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# Professing Education

Special Issue:  
9th International Conference on  
Education and Social Justice

Guest Editors  
Vidya Shah and Kerry Soo Von Esch

Guest Consulting Editors  
Carol Batker and Kevin Kumashiro

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Society of Professors of Education  
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## Professing Education

### A Journal of the Society of Professors of Education

#### From the Editors

This special issue of *Professing Education* is dedicated to the work and spirit of movements for social justice as it includes work from the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education and Social Justice. We thank the guest editors, Vidya Shah and Kerry Soo Von Esch, and the consulting editors, Carol Batker and Kevin Kumashiro, for this exciting issue and for this partnership.

*Mary Kay Delaney, Gretchen Givens Generett,  
Paula Groves Price, and Joseph Rayle.  
December 2020*

*Professing Education* is an e-journal of the Society of Professors of Education. The Society was founded in 1902 when the National Society of College Teachers of Education was first formed in cooperation with the National Education Association. Among its early presidents were Charles DeGarmo and John Dewey. The Society is an interdisciplinary, professional and academic association open to all persons, both theoreticians and practitioners, engaged in teacher preparation or related activities. Its purpose is to serve the diverse needs and interests of the education professoriate. The Society's primary goal is to provide a forum for consideration of major issues, tasks, problems, and challenges confronting professional educators. We invite you to join us. Visit [www.societyofprofessorsofeducation.com](http://www.societyofprofessorsofeducation.com) for more information.

**Call for Papers:** *Professing Education* publishes articles focused on the practice of teaching in education. Recognizing that the field of education is inter- and trans-disciplinary, the editors seek essays and studies from a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, on all matters related to teaching, "education," and pedagogies. Further, we also value and encourage creative forms of writing from "outside the academy." Submissions are peer and editor reviewed. Manuscripts should generally be 4000-7000 words in length, 12-point Times New Roman, double spaced, APA-style, with 1 inch margins. In support of the Society's goal of stimulating and sustaining dialogue among its members, all accepted authors must be members of the Society of Professors of Education, or join prior to publication. Find the membership form at [www.societyofprofessorsofeducation.com/membership.html](http://www.societyofprofessorsofeducation.com/membership.html)

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## Contents

<b>President’s Note</b> .....	4
<b>Forward</b> <i>Kevin Kumashiro</i> .....	6
<b>Introduction to Special Issue: 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education and Social Justice</b> <i>Vidya Shah &amp; Kerry Soo Von Esch, Guest Editors</i> .....	8
<b>Realizing the Contradictions of Equity Work: An Analysis of Discourse, Ignorance, and Discrimination in the Ontario Public Education System</b> <i>Melissa Wilson</i> .....	12
<b>“How do you measure that?”: Confronting Ideological Barriers to Socially Just Teacher Education in Charlotte Danielson’s <i>Framework for Teaching</i></b> <i>Rick Lybeck &amp; Karen R. Colum</i> .....	26
<b>Mythologies of “We”: Whiteness in Cross-Racial Solidarity Work</b> <i>Vidya Shah &amp; Michelle Peek</i> .....	41
<b>Polyclub: Oceanic Literacies of Interconnectivity and Fluidity</b> <i>Nate Gong</i> .....	55

## President's Note

### M. Francyne Huckaby

Texas Christian University

Society of Professors of Education President

Author, *Researching Resistance: Public Education After Neoliberalism*

Editor, *Making Research Public in Troubled Times: Pedagogy, Activism, and Critical Obligations*

The Society of Professors of Education publishes *Professing Education* to stimulate and sustain dialogue about teaching and education among members of the Society of Professors of Education and the communities with which we intersect. *Professing Education* is a space to consider our past and present as we face the challenges of these times and the roles of our intellectual traditions and informed practice. We invite submissions from you including individual articles and guest edited special issues. We also hope you will join us for our 2021 Annual Meeting in early April. Information will be forthcoming on our webpage:

<https://societyofprofessorsofeducation.com>

The Society of Professors of Education is excited to partner with the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education and Social Justice on this special issue of *Professing Education* and we look forward to future collaborations as we anticipate the upcoming 10<sup>th</sup> conference to be held virtually in December 2020. We hope you enjoy this special and offer appreciation for the guest editors and consulting editors Vidya Shah, Kerry Soo Von Esch, Carol Batker, and Kevin Kumashiro, as well as the journal editors, Mary Kay Delaney, Gretchen Givens Generett, Paula Groves Price, and Joseph Rayle. Because the guest editors have written a compelling introduction to this special issue focused on white supremacy and racism, settler colonialism, and decolonial futures, I devote my president's note to 2020 and teachers as artists.

2020 has been a year: a time of change, of transition, of evolution. It quickly transformed lives—ways of living, working, and learning.

This is not the year any anticipated even though pop culture, particularly film and TV, has been preparing us for such widespread viral contagions of the biological and social order for some time. 2020 has left us at the mercy of its circumstances, heightened individual and collective vulnerabilities, and brought people together for collective action and protest. It has been exhausting and has offered time to be more attentive to happenings in the world.

2020 pushed me to be more attentive to the well-being of those around me and to reach out for my own sake. I have new appreciation for things previously taken for granted. I have found myself just sitting and staring at nothing in particular as I tried to subvert despair, dancing to silly made up songs in the kitchen, and singing Nina Simone's *Mississippi Goddam* with new locations—Louisville, Glynn County, Minneapolis, and more—and then states as COVID infections and deaths rise. This year caused me on many an occasion to pull Alice Walker's (2010) poetry—*Hard Times Require Furious Dancing*—from the bookshelf so that I may “be with” and not “drowned” by (p. xi) its sorrows; that I may be reminded of hate's slipperiness and resistance, that it cannot be carried gracefully, that one can drop it on themselves (p. 58-59); that loving humans (p. 132-135) is hard to see, tricky, and in need of writing—poetry, lyrics, theatre, and protest. Society, in years like this one, needs artists.

Turning to arts in this 2020 has given me space to breath. I feel more capable knowing that even Toni Morrison needed a friend to hear and redirect her despair, “No! No, no, no! This is precisely the time when artists go to work—not

when everything is fine, but in the times of dread” (Morrison, 2015). “Civilizations heal,” writes Morrison because artists speak, write, and do language. And some of us teach. Education, John Dewey makes clear, “must be seen as a work of art which requires the same qualities of personal enthusiasm and imagination as required by ... the artist” (in Boydston, 2008, p. 186). As a professor of education, Dewey’s claim that art, “all art is a process of making the world a different place in which to live” (cited in Simpson, Jackson, and Aycock, 2005, p. 106) lingers in my thinking and surfaces in my actions in new ways. I’m less concerned about the mechanics of classes, online instruction, and the adapting systems that support teaching even as my works demands I work on them, meet about them, and assess them. My attention, (day)dreams, and restlessness has turned to the spaces created with students each week and in-between our weekly meetings in video conferencing, email, and our online learning platform. These are new media for me and many others. I trust we are working with these media

as artists not just avoid drowning in sorrows or succumbing to despair, but that as artists we teach and learn ways around the “unmistakable reluctance to evolve” (Walker, 2010, p. 135) in a world that holds onto too much hate and disregard to see ways to loving humans.

Boydston, J. A. (ed.). (2008). *The middle works, 1899-1924: John Dewey: Vol. 15. Journal articles, essays, and miscellany published in the 1923-1924 period*. Southern Illinois University.

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## Forward

### Kevin Kumashiro

Organizer, 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education and Social Justice

Author, *Surrendered: Why Progressives are Losing the Biggest Battles in Education*

How do we name this moment? How do we understand and story the contexts in which we find ourselves, as well as the interventions that such contexts demand of us as educators and scholars? What does it mean for education to advance justice in a moment when education itself is being troubled—thrown into disarray by a global health pandemic that amplified existing inequities, further worsened by governments and leaders and corporations that chose to follow not the guidance of science or ethics, but the opportunities for profiteering. Intersecting with the COVID-19 pandemic are any number of other global crisis, from the rising visibility of white supremacy and of other nationalist ideologies, to the reckoning of and pushback against anti-Black racism, to the accelerating destruction of the planet, to rising poverty and food insecurity and violence and conflict, to attacks on democratic institutions and human rights alongside the historic growth of wealth and power by capitalism's elite.

As schools around the world struggle to return to some sense of normalcy, we should be asking whether such a return to normalcy is what is demanded of us in this moment, and for that matter, whether such normalcy in education—including the trends that purported to advance justice—was ever the right path. Intervening in this moment requires not merely a critical analysis of the oppressive status quo in education, but also an honest grappling with the ways that anti-oppressive alternatives can and do function contradictorily. As progressives struggle to put forward visions and plans as alternatives to what brought us to these crises, we must constantly surface and rework the ways that such visions and plans cannot help but to be partial. In these ways, although the articles in this Special Issue

were all written before the COVID-19 pandemic and the intersecting crises of 2020, they presciently speak to this moment by helping us to grapple with the contradictory nature of even anti-oppressive work.

Catalyzing these articles was the 9th International Conference on Education and Social Justice, held November 9-11, 2019 in Honolulu, hosted by the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. The conference brought together scholars and educators from across the United States and the world to share research and resources and to build networks and other collectives for advancing equity and justice in education. The range of cultural and political contexts and of conceptual and transformative frameworks in the 150+ scholarly presentations provided fertile ground for discomfiting conversations and collaborative theorizing, spanning a range of disciplinary and institutional spaces, and interwoven with perspectives and examples of local educators and scholars and students whose voices helped to ground our work in the here and now of the gathering.

As the conference organizer, I know that I and many of the conference participants are grateful for the vision and leadership of co-editors Vidya Shah and Kerry Soo Von Esch that built on the event to produce this special issue, which is a brilliant and most timely intervention in education and intersectional racial justice. The range of topics in these four articles gives us a taste of the breadth and depth of presentations and conversations at the conference: from the contradictory and insidious ways that discourses of equity, diversity, appropriateness, effectiveness, collaboration, and solidarity can mask the long legacies of colonialism, white

supremacy, and other forms of injustice in education (whether that be at the level of individual educators, educational institutions, or advocacy spaces), even among those who express commitment to anti-oppressive change; to interventions that dive into such contradictions and offer insights that rattle conventional wisdom about the very enterprise of education that serves justice.

We owe much gratitude to the contributors; the collaborators who made their projects possible; the conference participants who deepened their analyses; the editors of this special issue, who brought together these articles into a fruitful whole; the editors of *Professing Education* and the leaders of the Society of Professors of Education for amplifying this intervention; and now to you, the readers, who are invited to engage with the ideas in these articles as we collectively build a stronger movement for equity and justice in education.

## Introduction to Special Issue Featuring the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education and Social Justice

### Dr. Vidya Shah

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This special issue of *Professing Education* comes at a particularly poignant time in our national and global history. The current wave of protests and movements for Black lives and racial justice is forcing us to once again confront ongoing anti-Black, colonial and racist police brutality, and other forms of systemic racism and oppression in the United States, Canada, and globally. Spurred by the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and Daniel Prude, and the shooting of Jacob Blake by police in the United States, and in Canada, the death of Regis Korchinski-Paquet, Dondre Campbell, Jamal Francique, Aisha Hudson, Rodney Levi, and Ejaz Chaudhry, the current social and political context reminds us how Whiteness and White supremacy have and continue to construct anti-Blackness and perpetuate anti-Black racism politically, economically, socially, mentally, emotionally, psychically. Beyond performative commitments such as public statements and tweets, we are called to address the systems, structures, policies, institutions and ideologies that give rise to the state sanctioned violence and murder of Black people by police, the disproportionate number of Black and Indigenous children in care, racist detention and deportation policies towards Black and racialized migrants, grave inequities in housing, social services, justice, immigration and health care towards Black people, and more.

Education, since colonization, has been weaponized as a tool to inflict and commit cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples. Like other institutions, it has been built on stolen Indigenous lands and maintained by Black slave labour. We have a professional and legal duty as

educators to repair damages done in the name of education and “civilization”, to understand that schools are often conflicted and unsafe spaces for students and families who are BIPOC. Therefore, as educators, we are (once again) confronted with the urgent need to cultivate our “ability to see, name and unpack the enduring racism embedded in our society” (Kohli, 2019, p. 40) and work toward dismantling racism that pervades our schools and education systems. This short, but powerful special issue aims to be one such intervention.

The papers in this special issue focus on three distinct, yet interconnected themes: white supremacy and racism, settler colonialism, and decolonial futures. Critical Race scholar Lee Ansley (1997) describes white supremacy in the following way:

...I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (p. 1024)

We understand white supremacy relationally, as contingent on Black subordination, objectification and exploitation, and perpetuated by notions of whiteness and White identity. While there is a growing awareness of anti-Black racism globally, we have seen only minimal calls to action that



disrupt the presence of white supremacy and anti-Blackness directly, and instead speak of anti-Black racism as historical (as in slavery), not of these lands that some call the United States or Canada, or not of this particular institution (in this case, education).

