

METHODS FOR (UN)KNOWING WHITENESS: A TRIPTYCH OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY,
CRITICAL FAMILY HISTORY, AND ORAL HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Sean D. Hernández Adkins: Methods for (Un)Knowing Whiteness: A Triptych of Autoethnography, Critical Family History, and Oral History
(Under the direction of Sherick Hughes and Tommy Ender)

Methods for (un)knowing whiteness do not exist within the current methods of narrative study centered on personal experience. This three article dissertation threads together three self-studies using distinct methods of narrative study centered on personal histories: autoethnography, critical family history, and oral history. I engage these methods from the point of departure that whiteness—the white liberal humanist subject—is the problem. Whiteness as the pinnacle of creation was manufactured out of the need to justify global conquest and its primary tools—slavery and genocide. Following Black and Indigenous feminist thinkers, especially Sylvia Wynter and Leanne Betasomasake Simpson, whiteness-as-conquest was manufactured through the stories we tell about ourselves, and two ways out of this predicament are working toward abolition and decolonization. Seen thusly, methods for knowing whiteness are necessary but insufficient for reorienting ourselves toward abolition and decolonization. Abolition and decolonization require methods for unknowing whiteness and making possible other ways of being human. While these methods of narrative studies centered on personal histories *can* be bent toward abolition and decolonization, these methods may better serve these goals as lenses or approaches to doing autotheory. Ultimately, I suggest autotheory as the methodological intervention on narrative studies centered on personal experience. Autotheory is a blend of Black feminisms, Indigenous feminisms, and queer thought with personal histories. Autotheory is a

methodology of knowledge production that seeks to alter our relations to each other and all things. That is, autotheory holds the potential for ontological reordering toward being human after whiteness.

*We die. That may be the meaning of life.
But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.*

Toni Morrison, the Nobel lecture, 1993

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This is a pandemic dissertation. I wrote all of this during a time of tremendous death, mass disabling, and accelerating white supremacist nationalism. During the heartrending early weeks of the pandemic, I wrote my comprehensive exam paper. My kid was two years old and waking up before 5am every day. And—I want this in the university archive—the School of Education didn't do shit to help its students. But we did. Me and my real ones, we did our best to care for each other. As we say in the abolition movement, who keeps us safe? we keep us safe.

This dissertation is for the future. And the future is happening now.

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Union strong!

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We belong to each other and a network of other relations. These are some of my network of relations. Let us love each other and protect each other!

PREFACE

I want to focus on the through-line of this dissertation—the potential for the methods of narrative study centered on personal experience to know and then unknow whiteness. I am continually in search of methods capable of getting us out of this mess. “Critical” add-ons do little to address the whatness of critical theory. While I don’t make this argument in the dissertation, much of critical theory fits neatly within conquistador humanism. So, while Critical Family History seeks broader understanding of colonization and enslavement in white histories, it does not require fluency in settler colonial studies, Black studies, decolonization, or abolition. The effects of which are obvious in the literature. Autoethnography and Critical Autoethnography fall short in this way as well. Additionally, autoethnography does not presently directly contend with either Indigenous understandings of peoplehood or Black studies (particularly Sylvia Wynter’s) conception of the human as bios and logos. I argue that we need other methods to fully contend with the overrepresentation of whiteness as the Human, and to write ourselves anew. For now, at least, autotheory appears up to the task. Autotheory takes as its point of departure Black, Indigenous, and Queer perspectives that do in fact work against whiteness-as-conquest.

The symbolic meaning of my defense date matters to me. As noted in my autoethnography, I’m making family history here. Before learning the sobering news of Dr. Hughes’s health, the plan was to defend on March 8, which inspired me to think about the last social moments I had before everything was marked by the pandemic. As I did so, I reflected on how we have all been systematically pressured to accept pandemic life to the point in which many of us believe the fiction of the pandemic being over. So, I wrote an autotheoretical

interlude that begins with a moment on March 8, 2020, and unfurls into an incantation on how whiteness acted as the vice that would grip and constrict us into accepting pandemic life as normal. I wanted to provoke readers to think of how their pandemic behaviors may mirror their practices of whiteness. I wanted all of us to contest what we've come to believe of ourselves.

Of course, that date changed. Amidst the turmoil of revisions, worry about my co-advisor Dr. Hughes's life and well-being, and some unwieldy logistics, I hadn't the capacity to revisit the symbolic meaning of today. Then, my partner told the good Dr. Eldrin Deas about my defense, and she relayed that he said something to the effect of, "of course Sean would defend the day Dr. Martin Luther King was murdered." What Eldrin couldn't have known is that I often work while listening to a playlist I made that serves as a reminder of how long Black music has outpaced white critical theory in its analysis of anti-Blackness. It features everything from Mingus's "Faibus Fables" to NWA's "Fuck the Police" and so on.

It also features Nina Simone's 1968 rendition of "Mississippi Goddam," which was recorded two days after MLK was assassinated. The day I defended, April 4, was the 55th anniversary of Dr. King's death. I consider Nina Simone's song to be a work of autotheory that also features many themes from my dissertation. I you'll to take some time to listen to it. I'll interpolate phrases from the recording below in italics.

The dissertation is a rather measured version of an argument for and invitation to ending and unknowing whiteness that generates from an excoriation of academia in general and educational scholarship in particular. Undergirding this work that diligently tends to methods, theoretical frameworks, and literature reviews is an insistence that we are *too late* in applying our collective skills as scholars and educators toward abolition and decolonization. Indeed, it's been *too late* for many years.

Why don't you see it? Why don't you feel it? It's all in the air.

Truly.

Let us state our obligations clearly! Own it! Or, reorient yourself and your work toward abolition and decolonization. Does your work help prevent Black and Brown kids from being brutalized and arrested in schools? Does your scholarship help trans lives blossom? Does your teaching and publishing make room for Indigenous futures and self-determination? Honestly, what are your limits to pursuing actual justice? Is it Palestine? Is it disciplinarity?

Look, a first move is owning whatever limits you may not have already acknowledged. *You've lied to me all these years.* This is not a purity test—it is a provocation to clarity. This is how we come to understand each other and, perhaps, coalesce and fight together. Clarity on our commitments and their limits is important work that is rarely discussed in education under the blanket term of social justice (or whichever flavor of the month we often hide behind). Social justice has been woefully un-specific for far too long.

Any meaningful conversation on social justice requires a deep and abiding knowledge of the source of social injustice—whiteness. I target the particular permutation of whiteness that I call the do-gooder liberal humanist. Indeed, much like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I consider the do-gooder liberal humanist to be one of the greatest obstacles to achieving a social reality in which 1) Black, Brown, Indigenous, and/or Queer people are not made and then marked for death, and 2) for a planet that is not reduced to property. So, we must know whiteness for what it is—a practice of world domination and destruction. This dissertation offers methods and modes of analyses to do that necessary yet insufficient work.

It's time we had another, more honest conversation to plot the death and unknowing of whiteness—because *I don't trust you anymore.* When it comes to unknowing whiteness, distrust

is necessary because whiteness has no imagination. And it is precisely the imagination that Fanon names a leap of invention in *Black Skin, White Masks*. He calls for a leap of invention to reach another form of humanism. That is, we must learn to unknow whiteness. Let the practice die. Kill it. Dethrone the status of whiteness as not just the pinnacle but the only way to be human. Yes. *I ain't about to be nonviolent*. Unknowing whiteness is a project of being human outside of or after whiteness. Throughout the dissertation I both attempt and theorize methodologies and strategies for doing that work.

Ultimately, this dissertation offers two methods for knowing whiteness-as-conquest: autoethnography and Critical Family History rooted in Black and Indigenous feminist thought.

It also offers three contingently theorized approaches for unknowing whiteness: the I→we coalitional self, love letters methodology, and autotheory.

Throughout the dissertation I work to present myself as a qualitative methodologist—someone who both practices and theorizes methods—and not as merely a critic, though we need critics, too.

One last thing, the reader may wonder: why Black and Indigenous feminisms? Well, what Black and Indigenous feminisms already have that whiteness-as-conquest does not is other modes of being human in a world that insists that deviations from whiteness are sub-human. Under whiteness-as-conquest, Black people are born into death and Indigenous people are born into erasure—and yet!—they make lives. Full, complete lives. Do-gooder white liberal humanists are born into conquest and supremacy, what do they make? To paraphrase Toni Morrison, without conquest and supremacy, are they any good?

In many presentations and discussions in education circles, I've noticed a difficulty in adequately describing anti-Blackness in a way that is fully understood. I haven't yet nailed it

down. Perhaps it is a matter of not sharing a background in Black and Indigenous feminisms. Regardless, I think it involves a misunderstanding of anti-Blackness as simply racism against Black people. It is not. Nor is it a binary. In conquistador humanism, anti-Blackness is a world making project where Indigenous African peoples were rendered as sub-human. Conquistador humanism pivots on this fiction as its fulcrum. And it does so today. *This country is full of lies.*

As whiteness pivots, it maintains itself as the pinnacle form of being human, the Human. As it pivots it judges other lesser human forms in proximity to Blackness. This is how white men in the early US who didn't own land were made excludable from citizenship. Landlessness put them in closer proximity to Blackness. Notice how in early anthropology the Caucasoid was from the Caucasus mountains, the Mongoloid—Mongolia, the Australoid—Australia, Amerindian—the Americas, and the Negroid—from nowhere, from Blackness. Alienated from land. Indigenous peoples in the Americas were also alienated from land, but for the purpose of erasure through genocide. Afterall, the affects of conquistador humanism “may be to your advantage always, sometimes, or never, depending on who you are, where you are, and what time it is” (paperson, 2017, p. 10).

To recap, methods of narrative study centered on personal experience can be bent toward abolition and decolonization. I chose to bend these methods by shoaling them alongside Black and Indigenous feminisms. There is important work that can be done under these conditions of productive suspicion. However, after studying and reflecting on my articles, I concluded that such work is necessary but insufficient for creating ourselves anew with a leap of invention to another humanism. Autotheory appears capable of producing such a leap. Afterall, *everybody knows about Mississippi, goddam! That's it.*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CFH	Critical Family History
CSFH	Critical Settler Family History
SU	Seattle University
UNC-CH	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I do not laugh. I am quite straight-faced as I ask soberly: “But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?” Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!

-W. E. B. Du Bois (1910, 1920)

Four hundred years and it’s the same philosophy.

-The Wailers (1973)

The methods most readily available to us sometimes, oftentimes, force us into positions that run counter to what we know. That is, our knowledge, of slavery and Black being in slavery, is gained from our analysis, yes, but also in excess of those studies...The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching.

-Christina Sharpe (2016a, pp. 12–13)

This three article dissertation threads together three self-studies using distinct methods of narrative study centered on personal histories: autoethnography, critical family history, and oral history of scholarly epistles. Overall, the dissertation seeks to answer the following two formulations of my research question:

- How might I engage autoethnography, critical family history, and oral history methodologies as a white educator working toward abolition and decolonization?
- How do autoethnography, critical family history, and oral history methodologies inform my work as a white educator working toward abolition and decolonization?

In answering the research question, I offer insights for how these methods relate to whiteness—its continuation, reform, or its destruction. I also open a broader discussion of methodology, what these methods are capable of, and how they might be repositioned both farther (in disciplinary/theoretical distance) and further (in degree) from whiteness. Ultimately, I

argue that if these methods are to convincingly contest with whiteness toward the goals of abolition and decolonization, then they need to be re-situated within a body of knowledge production capable of such goals. Exactly how and where to re-situate these methods has been one of the more vexing tasks of this dissertation. Clearly, I had an educated sense-feeling when I chose them for how these methods are linked. However, locating that terrain and describing that link has been evasive.

For the purposes of this introduction, I will describe the unifying link as methods of narrative study centered on personal histories. While somewhat unwieldy, this description is as accurate as it is precise. The overlaps and distinctions between autoethnography and critical family history (CFH) have already been outlined by Christine Sleeter (2011, 2015, 2016, 2020)—developer of CFH. Primarily, the distinction between the two is the timeline of their personal histories. Autoethnography focuses on one’s own lived experiences and/or stories relayed, whereas CFH dedicates its attention to personal histories that predate the individual researcher. The outlier of the three is how I chose to engage epistolary through an oral history. Of course, oral histories are narratives of personal histories, so that fits. Epistolary, as revealed in the third article, also centers on personal histories and often takes narrative form. As this was the link I held in mind as I approached these three studies, I want to stick with it for now—narrative studies centered on personal histories. Later in the conclusion, as it relates to themes that emerged from the studies, I will offer a re-situated place from which these methods might better pursue abolition and decolonization.

Overall, I engage these methods of narrative study centered on personal experience from the point of departure that whiteness, the white liberal humanist subject, is the problem. As I’ll describe further later, whiteness as the pinnacle of creation was manufactured out of the need to

justify global conquest and its primary tools—slavery and genocide. That is, the white liberal humanist subject is indeed a *master* of his land and his chattel. Tiffany King (2019) calls this conquistador humanism, and it is ongoing and pervasive. King insists,

even as Black and Indigenous people and the world bear live witness—on the street, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook—to real-time murder of their kin and relations, liberal political commentary, the academy, and the White left continue to use a form of speech that refuses to name the quotidian spectacle of death as conquest (p. 11).

It is precisely this “particular kind of human, this genre of human [as Sylvia Wynter puts it], that is represented as the *only* way to be human” (Crawley, 2020, p. 28). That is, the conquistador human—whiteness—as a genre of the human “requires the death of Indigenous and Black people. For the human to continue to evolve as an unfettered form of self-actualizing (and expanding) form of Whiteness, Black and Indigenous people must die or be transformed into lesser forms of humanity” (King, 2019, p. 20). This view on whiteness as conquistador humanism makes me necessarily suspicious of narrative studies of personal experiences, particularly for how such studies may tend toward personal growth or self-actualization. However, as philosopher Sylvia Wynter reminds me (Alagraa, 2021), the way to end the overrepresentation of this genre of the human is through storytelling.

The only cure will be a transformation of the whole society, and an entirely new knowledge order...It is through language that you and I...develop a mechanism to understand one another, do you see the immense potential there?! Language is entirely the point! (n. p).

Understood this way, narratives and origin stories hold the potential to refigure the dominant genre of the human as conquistador out of existence. My sincere hope is to explore methods of narrative study centered on personal experience for how they might be used against whiteness and its ongoing domination of education. For, as Saidiya Hartman (2020) portends:

The possessive investment in whiteness can't be rectified by learning “how to be more antiracist.” It requires a radical divestment in the project of whiteness and a redistribution

of wealth and resources. It requires abolition, the abolition of the carceral world, the abolition of capitalism. What is required is a remaking of the social order, and nothing short of that is going to make a difference. (n. p., para. 7)

I share Hartman and Wynter's vision of remaking society and the knowledge order through bending methods toward the dissolution of whiteness and the genocidal racial order it demands. Perhaps narrative studies centered on personal experience can be the language work that could unwrite the self-actualizing conquistador humanist.

As I'll discuss further below, abolition and decolonization are world-making projects seeking to undo the conquistador way of being human. As Wynter insists, being human is praxis (McKittrick, 2015). Abolition and decolonization are projects of praxis. In their introduction to *Toward What Justice: Describing Diverse Dreams of Justice in Education*, Tuck and Yang (2018) write that *toward* indicates a praxis. Or as Ruth Wilson Gilmore states (2019), "abolition is life in rehearsal." Tuck and Yang (2018) elaborate on how abolition works toward Black life and decolonization is toward Indigenous futures:

[this toward] does not mean that Black life is not already happening or that Indigenous futures are not already happening. In some ways, Black life is what demands abolition. Indigenous futures demand decolonization, rather than abolition births Black life or decolonization births Indigenous futures. (pp. 11)

Yes. These are the demands necessary to get us out of this mess of brutal ongoing conquest. Certainly, I expect skepticism when a cis-het, able-bodied, white man like myself fixes his mouth to say Black life and Indigenous futures. That skepticism is healthy and necessary. As I've argued elsewhere with my white accomplice Lucía Mock Muñoz de Luna, white people are not to be trusted (2021, p. 171). However, the toward of the praxes of abolition and decolonization demonstrate that distrust can be healthily maintained alongside doing the real, practical work. As Rinaldo Walcott notes (2021), "abolition is not an arrival," as in either *I am an abolitionist* or a finished project, "it is an ongoing practice of rethinking through a logic of

care that exists beyond the self” (p. 111). I approach these methods of narrative studies centered on personal experience for their potential as tools toward abolition and decolonization.

As I will later argue, while these methods of narrative studies centered on personal histories *can* be bent toward abolition and decolonization, these methods may better serve these goals as lenses or approaches to doing autotheory. Ultimately, I am suggesting autotheory as the methodological intervention on narrative studies centered on personal experience. That is, autotheory may be more fertile ground for methods of unknowing whiteness to emerge. As Christina Sharpe asserts in the above epigraph, we need new methods that don’t force us into relations of conquest. Autotheory is one such recently named methodology. Considering that Sharpe’s work is cited as foundational to the burgeoning work of autotheory, I find assurance in staking this claim.

In brief, autotheory is a blend of Black feminisms, Indigenous feminisms, and queer thought with personal histories. The point of personal histories in autotheory is to imbue theorizing with “where you know from” (McKittrick, 2021) in order to supplant the universal for the relational. My colleague Andrew Garbisch describes this type of work as “getting to the bone.” As a biological metaphor it’s as good as any. For the absolute goal of abolition and decolonization is the insistence and persistence of life in a world full of unnecessary and intentional death. This is what autotheory also holds close, whiteness is ownership of the earth forever and ever—and we must fight against that possession, together.

(Un)knowing whiteness is a painful process, and it might take more than a lifetime. This dissertation is but a few steps in this process. As a scholar, this work is also one way I can contribute to (re)making these worlds outside of conquest. I also have a kid in this world who I

can help raise further from whiteness. The work is everywhere and it is already happening. Let's take a tour of that work.

Theoretical framework

Or, Sketching a Black and Indigenous Feminist Approach

What follows is a sketch of what Black and Indigenous feminisms have done and can do in reading educational thought, particularly in terms of what they reveal for the fabled pursuit of 'the citizen' or enlightened Human in U.S. schooling. I use the term 'sketch' for two reasons: 1) maps, in the hands of white settler conquistadors like myself (Grande, 2004; McKittrick, 2015; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wynter, 2003), are tools of (settler) colonialism and property (Harris, 1993; King, 2019; Moreton-Robinson, 2015) and, 2) I embrace the call to theorize—and therefore understand—contingently (paperson, 2017; Todd, 2016). The latter point, I believe, is crucial for those who are not Black, Indigenous, gendered as a woman, and/or queer—those who have been differently/unevenly colonized (including extractive colonialism)—especially the emerging white settler who aspires to something other than conquest by reading and leaning towards Indigenous knowledges and Black studies. As the scholar-project la paperson writes (2017):

Theorizing contingently is not to take the ultimate position on what is possible, nor even the penultimate, but rather to commit to analyses that *make space* for Indigenous sovereign work, to commit to making room for Black and queer thought. This requires refusing to give away too much of what I've overheard *or what I think I know*. It involves *limiting the extrapolations of my analyses*. I hope to make room for you. (emphasis mine, p. xxiv)

Likewise, Red River Métis, Otipemisiwak philosopher Zoe Todd (2016) spent a year studying another Indigenous people's ontology and still describes her understanding as "infinitesimal" (p. 5). She writes:

My experience...is of course limited to the little bit that I know. I can only direct you to the thinkers that I have met or listened to in person, whose writing and speaking I have fallen in love with, who have shifted paradigms for me...I cannot, nor would I try, to speak for Indigenous thinkers in other parts of the world. (p. 14)

Todd and paperson give me words for how I intend to relate to and contingently theorize with Indigenous and Black thought throughout this dissertation. As paperson elaborates, theorizing contingently is “a landing pad, a way station, a taking-off point for your broomstick” (2017, p. xxiv). As such, my approach to thinking “in concert with” (TallBear, 2014 n. p., para. 7) Black and Indigenous feminisms itself is a contingent relation; but it is also a ‘taking-off point’ for theorizing what methods of narrative study centered on personal experience do for whiteness.

