learning this job difficult. This also allowed her the time and space to do things that were more important to her, such as finishing her doctorate.

Her next job was a director of equity and inclusion at the district level, a career advancement she was excited about. This job Sharon describes as a “political hotbed” and that the sexism, despite the group being multicultural, was rife. The people in the group who were men were “really ambitious. They had solutions to every problem that they felt really confident about.” However, Sharon had “by far the most critical lens” of the people on the cabinet, so she was in the position of having to ask the hard questions to keep the focus on the meaningful integration of equitable practices and changes. They just wanted to “talk fast” and “climb the ladder,” and the constant politicking created “just this hostile place.” Importantly, she observes, “the more you make people uncomfortable, the more they want to shut you down.” And she was making people uncomfortable. She characterizes her time in this job as “gamesmanship, and I’m using the term ‘man’ appropriately.”

At the same time, Sharon developed a valued friendship with her “closest co-worker, a mixed race, Black-identifying woman.” What Sharon didn’t realize at the time was how destructive this relationship would be. Sharon was “taken in” by—the woman’s intellect, her ability to make her way through the world—which negatively impacted how Sharon navigated the relentless politics of the job. Being encouraged to believe that she “couldn’t be nice,” and

that she was “aggressive” in her interactions was ultimately a self-destructive approach to doing the work that played on Sharon’s existing insecurities about herself. The male sexism she encountered, combined with the raced and gendered female manipulation, brought Sharon to the realization that she needed find the power in herself to be the person she wanted to be. When she left this job, she “was completely broken. It took me two or three years to really recover.” But it is also what propelled her into looking for and continually finding the “good enough” person inside her that was always there. In particular, releasing her need to be liked by everyone was a pivotal shift in her personal growth.

Sharon’s move to a women’s college has supported and advanced this growth. “Being at a woman’s institution actually feels different in my body.” Her expertise and critical lens are “welcomed and respected,” and she doesn’t have to fight to be heard, both herself and the DEI knowledge and critical perspective she brings. Importantly, being in a woman-centered environment has “changed my ability to see sexism at play in a much more constant, alert, and unapologetic way.” Understanding Sharon’s professional odyssey is paramount to understanding how she thinks about the concept of feminism, especially as it relates to her and her antiracist standpoint. “I think I probably identify as a feminist, but I haven’t studied feminist theory enough” to feel comfortable situating herself in this area. True to her mindset of knowing a thing before she can have an informed opinion, she characterizes herself as “a person who has to feel like I know about something, probably way more than other people do, to feel like I can claim knowledge of it.” Sharon deeply understands the epistemic nature of knowledge discrimination, about how institutions and information gate-keepers value certain types of knowledge over others, about how labeling different types of knowledge as acceptable or not is a significant way

hegemonic structures are maintained. In this vein, she notes that she is “wary of how feminism has been White.”

This leads us into a fascinating conversation about feminism in relation to female friendships. She describes that her friendships with other White females—in her early years and until today even—have been challenging due to the jockeying for position that happens within them and her lack of skill and know-how of that system. She sees women’s friendships as part of the systemic fall out of our racist, sexist society which White women perpetuate not just on people of color but on themselves. Sharon relates that one of her Black female friends notes that, “White women don’t have each other’s backs.” She references Rosalind Wiseman’s 2009 book *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World*. In particular, she notes two things. First, she has experienced in raising her children this toxic behavior from mothers to mothers. Second, she is struck by how very White it is. “What we’re taught to worry about as White women are the wrong things. We’re conditioned to, and so we worry about” things such as what makes someone “popular,” or what kinds of communication styles are “acceptable.” We often weaponize our privileged standpoints in our patriarchal society to try to make ourselves more important than women who are not White instead of using our privilege to support each other as women, mothers, and daughters. Referring to recovering from her district DEI job, once she released her focus on wanting to be accepted or liked by everyone, her life shifted, “and it’s been liberating.” Sharon expands that White women’s obsessive need to stay on top, to be “acceptable” to the White patriarchy, “keeps us from being empathetic, from having empathy even for other White women.” White women, she says, jockey with each other for the acceptance and attention of men. Drawing from her antiracist standpoint she adds, “White women are the common

denominator, so I don't know that their relationship with Black women is fraught so much as their relationship with women [overall] is fraught." Furthermore, she says, it is something Black women do not understand about us.

It's not just racism that is systemic; sexism is, too. Sharon talks about the number of women across generations who don't believe they've experienced sexism. Yet "when you leave work at 10:00 at night and have to walk to your car eight blocks away, alone, I can tell you, my husband and my sons wouldn't worry about that." That inability to feel safe, because of the body we inhabit, "cascades out" from just walking to the car. Inhabiting a body that is not male is dangerous. Inhabiting a body that is also not White is even more dangerous.

Since we are talking about layers of privilege, I ask Sharon what she thinks about what happens when our privileged race converges with our unprivileged sex especially in the workplace. Our conversation takes an insightful turn into how, when we let go of the fear of not being the best, those convergences can lose their perceived threat. She believes that her upbringing informs this. Being raised to believe that as a woman "the most important thing was to be accepted by men," and the best she could ever hope for was to "not be a bother," she found herself constantly driven and sustained by the need for acceptance and validation, and that created anxiety in how she moved through life and her career. The biggest lesson she's learned "has been getting over myself." She has learned that the constant striving for approval from others, and certainly not having it from herself, has "contaminated" so much of her earlier life. "Some of the bad experiences I've had would never have happened if I'd had more confidence [in my self-worth], and others that were pretty good would have been so much better." She notes that we have to stop being afraid to perhaps offend someone, to make a wrong move, to lose a job. Fully acknowledging that this is a financially privileged standpoint she can take at this time

in her life, she explains that getting over her unmitigated drive for acceptance opened the door to being able to be antiracist and practice ally behaviors. “Particularly White people worry about losing our jobs over taking a stand. The bigger price is actually your mental health. Figuring out how to be voice for racial justice and maintain your mental health—that’s a much bigger risk.” Furthermore, when we drop our fears of being “good,” being “accepted,” we can see our way to building coalitions rather than competitions.

When we build coalitions, the choice between race or sex changes. If we are supporting each other with the tools and access points we have, and find people who stand with us emotionally, we move past what should be a false dichotomy. When she considers the time and care that her friends of color have invested in her, “I feel an obligation to use what has been shared with me to do good.” For Sharon, there is plenty to go around. “When I have an opportunity that I can share, I’m going to look for a person of color at the top of my list, unapologetically. I want to share opportunities, not hoard them.” This is a way to use unearned White privilege that “shifts power and can make change.” She thinks of herself as a bit of a “bridge builder,” which underscores her call for coalition building. In reflecting on learning to see herself as a “good enough” person, she notes, “it says a lot when you share your capital. [It’s] sort of where the rubber hits the road.”

On Being Human:

Sharon has been so generous and open in our first two interviews that I am very much looking forward to how she chooses to round out my picture of someone who is antiracist and a social justice advocate and also human. It’s easy to see her (and all the participants) through a sort of monolithic lens and forget that they have all the rest of the human challenges and

insecurities the rest of us have. She is in the southwest both for business and pleasure and has graciously kept our meeting time.

Consequently, we meet on Zoom in a different place, a vacation rental, where she's at the dining room table with a neat, shiny white kitchen over her left shoulder. Over her right shoulder is a wall that separates the two rooms and on which is a large gray and white sign that says, "Thankful for the little things." Even though this isn't her home that she decorated, the sign does represent part of Sharon's philosophy to recognize and name what's good, to recognize progress as good, and stay present. Today she is wearing a charcoal pull-over hoodie and is without any jewelry. I realize that I have come to really look forward to her honest, open demeanor and those direct, clear eyes behind the cat-eye glasses.

Because this particular interview is not structured around any specific aspect of the research question but is meant to round out Sharon as a human being, she doesn't really have the opportunity to structure her narrative as she has done previously by going back to her history to contextualize her present. So to respect her way of expressing herself, I will start at the end of our conversation to provide the context for this present interview. While we are wrapping up our time, and I ask her if there's anything else she'd like to talk about, she brings up she fears that she didn't center her race or economic privilege, that she's found herself doing that when she's asked to focus on her life. "My Whiteness is so present, and I never name it, and I don't address antiracism, and I think that's strong through this conversation." She calls this a "remnant of my White privilege." I tell her that, in fact, while she may not explicitly name it, I have an idea of her from our previous work and that I can hear the antiracist connections as part of the person she just is. She acknowledges that one of the powerful things about qualitative interviewing is

that “the way people are just comes out. It's embedded in the way they see the world.” To honor this, while I tell this part of Sharon’s story, I will include the connections I see.

Our discussion around influential people in her life centers around how willing she is to open herself up to learning and self-reflection. Without this ability, and the willingness to use it, Sharon couldn’t be the antiracist and ally she’s always becoming. Her first answer is that her oldest son has been most influential in her life in “sheer volume,” meaning of all the people she’s influenced by, he’s been with her the longest. She was a single mother with him for eight years, which she describes as, “a profound experience to live with one other being who is dependent on you.” Moreover, “if you really love someone, then love is not a noun, it’s a verb. It’s a choice of an action.” In another pattern that has started to emerge as she has become more comfortable with our conversations is her use of dry humor to sometimes counter intense comments. It’s often mildly self-deprecating. In this case, she notes, this person you’re responsible for “is your thing, you know, this being...and then the cats. Those have been my longest standing relationships.” She notes that her other two children have of course been impactful, as has her husband; “they just haven’t been around as long.” In fact, she says, having a daughter has been “the most humbling experience of my life.” She also points out what she calls “hundreds of seconds” on the list of influential people, especially professionally.

I ask her why she thinks she her list is so extensive. I ask her if it’s because she seems to be so open to what other people are saying and experiencing, that not all people are so open. She believes that everyone has been influenced, but for some those early experiences have shut them off to new ones. She describes herself as a “sometimes quite painfully flexible thinker, very reflective and super willing to look at myself.” This is part of what underscores her antiracist standpoint and her ability to employ ally behaviors. “I am infinitely connected to growing and

getting better.” What brought her to this, she says, is her early family experiences. Her parents’ hyper-focus on her brother rather than on her and her sister manifested as a “lack of interest” in what she was doing so that “in many ways, I raised myself.” Without that parental validation she was left feeling “like I need to find my own answers, somewhere, because I do want to know; I don’t want to feel insecure.” This has led her, in all things, “to seek toward knowledge and gain those feelings of security.” Not only does this provide a foundation for her career as a researcher and teacher, it also shows why she can naturally make herself open to how to promote racial justice.

I ask her how, with this way of being in the world, she grounds herself, as it seems to me that this sort of open-mindedness could be disconcerting. “Oh,” says Sharon, “that has been its own journey in itself.” From the philosophical and spiritual traditions she likes to read, she’s learned that “we’re born as perfectly imperfect beings, but when we encounter the world, it tells us to shun certain parts of ourselves, to hide them.” Since humans are “wired for acceptance,” we bury the things that we learn will harm being accepted. Then, as we go through life seeking connection and authenticity, we find that this inauthentic way of being takes us “out of touch with our whole selves.” This is what leads to what is often referred to as a “midlife crisis,” one that sends us to find our true self and that is often triggered by something traumatic. In Sharon’s case, this final straw was a destructive friendship with a woman she trusted but who was adept at manipulating Sharon’s insecurities, to the extent that Sharon began to believe things about herself that were not true. In particular she found herself either too afraid to ask questions and make statements or too aggressive in confronting others’ words and behaviors. She had become “afraid of her voice,” and recognizes her susceptibility to this woman’s manipulations as the culmination of experiences that taught her that she “wasn’t enough.” And that, in particular, is

what she has turned around and that has paved the way to her being an effective antiracist and aspiring ally. Now she knows to “listen to the voice inside and bring it into the world in a way that’s compassionate but also sets boundaries. I know now that I am enough.”

We reach a natural pause, and I decide to throw out a question that feels like it will connect to the path of this conversation. I ask her if she could change one thing in the world, big or small, what would it be. I already know she would eliminate all forms of injustice if she could, so I’m curious outside of that. Her answer leads us into a fascinating conversation about the mind-body connection. This connection is part of how she stays grounded, and it is also a source of challenge, both internally as someone who struggles with anxiety and externally as someone who inhabits a White body. She starts out sharing that this trip she’s on has created an extraordinary and entirely unexpected amount of anxiety that is playing out in her body. “Stress hormones, in small doses, are really useful, but in the degree that they are infusing me right now, it’s destructive; it creates inflammation.” This is especially cogent for Sharon because she lives with “advanced cardiovascular disease” which is “hereditary, but I haven’t helped myself.” Stress and anxiety, in particular, are not good. She observes, “I think we tend to be either sad or anxious, and I tend to be anxious.” Significantly, this is what has led her to her yoga practice, which is a defining aspect of her life, a counter to another defining aspect of her heart disease.

Sharon began practicing yoga in 2006 and soon found the mental and spiritual transformations that have supported her. “The body movements change us. Yes, they make us more fit, but they also move energy in our body, and so they shift things in a way that just helps us be emotionally healthier.” When she started, she actually found that the physical practice came easy, quickly being able to execute complicated and demanding poses and sequences that allowed her to do the body work she was seeking. This yoga practice became a mainstay of her

life and a source of satisfaction and growth. However, the combination of the pandemic and her heart surgery has created a big shift in how she practices. True to her openness to learning, “my growth in yoga comes when I’m in class with a teacher.” Now she does a home practice, which she has figured out how to make meaningful, but it’s not the same. Also, she can no longer physically do some of the poses because they are dangerous for her. “And so I’m a much different practitioner now, and I’ve talked to my teachers about it, and they tell me it’s still a practice.” Just not the one she found so much fulfillment in before. She does not aspire to be a yoga teacher. “I am really clear that I want to be in the student space. I want to receive, I don’t want to give, when I’m practicing.” For someone who lives so much of her life in the giving space, this seems entirely reasonable to me and is an example of the boundaries she has learned to draw, to know what is good for her and what isn’t.