We also understand white supremacy as deeply connected to genocide, conquest, slavery, the ongoing exploitation of Indigenous land, and the taking of Black and Indigenous life. Pieterse (1992) asserts that race, as a socially-constructed concept, was invented to justify colonialism, and in his book *The World and Africa*, W.E.B. Du Bois (1946) artfully delineates white supremacy to its capitalist and colonialist origins. With European imperial expansion into Indigenous people's lands globally, and the subsequent settlements on these lands, our understandings of race, racism and anti-racism must be conceptualized in relation to indigeneity, colonialism, and decolonization (Motha, 2014; Dei & Lordan, 2017). This special issue considers anti-racist and anti-colonial discourses and decolonial imaginings in these times, discourses that are action-oriented and intentional in their engagement with a politics of resistance (Dei & Lordan, 2017). We see the papers in this series as offering different forms of resistance to colonialism and White supremacy in education.

The issue begins with an examination of the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism and anti-immigrant racism, rooted in settler colonialism in educational institutions and systems. In her paper, *Realizing the Contradictions of Equity Work: An Analysis of Discourse, Ignorance, and Discrimination in the Ontario Public Education System*, Wilson critically analyzes the "equity" discourse employed by public school boards in Ontario and how it contradicts the policies and educational opportunities provided for Black, Indigenous, racialized, and immigrant students in Ontario's public schools. Setting her analysis within the historical context of colonialism in Canada, Wilson draws our attention to how an "epistemology of ignorance" (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007) - the professed lack of knowledge or awareness of racism in education by White

educators - enables this disconnect between "equity" discourse, educational policy, and the educational experiences of Black, Indigenous, racialized, and immigrant students. We see this paper as exploring resistance against relations of domination and subordination that re/produce material and cultural injustices for these students and their families in Ontario schools.

Lybeck and Colum continue the thread of the pervasiveness of White supremacy in education by looking at how it is perpetuated through teacher education and the instructional practices that are validated through particular evaluation tools - specifically Charlotte Danielson's *Framework for Teaching*. The Danielson framework comprises twenty-two standards that have been adopted by many schools, districts, and teacher education programs to measure the performance and professionalism of teacher candidates and practicing teachers in the United States. Lybeck and Colum's analysis shows the White-dominant discourse in the language of the Danielson framework, particularly through the language of *appropriateness* of instructional materials and practices. Through vignettes of their work with teachers candidates, the authors show how the language of the Danielson framework is used to both uphold White standards of instruction and inhibit the development and use of equitable instructional practices for racialized students. Lybeck and Colum conclude with implications of using an instructional framework for teaching that specifically challenges White norms in teacher evaluation and more explicitly moves towards educational equity for students of color.

Shah and Peek take up the issue of complicating cross-racial solidarity and (inter)personal work in their critical co-constructed autoethnography (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012), *Mythologies of "We": Whiteness in Cross-Racial Solidarity Work*. In particular, this paper explores how "anti-racist" cross-racial relationships may constitute new forms of White progressivism, whereby White subjects mediate their need for connection, validation, self-improvement and innocence through people of colour. Shah and Peek focus on

the troubling ways in which Whiteness reproduces itself relationally through our bodies, through our emotions, and ultimately through our solidarities. The authors conclude by considering how exploring racial healing, attending to and centering conflict, and divestments from White kinship, offers new ways of thinking about how we might approach anti-racist solidarity work to challenge White supremacy in all of its forms. In our view, this paper approaches resistance as meeting the “piece of the oppressor that is planted deep within each of us, and that knows only the oppressors’ tactics, the oppressors’ relationships” (Lorde, 1984, p. 123). In this way, it challenges the purity, absolutism and binary configuration of colonization and decolonization, which reminds of Bhattacharya’s (2009) use of the term *de/colonizing*.

The final article in this special issue shows a powerful example of a decolonized, culturally sustaining educational space that centers Indigenous epistemologies in fostering literacy, knowledge, language, and cultural development. In his paper, *Polyclub: Oceanic Literacies of Interconnectivity and Fluidity*, Gong examines a decolonized educational space - a dance-focused Polynesian after-school high school club - as an asset-based space that draws on “Indigenous epistemologies [that] resist Eurocentric curriculum and offer expansive alternatives to assimilative classroom practices.” Gong shows how key elements of Polynesian pedagogical practices such as multimodality, communality, and transnationality/temporality, intersect with literacy and movement through dance to foster the learning and well-being of Pacific Islander students in deep and culturally sustaining ways. Gong highlights the need to expand notions of what is considered “literacy,” “knowledge,” and “educational spaces” when moving towards decolonizing education. We see this paper as speaking to resistance as Indigenous reclamation and control over social, cultural, spiritual and historical knowledges (Bhattacharya & Kim, 2018; Dei, 2019) and an acknowledgment of the survival of spiritual and embodied ways of

knowing and being despite neo/colonialism and interconnected systems of powers (Shahjahan, Wagner & Wane, 2009).

The logics and mechanisms of colonialism and white supremacy have taken, and continue to take land and life, while also engendering gravely disparate material, social and political realities. Our collective efforts to name and dismantle these logics and the mechanisms by which they perpetuate domination have necessarily encouraged a reverence for challenging structural and systemic inequities and acting collectively. In these times of a global pandemic and massive uprisings for racial justice, we ask ourselves, as Kevin Kumashiro has asked us, what might we learn from diving into crisis and contradiction? How might we challenge the (perceived) limits of our orientations and actions towards racial justice? What becomes possible when we are not focusing on institutions over individuals, or ideologies over practice, and instead approach liberatory and emancipatory pedagogies through relationality and interconnectedness? The articles in this special issue challenge us to feel into the boundaries of seemingly distinct constructs – individuals, ideologies, institutions. We find ourselves wondering:

- How might we take strong and direct action *while* continuing to trouble our multiple and intersecting complicities and inconsistencies that result from the partiality of knowledge?
- How might we recognize and name internal and communal disharmonies to social and political goals *while* requiring a strong and unified collective solidarity to challenge structural colonialism and White supremacy?
- How might we conceptualize relationally *while* recognizing the need for specificity, locality and contextuality that have consequential, material impacts?
- How might we focus on rich and vital theorizing *while* reflecting on how these theories are lived and denied in and through our bodies and spirits?

- How might we imagine new possibilities and dream new futurities *while* acknowledging the current realities and taking strong and direct action now?

These articles all began as presentations at the 9th International Conference on Education and Social Justice, Nov. 2019 in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. We are grateful to organizers of the conference, authors in this special issue, anonymous external reviewers, consulting editors for this special issue

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- (Carol Batker and Kevin Kumashiro), and the editors and staff of *Professing Education*.
- We hope this short and powerful Special Issue of *Professing Education* serves as an invitation into these and other questions so that we may co-imagine and co-create a more just and humane world.
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## Realizing the Contradictions of Equity Work: An Analysis of Discourse, Ignorance, and Discrimination in the Ontario Public Education System

**Melissa Wilson**

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Secondary Vice Principal, Peel District School Board**

### Introduction

The concepts of equity and inclusion are popular in the twenty-first century Ontario public education system. Equity work has grown in the province since the Ontario Ministry of Education released "Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy" in 2009. In this document, the Ontario Ministry of Education outlined their vision for equity and inclusion:

We envision an inclusive education system in Ontario in which all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected...school boards and schools will strive to ensure that all members of the school community feel safe, comfortable, and accepted. We want all staff and students to value diversity and to demonstrate respect for others and a commitment to establishing a just, caring society. (p. 10)

"Realizing the Promise of Diversity" is now a foundational document in this field, as it is often cited in successive publications by the Ministry of Education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a, 2014, 2017). School boards in Ontario have been making an effort to apply these guidelines about equity by creating policies, strategic plans, conferences, and committees dedicated to promoting equity work, as well as hiring people to envision and implement equity initiatives in schools and board offices (Halton District School Board, 2016, 2017; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, 2017; Peel District School Board, 2018, 2019; Toronto District School Board, 2018). While many staff and

students in school boards support the principles of equity which outline that educational spaces should be fair, inclusive, and respectful, the growth and popularity of equity work has created an institutional paradox in public education. For the purpose of this study, a paradox is a statement, situation, or action that is perhaps true, or seems to be true, but has contradictory qualities nonetheless (Merriam-Webster, 2019). It is true that the Ontario Human Rights Code prohibits discrimination in educational spaces (Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.), and all school boards have created equity policies to address inequities and promote equity and inclusion in public school boards (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 5).

Yet, visions, strategies, and other policies about equity put forth by the Ontario Ministry of Education and school boards contradict the historical and contemporary realities of racism in public education in Ontario. This paper asks: what enables public school boards in Ontario to publicly promise to have equitable and inclusive learning and working environments when research consistently demonstrates that racism is commonplace in elementary and secondary schools? This paper begins by highlighting that equity is a discourse in Ontario's school boards; it will then describe Charles Mills' concept of an epistemology of ignorance from *The Racial Contract* (1997) which contextualizes how school boards are enabled to popularize a discourse of equity in the twenty-first century. The paper will then turn to critical race theory and Indigenous studies to highlight examples of how settler-colonialism, anti-Black racism, and anti-immigrant racism are commonplace in the Ontario public education system, in order to

refute the promises embedded in equity discourse, and to demonstrate that equity discourse has become a tool of white supremacy.

### **A Discourse of Equity and Inclusion in Public Education**

In order to understand the meaning of equity and inclusion in Ontario's public education system, one must understand that these words are much more than merely concepts; rather, equity is a discourse that defines what can and cannot be said and known. Discursive analytic work involves more than exploring the meaning of thoughts, statements, and texts. Rather, Michel Foucault (1978) outlined discourse as, "The limits and forms of the *sayable*. What is it possible to speak of?...Which utterances are put into circulation, and among what groups? Which are repressed and censored?...Which utterances does everyone recognize as valid, or debatable, or definitely invalid?" (as cited in Burchell, Gordon, & Miller [Eds.], 1991, pp. 59-60). Moreover, Foucault (1978) stated that, "...discourse is constituted by the difference between what one could say correctly at one period (under the rules of grammar and logic) and what is actually said" (p. 63). Or, as scholar Derek Hook (2001) explained, "...discourse is both that which constrains *and enables* writing, speaking, and thinking" (p. 523, emphasis in original). In the Ontario public education system, discourse not only shapes the language of equity work, it also erases the realities of racism that students, staff, and community members contend with in their daily lives. In short, rather than producing equitable outcomes, equity has been co-opted as a tool of white supremacy because equity discourse has the power to overshadow and displace the Eurocentrism and violence that regularly occurs in Ontario schools.

The equity discourse that exists in Ontario schools today can be detected, learned, and taught by analyzing some key documents that are used throughout the public school system. When the Ministry of Education makes a critical decision regarding the direction of the Ontario public school system, it sends its directives to

Ontario school boards via a Policy/Program Memoranda (PPM). In 2009, Policy/Program Memoranda 119 was updated and re-named as "Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). As its title suggests, the notable change that took place in 2009 was that school boards became "required to develop and implement an equity and inclusive education policy" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). As a result, school boards implemented these directives by either creating new equity policies or updating existing policies to reflect the changes outlined in PPM 119.

In the same year, the Ministry of Education also published "Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy", which is often referred to as "The Strategy" (Ministry of Education, 2009). The timing of this document of critical importance because it helped to establish a foundation of equity discourse in schools. This discourse, which was then replicated in other documents, is a form of "equity" that is based on an idealized, nostalgic rhetoric, in which all people in Canada are valued and included. This rhetoric is both familiar and unsurprising, given Canada's national mythology that is centred on multiculturalism, human rights and peacekeeping.

In most of the Ministry of Education and school board documents, the discourse of equity is continuously stated through the goals of being fair, inclusive, and respectful, and creating a sense of safety and belonging for staff and students. Equity also involves removing barriers that lead to discrimination, in order to create more equitable opportunities. So, even though the Ministry of Education (2009) acknowledges societal inequities and acts of discrimination in "The Strategy," the document still states that: "Our equity and inclusive education strategy reaffirms the values of fairness, equity, and respect as essential principles of our publicly funded education system," (p. 11) and that "equity and inclusive education policies and practices will support positive learning



environments so that all students can feel engaged in and empowered by what they are learning...Students, teachers, and staff learn and work in an environment that is respectful, supportive, and welcoming to all" (p. 12). Given the mandate from the Ontario Ministry of Education's PPM 119 and the language outlined in "The Strategy," school boards were then equipped to update their policies or create new policies, and all school boards complied (Ontario's Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 5).

Now, each school board has an equity policy, and these policies claim that all learning and working environments in Ontario school boards are equitable and inclusive. For example, Toronto District School Board's Equity Policy (2018) promises that "All students and staff are supported equitably through the identification and removal of discriminatory bias and or barriers, whether individual, systemic or intersecting..." and that "...Equity and Inclusive education contribute to every student's and staff person's sense of acceptance and well being" (p. 4). Likewise, Halton District School Board's Equity and Inclusive Education Policy (2017) states that the board will "Serve staff, students, and families in diverse communities by incorporating the principles of equity and inclusive education into all aspects of its operations, structures, policies, programs, procedures, guidelines, training and employment practices..." (p. 2). Therefore, these policies not only state their commitment to equity and inclusion, but they even proclaim that equity and inclusion are embraced by every structure within the school board.