Underlying my project of theorizing contingently is the rejection of a key concept in whitestream academic knowledge production: mastery. In her analysis of post-, anti-, and de-colonial thought, Julietta Singh (2018) writes in *Unthinking Mastery*, “Whether we desire mastery over a slave, an environment, or a body of texts, we are always returning to this primordial fracture—to the partial destruction of the object that the would-be master yearns to govern over completely” (p. 10). That is, “a colonial master understands his superiority over others by virtue of his ability to have conquered them materially *and* by his insistence on the supremacy of his practices and worldviews over theirs, which renders ‘legitimate’ the forceful imposition of his worldviews” (p. 9). Similarly, Goenpul Quandamooka First Nations philosopher Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) describes how the “logics of possession” work to define whiteness, the nation, and the academic disciplines. Included in this denunciation of mastery and property is King’s (2019) assertion that “The map reflects the white human as possessor of things. In fact, the white human as proprietor possesses the objects and bodies that appear on the map” (p. 88). As such, only a true conquistador-humanist would wish to reify a method of colonial mapping upon Indigenous knowledges. The mere idea of mapping

Indigenous knowledges through some sort of literature review implies a “gap in the literature” or some uncharted *terra nullius* devoid of actual Indigenous peoples and their relationships to land. To put a point on it, any scholar raised or inculcated into whiteness/conquistador-humanism ought to never desire to fill a “gap” in the literature or seek to “map” Indigenous knowledges into the inevitable “resource” categorization that sustains white knowledge as property relations fit for violent defense of ownership (McKittrick, 2015; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wynter, 2003) and/or extraction (Tuck, 2018; Tuhiwai Smith et al., 2019). Instead, as Singh (2018) ultimately argues, “To distance ourselves from mastery is, first, an act of *reframing our relations to all things*” (emphasis mine, p. 175). As such, I remain a perennial student of the theoretical framework that helps me read and analyze differently—in different relation to—qualitative methods of self-study.

Indigenous feminist thought and conquest

Indigenous feminisms in the academy have long been positioned in or near settler colonial studies. Settler colonialism offers an analytic that takes the base position of all Indigenous knowledges of refusing the dominant Western narrative of discovery, civilization, and manifest destiny. However, analysis of settler colonialism is not itself a project, but it is a good enough first step. Projects, as defined by Tuck and Yang (2016, 2018), are living and acting toward a distant goal, they are movements toward far off horizons. Among the projects that have emerged from or aligned with settler colonial studies are post-colonial studies (Hansen & Stepputat, 2005; Stoler, 2002), critiques of neoliberalism (Craven & Davis, 2013; Tuck, 2013), decoloniality (Mignolo, 1995; Quijano, 2000), Third-World feminisms (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981), and decolonization. While each of these projects often work toward similar if not incommensurable goals of ending state and colonial violences (inclusive of

anti-Blackness and heteropatriarchy Tuck & Yang, 2012), decolonization seeks the entire dissolution of the liberal formations of the human through the creation of private property (Harris, 1993; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; paperson, 2017; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Walcott, 2021; Wynter, 2003). I'll turn my attention to decolonization shortly.

According to its official creation story, the foundational ideas of settler colonial studies are largely attributed to white Australian scholar Patrick Wolfe, who established the triadic relationship between the settler, the Native, and the Slave. He argued that the ongoing structure of settler colonialism was one that seeks to remove to replace the Native from their lands and expand enslaved labor to further profit from those lands. That is, Indigenous peoples must be continually erased in order for settlers to maintain their fraudulent claims to the land as property (Patel, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). And, because capitalism is a feature of settler colonialism, the legitimacy of those land claims is also based on the Lockean notion of lands being “improved” or worked for profit (McKittrick, 2015; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wynter, 2003), a profit that is maximized through the labor of enslaved peoples.

These two aphorisms that form the basis for the majority of discussions of settler colonialism, by themselves, directly challenge the national narrative of the U.S. that is told in schools (P-20) through history, literature, law, geography, and civics. As Patel (2016, 2019) and Grande (2004) have noted, understanding settler colonialism as “a structure, not an event” upends historical accounts of the “frontier” and “Manifest Destiny.” For instance, the colonial era can no longer be read as ending in 1776 but as an ongoing process that continued to flout tribal sovereignty and treaties through genocidal warfare, enslavement and imprisonment, boarding schools, English testing requirements for public funds, pipelines, and other structures of aggression and erasure (Boggs et al., 2019; Calderon, 2014; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2015;

Grande, 2004, 2018; King, 2019; King et al., 2020; Meyerhoff, 2019; Patel, 2018; Simpson, 2017; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Analyses using “remove to replace” have opened nuanced critiques of not only the inevitability of Westward expansion but also the benevolence of the settler. In their invitation to Abolitionist University Studies, Boggs et al. (2019) paint a radically different picture of expansion and immigration at the turn of the 20th century through an examination of the Morrill Land Grant Act, which established land grant universities. The authors highlight the educational, industrial, immigration, and anti-Black entanglements of the land grant as a settler technology to capitalize on the removal of Indigenous peoples through the establishment of settlements intended to preserve white territories of capitalist production and investment. This expansion was dependent, in part, upon massive railway infrastructure projects and importing new settlers and workers through the Homestead Act (Boggs et al., 2019). The Homestead Act of inviting immigrants to replace Indigenous peoples in the mid-West is a more straightforward example of remove to replace. Tuck and Yang (2012) destabilize the hero narrative in the extremely popular Natty Bumppo series of books as a tale of replacement (*Last of the Mohicans* is the most well-known volume). While the main character is written to be seen as a savior of “Mohican” life ways, he is indeed “becoming Indian” in order to properly replace the removed Indigenous peoples. Further, the “becoming Indian” narrative remains prominent in modern storytelling through films like *Dances with Wolves* and the *Avatar* franchise. As such, there is remarkable potential for further analyses of settler colonialism in education—not only exposing the ways the histories and literatures we teach facilitate the ongoing structures of settler society (Patel, 2017, 2018, 2019) but also how land-driven profits made possible many institutions of higher education.

However, settler colonial studies as yet has failed to produce knowledge that sufficiently explores the relationship between Black and Indigenous peoples—and much of this elision could be attributed to the all-too-tidy creation story the field tells of itself. As highlighted by Tiffany King (2019), the genesis of settler colonial studies actually emerges from Native (feminist) Studies. For example, King points to the fact that Kanaka Maoli scholar Haunani-Kay Trask was the first to attach the descriptor ‘settler.’ While the triad of settler colonialism is both a powerful and simple heuristic, as paperson (2017) acknowledges, it has been hampered by the easy ascription of racialized identities as “settlers, natives, and slaves.” The resulting error, the “pitfall of identity not only chills collaborations but also implies that the racial will be the solution” (p. 5). In other words, maintaining racialized “modes of representation” initiated in 1492 locks humanity in relations of conquest (Alagraa, 2021; Sharma, 2015; Wynter, 2003). Further, King (2019) asserts that settler colonial studies has been bleached white by the insistence on following Wolfe and Veracini’s leads in Marxist and Foucauldian analysis and ignoring the field’s roots in Indigenous feminisms. Critically, King surmises that white settler colonial studies largely dismisses the centrality of genocide as an analytic frame, as was originally argued by Trask. The corrective offered by King is that of conquest. Conquest, she argues, is not only capacious enough to hold both settler colonialism and genocide but also strong enough to embrace Black Studies. As Tiffany King’s project in *The Black Shoals* is entirely one of new analytics for frictive and sometimes speculative connections between Indigenous knowledges and Black Studies, I will not dwell on her revelatory work here.

Decolonization.

Decolonization is not a metonym for social justice. We don’t intend to discourage those who have dedicated careers and lives to teaching themselves and others to be critically conscious of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, xenophobia, and settler colonialism. We are asking them/you to consider how the pursuit of critical consciousness, the pursuit

of social justice through a critical enlightenment, can also be settler moves to innocence—diversions, distractions, which relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility, and conceal the need to give up land or power or privilege. (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 21)

Decolonization has been and remains infamously misused, misunderstood, and misappropriated. In an attempt to enact similar fidelity to Tuck and Yang's insistence that decolonization is not a metaphor (2012), I want to briefly outline a few key correctives for what decolonization is not.

Decolonizing methodologies appear as a play-thing, a problem for thought within a social justice framework that: 1) mistakes democratizing power structures for Indigenous sovereignty and relationality (as in Participatory Action Research Grande, 2004; Tuck, 2009), 2) confuses Indigenous land relationships for environmental advocacy (i. e.: McClaren in Grande, 2004), and, 3) misunderstands settler colonial analysis for actual decolonizing methodologies as outlined by Indigenous writers (i. e.: McCarty, 2002). For a comprehensive discussion of Indigenous thought in education, I suggest the series and volume introductions to *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education* by Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Unangax scholar Eve Tuck, and frequent accomplice K. Wayne Yang (Tuck & Yang, 2019; Tuhiwai Smith et al., 2019). These elders can much better situate this blossoming field of study and further illuminate Indigenous correctives than I ever could—their analyses are beyond the scope of this gloss.

Decolonization is also not de/coloniality. Although the terms share much more than a root word, it is imperative to respect their differences. I liken the comparison of decolonization and de/coloniality to how Tuck and Yang distinguish Fanon and Freire's seemingly similar calls call to decolonize the mind. Decolonization will require a complete break with conquistador humanism, but the ultimate goal is a return to Indigenous self-determination and relations to

land. De/coloniality, in contrast, cleaves much closer to a Frierian consciousness raising project. Typically attributed to Anibal Quijano (2000) and Walter Mignolo (1995), works in de/coloniality tend to emphasize an episteme of coloniality—a knowledge-for project that makes colonialization possible (Patel, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012). While not exclusively located in the mind, an episteme of coloniality and the logics of coloniality do not center land and relationships to land the way decolonization does (Brostoff & Fournier, 2021). Some of this distinction is due to thin engagement with a small cluster of thinkers, but the majority of the difference has recently been attributed to English bias in Global North scholarship (Fúnez-Flores et al., 2022). Until more scholars are studying across these linguistic divides, it is fruitful to maintain the distance between decolonization and de/coloniality.

Indigenous knowledges are decolonization; Indigenous futures are decolonization; Indigenous land is decolonization; Decolonization is not a metaphor. Decolonization is a horizon and it is happening now the way place-making is a process (Tuck & Yang, 2012). As paperson writes, “decolonization is, put bluntly, the rematriation of land, the regeneration of relations, and the forwarding of Indigenous and Black and queer futures” (2017, p. xv). So when Indigenous peoples and their accomplices demand #LandBack, it is not merely a call for the return of stolen lands—it is a call for the end of whiteness and conquistador humanism.

Black feminist thought and abolition

For whom are we doing what we are doing when we do [theory]? It is, I think, the central question today, especially for the few of us who have infiltrated the academy enough to be wooed by it. The answer to that question determines what orientation we take in our work, the language we use, the purposes for which it is intended. (Christian, 1988, p. 77)

I begin this section with an excerpt from Barbara Christian’s germinal “The race for theory” as a guidepost for how I conceive of Black feminist thought—what it does, how it does it, and why it does its works. Among the constellation of Black feminist thought with which I

study are the Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Christina Sharpe, Jennifer Nash, Tiffany King, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Sylvia Wynter, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Esther Ohito. Many of these thinkers could be considered abolitionists, afropessimists, existentialists, womanists, queer theorists, literary theorists, philosophers, writers, geographers, and educators. What unites them, however, is a clear-eyed understanding of the intersectional vectors of power that animate anti-Blackness.

Anti-Blackness is an ontological mode of conquistador humanism that enacts and is defined by the total fungibility of Black life (King, 2019; King et al., 2020; McKittrick, 2021; Nash, 2019; Sharpe, 2016a). “Black fungibility is an expression of the gratuitous violence of conquest and slavery whose repertoire has no limits or bounds” (King, 2019, p. 223). It is the ongoing world-making project initiated by and necessary for the enslavement of African peoples. It is a necessary condition for the type of conquest known as settler colonialism. In the modern U.S., anti-Blackness can most readily be seen in the realm of policing—from the “no humans involved” coding of brutality in California in the 90s to the ellipsis of murders that gave birth to the Black Lives Matter movement. It can also be seen in the vocal opposition to the resultant uprisings in 1992 Los Angeles to 2014 Ferguson to 2020 St. Paul; the All/Blue Lives Matter slogans of supremacy. Anti-Blackness also made possible the refugee status and vilification of the people who survived Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

While this last point is obvious from a Black feminist perspective, it merits noting that much-lauded scholarship on “human rights and social justice” narrows its view with neoliberal-analysis-blindness, thereby ignoring the ever-unfolding legacy of Middle Passage in favor of exclusionary citizenship as “the right to have rights” (Somers, 2008). Instead, Black feminists have offered rich and varying ways to understand and analyze the genesis and consequences of

anti-Blackness. For example, Dionne Brand describes the moment of total fungibility that is anti-Blackness as the door of no return. M. Jacqui Alexander discussed this transformation as crossing. Sylvia Wynter chronicled the emergence of anti-Black formations of the Human as Man1 and Man2. The effects of anti-Blackness have been described as the wake, the hold, the ship, and the weather by Christina Sharpe. Toni Morrison noted how the anti-Blackness of the white world is constituted by an invisibilized Africanist presence. This constellation of approaches to anti-Blackness is what I mean when I refer to Black feminist thought. It is precisely towards the dissolution of anti-Blackness that abolition seeks. Abolition is toward Black life.

Black life under conquest is made fungible through racialization and alienation from land. That is, racialization is a tool of anti-Blackness. The very creation of whiteness in conquistador humanism was in direct opposition to Blackness (Dumas, 2018; King, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The racialized categories of white and Black are anything but natural or predetermined. They are overrepresented, as Wynter might say, but fictions lived in the flesh nonetheless. Allow me to quote at length person thinking with Hortense Spillers:

[the creation of] Africans-turned-chattel, recasts Black Indigenous people as black bodies for biopolitical disposal: who will be moved where, who will be murdered how, who will be machinery for what, and who will be made property for whom. In the alienation of land from life, alienable rights are produced: the right to own (property), the right to law (protection through legitimated violence), the right to govern (supremacist sovereignty), the right to have rights (humanity). In a word, what is produced is whiteness. (2017, p. 5)

The justification for this feature of conquest is the fiction of racialization that is based largely on outward appearances, or what W. E. B. Du Bois famously calls the color line that separates lighter- and darker-skinned peoples (1903). Racialization into sub-categories of the human/Human brings about Wynter's oft-cited injunction that we humans are a single species. But, as Ashon Crawley reminds, "we must go *through* racialization to show its ruse

” (2020, p. 31). Seen thusly, the fictions of race and racialization are distractions from the root cause of anti-Blackness. Indeed, to fight against racialization leaves the base logics of conquest intact. Put bluntly, “anti-racism is a colonial project” (see Ohito & The Fugitive Literacies Collective, 2020; also paperson, 2017; Sharma, 2015, p. 175). So when I assert that abolition is toward Black life, I mean that abolition works not only against the brutalities of racialization and policing but also toward a refiguring of the human in which no peoples are fungible.

Abolition is most readily recognized as the end of policing and the prison industrial complex. The uprisings in cities in the U.S. and across the world against policing in 2020, at the beginning of the ongoing pandemic, put abolitionist slogans like “Defund, Disarm, Dismantle,” “ACAB,” and “Free Them All,” on the global stage. However, while eliminating policing and carcerality is necessary, the abolition I ascribe to extends to, “the abolition of white genocidal violence” (King, 2019, p. 44). As Tuck & Yang (2012) rightly note, that genocidal violence extends to not only bodies but Land as property. Abolition extends to property, ownership, mastery (Crawley, 2020; McKittrick, 2021; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Singh, 2018; Walcott, 2021). In other words, abolition seeks the demise of whiteness and its incumbent conquistador humanism.

Preview of the articles

The three narrative studies centered on personal histories that follow approach their methods from a Black and Indigenous feminist theoretical framework. At a basic level, this approach answers the question, “How might I engage autoethnography, critical family history, and oral history methodologies as a white educator working toward abolition and decolonization?” Of course, my fuller, more contextualized answer comes from leaning into the tensions that emerged while completing these studies. Thus far, my scholarly work has been in

and around reconceptualist curriculum theory and other auto-centered methodologies, so it would make sense to continue to situate these methods in the autobiographical turn (Miller, 2010; Pinar et al., 1995). However, the unnamed whiteness of these methods leads to unending modifiers that press against my ethics (e.x. Critical Race/Feminist currere in Baszile, 2015; Critical settler family history in Bell, 2022; Indigenous autoethnography in Sage, 2017 etc.). An approach to narrative studies centered on personal histories toward abolition and decolonization ought to have a space in which Black and Indigenous feminisms are the norm, not the modifier.

The first article/chapter 2, “White out of the gate: An autoethnographic account of my reordering toward abolition and rematriation,” is a layered autoethnography of my transition from a do-good liberal to an intellectual and political advocate for abolition and decolonization. As a starting point, I study my archive of printed undergraduate coursework from 2003-2005 in order to establish a depiction of who I was for much of my early adulthood. Then I follow the analytic autoethnography tradition to describe ‘what happened’ in a manner that ties personal histories to larger socio-political contexts. However, that approach alone felt misaligned with the artistic and affective approaches foundational to Black and Indigenous feminisms. So I layered the autoethnography with an interlude in the evocative tradition. I close the study with three takeaways covering method and meaning.

The second article/chapter 3, “Germans from Russia and settler colonialism in North Dakota: A Critical Family History,” is an archival study of my Schwartzenberger ancestors. I use a family genealogy to begin tracing both the origins and the social conditions of my settler family. Similar to the contrasting approach I used in the autoethnography, I first offer the story my family tells about itself then juxtapose it against what my research found as the contours of conquest my family helped shape. Here I endeavor to “think in concert with” (TallBear, 2014)

Hartman (2019), Sharpe (2016a, 2016b), and Gray's (2022) afterlives of slavery by illuminating the afterlives of settler colonialism haunting my family's legacy. This approach is an explicit effort to reject the latent goodness of (critical) family histories because that goodness is "precisely how the violence of settler colonialism is made acceptable in everyday life" (Sriprakash et al., 2022, p. 67).

The third article/chapter 4, "Love letters as academic writing and inquiry: An oral history," is a study exploring how and why three separate doctoral candidates employ love letters in their scholarly work. The doctoral candidates are me and my two brilliant colleagues Lucía Mock Muñoz de Luna and Andrew Jeon Garbisch. In this study I explicitly connect the Black, Indigenous, and Third World feminist tradition of the kitchen table talk as a method of oral history. I model this method on the kitchen table introductions in *Equity & Excellence in Education* written by the editorial collective (2020-present). These editorial introductions are a relational practice that highlights the Black feminist "well of feeling and wisdom from which all knowledge is recreated" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 20). In interpreting and presenting the oral history I turn to María Lugones's conception of the coalitional self, what she calls the I—>we movement toward decolonization (2003). From this perspective, I collectivized our three voices to relate a cohesive story about love letters methodology. This approach confronts the liberal humanist self that lingers within personal narrative studies and responds with Black and Indigenous feminist traditions of collectivity, what Sylvia Wynter plainly describes as "the need for a *we*" (Alagraa, 2021 n. p., para. 11).