Talking about her changing yoga practice leads me to ask Sharon what types of stories and narrations she enjoys, thinking that there are other ways to destress than physical activity. Her immediate answer is that she is “averse to things that are overly violent or overly sexual for the purpose of being violent or sexual,” which we both agree is a lot of what’s available these days. She’s watched “every single episode of every single Shonda Rhimes series that exists” because she wants to watch character-driven stories without having to work hard to know the characters. She didn’t used to watch television or take time to read novels, but in the last few years, she’s realized how freeing they can be. “I feel sort of like I’m being tugged at all the time from a whole bunch of directions,” so to be able to “receive and not put a lot of effort into it” feels good. When it comes to reading, she has to read so much for her job that she’s gotten away from it, but podcasts on her regular six-mile walks help her learn about something without “going to get the book that’s going to be on my shelf that I might make it through the first

chapter.” She is trying to work back into reading novels because she misses using that part of her brain. “It feels luxurious when we’re on vacation and I always take a book and read on the beach. I feel like that is the ultimate luxury.” Being able to relax and read a novel “is a sign that I have the right amount of space in my life.”

And this brings us around to where I started this part of Sharon’s story—at naming her Whiteness and acknowledging her privilege. For her, when she thinks back on this conversation, it’s very White, it’s very privileged. And it is. What makes it actually antiracist, however, is that this growth, this making space in her mind and body, this clearing of negativity, is what actually allows her to be as deeply committed as she is. To feel the constant moral obligation to do everything within her sphere of influence to address racial inequality, she also has to have the mental clarity and stillness to be effective and keep herself emotionally healthy. This mental stamina comes along with the need for physical stamina since stress and anxiety pull at the body. While she never says this, I am reminded of the cliché, “You can’t be there for someone else if you aren’t there for yourself.” Sharon’s commitment to self-transformation is also an expression of her commitment to transforming the world around her.

The Lotus Flower:

Pulling together my heady conversations with Sharon is both challenging and rewarding. Any attempt to synthesize feels reductive, so true to my way of seeking clarity, I decide to apply a symbol to Sharon that is both illustrative and constructive. It may seem trite, given Sharon’s explicit study of Buddhist philosophy, but a wonderful way to get a handle on how this advocate for racial equity moves through the world with this identity is to use the symbol of the lotus flower.

For some background, lotus flowers have rich symbolic history across millennia, most cogent for contemporary times within Buddhist and Hindu philosophies. Lotus flowers grow in swampy, muddy water, but the flowers emerge, clean and fragrant, out of the muck. For Buddhists, this is a symbol that out of ugliness and impurity, something perfect can flourish, perhaps even because of the ugliness and impurity. Moreover, as a representation of the universal soul, it can also communicate that all wisdom is inside us all along, if we seek to find it. Different colors of lotus flower have different symbologies, but I think red applies best to Sharon. It represents compassion, heart, and our original nature. In talking with Sharon, she acknowledged that this resonated with her.

To begin with, Sharon's *journey* can definitely be characterized as emerging from muddy water. She has come back multiple times to the influence of her upbringing in a household that devalued women as less than and openly showered praise and attention on the son. In addition, her mother's Christian fundamentalism and her centering of the church in Sharon's life reinforced those teachings. Because her father did not share this religious philosophy, or any religion for that matter, there was mixed messaging that pointed suggested there was another way. This certainly didn't negate his sometimes abusive behavior or her whole family's privileging of maleness, but he was another, influential lens. As Sharon confirms, this internalizing of her lack of worth took a lot of "undoing," of "rolling back." She tells me much of her earlier professional experiences where the lack of self-worth made her susceptible to bad actors and toxic situations. What she acknowledges, however, is that it is precisely these painful and soul-wounding experiences and people that spurred her to find and be better. In traversing these muddy waters, she found solace in therapy and in her yoga practice. She credits her work in therapy for contributing to her transformation because it has made room for empathy. She

explains that we use up so much psychic and physical room by pushing down what we fear instead of confronting it. That often can leave us ill-prepared to have compassion for ourselves and others. “The more we are broken inside, or wounded, or traumatized, the more all of that gets triggered when we’re in any sort of conflict or discomfort.” So healing that is paramount to finding the peace and strength to listen and react with compassion and empathy. This is especially crucial in having an antiracist standpoint. Not only does it help her as a White person be open to learning without defensiveness, it also allows her to hear the experiences of people of color in a way that leads to supportive ally behavior. She has shared throughout our time together that this growth toward healing is ongoing; her roots continue to ground themselves in the muddy bottoms as the foundations of what drive her. But her ability to push up through that to be nourished by ever clearer water and, eventually, the air and sun has expanded.

This growth has also been nourished by a naturally *humble and curious* approach to life. For much of her life, she sought knowledge to assuage her sense that she needed to know more in order to feel confident in how she moved through the world and brought value to relationships and work projects. Coming at knowledge-seeking from a place of feeling devalued seems to have precluded the arrogance that can come from thinking we know things. She addresses how she can be amazed at times how people can elevate their news-bite opinions over another person’s years of study and commitment to understanding racist structures and their results. She shares repeatedly how nurturing and gratifying it is working in a place that values not just women, but her expertise in particular. This has been a significant turning point in allowing her curiosity to flow because she does not feel judged for it. Instead, she is looked to as someone who can, with compassion and knowledge, ask the right questions at the right time in the service of impacting systems of racial injustice that are within her purview to impact. She regularly

acknowledges friends, colleagues, and others she counts as “teachers.” We just don’t know how to find the light, or even that there is a light, if we aren’t open to learning. White women “are conditioned to feel like we have to be it all, and then, when we can’t, we fall short,” and we blame ourselves for not being able to “fix it.” But really what we need to do open our minds and ears and absorb everything, even if it’s swampy and muddy. Face it, name it, move through it. Use it to emerge better.

Emerging better, for Sharon, is an absolute *moral obligation*. There is no room in her philosophy, both spiritual and more temporal, for a mindset that doesn’t believe that those who have the resources *must* work for the advancement of social justice for any who are oppressed. For Sharon, racial oppression is at the root of all other oppression, driven by a White, capitalist, patriarchal hegemony. Asking the oppressed to be solely responsible for changing the systems that are designed to keep them oppressed is just another fiction of the power structure. Therefore, it is incumbent for White people to use whatever power their privilege affords them in their own contexts to break this hold. Sharon has shared the epiphanic moment in grad school when, listening to a Black woman narrate an experience, she connected the pieces of the systems she was already involved in. She’s always been driven by her sense of morality to help. What she’s learned over time, however, is what it means to help “authentically and effectively.” Sometimes it just means asking a colleague of color who has to shoulder more than she does what she can take off her plate: “Can I be the person to write the email, or whatever, just like do some of those tangible things.” And sometimes it means being the critical voice in the room, asking the hard questions, and making people look at their words and decisions. This is how Sharon has chosen to find the light, to swim up through the murk. This is one way people can,

along with all the other lotus plants in the pond, break the water's surface and reach up and out, completely transformed from how we started.

The last thing Sharon asks me before we sign off is what I might tell my best friend I've learned from doing this study. I admit to her that I've been so busy focusing on the doing of the study that I haven't had much time to know how to articulate that. My somewhat anemic answer is pretty much that I can't wait to have time to actually do something for people instead of studying about it. Her response encapsulates our time together. Ever the valued teacher and the valued participant, she tells me, "So I want to encourage you to think about, as opposed to what you can do for other people, to think about how you can contribute to changing the systems. That's where the real deal is in terms of our anti-racism." And I envision that lotus rising above the water, each petal opening and revealing what could (and should) be our shared humanity.

Portrait of Beth:

Beginning:

For a bit, I despaired of finding a fifth participant. So I was very grateful that Beth was willing to talk with me, and although I was a bit concerned that she might not be able to commit, I also knew I'd be just fine if she didn't. Meeting her for the first time over Teams as she sat in her university café with a Starbucks in her hand, it didn't take long for me to really hope she'd want to be part of the project as she brought a perspective the other four did not have.

Beth comes across at first as a bit shy. She's a little halting in her conversation, and she has a sort of nervous laugh. I later learned that she's not shy at all—she's a fantastic storyteller. She has long blond hair parted down the middle that she frequently pulls back from her face and lets fall forward again. She looks like an athlete (I later learn that she is) and is clearly very physically fit, making her appear far younger than her 52 years. She is enthusiastic, voraciously

read, and committed to social justice. She is the director of online education at a large public R1 university in the Southwest United States.

The cause of what seems like her discomfort becomes clear immediately. Beth shares that she is unsure about participating, so I ask her if it's a time issue or something I can mitigate. She reluctantly tells me that she doesn't think she can help me because she doesn't feel as though she's ever been discriminated against as a woman. I couldn't be more intrigued by this and tell her that I'm not seeking identical viewpoints and experiences, that her experiences as a woman in higher education are just as valid as anyone else's. In fact, this viewpoint would give depth to the project. Assured that she wouldn't be "messing things up," she agrees to participate.

Beth makes sense of her life through physical activity, being outdoors, and reading. She evolved into this work by way of creating online curriculum for the National Park Service, and her heart is still firmly there. She gravitated to her current job as an opportunity to increase access and equity in education at one of the largest and most racially diverse public universities in the nation. She wants to offer alternative and flexible models but is finding that university politics plus resistance from more traditionally minded faculty is an uphill battle that "just completely baffles" her. "Why would anyone who cares about students and fairness in education fight this?"

Beth describes herself as an "individual contributor who got promoted" without the proper training in how to navigate tricky people-waters. She seems to come at her antiracist work almost organically from a deep-seated belief that every person has something to bring, that everyone is worthy of respect and consideration, that logical decisions should not be influenced by power dynamics, and that the end-goal (equity, access, uplift) is more important than

individual egos. I will come to find that Beth's unique path to this work and her equally unique view of the world will be a tremendous contribution to this study.

On Being an Ally:

Beth and I find that it's best for us to meet on Saturdays. This means I get to look forward to great conversation on what turns out to be one Saturday a month for four months. Because of unavoidable work and personal conflicts amongst the other participants, in fact, my meetings with Beth end up being interspersed with those of the other participants, despite coming to her later.

When I click into Teams, I encounter the space where we will have all our conversations, Beth's home office. Behind her is a table that today is empty, and on the pale, sage green wall behind her is a metal sculpture of butterflies arching toward the sky. She has clearly spent time with her conferencing set up. The camera feed is really clear, and the angle is set so that she's looking up a bit. She sits in a blue office chair that complements the dark blue rug, and she's wearing a light gray oversized blazer over a black blouse with white piping. Her long, straight blonde hair is parted in the middle and flows to the bottom of her rib cage. I know from our conversation about scheduling that she has spent the morning biking with some colleagues from work and wanted time to transition from that to our meeting. Nothing about her physically communicates that she's lived 52 years of life already.

I want to pick up from where we left off at our introductory meeting because I'd like to hear about the connection of working for the National Park Service and being an ally. I confirm what I suspected from our first encounter that Beth knows how to construct a good narrative that moves chronologically from point to point. What I learn about the Park Service provides both the foundation for and the validation of Beth's world view. She starts out revealing that as an

early undergrad, she was home for break and her family watched a movie centered around fighting forest fires. At that moment, Beth decided that was what she wanted to do. She returned to school and applied to the Park Service for seasonal work, not knowing at the time that firefighting is done by the U.S. Forest Service. This is the first instance of what I will call kismet because it is this application that starts her on the way to toward education and what becomes her antiracism. At first it appears to her on the application that she is not qualified for any of the jobs, but she digs deeper into the job of “interpretation,” learning that it did not mean interpreting languages other than English. In fact, it’s a term promoted by John Muir that means “interpreting natural history and cultural history. So helping people understand the meaning of the resources.” This appealed to the Communications major in her, and, in a last-minute scramble for staffing, she ended up being posted at the park where her father “did his master’s research, so as a very young child, I spent my first three summers on this wilderness island. My mom and I lived at a base camp in a tent while my dad was collecting data throughout the island.”

From there she experienced what seems to me to be a series of a combination of kismet and her ability to seize the opportunities presented. First, the wilderness island job resulted in her meeting the chief of that region who provided a cover letter on the ranger survey she did for her honors thesis. This meant she “had a pretty decent response rate,” which gave her rich data for what turned out to be an impressive piece of work that opened other doors for her. Second, during the next season, she was posted at a lakefront park that at the time was participating in a National Biological Survey. She notes that the chief there “was a very nice person who tried to encourage the careers of the seasonal workers.” Because of her thesis, he connected her with a former Park Service director who was working at a flagship R1 university in the Midwest known

for its environmental policy work. That resulted in her doing her master's research at that lakefront park centered on "environmental education in the k-12 setting." Third, while she was doing that work, a faculty member pointed her toward a substantial fellowship that was available if she would continue on her PhD there. Partnering with a large camera company, she conducted a Grounded Theory study asking people about "their most meaningful interpretive experiences they've had in trying to find out what the elements of those meaningful experiences were." I find all this to be important detail because Beth presents this as almost coincidence, or kismet. She acknowledges that she worked hard to honor the opportunities, but she also communicates this feeling of "right place, right time." While I'm listening to this fascinating biography, I make a note to ask her about the role privilege plays in the appearance of these opportunities.

Beth is then met with a series of life challenges that she also frames as situations that simply popped up and had to be addressed. Having married right after her undergraduate work, she had to decide whether to follow her heart and start a family or follow her heart to firefighter training which would take her away during the summers, not to mention to remote postings. She and her husband decided that they would prefer to have their children sooner rather than later so that "we'll be young when the kids go to college and we'll have more money to travel." Her oldest daughter, then, was born at the end of her master's work, but their plan to have another child right away didn't pan out. "So I ended up getting a PhD just because [my second daughter] didn't want to be born soon enough," she jokes, a fourth example of Beth following the path life throws out to her.

Three years later, as a stay-at-home mom living on the West Coast (where her husband's job brought them), her marriage began to unravel. In a fifth example of kismet, a colleague from the Park Service contacted her to "revise the curriculum and put it online." This took her back to

the university in the Midwest with her children to overhaul their interpretive training curriculum and make it accessible through the internet. In some ways, this makes Beth a bit of a pioneer in online education. At this time, in the early 2000s, this modality of education was in its infancy. She explains, “70,000 people needed that information; you have permanent park rangers who are federal employees, you have seasonals (6,000 to 8,000 every season),” including all of the contractors who get permits for their companies to operate in the parks. This is how she taught herself what good online education should be, how to deliver it with the technology available almost 20 years ago, and what the federal government thought these trainings should be. “We couldn’t leave anybody out,” even the solitary ranger up in Alaska “who in order to access the computer had to go to the maintenance shed that had a leaky roof to dial in on a modem.” This was the foundation for Beth understanding the power of online education to reach people who might not otherwise have access to education. “That was my dream job. It was incredible.”

