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Tara N. Meister

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## **From Interior to Dialogue and Deconstruction: Dismantling Ideologies of Whiteness with Stories**

Tara N. Meister\*  
*University of Denver*

*A reflexive and conceptual piece, I address the tension around white people and researchers utilizing stories of people of color for social justice, instead maintaining that white researchers can deconstruct their own whiteness upholding white supremacy through reflexive, race-centered stories. Because of white epistemological disadvantages (Alcoff, 2007) and the shallow depth of experiences required to see and dismantle oppression (Leonardo & Porter, 2010), white people must engage differently in work towards justice, focusing on the way white supremacy operates institutionally and individually. While painful, white people need to grapple with the interior work of reflexivity to confront individual histories and ideologies influenced by whiteness (Matias, 2016), as well as internal contradictions around racial constructions (Newton, 2002). Utilizing Jones (2000) levels of racism--personally mediated, institutional, and internalized--I explicate a process to engage with stories reflexively and unpack whiteness ideologies for justice-oriented action. I model the process with some of my own reflexive stories intended to support my everyday work for social justice.*

**Keywords:** Stories | Whiteness | Equity | Reflexivity

On an April day, the sun's warmth pressing through the leaves, two white female friends and I, also white, strolled the groomed pebble-dirt path around a public garden. As we turned east through a shady section, bending slightly uphill, one of the females remarked, "What do I do... what do I say... when white friends and family make racist remarks? I always feel so angry, so unable to speak, so lost on what to say or do..." At that time, I had just completed a grueling quarter of interior and painful reflexive work as I considered the ethics of and spaces for white researchers to work for racial justice and equity. While reflexivity can help white people reflect upon, unpack, and navigate their race-based emotions and realities (Matias, 2016), it involves *painful* self-work. Ghabra (2015) wrote that "privilege is more painful" (p. 11) because it involves extensive unlearning (Freire, 2011), fear—especially of self (Lensmire et al., 2013)—and shame.

Promoting deep grappling by white people of their positionality, both lived and inherited, will involve negative emotions because they are largely composed of "self-realization" (Matias, 2016, p. 170). There is a discomfort that comes with discovering that we are not what we think or that our successes do not come from a natural right or hard work, but from deep-seated racial realities that allow people to achieve and move differentially (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Harris, 1995; Matias, 2016). We must face whiteness and "shame head on" (Williams, 2016, p. 75), pushing ourselves toward

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\* Correspondence can be directed to Tara Meister at tara.meister@du.edu

discomfort, growth, and alterity. Otherwise, we are complicit in white supremacist systems that continue to mark bodies by race for educational possibility (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007), housing and loan acceptability (Chavartty & Da Silva, 2012), and police protection (White, 2015). As a white K-12 educator, tutor, and graduate student at a private university, I realize that the bulk of spaces I must work are white. Therefore, my purpose of deconstructing whiteness and building dialogue for equitable action becomes more urgent. In this drive to resist normative discourse and embrace discomfort and reflexivity, my friends and I talked through some of our own pain and our missteps, trying to locate spaces for more productive action with ourselves and those in our communities: friends, colleagues, and family-members. We decided to write critical racial autobiographies. We met to share and discuss our autobiographies to engage in the painful self-work required for action. The work of sharing stories and experiences for unpacking how ideologies of whiteness undergird white supremacy and operate within myself comprise central features of my everyday work toward racial justice. For me, the ongoing work of reflexivity through my personal story provides self-preservation and space to move in more racially just ways.

### **Framing**

In a society that privileges quantitative statistics and studies—“objective” measures—above the swayed subjectivity of story, story reaches the heart and the body, inciting empathy, humanizing perspectives, and action that statistics and numbers cannot (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Greene, 1978). However, when first coming to racial consciousness, white people can tend to focus their attention and efforts on stories of oppression and injustice by people of color (Tuck, 2009), even writing and disseminating them in their own work. However, to contribute to the tradition of anti-oppressive and social justice-oriented research, I—and white researchers in particular—must not only avoid appropriation of people of color’s stories, but also consciously engage in a continuous refusal to make claims that possess the experiences of others through our lenses or that serve our purposes rather than those of the communities we serve (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Thus, this conceptual and reflexive piece written primarily for white researchers and educators will consider a process white researchers can use to deconstruct whiteness through stories and move toward action (Freire, 2011).