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CHAPTER 2: WHITE OUT OF THE GATE: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF MY REORDERING TOWARD ABOLITION AND REMATRIATION

What follows is a critical autoethnographic account of the social and political conditions that produced my own transformation from a white liberal “do-gooder,” a small ‘s’ socialist/social-capitalist, to an intellectual and political fighter for Black life and Indigenous futures. This process is just one example of what my accomplice Mock Muñoz de Luna and I have called an “ontological reordering” (Hernández Adkins & Mock Muñoz de Luna, 2021)—that is, an all-encompassing reorientation to learning, knowing, and Being in this world of ongoing conquest. Commensurate with the demands of settler colonialism as neoliberalism (Tuck, 2013), my journey began as a series of personal travails—which I will document as necessary to situate the ‘auto’ of this critical, lived ethnography. That is, this self-study seeks to contribute to the modes of critical autoethnography that endeavor to side-step the belly-gazing pitfalls of some autoethnographic studies by highlighting the social and political conditions that served as openings to this ontological reordering. Situating my experiences within these conditions more readily presents and makes legible similar openings for the reader. This autoethnography is also an invitation to abolitionist and rematriationist practice.

Perhaps the real question here is: why did it take me so long?

When I set out to investigate my transformation—a radicalization that I wish upon other do-gooders inscribed in whiteness—I had intended to explore my own radicalization for what it might reveal toward a useful theory of change. After all, an extended reflection on personal change, aided by documentary evidence unsullied by memory has long been a fruitful approach

to autoethnography. I wanted to figure out *how* or *what happened*, but I increasingly found that question unwieldy—because life is long and complex. In part that complexity is what drew me to aspects of more objective forms of autoethnography. But I also thought maybe this question is flat out uninteresting. So, I turned to recent autoethnographic works on personal change and also found myself eager to skip to the interesting part.

I hope you, dear reader, hold the question *why did it take him so long?* in mind as you read. Perhaps layering this question with my pursuit of *what happened* will not only add intrigue but also offer a useful way to think with this autoethnography.

As Hughes and Pennington emphasize (2017a), autoethnography is both process and product. In terms of process, I have reviewed literature on autoethnography as method, examined a personal archive of my undergraduate coursework from 2003-2005, and reflexively mined my memories for the events that radicalized me. As a written product, I will follow the same order. First, I provide a note on autoethnography to situate this article within the broader scholarship. Second, I describe the personal archive and interpret *who I used to be*. Then, I include an evocative interlude of a memory that led me to conjure the question *why did it take me so long?* Third, I relay other events that solidified my radical transformation. Finally, I close with an interpretation of what I've presented alongside reflections and theorizing on autoethnography as a methodology.

A note on autoethnography

Autoethnography emerged as a corrective for the strictly observational traditions of anthropology by making relevant the observer's experiences and background knowledge (Ellis et al., 2011). As Hughes and Pennington note (2017a), autoethnography proliferated alongside the postmodern and ontological turns. This generative turn in critical social research insists upon and

troubles the subjective “I” that is refused in other modes of social research and social science. That is, autoethnography departs from the subjective “I” and pursues a critical examination of those personal experiences within a larger social context (Denzin, 2014; Holman Jones, 2005; Hughes, 2008; Hughes & Pennington, 2017a; Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2014). Or, as Denzin puts it (2014), autoethnography is “reflexively writing the self into and through the ethnographic text; isolating that space where memory, history, performance, and meaning intersect” (p. 22).

While the types of autoethnography continue to multiply beyond the 20 outlined by Hughes and Pennington (2017b), I suggest these types can be inelegantly split into two camps: analytic and evocative. Analytic autoethnography tends toward more straightforward storytelling and reporting, with a heavy focus on analyzing the broader social context. Because of this tendency, analytic autoethnography is oftentimes more readily recognizable as “research.” Evocative autoethnography, on the other hand, “focuses on emotion, evocation of emotion, and self-expression” (Denejkina, 2017, n. p., para. 12). Research in this camp tends toward the interpretive and performative styles in terms of how the product is written. Regardless of how the work is presented, both camps of autoethnography demand a commitment to reflexivity that is rigorous, contemplative, ethical, generous, and open to surprise (Denzin, 2014; Hughes & Pennington, 2017a; Lapadat, 2017; Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2014). In this autoethnography, I employ both camps in order to create a layered account (Hughes & Pennington, 2017b) that invites the reader into an emergent process that weaves concrete details, abstract analysis, and evocative vignette.

My use of a layered account aligns with the methodological standpoint of autoethnography: “a reflexive complicit lens [that] challenges an author to question taken-for-granted knowledge” (Hughes & Pennington, 2017, p. 17). An important aspect of this standpoint

is problematizing what the author thinks they know about themselves (Rodríguez et al., 2017). Additionally, this methodological standpoint contests the bounded, compartmentalized self of navel-gazing by invoking what Pensoneau-Conway et al. (2014) call the “implicated self” (p. 313). The reflexive complicit lens of the implicated self contemplates how the self is not only constructed by the Other and the Social but also how the author is complicit and implicated in systems of oppression. This ethic of complicity embedded within autoethnography, according to Lapadat (2017), is part of what makes the methodology a moral act of inquiry. Furthermore, autoethnography is future-oriented research that seeks social change (Denzin, 2014; Ender, 2021; Hughes, 2020; Hughes & Pennington, 2017a; Lapadat, 2017). As Holman Jones states (2005), autoethnography insists that “words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world” (p. 765).

Who have I been?

I tend to think of this moment of positioning in three ways: a) the article/autoethnography itself is the positionality statement (i. e.: the relevant details and political commitments should be present throughout), b) tell the reader a robust history and let them decide, and c) present the self/former self from a particular moment *as it could be observed from the outside* (i. e.: to sidestep the call to interiority invoked by autoethnography for a moment; to suspend my own belief in myself). These approaches have emerged out of an utter dissatisfaction—if not outright disgust—at the misuses of the so-called positionality statement. This pervasive approach in education often lists some demographic identity markers (white, male, straight, etc.) and then an assertion of political commitment (an advocate for bilingual education) or statement of past teaching history (CityYear volunteer at a Title I school). Figured this way, the pat positionality statement communicates no real information and merely serves as what Tuck and Yang might

call a ‘move to innocence’ (2012). Instead, I’ve lately been writing in ways “in concert with” (TallBear, 2014) Black and Indigenous feminist traditions that present the writing, thinking, and positionality as one and the same.

While I first drafted this autoethnography in the highly detailed second formation—because life is long and complex—I have ultimately opted to take the third approach. As this inquiry is primarily concerned with a learning process (a radicalization) and higher education (a supposed home of liberatory thinking), I’ve decided to mine the archive of printed coursework and syllabuses from my final two years of undergrad, 2003-2005.

I transferred to Seattle University (SU) in 2003 from a large state school where I briefly pursued a future as a baseball player and a major in Athletic Training. I had no experience with private school and no one in my family who had attended college. I was intimidated. At the time, SU was run by Jesuits deeply committed to social justice through an otherwise traditional liberal arts curriculum. Having been raised well outside the realm of religion and an undecided agnostic/atheist, I was nervous to enter a Catholic environment. But I was met with a veritable liberal utopia; a perfect picture of higher education. Yes, all students were required to take ethics, philosophy, and religion, but those courses had titles like “God, Money, and Politics,” “Medical Ethics on Death and Dying,” “Environmental Philosophy and Sustainability.” Indeed, when conservative Bishop Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, SU leaders and faculty shared concerns that the University could lose its accreditation with the Church for its social justice commitments toward marriage equality and abortion, among others. These are my recollections of that time and place, as best and succinctly as I can put them. That is all the context I will provide.

Me, 2003-2005

I have kept the vast majority of my coursework and syllabuses from my time at SU in a file storage box. I also retained some of my coursework from my two years at Washington State University, but that was a very different period of my early years—one largely focused on my transition from an elite athlete who didn't like school to a student who loves books. Still, at the time I felt it important to preserve my work. I can't recall for certain—memory is fallible after all— but I believe it had to do with being the first in my family (parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins) to go to college. For my family, I was making history.

Now, I approach this archive not as a form of memory work but as an attempt to excavate a presentation of who I used to be that is relatively untainted by my memory of that time in my life. In other words, I'm striving to demonstrate a past self on its own terms.

What's in the box.

Due to the state of the internet at the time, nearly all of my assignments, readings, reflections, and exams were printed, annotated, and/or handwritten. As a transfer student who also changed his major upon arrival to English with an emphasis in Creative Writing and added a minor in Philosophy, my coursework was dense with required courses in the liberal arts tradition.

I read through every essay, research paper, exam, quiz, and reflection paper that wasn't primarily evaluating proficiency. That is, the coursework that included my opinions and not merely an assessment of whether I knew, for example, the two formulations of Kant's Categorical Imperative. I figure that how I discussed various philosophical, ethical, and

theological ideas could reveal much about who I used to be. Additionally, I flipped through the course readings with an eye for interesting annotations to see what passages and ideas caught my attention back then. Below, I will provide examples to anchor a depiction of the white liberal “do-gooder” I used to be as evident from 2003-2005.

Me, in my own words

I had, at the time, some conceptual grasp of my German heritage...it was only half my heritage; half my story.

What happened next revolutionized my self-perception for years to come.

I am one sixteenth Native American; barely legal, even though I have no claims to tribal affiliation and thus no perks, if you will. My tribe is, as I later found out, the Blackfoot of the Midwest. Now, this bit of knowledge set my curiosity afire. I began reading every bit of Indian lore that I could find and searched out all the facts I could get my eight or nine year-old hands on. [10.13.03 Theological and Religious Studies]

These seeds of pretendianism fit neatly within the (neo)liberal conception of equality.

The effrontery of misunderstanding and abusing blood quantum nestled me at the edge of falsely *identifying as* Native American, just like Elizabeth Warren and Andrea Smith (Critical Ethnic Studies Editorial Collective, 2021). My settler ignorance erased the realities of Indigenous peoples and falsely frames meager reparations as perks. Even the language I used to describe Indigenous thought is telling. Dismissing Indigenous stories as mere lore is a technology of dehumanization that positions Indigenous peoples as incapable of “knowledge.”

[John Stuart Mill] asserts that the whole truth can only be found ‘by the collision of adverse opinions.’ Furthermore, once the whole truth is reasoned upon after extensive open discussion of all opinions, it must be continually challenged by dissenting opinions in order to remain vital and avoid becoming mere dogma...By now it should be made clear that Mill’s philosophy is sound. [10.11.04 Social and Political Philosophy] Liberal equality is a myth. [11.4.04 Social and Political Philosophy]

My contentions with Mill’s utilitarian liberal philosophy perhaps contain the seeds of my now hardline stance against the so-called marketplace of ideas. And even though I actually disagreed with Mill, my adherence to white logics and the pursuit of universal truths prevented

me from outright rejecting Mill's ideas. What remains, then, is a fuzzy picture of someone that might be describe as a democratic socialist. Elsewhere in this part of the archive I argue against unregulated capitalism as the great equalizer and for redistributive taxation with hints at reparations. If that isn't do-gooder politics, I don't know what is.

This means that in order to fully understand feminist knowledge and to be a feminist you must know yourself without patriarchy, outside of patriarchy, or before patriarchy. That is, you know your current identity because of patriarchy and a feminist identity must be understood through a wholly different and new system where power relations are more equal... [n.d. Philosophy of Gender and Sexuality]

[Author note: only papers from Gender and Sexuality include my handwritten responses to a professor's remarks. These are snarky disagreements. Visions of patriarchy.]

"[author] hitting his stride, supposedly." [Note on article, indicating impatience with feminist readings]

Once again, my stated understanding of axes of oppression grate against a deeper sense of liberal fairness and equality. When faced with an actual critique of gender and masculinity, this self-proclaimed feminist bristled. I even annotated the white woman professor's comments on my papers. In an environment in which I faced the very real consequences of patriarchy, I took the defensive stance of an aggrieved man who feels falsely accused of sexism. My writings and annotations on readings give off an air of arrogant innocence. Yet, as the first excerpt shows, I was capable of understanding the core arguments of contemporary feminism. In fact, this gloss on an author's argument closely resembles an argument I would make today against whiteness as an ontology. But it remains clear from the archive that I was far from ready to accept such conclusions. Instead, I protected my sense of self as a do-gooder by enacting sexist practices.

Before I arrived at SU I would have never considered continuing my education beyond certification and taking a course or two in order to move up the public school teacher's pay scale. Now, I am seriously thinking about at least two Master's degrees and maybe even pursuing a doctorate someday...I can't help but be a bit bewildered. That no one in my entire family has set foot on a college campus, and now I am looking to stomp around my third in pursuit of a second degree. [3.1.05 Capstone Intellectual Autobiography]

I can almost literally see the ladder of educational ascension at work. This vertical imaginary, as Eli Meyerhoff describes (2019), mirrors a Christian spiritual ascent in which “imagining a rise up toward becoming a graduate produces pride and desire, while imagining a drop down toward becoming a dropout produces shame, fear, and anxiety” (p. 129). The pride and desire of multiple degrees set over and against my family with the colloquial exaggeration “never set foot” is first-generation college student rhetoric par excellence. Staying with Meyerhoff, I can also see how my further ascription to the education mode of study accompanies the entrenchment of a capitalist viewpoint. The assumption between the lines of moving up the pay scale and graduate degrees is that those degrees would also further uplift my wages and (familial) status.

I suppose that my main objection to the death penalty would lie in the justice system’s failure to operate flawlessly... Grave consequences mishandled by a system grounds its abolishment [sic]. [2.14.04 Ethics, short reflection]

Patriotism is consistently and thoroughly instilled through public education, particularly by our elementary schools. Hitler (smart guy) once said, ‘Give me a child from 3 until he is 10 and I will have him for life.’ [3.11.04 Ethics, short reflection]

These apparent beginnings of structural critiques intrigue me. On the one hand, it seems I could locate an ultimate breaking point for carceral practices in the US. On the other, I identify a two-point argument for education as a hegemonic system, but instead locate the problem in patriotism. I infer from these excerpts that I was a liberal reformist. That is, I would have argued for prison reform and, perhaps, other modes of harm reduction, but nothing near abolition. It also appears I would have argued for curriculum reform to remove lessons in patriotism, which is far short of teaching about land rematriation and decolonization. Viewed through these earlier stances, I maintained a strong faith in the institutions of the do-good liberal: schooling as good unless abused and carceral punishment as necessary retribution.

I think my high school was racist. [3.11.04 Ethics, short reflection]

There is no thing in me that I can/could rationally define as racist. However, I do certainly find the potentiality of racism within faculties that I possess. For instance, I believe that I have been taught in many ways to fall subject to racism. Racism, at its very root, is strongly perpetuated in the form of patriotism—a special brand of hubris, all its own. [2.24.04 Ethics, short reflection]

Here, I am espousing an uneven understanding of racism. I seem to both fall into the ‘no racist bone’ trope while also correctly emphasizing enactments of racism as a well of potentiality inculcated through whiteness. The phrase ‘fall subject to racism’ is interesting. Reading the phrase generously it appears that I understood how those inscribed in whiteness are always already capable of the full spectrum of anti-Black violence. This generous reading implies a ‘fall’ similar to the Biblical fall from grace—a recognition of the world-altering rupture of Middle Passage and its ongoing legacies. Such a reading makes sense in that I was surrounded by and learning Catholic Jesuit mythologies. However, this reading is unconvincing. Instead, to ‘fall subject to racism’ reads much more like locating anti-Blackness outside of myself—that racism is something that primarily happens *out there* and falling subject to such actions is a state imposed upon myself. This reading aligns with the externalizations ‘no thing in me’ and ‘my high school was racist’ that distance who I was from what I saw as racist actions. This do-gooder positioning is analogous to the ‘but I have a Black friend’ fallacy, or later the ‘I voted for Obama’ move to innocence immortalized in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017). These do-gooder tropes are expressions of commitment to liberal equality, just like the ongoing exploitation of diversity and inclusion (paperson, 2017; Patel, 2015, 2018).

An evocative interlude

I asked the tow truck driver if we could stop at Little Caesar’s on the way to the house. He needed dinner, too, so my partner and I bought him a pepperoni pizza. We got a cheese pizza because it was fifty cents cheaper. Both totaled about \$9.50 plus tax.

As the driver backed in and unloaded our broken truck in the driveway, I gathered wood to start a fire in the wood stove. We needed to heat the dining and kitchen area where we slept on an air mattress. But we also wanted a way to re-heat the pizza since the stove recently went out. My partner called her dad back in Seattle. After I got the fire going, I poured myself a glass of cheap whiskey, opened our laptop, and searched Craigslist for cars under \$1500. How exactly we'd actually get to any of these cars was a problem for another day.

In 2011 North Carolina, the effects of the Great Recession continued to render my Bachelor's and my partner's Washington State law license useless. We had just moved from expensive Seattle to the foreclosure house in rural Durham where my in-laws intended to live in retirement. In exchange for rent, we did small projects to help fix up the place until we found reliable work. Meanwhile, the house had no heat, no AC, and the stove didn't work. Thankfully, the well water was clean.

* * *

I set the brake and put the car in neutral. The 1995 Saturn coupe drove well-enough. The driver's seat was stuck in one position and the AC didn't work, but overall it wasn't bad for a twenty-year-old car.

"You tried to reset the check engine light didn't you?" I said.

"Yeah," he sighed.

"So, will you take twelve-hundred?"

I hated this exchange. I mean, it was a fair offer since the check engine light was on. And we needed the money. But I knew he needed the money, too, and that he was hopeful he might get away with a common trick.

This tall, hefty figure appeared to be a Black man, about my age. He turned to who seemed to be his grandmother. She was holding a toddler and wearing pink house shoes.

“You better take it. With another one on the way?” she said and walked back into the house.

Two young, grown men, forced by circumstance to compete with each other. A white man enters an historically Black neighborhood to effectively and necessarily exploit a Black man’s precarity. It’s an old story.

The radio in the Saturn only worked on two pre-sets, an NPR affiliate broadcast by a local HBCU and a Black pop and R&B station. I was thrust into Black radio—a space I’d never bothered to even acknowledge. Nonetheless, I spent countless hours grooving and learning in that Saturn to the Tom Joyner Morning Show, Democracy Now!, All Things Considered, and the Quiet Storm. I began teaching and tutoring for The Princeton Review with that Saturn. I regularly taught class at 9am, then tutored a student or two in neighboring cities, and finished the day teaching a class from 6-9pm in another city—often driving over 100 miles a day. It was a lot of radio time.

Black radio always discussed anti-Blackness and the Black joy that refuses to be constrained by the anti-Black world (Hernández Adkins & Mock Muñoz de Luna, 2021; ross, 2021; Woodson, 2021). The violence of policing featured heavily on Black radio in the painful buildup to the Black Lives Matter movement. I listened to extended commentary of police murders and acquittals before pulling in to gated neighborhoods full of mansions. I heard about the brutal repression of protestors in Ferguson after leaving private school events. I arrived sweaty, with the windows down, bopping to Beyoncé’s “Love on Top,” before meeting wealthy mothers in ornate foyers to discuss their kid’s test prep needs. That little Saturn—from a Black

neighborhood that was made to serve the maintenance and janitorial needs of Duke University (Baldwin, 2021)—shifted my media paradigm and transported me to rich houses and schools where I would deliver social advantage for pennies of my cost.

The layers of anti-Blackness and its incumbent whiteness, social advantage and precarity, media divisions and public knowledge, competition under capitalism and class struggle were embodied in that '95 Saturn.