And then, just as the funding for that job was running out, in example number six of destiny opening itself to her, Beth is contacted by a former professor who was now at a different university and offered her a job offer she couldn’t refuse—more money, an opportunity to build an experience-based undergraduate curriculum, and the opportunity to expand the use of her online platform. Her decision-making came back to her family: her research showed her that this new city was ranked as a top outdoor adventure city because of its proximity to iconic nature preserves and state and national parks. Even better, although she and her husband were leading “completely independent lives,” they still had not divorced. This new place was close enough to him to allow them to keep their kids in one house while each parent took turns living there. She took the job. Then, “he relocated to [city], and in 2010, we remarried. So it was a good decision.”

Fifteen years now at this university, she has built on all these experiences to dedicate her professional life to “the opportunity to help improve access to higher education.” She continues her connections with the Park Service because “it’s the only agency that really has an education mandate in their enabling legislation.” The natural resources our national and state parks represent are core to Beth’s antiracist stance. “You need to understand our cultural and natural heritage in order to move forward and build a better future.”

This provides a natural segue into breaking down pieces of the research question that relate to social justice and allyship. When I ask her what in her view is a “socially just space” and how she makes them, she starts out with what I’m learning is her way of making sense of complexity: start big and funnel down. Consequently, she begins by explaining how the National Park Service addresses this. She has worked specifically with park ranger training and “helping develop materials for people on the front lines” who have to support the clear stance the Park Service has taken on climate change, on protecting both civil rights and Civil War areas, and on slavery as the cause of the Civil War. She notes that people visiting parks “bring all different perspectives to what they experience there,” in addition to different skill sets in how they communicate about what can be tough issues. This brings her to articulate what I will come to understand is at the core of how she sees the world and the people in it. “A socially just space is a space where people recognize that there are multiple perspectives and multiple lived realities. If we could get to where everyone recognized that each person’s experience was a true experience, then we would have social justice.” To illustrate this, she talks about the role of the park ranger. She explains that rangers help people filter the societal relevance of park resources through their own personal lenses, “which means there are many different meanings.” Questions like, “How does this enhance your life? What kind of changes in your personal life should you

make to preserve this?” are how rangers prompt people to “interpret” what they see. But, Beth says, she’s not sure “interpretation” is the right word because rangers aren’t providing meaning directly; they are leading people to find their own meanings. This is how we can advance social justice work.

Beth is very intentional in our conversation. She listens deliberately to my questions and provides full answers. Her hand gestures are spare, often folded in front of her while she’s formulating her thoughts and punctuating her conversation with a sort of encompassing sweep of one hand before they come back to center. While we have several things in common, one overriding one is our work in online higher education. It is a struggle across the industry to provide curated, online education at scale that addresses social justice and issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as being designed with those concepts in mind. Therefore, I am interested to hear her thoughts about creating socially just spaces online. To begin with, Beth’s online work is different from mine in that at her institution, current teaching faculty drive all the coursework. Her office’s job is to help them design and deliver quality online experiences. My university has an entire business arm that uses faculty as subject matter experts who guide and approve the experiences but who do not design them. That makes for differing areas of control. This starts the first of several conversations we have about the power dynamics with faculty in traditional higher education hierarchies.

For this time, we focus on the types of guidance her office provides to faculty as they design their online experiences. Beth says that social justice and DEI is “a lens I bring to every conversation” because it’s the right thing to do for their students. Her university is a designated high minority serving institution, especially for Hispanic and Asian Pacific Islander populations. “For the past three or four years, it has ranked the most diverse or tied for the most diverse

campus in the U.S.” There are many first-generation college students, it is not selective, and the moral imperative of the university is strong in providing education to these populations. “It’s one of the things that keeps me [here].” That puts her team of instructional designers in continual conversation with faculty about curricular decisions that impact equity. “We ask, ‘Hey, have you thought about this?’ And then, once we say it, they say, ‘Oh, ok, great!’ But they don’t know what they don’t know. And so that’s kind of what the role of my unit is.”

As the director of her unit, it is her job to help convince everyone of why these design approaches should be adopted, in addition to why more content overall should be available online. She talks about needing to disaggregate the data so there is a window into the needs of individual populations. “I’m a qualitative researcher, but I find myself advocating and championing many quantitative projects in the online space of learning analytics.” Noting that the in-person classroom can’t provide all the click-data that can be insightful to understanding how people learn, she tries to focus on things she can measure to convince people of good results. “Things don’t happen in our society unless you’re measuring it. Improvement can happen if we just talk about it clearly.” On the other hand, she doesn’t particularly like this measurement focus. She references a Brené Brown podcast in which the message was “stop asking for an ROI on diverse and inclusive practices. It sends the message that we will only do it if it makes money versus you’re a human, and you deserve to have these things.” In addition, she notes that it is her privilege speaking that she can actually have a conversation about whether to rely on money as a deciding factor. “I don’t have the lived experience of how shitty it must feel to have someone say we’re only going to do this [diverse and inclusive] thing if it makes money. I can be practical about it because I’m not living with the aggression and oppression.”

This naturally brings us to discussing Beth's concept of allyship and how she feels about being identified as an ally. I see her shoulders drop and she looks down, searching for words for the first time. Her face softens and she is clearly moved, which took her by surprise: "funny, that's an emotional question. I'm grateful that someone would see me that way and also humbled that who I am and what I do is seen." Moreover, this brings her back to her worldview that the "foundation of social justice is honoring all perspectives." She talks extensively then about her juxtaposition with another colleague in her office who is more adamant about rigorously holding people to very high standards and accountability. Beth has employees who have come to this work with varying backgrounds and degrees of readiness. She states, "this is who we have on our team. We have to make it work." In particular she notes that "you have to respect that they are doing their best" and coach and train them from there. "Value that lived experience regardless of what the particular difference is." She acknowledges that outlook on people also allows her to address performance issues in a less confrontational way and to avoid the bureaucracy and negativism of holding people more aggressively accountable. While Beth has no problem standing up for herself, she would rather avoid conflict if she can help people grow through coaching and empathy.

She shares that she developed a lens into racial inequality growing up in Detroit for most of her school years. Her father taught in a Detroit public school that was 95 percent Black, and so her racial interactions were mostly with Black people. When she came to her current university and encountered mostly Hispanic and LatinX populations, she experienced a learning curve that expanded her worldview. What she remembers most about Detroit is the shift in her friend group as she got older. She attended a prep school for scholar athletes that included many Black students. Her closest friend in middle school was Black. But by the time they were

“upper classmen we had a special commons area where we could all hang out,” and people tended to group by race, and it became hard to maintain closeness with her friend. As a White person, at that time she did not understand this. We talk about Beverly Tatum.

Beth tends to lean on the side of progress rather than focusing on what’s happened before. She takes the stance that “progress has been made” and that it’s our job to keep pushing it forward. She believes that “pushing people into a corner” with overly aggressive accusations isn’t useful. “You don’t want people despairing,” she says. “You have to think about the modes of human motivation. If you’re not giving people a reason to hope, then what are you giving them?” She talks to me about the Four Truths articulated by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in response to the aftermath of that country’s apartheid. The Park Service teaches these to their rangers in their interpretive work. Supporting Beth’s view that each person carries their own perspective, she talks about forensic truth (the clear facts as we know them), personal truth (the lived experiences of people), social truth (that constructed from multiple personal narratives), and public truth (the reconciliatory process that exposes conflicting personal and social truths that need to be confronted).

It's time for us to be finish and schedule our next meeting. I learn that she does a long bike ride with a group every Saturday morning, so we plan for what is later in the afternoon for me. I am looking forward to talking with Beth more. Her stance of acceptance with struggle and patience with learning is fascinating. As well, I wonder how someone navigates life when all truths she encounters are to be honored and respected. I know we will get there next time.

On Being a Woman:

I am very much looking forward to this meeting with Beth because we are going to talk about being a woman in higher education who’s creating socially just spaces. She had been

hesitant about being a participant because she doesn't believe she's ever encountered sexism or sex discrimination. Fortunately, she trusted me when I told her that all perspectives were needed and would give depth to this project. At the same time, my own life experiences make me really curious to hear how this could possibly be so.

When we click on Teams, I am shown a wider view of her home workspace than I had last time. The table behind her is actually attached to the wall on one side, and I wonder if it folds up to provide flexibility in the space. There is a vase with a colorful riot of a bouquet on the table. Off to the side of the table is a bookshelf neatly tucked away in a nook. This larger picture shows me the efficiency and almost minimalism of a space she spends a lot of time in. That streamlined room echoes Beth's pragmatic and clear focus on her work and on how things should be. Today, she is wearing a burgundy-colored sweater that complements her coloring, and her cascading hair is wavy. She is drinking tea out of a huge travel mug.

We seem to be developing a pattern of getting into the day's topic by talking about our mutual love/hate of online education. These conversations inevitably roll into how challenging it is to create more flexible, equitable access to education while contending with current traditional faculty roles. Today we start talking about higher education as a business, and therefore, what we offer is a product. For products to be successful, we need to meet and respond to the needs and wants of the customer, who is the student. Together, we fly through the litany of contemporary higher education "innovations:" eliminate barriers to completion, competency-based curriculum, smaller chunks of learning, self-paced progress, alternative credentials, microcredentials, badges. This is an area of work we both have so much passion about, and I realize we need to shift into our topic for today, or we will run out of time. Beth gives me this springboard when she mentions for the first time what will become a refrain: "my

purpose is to make the world a better place, and I can do that through expanding access to quality higher education.” Making the world a better place, I will come to learn, is what defines Beth.

What I learn in my conversation with Beth about being a woman, in higher education, as any ally, is that I need to unpack much of what I hear in her stories. In a nutshell, Beth is aware of sexism and sexist behavior but in her life feels as though it has not deterred her. One reason is that men have consistently pointed her toward career opportunities. Another reason is that she has a talent for not paying attention to things she doesn't like and doing what she thinks is right, regardless.

For Beth, “the first time it ever occurred to me that there may be a gender issue” was during her doctoral work. In trying to set up a meeting with her committee, she mentioned that she could only meet at time when she had babysitter. Later, her female committee chair advised her, “don't ever say that; don't let people know you have a family” because that could bias their view of Beth and her commitment to any potential jobs. Her response to that was, “that's not who I am.” In fact, as a teaching assistant Beth brought her daughter into the office as she needed to. What she remembers thinking is indicative of her multiple-perspectives mindset. She appreciates that this older-than-her woman was trying to mentor her, but “she said that because that was true for her in the time that she raised her children.” Acknowledging that women of her chair's generation paved the way for Beth and the rest of us, “I recognized in that moment that that was real for her, and her advice was real, but I wasn't going to follow it.” She felt assured because of this woman's generation's work that she would never be excluded from anything she was doing because of her sex or her family status. Immediately after sharing this, however, Beth observes that “the male faculty would do things together,” and “there was a real strong gender divide as far as who's getting coffee together.” But she was a student at the time, and she did not

feel like she was treated any differently than male students. Importantly, she notes, “I’m pretty clueless to a lot of that kind of stuff. Why would someone do that?”

In pondering this a bit, she offers that she was brought up a bit non-traditionally. The “soundtrack of when I was girl” was *Free to Be, You and Me*, a 1972 album produced by Marlo Thomas. I remember listening to it, also, and hearing catchy songs that challenged the binary sex divisions in our society. She remembers funny, gentle lessons about how “William might want a doll” or that just because your dog is plumber doesn’t mean it’s a boy. She remembers spending summers in a tent while her father did his research. She is six years older than her next sister, so she had a close relationship with her father, “like I was my father’s only son,” she jokes, and even in her marriage many of the traditional, gender-specific tasks are reversed. Therefore, these traditional, binary constructions don’t exist in her life in a conscious way. “It’s just who I am in the world. I just don’t experience it. I don’t stand for it. It’s not that I don’t accept that it’s out there.” She again acknowledges that she can go forth in the world this way because of the work and sacrifices of women/people who came before her.

When she addresses how she might have experienced the convergence of her privileged race and nonprivileged sex, her view of the world and what drives her allyship really starts to take shape in my mind. I realize that when I listen to her, I don’t hear the language and experiences my other participants use. And yet, I know she’s an ally and that she works intentionally to make antiracist spaces. Because she is not in a designated DEI position, she doesn’t really think of herself as specifically fighting racism—she sees herself as fighting any unfairness, any aspect of discrimination or exclusion. Therefore, her answers to these kinds of questions revolve around her own personal struggles to understand people overall. In general, this means we address any issues of convergence or struggle with racial issues in terms of Beth

trying to parse out what happens because someone is BIPOC versus what's just someone's personality. Where does Beth need to listen with an ally ear, and where does she need to recognize what might be aggressive behavior that isn't obviously about race? And where does she need to understand what's racial and/or cultural that she needs to learn about?

Considering that, as the director of a university-serving unit, she interacts with people from all areas of the institution, she has noticed patterns of behavior she struggles with, regardless of someone's race. Beth approaches problems to be solved in logical, results-oriented ways and struggles with people who are more emotive. "Sometimes there can be a difference in volume and passion and energy level" that she needs to reconcile. Another difficult approach to figuring things out is what she calls "divergent thinkers" who are people who jump to "we should do" before the problems and frameworks have been identified to make good decisions. Even more difficult for her are people who use "too many words" when they are trying to explain something. This refers to people who think out loud and form their ideas while they are talking. None of these challenges seem race-specific to her; however, when the person behaving like this is a person of color, Beth knows she needs to examine her own reactions. She says that "she hasn't given much thought" to that intersection of race and gender, but her actions show that, at least unconsciously, she does. When the person who is behaving in these manners is also a person of color, "I make sure that I internally listen harder and look for the positive contributions rather than shutting myself down to what's being said." There is intentionality in her actions. "I make sure that there's enough space to ask if [what she's experiencing from others] is the wrong way to do it or just different," which leads her to recognizing that there are all sorts of cultural ways of working that she needs to adjust to.

Another example she gives of her intersectional experiences involves a Black woman who has been extremely persistent in asking Beth and her team to get something done. Beth acknowledges that the woman comes from a place of passion and the drive to redress a systemic injustice in their online work. Beth has assured her that the issue has been solved as the woman asked, but the woman also wants training on the problem to happen from the highest levels down. She notes that she's "a little afraid" of this woman "because she gets angry" really easily, but simultaneously, her aggressive persistence makes Beth feel like she's being "pushed or like I wasn't prioritizing this enough," even though she's done everything she can do up to this point. Beth's interactions with the woman, however, come from a place of compassion and a desire for everyone to feel heard. "I try to be super kind and say, 'Hey, thanks for your concern. We have it covered, but thanks for making me aware of that, and you can stop making me aware of that.'"