White scholars must be intentional about shifting the norms around disseminating damage-centered stories and research about people of color (Calderón, 2016), shifting blame for society’s problems onto bodies and communities of color without locating and dismantling the systems that perpetuate white supremacy. Instead, they must painfully interrogate how white supremacy damages white humanity and communities of color, reorienting the damage onto their own complicity with the intent of dismantling racist beliefs and systems. However, whiteness provides a “shallowness” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010) stemming from physically embodying white privilege in a white supremacist society, and, consequently, living as “epistemologically disadvantaged” (Alcoff, 2007, p. 46); whiteness obscures realities, such as lived understandings of police brutality. Thus, I engage a critical, postmodernist orientation that assumes many realities exist simultaneously, what Ellison (1995) terms as “frequencies” (p. 581), without a singular absolute; we only hear and see the reality we are tuned into, mediated by our intersectional identities. Here, I center my white identity, but my positionality as a woman and a former

evangelical Christian who has taught public middle and high school English also informs my thinking. I contend that progress does not move with linear rationality, but instead cycles and shifts as we encounter various channels of understanding within society and self (Greene, 1978). Through this orientation, I consider the following questions: How can white researchers and practitioners reflexively navigate tensions that exist to push the systems they live within, connecting from theory to practice? What facilitates deep grappling with racial identity for white people to use stories to contest white supremacy rather than reify it?

### **Grounding in Terms**

For the purposes of this work, I must delineate my conceptions of the differences between white, whiteness, and white supremacy; these distinctions helped me restructure my ideas about my own identity and how it situates in society. The race “white” simply refers to a phenotype, or skin color, but it carries certain signifiers in a racialized society, rooted historically through religion, politics, and science (Wynter, 2003). Gillborn (2014) distinguishes between whiteness and white, arguing that “whiteness is not a race; whiteness...is an ideology, a form of belief, and a system of assumptions and practices” (p. 32). These assumptions and practices center dominant ideologies around meritocratic notions of hard work leading to the American dream (West, 1989), entitled access to resources such as elite education (Weis & Fine, 2012), and pathological views of people of color and their cultures (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tuck, 2009). Educational structures—including academia—reproduce whiteness (Thompson Dorsey & Venzant Chambers, 2014; Weis & Fine, 2012; West-Olatunji et al., 2008) in their curricula, in their modes of learning, in what they constitute as knowledge, and in the stories they share.

As a composite, ideologies of whiteness are embedded in systems and institutions to uphold white supremacy. White supremacy emerges individually via racism, which Audre Lorde (1984/2007) defines as “the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance” (p. 45). However, individuals and systems move racism from personally mediated prejudicial actions or even institutional discrimination (Jones, 2000) to white supremacy: the way that systems, institutions, beliefs, and ideologies (collective beliefs) maintain white superiority and dominance (Leonardo, 2004). White supremacy developed through the global inscription of religious, ideological, and scientific beliefs through processes of slavery and colonization (Chakravartty & da Silva, 2012; Wynter, 2003). Because of the overrepresentation of white authors, histories, researchers—particularly white men (Wynter, 2003)—U.S. society promotes the myth of neutrality and white normality (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004). I consider neutrality as normative centering in U.S. consciousness, which utilizes meritocracy, colorblind racism, and silence to embed and reinscribe racism into individual mentalities and institutions so it is pernicious, unseen, or, at best, ordinary (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Harris, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015).

### **The Role of White Stories**

Within the milieu of white supremacy, stories provide important connections to truths and emotions that numbers cannot wholly convey, making them a powerful tool to expand

racial consciousness and to push against systems (pK-12 and Higher Education). People of color's stories use personal experiences to understand the way racism endures and proliferates, as well as to disrupt the normative centering of the master narrative (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counternarratives offer alternate views on reality that declare racism's perpetuation, strive to dismantle systems, and seek to expose strategies for liberation, both personally and collectively.

Stories for white people differ, offering spaces to reflect, unpack, and navigate race-based emotions and realities and understand the way white supremacy weaves into the individual (Matias, 2016). Maxine Greene (1978) described the power of operating from "personal landscapes": when white people engage with their own story, history, and perspective, they ground themselves into the terrain in which they live to be in community with others, "ask their own questions and seek their own transcendence" (p. 2). Therefore, white people must tell personal narratives that depict how "actions, ideologies, and discourses might, in fact, be racist... Without identifying these acts of racism and white supremacy, regardless of intentionality, these will continue to reign supreme while rendering the power whiteness uses to perch itself atop the invisible hierarchy" (Matias, 2016, p. 169-170). Because of the reality of the society in which we live, the dominant discourses and modes of being center whiteness and white norms. Thus, to live is to live within that reality (Greene, 1988). White stories need to unmask tropes of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy within whiteness (Matsuda et al. 1993, p. 6; see also Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), exposing the oft unseen kinesis of race and white supremacy (McAfee, 2014) into consciousness for disruptive action.