What happened

First, the interceding years between undergrad and these final months of the PhD brought a great deal of struggle that I couldn't comprehend beyond personal misfortune and a weak assessment of political chicanery.

After marrying a first-gen, immigrant, Latina. After graduating. After 'volunteering' for AmeriCorps affiliate CityYear. After moving to NC. After my dad died. After my mother-in-law died. After having my Bachelor's and her J.D. rendered useless in the Great Recession. After years of living under the organized abandonment of the right-wing controlled NC government. After years of health troubles while uninsured. After bankruptcy. After years of scrambling for contract and independent contractor work, I went back to school at the beginning of 2015 for a Master's in Education. Despite our misfortunes, my faith in the vertical imaginary of education remained. Grad school was an intellectual and (albeit loan-based) financial lifeline with promise for the future.

Thanks again to the NC GOP's continued attack on public schools—an act of what abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022) calls organized abandonment—not only was the increased pay incentive for graduate degree holders eliminated but also there were precious few jobs open in my area. With my acceptance in-hand to pursue a doctorate and no real job

prospects, I began study at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) School of Education. I received no funding but was assured I would find some, and given the reputation of the (formerly) Culture, Curriculum, and Change program, I felt assured. It was, again, an intellectual and financial lifeline.

Second, the struggle became not only more site specific but also more socio-politically confounding.

During that first semester, the 45th President of the US was elected, and the white students, faculty, and staff in the School all seemed to short-circuit. At the time I was focused on bi-literacy in centroamericanx students, so I didn't have the tools to understand what I was witnessing. And while it was only so surprising to hear older, white faculty fumble through conversations on race and racism, it was baffling to see white classmates—these more modern-day do-good liberals—crumble at merely addressing the problem before falling into puddles of tears.

Then, as health problems revisited my home life, I noticed Black and Brown faculty members leaving the School. The literacy faculty also left or retired. There was one remaining Latinx faculty in cultural studies. I was reading a canon unchanged in the 20 years since my undergrad years: Foucault, Bronfenbrenner, Piaget, Bordieu, Friere, Anzaldúa, etc. All the while, the decades-long movement to address anti-Blackness on campus and one of its symbols in the Silent Sam statue was growing and intensifying. As a transplant to the area, I knew nothing of this history. I began to end that strategic ignorance of whiteness (Hoagland, 2007; Meyerhoff, 2019; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007).

Third, after a year of doctoral study I was losing my patience. As Gilmore (2022) says in conversation with *Teen Vogue*, “It’s not, ‘If you're working in a factory, you're a dupe until you

read this [book].’ Rather, it’s, ‘Oh, you’re struggling? Well, maybe this helps you understand the things you were doing anyway’” (2022, n. p., para. 10). Thus far, I was no closer to understanding the evolving struggles on the ground or at home that were constricting collective airways.

In August 2017, a few hours’ drive away in Charlottesville, VA, a white supremacist rally gathered around a statue honoring the Confederacy. Near the site, a white woman activist named Heather Heyer was killed by a white supremacist driving a car. A week later, classes started at UNC-CH. The movement to remove Silent Sam from campus ignited, bringing together students, activists, and others from nearby communities in a sustained effort unlike anything I had seen before. This groundswell also brought Confederate loyalists. By necessity, I learned about Proud Boys, III%ers, ACTBAC, and other white supremacist factions. The Chancellor of the University kowtowed to the NC General Assembly and their henchmen in the Board of Trustees. The University protected the bodies and “free speech” actions of these fascist white supremacists at every turn. It hired cops from other counties to repress the student-community protestors. The Dean of the School, which touted a “social justice” mission, refused to “take sides” and actively worked to squash any statements, actions, or discussion about Silent Sam.

My friends and colleagues were teargassed by Campus Police. Unknown comrades were attacked by police armed with bicycles in a phalanx-like fashion. Police pepper-sprayed students and community members. My colleagues received death threats. Still, the Dean of the School refused and suppressed. The police protected armed white supremacists. The white supremacist fascist controlled General Assembly exerted every avenue of power to preserve the safety of the statue and its white supremacist defenders. Students were arrested and trespassed from campus.

The School had me study Denzin and Lincoln, Bordieu (again), Yosso's community cultural wealth (or whatever rebranded capitalism it's called). My partner had been getting treatment out-of-state because her condition was among those that right-wing State laws and policies dismiss as individual responsibility. Nothing, it appeared, helped me understand the ongoing struggles encircling me.

Fourth, a professor in the English Department broke the false divide between classroom and real world. Yes, we studied Sandoval, hooks, Morrison, and Butler. But we also participated in—that is, studied—a small daytime rally at Silent Sam.

I stood there next to Silent Sam, sweating through my pink t-shirt in the late summer heat in a wide circle of students, activists, and other community members. The gathering was intergenerational. It was Black student-led. And it was beautiful.

At the end, the Black woman organizer—an undergraduate student—took to the bullhorn and said, "I'm going to read a poem and I want you all to repeat it after me. But! But! Please only repeat it after me if you *truly* mean it. This poem means everything to me, so I want you to mean it, too." She paused. We had all been holding hands in an ongoing and spiraling chain for a few minutes already. I felt something in that communion. Then she read these words from Assata Shakur:

It is our duty to fight for our freedom.

It is our duty to win.

We must love each other and [protect] each other.

We have nothing to lose but our chains.

She read the poem twice. My voice, reluctant at first, grew bold. And I never looked back.

Closing thoughts

I'm struck by three takeaways from both the process and creating the product that is this autoethnography: media, showing up, and analytical limitations. First, media can play a much larger role in ongoing education and political formation than I had previously given credit. This conclusion is odd given how central studying media and arts has been to my intellectual journey. But I think what is different in this instance is that media, like everything in the US, is separated by the color line (Du Bois, 1903). Understanding media through a Du Boisian conception of anti-Blackness opens possibilities for do-gooders inscribed in whiteness to get a peek behind the veil of the color line. So, instead of considering news and media divisions along political lines as is commonly done, seeing how media divisions emerge out of racialized experiences of the world reveals the stark contrast of the color line. Now, as I'm not a media scholar I want to keep my extrapolations to my experiences of media and understanding of whiteness and its incumbent anti-Blackness. One key tenet of do-gooder whiteness is suppressing discussion of racialization and anti-Blackness whenever possible. It stands to reason, then, that white media avoids what Black media readily confronts. From an ongoing education perspective, Black media models analyzing the anti-Black world in ways that can then be practiced by its followers. Naturally, within this color line paradigm neither white nor Black media is monolithic—each contain differing takes on freedom, rights, safety, and prosperity—leaving the follower to understand politics from another angle. I propose this angle as a view of media as the modality through which racism is confronted or invisibilized. Here I am trying to shift understanding of media and race in similar ways to what Stuart Hall does with race and class when he writes, “race is thus, also the modality through which class is lived” (1980, p. 216). This approach to understanding and following media fully recognizes how media and the color line are inseparable.

Second, showing up can be a powerful strategy for personal and collective change. By showing up I mean, quite literally, participating in modes of public resistance that align with one's stated values. Certainly, I am far from the first to highlight the importance of collective resistance for political formation and social movements—there are innumerable scholars and activists who've noted this necessity. Still, seen through my experiences, showing up enlivens and challenges stated values and one's sense of goodness. In that moment at the rally to remove Silent Sam, I witnessed and learned from the biting analysis of the rally's leaders. Those young peoples' public pedagogy insisted on our collective implication in the fight against a symbol of white supremacy and the anti-Blackness that permeates campus and its surroundings. Labor and social movements historian and abolitionist Robin D. G. Kelley (2022) recently commented during Q&A at a conference that directly addressing collective implication this way is a new practice. He specifically mentioned the excerpt from Assata Shakur—the call to love each other and care for each other. He noted how the message harmonizes with the recent abolitionist outcry, “Who keeps us safe? We keep us safe!” Thinking alongside Indigenous rematriationist perspectives, these calls of collective implication can readily be extended to Land (Simpson, 2014; Tuck, 2015; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015) and other non-human relations.

So, showing up also means learning from (and then accepting) the analysis of those who have already been in the fight. It means acknowledging one's misunderstandings and, at times, one's outdated perspectives. Considering autoethnography's entrenchment as part of the academy, it is paramount to work against the tendency to discount the positions taken up by younger or less formally educated people just because of some letters at the ends of our names. No one knows the fight better than those already in it. Be humble. We must be humble. Yes, formal education permits us different knowledges, different tools, but that's all they are—tools

and information. Like what Ruth Wilson Gilmore said in *Teen Vogue* (Mcmenamin, 2022), books and theories are only helpful insofar as they clarify and contextualize what people in the fight are already doing. We must respect their fight and follow suit. Heed the calls to the social: Water is life, Ni una menos, Free Palestine, Abolition is the compromise, Protect Mauna Kea, We gonna be alright.

Third, in terms of the product of autoethnography, I found some limitations to the analytical tradition of autoethnography. I wanted to follow the analytical tradition because I have deep and enduring suspicions about centering emotions with white people (see Hernández Adkins & Mock Muñoz de Luna, 2021; also Mock Muñoz de Luna, Hernández Adkins, & Ohito, forthcoming). But as much as dispassionately reviewing my experiences allowed for a more clear-eyed vision of myself, then and now, I kept wondering why anyone else would care about this self-study. I don't mean this question as a type of self-pitying non-importance. What I mean is that I kept wondering a) what might a reader get out of this autoethnography, and b) how might this product compel a reader to the type of change I experienced? Perhaps because of my writerly tendencies, I responded to these questions circulating my mind with a story. I could have chosen to recount more vividly the moments surrounding the Silent Sam protest and repeating the Assata Shakur poem. Offering a different lens on that moment of collective implication would have fit nicely. However, in my experiences I had another story that could speak to this other lingering question, why did it take me so long? I thought that evocatively returning to the interregnum between who I was and who I've become might stir something in readers to not only further prod the narratives I present but also to ask themselves what the holdup has been. Why haven't you, dear reader of autoethnography, reoriented yourself toward abolition and rematriation? After all, what we are committed to is to love each other and protect each other.

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CHAPTER 3: GERMANS FROM RUSSIA AND SETTLER COLONIALISM IN NORTH DAKOTA: A CRITICAL FAMILY HISTORY

There is nothing inherently interesting about family histories. Nor are they particularly useful as mere genealogies. But situating family histories within their larger social contexts compels a reorientation to the personal past that may offer those inscribed in whiteness a pathway to *be* otherwise. In her explanations of Critical Family History (CFH), Christine Sleeter (2011, 2015, 2016, 2020) often mentions that Parham (2008) found that while white genealogists mostly constructed family trees, Black genealogists also studied the social conditions that their ancestors lived under. This distinction clarifies how she develops tools and practices for CFH. One such approach led her to “trace [the] inheritance [she] had received to the theft of Indigenous peoples’ land, then wrestled with what to do with [that] realization” (Sleeter, 2016, 2020, p. 2). Similar those ends, in this paper I ask, “how was my family shaped by settler colonialism and/or the afterlives of slavery?” In other words, “what were the social conditions that produced my white family?” In order to explore that question, I need to first clarify my theoretical/interpretive lens as it relates to CFH. Then I will describe the materials and archival documents I use to construct this retelling of family history. After (re)telling my family-specific story, I delve into major themes from the social conditions and theorize their ongoing implications. Finally, I reflect on the process of pursuing this mode of CFH, with an eye toward its affordances and shortcomings.

Shoaling Critical (Land/Settler) Family History

In her luminous book *The Black Shoals*, Tiffany Lethabo King (2019) theorizes a fertile semi-aquatic working ground where Black and Indigenous feminisms coalesce against

conquistador settler colonialism. A shoal, as a geographic feature, is a shifting collection of sand or soil that forms off the coast as a result of tidal movements. Because shoals grow and shrink and move, they are impossible to precisely map. Thus, both physically and metaphorically, the ships of conquest must slow significantly to avoid running aground when approaching known shoal areas. Furthering the metaphor, King argues that the shoal puts the Indigenous notions of land and the Black oceanic discourses in “productive friction” with each other (p. 19). It is precisely this site of productive friction between enemies of conquest that I want to situate Critical Family History. While Sleeter has made great efforts to dislodge family history from the practices of whiteness, I fundamentally distrust all white thought (see Hernández Adkins & Mock Muñoz de Luna, 2021). Seen this way and on these shifting grounds, Critical Family History is received with productive suspicion.

Recently, scholars have labored to further sharpen CFH’s approach to settler colonialism. For example, Shaw (2021) delves directly into his familial history of settlement in Aotearoa and describes his ancestral connection to invasion and theft of Parihaka land. However, this CFH merely aims to ‘end the forgetting’ or otherwise ‘make visible’ a truer past. In the introduction to a special issue on Critical Settler Family History, Bell (2022) describes the aims of the articles.

Some of the papers use the author’s family as a springboard to focus specifically on the founding violence of settler colonialism. Others link these founding acts of settler violence to what then follows in the accrual of new identities, forms of privilege, and the practices of forgetting that hide both the violence and the accumulation of privileges over the generations that followed... Throughout the collection, land is a central focus—the possession (and dispossession) of land, relations to land, place-based feelings of belonging, and identity are all recurring themes (p. 3)

While these efforts point toward unflinching accounts of family history, which I certainly welcome, the articles tend to result in either leaving the past too much in the past or focus too much on the author’s feelings in uncovering difficult truths. I prefer lines of analysis that both

disrupt linear conceptions of time and avoid expressions of guilt or shame. One beautiful offering that does both is French, Sanchez, and Ullom's "Critical Land-Based Family History" (2020). In this collective and sustained work to "compost settler colonial distortions" and "cultivate relationality and love" as a theory of change, French et al. suggest ways to move past the grief and anger that often comes with better knowing the past. I truly applaud their work. Still, I question the frequent reason for settler guilt, grief, and anger that figure in these varied CFHs: goodness. History would reveal little to grieve or rage over if we didn't expect goodness in our settler histories. This is what I mean about viewing CFH with productive suspicion—shoaling CFH on hostile terrain for settlers might help us enter into better relations with Black and Indigenous desires for abolition and rematriation. Clarifying the goals of this work alone might just help.

Next, I will describe the various materials, archival documents, and other resources I used to construct a more accurate description of my familial origin story. Beyond collecting dates and locations, I sought to contextualize the social conditions my family encountered or benefited from. Some of this information came from oral histories not specific to my family, but by reading a selection of histories I could develop common occurrences. As such, the more accurate description of my family origin story involves speculating what likely happened based on the historical record.

What I found

There have been significant research, collection, and memory projects conducted on the Germans from Russia in North Dakota in recent years. The North Dakota State University library devotes an entire section to Germans from Russia, which is available digitally in its near entirety. There are also numerous "citizen researcher" projects online that go well beyond common tools

like Ancestry.com. Lastly, federal agencies maintain deeds, land patents, immigration records, and census-related documents. I used the following information to construct a more truthful account of my family's history.

- I received a book from my mom, titled *The Way it Was: The North Dakota Frontier Experience, Germans from Russia Settlers* a relatively thin volume edited by two scholars introduced the historical context and general timeline of German from Russia settlement. The volume contains 20 oral histories and includes photos and maps throughout. The oral histories were all conducted with first-generation immigrants (1999).
- The boat my ancestors travelled on. The SS Kaiserina Maria Theresa carried passengers from Scandinavia to Canada.
- A homestead was made affordable to attract settlers. Around 1890 the cost was \$10 to make a temporary claim, \$2 commission to the land agent, and the claimant had five years to 'prove up' by paying \$6 for title to the land. For comparison, \$10 in 1890 would be between \$290-320 in today's dollar.
- Buffalo bones could be easily collected and sold for \$7 a ton. Supplementing income by selling about 2 tons of bones was commonly done 3-4 times a year.
- The Germans in Russia lived there in a form of settler colonialism, in literal colonies within the Russian Empire with special rights and privileges.
- Tree claims were another means to obtain land. The Timber Culture Act of 1873 allotted 160 acres for free to anyone who could establish a 40 acre stand of trees on the land within 10 years. Meanwhile, the temporary owner/claimant could rent or farm the treeless acres.
- Schools in the area were allowed to teach in German.

- The German from Russia settlers built a courthouse and jail building in 1885 within 10 years of the first wave of arrivals.
- In 1918, the earliest specific demographic information I could find, my family was officially documented as white. My great grandfather's WWI registration card is pictured below.
- Day labor was easy to acquire and generally paid \$1-1.75 per day.
- I found the exact property my great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather held patent for in 1910. This is most likely the original homestead site. I also located another relative's homestead (Johs-Schwartzenberger) from 1910 about two miles down the road. Google maps currently shows houses and barns in the distance on each of these farms.
- Transcripts of three oral history interviews with one of my relatives, Andrew Johs (b. 1909). He was one of the first generation of relatives born in ND. His accounts are accompanied by a small set of photos, including a picture from 1980 of the Johs-Schwartzenberger homestead and a family portrait of the Schwartzenbergers in Russia.
- The 1910 Census Supplement for ND, which includes an array of statistics down to the county level.

The Schwartzenger Family History

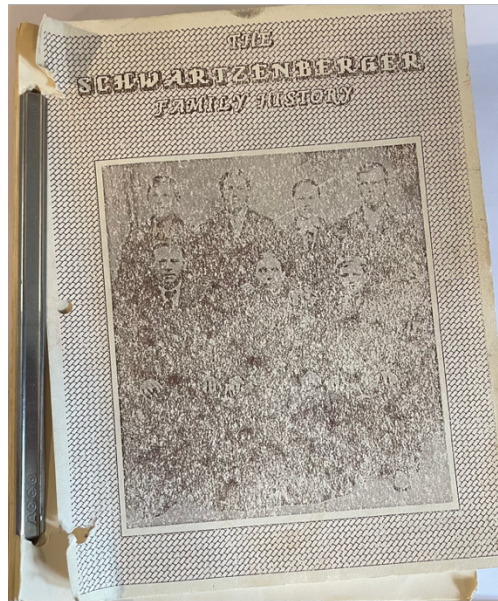


Fig. 1 white geneology

My mom was born Dena Schwartzenger, a third-generation German-from-Russia-American. While I wasn't raised with much family lore about the Schwartzenger line, a relative spent a great deal of time in the 1980s constructing a 500-page book of family history in the US (pictured above). It is even rumored that the original family homestead still stands somewhere in Mandan, ND, but that remains a rumor. These bits of knowledge plus my mom's lifelong lamentations about lost recipes and kinship practices led me to choose this particular line of my family history.

The family story as I remember it is quite simple. Michael Schwartzenger, Jr. arrived first in Mandan, ND to farm on a homestead in 1892 and later sent for Marianne Fettig in 1902 so they could marry. The circumstances of this apparent arranged marriage are unknown. By 1903 they had the first of 16 nearly consecutive children, one of whom was my grandfather Mathias (Matt) Schwartzenger. Michael and Marianne spoke very little English throughout their lives. Their children spoke German and learned English in school. Everyone contributed to

the farm until some of the children were grown and the family began to disperse. Around 1930, Michael and Marianne moved westward to Spokane, WA, where they would spend the remainder of their years. Later, my grandpa Matt would move to the outskirts of a small city called Seattle. He married my grandmother, Olive Bock, another of German descent. They would have six children, three boys and three girls. My mom was born in 1954 and grew up with some of the traditions, foods, and Catholicism of this line of Germans from Russia. By the time I was born in 1983, the youngest of three, most traces of German from Russia culture began to dissipate.

A More Accurate Depiction; Twice Colonizers



Fig. 2 from Strassburg Settlement (Miller, n.d.)