This equity discourse is also integrated into professional learning opportunities and professional gatherings. For example, some school boards begin the school year with a large-scale annual kickoff, in which school leaders come together to hear messages from directors and trustees, as well as to watch performances and videos pertaining to their mission, vision, and values, and the priorities for the upcoming school year. These gatherings typically take place in late August, and the names of these events even

mirror each other. In York Region District School Board, the event is called "Compass Points," while in Peel District School Board it is named "Starting Point," so even the titles of these events indicate that their purpose is to set direction. These gatherings provide an ideal opportunity to disseminate equity discourse to school leaders.

In the 2018-2019 school year, approximately 600 staff attended Peel DSB's "Starting Point" event, with the presentation was broadcasted online as well (Marychuk, 2018). Throughout this presentation, both the Chair of Trustees, Janet McDougall, as well as the former Director of Education, Peter Joshua, reinforced the equity discourse. Chair McDougall stated, "We will continue to be guided by our unwavering commitment to equity and inclusion in all that we do to include students," while Director Joshua stated, "Peel schools will continue to provide positive learning and working environments that are both physically and emotionally safe, that are free from harassment, and that provide students with a sense of belonging, support, and respect. In this we shall not waver...Our goal must always be to ensure that everyone feels safe, celebrated, and included" (Peel District School Board, 2018, August 29). This form of public presentation is one of many mechanisms used to disseminate the discourse across a large school board, which ensures that all staff are learning the discourse, regardless of whether the messaging is accurate, or whether the audience even believes in the core principles embedded in the discourse.

Regardless of how widespread this equity discourse is in Ontario, academics, journalists, activists, and people from marginalized communities are continuously demonstrating that the public education system is not equitable. In fact, studies have consistently shown that the public education system is Eurocentric, and that many people suffer in Ontario's elementary and secondary schools as a result of being alienated, excluded, and discriminated against (Cole 2020; Government of Ontario, 2017; James & Turner, 2015, 2017; Lewis, 1992; Longboat, 1987; Lund, 2006; Maynard, 2017; McCaskell, 2005;

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; Winks, 1997). These studies provide an entry point into explaining Mills' concept of how an epistemology of ignorance is able to thrive in educational spaces, and how it is enacted in large school boards across Ontario through the prevalence of equity discourse.

### Theoretical Framework: The Racial Contract

Charles Mills is a professor of philosophy, and he has used ideal social contract theory from Western political philosophy to theorize about a "Racial Contract" and white supremacy as a political system. While Mills (1997) acknowledges that "no single act literally corresponds to the drawing up and signing of a contract" (p. 20), he provides several examples of moments in history that demonstrate the notion of a Racial Contract, such as papal bulls, doctrines of discovery, Indian laws, slave codes, contemporary land claims, and other legal decisions (Mills, 1997). Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, the Racial Contract requires members in the polity to subscribe to an epistemology of ignorance (p. 93). While most people ascribe ignorance to a lack of knowledge, an unintentional omission, or an ill-informed epistemic mishap or error, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (2007) have argued that "...in the case of racial oppression, a lack of knowledge or an unlearning of something previously known often is actively produced for purposes of domination and exploitation...such as contemporary white people's obliviousness to racism and white domination..." (p. 1). They further argue that "Far from accidental, the ignorance of the racially privileged often is deliberately cultivated by them, an act made easier by a vast array of institutional systems supporting white people's obliviousness of the worlds of people of color" (p. 3). Two institutional systems that support this ignorance are the legal system and educational system.

The epistemology of ignorance requires White people to misinterpret and misunderstand

race and racism, and even deny its existence. Mills (1997) explains that "...officially sanctioned reality is divergent from actual reality. So here, it could be said, one has an agreement to *misinterpret* the world. One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority" (p. 18, emphasis in original). In other words, White people agree to a revisionist history whereby they intentionally evade the truth about how so much in human history was based on racial oppression and exploitation.

Education systems must be continuously analyzed and studied for the knowledge they are, and are not, producing. Alison Bailey (2017) explains that "Classrooms are unlevel knowing fields, contested terrains where knowledge and ignorance are produced and circulate with equal vigor, and where members of dominant groups are accustomed to having an epistemic home-terrain advantage" (p. 876), which is why Mills (1997) summarizes the epistemology of ignorance by stating that "To a significant extent, then, white signatories will live in an invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland, a 'consensual hallucination'...There will be white mythologies, invented Orients, invented Africas, invented Americas..." (p. 18).

There are many connections between the epistemology of ignorance that Mills outlines and the Ontario education system today. It is noteworthy that lessons pertaining to white supremacy and whiteness are omitted from elementary and secondary education in Ontario. Furthermore, many scholars in different fields have accused elementary and secondary curriculum of being Eurocentric (James & Turner, 2015, 2017; Lewis, 1992; McMurtry & Curling, 2008). When the above realities are coupled with equity discourse, then critical conversations about injustices are evaded even further. This is how school boards are implicated in the epistemology of ignorance. As staff and students in Ontario school boards are compelled to utilize a discourse that reinforces the fantasy that all people are welcomed and included and

that education systems are consistently fair, then issues of discrimination are silenced and students are discouraged from discussing the very structures that have created the current sociopolitical conditions in Ontario. Mills (1997) inadvertently addresses this issue in *The Racial Contract*. He states:

Whereas before it was denied that nonwhites *were* equal persons, it is now pretended that nonwhites *are* equal abstract persons who can be fully included in the polity merely by extending the scope of the moral operator, without any fundamental change in the arrangements that have resulted from the previous systems of explicit de jure racial privilege. (p. 75, emphasis in original)

Therefore, it could be argued that equity discourse is a tool of white supremacy because in the twenty-first century, equity discourse supports the epistemology of ignorance that Charles Mills describes.

When equity discourse repeatedly ensures everyone that learning and working environments in school boards are safe, supportive, and respectful, then this equity discourse prevents people from openly discussing when they're feeling unsafe, disrespected, and/or excluded. Moreover, when staff or students feel unsupported, then they would be inclined to believe that these problems are individual issues; unconnected to larger systemic socio-historical problems. If the common discourse amongst Ontario educators is that Ontarians live in a post-colonial, post-racial inclusive utopia, then there is no need to teach about systems of power, or topics such as colonialism and anti-Black racism. For those educators that do propose to teach about these issues, equity discourse stigmatizes them as disruptive, and teaches people to see them as instigating problems that do not actually exist. Overall, white supremacy will continue to remain intact as successive generations of youth are prevented from learning about white supremacy, race, and racism. Instead, Ontario's youth will be encouraged to live in a racial fantasyland that is reinforced by equity discourse.

## Debunking Equity Discourse

Thus far, this paper has demonstrated that equity as a discourse in the Ontario education system is being used as a tool of white supremacy, and that it contributes to an epistemology of ignorance in public education. As stated earlier in this paper, regardless of how widespread equity discourse is, there is ample research that demonstrates that racism is part of the ordinary, daily educational experiences in Ontario, and this includes schools, classrooms, and other educational spaces in the province that are referenced in equity policies. This section of the paper will outline the research that refutes the promises of inclusion that are integral to equity discourse.

### Debunking Equity Discourse: The Legacy of Settler Colonialism in Education

To begin with, education systems are deeply complicit in settler colonialism. In spite of the fact that education is a treaty right for First Nations (Henderson, 1995), education systems across present-day Ontario have been used as tools to silence, abuse, assimilate and erase Indigenous communities and Indigenous knowledges for centuries. In 1877, the *Algoma Missionary News and Shingwauk Journal* recorded that the Shingwauk Industrial School near Sault St. Marie, Ontario, was intended "...to wean our [Indian] boys altogether from their old savage life; to instill into them civilized tastes...and in fact to make Canadians of them" (as cited in Wilson, 1986, p. 74). Schools also funneled Indigenous students into lower class, subservient roles in Ontario. For example, male students were taught shoemaking, blacksmithing, or agricultural skills, while female students were taught knitting, laundry skills, cooking, and other housework (Wilson, 1986, pp. 67-72). Wilson (1986) notes that graduates of Shingwauk "...failed to attain that equal footing with their White neighbours which was held out as the objective of this sort of schooling...Most graduates found themselves forced back onto the reserve to face a traditional



tribal life for which they were no longer prepared" (p. 81).

In addition to industrial schools, residential schools also existed in Ontario. These racist and paternalistic schools were created and operated on the premise that Indigenous parents were unfit, and that European ideologies, lifestyles, and religions were superior to Indigenous peoples' ways of life (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 4). Accordingly, most students were isolated from their siblings while staying at the school, they were forbidden to speak their first language, practice their spiritual and cultural beliefs, or visit with their parents without supervision. Instead, students were given numbers as their names, had their hair cut and deloused, were dressed in Anglocentric fashions, and were forced to speak English and practice Christian or Catholic religions (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The Indian Residential School System legalized cultural genocide, which is defined as "the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 1). It is also important to note that when the entire history of Indigenous-settler relations is considered, one could argue that Canada has committed acts of genocide (Palmater, 2015, pp. 39-42).

Moreover, in terms of educating students, the schools produced mediocre educational results. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) states that "The educational goals of the schools were limited and confused, and usually reflected a low regard for the intellectual capabilities of Aboriginal people. For the students, education and technical training too often gave way to the drudgery of doing the chores necessary to make the schools self-sustaining" (pp. 3-4). All of these distressing conditions were compounded by the fact that the schools were poorly built and poorly maintained, were overcrowded, and unsanitary (p. 43). Therefore, the evidence from industrial and residential schools overwhelmingly demonstrates

that education systems were not founded upon fairness, inclusion, and respect.

While residential schools stayed open throughout the twentieth century, they were not the only issue in education that Indigenous communities were navigating. In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood published "Indian Control of Indian Education," which outlines the philosophy, goals, principles and directions for any school program that includes Indian children. In short, the paper outlined how Indigenous parents and Indian bands wanted local control of education. In 1973, the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development gave official recognition to "Indian Control of Indian Education," "approving its proposals and committing the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development to implementing them" (National Indian Brotherhood, 2001, p. iii). However, it quickly became known that the Department of Indian Affairs had a different interpretation of "control" than that outlined by the National Indian Brotherhood.

While "Indian Control of Indian Education" did lead to the creation of Indian colleges, nurseries, cultural survival schools, and band-operated elementary and secondary schools, several institutional impediments developed that inhibited Indigenous communities from having full control over their education systems (Longboat, 1987, p. 26). For example, many concerns arose over funding because the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development had the authority to set the budget, require extensive reporting regarding how the funds were spent, and deny or limit funding. As Dianne Longboat (1987) explains, "Differing concepts of control, jurisdiction, funding requirements, and standards have obstructed the movement of real Indian control from a mere idea to an implemented reality" (p. 39). The history of "Indian Control of Indian Education" is one example of how the Canadian government began to fabricate a perception of good relations with Indigenous communities during the latter half of the twentieth century, yet the evidence demonstrates that the government did not follow

through with the intentions and direction outlined by the National Indian Brotherhood. This is another example of how education is a critical component of settler colonialism.

In spite of the legacy of oppressing Indigenous students in education, dishonouring treaties and renegeing on the promise to give Indigenous communities control over local education, Canadians have managed to re-write history in order to fulfill the racial fantasy that everyone in Canada has had consistently amicable relations, and/or that any problems between groups of people were merely premised on misunderstandings. In the twenty-first century, teaching about culture continues to remain at the forefront of Indigenous education in Ontario (Lewington, 2016), in spite of the many Indigenous scholars that have problematized the focus on culture in Indigenous education.

For example, Marie Battiste (2013), author of *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*, explains that:

Culture [is] an educational concept that allow[s] Euro-Canadians to focus on empowering the deprived and the powerless, yet not having to confront any explanation or evaluation of the effects of racism or colonialism on these cultures or people...Culturalism...has developed strategies that mask Eurocentric foundations and purposes of education and its privileged consciousness and perspectives (pp. 31-32).

Likewise, Verna St. Denis (2017) comments that "If cultural authenticity is the problem then we don't have to look at what is the immensely more difficult task of challenging the conscious and unconscious ways in which the ideology of white identity as superior is normalized and naturalized in our schools and nation, both in the past and in the present" (p. 155). Cannon (2018) also concurs that "...focusing in on 'the Other' does little to help non-Indigenous peoples to know, understand, and challenge their own investment in colonial dominance and self-identification" (p. 159). Therefore, all three of these scholars highlight how focusing on

Indigenous cultures in education allows Euro-Canadians to ignore the impacts of settler colonialism and white supremacy in Ontario classrooms. When these diversions of culture are coupled with equity discourse, then educators across Ontario are equipped with the required tools to remain in their delusional world of fictitious racial harmony and reproduce epistemologies of ignorance for successive generations of Canadians.

