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“How long will we continue to pull bodies from the river before we go upstream and see what’s pushing them in.”

-Harrah Apel, Crow Creek Sioux, Fort Thompson, South Dakota 2004

For more than a decade, this statement has resonated with me...even haunted me. I spent the first half of my educational career on the front lines as a classroom teacher, coach, and mentor. I implemented grant-funded, community-based projects, volunteered as a community organizer, and worked one-on-one with many individuals and families. I did everything in my power to pull “bodies from the river;” to some degree, my dissertation was my attempt to move upstream. I began my doctoral journey attempting to transform democratic education reform efforts into a more inclusive, supportive, and productive enterprise. However, I ended my study with the direct challenge to schools—and the institution of schooling—to explicitly dismantle White supremacy and the oppressive ideologies that sustain it. Making change locally is necessary, and the needs in these localities are certainly immediate, but to go upstream, to create institutional change, we must focus equally upon the political.

In today’s divisive world, one in such dire need of finding ways to walk together, it is crucial to approach education research and training as a method for political change. My dissertation responded to calls within education and feminism, for an intersectional approach that draws attention to White supremacy, power, privilege, and identity. Today, it grounds my education worldview.

Higher education institutions should be viewed as places to learn from, and walk with, students. As an anti-racist feminist and White-ally, it is my responsibility to better recognize the lived experiences of others. I believe we need to understand the broader social messaging that takes place within academia, as well as pay attention to the implications external social messaging has for life and learning. If a goal of higher education institutions is to help students succeed in the “real world,” then understanding and challenging the way students negotiate knowing themselves and the world around them can only enhance their complex development (Magolda, 1999).

### ■ Research and Teaching Philosophy

**Research.** Utilizing Critical Race Theory and intersectionality to understand teaching praxis is necessary for exploring future educational reform efforts—in particular when attempting to disrupt the White supremacist, paternalistic, neoliberal, deficit-based, top-down ideology woven into many modern school reform movements. This framework proves particularly useful when working across lines of race. It requires us to refrain from offering our own narratives and instead allows for the experiences and counternarratives of “others” to be expressed in their own words, providing their own perspectives (Thompson, 2004). Intersectionality “explains the processes and mechanisms by which subjects mobilize (or choose not to mobilize) particular aspects of their identities in particular circumstances” (Nash, 2008, p. 11);

systemic oppression, power, and privilege cannot be separated from the institution of education.

While I consider myself a realist, I also trust in the goodness of people and in the divine power of the universe to right itself. I believe and see evidence of previously idle (White) people mobilizing because they “now know,” having heard the stories, pain, and struggles of “others.” Quantitative data is undeniably valuable, especially for understanding the scope of an issue. It helps us see how many and how far the proverbial dots spread. Qualitative data, though, connects those dots. It allows the picture to be completed. Narratives paint those pictures in color and add both ethos and pathos. Narratives allow us to explicitly say what we mean—to name the demon. It is a vehicle to expose and challenge curriculum, policy, and practice more directly (Magolda, 1999). Moving beyond the politicized debates strictly around policy concepts, such as neoliberalism, and toward the lived experiences of those navigating these systems, is the best route to true progressive education reform. I believe this approach can lead to a deeper understanding of agency, responsibility, and the negotiation of power for both researchers, study participants, and students.

**Institution of Education.** The second major implication of my teaching philosophy and education worldview is that critical works can and should be used to inform educational leadership, as well as student development policies and practices in K-16 education. We must elevate conversations about prejudiced recruiting and hiring practices, as well as exclusionary practices once hired. This begins with examining who is in leadership positions within K-16 institutions and whose voices are and are not being represented. We must move beyond hiring for diversity and instead hire because inclusion moves the needle of social justice. We must address the silencing of others through the White supremacist, patriarchal, neoliberal curriculum, policies, and practices that promote and reward obedience, competition, and standardization. We do this by uncovering the explicit and implicit lies offered to us, which dictate that everyone should be able to benefit from the opportunities of choice-based, White supremacist systems and structures. We do this by creating spaces for marginalized voices to be heard and privileged ears to listen and we—those who are currently with the power to do so (i.e., accomplices)—must continue to explore ways, models, and systems to facilitate this collaboration.

We must focus our efforts on cross-coalitional activism. If we are serious about attending to the needs and rights of marginalized students and engaging students of privilege in social justice work, then identity work in educational spaces is imperative. We cannot fight the demon we do not know or will not acknowledge. Campuses or districts operating in silos need to reform into spaces of collective action; this must be an across-the-board adoption. In addition to educating students, faculty and staff need to be trained in race and identity work, and the implications of (in)equity malpractice need to be made clear. Personal exploration of implicit bias, welcoming and processing difficult critical conversations, and evaluation of our own (evolving) participation in oppression is never complete. Continual and conscious self-work must be at the forefront of this change.