### **Interrogating the Self with Reflexivity**

The violence of colonialization and slavery that engendered a white supremacist system influence the psychology of both white people and people of color, rendering white people particularly inhuman in their need to maintain superiority through race (Fanon, 1952/2008). Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) speaks of the need for discomfort in dismantling the internalized ideologies of whiteness in *Between the World and Me*. His internalizations as a Black man reflect dismantling inferiority, while white people must dismantle internalized dominance (DiAngelo, 2011) and privilege. Spaces and moments of dissonance push against taken-for-granted ideas to see beyond our *particular* realities to consider other realities inscribed historically. Greene (1978) describes this turn inward as a place to "become human... within a community" (p. 3). Our stories must decolonize ourselves, including from the racial dimension underneath exploitative power relationships inscribed historically and maintained (Fanon, 1963/2004), creating space for others to do the same. Many white people do not have the deep experiences of racial oppression because of privilege (Alcoff, 2007) or the requisite experiences with people and communities of color to recognize—or even empathize with—racial oppression (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Thus, the process can be overwhelming, making white people disengage, wondering, "Where should I begin?... I too felt bound by my ignorance" (p. 47-48). DiAngelo (2011) terms this as "white fragility," where privilege insulates white people from building the "psychosocial stamina" created by witnessing and experiencing racism, limiting their ability to deal with it effectively or for sustained time periods (p. 56).

However, “the pursuit of knowing” (Coates, 2015, p. 48) leads to questions and ideas connected to histories and selves that allow us to see more and be more than we ever could by limiting ourselves to “good” racial constructions. If we admit our complicity with racism, we become “bad” since Western constructions of good and evil exist in “two entirely different entities” (Newton, 2002, p. 182). Conversely, in African societies, for example, both good and evil create an internal contradiction, causing all people to possess both capacities at once (Newton, 2002). The reticence of white people to confront their racism stems from the notion that they are racist or not, but allowing for both simultaneously opens space to consider the ways we are racist and uphold white supremacy while also maintaining our “goodness.”

Coates seemed to understand the necessity of contradiction in his written art, describing it as living “in this void, in the not yet knowable, in the pain, in the question” (p. 50). White people’s privileged position enables them to live aside the pain, aside the questions of justice: they have not penetrated the everyday, the constant consciousness, the forced confrontation. For Coates, writing is “a confrontation with my own innocence, my own rationalizations” (p. 51). We must write, speak, and/or share our stories as white people, including our raced histories and lives. We must confront ourselves as situated within histories and systems, rather than maintain an overly simplistic positive self-view that harms justice. Writing or speaking stories requires what Williams (2016) called “radical honesty... a pedagogical practice of truth-telling that seeks to challenge racist and patriarchal institutional cultures” (Williams, 2016, p. 72). Pushing against systems—both outside and coursing through the self—elicits pain, and subsequent learning... and unlearning (Freire, 2011). While not linear, rational, or comfortable, radical honesty builds our capacity for humanity as we uncover all the pieces of ourselves.

### **Critical Racial Autobiography for Reflexivity**

I grew up in a church with about 250 members and its 50-student K-8 parochial school, which was predominately white. We had one Black family and one mixed Chinese-white family. I believed that only people in my particular sect would go to heaven, that I could not pray with people from any other religious sects, that I was God’s chosen. *I was six*, sitting in class the second row from the left, having an internal conversation with the devil to stop his temptation of me, wondering about fear as the basis of belief. *I was seven*, staring at a map of the world on our shower curtain, thinking about who and what I would believe if I were born in China; as my education expanded, I wondered about myself in Ghana or back in America prior to European contact. *I was eleven*, reading Jesse Owen’s (1970) biography *Blackthink: My Life as a Black Man and a White Man* and thinking about the racism that existed “way back then,” now an artifact. *I was twelve*, sitting fourth row back in the 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade classroom at my K-8 learning about slavery for the first time, unknown realities sinking from my brain to my gut, guilt emitting from my eyes as tears. *I was thirteen*, reading article after article about Terrell Davis in fan love, learning from his autobiography about his difficult childhood as a Black boy in San Diego. *I was fourteen*, entering my public high school, with about 100 spoken languages for the first time, realizing only two of the 2,000—my brother and a K-8 classmate—ascribed to my religion.