### **Debunking Equity Discourse: The Legacy of Anti-Black Racism in Education**

The racial fantasyland that Canadian educators embrace also evades how education systems in present-day Ontario have routinely oppressed students of African-Caribbean descent for centuries. For example, Black people were enslaved in present-day Ontario for two-hundred years. As enslaved humans with no legal rights, Black enslaved people were not permitted to go to school. While there are records of some White slave owners teaching their slaves to read and write, and some runaway slave posters indicate that some slaves were literate, most Black enslaved people were denied the opportunities to learn reading and writing skills (Winks, 1997, p. 364).

As slavery waned at the turn of the 19th century and became officially outlawed by the British Empire in 1833, Black children were increasingly allowed to attend school, but racial segregation was enforced both illegally prior to 1850, and legally with the creation of the Common Schools Act of 1850 (Henry, 2019, p. 2). For example, when Black residents of Hamilton, Ontario petitioned for the right to attend common schools in 1843, George S. Tiffany, the president of the Hamilton Board of Police replied that "if Negro children were admitted to the common schools, white parents would withdraw their children entirely" (Winks, 1997, p. 367). Or, in Amherstburg, Ontario, in 1846, a school trustee declared that rather than send children "to school with niggers they will cut their children's heads off and throw them into

the road side ditch" (Winks, 1997, p. 368). Many Black parents had no choice but to send their children to segregated schools, or send them to schools with White children, where their children would be segregated within the schools via separate seating areas and differential treatment (Winks, 1997). While common schools slowly became racially integrated at the turn of the twentieth century, many parts of Ontario remained segregated throughout the twentieth century nonetheless. For example, the Common Schools Act remained law in Ontario until 1964 (Winks, 1997), and the Ontario Racial Discrimination Act was created in 1944 to end segregation as well, although it had varying effects across the province.

This lengthy history of institutionalized racism in Ontario contextualizes the plethora of contemporary research reports that have proven that anti-Black racism continues to be a pervasive problem in education. For example, Stephen Lewis (1992) named anti-Black racism as a problem in the Ontario education system in his *Report on Race Relations in Ontario*, noting that anti-Black racism resulted in Black students being inappropriately streamed in schools and disproportionately dropping out of school, and double standards for disciplining Black and White students. As well, this report highlighted that the Ontario curriculum was Eurocentric, and taught by predominantly white teachers (Lewis 1992).

More than two decades later, studies continue to confirm: that Black students are streamed away from academic courses because educators have low academic expectations of them; Black students are suspended or expelled at higher rates than White students; and many educators have anti-Black bias, which results in racial profiling and harsher disciplining of Black students too (Chadha, Herbert, & Richard, 2020; Gray et al., 2016; James & Turner, 2015, 2017; McMurtry & Curling, 2008). As well, the curriculum continues to be Eurocentric and the teaching population continues to be predominantly White (Chadha, Herbert, & Richard, 2020; James & Turner, 2015; McMurtry & Curling, 2008). Moreover, James & Turner (2017) recorded that

in October and November of 2016, nearly three hundred people from Black communities gathered in North York, York Region, Durham Region, Peel Region, and Scarborough, and that:

Participants in all regions maintained that they did not see that the Ontario Ministry of Education's *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* has had any significant impact on the respective board's equity work pertaining to Black student achievement and well-being. They noted that generalized equity and diversity efforts often fail to address anti-Black racism and improve outcomes for the Black population - anti-racism strategies are needed to address anti-Black racism (p. 39).

These community gatherings were comprised of educators, administrators, trustees, students, parents, and other community members. Therefore, it is not only research reports disproving that equity and inclusion are the norm in public education; Black people living in Ontario today also know that promises of inclusion, fairness, and equity have not been realized in Ontario classrooms. Yet, Black educators and students alike must learn and work in educational environments that deny this history and their lived realities with racism in Canada. It is fitting to ask Black Ontarians W.E.B. Du Bois' pivotal question: How does it feel to be a problem? (Du Bois, 2017). And yet, very few students or educators in Ontario are taught the tools, vocabulary, or any lessons whatsoever to answer this question in any meaningful way.

Indigenous communities across Ontario can also attest to the prevalence of racism and settler colonialism in Ontario's education system in the late-twentieth and twenty-first century, which stands in stark contrast to the equity discourse outlined earlier in this paper. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) reported that "The majority of Aboriginal youth do not complete high school... Those who continue in Canada's formal education systems told us of regular encounters with racism, racism expressed not only in interpersonal exchanges but also through the denial of Aboriginal values, perspectives and cultures in the curriculum and

the life of the institution" (pp. 404-405). More than ten years later, Ontario's Ministry of Education (2007) published the "Ontario First Nation, Métis, Inuit Education Policy Framework". While this document highlighted its goals and strategic plans to "...improve achievement among First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students and to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the areas of literacy and numeracy, retention of students in school, graduation rates, and advancement to postsecondary studies..." (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 5), the actual "gap" was relegated to the Appendices. In Appendix C it stated that "There is a significant gap between the educational attainment of the Aboriginal population and that of the non-Aboriginal population. Forty-two per cent of the Aboriginal population in Ontario, aged 15 years and over, have less than a high school diploma, and only 6% have completed a university degree" (p. 35).

These statistics are compounded by the fact that many Indigenous children in Ontario are dying as a result of the federal and provincial education systems. For example, between 2000 and 2011, seven Indigenous students in secondary school died in Thunder Bay as a result of a colonial education system that deprives Indigenous students of the educational standards that are available to non-Indigenous peoples elsewhere in Ontario (Talaga, 2017). Tanya Talaga, author of *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death, and Hard Truths in a Northern City* (2017) explains that "There is still a lack of schools on reserves. Children are still being separated from their families and sent hundreds of kilometers away to get an education...They are placed in boarding homes where people are paid to take care of them. For the most part they are not living in nurturing, loving environments" (pp. 88-89), and she continuously draws the connection between racist, inequitable education systems and the death of Indigenous children who are forced to leave their homes in the past and present. The racist and colonial roots of these issues and differential treatments of Indigenous and Black students run deep in Ontario. Clearly,

these contemporary examples are connected to and compounded by the history of racism in education. Equity discourse may temporarily conceal the reality of institutionalized racism, but it does not change the fact that generations of Indigenous and racialized students have suffered and died as a result of inequitable and abusive educational practices that continue to exist in Ontario.

### Debunking Equity Discourse: The Legacy of Anti-Immigrant Racism in Education

In addition to anti-Black racism and anti-Indigenous racism in Ontario's public schools, students that are first- and second-generation Canadians also experience marginalization and exclusion in the education system. Prior to the 1960s, immigration laws in Canada prioritized immigrants from Western Europe and excluded immigrants from many non-European nations, which is how the government ensured that Canada remained a white settler nation. In 1962 the *Immigration Act* was changed. Country preferences - which had authorized racist discrimination practices - were omitted and was replaced by family reunification goals and educational and occupational qualifications (Galabuzi, 2006). These changes have led to an increase of racialized immigrants in Canada during the second half of the twentieth century.

Grace-Edward Galabuzi (2006) also examines the socio-economic conditions of racialized peoples in Canada, and he argues that racial discrimination is a key determinant of access to economic opportunities. He explains that "While the average educational attainment of immigrants has risen, partly due to strict skills-based immigration policy requirements, this has not translated into comparable employment and income opportunities" (p. xix). Moreover, Galabuzi also points to the differential treatment of European and racialized immigrants. He notes that "Immigration status has become a proxy for racial discrimination...While European immigrants' qualifications routinely go unchallenged, racialized Canadians often lose

opportunities because of the perceived low value of their qualifications" (p. xx). Considering the many ways that racialized immigrants have been excluded, controlled, and exploited throughout the twentieth century, it is perhaps unsurprising that in a 1974 survey, Canadians ranked people of European origin much more favourably than people from non-European countries. For example, Berry, Kalin and Taylor (1976) noted that people from European countries were described as "hardworking" and "likeable," while people identified "Chinese," "Canadian Indian," "Negro," and "East Indian" amongst the lowest ranking people in the survey (as cited in Galabuzi, 2006, p. 36).

Then, after the attacks of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001, states such as Canada adopted discriminatory policies to police borders. Stasiulis and Bakan (2005) argue that, "...innocent people, particularly People of Colour from Third World regions, have been increasingly treated with undue suspicion..." (p. 9) and that "Restrictive policy reforms by the Canadian immigration authorities have been accompanied by official discourses which link immigrants and refugees to crime, welfare fraud and threats to national security" (p. 33).

Backlash from the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and other forms of anti-immigrant racism described above have also affected the Ontario education system, as children are also marked by these anti-immigrant racist stereotypes. Galabuzi (2014) states that studies show:

Students of South Asian and East Asian backgrounds complain about being subjected to racial stereotyping, accused of not being assertive, confident and outspoken. This has the effect of making them uncomfortable about participating in class and unable to develop socially and psychologically to the full. They express a low sense of belonging and a high level of social exclusion. It impacts their ability to engage in school activities or build trusting relationships with adults and other students. (Galabuzi, 2014, p. 192)

Moreover, Islamophobia in education is another rampant form of violence that students must contend with in elementary and secondary education. In a guide for educators titled "Helping Students Deal with Trauma Related to Geopolitical Violence & Islamophobia," the National Council of Canadian Muslims & Islamic Social Services stated that:

Canadian Muslim youth have been forced into defensive positions — apologizing for things they had no influence over, and feeling ostracized owing to their religion or culture. Indeed, Canadian Muslim youth are often expected to prove their loyalty to Canada... To constantly feel under attack, to have to defend one's faith, and to be continuously called upon to condemn the actions of criminals and terrorists is emotionally traumatic and can have a significant impact on one's mental health. (National Council of Canadian Muslims, n.d., p. 2)

In Ontario classrooms specifically, Muslim students have been streamed into lower academic placements or inappropriately placed into English Language programs based on teacher's incorrect assumptions about their abilities, while other students have been called "terrorists" (Hindy, 2016, p. 8). Furthermore, curriculum resources either misrepresent Islam and Muslims or reinforce stereotypes (Hindy, 2016, p. 10), or curriculum is blatantly Islamophobic (Chadha, Herbert, & Richard, 2020). Therefore, Muslim students must navigate the stereotypes that stem from racism in Canada. These issues are neither new, nor a secret; white supremacists have used schools and school boards to target Muslim communities (Chadha, Herbert, & Richard, 2020). Yet, they are not adequately addressed in education, which makes school boards complicit in the violence. Moreover, this racist violence in the public education system is diminished and overshadowed by equity discourse which wilfully ignores racism and assures staff and students that educational systems are fair, contrary to all of the research and data that proves otherwise.



## Conclusion

A lot of effort has been invested into continuously creating and re-affirming white supremacy in Canada, which concurrently allows public school boards in Ontario to openly speak about equitable teaching and learning environments that do not actually exist. While Canadians enjoy believing that this nation's history is built upon human rights and inclusion, Canadian history and the contemporary political landscape do not substantiate these claims. Canada as a nation was founded upon settler colonialism, which is a structure, not an event (Wolfe, 2006). Yet, the narrative of settler colonialism has morphed into one of cultural misunderstanding. The government also enslaved people of African and Caribbean descent and legalized racial segregation. While the culmination of this inequitable treatment of Black and Indigenous peoples in Ontario has been well documented and researched, studies continue to show that Black and Indigenous students today are still experiencing racial profiling, harsher discipline, higher suspension and expulsion rates, and lower graduation rates. These studies highlight the fact that education systems are racist and Eurocentric, and that anti-racist and equity initiatives have not brought about enough change because racism still widely exists. Similarly, the Canadian government has routinely implemented exclusionary and racist immigration and domestic laws, which either bar the entry of racialized peoples into Canada, or severely circumvent immigrants' legal, political, economic and educational opportunities in Canada.

Given the hegemonic narrative of Canadian racial harmony that pervades all Canadian institutions, it is perhaps no surprise that equity policies thrive in contemporary education systems. Equity policies proclaim that schools are fair, inclusive, and respectful, which is simply untrue in Ontario. Equity policies and their related discourse are merely continuing the tradition of white supremacy in Canada by encouraging an epistemology of ignorance, which will further evade the truth about institutionalized racism in this nation. Educators

who are committed to social justice must critically examine and expose this paradox in equity work, whilst simultaneously striving for a more just society through alternative means that are more authentic and transparent, and that openly challenge and reject white supremacy in education.

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## “How do you measure that?": Confronting Ideological Barriers to Socially Just Teacher Education in Charlotte Danielson's *Framework for Teaching*

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### Introduction

In February 2019, a fight broke out at a high school in a partner district not far from the university where we work as teacher educators in southern Minnesota. As reported by local media, the altercation at Owatonna High School occurred after White students had taunted Somali-American classmates online with racist slurs, including repeated use of the n-word. Many students participated in the conflict which spread from the commons area into the gymnasium, resulting in a school-wide lockdown. Social media video showed White officers grappling with students and using a straitjacket to restrain a female student of color (Zilber, 2019). Community reaction shared in follow-up reporting questioned school officials' role escalating injustices by calling in law-enforcement, failing to properly identify White instigators of the conflict, and lacking the cultural competency needed to address racial tensions (Shockman, 2019).