In 1763, the Russian Empire needed people to settle and work the lands around the Black Sea. These people would not only expand agricultural and economic production in Russia but also serve as a buffer against the Turkish Empire. Being of German descent herself, Tsarina Catherine the Great decided to offer Germans free land, religious freedom, self-government, tax and military service exemptions to fulfill the Empire's needs. The result was dozens, if not hundreds, of semi-independent German colonies within the Russian Empire—throughout modern

day Ukraine, Crimea, Georgia, and Armenia. Two of these colonies, Strausberg and Odessa, were where my Schwartzenberger and Fetig ancestors settled.

As time passed and leadership of the Empire changed, the German colonies became less beneficial. In 1864, the Germans began losing their unique privileges. It also became increasingly difficult to provide for growing families and colonies on the small plots they were given. By 1892, all Germans in Russia lost their special status and were to become Russians. That year, my great-great-great grandfather, Michael Schwartzenberger, Sr. and his wife, Barbara Pfliniger/Pfleiger, and their five children left Russia to settle in the new state of North Dakota, where many other Germans from Russia had been colonizing for over a decade. The area later became known as the German-Russian triangle.

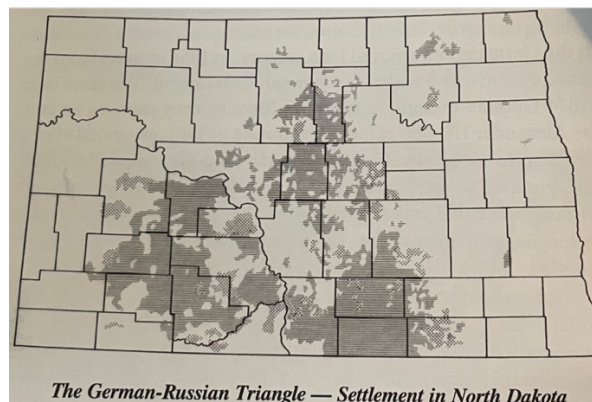


Fig. 3 from Albers & Tweton (1999)

In 1862, the United States empire needed people to settle and work the lands west of the Mississippi River. These people would not only expand agricultural and economic production in the US but also serve as replacements for the newly removed Indigenous peoples. Being a settler colonizer himself, President Abraham Lincoln offered white Americans, white foreigners, and freed Black people (nearly) free land, and (general) religious freedom to fulfill the empire's needs. White foreigners were also offered full citizenship. The result was thousands of Germans from Russia colonizer citizens in the Dakota territories—throughout modern-day North and

South Dakota. Some of these settlers replicated their former colonies and retain names like Strasburg and Odessa, ND.

Because the US empire wanted more settlers to secure the “West,” whole family immigration was commonplace due, in part, to children being offered free passage on US-bound ships and railways in the US and Canada (the “free pass rule” Albers & Tweton, 1999). Michael Schwartzenberger, Sr. and his family traveled freely across Europe to a port in Scandinavia on to Britain where they boarded the SS Kaiserina Maria Theresa for the 9-day journey to Canada. By 1892 railroads extended past cities like Toronto and Chicago and into most of ND. The family was likely met by friends from Russia at the rail station in Minot, ND. They probably stayed with those friends for 2-3 weeks while Michael, Sr. applied for their citizenship, secured a homestead plot, and built their sod house. Michael, Sr. certainly enjoyed the free help and transportation from his former-new countrymen in obtaining the food, supplies, tools, horses, and translations necessary to begin farming the homestead. While establishing a first crop of flax on 10 acres of the homestead, Michael, Sr. probably worked for neighboring settlers and helped Michael, Jr. (then 12 years-old) and Sebastian (10) collect buffalo bones to sell for \$7 a ton. Michael, Sr. likely also took out a tree claim and rented the 120 acres not for planting while working to prove up on the claim. The youngest children likely attended the local school, learning in German or English depending on the teacher. The family would regularly ride their wagon 5 miles to attend church at St. Anthony, where Micheal, Sr. would later be buried in 1920.

Afterlives of settler colonialism

I am necessarily uncertain of how to describe the discussion and theorizing that follows. I am trying to think in ways that aren't mine—that is, in concert with Black and Indigenous feminisms. Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear describes thinking “in concert with”

differing traditions and ontologies as “furthering the claims of a people while refusing to be excised from that people by some imperialistic, naïve notion of perfect representation” (2014, p. 7). That is, I’m trying to think in ways that further the efforts of Black and Indigenous desires for decolonization and abolition. For me, this is a mode of contingent theorizing that strives to “makes space” for and with Black and Indigenous thought. As la paperson describes it (2017):

Theorizing contingently is not to take the ultimate position on what is possible, nor even the penultimate, but rather to commit to analyses that make space for Indigenous sovereign work, to commit to making room for Black and queer thought. This requires refusing to give away too much of what I’ve overheard or what I think I know. It involves limiting the extrapolations of my analyses. I hope to make room for you (p. xxiv).

In similar fashion, Red River Métis, Otipemisiwak philosopher Zoe Todd (2016) describes her understanding of another Indigenous people’s ontology—after an entire year of study with the people—as “infinitesimal” (p. 5) and later highlights her relational stance on Indigenous thought:

My experience...is of course limited to the little bit that I know. I can only direct you to the thinkers that I have met or listened to in person, whose writing and speaking I have fallen in love with, who have shifted paradigms for me as an Indigenous person navigating the hostile halls of the academy. I cannot, nor would I try, to speak for Indigenous thinkers in other parts of the world (p. 14).

Both Todd and paperson describe beautifully how I intend to relate to Indigenous and Black thought in this paper. With this orientation in mind, I want to briefly describe which particular frames within Black and Indigenous thought I am contingently theorizing in concert with. First, I want to pay attention to land and relationality. As Tuck and many others have argued, Indigenous conceptions of land encompass the literal land on which they live, the peoples themselves, their languages, the animals, the plants, the air, the water, and all the relations among them (Grande, 2004; Simpson, 2014; Tuck, 2015; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012, 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). As Quechua scholar Sandy Grande recounts, Indigenous land is part of a cosmology (2004). For

me, this means paying attention to not just specific homestead plots but to how that land became available for settlement and what those removals did and continue to do on and for those lands (Boggs et al., 2019; Stein, 2020). Second, I want to “notice,” as Katherine McKittrick puts it (2015, 2021), the seemingly disparate modern conditions in productive tension with these historical structures of settler colonization. In particular, I want to think in concert with Saidiya Hartman’s notion of the afterlives of slavery to notice those presences and absences (2019). Sitting with these afterlives, as practiced by Christina Sharpe (2016) and Biko Gray (2022), works to disrupt the Western pull to think of time as neat and linear. Putting these two frames of Black and Indigenous thought in productive friction is expressly a form of shoaling.

One way I’ve come to think of this particular expression of shoaling—if it’s helpful coming from a white subject position—is that of the afterlives of settler colonialism. Or perhaps the afterlives of land theft. Another way I’ve begun to think of this shoaling is as a form of noticing haunting. In “Before dispossession, or surviving it,” Morrill, Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Collective write that, “settler colonial societies are haunted by the ghost of gone peoples—they pulse at the center” (2016, p. 7). Perhaps the noticing I’ve been doing has been noticing the ghosts at the center of my slice of settler society. Regardless of how this shoaling might be described, the point is in “furthering the claims of a people while refusing to be excised from that people” (TallBear, p. 7). Below I will describe and theorize the ghostly afterlives of four themes I noticed while doing this family history.

Trees and Buffalo Bones

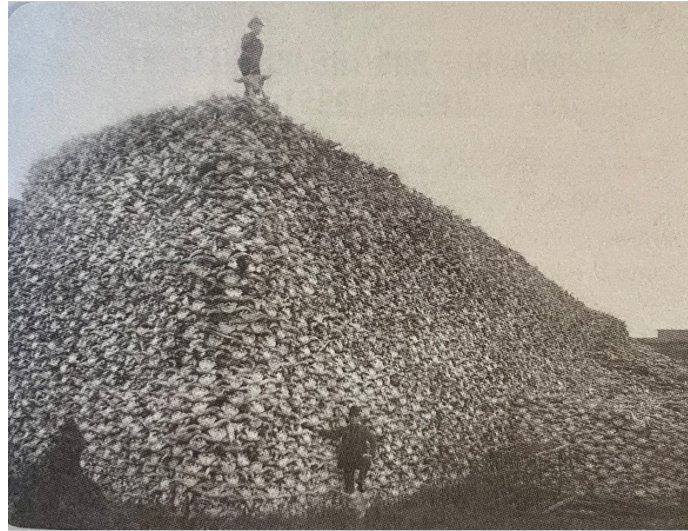


Fig. 4 Buffalo bones in Dunbar-Ortiz (2019)

Since time immemorial, buffalo have been sacred relations to the Indigenous peoples of the vast plains lands stretching what is now known as Chihuahua to Colorado to North Dakota to Manitoba. Buffalo are particularly central to the peoples of the Northern Plains, the Dakota, Lakota, Cheyenne, and many others. The Lakota thrived on and stewarded the lands my ancestors would steal. Millions of herds of buffalo grazed and fertilized these lands alongside the Lakota. Their rooting behaviors dug up spent roots and tired soils, making space for buried seeds to germinate. The buffalo also gave the Lakota their hides for tipis, clothes, drums, water bags, and blankets; their horns for spoons; their bones for tools and sleds for children; their meat for sustenance; their hooves for rattles; their stomachs for soup kettles; their sinew for bowstrings and thread; their skulls for alters (Lame Deer & Erdoes, 1994). For peoples like the Lakota, the buffalo were an essential relative and there were millions upon millions of them.

Millions and millions of these massive, beautiful, unruly buffalo roamed and grazed in large herds. These relations grow to nearly seven feet tall and weigh over a ton. Living in good relations with buffalo takes remarkable care and respect.

As early as 1868 US Army General Sherman initiated the “Grand Buffalo hunt” to weaken the many Indigenous peoples who relied on the buffalo as relations. Sherman also prioritized protecting the railroads and their expansion. Herds of buffalo would often linger on their lands where rails had been laid, stopping trains for hours at a time. Traveling hunters, settlers, and Army men would often shoot hundreds of buffalo in a day. Some of the buffalo shot would be skinned and then dumped on the prairie. Trains regularly slowed for gunmen inside and atop the rail cars to shoot entire herds of buffalo and leave them to rot. By 1898 approximately 50 million buffalo had been slaughtered by settlers. The bones from the carcasses were so plentiful that tens of thousands of Germans from Russia in ND could regularly collect and sell the bones by the ton. One ton yielded enough profit to prove up on a homestead patent for 160 acres of stolen land. The railways also shipped the wagonloads off to plants to be ground into fertilizer or made into ornate bone china.

At the beginning of the “Grand Buffalo hunt,” six all Black regiments of the Army enacted years of brutal attacks against Indigenous peoples. These regiments would become known as the Buffalo Soldiers. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz writes that “the soldiers themselves considered the name itself to be high praise because the buffalo were deeply respected by Indigenous peoples of the Plains” (2019, p. 144). Such are the deep contradictions of Black-Indigenous solidarity while being made to serve as agents of conquest for the US.

Buffalo, the sacred relations of Indigenous peoples, were nearly completely exterminated so my ancestors could settle the land that was stolen and given to them by an empire. The bones were immediately converted into goods for sale. The bone meal fertilizer would be used on the very farms that transformed the plains into the settlement farms that continue today. Buffalo bones, ground to dust, mixed, formed, painted, and baked, made ornate china for colonizers to

sip their coffee and tea. Antique purveyors continue to profit from the sale of bone china. Lives of thousands of Lakota, Dakota, Cheyenne, and more who were erased also live on in the fancy teacups pressed to colonizer lips.



Fig. 5 Johs-Schwartzenberger homestead, 1980

Location	Acres	Selling Price per Acre	Location	Acres	Selling Price per Acre
Colorado	5,211.21	\$7.27	Oklahoma	34,664.00	\$19.14
Idaho	17,013.00	24.85	Oregon	1,020.00	15.43
Kansas	1,684.50	33.45	South Dakota	120,445.00	16.53
Montana	11,034.00	9.86	Washington	4,879.00	41.37
Nebraska	5,641.00	36.65	Wisconsin	1,069.00	17.00
North Dakota	22,610.70	9.93	Wyoming	865.00	20.64

Fig. 6 from Dunbar-Ortiz (2019)

Since time immemorial, these plains lands have been sacred grassy relatives to Indigenous peoples. These peoples alongside their buffalo relatives stewarded these lands by using controlled burns and nomadic crop cultivation, among other practices. To the European-descendant colonizers, these bountiful and complex drylands ecosystems were unrecognizable as habitable land. The prevailing theory at the time was afforestation.

The undergirding premise of afforestation was that trees increased rainfall. It was thought that by creating forests, the plains could be forever transformed into lush, loamy lands akin to those in Europe and the northeastern US. Indeed, the “replicable model of planting a shelterbelt [a wind-breaking tree barrier] catalyzes the farmer as an agent of the federal economy by suppressing Indigenous practices” (Elkin, 2022). Tellingly, afforestation theory led to the

enacted policy called the Timber Culture Act of 1873. Millions upon millions of acres of stolen grasslands were given away to any US citizen who wanted them, in exchange for planting a portion of the 160-acre plot with trees. This attempt to simultaneously cultivate a new landscape alongside an enduring timber *culture* was only partly a failure. While large stands of forest were difficult to establish in lands that don't want to grow trees, the overall timber culture remains strong throughout the plains in the use of wind-breaking shelterbelts between farming properties. In fact, two shelterbelts are visible on my ancestral properties on Google Maps.

Surely the Timber Culture Act only succeeded in part due to the wonton erasure of buffalo, who could have casually trampled entire acres of saplings. Both of these structures of erasure and conversion to property are methods of Indigenous genocide—of the peoples, the buffalo, and the lands themselves. The Timber Culture Act served as a technology for ongoing settlement by planting enduring, immobile occupants of the land. Naturally, the Act also allowed for claimants to profit off the stolen land by farming or renting the land to other farmers.

Maps and Who Counts

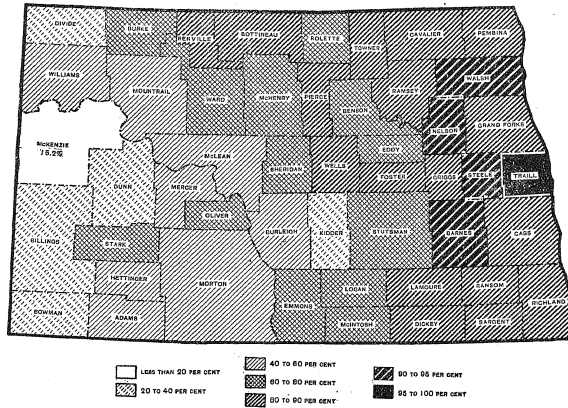
Flipping the pages of the 1910 North Dakota Census Supplement is a fascinating activity. Asking questions of family historical experience, I'm drawn to data on Logan County, where much of my family settled until at least the year of this census. I could find population growth in the county over the previous two censuses starting in 1890 to get a sense of how solitary their lives might have been. I could get a sense of what their neighbors might have looked like. I could learn which crops were popular and the value of various farm assets. Each oxen was worth x dollars. That sort of thing.

PER CENT OF LAND AREA IN FARMS, AND AVERAGE VALUE OF FARM LAND PER ACRE, IN NORTH DAKOTA, BY COUNTIES: 1910.

PER CENT OF LAND AREA IN FARMS.

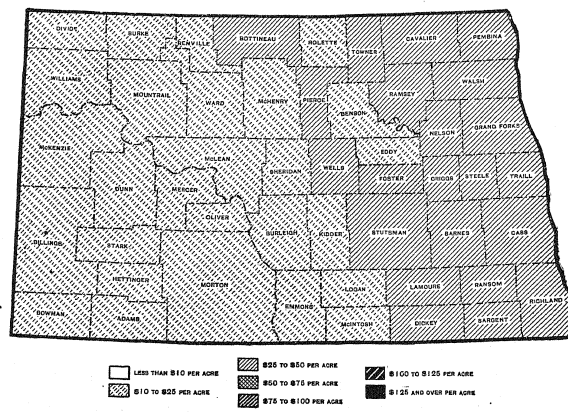
[Per cent for the state, 63.3.]

The per cent of land area in farms, when less than 20, is inserted under the county name.



AVERAGE VALUE OF FARM LAND PER ACRE.

[Average for the state, \$25.69.]



(612)

Fig. 7 Census maps

The upper map represents the percentages of farmland per county. In a settler colonial context, any land that isn't farmland is terra nullius—land waiting to become property (Patel, 2016, 2019). As such, farm density is a proxy for settlement density. The darker areas to the east have the most farmland and were generally settled earliest. Now, notice how the lower map displays value of farmland, with the darker areas being the more valuable. Notice how value and

length of time of settlement correlate. Imagine laying these maps on top of one another. Do you feel the westward pull toward profit?

Now draw your attention to Morton County in the center south of the state. Much of that county was made Sioux Territory with the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851. Knowing that is the modern territory of the Standing Rock Sioux, I wondered how that county came to be 40-60% farmland by 1910. Of course, General Sherman had continued leading the Army in its genocidal war against Indigenous peoples. Then enter General Custer of his infamous Last Stand against the Standing Rock Sioux. As warmongering colonizers do, the Army exacted their revenge by indiscriminately machine gunning down nearly 300 Sioux and two dozen of their own soldiers on December 29, 1890. This was a short two years after the enactment of the Dawes Act of 1888. The Dawes Act further shrank treated Indigenous lands by dividing reservation land out of communal “ownership” into individual 160-acre parcels per tribal man. This process was called allotment. It produced tremendous amounts of “surplus” land. The modern day, much smaller portion of the Standing Rock Sioux reservation that spans the border between the Dakotas continues to inform how so much of Morton County became settled farmlands. It also draws attention to the fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline, which was re-routed through much of Morton County and the Standing Rock Sioux lands (Dakota Access, LLC, 2014; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2019). A handful of miles to the border of Logan and Emmons counties sit my familial homesteads. The original route of the Dakota Access Pipeline would have crossed the nearest river upstream of those homesteads and similarly threatened my ancestral farms’ water supplies. Perhaps a distant relative lobbied against routing the pipeline so near a vital water source.

Old Russia, New Whites

REGISTRATION CARD				
SERIAL NUMBER 293	NAME 1 Michael Schwartzberger			ORDER NUMBER A-130
2 FURNISH HOME ADDRESS R.F.D.#1 Napoleon Logan N.D.				
Age in Years 38	Date of Birth 4 Feb. 20 th 1880	RACE		
		White <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Negro <input type="checkbox"/>	Oriental <input type="checkbox"/>
		Indian <input type="checkbox"/>		
		Citizen <input type="checkbox"/>		
		Non-citizen <input type="checkbox"/>		
U. S. CITIZEN				
Native Born <input type="checkbox"/>	Naturalized <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Citizen by Father's Naturalization Before Registrant's Majority <input type="checkbox"/>		ALIEN
10	11	12	13	14
15 If not a citizen of the U. S., of what nation are you a citizen or subject?				
16 PRESENT OCCUPATION Farming		17 EMPLOYER'S NAME		
18 PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS #1 Napoleon Logan N.D.				
19 NEAREST RELATIVE Name Mrs. Mary Schwartzberger		20 Address #1 Napoleon Logan N.D.		
I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE				
P. M. G. O. Michael Schwartzberger				

Fig. 8 WWI Registration card, 1918

Tens of thousands of Germans from Russia were encouraged to immigrate to the US to homestead on stolen land for nearly free. Each of these Germans from Russia became naturalized citizens after a simple application. Many of these Germans from Russia were Catholic in a time of great anti-catholicism in the US. The late 1880s were also a time of rising English-only nativism. None of the Germans from Russia spoke English at their times of immigration and naturalization. Consider the long battle the Irish fought through the latter 1800s to ascend into whiteness, and the anti-Blackness they leveraged to obtain whiteness (Ignatiev, 1995). Consider the systematic anti-catholic nativist racism against the formerly Mexican Americans (who in this light might be called Mexicans from America). Speaking Spanish in Texas schools, for example, was not only forbidden but severely enforced (MacDonald, 2004). And yet, Germans from Russia were officially designated as white as early as 1890. No fight, no *Gangs of New York* drama, no Zoot Suit Riots, no farmworkers or Chicano movements, just a checkmark in a box. To say that settler colonialism is entangled in whiteness is perhaps an understatement.