At first, my experiences in high school felt akin to merging onto a 75 mph highway in a rusted, dented Pinto with a 40 mph ceiling: I watched and absorbed without much

authentic interaction. Beyond different languages, people used words I had never heard, often lewd or crass. I experienced high school through glass, as though a guest at an aquarium watching an entire ecosystem operate apart from my presence, distorted by the thickness of my conditioned mindset. I yearned to break through, to connect with the world without a lens of judgment or perpetual guilt. While I played sports and gained some social experiences, I primarily embraced my academic self to earn a scholarship to an out-of-state college. I sought separation from my family during college to explore my identity and determine *my* beliefs. If I rejected their beliefs while still in their house, the ramifications would exceed my maturity and capacity to deal in a healthy way.

My traditionally-white university's pristine campus immediately struck me as the 700 members of my freshman class encircled the academic quad the first night of orientation: anecdotally, about 80% of the males wore khakis and a light blue button down. Surveying my peers, my gut tightened with discomfort, and I remarked to a black male dorm-mate next to me, "I am going to transfer." In my early college moments, my eyes opened wide to systemic racism, as the university reflected a whiteness I had not known that stood in stark contrast to my diverse high school experience.

Sophomore year, I sat in the hardwood pew, listening to the preacher's words. Instead of hearing through my faithful eyes, I considered how the words struck my not-so-religious, Haitian boyfriend, attending church with me for the first time. Perhaps this sermon emphasized the dogmatism and intractability of my religion's tenets: the pastor kept mentioning the fires of hell that awaited all who did not believe, his voice rising into the rafters. As I listened, my mind skated to my boyfriend's perspective and to all my childhood questions about the religion I grew up with. I looked affectionately at him doodling on the bulletin, and I realized: *I don't believe any of this.*

Except for weddings and funerals, that was the last day I attended my childhood church.

My childhood religion factors heavily into my conceptions of the world, both who I am and what I resist about who I am. I started noticing race as a factor in human relationship at about five when my mom and I shopped at the diverse local mall. She diverted me across the bridge to the other side, circuitously avoiding a cluster of young, Black men rather than walk conveniently to our destination right ahead. In my hometown, these types of interactions occurred often, and I asked a lot of questions, "*Why?*" but lived within a conditioned reality based in fear.

My uncle on my dad's side serves as a missionary, in Taiwan until the mid-90s and in Thailand since. He, his wife (a Mexican woman he met while vicarring in Mexico), and their four children have lived abroad my whole life, coming to the U.S. for furlough every other summer to great anticipation. Watching grainy home movies of two of my aunts' trips to Taiwan in the 1980s, I connected my secluded world with a site/sight outside myself, but saw their role abroad as necessary saving. While I never visited my missionary family until adulthood since my parents are terrified to leave the country—my father panicked when we took a brief jaunt to Niagara Falls and Toronto, worrying about money conversions and speed limits and how to talk to people—southeast Asia occupied my map-staring attention. That is the part of the world that opened my curiosity. That is the part of the world that made me think about Buddhism and how geography related to belief. That is the part of the world that made me seek a life of service, that established a savior mentality within me. That is the part of the world that ultimately guided my opening to multiple perspectives and to racial identity: problematic, yet essential aspects of myself.

I devoured at least a book a day from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and each book provided imaginative rehearsals into the lives of people whose identities departed drastically from my own (Gallagher, 2009). In reading, I learned that we are connected, that humans deal with the same sets of issues and feelings, though from very different locations and spaces. Some of the books dimensionalized my perceptions, such as Walter Dean Myers' work, and others perpetuated a voyeuristic or missionary mentality. When I entered the world from my interior space—which I argue was not truly until college, over 2,000 miles from my family—I took my wonderings and realizations pulled from the page, but I still maintained flat beliefs.

Between my freshman and sophomore years of college, I worked as a Residential Advisor with an Upward Bound program for students from Reservations around the country. Besides family trips to the Cliff Dwellings near Durango and a fuzzy/distinct experience of watching Native Americans (the term I use because the Upward Bound community I worked with preferred it) perform music and dance, I had never explicitly and knowingly encountered Native Americans. On the day the students arrived, I walked across campus with a profound pit knotting my stomach and tears drowning my eyes: I realized that I felt fear to meet the students because I had internalized the image of Native Americans as savage. Halting, I questioned the belief, knowing its harmful tenor. That summer, my perceptions of my own superiority and of their savagery sat as a question in my body, cycling between mind, heart, and gut. When thoughts of superiority came to my mind, I questioned them: why do you think that? Where is it coming from? What is the impact? Achingly, I recognized and began to unlearn my savior mentality.