I ask her if the woman were not Black, would Beth confront this behavior. She says no, that she interacts with another faculty member, who is White, who is also "kind of a bulldog," but Beth approaches her with the same listening stance. She notes that the Black woman she's trying hard to understand wants letters of completion for this project for her annual review. Beth has told her more than once that she will be happy to write the letter when the project is complete. She doesn't understand why this woman needs so much validation when other Black members of this project don't behave this way. In asking herself this, she decides that women overall who behave this way may be doing so out of insecurity. "They just always push themselves hard and then push everyone around them hard." I talk with her about the literature on the Black faculty experience, the need to prove themselves in ways White faculty do not and the expectations for faculty of color that are above and beyond those of White faculty. We talk about how those things are true for women of all races but multiplied exponentially for female

faculty of color. This causes Beth to be very reflective: “I don’t think I think enough about the structural racism that is playing in my interactions.”

As she continues to reflect, she comes back to her focus on multiple lived realities. She admits that she has a very hard time holding people accountable for their work and behavior. When someone, anyone, doesn’t behave as they should, she says she doesn’t really understand. However, in listening to her, I wonder if she does understand but gives so much credence to that person’s experience that it doesn’t seem fair to her to judge them against her own. She mentions that she feels like she “doesn’t have the skillset to hold people accountable” for the way they show up, for how to address and fix what can lead to a toxic environment. I see this as an opportunity to ask her if she thinks being a woman has anything to do with that. She says no, that from a leadership standpoint, she reports to a woman, that the provost intentionally “wants to provide a pathway for women in higher education.” She comes back to thinking it’s just her personality and her difficulty with holding people accountable in relationship to their behavior toward her. She talks about a White woman starting to cry right in the middle of a meeting because she feels overwhelmed. She notes that derailed the meeting, and other people’s topics ended up not being aired. That kind of emotional reaction in a group setting is “not fair to me, and it’s not fair to the other people in the meeting.” But knowing the multiple responsibilities this person has as a woman in our society, in higher education, she believes she also needs to support her. Therefore, she’s in a situation of self-conflict again regarding how to talk to the woman about her behavior. She notes that part of what spurred the overwhelmed crying is around being a working mother. However, Beth notes, being a mother of a White son is nothing compared to being the mother of a Black son. “I cannot even begin to fathom the level of worry

you have as the mom of a Black son. I will never have that experience. The burden that those Black moms are carrying everyday” makes the burdens of White moms pale in Beth’s eyes.

While Beth herself may not be able to articulate it, she does, in fact, think intersectionally. She just frames everything in terms of “fairness” and being “compassionate to people’s lived experiences.” She knows that “there are many different ways I have privilege,” but that privilege also helps her understand privilege so she can be a better actor. Mostly, she thinks we should all give ourselves and each other more grace. “We’re all working at different levels and expectations, so how can you hold people accountable to the same standards?” She references a well-known cartoon about accessibility that depicts people watching a soccer game through a fence: what tools, in Beth’s mind, what grace, do we need to afford people of different heights to enable them all to watch the game with the same view? She notes the very real traumas she has experienced in the last two years that she has had to deal with. “Some people just have higher levels of being able to cope with the world,” and we need to meet people where they are. That includes structural inequalities that need to be accounted for

This brings us full circle to Beth’s experiences with gender discrimination. “I probably have been influenced by gender bias, but I couldn’t identify it. I have never felt like something has been denied me [because I’m a woman]. And if it has, I didn’t notice it.” But what’s more important to her is that others have. “I might not experience it, but it’s real for other people.” That’s how she sees issues of race, also. That’s why we all have to understand that we’re all struggling with something.

It’s time for us to end, and I realize I’ve been given insight into someone who comes at being an ally almost instinctually and who doesn’t particularly parse areas of injustice into different buckets like “race” or “sex.” Everyone deserves to get what they need to be able to

watch the soccer game over the fence. “I look for the good in someone, instead of just seeing where people are falling short. I work at that. You just have to give people grace.”

On Being Human:

By our third interview, it has become clear to me that the linear Q&A approach to spurring Beth to talk is not the most effective. First, she is extraordinarily generous with sharing her thoughts and feelings, so it takes very little prompting. She is committed to giving back and helping a fellow qualitative researcher do her work. Second, our conversations definitely follow the flow of her thinking processes. It’s not exactly stream of consciousness because she is more deliberate about answering specifically. However, Beth takes tangents and swirls and then comes back to the topic, so it works best if I just listen and clarify and then later connect the information. Therefore, I prompt ideas here and there but work more precisely to really listen to the flow and meaning of Beth’s life experiences.

Today I meet Beth through Teams again in her home office. Her hair is straight and pulled back in a messy ponytail. Her camera angle has changed so that I can only see her head and the top of her shoulders, which means I miss a lot of the punctuating hand gestures I have come to appreciate. She is wearing a light blue hoodie sweatshirt; I notice that she seems to surround herself with a lot of blue. Another, fresh-looking bouquet is in the vase behind her next to what looks like a burning three-wick candle that I assume is scented.

To get the conversation started, I ask who her most influential person is, and we have a brief conversation about her oldest daughter. As someone who started out in the fashion industry, she was a bit of a puzzle to Beth for whom “fashion is not a priority.” However, during the last election, her daughter worked in digital marketing for a major candidate, and that led her to the ecological, sustainability, and political aspects of fashion. This turned her more and more

to environmental issues so that she now works for an international environmental organization in the United Kingdom. Beth is so proud of her for following a path, finding a purpose, and working to make the world better. These are themes I will hear repeated in what is important to Beth.

This idea of being devoted to looking outside yourself to find meaning is crucial to Beth. The conversation turns to the progressive losses she's experienced over the last two or so "pandemic years" that are hard on their own but have been especially impactful because they have impinged on her ability to look beyond her current moment. The first loss came in the form of a back injury that has taken away her ability to run. This was truly life-changing for Beth. Not only was running a physical activity she relied on, but it was also an identity. "That was huge, losing running. I can still run occasionally, but, like, I was a *runner*, you know?" To compensate for this, Beth will do a triathlon here and there. Mostly now she rides a stationary bike, "but it's not the same because it's like a treadmill essentially," and if she doesn't "watch a show or something else I would just die of boredom." Beth does not find centering in activities like yoga; she needs more explicitly active outlets. Not being "out on the trail" training for an ultra or a marathon has eliminated the "contemplative time that I had putting in all those miles." She deliberately used that time outside, undergoing extreme physical exertion, to "work through tricky issues" or to "think up analogies we could use to address" complicated situations. Many of these situations are how she works to make the world around her better, so losing this meditative time has changed how she approaches life. She also used it as time to "work out the crazy," which she can do on the indoor bike, but it's just not the same as being outside, under her own power.

Not having the goal and achievement of competing in an ultra or a marathon has changed how she thinks about herself. Biking outside is not a good substitute for her because she's a "nervous biker," and she tells the story of a conversation that happened at the end of a 60-mile ride: "My friends said, 'Did you see the mountain lion carcass by the side of the road, and did you see that goat?' And I'm thinking, 'no, but I saw *every single one* of the rocks right in front of my tires.'" While we definitely talk more explicitly about running during this meeting, it has been a thread from our very first introduction. Listening to her now, I understand better why it's actually tied to who she is and how she has approached life. Her worldview that people's individual lived experiences need to be honored makes for complicated work interactions. Her personal struggle to understand why people would ever behave in ways that create unfairness and injustice require some outlet and time for her to sort out. She used to do this through extreme physical challenge, defining herself in the process. Now that is mostly gone, and Beth has had to figure out how to replace that.

The next set of losses came one after the other soon after she learned she could no longer run. First, Beth was diagnosed with melanoma. Fortunately, it only had to be treated with surgery, but it was the first serious illness she had ever faced and the first major surgery. "It is a scary kind of cancer. I had a big chunk taken out of my back because they had to go really deep." She's still recovering from that, she tells me, and processing that she had cancer. However, several months after this surgery, her cherished father died. Not only was this in itself an unfathomable loss for Beth, but it came on the heels of losing running and her cancer diagnosis. Realizing that she wasn't functioning as she should, she got the school year started and then "took a solo hiking trip" for a week. Taking only what she could carry on her back, she threw herself into nature as a way to process...everything. Her life felt turned upside down, and

true to her what she terms her “self-centered” way of dealing with things, she needed time alone and a way to come back and deal with the world. However, when she came back, she started to experience balance issues and was subsequently diagnosed with an acoustic neuroma. “It’s benign, and they knew it when they saw it, but it had to come out because it was pressing on my brainstem.” The result of this mid-pandemic surgery, meaning no one could be in the hospital with her, is that she is now “single-sided deaf” and has had to understand what it’s like to become “a person with an invisible disability.” I’m a little speechless after hearing all this. She has mentioned each one of these things during our previous conversations, but she did not put them in context or order with each other until now.

In truth, her experiences of those 18 to 24 “COVID months” parallel in my own life what the two of us end up calling the “cascading trauma” of that time period, mine too being a combination of deaths and serious illnesses. But what surfaces from this sharing of life-changing situations is deep insight into what drives Beth. She first starts out using running imagery. She tells me she’s learned “there is no finish line,” that “life is a marathon, and you have to pace yourself.” She uses these metaphors because “life makes sense to me because of the physical activities I do.” Having previously learned from her how she has moved through various jobs with the purpose of making education accessible, this image of continual journey and improvement makes sense. On further contemplation, however, Beth offers a refinement of this idea. Sharing that she is reading a book on leadership that analyzes the journals of Lewis and Clark, she talks about the idea that has resonated with her the most. “They got to the top of a mountain range, and they thought they were going to see the Pacific Ocean, and what they saw was the next mountain range.” Instead of looking at that and thinking “we’re fucked, the next morning [one of them wrote in his journal], ‘And so we carried on.’” Beth thinks back on the

recent and past challenges and switchbacks in her life, including when her husband decided they needed to separate. During grad school, “I thought we are climbing the mountain range, and when we get to the top we’ll see Happy Valley, and then the rest of our life is Happy Valley.” Thinking, as many young people do, that “you get to be a grown up and then life stabilizes,” she now knows that’s “totally not true.” The marathon is really one more mountain range, with peaks and valleys, and we just carry on. This is not communicated with fatalism or pessimism but with a feeling of groundedness, of now understanding how to approach and absorb life, of what her value is now in her job and how she can be of service to people. Of how to think about the next mountain range with clear eyes.

This leads us to a conversation about mindfulness. It comes as no surprise at this point that Beth does not find a sense of being centered from practices that feel slow to her, such as yoga. She acknowledges how physically difficult yoga practice is, and that she probably should do it, but it is not “fast enough” for her. What I think she means by this is that it doesn’t actively propel her physically forward from point to point, and it’s not outside moving through the world. She used to use baking as a way to center, “cute little things for holidays or whatever. But once the kids got older and life got busier—I just don’t bake anymore.” She even tried to bake healthier things, “but then I realized, ‘Oh, I can have five of these instead of just the one real rich one,’” and determined that, “I probably just need to do more physical activity rather than becoming a better baker.” But without that, and without running, she found herself a bit untethered, so she decided to prove to herself that she needed an office where she could go to practice mindfulness. Deciding that if she did some sort of light meditation and affirmation work every day for a month she could have an office, she started doing just that. Now she’s in the space she’s earned that I’ve been seeing during our time together, and every day she “sets an

intention. I pick a mantra for the day. It's become part of my daily routine." At certain points during the day, she asks herself, "What was my thing for this morning?" And then she will re-center around it. She notes, "It's not in my nature" to think this way, but she knows that "you just have to be in this moment because you're robbing from the future if you're worrying in the present." She credits Brené Brown for these insights and has even sought occasional therapy from a Brené Brown-certified therapist since the messages resonated so deeply.

When I ask her to tie the way she centers herself to her current work, she tells me that the combination of life experiences and this evolving philosophy has given her the courage to take risks that are actually "growth opportunities." When she was offered her current role, she thought it would "require a skillset I [didn't] have. And so let me see if I can get it." She did not want to miss an opportunity to open up access to higher education to more people. She believes she still hasn't mastered the people-heavy skills the job requires, although she focuses her intention on it and gets better every day. She brought "the persistence and determination that I use in my physical activity" to keep her focused and moving toward her goals. "I would not be who I am today if I had not said, 'Sure, I'll try that,'" and then set her intention to be the best at it she could possibly be, in a continuous loop of improvement.

As an example of what she works hard to master, she tells me that she has to address unsatisfactory performance with an employee. What this story underscores is her almost unconscious focus on fairness and her struggle with reconciling her belief in relative realities with holding people accountable. The situation she finds unsatisfactory is factual—the employee claimed something about themselves on an official document that as proven untrue. That is a clear-cut performance issue to Beth, and she believes strongly the person should be held accountable for that claim as it has led Beth to make assignments that, in fact, the person was not

qualified to do. Because it's factual, Beth can be very clear about what is right and wrong here. It is not a behavioral issue that she has to filter through multiple lived realities. Issues of fairness and honesty land in this factual realm for her, so she will always address racial inequity when she has the tools to do so, but things get muddy when someone's behavior doesn't fall into clear-cut manifestations of right and wrong but is nevertheless causing disruption on the team.

As devoted as she is to her job, as important as it is for her to be part of opening up access to education for more people, it is very taxing for her. As someone who values fairness and honesty above all else, the politics and "people-ing" are exhausting. I ask her what else she would be doing, then, if she could choose anything. Her face lights up. "I'd make the breakfast at a bed-and-breakfast. I don't want to own the bed-and-breakfast, but I would bake really yummy, healthy baked goods, and other people would eat them, and I'd be able to have a little bit." But, she adds, she would still need to work on "projects where people are wanting to do good things." She recounts the example of a man she met in a small, rural town who had retired there and opened a BnB but was also on the city council. Pre-Pandemic she had applied for the executive director position of a non-profit that supported two national parks—her first love. It was a "downshift in my career" but one she was willing to take. The Pandemic put a halt to that job, but she volunteered to work with them anyway to strategize their moves and to refocus their use of scholarship money with a more refined social justice and DEI lens. Rather than funding graduate students, Beth is suggesting instead that it fund internships for those who can't afford not to work. "It's a privilege to be able to take unpaid internships. To be able to provide a scholarship that gave somebody the breathing room to not earn money during the summer" is a more equitable approach.