When else in history has a people been able to freely travel across Europe and the Atlantic to settle stolen land and become white? Right. This is the history of settler colonialism in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Israel.

The part of the Russian Empire that the Germans settled throughout the 18th and 19th centuries is modern day Ukraine. How quickly the ongoing war in Ukraine brought Ukrainians into the fold of global whiteness! Since its inception, the war in Ukraine has spurred mass support for the country and its people. The US continues to send billions worth of “lethal aid” to Ukrainians. The US readily accepts and relocates Ukrainian refugees. In contrast, the country continues to militarize its border with Mexico and deport countless Haitians. In the same breath, the US actively considers military intervention in Haiti to insert the “rule of law.” Yet, undoubtedly, descendants of Germans in Russia—perhaps my distant relatives—are received with open arms, Ukrainian flags hanging in solidarity, and lethal military assistance. To say that the US and its people are actively defending their investment in Ukrainian whiteness as property may be an understatement as well.

Consider further the many images of modern Ukrainian Nazis. Nazism and the plantation owner may be the coeval peaks of global whiteness. I don’t know what main ideological currents motivate the Ukrainian brands of white supremacy. Regardless, the unabashed support shown Ukrainians, including their forms of Nazism, by nation-states of global whiteness is cause for much more than concern. How long before one of these white supremacists gleefully snuffs out a Black life? An Indigenous Arab Palestinian life? A Diné life? Perhaps the murderer will be or was from my genealogical tree.

Closing thoughts

As a result of thinking in concert with Black and Indigenous feminisms, I never once considered (re)constructing or (re)covering my white family's goodness, ancestral or otherwise. To this end, I think shoaling CFH is a productive suspicion. Perhaps this suspicion helps break with ancestral goodness. For white people and those inscribed in whiteness, breaking with goodness can be productive work to further the goals and desires of Black and Indigenous feminisms—namely, decolonization as land rematriation and abolition as disintegration of racialization and carcerality.

Part of that productive suspicion led me to ask different questions and notice different things. For example, taking a purely CFH lens, I'm not sure I would have noticed the tree claims or the buffalo bones. Yes, Sleeter's work confronts the advantages of settler colonialism, but I don't know that I would have tended to Indigenous conceptions of land as I endeavored. And perhaps the Settler and Land-based CFH approaches could have led me to notice those histories, but I'm not sure that alone would have also brought me to contend with the ongoing legacies of settler violence the way that Black feminisms demand.

I think part of what makes productive suspicion productive is that it is curious. Breaking with goodness sounds like a dispassionate endeavor, which is far from what I mean. For those of us inscribed in whiteness, I think breaking with goodness makes the room necessary for the productivity of suspicion. Without my and my ancestral goodness in the way, I could see beyond the hardship/frontier narrative with an abiding curiosity how my family was able to settle and prosper across Turtle Island. It also allowed me to seriously consider how those conditions persist into the present day.

Additionally, this form of shoaling may also be helpful for my non-white relations, especially Black, Indigenous, and (other) displaced peoples who have violent erasures in their family histories. As Indigenous scholars McCoy, Sabzalian, and Ender (2021) highlight, family histories often assume clear and traceable lineages that aren't impacted by colonization and global white supremacy. They also note that just because someone is Indigenous doesn't mean that their relations aren't marked by anti-Blackness, and I think they would agree that the same goes for Blackness and anti-Indigeneity. Shoaling is one way to forefront these frictions and make them productive.

Tending to the shoal of Black and Indigenous feminisms in family history projects can help all students, teachers, and researchers contend with the frictions of time, erasure, and the intertwined legacies of settler colonialism and slavery. Perhaps it will keep us from rewriting past violences.

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CHAPTER 4: LOVE LETTERS AS ACADEMIC WRITING AND INQUIRY: AN ORAL HISTORY

This study emerges from struggle (see R. D. G. Kelley, 2002; Patel, 2021). The struggle to learn in a settler colonial institution. The struggle to understand various ‘turns’ in qualitative methodologies. The struggle to “survive in this world of competition” (Bob Marley & the Wailers, 1979). But perhaps most of all, this study emerges from the parallel and collective struggles of three doctoral candidates who find otherwise world-making possibilities in love letters (Crawley, 2020). Each of us in our own way has struggled toward love letters as a means to contend with their relationships to a world of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, as bell hooks names it (1994)—or settler colonialist enslaving empire of conquistadors, to put a face on it. In this study I sat at the metaphorical kitchen table to conduct a group oral history on how and why three graduate students turned to love letters as academic writing and inquiry.

Given the intersection of our academic and activist struggles, I find it most fruitful to view our conversation as a “resistant seeing circle.” Decolonial philosopher María Lugones (2003) describes resistant seeing circles as alternative “enclaves” outside of whiteness--places and associations that see outside of the “racist/colonialist gaze” (p. 127). Furthermore, Lugones contends that individualism is a “misdescription of formation of dispersed and complex collectivity” because whoever the individuals might be in the resistant seeing circle, the whole point of the circle is to displace the self for the coalitional self. Indeed, as she argues, an I→we formation of a coalitional self “captures the looking-for-company” quality of decolonizing

desires and “exemplifies their looking-to-dismantle quality” (p. 172). Since our collective understandings of a love letter methodology center on relationality, the I→we formation is generative for “interactive intersubjective sense making as processual and located” (p. 173). As such, I have collectivized our conversation into a cohesive ‘we’ oral history of sense making toward a love letters methodology.

The first academic letter I remember encountering was Uganax scholar Eve Tuck’s “Suspending damage: A letter to communities” (2009) around 2018. The open letter is a powerful meditation on the true ethical stakes of qualitative research and their underlying theories of change. Tuck then proposes a shift to desire-based research. That is,

Desire, yes, accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the *not yet* and, at times, the *not anymore*. In many desire-based texts there is a ghostly, remnant quality to desire, its existence not contained to the body but still derived of the body. Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future. It is integral to our humanness. (p. 417)

Arguably, letter writing itself is a desire-based framework. Recently, Player et al. (2020) also directly addressed the students who are usually written *about*, thus opening a conversation that desires to truly care about its true audience. Most commonly, perhaps, scholarly letters have addressed family members, especially children, in pursuit of theorizing and envisioning otherwise worlds (Carrillo et al., 2018; Cisneros, 2018; Crawley, 2020; Hernández Adkins, 2021; McCoy et al., 2021; Mock Muñoz de Luna, 2020; Reyes, 2022). Outside of strictly “academic” venues, critical scholars have recently taken to letters in both long and short format books, scholarly dialogues, and poetry collections (Gumbs & Sharpe, 2022; E. Kelley & Crawley, 2020; Perry, 2019; Singh, 2021; Washuta & Warburton, 2019). In short, letters are attracting the minds of radical Black, Indigenous, Brown, and/or Queer scholars. Something is afoot.

Letters have also been suggested for decolonial inquiry (Cisneros, 2018; Fernández et al., 2021), qualitative dialogues (Pensoneau-Conway & Cummins, 2016), autoethnographic data, and other autoethnographic modes of research (Fennel, 2010; Harris, 2015; Janes, 2021). Part of this epistolary turn, if you will, in methodology appears to be emerging from the fields of education, communication, and life writing. Pensoneau-Conway and Cummins (2016) wrote an epistolary dialogue to, in part, disrupt the power relations between senior and junior scholar. Somewhat similarly, educational anthropologist Fennel (2010) analyzed his previous letters to his doctoral advisor in order to interrogate his use of epistolary in writing his dissertation. Lastly, two education scholars have made explicit connections to autoethnography and epistolary. In an article (Janes, 2021) and a dissertation (Harris, 2015), the authors address themselves in *critical autoethnographic epistolary* and *epistolary autoethnographic personal narrative*, respectively.

Kitchen Table Conversations as Oral History

This study offers at least two opportunities. First, as a study of struggle, it offers another way to invoke and use kitchen table discourse in the academy. Here, the kitchen table conversation is the method of research. Despite the storied history of kitchen table theorizing (i.e.: Kitchen Table Press, the Combahee River Collective, etc.), I have yet to encounter kitchen table conversation as a method of research. That is, while the praxis of kitchen table theorizing is well established, it has not yet (to my knowledge) been explicitly offered as a practice of research. Doing so opens possibilities for research that must not be constrained by the formalized procedures of the academy that often chill relationships and stifle knowledge production. Second, the kitchen table theorizing done in this study will offer the beginnings of a methodology of love letters as scholarly writing. While epistolary methods and studies are common in archival and literary works, few letters have been taken up as scholarly works

themselves. However, there appears to be a recent shift in critical scholarship, including education.

Oral history is an established method for documenting and analyzing events and experiences of a community. Indeed, much oral history pursues collective memory and is “designed to be intentionally collaborative” (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2022; Ritchie, 2010). Additionally, oral historians have invoked various media (documents, photos, songs, drawings, etc.) to not only draw out memories but also to challenge power imbalances between the oral historian and participants (Phelps-Ward, 2022). In this study, I approach oral history through an alignment with Black feminist memory work (Ohito, 2021). As Ohito explains, Black feminist memory work:

elicits a deeper comprehension of humans’ experiences—that is, the experiences of multiple types of human beings—as affected by the embodied dimensions of race, sexuality, dis/ability, class, gender, im/migration status, and so on. In other words, by utilizing Black feminist memory work, researchers can dissect the diversities and corporeal specificities of ‘the meaning of who we are and how we are in the world’ (Dillard, 2011, p. 223, as cited in Ohito, 2021, p. 521).

This attention to who we are and how we are in the world, in a group setting, is more likely to come into focus in a setting that is intentionally de-formalized of legal and procedural modes of consent and compliance. Instead, I opt for a relational setting in step with Black feminist memory work that has lately been invoked by Ohito and colleagues.

Kitchen table conversations, or kitchen table theorizing (I use them interchangeably), have deep roots in the Black radical tradition that was then taken up perhaps most notably by two groups of Black and Brown lesbians, queer and/or trans wo/men—the Combahee River Collective and the Third World Women’s Alliance. Kitchen table conversations are also a relational practice with decolonizing promise (paperson, 2017), particularly as they offer a way to sidestep the colonizing functions of IRB (Sabati, 2019) as does oral history (Ritchie, 2010). A

recent editorial introduction to *Equity and Excellence in Education* titled “Call us by our names: A kitchen-table dialogue on doin’ it for the culture” (Lyiscott et al., 2021) serves as a guide to establishing a research method. This group of colleagues and frequent co-authors/co-researchers read a set of articles and prepared for a discussion on a theme. They recorded the session and presented a transcription of the discussion organized by themes and background music. Each also presented and discussed artifacts related to the discussion topic. The authors introduce their kitchen table dialogue as an “autotheoretical editorial” that is an “improvisational exegetical method” (Lyiscott et al., 2021). The editorial board has continued to publish kitchen table conversations that will serve as further guides to the proposed study (Li et al., 2022; Lue et al., 2022; McNeill et al., 2021; Saco et al., 2022). In this study, I extend their improvisational exegetical method toward an explicitly oral-history-focused method.

Context of the Study and Participants

The kitchen table conversation was between three doctoral candidates and colleagues from the same program—Cultural Studies and Literacies in Education. We met for two hours on Zoom, producing a nearly 13-thousand-word transcript. Prior to the meeting I asked each to read a brief essay by Marquis Bey that invokes epistolary (2021). I also requested each consider bringing songs, visuals, or other media they may associate with love letters. One of the members is me, the author. I am a white, cis-het, able-bodied man raised in a blue-collar family in what is now known as Seattle. Lucía Mock Muñoz de Luna is a white, cis-queer, able-bodied, Spanish-American immigrant woman. Andrew Jeon Garbisch is a brown, cis-het, able-bodied, Korean man adoptee who grew up in a white, upper-middle class family in a small town in what is now called Minnesota. We are all in our 30s. Each of us began doctoral study with and still pursue very divergent projects in education, covering different sub-fields and employing different

qualitative methods. We have also taken rather different courses and have different advisors. Yet, each of us has been drawn to the otherwise world-making possibilities of love letters. Letters, much less love letters, have not been featured in any of our courses. This situated knowledge means something to us, and given the rise of other critical scholars writing letters in different forms, formats, and functions, it contributes to the larger conversation of knowledge production and qualitative writing.

Emergent Themes

Our conversation centered on love letters as methodology and what led us to love letters as a relational practice. Before presenting our collectivized conversation—exemplifying the movement I→we—I hope to offer useful themes for other scholars to build upon in the pursuit of otherwise worlds outside of this world of competition. For further explanation of these brief descriptions, please hold them in mind while reading the collectivized conversation below.

The academy ain't it...

As it is currently constructed.

...yet, the classroom remains a site of radical possibility

That is, bell hooks remains correct (1994).

Certainty ain't it; knowledge claims and expertise foreclose possibilities

Teaching to the bone. Social science is trash. Morrison is a gift. “When and where you enter matters” (transcript).

Love letters displace the self

Letters produce themselves—“not me pushing the pen. It was our relationship that was writing” (transcript). Also writing to ourselves.

Love letters are a place, a relationship one enters

“It’s an otherwise world that is created, not by the author, but it’s a world we get to enter when it’s read. And it’s something other people get to enter in a different way” (transcript).

Relatedly, love letters as consensual coalition praxis

It’s about being together differently (Bey, 2021).

Oral History as Coalitional Self (I → We)

What follows is the collectivized oral history that I constructed through varied attempts at sense making, as Lugones might put it, of the transcript. I listened to the audio recording multiple times—as I corrected the automated transcription and to support my reading of the transcript. Using the “algorithm called my brain” (McMillan Cottom, 2019, p. 213), I noted the themes listed above. However, I didn’t think a thematic analysis would convey the dynamism of the oral history. As I spent more time making sense of the transcript, I began to ask myself ‘where is the story in this oral history?’ Since I noticed themes around the self, relationality, and coalition, I returned to Lugones’s work on displacing the self (2003). Following her lead, I decided to combine our voices into a cohesive narrative that moves from I→we and thus presents a coalitional self that is the resistant seeing circle. This collectivized narrative tells our oral history by distilling—cutting and pasting, really—our many overlapping points of agreement. As I constructed this collectivized narrative, I asked my participants to comment on or correct how I was combining and presenting our voices into a coalitional self. Throughout the process of piecing together the oral history, I→we lightly edited the narrative for clarity.

Our collectivized story, coalitional theorizing love letters

We can say that love letters are a method, right?

Let’s just sit with that, because it’s been on our mind and on our heart. Particularly because we just read another love letter from a Black feminist scholar who wrote to her younger

self and it's just, just so beautiful, right? It's just beautiful. It's a way to live life as an action verb. And we think that's something that love letters can help us do.

And letter writing has always been around and we think it's actually always been around academic spaces as well. Tuck writes about this with Tuhiwai Smith. So, maybe they're not recognizable as such, or, you know, it's also just a matter of what we have time to find. And even more important than an academic method. Love letters are a rare tool to do the work of remembrance, even if there's nothing to remember. Right? It erases erasure. Even if it's just for the time being. Love letters do the recollecting that you just can't do through a different method. Right? And, so if we want to call it a method, sure, but I just think it's such an essential piece of survival for people like us—and other ghosts that may exist.

Yeah, and you know, we should clarify, when we say method we don't even mean a formalized academic, like, this qualitative thing, right? We mean a method for living and a method for being, which we think is another type of intervention, right? We're just saying 'fuck you' to academic methods. We're just saying, No, this is instead the way that we're going to be in relation. Because we don't speak to each other's minds, right? That's an academic thing. We speak to something bigger than that, deeper than that. We speak to the bone. And we think that's what letter writing does. It's a certain lexicon that teaches, you know, in a very different fashion than any of these other disciplines do, right. They teach to the mind. We're not interested in teaching to the mind. We teach to the bone, right? If you can teach to the bone, you cut through the meat, through everything, and get to the bone—you can't forget that. No matter how hard you try.

Love letters are such a vibe, you know? And we think that it also—well, who knows—but it feels like our work together. All the conversations that we've had over the years in study and

struggle. And it feels like a space. This coalitional temporary space. A fugitive space as we've argued elsewhere [laughs]. But we mean, like, what we were able to do was create this space of consensual coalition. We think letters can create that space too, you know? As Marquis Bey reminds us,

that kind of coming together and staying together, while knowing that you can leave anytime. And that you're staying together is non-coercive, is the coalition I seek. It is a togetherness that emerges from a caressing invitation to become with me, alongside me.

Who knows if we can fully accomplish that, but it sure felt like our work on the ground, at times. We think that there were moments of, of building something else besides competition and coercion. Again, it's not so much about the academy, but just being able to contribute to the work and cultural thought that matters in some way. And how that has always been about the real world, right, that coalition building was always already there. Honestly, we're just trying to get it right, because our lives depend on it. And we think that partly has to do with our desire for, within our particular circle, our desire for searching for otherwise methods—that what we were being trained into was not it.

Creating, practicing, and reaching toward otherwise worlds, like the coalitional spaces of love letters, has helped us find other places where the same conditions were there. That work on the ground and the study in struggle created a space with a group of people who knew a language that nobody else knew. People who knew a lexicon, knew the words that didn't speak to the mind, right? And when you find people like that you do one of a couple of things, right? You try to hang out with them, uncoerced, for as long as you can. Or else you marry them, right? [laughs]. And that's sadly rare. There's just not too many times you find that. Not yet, anyway. So, when you do find them, even if they're spread throughout the rest of the world, and you don't get to talk to them every day—you can recreate that space with them, right? Because they know

the language that you know. And that is essential to keep you going through the parts of the world that hate you the most, that want you dead. And we think that's the same thing that letter writing does—or at least it could.

In particular right now, we're coming back to the Bey essay we shared around the idea of being together differently. And we were struck by what we read as their distinction between community and coalition—and this idea of how and where we enter knowledge and being, alongside how and where we are together—and the unruliness of all that. The necessary unruliness of that type of relationality.

You know, we were reading Toni Morrison recently and thinking about when and where we enter as a critical position of understanding, of knowledge production. And part of the problem, really, is mastery, is expertise. We were reminded of the literary experts—white women, of course—who declare that Morrison was saying 'this.' 'This is what she meant.' And we don't know, maybe Morrison was saying that. But we think when and where you enter is just totally erased off the map when you try to pinpoint exactly what the author was saying. And, you know, Morrison's work is a gift to the reader, but you have to do your work. It's just a beautiful gift from her to us. So, to take on the role of the expert and think that she was saying definitively 'this.' That's gross. And that's one of these things that academia does, right? That's education. It takes away the beauty of what she writes and the torture of what she writes and the angst and the love, it takes all that out of the way and just distills it into this academic copy of a literary story, which it's so much more than that. You miss principles that brilliant people like Toni Morrison are trying to say to you.