In June 2019, *The New York Times* published an exposé on the situation at Owatonna High, revealing a climate of color-blind racism evidenced by student testimony:

'They're so quick to address situations about vaping, skipping school and everything,' Eman, a 15-year-old Somali-American sophomore, said of school officials. "But when it comes to racism, they never want to address it. They never want to say, 'This is happening at our own school, we shouldn't be doing it.' It's not O.K." (Eligon, 2019)

As the exposé notes, the altercation amounted to a recurrence of a 2009 fight that initiated a

federal investigation, leading the Owatonna district into a 2011 settlement with the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education (Independent School District #761, 2011). Then, as now, White students' harassment of Somali-American students and disproportionate punishment against victims of White aggression were at issue (Eligon, 2019; Shockman, 2019).

Reports of racial injustices in one of our partner districts come as no surprise. Since the election of Donald Trump, acts of overt racism in K-12 schools networked with our institution have grown disturbingly commonplace, mirroring the country's resurgent White-nationalist politics (Gunter, 2019). As we struggle to build movement for social-justice education in our teacher-preparation programs, continual reminders of racial oppression in regional schools move us to critically examine systems and structures our network of institutions share, beginning with standards long used to measure teacher professionalism, Charlotte Danielson's *Framework for Teaching* (FFT). The present article analyzes acts of ideological resistance to socially just teacher practices we have learned about from teacher candidates of color working in regional field placements, and selected passages from FFT that provide ideological support for those acts of resistance.

Weaving autoethnographic vignettes (Patton, 2015) together with analyses of supporting passages in FFT, we unpack the White-normative *power in* and *power behind* (Fairclough, 2001) Danielson's dominant discourse, "appropriateness," and the potential of this discourse to reproduce unjust outcomes of schooling (Jupp et al., 2016). Drawing on theory

from Cochran-Smith et al. (2018), our analyses of the *whiteness in* and *whiteness behind* FFT emphasize the need for a) *recognition*, where teachers grow aware and challenge oppressive social structures like White supremacy that reproduce inequalities (p. 159), and b) *reframing*, where teachers interrogate and ultimately work to change commonsense assumptions in oppressive structures that implicitly serve to uphold inequalities (p. 160). Our conclusion reflects on prospects of implementing a social-justice framework for teaching that could prompt teaching professionals to adequately problematize and undo White-teacher normativity in their daily practice.

### FFT and the Regional Context

Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin's horrific murder of George Floyd last May thrust our state's routine oppression of people of color into an international spotlight. Beyond the situation at Owatonna, recent high-profile acts of White supremacy plaguing southern Minnesota schools have included online racist slurs inciting other brawls (Goodrich, 2019a); rural students sitting courtside with a Trump banner, taunting a predominantly Black basketball team visiting from Minneapolis (Walker, 2019; Winter, 2019); and racist graffiti such as "IMMIGRATION IS WHITE GENOCIDE" being scrawled on school grounds overnight (Goodrich, 2019b). In response to one regional district's persistent failure to address White supremacy, parents in Chaska, Minnesota have taken the struggle for racial justice into their own hands, forming the powerful activist group Residents Organizing Against Racism, or R.O.A.R. (Hassanzadeh, 2019). This, after White students have repeatedly shown up at school events and even the school yearbook wearing blackface (Messer, 2019; Shockman, 2020).

All such developments come in context of data reflecting Minnesota's woeful record on racial disparities (Gee, 2016; Jones, 2019) with some accounts proclaiming the state "2nd Worst in U.S." (Wagner, 2017). Most recent U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights

data on our college's closest partner district show, for example, that only 1% of students enrolled in gifted-and-talented programs identify as Black despite Black students comprising 11% of the student population; at the same time, Black students account for 35% of the district's out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education "Mankato," 2015). With overwhelmingly majority-White student populations, other area districts report similar disparities (U.S. Department of Education "Owatonna," "Waseca," 2015). In the region's more diverse districts, suspension and expulsion severely burden students and families of color while gifted-and-talented and advanced-placement enrollments show college preparation standing as a White reserve (U.S. Department of Education "St. James," "Faribault," 2015).

Upon scrutinizing their own data, leaders of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system where we work recently launched "Equity 2030," an initiative to "eliminate the educational equity gaps at every Minnesota State college and university" (Malhotra, 2019). In his convocation speech last fall, our university president noted that 63% of domestic students of color fail to graduate within six years. More than a third — 35% — don't even return for their sophomore year (Fischenich, 2019). As with much data generated through quantitative methods and interpreted by people of power (Giroux, 1997, p. 41), the extent to which the numbers reflect resistance to oppressive, historically White social practices remains either unknown or undisclosed, risking perpetuation of deficit thinking toward people of color.

Reflecting on our institution's complicity in the systemic oppression summarized above, we — one White elementary and one White secondary teacher educator — wonder how our region's educational profile might look different had racial justice been prioritized decades ago in the official systems that guide teaching and teacher preparation. Naïve as this wondering may sound, our research reveals a history of close networking between our college and educators from regional school districts with poor track

records on racial equity, including Owatonna (Fitzgerald, 2007; Mankato Media Relations, 2016; Pendarvis, 2011).

One of the most significant collaborative initiatives accomplished in recent decades has been widespread adoption of FFT, a comprehensive set of standards by which teacher professionalism is evaluated in area schools. This includes Owatonna where FFT has been in place since the late 1990s. Defined and fully elaborated in Charlotte Danielson's *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching* (2007), FFT theory and standards happen to avoid use of the term "race." Careful reading and digital searches in this text using "race" and associated terms like "racism," "racial," "White," and "Black" turn up zero hits. A single reference to "students of color" (p. 32), discussed later in this article, does little to save the document from being characterized as colorblind. This preliminary level of analysis renders FFT suspect for ways it may implicitly work to support White ideology in schooling. In this respect, we approach FFT as a potential "act of whiteness" in educational policy (Leonardo, 2009, p. 127), perpetuating a system of injustice with its recommendations about "appropriate" teacher practice.

For the uninitiated, FFT's four "domains" of teaching include "Planning and Preparation," "The Classroom Environment," "Instruction," and "Professional Responsibilities." These domains break down into 22 "components," each with a descriptive rubric and four levels of performance: "unsatisfactory," "basic," "proficient," and "distinguished" (Danielson, 2007). Aided in its expansion by federal policies like Race to the Top and corporate entities such as the Gates Foundation, FFT has been noted by critics as a "corporatist instrument" with ideological roots running back through Taylorism and Fordism not only for its drive to standardize but for its underlying concept of "effective" teaching, i.e., producing predictable outcomes (Burns, 2015, pp. 188-189). The Danielson Group, a consulting firm fronted by Charlotte Danielson (Singer, 2014), touts FFT as "the gold standard and most widely used definition of teaching practice in the

U.S." (The Danielson Group, 2020a). FFT currently claims partners in over 1,000 institutions, 45 states, and 12 countries (The Danielson Group, 2020b). Number one among the Danielson Group's core beliefs is Equity, meaning each student having access to high-quality teaching — "A commitment to excellence is not complete without a commitment to equity" (The Danielson Group, 2020c).

As regional data show, however, inequity persists in regional schools where FFT has long set the bar for professionalism and it has actually worsened in some respects related to FFT's presumed strengths. For example, FFT's Domain 2, "The Classroom Environment," has been noted nationally for its potential to help teachers develop classroom-management strategies to "keep students engaged in school and out of the juvenile justice system" (Morgan et al., 2014, pp. 104-105). With FFT in place, however, some of our partner districts have seen dramatic increases not only in disproportionate punishment since 2009 (U.S. Department of Education "Faribault," "Mankato," "Owatonna," "St. Peter") but in the number of students issued out-of-school suspensions and referrals to law enforcement (U.S. Department of Education "Mankato," "Owatonna").

A prominent statistic found when searching our closest partner district on ProPublica's *Miseducation* website is that Native-American students "are 7.8 times as likely to be suspended as white students" (Mankato Public School District, n.d.), a symbolic statistic considering district schools sit on Dakota land once seized by White officials through a duplicitous treaty system (Westerman & White, 2012). As we cite recent statistics on educational inequities, then, the colonial context of Minnesota's founding as a "white man's" state remains the ideological backdrop (Wingerd, 2010, p. 227). Along these lines, current federal law retains the 1863 "Abrogation Act" whereby settler authorities violently "removed" Dakota people from Minnesota (Westerman & White, 2012, p. 195); historically White institutions of education

continue to exclude and expel today, exacerbating racial injustices through combinations of “neutral” color-blind practices and zero-tolerance policies.<sup>1</sup>

In the final analysis, FFT could only be found symptomatic of a larger color-blind ideology, appealing to Minnesota’s 94% White licensed teaching force<sup>2</sup> in part for its refusal to adequately address racism. Yet, we find FFT worthy of close analysis precisely for its symptomatic and systemic aspects, deeply baked as it is into the routines and protocols through which we conduct teacher evaluation in our network. As we argue, FFT has become normative to the degree that its “white referents” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 127) likely remain hidden to those using it most — White teacher educators, teachers, and teacher candidates. Regarding its systemic status, FFT currently enjoys the recommendation of our state teacher’s union for its alignment with Minnesota Board of Teaching’s “Standards of Effective Practice” (Education Minnesota, n.d.). Dislodging FFT from its canonical status, as our article recommends, would therefore require sustained activist work among teachers and fellow teacher educators, lobbying policymakers on a variety of fronts. Our analysis therefore includes scrutiny of the degree to which FFT finds activist work outside schools “appropriate” for teachers.

### Theoretical Framing

To build movement for *recognition* and *reframing* (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018) the situation of injustice that is schooling in southern Minnesota, our theoretical perspective combines aspects of Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Whiteness Studies, fields providing interpretive frames for interrogating the *whiteness in* and the *whiteness behind* FFT. Our approach begins in Fairclough’s (2001) observation that discourses can reproduce social power on two different

levels. First comes everyday social encounters where power is exercised by unequally positioned speakers, a level Fairclough labels the *power in* discourses (p. 36). Next comes larger “orders of discourse,” institutions for example, that can shape the unequal nature of those encounters. Fairclough calls this level the *power behind* discourses (p. 46).

The reference above to our state union’s endorsement of FFT for its alignment with Minnesota’s teaching standards provides just one example of the *power behind* FFT discourses, or Danielson’s privileged status in an order of discourse that frames “appropriate” teacher professionalism for our network. Beyond this regional context lies an even larger neoliberal order of discourse of “accountability,” supporting an array of standardizing reform measures like FFT. As Cochran-Smith et al. (2018) explain, relatively recent reform measures enacted in the name of accountability have promoted *thin equity* to the detriment of *strong equity*, that is, they have supported notions that schools alone can achieve equity simply by providing students equal access to high-quality teachers while ignoring the broader movement needed to undo oppressive systems like White supremacy that deny people equal access to all manner of social goods, not just high-quality teachers (p. 30).

Our analysis comprises, then, a response to the need for acknowledging accountability measures like FFT as part of a neoliberal, *racializing* process in teacher preparation (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018, pp. 30-31), directing educators away from solidarity for strong equity as it acculturates teacher candidates toward historically White professional practice. In light of these larger orders of discourse that shape what we call the *whiteness behind* FFT, our analyses find Danielson unsurprisingly

<sup>1</sup> A prominent case in point is, again, Owatonna whose 2011 settlement agreement emphasized zero tolerance for racial harassment rather than the desperate need for anti-oppressive, race-conscious pedagogy (Independent School District #761, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Minnesota’s licensed teaching staff stands at 94% White (see “Race/Ethnicity of Licensed Staff,” 2019). The population of white teacher-education faculty at our institution stands at approximately 84%, mirroring the racial composition of the nation’s teaching force (Jupp et al., 2016, p. 1152).

compliance-based (to White authority), rooted as it is in a dominant discourse of “appropriateness” that refuses to recognize who mainly determines the “appropriate” and “inappropriate” in American educational contexts, namely, White teachers, administrators, and policymakers (Jupp et al., 2016). Our analyses of acts of resistance to socially just teacher education therefore emphasize the need to recognize the *whiteness behind FFT*.