Beth calls herself “self-centered,” and I ask her to elaborate since I’m hearing that term with a negative lens. She explains that she doesn’t derive renewal energy from other people. Her ideal weekend is exercising and then reading. “But that’s not healthy. You just get too much inside yourself.” And that’s what she means by self-centered. She centers on herself in order to renew her energy. She calls it “selfish” in terms of knowing herself and honoring that so that she can be present and focused for other people. She references “Dunbar’s number” that most people only have the cognitive resources to maintain a friend circle of 150 people, with five people being the “tight circle.” She doesn’t need a lot of people. “Five is good for me. That’s all I can handle. I don’t have a lot of emotional bandwidth, and I don’t have a lot of those needs.” For me, Beth is describing a classic introvert, and what she characterizes as “self-centered” or “selfish” is a combination of our society’s privileging of extroverted behaviors in addition to reframing the negative aspects of those terms to be about how she recharges *herself*.

Taking this all into consideration, I have a renewed admiration for Beth’s determination to promote fairness and equity in all areas of her life. It is doubly hard for her to do this when that drive for fairness means honoring all people’s lived and multiple perspectives on reality, especially when she is so focused on a purpose-driven life committed to making the world better. Add to this her on-going growth in “people-ing,” and Beth seeing herself as an antiracist is a bit muddled. Her commitment belies this confusion, however, in her constant search for fairness and equity and her “self-ish” focus on being better every day.

On Being a Runner:

As I synthesize my conversations with Beth, I am struck at how accurate she is when she told me, “I’m not easy to categorize.” However, what underscores our work across the four months we’ve connected is a focus on running as a lifestyle and identity and her deep mindset to

make the world a better place. Being able to think about her through the metaphor of running is helpful.

Beth's view of life's *journey* is that "there is no finish line." While she does not expressly tie this to allyship or antiracism, it is a pervading view of life for her. In everything she does, there is a level of learning and of trying to move people to places of understanding. We are all in this race together, and she feels deeply that "we just need to get to a place where we can appreciate each other's strengths and recognize that we all have weaknesses." She wonders if her time in her current job has come to its natural conclusion based on her challenges in getting the people in her institution to come together for the sake of opening access to higher education for more learners. The politics of traditional faculty roles, entrenched institutional practices, and the nuances of managing a high performing team are taking their toll in that they often run counter to her notions of fairness and honesty. They keep people from being able not just to advance in the race but to join it at all.

She works with a person who runs the race quite differently, and Beth wonders if it's time for her to step into a different marathon, one that has more resonance for her and in which she can be more effective. She notes that there are two ways to drive forward progress. Her way is to be patient, let people come to her, position the work and the end goal as important, and to understand that everyone is in the place they are at any given time. "There's a continuum of pestering, nudging, and being patient. My approach got us through [the Pandemic] and got us to where we are over the last five years. But now maybe it needs a different approach." She is always looking for how she can run the best race she can: "It's important for me to make the world a better place, and the access piece of online education and alternative credentials speaks to me. But I'm tired of not being able to make any movement there, like, I just can't budge

them.” Because of that, she’s been doing some serious soul searching. “I don’t want to be the person that stays too long. Situations change over time.” It may be time to take a different trail, to redirect the journey.

Part of Beth’s success in creating socially just spaces is also what makes that work personally challenging. Her *humility and curiosity* about antiracism and allyship are illustrated by her reflective nature and constant drive to be better. Much like being in training, her current best is not good enough for future best. She is voraciously read, and her reading takes her from books by and for antiracists, to books and trainings on inclusive leadership, to books and podcasts that teach her things she didn’t know or didn’t know the way she thought she did. She wonders openly, “Can you be empathetic and self-centered?” She admits freely that she is not very “other-centered,” and that she has to make herself “think of another person’s perspective.” What’s insightful for me is that, despite how she’s inclined to act, she purposefully teaches herself to be another way. She believes that because “on a micro level I do what I want to do” this precludes her from being naturally empathetic. “On a macro level, I do make choices” that are inclusive and compassionate. She compares herself to her husband who “watches people’s body language and cues” and reacts to what he intuits. I get the impression that she believes that if she’s not understanding people in that way, then she’s not understanding people at all. It’s clear, however, that she sees this as a challenge, one that she approaches like any physical challenge she encounters. She knows how to train and race, and she brings the same determination and belief to her work with people.

In fact, as I piece together our conversations, all of the self-reflection and deliberate journeying come from a deep *moral obligation* she has to make the world a better place. Having been brought up in the Mormon faith and with a father devoted to learning from the environment

and to educating young people, she literally sees no point in being alive and not striving to do and be better in service of others. This, I think, is the bridge between her reticence to engage with people and the fact that she seems to engage very successfully. The Four Truths put forth by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1996 illustrate how looking at any situation from multiple lenses allows her to be of service the right way. Forensic truth, personal truth, social truth, and public truth taken together can forge understanding among people who have differing experiences. “I just want us all to recognize, don’t try to change somebody else. Just work with what you’ve got. Everybody’s doing their best, and they’re doing good things. Focus on the good things.” People who don’t believe they have a responsibility to make the world better, who have privilege but don’t see any reason to leverage it for other people, are a complete puzzle to her. There is a reason to run this race, and it isn’t simply to finish or win. There is always another race, another trail, a personal best to be better that in turn betters others. And those people who can continue the work should never stop.

Beth tells me she’s “not a complicated person;” it’s just that she doesn’t neatly fit into preconceived categories. As someone who has been privileged to hear and tell the story of her antiracist and ally behavior, I might beg to differ on the first part of the statement. Seeing the world through a kaleidoscope of perspectives is not easy. That she undertakes this ultra trail run willingly, despite the myriad conflicting perceptions she feels compelled to honor, turns her from being a passive person in the world to being a woman deliberately confronting injustice and doing something about it. She might have thought that Happy Valley existed for once and for all just around that next curve in the trail. Now she knows that it only exists until the next curve, that the peaks in the climb and descent are short, but they exist. It’s our job, as privileged

humans in this world, to try to help everyone along the trail in the way they need it. It's our job to stay in the race, even when we want to quit. She just doesn't know any other way.

Theme Analysis

While in the Chapter 5 I will connect aspects of the portraits to both the literature and to the conceptual framework of Black Feminist Epistemology, it is necessary to offer some overall connections, emergent themes, that surfaced from listening, talking, and writing. Partially because of how these women have chosen to live their lives, and partially because of the interconnected interview approach, separating who they are as allies, as women, as higher education professionals, and as human beings is difficult. Each one of these identities informs the other. In particular, I would say that looking at being female and aspiring White allies through a higher education lens alternatively magnifies and unfocusses the convergence of these two identities. Higher education is a site, a location, a “space,” where this convergence can be studied or articulated, but it is not a reason for or a result of what it means to inhabit being both White and a woman. More precisely, all five of these humans have committed themselves to antiracist behaviors and mindsets, as women, separate from their jobs in the academy. Higher education has acted as both catalyst and impediment to their ally behavior and to their identities and growth as females. The following themes show this interweaving, which are individually explicated for each of the participants in the metaphor (last) section of each portrait.

Life as a female, White ally in higher education is a continuous, winding journey full of switchbacks; there is no end destination.

All five participants articulated this idea throughout our conversations related to ally behaviors, antiracist mindsets, their roles as women, and their lives overall. It manifests in their ongoing search to understand how they can use their Whiteness to be social justice advocates, indeed, to understand their Whiteness overall. This is the piece of the journey they are most comfortable talking about. They all give examples of their continued growth in learning how to

use their privilege to support the women of color around them in the ways they need to be supported. Leah's role in institutional effectiveness and in obtaining and parsing the data to surface the hard questions and focus on meaningful approaches is a good example. Others are Sharon's publishing and consulting with education leaders to help move organizations towards more equitable outcomes; Beth's insistent focus on expanding access to online education; Karen Z's advocacy with her residents and then in a community-based center for equity; and SB's unending willingness to ask the hard questions and keep people in her institution focused on them. They all talk about situations where they didn't behave as allies and how grateful they have been, and continue to be, to the people of color who hold them accountable and who spend their time and energy helping them be better. Despite this, however, they all acknowledge that they will never be perfect, that as White people with privilege they will continue to make mistakes. What they do with those mistakes is what is important.

As they were identified from the outset as allies, it is not surprising that they can frame their journey to unlearning in relation to aspiring allyship and social justice advocacy. However, when they talk about what has opened them up to being aspiring allies, the conversations become less clear. All of them started from places that required that they unlearn much of what they grew up learning, in particular how they see themselves as agents in the world. Both Sharon and SB have had to contend with Christian fundamentalist upbringings that situated them as "less than" because they are women. The mindset to judge, SB even says "to hate," is embedded in their childhoods and a theology that is steeped in White patriarchy and in maintaining a very narrow path of what is "right." Beth grew up in the Mormon church but never felt she belonged there since her parents were converts. Feeling that she was not as good as the other Mormons created incentive for her examine what about her upbringing she wants to keep and what she

doesn't. Karen Z's part-pagan, part-Buddhist upbringing has been instrumental in leading her to see the interconnectedness of all people and all things. However, her chaotic childhood with parents who loved her but whose capacity to support her were often hindered by substance abuse and mental health issues has led her to undertake journeys of self-discovery in order to find what's important to her. Leah's unlearning centers on coming to understand that she doesn't have to drive to be the best all the time, to know everything all the time. She states that she doesn't really know where this internalized anxiety that she wouldn't be good enough came from, but she knows she can't continue to hold that and be the ally and antiracist she aims to be. They do all realize, to less or more extent, that growing up as women in our current U.S. society has imbued them with self-doubt, the fear of not being accepted or not being good enough, and that these issues of self-worth impact their aspirations of allyship.

Each woman has taken, and continues to take, deep forays, deep introspections, into themselves as people in this world. They recognize that they have powerful privilege because of their race. They also recognize that their ability to use that privilege in the ways they want to can be negatively mitigated by their sex. The reproduction of White patriarchy endemic in their institutions of higher learning adds to this. Traditional faculty models, hierarchical organizational structures, power dynamics (even among women), and their own self-conceptions add layers of complexity to just wanting to be the best and most effective allies they can be. But as they learn to overcome their self-doubt, as they learn to converge the strengths of being a woman with the power of their privilege, they move along the path. As Beth explains, there is no Happy Valley just around the next curve. There are peaks for sure, but there are more peaks and valley beyond them. The job of an aspiring ally is to just keep going.

To undertake this journey authentically and meaningfully as a female, White ally in higher education, you need to be simultaneously humble and curious.

For all of the participants, working in higher education does put them in an environment where learning and gathering information is expected. From that point of view, their jobs have provided some opportunity to grow. Each one of them, however, has also experienced how the traditional and patriarchal structures of education actually work against a humble and curious mindset. To be curious in a constructive way first requires humility.

Sharon has had to learn to not drive with her ego, something she did as a compensation for a lack of self-worth. Reacting aggressively to certain power dynamics in particularly “male” ways (approaches supported by both male and female colleagues), trying to be the best all the time, and trying to “win” by “fixing it,” all eventually brought her to an emotional low point she felt no choice but to climb out of to survive. This meant finding the humility to face her collusion in these beliefs about herself and then undertake the work of putting herself back together to find the person she knew she always could be but who was buried underneath messages from society, her family, her work environments, and herself. That humility ultimately allowed her mind and heart to open more authentically to learning to be antiracist.

Two of the other four participants report this same sort of low point/turning point that shook them out of their own egos. SB points toward having to face and process grief as her turning point. This encompasses grief from the physical loss of people she loves, but, perhaps more significantly here, grief of letting go of expectations for how things should be. For instance, she grieves for the parents she wishes she had while simultaneously loving the ones she does have; she grieves for the young adulthood she missed by having a child early while simultaneously loving and appreciating what her daughter brings to her life every day.

Dichotomies like these strip away some of the ego that previously drove SB to think she could fix other people's problems for them at the risk of dealing with her own problems. Similarly, Karen Z has had to face the reality of her experiences with her mother and substitute compassion for blame. By engaging in relentless and difficult self-work, she has come to realize all the strong and powerful ways her mother influenced her, despite the challenges. Setting aside ego and blame have opened Karen Z to compassion and humility that are truly about other people rather than elevating her own selflessness.

Interestingly, both Beth and Leah don't articulate this sort of bottoming out in the same terms; however, each in their own way has described a turning point that supports letting go of their egos. Leah talks about moving from social work to organizational psychology so that she could study the systems that undergirded the problems she sought to address as a social worker. She had to get past her ego and belief that she could fix things as she realized that direct social work was not a "good fit" and was depleting her emotional and physical ability to actually make progressive change. This shift illustrates her "know better, do better" mentality developed by facing her reality and taking the risk to change it. Similarly, Beth describes a series of "coincidences" and decisions that have required her to drop her ego and figure out the best way forward. Keeping her family at the forefront, she has allowed circumstances to open her up to life decisions which have landed her where she is now. More recently, her personal health struggles have impacted her understanding that she cannot control all her life outcomes.

For all of them, the stripping back of ego and the letting in of humility toward what they can and can't control in life has given them the ability to be curious and learn in authentic and meaningful ways. They all believe they are more open to seeing and hearing what is going on around them and then learning what actions they should take. Being divested for the most part of

the drive to rush in and fix things, they instead seek understanding from generous friends and colleagues of color, from books and literature, from podcasts, and from continuous self-reflection. In this sense, the experience of being women is helpful, as the internalized messages of not being enough leads them to search out information, to immerse themselves in finding out what they don't know. While this has often meant facing down the over-compensation of having to be the best at everything, their searches for self-actualization have turned this over-compensation into a truly humble search to learn and do better. Interestingly, each participant, without prompting, uttered a version of the following: "The more I think I know, the more I know how much I really don't know."

White people have a moral obligation to use our privilege to make the world more equitable in the ways that we can.