When I returned home the next summer from college, my mom came into my room at about 6:30 am to jostle me awake for our 8 am church service. "I'm not going," I said, looking her in the eyes before turning my back to continue sleeping. I had been rehearsing this moment for over a year in my mind.

"I'm going to go tell your Father. He is not going to be happy." I kept my back to her because I could not meet her eyes with their inevitable tears.

After I heard the garage door rumble open, then back closed, agonizingly awake with my head resting in dew, I readied myself for the day and walked and walked. I avoided Sundays and holidays—church days—with sleep or with random errands and engaged my family in talks about the Broncos instead of anything real for years. When contentious topics came up around religion or politics, I diverted, choosing silence and avoidance.

This past Thanksgiving and Christmas, in the wake of a presidential election that evinced deep divisions in my family, I sought spaces to speak to the events transpiring in the country, understanding that the election simply removed the shroud covering our countries "goodness." Either result required community organization and a deep interrogation of the systems and discourses of the country. On Thanksgiving, my mom told me, "I have decided that I don't want you to be a professor, but I am sure you are going to anyway." After some probing about why, she—a high school educated secretary whose evangelical Christian family is from South Dakota farm country—shared that her liberal-leaning workplace derided such people post-election, blaming them for the country's decision. I realized that she feared my rejection of *her* because of my education. My body tensed and my brain blanked as fear and angst overcame my intellectual consciousness. "I am sorry your co-workers said those things. They are clearly misinformed because the majority of educated white people, including women—which is incomprehensible to me—



voted for Trump. This is more about race than education, and they are just as much to blame.”

My father, a high school educated pipe fitter whose evangelical Christian family helped found their church in the Denver area, chimed in that people had no reason to be upset or protesting. I retorted, lost or found already in this possibly souring conversation, “Just because you do not see or experience the destructive aspects of communication and policy that specifically targets groups of people does not mean it is not happening.” We spoke a bit longer, with me citing historical examples of systems to try to help them see the “other” side, before we slipped into separate cars (as planned) to drive to my aunts’ house for dinner. In the car to my aunts’ house, I felt hope: my parents and I had an honest, heated conversation about politics and race, and it did not destroy myself or, as far as I can tell, them.

## **Discussion**

### **Deconstructing Stories with Levels**

In thinking through fragments of my racial autobiography, I see a lot of the dangers of whiteness emerging as well as my unlearning and my resistance to whiteness. To unpack stories and interrogate how they connect from individual beliefs to ideologies of whiteness to institutions and systems of white supremacy, I created a process for myself based on Jones’ (2000) conceptions of personally-mediated, institutionalized, and internalized racism. Jones ecological metaphor of the garden illustrated how racism operates and is especially useful for people less comfortable or literate with race. Utilizing the levels of racism allows people to consider how the “structural conditions” of policies and institutions are “woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals” (Weis & Fine, 2012, p. 174). Or, read the other direction, Dewey (1938) contended that individual thoughts fix into the status quo to create institutions.

I typically start within a landscape of personally mediated racism, as it is local and reachable. For example, for many years, I harbored stereotypical beliefs about Native Americans built via constructions from media and school and utterly flat without requisite experiences and interaction. Adichie (2009) warned against this “danger of a single story” where “one story become[s] the only story.” Though my racism was unintentional and came through omission and a lack of knowing, nonetheless, I internalized beliefs of white superiority that connected to a white savior complex. Operating at a local level, these personal beliefs affected my relationships with students and colleagues in the Upward Bound program and upheld a lack of seeing Native Americans within my life. Not merely pernicious in my lived sphere, these beliefs attach to broader ideologies of Manifest Destiny, meritocracy, and white supremacy embedded in educational curricula, thus moving from individual to institutional. In a test-prep book I utilize for tutoring, a question-type utilized context words for students to identify the synonym of the target word. To find a synonym for “nomadic” they give the context of “tribe,” with “savage” among the answer choices. Every student I have worked with who does not already know the word “nomadic” selects “savage.” Individual beliefs reify a mindset of neglect, of disregard, and of superiority, becoming ideologies that permeate discourse, so normalized as to be unseen (Greene, 1978), as the language in the test prep

book portrays itself as neutral. Together, they allow differential, unjust policies to persist and to pass anew, such as building oil pipelines through sacred land for corporate greed and capitalistic gain.