And, you know, maybe we're foolish, or maybe we're just literary nerds. But we always thought that if you read something, it's demanding something of you. It's not going to just be

given to you. Like, you read Morrison and there's work to be done to really get into it. There's background knowledge that you need to have to understand certain conversations. And we like that mode of thinking. We like what that demands of a reader—and also of the writer, right? Because you have to be really careful about what you're doing with those ideas. We were reading Katherine McKittrick again, you know, on citational practices in her Dear Science. And she's writing about how the work of referencing should be difficult—it shouldn't be easy to just rattle off citations through a paragraph. Because we should be approaching the work with more care than that. And we think a love letters approach works on both the author and the audience that way. Love letters are a method of being and knowing that is much more than just, you know, a format.

The flip side of that is that, especially when reading Morrison as non-Black people, there's background knowledge that we don't have, and that we can't have, and what it means to still witness and be a part of what she offers. We think letter writing also does this—well, we hope it does—is it does away with the notion of knowing so much as just like sitting with or caring for. Because it refuses to be fully known. And we like that as a way of approaching knowledge.

How and why and when you're entering is so critical. And we think it's brought to the forefront by letter writing. Right? Because it's an act of relation. Like, whenever you write a letter, you're writing from a particular location—a certain space time. And you're addressing someone at a certain space time. And it doesn't have to be now. And in the same way, addressees can be so many different kinds of beings. Right? It can be unknown mothers. It can be past selves, future selves, of course, kids, people are writing to their kids. People are writing to their relationships, to their obligations. And we think those orientations matter. Also, you know, if you

write a letter from a you before you became radicalized, that completely changes how you'd orient towards the work. We think one of the strengths of love letters is that they forefront how and why we enter into particular conversations—in a really, really expansive way.

Which for us, kind of resonates with this idea of, you know, how and where we're entering a conversation, right? That it's not always going to be aligned in a way that comes together neatly—that we're not always going to be accepted into that conversation. Right? We were reminded recently, Robin D. G. Kelley was saying that, you know, the power of the love letter is in that it doesn't demand a response. And, you know, there's something about that kind of slippage in time, right? Like, you might not get a response or you might not be invited to that conversation. Or you might be invited later or vice versa, right? There's an unknown-ness to it. But the commitment is in the letter writing itself. It's a declaration.

[play Solange's "Mad"]

So much of this journey towards letter writing has been through figuring out what to do with, at times, just really unbridled rage. Just being so pissed at how utterly incapable the mechanisms of schooling and education are at handling the world that we really have in front of us. We were very eager to sort of think through and write through what was happening in that moment in terms of our work on the ground, the reactions to it, the anger that we were feeling, the joy that we were feeling. And the only way that we could think to express that was in writing love letters, right? We'd been clinging to this idea of education as a liberatory space, as a freedom seeking space, or at least a place of general good that was—in our particular context—just an absolute fucking lie. And then relating to scholarship through both our activism and this, like, this building of a friendship. And the only way to do that was to write love letters. And so we just did. And all of a sudden, like, it was not exactly us writing—it was, it was something

different. And we were able to write papers 'like that.' And it was the first time in our academic careers that we felt like we could write what we needed to and theorize.

It doesn't mean it's easy. It doesn't mean you want to do it. There's a certain part of you that's left to the world, right? You're naked when you're writing and publishing love letters. But it's a form that allows you to get at some of the things you've been holding since you were 14 years old, right? And it is of a different world. It creates another world. It doesn't make it any less angry, doesn't make it any less scary, and certainly doesn't make it any less love. But it's a form that allows you to say the things that you wouldn't have been able to say otherwise. It's important to, again, underscore the fact that we don't think we are always the ones writing these love letters. It's not always exactly us who is pushing the pen, you know. Those worlds are created, but not exactly by us, right? Those worlds are created by relationships, by acts of relationality. And that's a place we get to enter, and that's a place other people get to enter in a different way.

Ultimately, without love letters we can't do this work in a way that is intimate. In its current form, in the ways that it's allowed, education scholarship is so lacking in intimacy—it's anathema; intimacy has no place in it. And therefore humanity has no place in it. We think that education scholarship rarely does anything beyond dehumanizing—not that we think you can ever really dehumanize people. That's the arrogance of whiteness that, as much as we try, we can't fucking do it, because people are always going to survive, right? And they are going to always be human, outside of the purview of whatever we've decided is human.

Anyway, something that crosses our mind a lot when we think about letter writing, and in particular, as academic writing, is that it's an invitation to listen in on a conversation. And we really like how that shifts the perspective—because what you're doing is you're communicating

something intimate while knowing that you're being overheard, right? It's like writing poetry and then performing it, right? or doing these other acts of, you know, hauntological pedagogy. And so there's certain disclosures, but then there are also certain withholdings. It's scholarship made intimate. And that would just make us ask questions that we can't currently ask right now.

If we were to approach that from a theoretical and methodological framework, informed by Black feminist and Indigenous feminist desires and ways of being then we guess what it does is it gets us to the point that if we were actually to approach refugee education practices from this stance of intimacy, from a stance of abolition, from decolonization, all these desires, right?

So instead of approaching moments of suffering as pedagogy for the rest of the world to fucking care, what if we wrote love letters that tell life and create places of life. Scholarship that is, like, beautiful, innocent, and playful acts of vulnerability and care that we've just not seen or witnessed in many other forms. If a letter that we write can elicit that same type of emotion that songs and art elicit in us, like, if someone could read a letter we write and just feel a moment of connection, that's everything. Because for us it is really just a pure act of love—of giving yourself over to love.

Conclusion/contributions

Through this study I've endeavored multiple methodological contributions. First, and as discussed toward the beginning, I offer kitchen table conversations as a method for oral history that brings with it the Black radical and Third World feminist traditions. Second, is the analytical and writing method of collectivizing narratives via a coalitional self. Third, of course, is the methodology of love letters as academic writing and inquiry itself, as discussed through the collectivized oral history. Fourth, and finally, is further possibilities for connecting aspects of this work to those who have been exploring writing as a methodology. Given that I earlier

explained the kitchen table conversation at length, I'll focus my attention to the remaining contributions.

Taking up the possibilities afforded by Lugones's challenge to embrace an I→we formation, I collectivized the three voices from the kitchen table conversation oral history into one united story. Doing so shifted the lens of analysis of the transcript from one that seeks to retain individual perspectives in favor of a collective I→we where the self is displaced and blurred into a coalition. Given the demands of individualism under the Enlightenment, settler colonialism, and conquest (Carrillo Rowe & Tuck, 2017; King, 2016, 2019; Patel, 2016; Roshanravan, 2018; Sharma, 2015; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wynter, 2003), any and all methods that work (outside of whiteness) toward displacing the self must be pursued. Such methods, both for understanding how groups develop fleeting coalitional identity-stories and as individual→collective praxis, contain the possibilities of collective and/or coalitional knowledge production.

A love letter methodology caresses knowledge, invites beauty, yearns for relation, creates worlds, and loves through love and loves through pain. A love letter methodology has no time for evil, because as Toni Morrison says, evil is boring. While love letters or their methodologies won't break the stranglehold of white supremacy—nothing alone can do that—they are, as la paperson (2017) might put it, bugs in the system lying in wait to short circuit the machinations of whiteness. If nothing else, a love letter methodology offers a wholly otherwise way of doing the academy, a reorientation to both knowledge production and to each other as peoples.

Lastly, a love letter methodology may yet find good relations in Black, Indigenous, Third World, and/or Queer rooted explorations of writing and/or beauty as a method. This potential connection, to me, is unsurprising because much of the work seeking different modes of

relationality has been generated by these academic and grassroots traditions. Beyond simply noting this potential for connection, I'd like to gesture toward the few writers and thinkers of which I'm aware that are approaching writing and beauty explicitly as method. Two brilliant Black feminist scholars, Jennifer Nash and Christina Sharpe, have recently written extensively on beauty as method (see Nash, 2019, 2023; Sharpe, 2019). Likewise, Esther Ohito continues the Black feminist tradition of theorizing through affectively electrified vignettes, epistles, and multi-modal essays and research (2016, 2021, 2022; 2020). Considering that Ohito began a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing in 2022, I suspect her craft will further blossom. In close, and perhaps most broadly, is the Duke University Press book series *Writing Matters!* edited by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Monica Huerta, Erica Rand, and Jerry Zee. I encourage interested readers to seek out these texts and conversations.

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CHAPTER 5, PART ONE: OR,

****PENULTIMATUM: AN AUTOTHEORETICAL INTERVENTION****

Where were you the day the pandemic ended?

How did it end that time?

Who declared it over?

Why did you believe them this time?

What made you realize it's only just begun?

On March 8, 2020 I was making breakfast for friends in a vacation house in rural Virginia. *Huevos ahogados*. Parents chatted in the dining room while the kids fought over what games to play. I dry roasted onion, garlic, tomatoes, and chiles. The savory aroma competed with the freshly brewed coffee. Warmth. Conviviality.

“So, I guess this thing is in Seattle now?” someone said.

I blended the roasted ingredients in a pot, poured in a quart of chicken stock, and put the mix to a simmer. The eggs sat on the counter next to the tortillas. I still needed to fry the beans.

“Yeah, a few miles from my mom’s house,” I replied. I began cracking 14 eggs into the salsa to poach. Two for each adult. The kids would eat beans and tortillas or cereal. Santiago sat on my partner’s lap. He was still taking a bottle between snacks. He just turned two years old.

“Hey, Sean, what time are you making the punch?” someone asked.

“That’s up to the birthday girl,” I said. “I’ll get the base ready after breakfast. Then I’ll charge the punch whenever Sarah says go.”

“That’s when you add the champagne, right?”

“You know it!” I said.

I began ladling the *huevos ahogados* into bowls. I’m not sure whose hands were taking the bowls to the table, probably a mix of friends. We set the table with the rest of the fixings.

Culantro, cebolla, crema, queso duro, salsa roja.

“How do we do this?” someone asked.

“Does anyone have a plan?”

“Do you think it’ll be there when we get back home?”

Since then 7 million people have died. Global white supremacy sets the conditions for a worldwide unwillingness to care for each other. Ascription to whiteness disallows such an ethic of relationality and readies the terrain for vaccine apartheid and disbelief. My uncle, Donald Schwartzenberger, chose whiteness and refused to vaccinate.

My uncle Donald was sick with the virus and taking veterinary ivermectin when he travelled to his sister's house for Thanksgiving in 2021. All but one family member in attendance got sick. Two out of eleven or so were vaccinated despite their staunch support for the 45th president. Their son is an EMT and convinced them over a period of months. Nine were later hospitalized. For a month after my cousin was released from the hospital, he couldn't walk but a few steps without losing his breath. During a follow-up chest scan the doctors found an irregularity on his heart. "Thank god for COVID," his wife said.

Donald Schwartzenberger never left the hospital. He died on December 27, 2021.

He chose whiteness and he died.

He chose whiteness and widowed his wife.

He chose whiteness and left his adopted, teenage grandson without a father.

He chose whiteness and endangered his closest family members.

When did the pandemic end for you?

How many moments have you chosen whiteness? What are the consequences? How many times have you been willing to risk killing or disabling those around you? Gone to an indoor lunch or out for drinks? A holiday party. The grocery store unmasked. A classroom or conference unmasked. A neighbor's house unmasked. Pandemic: everywhere, at any time.

Thinking with Black and Indigenous feminisms, particularly thinkers like Christina Sharpe and Leanne Betasomasake Simpson, clarifies the violences under whiteness as conquistador humanism. That is, they highlight the velum-thin space separating the extreme and the quotidian violence of conquest. What actually separates a modern-day lynching and socializing unmasked around those you claim to protect? Think especially of the seemingly innocent request for a well-check from police on a neighbor. Black and Indigenous people die from those phone calls. A phone call. A quick bite between meetings. A little drink before coming home.

It's not that the quotidian and extreme are equivalent. But they are far less different than the denial of relationality that is whiteness permits us to think. Part of breaking with conquistador humanism toward relationality is seeing clearly our capacity for both ends of the spectrum. Sharpe calls this part of wake work.

And no, we can't avoid all the violence. Risking violence under conquest can be unavoidable at times. So, for those times we cannot refuse, we must acknowledge the risk involved. For those times when we simply need a break to commune, we cannot look away from the potential violence. We must remain implicated in our own eyes.

Let me tease this out. If it's not already clear, I've been imagining someone a bit like myself: an educator, a restaurant enjoyer, someone with cherished friends, a conference goer, a neighbor. I've taken these risks and more—and I make claim to be different from (ostensibly better than) a do-good white liberal. But if I've made my arguments well-enough, what this apparent contradiction should mean is that I've dispensed with the primacy of my own innocence, my own goodness. When I was presenting at the American Educational Studies Association conference in November 2022 on the problem of goodness in critical whiteness

studies, I felt deeply uncomfortable. In fact, I felt disturbed the entire conference. Hundreds of critical scholars of educational studies milling about mask-less with no enforced community protections, talking about equity, justice, and otherwise worlds. Sure, I felt unsafe because I was unsafe. But what bothered me was the damning irony of a super spreader event for a more just world.

As I tried to make sense of my great discomfort, I recalled the last visit I had with my cuñado in Seattle. See, he used to be a Latin King and was once one of Louisiana's most wanted. Many of his friends used to be in the life, too. Some of them have teardrop tattoos by their eyes. Some of those teardrops are filled in. But the thing is, I always feel way more comfortable around those guys than I did at that conference and many other academic spaces. And I finally figured out why that is, and it has nothing to do with family, social anxiety, or whatever easy explanation. It boils down to complicity and goodness. What makes being around these folks who conquistador humanism would have us label deviant and discarded—permanently dangerous, gang bangers, criminals, drug dealers, whatever—what makes them different than the do-gooder liberal inscribed in whiteness is that they know how exactly many bodies they've dropped. They live with that because they can't look away from what they did right in front of their eyes.

And it doesn't matter what they're like now. That couldn't be less relevant. No redemption story necessary. Who of us can be redeemed from participating in conquest? What quotidian act of compliance under conquest merits redemption? What is redemption in light of conquistador humanism? Is it John Brown martyrdom? I don't know that he was redeemed anyway, but that's a problem for another time.

I'm drawn back to Sharpe's words in an article titled "Lose your kin" in which she interprets the frenetic moments displayed by white people following the 2016 election. She homes in on the symbol of the safety pin and how a pin is a temporary fix for a tear in fabric. She concludes that white people must be willing to rend the fabric of kinship if those kinship bonds insist on upholding white supremacy. Sharpe writes (2016):

White people are searching for ways to show solidarity to people of color and some have landed on the performative symbol of wearing a safety pin. Symbols are important and a safety pin is not enough. A safety pin is a temporary fix for a rend in the fabric. One must be willing to say this is abhorrent. One must be willing to be more than uncomfortable. One must be willing to be on the outside. One must refuse to repair a familial rift on the bodies cast out as not kin...Refuse reconciliation to ongoing brutality. Refuse to feast on the corpse of others. Rend the fabric of the kinship narrative. Imagine otherwise. Remake the world. Some of us have never had any other choice.

To refuse reconciliation to ongoing brutality is to accept our obligations to each other and act accordingly. Now, thus far I have focused on seeing ourselves as implicated in violence in terms of living humans and whiteness as a pandemic behavior. But I'm afraid I have not yet convincingly defined this implicated-ness, this ethic of relationality as practiced by Indigenous peoples. Let me allow Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2022) explain at length through her example of a canoe made out of four different trees in the Nishnaabeg tradition:

I am ethically required to seek out consent and engage in reciprocity with these trees as a way of living in this world. I am required to nurture and maintain a meaningful relationship with them—from harvesting and using their medicine, to protecting their access to the things they need to live, to defending their habitat from life-ending forces, to engaging in conversation or prayer with their spirits. I take on the responsibility to learn what time of year is best to engage in harvesting practices, and which methods of harvest cause the least harm to the wider community. I'm required to use everything I take, to share everything I've gained from these trees, and to take only what I need. I am required to braid these four trees together into a canoe the best way I can, putting good emotion and positive thought into the making process...I am required to carry the responsibilities for these relationships throughout the entire time I'm in relation to the canoe...It is not a possession. It is not my property. I do not own it. I am attached to it. I am related to it...We belong to each other and a network of other relations.

This is relationality. And it extends to land that supports our lives, the water we drink and swim in, *the air we share*. To all our relations.

I sat down to write this discussion of relationality the morning after I celebrated my fortieth birthday by going out for dinner and drinks with my partner. It was January so we were inside. It was crowded.

I sat down to write this discussion of relationality the morning of the news of yet another Black life extinguished by police. A parent asking for help from police after a car accident. The police tased him until he had a heart attack.

Whiteness in the contemporary moment has created a world in which actions like asking for help or sharing a joyful moment are marked by death and permanent illness. But it's not too late to refuse reconciliation to ongoing brutality. We can still belong to each other and a network of other relations. But we have to get in the mess, in the shit, as Fred Moten says. Wynter scholar Katherine McKittrick calls getting in the shit a process of unknowing the self. It's not fun, by any means, but neither is this way of being. As Sylvia Wynter reminds us, we can tell our story differently and re-create ourselves. We must reorient ourselves toward abolition and decolonization. We must reorient ourselves toward each other, anew!

Chapter 5, part two: Ending, anew

Part one of this conclusion is what I've come to understand as an example of autotheory. At the moment there is no consensus whether autotheory is a genre or a methodology. I prefer to think of it as a methodology, because it is undergirded by a theory of method. That is, the autotheory methodology is based in theories of writing as a method. I suggest that its roots in writing as a method are why autotheory is sometimes described as a genre, a form of writing. However, I think, that properly understood, autotheory as methodology contains theoretical

approaches to study, objects of analysis, memory/experience, and writing. As I endeavor to describe below, autotheory is—for now—in concert with Black, Indigenous, and queer approaches to narratives involving personal experience that expand and expound on what it means to be human.

An overview of autotheory: The methodological intervention

The autobiographical example...is not a personal story that folds onto itself; it's not about navel gazing, it's really about trying to look at historical and social process and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them. (Hartman in Saunders, 2008, p. 5)

This quote from Hartman is a touchstone for how autotheory operates simultaneously as *auto* and *theory*. If we first think of methods of narrative studies centered on personal experience instead as autotheory, then perhaps we can more readily foreground and embrace the Black and Indigenous feminisms of autotheory and the queerness of autotheory in these methods. If, for example, autoethnography is first and foremost understood as a lens for autotheory, then the debates over evocative versus analytic and the troubling appeals to social science and IRB-sanctioned research all but disappear. Given that autotheory has been defined by queer, Black, and Indigenous thought, it follows the standards of those intellectual traditions. Frankly, I view those standards to be much higher than any I've seen in oral history, critical (settler) family history, critical whiteness studies, or autoethnography.