**My Dissertation in Praxis.** My continued commitment to this work has been revived through my research and teaching, with renewed energy spent on uncovering and understanding my own biases and assumptions. Dominelli (1988) argued that continual anti-racism education and training are necessary to uncover and discard avoidance strategies. The rewards outweigh the

risks and discomforts. "Without the ability to think about yourself, to reflect on your life, there's really no awareness, no consciousness. Consciousness doesn't come automatically; it comes through being alive, awake, curious, and often furious" (Greene, 2008, p. 2). For social justice reformers and activists, my work and practice hopefully inspires, informs, or infuriates them. I want educators and researchers to discern the self-reflective nature of using the frameworks I employ as an immense benefit; Personally, my dissertation has been transformative for my practice and my understanding of my own true identity.

I have changed who I am at my core after focusing on the struggles of people who've sought to liberate themselves from oppression and domination. Hearing participants talk about how they've contorted and conformed, both willingly and at times against their will, to fit or belong or find a sense of "normal" made me reflect on my own educational experiences and practice as an educator-scholar. At the forefront of my mind and throughout the pages of my researcher diary, I find my identity meaning-making process as related to my educational experiences, and more narrowly with regard to developing and writing research, syllabuses, and course content.

Reviewing the seven-years of my professional doctoral program, I found endless examples of my own identity construction mechanisms: from the lexicon I'd adopted, to writing styles, to what I read and who I sought out as experts. I looked to my committee for approval and, maybe more importantly, I looked to my participants for approval. I wanted to get it right—right as determined by external authorities, perhaps even a peer-reviewed journal.

I also looked at my doctoral experience and found imposter-syndrome throughout. Will I be accepted as an anti-racist, feminist scholar-activist, or will I be criticized as yet another White woman trying to speak on behalf of women of color? I have gained more and more footing in my confidence through my relationships with women of color and with other White, anti-racist women activists; however, I still waiver between "I'm just a novice... no I'm an expert... I'm ready to speak... and maybe it's best to just listen." My uncertainty has come through trial and error in multiple contexts. Most honestly, my emotional challenges have been affected directly through listening, reading, writing, speaking, and welcoming critique from mentors, like my committee, and from peers, scholars, my participants, and former and current students. It is work and it takes courage.

My hope as I moved toward the end of my dissertation was that I continued to approach an affirmed identity as an educator-scholar. It also takes continual identity work of my own. I have constantly seen opportunities to explore my own biases and assumptions, my own implicit and explicit knowing, my cultural competencies and deficiencies. Identity work is never really done.

## ■ Education Worldview

I believe that more mixed methods and qualitative studies are needed to document the experiences of all students who are on the margins, especially regarding identity construction. Obtaining narratives behind the many quantitative studies that exist would prove powerful and connective. Future studies could be improved by using longitudinal design. I believe more longitudinal studies need to be completed to gain a more holistic view of the evolution of identity within the institution of education. For me, having a storied past with participants was

helpful and insightful, but had I been able to regularly collect data over the years, the data provided could have been richer. Additional studies could also be improved with an increased sample pool and number of research sites. Including additional marginalized groups or focused dimensions of identity could also improve future studies. Similar inquiries are warranted, for example, into the experiences of other marginalized groups (perhaps Latina, Native American, Non-binary and Trans\*, etc.). They might include other focused dimensions of identity constructions as an additional point of entry, for instance, (dis)ability in relation to and intersection with other identity constructions.

## ■ Future Practice

My future practice will serve three purposes. First, it will continue to contribute to the anti-racist, feminist body of literature on, and more importantly with, women of color in secondary education. Secondly, my work as an education reformer will consider the salient social and educational contextual influences on identity construction as meaningful locations for addressing the relationship between knowledge, power, and political change. Lastly, as a White administrator, researcher, and teacher I will explore the phenomena of my own implicit knowing and my own situatedness, while cross-collaborating with others so that my anti-racist social, political, and education reform work will reflect an authentic commitment to social justice within and beyond the walls of academia.

My dissertation was a labor of love. The subject of my study, when it was less defined, is what drove me to apply to a doctoral program. The scholarship has met and exceeded my every expectation. The relationships I've developed with my advisors, my colleagues, my peers, and my participants have been the unexpected truest reward, not to mention the self-reflection and self-development that has transformed me, my life, and my practice. I want that for other scholars.

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In closing, I leave you with a passage from "The Passionate Mind of Maxine Green: I am—not yet," where William Pinar (1998) penned the brilliance of Maxine Greene:

Education at its best is a process of teaching people to explore ideas themselves and the world in which they live, to ask questions about the experience called living and to embrace ambiguity, to notice the unusual without fear and to look upon the ordinary with new eyes. (p. 67)

My hope is those I collaborate with also *look forward with new eyes*.

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