Therefore, in our reflections and sharing of stories, we must to extend them outside ourselves to consider how our beliefs attach to ideologies, hold up institutions, and perpetuate white supremacy. In this space, we can conceive of alternative actions, such as divesting from financial institutions funding oil pipelines, voting for candidates who vote against racist policy and advocate for equitable policy, and donating money or time to community organizations committed to racial justice. As an educator, it means interrogating the hidden curriculum, or unacknowledged—and often unseen—values and lessons that permeate institutions and often serve to reinforce normative structures and discourses (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye, & Flinders, 2007). Considering our lessons and the books through a critical lens disrupts their supposed neutrality and authority, offering supplemental and/or alternative perspectives and explicitly teaching students critical analysis.

As I continue to deconstruct racism with white people, primarily white teachers, questions can help me probe further reflection and action for myself and my participants, rather than stopping at a story. Potential questions include: What beliefs emerge from the story? To what ideologies and institutions do those beliefs connect? How do they resist or uphold ideologies and institutions? How do they influence bodies and lives? How are the storytellers complicit? From where do these beliefs come? What do the storytellers do in their stories? How could they act differently? How could they act if \_\_\_ belief was different? Within our questioning, we must attend to the locus of blame, directly addressing the levels of racism and seeking roots rather than comfortable strategies of distraction. Just as Gallagher (2009) describes reading as a space for imaginative rehearsals to build empathy and understanding of alternate realities, unpacking stories alone or in communities can create a locus for imaginative rehearsals of alternate and equitable actions.

In summary, the process I undertake includes the following steps: (a) telling stories; (b) identifying personal beliefs underlying the stories; (c) interrogating those beliefs with targeted questions; (d) connecting the beliefs to ideologies present in broader culture (i.e., education, political discourse, the media); (e) unpacking the way beliefs and ideologies operate within institutions; and (f) determining sites of action within systems and structures to dismantle white supremacy.

When my friends and I met over lunch to read and discuss our racial autobiographies with each other, our different approaches to the telling of our stories struck me; therefore, my process—only an example of one path that makes sense to me—can be altered to accommodate different processes and purposes. Within my stories, I sought a through-line of myriad experiences to conceptualize how my racial consciousness formed over time. I find this tendency in myself overall, as I constantly seek to place histories and narratives within a broader framework and in relationship to each other, a somewhat linear (over time) meandering. On the other hand, one of my friends discussed a single interaction with another student in her elementary class, thinking through her thoughts and feelings about this one person and raising questions as to how and why they occurred. Her process moved in a deep and cyclical way, probing herself within one interaction. Her radical honesty in implicating herself and bringing the past narrative to

the present to speak the story as part of her current self provides important lessons for this work. Her process, instead of connecting from micro to macro as I did, delves deeper at the individual level, connecting beliefs within the self. While I contend that stories need to move outward to create systemic change, her process serves personal transformation, a necessary basis for change (Zedong, 1937/1987).

### **Dangers of Whiteness**

In thinking through fragments of my racial autobiography, many dangers of whiteness emerged within my stories and in how other people may use stories to hold up rather than contest white supremacy. I will explicate some of these in this section. Societal discourse often perpetuates a savior mentality for white teachers and researchers; within this discursive framework, they act either as “missionaries”—attempting to save students or communities—or as “cannibals”—controlling students or communities through degrees of force (Martin, 2007). The work white people need to do is not in fixing the so-called deficiencies in communities of color, saving people of color from their cultural lacks as a form of cultural racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), but, instead, dismantling white ideologies and systems of power (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Placing deficiencies on students and communities of color rather than the structures surrounding them (Cobb & Russell, 2014) preserves a myth of the supposed neutrality of systems. Thus, institutions such as education, the police force, or home loans operate through meritocracy: with hard work and adherence to societal norms comes success. However, as Khalifa and Briscoe (2015) argued, such “discursive avoidance[s]” displace responsibility, allowing systems “protect their own interests and ways of operating” (p. 2), thus continuing oppressive systems.

Because systems lack neutrality and contain hidden values, we need to learn our history beyond the hygienic variety taught positivistically in schools with linear rationality and constant progress toward “good,” recognizing that schools, like people, contain internal contradictions (Newton, 2002). Schools, too, tend toward avoidance of responsibility for the discourses they perpetuate. Similarly, as Coates (2015) attested, “People who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration” (p. 97); white people want to be viewed as good, decent, and non-racist. Leonardo and Porter (2010) posited that default settings toward neutrality and meritocracy exist because the construction of white humanity necessitates demonizing people of color to assert white acceptability because of the raciality undergirding U.S. society (Wynter, 2003). The need for positive self-conceptions connects to Harris’ (1995) explication of whiteness and property wherein whiteness normatively provides educational and economic benefits for having white skin. Consequently, white people must face themselves, their communities, and structures of white supremacy rather than continually shifting blame—and pity—to bodies of color, part of the mentality that “the destruction of the black body [is] incidental to the preservation of order” (Coates, 2015, p. 84), that expects drop-outs and crime in communities of color. Thus, myths of neutrality, meritocracy, and white “goodness” act as a distorting mirror to avoid the internal contradictions and culpability of white positionality within white supremacy under the guise of charity or good intent.