Allow me to give an overview of how this nascent field is being described. Lauren Fournier (2021) has done much of the work to describe the existing practices of autotheory and establish its name as such. She traces earliest ascriptions to autotheory in 2015 and names Christina Sharpe's 2016 *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Maggie Nelson's 2015 *The Argonauts*, and Saidiya Hartman's 2007 *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave*

Route as foundational examples of the genre.¹ Two recent special issues have sought to further describe the practice of autotheory and its foundations. One is stained by conquistador humanism, so I will discuss the other. In the Black, Indigenous, and Queer framing of autotheory, it departs from narrative studies centered on personal experience by ensuring “the point is not the I but the discourse...that inevitability of proximity, that catching closeness, is quite possibly the signal effect of autotheory” (Cooppan, 2021, p. 600). That catching closeness, Cooppan notes, emerges sometimes from form (as in love letters) and sometimes from the “dissection of vulnerabilities” with critical theory but always from autotheory’s call for “collective witnessing” (p. 590). Cooppan describes the I/you/we entanglement of autotheory:

If autotheory is a genre in the classical sense, it can be classified and taxonomized, constituted as an inventory of markers among which one marker is paramount. Not X but I marks this critical spot. If, however, autotheory’s genre is something more on the run, errant, hybrid, in process, then another approach is required. Look beyond the I, the nominative identity, the “personal” pronoun, to its operations: the addressing of words, the confession of secrets, the telling of stories, the leaching of insides, the assembling of self, the making of worlds, the witnessing of history, the speculation of futures. *What matters is less the I in the theory than the theory overflowing from the I.* And to see that, *you have to agree to be led all over the place.* Circling back is fine, but arriving is no longer in the cards. Autotheory’s I is fount, not foundation or destination or explanation. (emphasis added Cooppan, 2021, p. 599)

In their introduction to the special issue of ASAP/J on autotheory Brostoff and Fournier “locate autotheory at the intersections of ‘I’ and ‘we,’ singular and collective” (2021, p. 495). This I→we intersection is an important distinction from the autoethnographic self-study in its broader socio-political context. In terms of theoretical foundations, Brostoff and Fournier also note how the issue roots autotheory in Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Queer studies. I, of course, agree with the editors when they distinguish their works from the poststructuralist framing of

¹ Touchstone examples: *This Bridge Called My Back*; *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name—A Biomythography*; *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*; *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*; the *Earthseed* series; *Spill*; *M Archive*; *Dub*; *The Souls of Black Folk*; *Black Skin, White Masks*; *Beloved*; *Zong!*; *Map to the Door of No Return*; *bluets*; *As We Have Always Done*

autotheory in a 2020 special issue of *Arizona Quarterly*. While Black and Indigenous feminisms certainly engage poststructural thought, the orientation to knowledge production is entirely different. Indeed, Brostoff and Fournier emphasize the decolonizing desires inherent in autotheoretical works, particularly in their attention to relationality.

Autotheory, as Leila Nadir describes it (2021), is the layering of personal essay with critical theory and citations. Nadir notes how autotheory offers her a way back to scholarship that does not “exclude and invisibilize racialized Others who cannot conform to so-called detached, professional objectivity without erasing our bodies and experiences and ways of inhabiting the world” (p. 547). Attending to this ‘emotional residue,’ as Anzaldúa puts it, “autotheory may constitute a chance to overturn academia’s unjust hierarchies” (p. 550). Similarly, Chansky (2021) insists that, in the context of (un)natural disasters, “it is important to recognize the self in the scholarship in varying methodological approaches. My students have a right to their tears, as do my collaborators, as do I. We all have the right to be human in the face of overwhelming destruction and tragedy, even if our human messiness destabilizes the tropes of humanistic inquiry” (p. 553). Chansky also notes the similarities between autoethnography and autotheory for studying cultural trauma, but she considers the need for collective grief and the humanistic limits of autoethnography to answer the question “How do we describe the smell of decaying bodies?” (p. 552). As Chansky’s move toward autotheory emerged out of an oral history project, I would also suggest that oral history is also methodologically too constrained to fully grapple with (ongoing) disasters.

It is this very attention to disaster that animates and engenders autotheory, according to LaFrance (2021). She ruminates on “the aftermath of events that brutalize relations (to one another, to theories, to theorists) to the point that they become beyond repair” (p. 586)—like the

rampant anti-Blackness routinely ignored in critical theorists like Horkheimer and Adorno. My experience with works now thought as autotheory, particularly Sharpe's *In the Wake*, certainly broke my relationship to even "critical" conquistador humanism. As seen throughout my three articles, "such a rupture also holds the power to realize politics in a way that could not have been realized before. It holds the power to radicalize those who were once soldered to normalized ideologies" (p. 568). And an autotheory that embraces the Black radical tradition, as Gossett argues (2021), "not only exceeds the boundaries of the personal but problematizes the category of personhood itself...the ontological infrastructure of the self is jolted, short-circuited" by Black thought (p. 577). In this light, autotheory "means getting into precisely why relationships are messy. It means rolling around in the shit together, the residue, the mess, and ruminating there" (LaFrance, 2021, p. 573). This is what Gossett (2021) means when he harkens back to Du Bois's "autobiography of a concept of race" (p. 577).

Throughout the special issue, the authors wrestle further with the expansive intersection of I→we in autotheory. Trigg (2021) highlights the creative-critical hybridity of an autotheory that doesn't "shore up and consolidate a self, [instead one that] actually documents the self's dispersal, collaboration, and mutation in complex relation to the world" (p. 535). She considers one example of autotheory, Carla Lonzi's 1969 book *Autoritratto*. The book is constructed of cut and spliced interviews she conducted with other artists, with her recorded questions and responses included. This amalgamation of voices, the blending of interview excerpts is jarringly similar to how I performed the kitchen table oral history. I suppose this makes sense given that many foundational examples of autotheory mentioned throughout this special issue are the very same texts I frequently think in concert with.

Upshaw (2021) makes both a pedagogical and visual move in her autotheoretical work that disjoints the self. She creates a photo essay that I would describe as (autotheoretical) wake work for the ways it blurs her current formation with the afterlives of slavery. The essay, titled “Put on my robe, tell the story,” displays photos of the author, a Black woman, standing in a field of blooming cotton while wearing her doctoral robe. Even the title is autotheory: put on *my* robe, tell *the* story. She dons a status symbol; the story of Black women in cotton fields. These powerful visual gestures demonstrate the potential for images and multimedia in autotheory. Once again, the autotheoretical bears great similarity to what I tried to accomplish with images in the Critical Family History.

Brennan (2021) poses the pedagogical question, “Could the genre of autotheory help students to see themselves as subjects-in-relation, along multiple axes, without reifying the stability of the self they were writing into being?” (p. 711). Given the pervasiveness of identity work and self-study in education, pushing students to “resist the sense-of or confidence-in identity as a teleological aim” seems promising (p. 713). Perhaps the genre is capacious enough to work as a theory of change in ways I found limited in methods of narrative study centered on personal experiences. If nothing else, the pull to the collective, the I→we intersection inherent to autotheory aligns with the desires of abolition and decolonization. And, as Brennan notes, “[autotheory] is not the same as coalition-building, but that’s because it’s writing, not organizing. But writing can lead to organizing—which means we’re back to pedagogy again” (p. 713). Autotheory provides students/practitioners the opportunity to reframe identity not as either static or teleological but as unfixed and in-relation.

Lastly, autotheory often takes the form of epistolary—especially open letters and love letters (Brostoff & Fournier, 2021; Cooppan, 2021; Gossett, 2021). Setting the form of

autotheory as love letters carries tremendous pedagogical potential. As a practice of unknowing, love letters make “when and where we enter as a critical position of understanding” not only tangible and concrete but also unavoidable (see chapter 4). That is, autotheory as love letters is an entry point to the hard work of unknowing conquistador humanism; it is demanding work that, as McKittrick notes, is sometimes awful and lonely. But love letters can be a lifeline in that loneliness. In autotheory, those love letters won’t be alone. And together, repositories of love letters take on a life of their own—and that is the whole point, to re-initiate ourselves, anew!

Back to the Question at Hand: Methodology and Unknowing Whiteness as the Human

...education [is] an initiation into a world full of symbols and descriptions about who we are. Thinking of it as an initiation helps us to understand the importance of introducing something else into the lives and worlds of children. Initiation also gives us an understanding of the symbolic significance of education, and how language and art structure the whole of our existence. We need to re-initiate ourselves, a symbolic life through death, and create ourselves anew! (Wynter in Alagraa, 2021)

When education is understood as an initiation, its role in stepwise engendering a genre of the human becomes clear. The symbolic superiority of white disciplinary canons; the aspiration to the ‘great (white) men’ of selective history; the teacher as carceral disciplinarian; the moral superiority of the highly educated; the preparation for a career. But initiations can also be undone! When education refuses reconciliation to ongoing brutality, it holds the capacity to undo conquistador humanism in quotidian fashion.

Taken in a more literal sense, the introduction to methods of narrative studies centered on personal experience in teacher education is part of an initiation to the profession. As demonstrated through my three studies, there is nothing inherent to these methods that will lead us to create ourselves anew, as Wynter says. Indeed, within these methods resides a pull toward the ongoing self-actualization of whiteness as conquest, the reconciliation of conquest and

genocide, and the superioritization (Freter, 2018) of both the researcher and the written record of conquistador humanism. So, if these conclusions hold, then what contingently theorized answer to the research questions might I have?

- How might I engage autoethnography, critical family history, and epistolary methodologies as a white educator working toward abolition and decolonization?
- How do autoethnography, critical family history, and epistolary methodologies inform my work as a white educator working toward abolition and decolonization?

I've struggled since the beginning of my radicalization to describe how I approach methods and methodology. It's an incredible relief that I now have a word to describe it and a burgeoning set of potential interlocutors—autotheory. As I've worked to think in concert with Black and Indigenous feminisms in order to bend methods of narrative study centered on personal experiences toward abolition and decolonization, I now find myself somewhat more inclined to leave the bending project behind and explore the potential of autotheory as a kaleidoscope of light diffracted through Black, Indigenous, and Queer thought. As I'll show below, autotheory carries many of the stylistic and theoretical foundations I have attempted to insert into existing methods of narrative studies centered on personal experiences.

My engagement with the tension between the product and the process of autoethnography (2017) rubbed against the traditional methods of autoethnography and led me toward unknowing. Ultimately, I locate the source of this tension between process and product as my foundational understanding of whiteness as conquest. When whiteness is the enemy, what purpose is there in autoethnographically mining those narratives centered on (white) personal experience? In white hands, analytic autoethnography readily works as an indemnifying documentation of the journey from strategic ignorance to self-improvement. "Look! I'm an abolitionist now!" When packaged

this way, analytic autoethnography further entrenches those inculcated into whiteness in their own innocence amidst ongoing conquest. As scholarship, as a product, it also begs the question, who cares? Why could anyone learn from such an innocence project? In response to this tension, I layered the autoethnography with an evocative interlude as a gesture outward to the reader. I also framed the evocative interlude with the very question I landed on from doing the analytic work, “why did it take me so long?” The answer to this question is merely implied and offered to the reader. I bent the evocative interlude this way because of my foundational distrust of white emotions. If white emotions have always been dangerous to Black and Brown peoples, then how could evoking them possibly serve projects toward abolition and decolonization? Instead, I tried to write an interlude that both relocated the work in real life and might evoke emotion in the reader—all while excising my own emotions from the narrative. I now understand these bendings as practices of autotheory.

While how I worked to escape the ways I felt circumscribed by methodological constraints seem to be effective, those interventions fall short of the demands of unknowing:

...not focusing on reparation of the self, alone, but instead sharing information and stories and resources to build the capacity for social change...And still, displacing the self, unknowing who we are, is awful: it is indeterminate and unpredictable and lonely...The awfulness, though, opens up a conversation about why we do what we do and offers methods for living...Unknowing does not seek or provide answers: the steady focus is, instead, on working out how to share ideas relationally...[the focus] is to share *how we know*, and share how we came to know... (McKittrick, 2021, p. 17)

Notice how sharing and stories and conversations and “*how shall we live*” are the entirety of a methodology of unknowing (Tuck, 2018, p. 157). Here McKittrick expounds on Wynter’s insistence on a re-initiation to being human as praxis. This process, the practice of unknowing may just be a way to re-locate qualitative methods of narrative studies centered on personal experience toward abolition and decolonization.

Perhaps the method of narrative study centered on personal experience most resistant to bending toward abolition and decolonization is the Critical Family History. While autotheory's roots in Black, Indigenous, and Queer thought not only makes "guilt a wasted affect" (LaFrance, 2021, p. 574) but also forecloses the possibility for reconciliation or redemption that seeps into even settler-focused CFH (see Fitzpatrick, n.d.; also Fitzpatrick & Fitzpatrick, 2020). My attempts to bend CFH by specifically shoaling the methodology on an unwelcoming, shifting geography helped to center Black and Indigenous feminisms but ultimately failed at anything that might be called a reckoning with an aftermath. Dispassionate, yes, but the fact-reporting register so prominent in CFH hamstrung my ability to tell a messier story, to really get in the shit (LaFrance, 2021). It bears noticing, also, that I am largely absent in my CFH. Which has left me with the question, what would an autotheoretical family history look like? However, after much consideration, that's the wrong question. After all, in reaching for a unifying location for these approaches to self-study, I've been looking for a terrain where the affective registers of Black and Indigenous feminisms are the norm not the exception. Instead, I now think of family history as one lens of many that might be useful for autotheoretical inquiry.

Returning to "Love letters as academic writing and inquiry" in search of meta-narrative on methods of narrative studies centered on personal experience revealed the most blatant connections to my ultimate answer to the research questions. First, methodologically as a kitchen table oral history, my source material in the inaugural editorial by Lyiscott et al. (2021) actually describe their kitchen table talk editorial as an autotheoretical work, although they do not define the term. Coincidence? I don't think so. The editorial collective—as their editorials and the special issues indicate—actively work to promote abolition and decolonization. I take this connection as further evidence that scholars from disparate corners of the academy are making

space for and searching for coalition under the lodestars of abolition and decolonization. I contingently offer this coalitional terrain as autotheory. Indeed, the editorial collective's work points to the possibilities of multi-authored autotheory, and perhaps points to autotheoretical collectivized voices in the I→we formation.

The love letter methodology we contingently co-theorized (Nxumalo & Tuck, 2022) also finds cozy bedfellows in autotheory. In fact, many of the love letters I traced in conjuring the rationale for the study have been cited as examples of autotheory. And as I note above, epistolary methods—especially love letters and open letters—feature heavily within the autotheoretical. Our sense of love letter methodology is all about relationality, of “reaching to offer, reaching to accept” (Guess et al., 2016). My presentation of the kitchen table oral history transcript cleaves the most closely of the articles to autotheory in that it sought disregard for the individual voices in demand for an expansive ‘we’ that our co-theorizing created through praxis. Given autotheory's necessary preoccupation with an unbounded and untethered self/I, such a writing practice that does away with knowledge claims or mastery may be useful for other autotheorists in the journey toward abolition and decolonization.

Outro

I opened this concluding chapter with an autotheoretical move, to recall the stakes at hand. Autotheory departs from narrative studies centered on personal experience in its recurring call to the pressing matter of how to live in a world of deadly conquest. I suppose, ultimately, that is where I see the promise in this methodology, its drive toward using research tools and language techniques to figure out how we can better survive the current world while we remake it anew.

I wanted to open this conclusion with an autotheoretical demand that we notice what the pandemic has changed, notice how it has been occluded, and refuse to forget or stop noticing. In a recent work I would describe as autotheory, Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2022) wrote letters to each other since the beginning weeks of the pandemic. Their letters are an act of relationality, sprouting from the mess of sheltering and keeping safe distance. But their letters are also examples of what my colleague (another autotheorist) Lucía Mock Muñoz de Luna calls intimacy in scholarship. Those familiar with her dissertation know how deeply emotional the work is—both in process and product. As Mock Muñoz de Luna argues and demonstrates, letter writing is a move toward intimacy (2023). Taken together, these two epistolary works beautifully and forcefully show how autotheory can also pull the practitioner further into their own powers of analysis. As an example, I want to once again quote Leanne Betasamosake Simpson at length, this time from her closing letter to Robyn Maynard:

It's November now [2020]. The US election is over, and there is a new president or, as the Haudenosaunee say, a new Hanadagá:yas, or Town Destroyer. We are in the second wave of COVID-19, and our politicians are busy calculating how much white death is acceptable to keep stores open, while Black and Brown people continue to die at much higher rates. The opioid crisis still wears on, with more deaths from overdoses, in the city where I live, than from the virus. Black people are still being deported. Police still end wellness checks with death for Black and Indigenous peoples. We aren't dropping off care packages on our neighbors' porches anymore. We aren't banging pots and pans every afternoon in support of health care workers. No one is baking sourdough.

Nearly everything we wrote about in those first few letters has come to fruition. Our analysis and predictions were true. And while it does not take much to see the end of his world, it is also clear to me that this world will not go quietly or easily...In each new crisis, white people will be surprised, as if they just heard of MMIWG in 2019 and police violence ending Black life in the summer of 2020. The liberal ones will be enraged, as if their lives are built upon Black and Indigenous suffering. Their guilt will book us for talks, give us book contracts and awards our aunties could have only dreamed of. They'll hire us into tenure-track positions, and donate their proceeds. They will take our organizing and our work and make it their own, watering it down, washing it in white, so that our radical imaginings become window dressing on the status quo of this world. They will beg us to vote for the next Town Destroyer. The system will remain intact and at the end of every event, they will ask us where we see hope. (p. 256)

This is demonstration of practiced and persistent Black and Indigenous feminist wisdom provides an example of both the power of autotheoretical analysis and its knowledge of the predictability of whiteness as conquest. What Simpson so affectively shows here is the dire need to never look away, to continue to notice, to refuse reconciliation to ongoing brutality. With each new crisis, white people will be surprised; the liberal ones will be outraged; the system will remain intact. We aren't delivering care packages; Black and Brown people still die at higher rates; no one is baking sourdough. What other method of qualitative scholarship not only allows for but engenders such analysis? Well, Black and Indigenous feminisms have been doing this work for years. What I'm suggesting, however, is that there is also power in cultivating coalition and giving it a name. Yes, there's always the danger that these radical imaginings will be washed in white and serve as window dressing on the status quo. But for now, for the time being, contingently, autotheory can be a name for a methodology that holds and keeps Black and Indigenous feminisms at the center. Autotheory has the potential to coalesce disparate thinkers in the project of unknowing conquistador humanism toward abolition and decolonization, a different way of being human as praxis.

Speculations for what's happening next

One particularly vibrant possibility is employing love letters methodology as coursework with students and future teachers. G. T. Reyes (2022) recently modeled one way to use love letters in the classroom during a conference presentation (2023). He suggested addressing letters to a younger self, a future self, or a community that envision liberation. Adding to that, I suggest grad student write love letters as literature reviews addressed to a particular scholar. Such letters could look like affectionate moves to intimacy similar to how I wrote to Patel (Hernández Adkins, 2021), or modeled as break up letters, as Tuck famously wrote to Deleuze (2010). The

letter approach could be particularly healing for those who were taught to follow and admire white canonical writers like Mann, Dewey, and Noddings, and never saw themselves (their Black, Indigeneity, queerness, etc.) in those works.

This autotheoretical move centers relationship in a manner suited for possibility toward relationality in the Black and Indigenous feminist traditions. Additionally, I see opportunities to further theorize love letters methodology under the umbrella of autotheory methodology. At present there is no consensus as to whether love letters or autotheory are themselves genre, method, or methodology. Clarifying these relationships and approaches would make them more readily available to praxisioners (Reyes, 2023) who need them.

Part of clarifying these relationships, I suggest, ought to come from a Lordean erotic study of love letters as autotheory. Other more “systematic” approaches are also welcome, as long as they are centered on relation and intertextuality.

Speaking of relation and intertextuality, another possibility for autotheory and love letters is analysis and theorizing alternative forms of citation. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson (2015) places vague references in the margins of paragraphs. In *Dear Science*, McKittrick uses extensive and elaborate footnotes that act as something of parallel essays. Lastly, in *Rehearsals for Living*, Maynard and Simpson (2022), list references as endnotes that list page numbers while leaving the main text unmarked by references. These citational practices should be contextually theorized.

Autotheory methodology holds an other world of possibilities for knowledge production and what we have come to know as the self. Love letters methodology can play a significant role in reorienting ourselves toward relationality and, perhaps, writing ourselves anew.

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