Each of the five women have had significantly influential spiritual upbringings. It is my contention that these early teachings, while perhaps needing some considerable adjustments, nevertheless created a core belief in each of them that it their obligation as a human in this world to do everything in their power to make it better. SB's close to Mennonite childhood focused her on good acts and centering people less fortunate. Karen Z's pagan/Buddhist childhood focused her on the interconnectedness of everything and the understanding that what we do (or don't do) impacts us all. Leah's Jewish childhood focused her on the concept of *tikkun olam* and the obligation to repair. Sharon's Christian Fundamentalist childhood focused her on believing that those who can help, should help. And Beth's Mormon childhood focused her on seeing the world as family and her responsibility to always leave it better than she found it. Whatever pathways have led them to ally and antiracist behaviors, they seem to lead to this unwavering conviction that they have a personal obligation to use the tools they have to make positive

change. As they've grown in their understanding of their race privilege and how to use it constructively, they have come to realize that it is a lever they can use to pry the lid off the truth. How and when to use that lever, they have come to learn, needs to be in partnership with people of color. How to hold themselves and others accountable, how to walk next to people of color and not in front of them, how to listen and ask questions, and how and when to take the emotional load: these are all ways to wield the lever of privilege in positive ways. Believing that a better world for one group of people is a better world for all, these five women work to embody that.

How this converges with being women is complex. As people focused on confronting racism and racial injustices, they have spent the majority of their focus on that. After trying to unravel this, I have come to the conclusion that for them, sexism is part and parcel of the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2015). It's not that they don't actively experience or acknowledge sexism. It's not that they can't give examples of sexism inside and outside the academy. It's that, for them, sexism results from a primary worldview that White men know best and make the rules, "White" being the first part of the equation. From there, White women have a race privilege that can override all other areas of marginalization. So, yes, sexism is a thing. And, yes, it's insidious. But as long as White women, all White people, choose to weaponize our race privilege, all other privileges will be weaponized, also.

In conclusion, three interconnected themes emerged from hearing and telling the participants' stories. They represent a variety of differences. Their ages range from 29 to 57-years-old; their geographical locations span New England to the Midwest to the interior West to the West Coast; their institutions are a mix of public and private, ranging in size from approximately 2,500 to 29,000 students; and their positions range from entry-level administrators

to upper-level executives. Even so, they share the language of aspiring allyship and antiracism. They share the traits of humility and passion, of curiosity and obligation. And they share an unshakeable belief that despite what we learn, unlearn, succeed at, or fall short of, we must keep going.

Chapter 5: Analysis, Recommendations, & Limitations

In the previous chapter, I offered each participant's portrait and an explication of the themes that emerged from the construction of them. In this chapter, I will analyze how the literature supports the themes and the how the research question was answered. In addition, I will offer an analysis of how the study was both guided by and expresses the conceptual framework of Collins' (2002) Black Feminist Epistemology.

The themes that emerged in the portraits are:

4. Life as a female, White ally in higher education administration is a continuous, winding journey full of switchbacks; there is no end destination.
5. To undertake this journey authentically and meaningfully as a female, White ally in higher education, you need to simultaneously humble and curious.
6. White people have a moral obligation to use our privilege to make the world more equitable in the ways that we can.

These themes mirror the extant literature on allyship and antiracism and reflect Lawrence-Lightfoot's concept of *goodness* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The nature of the recursive and minimally structured interviews resulted in recursive and interwoven themes. To surgically take each one apart and match the pieces to the literature is reductive. In fact, what the interviews and the resultant portraits most illustrate is the interplay of being committed antiracists who also are White, female, and working in the academy. Therefore, it is most instructive to look at their experiences through the lens of "convergence," my way of applying intersectional concepts without co-opting the term.

Intersectionality is a concept I have tried to be very careful with during this study.

Kimberlé Crenshaw popularized the term in 1989 as a Critical Race Legal Scholar focused on

the multiple layers of discrimination Black women face in the legal system. Over time, however, it has fallen into the realms of identity politics, often co-opted by White people to “plot” their areas of marginalization. Wijeyesinghe and Jones (2014), and Collins and Bilge (2016) all caution against using intersectionality in this manner: intersectionality should be a form of critical praxis, a tool for critical inquiry, to challenge the status quo and attempt to transform power relations. At the same time, there is no doubt that different overlapping aspects of the (White) participants’ identities converge to impact their experiences and actions as aspiring allies and committed antiracists. Choosing to term this as “convergence” (with gratitude to “intersectionality”), I was able to hear what they perceive as the impact. These women all challenge the status quo in their attempts to transform power relations. To take the next step, it is my hope, then, that hearing about these experiences can support others in effecting change, as I will document in Areas for Further Study below.

Thematic Analysis

Regardless of their individual journeys or situations, it is clear that all five of them believe that America’s White patriarchy is the overarching barrier to achieving an equitable society for all, and the intertwining of racism and sexism (among other -isms), especially in the academy, is real in these women’s lives. Below I will illustrate how, as a group of aspiring allies, they recognize racism as systemic and see sexism as part of conserving America’s racist status quo, especially in the academy. In addition, I will comment on how the act of storytelling was transforming for the participants as aspiring allies.

Racism is systemic.

All five participants either directly stated that racism is systemic or described situations in which they had to address systemic issues. Their experiences support what Jamel Donner and

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2018) call the postracial imagery. In this construct, the conservative perspective of embracing colorblindness and ignoring the primacy of race as a social category, combined with the leftist perspective that U.S. society is postracial, create an imaginary which decontextualizes “the symbiotic relationship between race, opportunity, exclusion, marginalization, and exploitation” and holds that efforts to explicitly redress inequality are forms of racism (Donner & Ladson-Billings, 2018, p. 195). The underlying idea is that American society was created on the unquestioned assumption that White people are superior and deserve to be in charge (Allen, 2012; Kendi, 2016; Painter, 2010; Smedley, 2007). This underlying assumption has so imbued our thoughts and emotions, that it results in beliefs and behaviors that protect this status quo for White people and our privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; DiAngelo, 2018; Feagin, 2013). As aspiring allies, the participants confront these assumptions and behaviors in the people they work with and also in themselves.

Sharon works extensively with a community organization and through her consulting to help school organizations and school leaders confront the inequities in their systems and in their own thinking to help drive positive change. In this work, she has experienced behavior from others that describe DiAngelo’s (2018) examples of fragility, such as anger, fear, guilt, argumentation, silence, and withdrawal. Sharon shares that sometimes workshops never get past these base behaviors that DiAngelo (2018) believes function to reinstate white equilibrium and arise when feelings of superiority and entitlement are challenged. In true aspiring ally behavior, Sharon also confronts these assumptions and behaviors in herself. She offers several examples from when she was writing her book on equity leadership in schools where her colleagues she also counts as “teachers” pointed out assumptions and behaviors she didn’t recognize in herself. She recounts being cautioned to examine her use of the pronoun “we” in her writing: who,

exactly, is this group called “we,” and is it an accurate label in relation to what she is contending? She admits to what she now thinks of as “mistakes” she’s made in dealing with race issues and that she wishes she could go back. “I just come to expect that [Whiteness] is going to keep showing up. It goes everywhere with me.” Her focus on “naming and owning” her Whiteness so that she can begin to understand how she operates in the world and how powerful her privilege is supports Bonilla-Silva’s (2018) idea of a White habitus that is both created by and creates the racial structure and racial ideology. Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006) explain that habitus is not about individual character or morality but the “deep cultural conditioning that reproduces and legitimates social formations” (p. 233). Similarly, Feagin (2013) identifies that a White racial frame destructively overarches White class, gender, and age across time and has become the country’s dominant “frame of mind” and “frame of reference” regarding racial matters (Feagin, 2013, p. 10). These theories help explain why Sharon, an aspiring ally and committed antiracist, still must be ever vigilant to do the best she can to break the system.

Leah interacts with systemic racism in her efforts to bring the right data in the right ways to allow people at her institution to have meaningful and constructive conversations that lead to decisions about equitable approaches and policies. What brought her to higher education in the first place was her direct interaction as a social worker with systems that were broken and actually worked against the people they were ostensibly created to protect. In her current position, she now has the opportunity to help people understand how these discriminatory systems work and how they can be made more equitable. She shares examples of needing to disaggregate the data to uncover what’s really going on. When her institution was trying to get a handle on the struggles of its Pacific Islander population, Leah saw that they were aggregated in the overall category of “Asian.” However, certain Asian groups historically perform much better

in school than other Asian groups, so finding a response that worked for Pacific Islanders meant having to look at them as their own group. She notes that these wholesale racial groupings are an example of White hegemonic thinking (Kendi, 2016; Painter, 2010). This thinking simultaneously skews and covers up the reality of what students might struggle with. Her institution was wont to make blanket statements about the “need to do something” about the decline of their Black student population, but because no one had dug down to see what might underly this decline, they couldn’t come up with any effective interventions. Leah did just that so that they had precise information to make good decisions about where to put their efforts and resources that might address what was really going on. She says that she likes to “get people thinking in a different way,” which is her aspiring ally approach to getting people to confront their hegemonic thinking. Our racist society and the institutions that support it, notably our education system (Bell, 1993; hooks, 2013; Katz, 1983; Lorde, 2007), can use data carelessly and deliberately to maintain a White-privileged status quo if we aren’t willing to closely examine that data and how it’s being presented.

Similarly, Beth confronts White hegemony in her institution in her faculty’s concern about losing their academic freedom by increasing access to education through the online space. Her struggles to move faculty to accept alternative ways of teaching, assessing, and validating knowledge are indicative of the historical White stranglehold on whose knowledge “counts” and what “counts” as knowledge (Bell, 1993; Collins, 2002; Etter-Lewis, 1993). SB talks about the unexamined biases reinforced by many of her tenured faculty in relation to publishing (Bell, 1993; hooks, 2013; Lorde, 2007). She notes that the “choice” to open publish is often a forced choice for many access to established journals that live behind pay walls and are adjudicated by panels that reproduce hegemonic biases are barriers to publishing knowledge that challenges

those biases. The inability to challenge accepted knowledge in conventional spaces makes it easy to ignore these challenges and maintain the system of White hegemony and privilege (Collins, 2002; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). For Karen Z, higher education perpetuates a racist system almost simply by existing. The concept of society measuring someone's worth by whether or not they have a degree granted by an institution accredited by groups of people who reinforce the hegemony represented by the institution is anathema to her. She chooses to remove herself from that vicious cycle at this time to work in areas that directly confront social issues created and exacerbated by the racist system.

Being a White Ally Who is Also Female.

There has been so much written on ally behavior. And since the tragic death of George Floyd and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, the sheer volume of literature on this subject has exploded. The literature review addresses both ally identity development and the definition of allyship. In relation to the portraits and themes that resulted from my conversations with the participants, what is most cogent here, however, is how White women can be allies to Black women, as explained by Black women. Since the participants were sent to me by women of color who identified each of them as allies, it has not been my focus to question that. Instead, participants described, through their thoughts, actions, and feelings, how they aspire to be allies every day, especially in the academy.

Catrice M. Jackson (2015) speaks directly to white women in the belief that “it will be the unification of women that will break down the systems of oppression, transform the human condition, and cultivate world peace” (p. xxii). Her book *Antagonists, Advocates, and Allies: The Wake Up Call Guide for White Women Who Want to Become Allies with Black Women* is literally just that. Stating that women were created to love and nurture, that women are by nature

collaborative, and that together women can change the world, she also believes that, even as adults, women engage in versions of the school yard games that defined our existence as girls in a boy-centric environment. She makes it clear that white women “should NOT self-appoint [themselves] an Ally: the title of ‘Ally’ is one that must be earned, and it is bestowed by people of color to White people” (Jackson, 2015, p. 158). And, finally, Jackson (2015) repeats a theme prevalent in the ally literature written by black women: “You’ve got to want to do this because it’s the right thing to do, not because you are feeling guilty about the social and racial injustices that are happening in the world” (p. 203).

Sharon, interestingly, addresses these same school-yard games when she talks about friendships between White and Black women. She talks about White women’s obsessive need to stay on top, to be “acceptable” to the White patriarchy, and how that “keeps us from being empathetic, from having empathy even for other White women.” She shares that her Black women friends believe that “White women don’t have each other’s backs” and that we are conditioned to be worried about what makes us popular and, ultimately, attractive to White men. Drawing from her antiracist standpoint she adds, “White women are the common denominator,” historically and today.

Audre Lorde (2007) addressed a common complaint from White women about Black women in the academy, that of anger. In her 1981 address to the National Women’s Studies Association, she exhorts White women to draw on their anger as women to come together and fight with BIPOC women in common cause. “Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change” (Lorde, 2007, p. 128). Noting that if women in the academy truly want to address racism, they need to recognize the needs and situations of women not like them. “To

those women here who fear the anger of women of Color more than their own unscrutinized racist attitudes, I ask: Is the anger of women of Color more threatening than the woman-hatred that tinges all aspects of our lives?" (Lorde, 2007, p. 128). In many ways, this is a central message from the participants, seen mostly in their comments about what I called the "convergence" of their privileged race and their unprivileged sex in their ally behaviors.

SB, in particular, addresses this in her frustrations over the way the institution's traditional hierarchy seems to override constructive antiracist projects. She offers real-time examples of what bell hooks (2013) explains: "academic institutions are by nature and direction structurally conservative. Their primary function is to produce a professional managerial class that will serve the interests of the existing social and political status quo" (p. 83). An initiative to address racism at SB's institution which she administers, despite telling her supervisors that the position should be held by a person of color, is the result of a grant that was awarded to the White people who wrote it. "The White people were given the resources to give out grants and to fund people. And then the people of color were tasked with the work." She comments on another annual gathering focused on addressing marginalizations in the university that didn't start out with asking what pronouns people use, without any land acknowledgement—any of the things that center non-White, non-male, non-cisgender people. Moreover, the ostensible democratization of these groups and meetings reflects university politics. "I'm the lowest one on the pole since I don't have a PhD; I'm a staff member. The White people call me the little admin instead of assistant director. The people of color are the only ones that actually respect my work." SB brings up hard questions and observations to the group anyway. But this makes her the "unpopular" person."

Sharon references this fear of being unpopular, especially for women. She notes, “Particularly White people worry about losing our jobs over taking a stand. The bigger price is actually your mental health. Figuring out how to be voice for racial justice and maintain your mental health—that’s a much bigger risk.” In particular, she points toward building coalitions rather than competitions. When we build coalitions, the choice between race or sex changes. If we are supporting each other with the tools and access points we have, and find people who stand with us emotionally, we move past what should be a false dichotomy. Coalition-building is a central tenet of Collins’ (2002) *Black Feminist Thought*: “By [Black women intellectuals] advocating, refining, and disseminating Black feminist thought, individuals from other groups who are engaged in similar social justice projects—Black men, African women, White men, Latinas, White women, and members of other U.S. racial/ethnic groups, for example—can identify points of connection that further social justice projects” (p. 37).