While present-day individuals did not create the historical context, educational systems, home-loan realities, or the media’s rhetoric, individuals must unpack where and how they situate within systems, connecting individual experiences to structures for

alternate actions. Amy Brown, the head of the Denver chapter of Black Lives Matter (personal communication, February 22, 2016), argued that there are two strands to justice work: liberating people of color and dismantling white supremacy. In her opinion, white people possess capacity and the position to dismantle white supremacy, but the liberation of people of color needs to be led by people of color or else it will likely fall into the dangers of whiteness. Because whiteness constructs our white eyes, it occludes knowledge of power structures. We must cast aside the fear of seeing ourselves, in all our complexities, tensions, contradictions, and prejudices. Our narratives can become “a complex and multilayered analytical tool” (Williams, 2016, p. 80) of consciousness. Only then will we be human, capable of existing alongside others in a humanizing manner (Greene, 1978; Matias, 2016).

### **My Dangers**

I realize that the dangers within my shared story surround a deep insecurity about acceptance, likely rooted in my rejection of my family’s faith and our subsequent relationship where I feel limited to show myself only in terms of their belief system. This insecurity surfaces in my commitment to racial justice as well. To explore this feeling, I mimic-wrote a section of Alexander’s (2003) piece about “A Man in a Woman’s Space” (p. 121). Much of the language and structure is his, but I shifted the content from a man in a woman’s space to a white woman in a person of color’s space—though, I would contend that white people’s work is deconstructing whiteness:

I must admit that when I am writing about the impact of racism standing at a counterheight table in a coffee shop, I feel out of place. Not in the coffee shop, but in the writing. I hear the phantom voice of my insecurities—or are these actual people?—saying, “Stay out of this—this is for people of color.” But I am the one standing at the table writing, or sitting in a chair in a class on race. And although I am engaged in a lot of the talk (always reflecting on how much, exactly), I am not fully part of the experiences. In essence, I have worked my way into the scholarship of race, power, and education via years of reflecting, thinking, and working. Thus, I am a welcomed but oddly misplaced member of this cultural community.

Lately, I have had mixed feelings about being in this space. My feelings travel along three vectors of dis-ease. First, it is a struggle over the tendency to co-opt the work of people of color... (Gee, 2015). Second is my presence in the company of the conversations that people of color have—a discourse not intended for my ears... (Bailey, 2007; Hoagland, 2007). Third, I experience discomfort in the tensiveness between my whiteness and writing about racism from within dominant culture (Lorde, 1984/2007). I am feeling trapped in an ethical quandary: the white person as eavesdropper or spy. I know that my intention is not to exploit people of color or their culture. I also know how difficult that is as a white person.

These feelings permeate my daily life: I possess a penchant for outsider spaces, where I am the only \_\_\_\_\_ (woman, white person, non-Christian, non-Baha’i, non-fluent Spanish speaker, the list goes on and on). It is often easier for me to find spaces of occupied difference rather than spaces where I feel at ease and congruent. It is my white privilege

that enables me to navigate spaces and it is my whiteness that that limits my sight. I must constantly and aggressively work against my whiteness without making myself come undone in the process. And, I realize that I cannot avoid “slippage” (Alexander, 2003, p. 109). I cannot get everything “right.” But I can continue to grapple with myself, with other white people, with white systems, attempting to speak truth to power, to deconstruct, to subvert.

I must disavow my other prominent danger—silence—because it is a machination of whiteness (Potter, 2015). As Martin Luther King, Jr. (1993) argued in his 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” silence is a tool of the “white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice... [who] become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress” (p. 842). I am implicated. My tendency for outsider spaces is the same avoidance that allows me to disassociate from ideologies of whiteness inherent in the family and communities in which I grew up... and in the fibers that stitch myself. My separation allows me to maintain a positive image of myself against a “racist” community rather than coming blow-to-blow with myself and the realization of the background that is part and parcel of me. Afraid of losing childhood friends and family—which has happened numerous times when I have spoken—of admonishments and warnings of my hell-bent ways—that has also happened—I chose complicity and comfort. The comfort, though, was for my family’s benefit and not mine, and ultimately benefitted white supremacy.