Zooming in on the *power in FFT* discourses, we consider policy documents like FFT consequential for how they serve as framing devices that guide social action, defining “what counts as ‘rational’ action, and even the means by which people might accomplish particular purposes” (Hand et al., 2012, p. 253). In discourse studies, *frames* deeply influence *scripts*, i.e., the things people say and do and the ways they relate to one another as they carry out shared activity (Fairclough, 2001, pp. 131-133). Through shared activity over time, a discursive frame can become highly normative, “taken for granted by the participants involved in constructing it, [and] attempts to introduce new frames for situations are often reinterpreted in terms that fit within the existing one” (Hand et al., 2012, p. 253). These observations resonate with Author 1 after recent efforts lobbying his department to replace FFT with Teaching Tolerance’s *Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education* (Scharf, 2016; hereafter *Critical Practices*), provoking persuasive questions of resistance like “how do you measure that?” (e.g., speaking up to prejudice) and “where are the rubrics?” All such utterances speak to the *power in FFT* discourses made normative through shared activity over time.

Briefly, this shared activity has involved fellow faculty and adjunct supervisors making regular site visits to regional schools armed with FFT check-sheets for evaluating teacher-candidates, a practice even Charlotte Danielson has spoken out against (Danielson, 2016). Yet, with FFT frames providing the “measures” of teacher-candidate professionalism for nearly 20 years at our institution, this norm has proven successful as the

college has maintained its accreditation across that timespan. This proven track-record implies risk in any attempt to reframe our institution’s standards of professional practice, at least for those who benefit from the status quo, and that of course includes us. In this, the normative *power in FFT* discourses routinely reconstructs FFT *ideology*, or everyday language and social practices that make oppressive hierarchies seem natural or commonsense (Fairclough, 2001).

Finally, it is in the unpacking of *ideology* where main currents of our theoretical perspectives merge. Critical Discourse Analysis examines how everyday language and social practices work in the service of power (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 2011; Rogers, 2011); so too does Critical Whiteness Studies which analyzes how White ways of knowing and being both oppress and prevail as normative (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Jupp et al., 2016; Lensmire, 2017; Tanner, 2018). Critical Whiteness Studies acknowledges *White supremacy* as the prevailing ideology in American society, where “conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings” (Ansley, 1997, p. 592). Accordingly, White ideology has played a strong hand shaping educational policy and accountability measures (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018; Gillborn, 2005; Gillborn, 2014; Leonardo, 2009). The remainder of this article examines moments of White dominance and non-White subordination enabled by FFT ideology, that is, enactments of the *whiteness in FFT* discourses in recent encounters between White university supervisors and teacher candidates of color, and the *whiteness behind* such encounters provided by theory from Danielson (2007).

The three autoethnographic vignettes that follow are reconstructed by Author 2 from recollections of meetings with students as part of a successful joint effort to reform how her department evaluates teacher candidates in pre-student-teaching field experiences. We acknowledge that these anonymized anecdotal



stories risk perpetuating *damage-centered* narratives (Tuck, 2009) about students of color in teacher education; at the same time, in order to challenge FFT, we feel we must expose ways teacher evaluators can weaponize FFT discourses against students of color.

## Erasing Identities in Danielson

### Domain 1

*Author 2:*

I am a tenured professor teaching in an undergraduate licensure program. I met Keej, a Hmong teacher candidate, in my methods course during his first semester. Partway into a four-week field experience, I received word from Keej's supervisor that he was failing to meet expectations in his kindergarten placement. I was taken aback since I had seen much promise in Keej's teaching demonstrations and warm disposition which I knew would help him nurture his future students. I emailed him and requested we discuss his situation.

When we met, Keej said his supervisor had told him he had a "you problem," meaning something inherent that made his instruction inappropriate. Keej explained how he'd been told it's hard for children to understand him when he speaks. His supervisor considered his north Minneapolis home language "slang" and his written lesson plans hard to follow. Keej shared how he had worked to overcome stuttering, learn English, and teach it to his siblings. He had spent much time volunteering at local elementary schools.

I asked Keej if he could share an example of what counted as inappropriate instruction in his field experience. He explained trouble he had selecting a book for kindergarteners to practice the skill of sequencing. His mentor teacher suggested the commonly used text *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, but this book had not been available at the university library. Keej tried to find another book with a clear sequence pattern that could also provide an example of multicultural literature, an emphasis in his literacy course. He ended up choosing *There Was an Old Man Who Painted the Sky* by Teri Sloat

(2009) which contains a rhyming pattern similar to the one in *There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*.

Sloat's book tells about an elderly man, a ghost-like creator, who paints the sky, the stars, moon and sun, day and night, animals and humans into being. After painting people, the old man rests and hands the painting process over to his creations. Keej's supervisor deemed this book inappropriate ostensibly for its spiritual nature being hard for kindergarteners to comprehend. The old man could be read as God creating the universe, an objection difficult to understand considering Keej's placement at a school in a predominantly Christian town. Curious, I examined the text and found the old man's painting of humans rendered in a way suggesting cross-racial procreation — an ambiguously naked White woman stands holding hands with a Black man with children of many bright colors surrounding them.

Keej said his supervisor asked him why he hadn't selected *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. When he tried to explain, he was reprimanded for not using the elementary school's library. Keej said he didn't realize he was able to borrow books there since he wasn't an employee. Because of text selection and choice of library, Keej's supervisor scored him "Unsatisfactory" on two FFT components as construed on the compressed check-sheet my department used at the time: 1.1b "Demonstrating Knowledge of Students" which includes "displays little or no knowledge of students' interests or cultural heritage," and 1.1d, "Demonstrating Knowledge of Resources" for being "unaware of resources for classroom."

\* \* \*

Except for the lone reference to "students of color" mentioned above (p. 32), Danielson (2007) avoids race and instead applies the terms "culture" and "cultural" when coming close to the subject. For instance, when explaining FFT's commitment to "cultural competence," Danielson states, "Schools have an obligation to help students recognize that in a democracy, no one, and no cultural group is marginalized" (p. 33). Yet, FFT's failure to properly consider race leads

to marginalizing slips that betray even this commitment. While theorizing FFT's constructivist foundations in Chapter Two, Danielson provides a scenario where middle-school students studying the Civil War might be assigned to write a conventional report on events surrounding the Second Battle of Bull Run.

Danielson writes:

- 1 Instead of a report however suppose the teacher asks students to imagine that they are
- 2 soldiers (either Union or Confederate) in the battle and to write a letter home. The
- 3 directions could be fairly specific: describe the terrain, the weather that day, what (if
- 4 anything) the soldiers had to eat, the events of the battle, what happened to one's
- 5 buddies, and so on. Students will need not only to learn information about the battle from
- 6 as many sources as possible but also to do something with the information. They will
- 7 have to coordinate versions from different perspectives, draw their own conclusions, and
- 8 personalize the information. (pp. 16-17)

Danielson offers no commentary on how Black students, for example, might respond when required to write from the perspectives of apparently generic "soldiers (either Union or Confederate)" (line 2) in order to gain empathy for their plight, this being the apparent purpose of the assignment given selection of this especially horrific battle and the parenthetical comment about what the soldiers "had to eat" in lines 3-4 — "(if anything)." Importantly, Black men were not permitted to fight for the confederacy, and, at the time of the Second Battle of Bull Run in August 1862, no formal call for Black soldiers had yet been issued by Union officials.

Leaving consideration of race out of this implicitly White scenario, as Danielson does, happens to correspond with the historiography of Bull Run itself which has tended to ignore the role slavery played in events, including the Confederate ideal of "a valiant army of White men supported by the uncompensated labor of enslaved African Americans" (Masur, 2011). In other words, however difficult conditions were for White soldiers, beginning with White Confederates, those conditions still held prestige

vis-à-vis an underlying system of chattel slavery that supported these soldiers on the battlefield. So, as White students might have notions of White valor and sacrifice bolstered by engaging in this activity, Black students would be at risk of reenacting layers of servitude, erasing their historical identities as they took up the implicitly White default soldier identities Danielson conjures.

We ask then, who would be more likely to give full attention to the ensuing standards-style work Danielson envisions in lines 6-8 where students will be consulting multiple sources, triangulating perspectives, and so on: White students whose identities are implicitly aligned with the voices they should take up or students of color whose critical consciousness will likely be provoked by the color-blind assumptions structuring the assignment? Immediately following this scenario, Danielson claims, "Nothing in this approach is particularly new or controversial..." (pp. 16-17), drawing race-conscious readers' attention to the deeply politicized nature of FFT's constructivist theory.

Reflecting on Keej's experience, we note the *whiteness behind* both scenarios manifesting itself not simply in erasures of diverse identities but in segregationist ideology. First we have negative reaction to a teacher candidate's selection of a multicultural text presenting images suggestive of cross-racial procreation. To follow, we have an assignment precluding students of color from fully identifying and likely engaging at all. Ironically, the Bull Run scenario undermines Danielson's stated obligation that schools help students recognize that "no cultural group is marginalized" (p. 33). Meanwhile, rubric criteria for "Domain 1: Planning and Preparation," reveal 17 occurrences of *appropriateness* as a discourse expressed either directly or by way of synonyms such as "suitable," "reasonable," etc. While FFT attempts to pass the Bull Run scenario off as appropriate, one can imagine race-conscious readers rating it "Unsatisfactory" for lacking "Suitability for diverse learners" (p. 54), a lack that stems from the *whiteness behind* FFT and its failure of *recognition*.



## Asserting the Power of the “White Listening Subject” in Danielson Domain 3

*Author 2:*

I met Destiny, a young African-American teacher candidate, in her first semester in the professional education program. We communicated periodically all the way through her student-teaching experience. When she asked me to write her a letter of recommendation upon graduating, I happily agreed. I had seen Destiny grow into a dynamic educator who engaged students in hands-on, inquiry-based lessons. After observing her in student teaching, I would describe her pedagogical approach as humanizing. She connected well with her elementary students, calling them “friends,” for example, to avoid gendering them with terms like boys and girls. Her genuine care and respect were evident, and her students reciprocated.

I always appreciated Destiny’s frankness during discussions in our methods courses for calling things out as they were rather than dancing around issues. She was quick to speak up and share her thoughts on race in teaching and learning. Destiny’s frankness, however, was sometimes interpreted by others as anger. Destiny once told me that her classmates saw her as “the angry Black woman.”

In a debriefing conversation following an observation, Destiny asked if she could share some of her experiences in the program. She said she didn’t want other students of color to have to go through what she did. She explained how she had been repeatedly told that the way she spoke was inappropriate. In wry resistance, she responded by maintaining she speaks “southern.” I understand Destiny’s “southern” accent to be the form of African-American language she spoke growing up in Chicago, influenced by her family’s Mississippi roots. It appears her supervisors perceived her speech as too divergent from the White, small-town Minnesota dialect that passes for standard in regional schools. She proceeded to recount advice spoken to her by past field supervisors — “you need to polish up

your language,” “watch how you speak around the kids,” “be more mindful because the kids will start repeating you,” “your language is too friendly.” Destiny told of instructors reprimanding her for her bluntness, advising that she “learn to communicate professionally.”

As a result, evaluators repeatedly scored Destiny “Unsatisfactory” on FFT component 3a, “Communicating with Students,” for the alleged incorrectness of her “spoken language” and “English communication skills.” Destiny had also been flagged for dispositional issues under our compressed FFT component 4f, stating her “Interactions with students, co-workers, parents, and community are inappropriate, unprofessional or limiting.”

\* \* \*

While FFT addresses the need to remain inclusive regarding students’ “cultural backgrounds” (pp. 46-50), much about its approach to inclusion and exclusion can be found in its passages on language. In “Domain Three: Instruction,” Danielson describes what effective communication with students entails, repeatedly stressing that teachers’ language be “clear” and “accurate,” the latter term suggesting an objective set of literacy practices to which teachers should adhere. Danielson concedes, “Not all oral communication needs to be expressed formally at all times; more informal speech is sometimes appropriate,” explaining,

- 1 Some students, in their home environments, communicate with family and friends in a
- 2 version of English that, while rich and expressive, does not represent standard (or formal)
- 3 usage. This situation may present teachers with a dilemma. On the one hand, they do not
- 4 want to convey disrespect for the language of students’ families and neighborhoods,
- 5 which means that they don’t want to criticize such language simply as a matter of course.
- 6 On the other hand, academic and economic success depends on students’ learning to
- 7 communicate, and communicate well, using standard English. (p.78)

In referring to “teachers” in line 3, Danielson reveals her assumptions about who teachers already are, i.e., native speakers of standard English inclined to devalue nonstandard forms

and take deficit views toward language--minoritized students. This move seems at once exclusionary and realistic: disregarding language-minoritized professionals who currently teach but showing awareness of a normative, exclusionary attitude among White Anglo-American teachers that poses significant barriers to language acquisition and educational well-being for non-White students (Delpit, 2006). On literacy instruction, Danielson promotes an additive approach where teachers support students' use of first languages in the process of gaining proficiency in "standard (or formal) usage" (line 2-3). Yet, in imagining a "dilemma" (line 3) and stating teachers should not criticize "simply as a matter of course" (line 5), Danielson encourages professional criticism of nonstandard English, presumably so that students may be taught the proper contexts for using standard English and their "rich and expressive" home languages (line 2; paternalistically understood). This way, language-minoritized students may learn to "communicate effectively in either environment as *appropriate*" (p. 79; emphasis ours).