Stockdill and Danico (2012a) also call for coalition-building and alliances in the academy that can address what they call the “ivory tower paradox in which conventional pedagogies, research, and theories that have perpetuated race, class, gender, and sexual inequalities exists side-by-side with “a rich legacy of utilizing education in the pursuit of liberation (p. 12). Beth and Leah experience this paradox daily. Beth must advocate continuously for more online education at her institution to open access to people who cannot attend school in the traditional way. She works hard to educate faculty on what good online design consists of, how assessment much change, and how there needs to be a laser focus on outcomes that are valuable to employers. These concepts hit hard at the historical core of what exactly faculty do and have purview over. She finds herself holding a bar many of her teaching colleagues don’t appreciate and caught between their conserving voices and those of people in the university who want to see

more sweeping and inclusive change. Leah, on the other hand, is in a position to provide data-driven information that she uses to create collaboration and to form the benchmarks for constructive initiatives. She has worked hard to gain trust in the groups she works with but still finds herself having to convince people to dig deep into the statistics to see the people behind them.

I found it interesting that the convergence of race and gender I was interested in hearing about was not something the participants seemed to struggle with on its own, but rather they applied their ally mindsets and antiracist behaviors to these situations and acted accordingly. Sharon explains that her ability to do this results from the hard personal work she's done to overcome an upbringing that led her to feel unimportant in the world because she is a woman. When she finally understood that she didn't have to compete, that she is "good enough" just as she is, it opened her mind and heart to accepting other learning. Getting over her unmitigated drive for acceptance opened the door to being able to be antiracist and practice ally behaviors. Karen Z managed the convergence by working hard to understand where she could most use her influence and then staying in her lane. She realized, after ramping up to possibly apply for a more visible (and pressurized) DEI position in the university, that she's more comfortable in the background, "taking the emotional labor at different points" and "utilizing the resources we have" to make life better for people. She believes that White women get "stuck in their stories, their experiences in victimization" and then use that to not see the power to effect change we really have. She practices almost textbook ally behaviors in asking questions, listening to the wisdom and needs of people of color around her, and figuring out how to "step back" without removing what supports they might need. In that same vein, SB applies her antiracist and ally behaviors to situations she encounters. The same things she does to create socially just spaces—

making a seat at the table, listening, stepping back, taking some of the daily labor—are the ways she makes sure not to “take up too much room.” However, she makes sure to acknowledge that the key to this question of convergence is that White women actually can choose a “side” if they wish. Black women and other women of color are reactors to that choice. Finally, Beth experiences this convergence in her struggle with the question of how to honor all people’s perspectives. For Beth, all -isms come down to matter of fairness. We all see the world the way we see it, and if we would just not judge this, if we would just listen to each other to find common ground, we could find the respect and care we need. Coming at Leah’s philosophy of *tikkun olam* in a slightly different way, Beth also believes that we need to do everything we can to repair injustice. Both Beth and Leah point to times in their careers where sexism was at play, but neither of them really talk about it impacting the way they do their work as antiracists.

Overall, I can state that because the participants’ overriding focus is on racial injustice, they don’t always consciously focus on sex injustices that aren’t explicitly in front of them. That is not because they don’t think sexism exists. Instead, they see it as part of the White patriarchal hegemony that drives American society, and therefore, the American academy—the traditional site of knowledge production in the system. “Given that the ideologies of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy form the founding principles of culture in the United States, ways of thinking and being that are taught via mass socialization in educational institutions, it should be evident that the fundamental concerns of the academy in general are at odds with any efforts to affirm black self-determination” (hooks, 2013, pp. 166–167). The participants have studied racism and racist behaviors as both scholars and aspiring allies and work daily to apply what they learn from the scholarship and the people around them. By also turning their sights on the interplay of racism and sexism, they are able to talk about the impact of that convergence, but

only two of them feel comfortable “owning” the word “feminist” beyond the more popular understanding of the word because they haven’t deeply studied what it really means. Leah and Sharon both directly state that they have not studied feminism enough to feel like they can speak as experts, even though as women living their experiences every day, I believe they have more than enough knowledge. SB and Karen Z were Women’s Studies majors and identify themselves readily as feminists but have been driven to address the social inequities of race first. They can speak with the language of feminism and refer to some of the history but focus on addressing race and gender, rather than sex, inequities. Beth admits that she just doesn’t pay attention much to sexism. She finds it ridiculous and simply overrides it in her life. However, a result of participating in this study is that they all now believe, to greater or lesser extent, that they need to look deeper into this convergence in relation to themselves and to their social justice advocacy work. This realization came about for them after they read their portraits, a testament to the power of storytelling.

Storytelling is Powerful.

As can be underscored by the literature (Bruner, 2002; Collier, 2019; Czarniawska, 2004; Etter-Lewis, 1993; Gluck & Patai, 1991; Iser, 1978; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008), storytelling for the participants was a powerful experience, reinforced by reading the portrait (story) I was privileged to construct for them. As women, even White women, are othered in U.S. society, our knowledge is often questioned and devalued. Gluck and Patai (1991) strongly advocate for using women’s words about themselves to understand any woman or group of women and that “recovering women’s words” (p. 1) is exactly how we can “revise received knowledge” (p. 2) about the invisible other. Etter-Lewis (1991, 1993) acknowledges that while all women are othered in this manner, the unique intersectional reality of Black women’s lives

and identities can be found by listening to how they talk about themselves and their experiences so that we can learn from an otherwise invisible group. While the participants are not Black, the conceptual framework of Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2002) supports an approach that centers alternative ways of knowing as valid and generative. Furthermore, Etter-Lewis explains that the patriarchal assumption that only *some* groups are capable of producing meaningful stories about themselves has turned women, and especially BIPOC women, into an “invisible other” in traditional scholarly work. She reminds us that an individual’s account of their life is social, historical, and political as well as personal and that the hegemonic idea of who makes the rules about what is worth telling and who is worth telling it frames “theory in such absolute and discriminatory language [that] reflects a concealed agenda that is neither innocent nor harmless (Etter-Lewis, 1991, p. xv). Finally, Iser (1978) explains reader-response theory in which he posits that inherent meaning does not lie in the text alone or in the person reading but in the convergence of the two. It is a moment of construction that happens when the text and the reader collide.

As the participants and I worked together to tell the stories of their experiences as female White allies in higher education administration, they made connections about themselves and their lives they may not have thought much about before. In particular, they uncovered, to more or less extent, their over-looking of the complexities of being a White woman in the social justice advocate space. They can speak as White allies, and they can speak as women, but the convergence of these is a bit fuzzy for them. Beth offers, “You captured what I was saying and analyzed it so clearly that the experience of reading...included a lot of self-reflection. Providing a space for me to tell my story, listening and reflecting it back to me, you helped me navigate the mid-life point I’m going through.” Leah says, “I have learned a lot, and it’s helped me see next

steps for my growth and development.” And SB shares, “I feel seen, heard in ways I have never felt before.” I am grateful that they trusted me so much to allow me to tell their stories, but they are *their* stories, even if filtered through my construction of them. They read each word, fed back, deleted, added—through co-construction *we* crafted their experiences of inhabiting this almost niche identity of *female* White ally higher education administrator. Because they are humble, they don’t always see what they do and struggle with in the convergence of race and gender, but participating in this activity, in this social justice project, they can be both validated and led to further development.

My voice as storyteller. No good Portraiture (or any qualitative work, for that matter) project can be complete without some acknowledgement of the Portraitist. Lawrence-Lightfoot (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) makes it clear that “the portraitist uses [her] voice in many modalities” (p. 105). As I navigated the interviews, I tried to be attentive to how much I participated in the conversation so as to neither dominate it nor direct it. That was something I had to practice! Indeed, with Beth and Leah in particular, the commonalities in our jobs and our desire to learn from each other sometimes made it difficult to stop that conversation and move on to the actual work. However, I worked very hard to follow Lawrence-Lightfoot’s stricture: “although it is always present, the portraitist’s voice should never overwhelm the voices or actions of the actors. The self of the portraitist is always there; her soul echoes through the piece. But she works very hard *not* to simply produce a self-portrait” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 105).

Commensurately, Davis (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) explains the implementation of voice in the following ways. Portraitists can use their voice as *witness* to “guide the underlying inquiry and shape the narrative” (p. 107); as *interpretation* since “the

researcher selects and includes those factual details that contribute to the coherence she seeks in constructing an interpretation” (p. 100-111); as *preoccupation* of the researcher in conducting the study, “areas of ‘mattering’ that derive from knowledge of the larger field (p. 113); as *autobiography* along the three axes of teller, portraitist, and reader (p. 118); and as *dialogue* between participant and researcher (p. 122). The interactions of these modalities of voices, always with the storyteller at the center, is what allowed me to create a coherent interpretation that not only addresses my preoccupation but responsibly and humbly represents the participants’ life experiences.

To address issues of race, we must acknowledge its real-world complexity and go beyond the measurement of magnitude only. I inquired about what my participants experience and the context in which they operate in the hope of finding significance in the larger world (Wertz et al., 2011). In addition, I not only heard stories (data) but then told stories using the data that are made up of rich descriptions anticipating that I would find more than my initial conceptions (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I sought, in hearing and sharing these women’s words, to create Miles’ quality of undeniability (Miles et al., 2014) in a concrete, vivid, and meaningful way. Also, I sought to make a world visible that is not well-represented in the literature and that can only be made so by surfacing the meanings people make of their worlds and their experiences in them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a).

Theoretical Framework Application

Epistemology “investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or *why* we believe what we believe to be true” and also the ways power shapes what we believe is knowledge and what we believe we know (Collins, 2002, p. 252). Collins (2002) reminds us that in a Western, Eurocentric cultural approach to knowledge validation, two political criteria drive processes.

The first is that “knowledge claims are evaluateded by a group of experts ...[who] bring with them a host of sedimented experiences that reflect their group location in intersecting oppressions” (Collins, 2002, p. 253). In most cases in the U.S., that group of experts is a “scholarly community controlled by elite White avowedly heterosexual men holding U.S. citizenship” and the people who support them (Collins, 2002, p. 253). The second criteria is that this community of experts maintains its credibility by aligning with its associated outside population to avoid risking challenging the basic beliefs on which that population positions its taken-for-granted knowledge. The result of these two criteria functioning together to maintain the status quo is that Black women are excluded from access to the knowledge or are expected to help legitimate the system that devalues them to avoid their knowledge claims being rejected all together (Collins, 2002). Because one tenet of Black Feminist Thought is praxis (Collins, 2002; Collins & Bilge, 2016), this investigation sought to ground the investigation of the convergence of race and gender in female White ally experience in Black Feminist Epistemology for the purpose of inquiring what that might mean for antiracist action.

Collins explains, the “significance of a Black feminist epistemology may lie in its ability to enrich our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters both their empowerment and social justice” (Collins, 2002, p. 270). This is important because alternate epistemologies employed by any group with a distinctive standpoint can share its own knowledge as its objective truth, thus allowing us to better understand each other without giving up our own unique standpoints. It is this dual individual/collective nature of the truth that is threatening to the dominant group. “Alternative epistemologies challenge all certified knowledge and open up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth” (Collins, 2002, p. 271).

Black Feminist Epistemology is based on ways of knowing that traditional American/Eurocentric paradigms and methodologies do not necessarily validate (Collins, 2002). Using this framework, this study validated the wisdom and knowledge of the participant White allies through criteria valued by Black feminists: lived experience as a criterion of meaning, use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, an ethics of caring, an ethic of personal accountability, and Black women as agents of knowledge (Collins, 2002). By determining what is known and what is truth through these means, this work grounded itself in the scholarship and thinking of one of the United States' most marginalized groups, both historically and today. I will explicate how each of these criteria was extent in the inquiry.

Collins' (1986, 2002) believes that the power of coalition building across intersections is required praxis for change. Therefore, while "Black women's experiences highlight the tension experienced by any group of less powerful outsiders encountering the paradigmatic thought of a more powerful insider community," any variety of people can learn from and occupy an outsider within standpoint, including White women (Collins, 1986, p. S29). She encourages disciplines and researchers to "conserve the creative tension of the outsider within status" and "to trust their own personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge" (Collins, 1986, p. S29). This is important to explain in a study used scholarship created by Black women based on their experiences. "Black women must be in charge of Black Feminist Thought, but being in charge does not mean that others are excluded" (Collins, 2002, p. 18).

Lived experience as a criterion of meaning. Collins (2002) differentiates between two types of knowing, knowledge and wisdom, and explains that Black women place more credence on wisdom. She provides several examples of the difference between formal knowledge acquired in school and through books or study and the wisdom acquired by living in the world

and having to survive. “Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate” (Collins, 2002, p. 257). She also documents that some feminist scholars “claim that women as a group are more likely than men to use lived experience in assessing knowledge claims” (Collins, 2002, p. 259) and that women are also more likely to experience knowledge located in the body *and* knowledge located beyond the body and use lived experience to mediate between these. “These forms of knowledge allow for subjectivity between the knower and the known, rest in the women themselves (not in higher authorities), and are experienced directly in the world (not through abstractions)” (Collins, 2002, p. 259).

The participants in this study did exhibit both these forms of knowledge. As educated women working in our society’s bastions of “knowledge,” they have had to mitigate their lived experiences with what they have been taught, and vice versa. For Sharon and SB, they had to “unlearn” their Christian fundamental upbringings to value themselves as human beings and women in this world. Sharon and Leah had to parlay what they learned about social systems in their undergraduate programs and turn that into wisdom from their actual experiences in those systems. Karen Z had to confront her childhood experiences to re-envision her relationship with her mother that is also allowing her to claim her own power and be a better aspiring ally. And Beth has had to find wisdom in new ways now that she can no longer run. The interplay between the wisdom of living, the formal learning we are taught to privilege, and the processing of lived experiences in relation to those led to the participants being able to tell me the stories of how they have come to be White allies. Because I could listen to their words directly, because I could experience their storytelling over video conferencing, I could also bring my knowledge and wisdom to the moment. This allowed for a validation of these women’s truths so that I could

apply them to the research question. Their experiences, their wisdom about their own lives and their antiracist standpoints, drove the narrative of the co-created portraits.