I felt choked, held, inauthentic, angry. Therefore, I refuse the silence that “had not protected me” (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 41), instead seeking to push myself and my body into spaces of personal danger rather than embodying danger (Madison, 2009). Rather than passivity and evasion, I interrogate reality to consider alterity, build empathy, and seek justice within the communities where I live and work. I must shift into authentic dialogue with my family and other people white communities, confronting discomfort, questioning “reality” as is, and continuing when no discernible changes are made: much of the work toward consciousness occurs in the interior before it emerges in act (Freire, 2011; Zedong, 1937/1987).

Even though I chose to depart from my childhood religion because of ideological and moral reasons, this does not mean that I am now good and my family is bad. On the contrary, we each strive to live a life of meaning and sense, and our decisions follow from the histories we know, what we read, and the relationships we have. We are ambiguous, nuanced beings as humans, and, while I sometimes tend toward a deficit view of my family—impelled by a hopelessness at opening their mind to power structures we exist within—they, too, attempt to live by love. My empathy for their stance toward race emerges from my position in their belief set and my experiences with their good intents. Love and intention, though, do not eliminate culpability, and this is another diversion of the white moderate that defers justice. Therefore, the work of critical and reflexive white scholars in white communities is essential: although relationships can be easier (and more supportive) with closer-minded individuals, white communities will move toward racial justice more readily when white people enter their communities and work within relationships and trust to alter them. We must consciously challenge perceptions and comforts of white supremacy in ourselves and others, or we maintain it.

### **Within Practice**

In a recent workshop, I asked the predominately-white participants to share stories depicting racial experiences and use the levels of racism to deconstruct them. I witnessed the challenge of asking people to implicate themselves as racist. The white participants who shared their stories tended to do so in a way that historicized the story, attempting to demonstrate a linear progression away from racist ideology, or that dealt with someone else's racism, portraying themselves in a positive way. If I did the workshop again with the same story about my experiences uncovering my white savior mentality through my summer with Upward Bound, I would delve more deeply to consider the way that mentality persisted or emerged in my teaching practice. For example, I could share my tensions around school-based practices of the teaching of cultural capital skills with college as an end goal for successful K-12 education, unpacking specific moves and decisions I have made (Yosso, 2005). While encouraging college couples with success in a capitalist and meritocratic framework, capitalism requires people in lower classes. Therefore, rather than teaching college's necessity as an absolute, I could engage in pedagogical practices of critical thinking and of researching ones' own locale and conditions to open space for action, both for students and for teachers, and horizontalize power (Freire, 2011). In future work, I would also use the intentional questioning strategies described earlier.

### **Conclusions**

Researchers and educators can both conform to and challenge dominant paradigms; thus, we must foster dialogue around white supremacy and the roles of white researchers within the academy as forces capable of both reproduction and disruption. While the work of dismantling systems of white supremacy centers the work of critical researchers and educators, critical reflexive work will support the ethics of white researchers willing to consider who their research benefits and how. In the constant strain toward whiteness, critical work necessitates investment in self-love and community, aligning love and purpose in a way that creates space for self and others. As white people writing against white supremacy from within it, we must constantly shift between deconstruction/destruction (sometimes of self) and worth/reconciliation, realizing that we must constantly question or we will merely reinscribe injustice. White people need to share stories of why they disidentify with whiteness (Gillborn, 2014), of the emotions and costs of family and friends, of how to navigate loss toward self-love and humanizing love (Matias, 2016), of successes and struggles in dismantling systematized beliefs, and of how individual stories reflect broader structures. In a society groping for drama within instant connections that spit across internet and media spaces, a turn inward creates space to "become human... the more fully engaged we are, the more we can look through others' eyes, the more richly [human] we become" (Greene, 1978, p. 3). In this space, we can disrupt a linear rational model of thinking that places people in binaries of good and bad, racist and nonracist, successful and pathological. Ultimately, our moral and ethical interests must propel us toward the reflexivity and persistent work that racial justice requires. As Duncan-Andrade (2009) contended, our work must center a hope that is audacious and courageous, channeling "moral outrage... to actions" (p. 182). Colleague, job, friend, and

family rejection must not weight our words and actions; instead, we must center on a humanizing love that *requires* racial justice.

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### **Author Notes**

**Tara Meister** is a third-year PhD student in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Denver. In her studies, she centers the historically-rooted influences of race and power in education, including the interrelationship between structural and individual factors. She strives to facilitate teachers work to confront and deconstruct racism within themselves as features of institutions. She uses narrative and arts based research methods to disrupt normative discourses and seek alterity.

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