Recent critique of additive approaches posits that "even when long-term English learners, heritage language learners, and Standard English learners adopt idealized linguistic practices, they are still heard as deficient language users" (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p. 167). That is, even after non-White learners have acquired standard English, empowered Whites are still likely to exclude them from academic advancement, well-paying jobs, and positions of relative prestige based on what they (empowered Whites) think they hear. In response, Flores & Rosa (2015) "suggest that shifting the focus to scrutiny of the white listening subject may open up possibilities for reconceptualizing language education in ways that move beyond appropriateness-based approaches" (p. 167). In this, Flores & Rosa lend vital symbolic representation to the notion of the *power* or *whiteness behind*, naming the otherwise obscured "White subject" who reserves the right to distinguish the satisfactory from the unsatisfactory, the appropriate from the

inappropriate when assessing the work of non-White students like Destiny.

### Misplacing the Burdens of Justice in Danielson Domain 4

*Author 2:*

I first encountered Mateo in a video he submitted as part of his application for admission to the education program. He stood out from other applicants for his passionate declaration of wanting to change the narrative for people of color in teaching and for students in the schools.

I got to know Mateo personally in my methods course during his first semester. Occasionally, he would stay after class to discuss racism and other ways students are marginalized in schools. During class, Mateo often challenged peers on color-blind ideology and other racist beliefs. He shared his schooling experiences with me of repeatedly being singled out as the only Latino student in classrooms filled with predominantly White children in his small rural town.

Not long after Mateo had gone to his first field experience, a colleague told me that Mateo's supervisor reported him acting unprofessionally and perhaps being unfit for teaching. Upon hearing this, I emailed Mateo and asked if he would come and talk to me. He responded right away, saying he had been meaning to contact me.

Mateo described how he had been scrutinized from the beginning of his field experience, adding that his integrity and professionalism always seemed to be in question. When I asked for an example, he said he'd been told that he's awkward when interacting with other professionals. Mateo told of an interaction with a long-term substitute teacher who had been filling in for the cooperating teacher on extended leave. In one lesson, he had witnessed the substitute asking students of color if their parents spoke English, having them declare their home languages aloud to the class. This line of questioning had come, according to Mateo, in an activity focusing on correctness in writing alphabetic letters.

Mateo wanted to understand the substitute's reasons for doing what she did. When the students were at recess, he approached her, hoping to get her perspective. He said the conversation did not go well and that the substitute grew offended by his questioning. Mateo told me he was just doing like he had been taught in class: disrupting patterns of inequity.

Mateo said he'd been pulled out into the hallway a few days later by his university supervisor who told him he didn't know how to act and added that he was condescending. The supervisor said it was simply not appropriate for him to express his feelings about the substitute's practices, or those of any teacher for that matter. His actions could end in his dismissal from the program.

On his evaluation, the supervisor rated Mateo "Unsatisfactory" on two FFT criteria. As construed on our "compressed" check-sheet, these criteria fell under Domain 4, Component f, "Professional Responsibilities," including 1.1, "Interactions with students, co-workers, parents, and community are inappropriate, unprofessional or limiting," and 1.3, "Does not perceive and/or respect diversity among groups of people and individuals . . ."

Clearly, Mateo was trying to understand and perhaps intervene in what he knew to be a marginalizing process. In fairness to FFT, the rubric for Component 4f includes criteria for "Advocacy," stating that the "distinguished" teacher "makes a concerted effort to challenge negative attitudes or practices to ensure that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, are honored in the school" (p. 108). Language from this element did not make the cut when our department "compressed" 4f into a check-sheet. By contrast, language about "complies fully with school and district regulations" did, illustrating how FFT, already crafted to benefit White interests, can be deployed in ways that make it even more so, to the detriment of equity-minded interests.

\* \* \*

In her section devoted to equity in Domain 4, "Professional Responsibilities," Danielson delivers

her lone reference to race, taking on the injustice that "our public schools have not served all students equally well. Those who are underserved are primarily students of color, or students living in poverty, especially in urban areas; and females, particularly in science and mathematics" (p. 32). Her solution involves providing all students sameness of opportunity, what Cochran-Smith et al. (2018) define as *thin equity* explained above, a form of distributive justice where all students have "equal (or the same) access to 'high-quality' teachers, curriculum, and school opportunities" (p. 30).

According to Danielson:

- 1 A commitment to excellence is not complete without a commitment to equity. Such a
- 2 commitment provides (1) equal opportunities for stimulating academic achievement, with
- 3 the open doors to higher education and careers that result from success in that arena, and
- 4 (2) additional levels of support for those traditionally underserved, to enable them to
- 5 overcome individual and community-wide doubts about their capability to succeed with
- 6 distinction. In a school committed to equity, one would never hear a science teacher or a
- 7 physical education teacher in the faculty lounge say, "She did pretty well *for a girl*." Nor
- 8 would teachers, even implicitly, accept lower performance from some students because
- 9 of their perceived ability or their background. This practice constitutes a particularly
- 10 insidious form of bigotry. (pp. 32-33, emphasis Danielson)

This is one of the few moments in FFT where *recognition* seems to be engaged. Here, teachers rightly need to identify "traditionally underserved" students in order to provide the "additional levels of support" (line 4) they need for success in a community that likely doubts their abilities. Yet, this recognition remains *partial*, i.e., incomplete and biased (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 39), for its refusal to name the sources of "community-wide doubts" (line 5) that hinder underserved students' success, beginning with Whites who hold deficit views toward students of color. Such partial recognition leads Danielson to misplace the burden of justice on equity-minded teachers and underserved students who are

striving to “overcome” at school (lines 5-6) rather than on “community” Whites who need to change their racist thinking. This observation points again to the *whiteness behind* FFT, this time in the Framework’s friendly politics in relation to an oppressive White status quo. Rather than identifying the need for educators to join collective struggles for equity and justice outside schools (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018; Giroux et al., 1988), FFT keeps its approach to equity confined to individuals and popular notions of perseverance or grit performed in schools.

Danielson’s claim in lines 6-7 that “one would never hear” sexist statements from teachers in a school committed to equity gives us pause, working as we do in a college where racial consciousness and social justice stand as officially stated goals but where assessment practices often alienate teacher candidates of color (Burnett & Beschorner, 2019; Berry et al., 2020). As we have found, oppressive ideology does not suddenly recede with the claiming of new commitments. Reformulated for strong equity, a social-justice framework might say teachers need to actively educate wherever one might hear microaggressions like “She did pretty well *for a girl*,” and even engage in community building around topics like gender expression, as *Critical Practices* does (Scharf, 2016, p. 16). Yet, would such advocacy be “appropriate” according to FFT? Considering FFT’s criterion for “Advocacy” quoted above, it might seem so. But in Criterion 4, the “distinguished” teacher only “makes a concerted effort to challenge negative attitudes [. . .] *in the school*” (p. 108; emphasis ours). At the same time, when considering students’ rights in Domain 4, FFT says teachers should be “motivated by a search for the proper balance between conflicting interests, never solely by the dictates of tradition” (p. 107), meaning as advocacy may sometimes involve breaking with the interests of “tradition” (White school norms), consideration of such interests should lead teachers toward appropriate (White) balance in relation to the status quo.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the most insidious thread running through Author 2’s vignettes is the tendency for supervisors to invoke FFT discourses while curtailing the self-determination exercised by these developing teachers: Keej’s selection of an explicitly multicultural text for sequencing, Destiny’s ways of connecting in humanizing ways with her students, Mateo’s inquiry into the philosophy of language acquisition driving the substitute teacher’s methods. As Lisa Delpit (2006) observes, it is critical that teacher candidates of color find the space to access “internal sources of knowledge” when undergoing training in predominantly White settings (p. 117); this because predominantly White sources of knowledge so often exclude. We read the assessment practices captured in these vignettes as attempts to deprive Keej, Destiny, and Mateo of their space and thereby cut their self-knowledge processes short. Here, the scenarios can be understood as *violent* in Freirean terms (Freire, 2010, p. 85), i.e., evaluative acts that threatened to alienate these teacher candidates from their own sense of agency, preventing them from self-actualizing as teachers.

Considering the various ways whiteness exerts itself both *in* and *behind* Danielson’s dominant discourse of “appropriateness,” we argue FFT offers a particularly weak instrument for assessing the critical work needed to reframe teacher preparation for strong equity (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018, p. 30). Unpacking the Framework this way has led us to lobby our unit for adopting *Critical Practices* (Scharf, 2016), a powerful counter-framework that cuts against the grain of White FFT ideology. In contrast to Danielson’s Civil War scenario, for example, *Critical Practices* calls on teachers and students “to draw attention to gaps, silences, contradictions, beliefs and attitudes that typically go unexamined by the dominant cultural reading” (p. 3). Rather than keeping advocacy confined to the school, *Critical Practices* directly names teachers as “advocates for social justice” (p. 21), providing standards and rationale for them taking action to redress community problems (pp. 17-21). While we

hope for a future where standards of teacher professionalism may be determined by local critical expertise, we argue that turning to this existing counter-framework would help our unit (and others) reframe professional practice for strong equity in this particularly troubling historical moment.

But wouldn't we still be held accountable to the same White stakeholders in the end, state authorities whose power to prescribe and sanction would keep moving us back into "appropriate" Danielsonesque positions? And given our unit's habituation to strict assessment practices, wouldn't any set of standards, even social-justice ones, still be weaponized against students? What if implementing a social-justice framework ended up alienating our White students, by far our largest demographic, driving many (and their tuition dollars) away? Perhaps this question above all others keeps our institution from anti-oppressive change. Even so, we maintain that implementing a race-conscious framework like Critical Practices would move our institution a step toward strong equity, *authorizing* teacher practices such as "speaking up" and taking educational struggle for equity beyond school walls (Scharf, 2016, p. 20).

For now, FFT presides comfortably over teacher professionalism in a regional network where White supremacy abides. We argue that either developing or adopting a critical social-justice framework could disrupt this situation, offering a small, admittedly reformist, but badly needed step toward strong equity. White ideology would no doubt persist and naturalized questions like "how do you measure that?" would surely linger. But the reframing we suggest could at least change the *what* of teacher evaluation, making anti-oppressive action standard. And should the violence of professional framework knowledge linger too for its having become so routine, it might be redirected to where it needs to go at this moment — inward — toward our White *evaluating* subjects as Flores & Rosa (2015) might put it, challenging what many White veteran teachers think they know about "appropriate" practice.

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## Mythologies of “We”: Whiteness in Cross-Racial Solidarity Work

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### Introduction

We write this paper amidst the ongoing state-sanctioned brutality against Black bodies, missing and murdered Indigenous women, the disproportionately negative impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous, Black and Brown bodies, the denial of Indigenous rights, the unfathomable living conditions for many Indigenous communities in Canada and worldwide, and the ongoing trauma inflicted on young Black, Indigenous and racially oppressed bodies in schools every single day. These are the realities within, and histories through which we write this paper; realities and histories that are legally, politically, structurally and culturally enshrined, and that are maintained in *everyday* relationships, kinships and solidarities that make up systems, that make up families, that make up communities, that make up “anti-racist” movements. As critical race and critical whiteness scholars have shown us, how we come to know what we know about race, racism, and anti-racism is informed by modes of intimate, everyday socialization (through school, neighbourhoods, church, media, education, friendships, affinity groups, to name a few) (Baldwin, 1963; Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Kendi, 2019; Matias, 2016; Oluo, 2019; Rankine, 2014). We situate our paper in these intimate and everyday relational interactions that un/consciously work to undo this urgent and

necessary work. These everyday occurrences unsettle our solidarities, maintain systems of oppression, and foreclose the possibility of more lasting change at the systemic level. There is an ever-present need for decisive, direct action to take down racist and other oppressive systems, in the streets and in our institutions; and, we suggest that a parallel commitment to our ongoing (inter)personal work is needed in our relationships and solidarities.