The use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims. Collins (2002) explains that for “Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community” (p. 260). The primary concept is that connectedness is paramount in validating knowledge. “People become more human and empowered primarily in the context of community” (Collins, 2002, p. 261). Noting that “feminist scholars contend that men and women are socialized to seek different types of autonomy” that are parallel the separation/connection dichotomy, the validating of knowledge through extended and connected conversation is a central way women make meaning (Collins, 2002, p. 262). For this reason, I employed a conversational and very informal style of interview. I wanted to give my participants the ability to take whatever direction seemed most important to them. Certainly, I would circle back for clarification, for focus on the research question, but there was no consistent plan. As a matter of fact, even though the four interviews did have overarching topics, participants themselves would come back to previous interviews to add things they thought of or ask questions, sometimes even sending me links to podcasts or books they liked or attaching artifacts of things they produced for their jobs that they wanted to talk about in our next meeting. I worked hard to create a small community of trust that would allow for free conversation so that we could dialogue, not debate, and which were mutually enriching. This further validated the claims they made about themselves and their roles as aspiring allies.

The ethics of caring. Collins (2002) explains that “ideas cannot be divorced from the individuals who create and share them” (p. 262); therefore, “personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process” (p. 263). She details that a

person's unique mode of expression is important in establishing their veracity, as is their willingness to employ their emotions in something they truly believe in and their ability to show that they actually care. In the separate/connected dichotomy, connected knowers value personality in deeming someone believable; however, "White women may have access to women's experiences that encourage emotion and expressiveness, but few White-controlled U.S. social institutions except the family validate this way of knowing" (Collins, 2002, p. 264). Considering that all of the people in this study were White, this was an interesting aspect of the epistemology to apply as we didn't readily let our emotions come out. I had to establish a safe venue for them first. I was mainly able to create a caring space by employing our dialogue to share about myself, when appropriate, so that participants didn't feel like they were being studied but that we were sharing. I shared such things as my own health issues with Sharon and Beth and my own coming out experiences with SB and Karen Z. I worked completely flexibly with their life circumstances and time constraints to the extent that the interviews took nine months to complete. We came to care for each other, for our circumstances and challenges, and to have insight into how our life paths intersected and diverged. Then, when they experienced my unique mode of expression in the actual writing of the portraits and saw that I kept my word about how they would be represented, we developed partnerships, community, that led to a way of knowing about their experiences that might not have emerged from a different approach.

The ethic of personal accountability. Collins (2002) explains that in addition to the previous tenets, "people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims;" furthermore, "it is essential for individuals to have definite positions on issues and assume full responsibility for arguing their validity" (p. 265). She also notes that claims made by people respected for their moral and ethical integrity hold more weight such that "emotion, ethics, and

reason are used as interconnected, essential components in assessing knowledge claims” (Collins, 2002, p. 266). The five participants were very clear about their claims, what they knew and didn’t know, and what they still needed to learn. They exemplified ally behavior by making sure to consistently tell me that they were in a continual state of learning but here is what they know *now*. A common standpoint is that being an ally is never actually accomplished—as White people we can only aspire every day. SB would say, “it’s not a checkbox.” In addition, each one of them actively and deliberately learns almost daily, formally and informally, how to be better antiracists. One of the most telling aspects to me of their personal accountability was each one’s deep consideration of how to be identified. To a woman, they told me it was important to own what they were saying and be accountable in a transparent manner. However, they also talked about other people and are in different stages in their professional careers, as well as at different types of institutions. So while two of them felt like they could use their own names, the other three chose to use pseudonyms.

Black women as agents of knowledge. Collins (2002) sums up the above four tenets. “In this alternative epistemology, values lie at the heart of the knowledge validation process such that inquiry always has an ethical aim. Moreover, when these four dimensions become politicized and attached to a social justice project, they can form a framework for Black feminist thought and practice” (p. 266). It is my hope that this inquiry did just that. However, to stand the test of legitimacy, the fifth tenet must be met, that of Black women as agents of knowledge. Since the study focused on White women, it is important to explain how I sought to meet this dimension. The main action I took to address this is to ask Black women who worked in higher education to lead me to female White higher education administrators they experienced as allies.

I chose not to define “ally” for the Black women as I believed their lived experiences of the White women should be enough.

Collins (2002) explains that Black women intellectuals must satisfy the epistemological standards of three key groups. While I am a White woman, I tried my best to address these. The first group is “ordinary African-American women” who would expect me to personally advocate for my material, be accountable for any consequences from it, have lived it in some manner, and be willing to talk about it with people outside the academy (Collins, 2002, p. 266). The way I do this currently, and hope to be better at after the dissertation process is over, is to be the sort of social justice advocate that the participants have exemplified by using my privileged standpoints to help change systems from within, especially in higher education. For me, that means continuing to work toward increased access to education, including all the supports needed for educationally marginalized people to be successful. That also includes supporting frameworks that focus on inclusive and cogent curriculum and learning design. It will be important for me also to hold other White people accountable for their words and actions in ways that respect and value people of color. Just like the participants, and just like any White person, I have a lot to prove to “ordinary African-American women.” The key is to keep trying.

The second key epistemological group is “the community of Black women scholars” (Collins, 2002, p. 267). Collins’s focus is on how Black female intellectuals must satisfy this heterogeneous community that may share the location of higher education but inhabit vast areas of expertise and interest. I take this to mean the same thing for me. At this point in time, I do not know whether I would satisfy this contingent. It would be interesting in further study to find that out. For now, I hope that the scholarship I’ve shown counts for some measure of acceptance.

The third epistemological group “consists of dominant groups who still control schools, graduate programs, tenure processes, publication outlets, and other mechanisms that legitimate knowledge” (Collins, 2002, p. 267). This is just one place where my race privilege operates. I was able to propose this study that, from its inception, was deemed “alternative” because my ability to be scholarly and stand up to hegemonic forces was never questioned. I can chalk that up to a personality that pushes against the status quo, but my White privilege has always paved the way for the confidence with which I do this. When I push back, I am “brave” and “outspoken.” I am not “angry,” nor do I “have a chip on my shoulder,” descriptions I have heard throughout my career in relation to people of color who push back. This is not the group I have to worry about the most, which is not true for Black female intellectuals.

Limitations

First, due to the nature of the study, I do not claim to generalize the individual experiences of the participants beyond their own lives. These are lived moments in time that next year will change and then change the next, as evidenced by concept of allyship as a winding journey with no end. Second, while Sharon does have significant teaching duties in addition to her other work, this study was not about teaching or interacting with students. These women engaged with me as administrators who experience the inner workings of their institutions outside of the classroom. It is possible that talking with people who focus on student interactions would yield different themes. Third, the use of conferencing software to conduct the interviews impacted the nature of our interactions and my approach to the portraits. Setting in Portraiture is key, and without a physical place to meet outside the computer screen, I was unable to invoke that methodological aspect as I would have wished to. While I don’t believe the final work would have been all that different, I do believe that a level of richness was sacrificed.

Finally, an interesting aspect of the research question presented itself as “sort of” a limitation and “sort of” an area for further study. As noted above, setting is a crucial aspect of Portraiture, and, in many ways, the setting of “academe” forms almost a sub-layer of setting. Indeed, the research question is centered on women in higher education, and much of what they talked about, often struggled with, is part and parcel of American higher education. In addition, I note several times that American institutions are these paradoxical places that both conserve the status quo and push on that status quo. As powerful locations of knowledge production, institutions of higher learning hold a tension between these two polarities.

In that sense, the institutions that each of the participants worked in were, in themselves, almost actors in the portraits, as any dynamic setting would be. While my research prepared me for that, it wasn’t accounted for by the participants in the interviews. Certainly they talked about situations in their respective institutions, but higher education/academe as a “thing,” as center of knowledge production that holds the tensions we talked about above their own institutions was not an area of conversation. Nor did I take them there. For these reasons, I would count this as both a limitation of the research and fascinating area for further study.

Areas for Further Study

The blessing and the curse of over six hours of interview data from five people is the amount of information and the plethora of directions for study. What I had to leave out informs areas I believe are rich with possibility.

1. I have joked with people that this study is “so White.” And it is, by design. But it would be both fascinating and informative to have a Black female perspective on it. For instance, what specifically drove my colleagues to identify these women? Do their

experiences of them match up to the participants' experiences of being aspiring allies?

How has my White perspective impacted my interpretations?

2. The wide age range of the participants begs a life-stage analysis in relation to ally development and point in career. In some fashion or other, each participant referenced generational aspects of their work, and it is tempting to give them generational labels. However, what is the difference between generational location and life-stage? Are the generational labels we like to use steeped in hegemonic assumptions? Is there really any connection between generation, age, and ally standpoint?
3. The concept of "mothering" came up in several ways. Four of the five have children and credit them with helping them see themselves and their accountability in the world. They talk about "mothering" social justice projects and, simultaneously, being careful not to approach ally behavior with a parental mindset. Since mothering is a uniquely female practice, it would be interesting to investigate any connections between mothering and ally behaviors.
4. While this study made a connection between the participants and their early religious and spiritual upbringings, it would be interesting to do a broader study focused on this connection. Are people with early religious training more likely to adopt ally behavior? Does it matter what kind of spiritual tradition? What is the impact of fundamentalism on ally behavior and antiracism?
5. The two youngest participants encountered devaluing and sometimes discriminating behavior from other women in their institutions. These behaviors seemed to center around age and level of education. If, in fact, the academy is purporting to be a location of open-minded acceptance and venues for social justice, this ageism and elitism in

convergence with sexism could be fascinating. Why do older, more highly-placed women react defensively and with hostility to younger, lower-positioned women? Are there actions and attitudes the younger women embody that trigger the older women to feel threatened? What is it about the academy environment that engenders this behavior? This is a good example of White women not even being able to support each other, so how can we support Black women in this paradigm?

6. Finally, I was fascinated by Sharon's interesting conversation about cross-racial friendships and how difficult they can be. None of the other four participants talked much about having female friends, much less friends of color. This doesn't mean they don't have any—I just didn't ask. Digging into ally behavior and effective social justice action, it could be informative to analyze the state of participants' cross-racial friendships? How does the White person experience it? How does the person of color experience it?

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study grounded itself in Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2002), meaning ways of knowing valued by Black women and used that meaning-making to center the goodness in the practices of five female White ally higher education administrators as the advocate for social justice in their institutions. I did this through the lens of Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) in which each participant co-created the story of her experiences with me as we sought to document the constructive work they do while simultaneously uncovering areas of opportunity for each individual to do better and also for their institutions to do better. In particular, we uncovered that while the participants are comfortable talking about their ally behaviors, they are less so about being women, and seem to undervalue

the difficulties this convergence of sex and race can create. In addition, we uncovered that, while the academy provided them access to social justice projects and significant scholarship, its societal location as a conserver of White patriarchy often mitigates the work they undertake.

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Appendix

Informed Consent

Appendix A - Informed Consent Form

Study Title

Choosing Sex or Race: Portraits of Female, White Ally Higher Education Administrators Committed to Making Socially Just Spaces for BIPOC Women in their Institutions

Consent

I, _____ (print name), agree to participate in this research project entitled, *Choosing Sex or Race: Portraits of Female, White Ally Higher Education Administrators Committed to Making Socially Just Spaced for BIPOC Women in their Institutions*. I have had the study explained to me by Christine Parr and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of the study and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the criteria for participation in this study.

Participant's Signature

Date

Permission to audio record interviews?
(Please check one)

___ YES ___ NO

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher Contact Information

Christine Parr
[phone number]
[email]

Community Nomination Letter

Dear _____,

Thank you for taking time to consider the following request.

As you may recall, I am embarking on a dissertation study of female white ally higher education administrators as they experience the convergence of racism and sexism in their antiracist behaviors.

I am seeking guidance from women of color who best know what “ally” behavior is to lead me to white women I can contact to see if they would be willing participants in this study. I would also ask that you provide whatever information you are comfortable sharing about why the woman you are suggesting to me is an ally: this could include specific instances or descriptions of behavior or attitude or anything else that has led you to the recommendation. At this point I do not plan to share that information with the potential participants, and I surely won’t share it if you ask me not to. I do, however, plan to tell them how I was led to them but can keep your specific name anonymous if you choose. In addition, by study constraints, I will not be approaching any possible participants who currently work at SNHU.

My ultimate goal is to hear and tell the stories of these women as they navigate the phenomenon of being both privileged (White) and subjugated (female) in higher education. I am looking for what Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot calls the “goodness” in their work. This will not be an exposé or an investigation into all the bad things that happen to them in their antiracist journeys—I am looking for the good they do and their experiences in doing that.

Thank you so much for helping me. I look forward to hearing back from you and would be more than happy to chat about this on the phone if you like. If you have questions or any concerns regarding this project, you may report them – confidentially, if you wish – to the UC Institutional Review Board Chairperson at IRB@snhu.edu or the COCE Institutional Review Board Chairperson at COCEIRB@snhu.edu.

Sincerely,

Christine Parr
[phone number]

Participant Outreach Letter

Dear _____,

Thank you for taking time to read this email.

I am embarking on a dissertation study of female higher education administrators who have been identified as allies by women of color. _____ has suggested I reach out to you to see if you are interested in being a participant in my study.

I am interested in hearing the stories of women in higher education who are simultaneously privileged due to race (white) and subjugated due to sex (female). In particular, I would like to hear about the convergence of these socio-cultural locations and the experiences that result from having to make a choice.

The methodology I am pursuing is Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's Portraiture. In this approach, you and I would meet for interviews (three is ideal) in which we converse about your experiences as a female white ally in higher education administration for the purpose of writing your story (Portrait). The backbone of Portraiture is its focus on "goodness," meaning that we will be looking for what works, what advances antiracist behaviors, and what we all can learn from you. It is inevitable that we will also talk about the opposite, but this is not an exposé or excoriation. This article can provide more detail about the methodology: [provided link]

Over the course of three or four months, I anticipate that I will need approximately 5 hours per month of your time in interviews, small back and forth conversation, and story co-creation. I will need to record our interactions, whether in person or over video conference. And, of course, I will keep you and your institution as anonymous as you wish.

If you think you might be willing to participate in this study, let's have a conversation so you can ask any questions you might have to help you decide if this is right for you. Please feel free to respond to this email and/or call my cell phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you so much, and I so look forward to hearing back from you.