This paper emerged from friendship. And our friendship, like many friendships, started with an encounter between strangers. Independently of one another, we decided to take part in a contemplative retreat in November of 2017. Our chance encounter was one between two people and their interlacing dynamics of privilege, marginalization, race, gender, class, luck, and the micro and macro histories that have made us both. When we met, we had no intention of taking on racial justice work together outside of the work we were independently engaged in, albeit in very different ways. In her work with schools and school districts, Vidya, a South Asian, activist-minded scholar, was witnessing the ways in which educators commit to challenging anti-Black racism by, for example, questioning Eurocentrism in the curriculum and racist disciplinary practices, and then turn around and fail to treat their Black colleagues with respect or honour and validate their expertise, experiences and decisions. As a White<sup>3</sup> activist-minded

<sup>3</sup> We are in agreement with Eve L. Ewing, a sociologist of race and education, who also chooses to capitalize the “w” in White. She writes: Whiteness is not only an absence... Rather, it

is a specific social category that confers identifiable and measurable social benefits... When we ignore the specificity and significance of Whiteness — the things that it is, the things that it

Executive Director of a community-engaged arts organization, Michelle was observing how institutional-level commitments to anti-racism and anti-oppression are continually undercut by what transpires at the interpersonal level: particularly in the mental health world, individualism still reigns supreme, and so accountability for how Whiteness plays out *between people*, even in justice-oriented group facilitation, is often subverted by a focus on (White) individual safety and well-being. But in our initial meeting, we were simply in the same place at the same time, engaging in acts of witnessing within a very specific container for self-reflection.<sup>4</sup>

What started as an encounter between strangers has morphed into a two-and-a-half-year introspection on the complexities of cross-racial solidarity and friendship, read through the lens of critical whiteness studies. This paper builds on Shah's (2019) exploration of some of the ways in which inattention to the *personal* realm, namely a lack of critical reflexivity and the influence of the ego-mind's pursuit of self-interest and self-protection, furthers individualism at the expense of collective liberation and systemic change. Our cross-racial friendship has been an important terrain to mine expressions of Whiteness between us and has urged us to reflect on the ways in which these expressions reinforce White supremacy. In particular, this paper explores how many "anti-racist" cross-racial relationships constitute new forms of White progressivism, whereby White subjects mediate (Tanner, 2019) their need for connection, validation, self-improvement and innocence through people of colour. We focus on the micro levels by which White supremacy is maintained precisely because we are interested in the inconspicuous and

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does — we contribute to its seeming neutrality and thereby grant it power to maintain its invisibility."

<sup>4</sup> Here we refer to the Centre for Courage and Renewal's Circle of Trust retreats. Circle of Trust retreats create spaces to "support the inner journey of each person in the group, to make each soul feel safe enough to show up and speak its truth, to help each person listen to his or her inner teacher" (Palmer, 2004, p. 54). The circle is built on the idea that in order to understand the

insidious ways in which Whiteness reproduces itself relationally *through* our bodies, *through* our emotions, and ultimately *through* our solidarities. What mythologies of "we" lurk beneath the surface of inter-racial friendships and anti-racist solidarities?<sup>5</sup> We conclude by considering how exploring Whiteness in a cross-racial friendship offers new ways of thinking about how we might approach anti-racist solidarity work to challenge White supremacy in all of its forms.

## Literature Review

### Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS)

This paper differentiates between *Whiteness*, *White supremacy*, and *White identity*. Like other racial categories, White identity, usually based on skin colour, is situational, intersectional and socially constructed (Leonardo, 2002). White supremacy can be defined as the institutionalization of Whiteness and White privilege and the historical, social, political and economic systems and structures that contribute to its continued dominance (Giroux & McLaren, 1994). We understand Whiteness as an *ideology* and *logic* by which one moves through the world, "intrinsically linked to dynamic relations of domination" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57) and one that is operating most saliently in White bodies but also in and through racially oppressed bodies. Whiteness is therefore "a constellation of processes and practices rather than a discrete entity" like skin colour alone (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). Our understanding of Whiteness is informed by early CWS and critical race scholars and activists such as W.E. DuBois (1920), James Baldwin (1963), Franz Fanon (1967), Toni Morrison (1992), and bell hooks (1992) who explore how Whiteness maintains its position of dominance through claims to superiority and innocence, specifically positioning Whiteness as

self, "we need both the interior intimacy that comes with solitude and the otherness that comes with community" (Palmer, p. 54).

<sup>5</sup> Rubén Gatzambide-Fernández speaks to the "mythology of me" in solidarity work: these are the mythologies of "who we are and what we claim to do" (2012, p. 55). Gatzambide-Fernández questions how the fear of acknowledging the inherent privileges in these mythologies blind us to the fact that we may not be making a difference at all, or activate a second myth of innocence that we cling to in order to feel better about ourselves.

*anti-Blackness*. Fanon (1967) argued that Whiteness is a process that corrupts the “soul of the White man” (p. 129), while hooks (1992) claims that seeing Whiteness as natural and people of color as racialized “Others,” leads White people to deny any “representation of Whiteness as terror or terrorizing” (p. 45). CWS theorists have looked at the way Whiteness is invisible only to those who inhabit it (Ahmed, 2004; Leonardo, 2002); as embodying the racially ideal subject (Ahmed, 2004); as ahistorical and in denial of its own creation (Leonardo, 2004); and as a global privileged signifier (Leonardo, 2002; Matias, 2016). We also draw on Thandeka’s (1999) understanding of Whiteness as predicated on the denial of difference within oneself, constituting in the White subject a core sense of self that is hidden from view and shrouded in shame. We are drawn to theories like Thandeka’s that expose the psychic costs through which Whiteness is made because they simultaneously point to its deeply stubborn persistence, and hint at how even a highly “conscious deconstruction of Whiteness” does not stop Whiteness from showing up as “murky, largely unconscious feelings that often manifest in very subtle forms” (Birge, 2019, p.18), even for those *doing the work*. We also acknowledge the risk that an explicit focus on Whiteness within our interpersonal relationship brings: the re-centering of the White subject. And, we too agree with Richard Wright that race and racism are a White problem (Tardon, 1993). We hold these cautions alongside the possibility of disrupting Whiteness so that we might distill and dilute its power, knowing that it acts as a barrier to systemic change.

### White Emotionality

We would be remiss not to talk about emotions in a paper on interpersonal racial justice work, not just because of the highly politicized ways in which emotions are received, permitted, and interpreted among White subjects and people of colour in the world at large (Ahmed, 2004; Matias, 2016), and in anti-racist organizing specifically (Srivastava, 2006), but also because as

friends, we are not immune to the unequal emotional cadences, pitfalls, and dangers of this work.

Critical race and CWS scholars have named the devastating ways in which White emotions are backed by the full force of the state and its attendant apparatuses of protection, especially their tears and fears (Matias, 2016; Matias, 2019), but even, hypocritically, their rage (Anderson, 2016), with real and violent consequences on Black, Brown, and Indigenous lives. And yet, White emotionality is in everyday discourse afforded the presumption of “neutrality” (Allen, 2004; Leonardo, 2004), as issuing forth from White bodies in completely innocent, decontextualized ways. Even in highly political spaces working to fight various forms of oppression, when emotion is welcomed “equally” from both women of colour and White women, there isn’t the same level of safety experienced by both parties in private disclosures in public (Srivastava, 2006). Ahmed (2004) argues that we must be cautious of the emotional politics in declarations of Whiteness, and the way in which they can “re-install the very ideals they seek to contest” as is often the case with White emoting around, for example, something like shame. Ahmed’s caution here lies in the dangerous and untrustworthy presumption that in owning one’s shame, one has *overcome* the thing one feels shame about (i.e. White supremacy). How the public receives emotions from people of colour, on the other hand - think about the “angry woman of colour” image - is drenched in stereotype, misrepresentation, and disavowal of the degrading history that created these stereotypes in the first place (Walley-Jean, 2009). *At the same time*, public scrutiny and misrepresentation of the angry woman of colour trope undermines that emotions like anger, frustration, and rage are entirely appropriate and necessary responses to racist misrepresentation, misrecognition and a denial of rights (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984).

There is a Eurocentric bias reflected in the negation of body and emotion in academic scholarship (Batacharya and Wong, 2018). Attending to emotive and embodied terrains

presents the possibility of resisting the reproduction of the coherent, rational, self-made, autonomous, “free” male subject of Western Enlightenment thinking that has come to be synonymous with Whiteness (powell, 2012) - the production of which has produced so much harm, alienation, and pain, precisely by denying access to a full(er) sense of an embodied, emotive, and relational humanity. And yet, we do not want to presume an anti-racist or progressive stance in this framing, because of the impossibility of attending to our intimacies, bodies, and emotions from a place of (race) neutrality, universalism, or even certainty. Further, emotions operate with such subtle, pre-cognitive force that they are exceedingly challenging to name; and yet their impacts are deeply formative for both racially oppressed and White subjects alike. Difficult as it is to trace emotions and their impact, we take it on here as way of contributing to an antiracist literacy around White emotionality by attending to its unique expression in our friendship, and in interpersonal relations more generally, with the intent of better understanding how emotions undermine efforts at disrupting White supremacy.

### Solidarity

This paper is also in dialogue with existing scholarship on racial solidarity. Noting the vast and contradictory ways in which the word solidarity is deployed in anti-racist movements and organizing, we are interested here in how racial solidarity consciousness is enacted between racially oppressed and racially dominant people, and where Whiteness gets in the way. For professor and activist Bettina Love, what we need in racial solidarity and justice movements are co-conspirators, not allies: people who are willing to risk themselves before and alongside others (Love, 2019). Likewise, Olser (2016) differentiates between White actors, allies, and accomplices. What distinguishes an ally from an accomplice is the willingness to take direct action in disrupting White supremacy, informed and coordinated by Black, Brown, and Indigenous

folks, and with an understanding that our liberation is bound together. These conceptions of solidarity presume a shared and unequal stake in liberation *and* the physical, economic, and material risks of fighting racial injustice. What we are interested in is how we might approximate these solidarities by reckoning with our whole selves, not just our dollars, or our allegiances, or our political commitments, but our shadows, our consciousness, our socialization, and our attachments. Freire’s (1970) notions of solidarity inspire us here, as they require dialogical engagement and a commitment to conscientization: an ongoing process by which oppressors and oppressed engage in consciousness raising through uncovering and acting upon unjust relational power dynamics.

In arguing for a solidarity that is relational Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) encourages us to first acknowledge “being as co-presence, by deliberately taking as a point of departure that the individual subjects do not *enter* into relationships, but rather subjects are *made* in and through relationships” (p. 52). Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) reminds us to move beyond an *assumed* solidarity that has simply *emerged* by virtue of the fact that we are friends committed to anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice in our personal and professional lives, to one that is made, and re-made, intentional, and accountable. Further, such a solidarity must also begin with the premise that Whiteness is made through relation, with its own attachments (innocence, purity, comfort), ways of being (surveillance, individualism, universalism, exploitation), and logic (the self as separate, neutral, invisible, knowable and self-made), and that we have both been formed and made through Whiteness.

### Critical Co-Constructed Autoethnography

Our process resonates with what Cann & DeMeulenaere (2012), doing cross-racial work, call *critical co-constructed autoethnography*. Situating it within critical theory, critical pedagogy, and critical race methodology, they attribute three main qualities to their definition. First, this

methodology aligns with activist research by capturing Freire's (1970) process of critical praxis, the continual interplay between reflection and action (Freire, 1970). Naming praxis (*vis-a-vis* Freire) as part of what constitutes critical co-constructed autoethnography speaks to how we understand our process as involving a cycle of action and reflection that is always unfinished. Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) describes praxis in solidarity work (also drawing on Freire) as a mode or "term of engagement," whereby the subject "permanently seeks transformation" not as a means of self-empowerment or improvement but as an ongoing process of being formed and (re)formed through acting in relation (pp. 54-55). Not only did we feel that we, as subjects, were being formed and (re)formed through our praxis, but so too was our work in ways that showed it to be non-linear, non-progressive, and always complicit in the very systems we were trying to critique.

Second, Cann and DeMeulenaere (2012) argue that as a methodology, "it allows collaborating researchers and writers to more accurately represent the tempo (Bourdieu, 1977), intimacy (Tillmann-Healy, 2003), uncertainty, and complexity of relationships—creating a space for colleagues engaged in critical work to reflect together" (p. 147). While our method of working involved many stops and starts, interruptions, playfulness, pain, hurt, questioning, serious and casual conversation, captured in what Cann and DeMeulenaere (2012) refer to as the *tempo, intimacy, uncertainty, and complexity* of relationships, where ours differs is those things were not just features of *how* we worked (often seamlessly moving between casual conversation, stories from our lives, and critical reflection), but also part of *what* we are analyzing. To us, each of these affective, intimate, and temporal features of what makes a relationship are also central to understanding (and therefore dismantling) how White supremacy operates on the micro level. The third feature of Cann and DeMeulenaere's (2012) methodology is that "it generates opportunities for solidarity among marginalized groups as well

as across difference, inspiring those in spaces of privilege to be allies in social justice work" (p. 174). To us solidarity requires risk, it requires an acknowledgment of how power mis/constructs and unequally harms us, and a continuous process of holding ourselves and each other to account.

### Our Process

The retreat that began this journey became part of a contemplative practice that we attended together ten times over the course of two and a half years. During that time we witnessed and held space for all manner of experiences and struggles from our individual lives. What was enabled by our witnessing and listening was a foundation upon which we could lay down some difficult and challenging truths and exchanges one-on-one. We both intuited from this practice that our friendship might hold or facilitate possibilities for learning and growth around racial justice work. This first emerged in moments of tension and cautious conversation and eventually took the form of a series of critical conversations. We eventually decided to co-author a paper together, which marked a significant turn in our relationship. From that moment on we have put our friendship under scrutiny, initially to try and make sense of what enabled us to have really hard and painful race-based conversations with each other. We wondered: what are the conditions that allow for that kind of honesty? What is it about the relational, embodied, personal space of reflection that allows an interiority and reckoning where academic theory cannot? We started by engaging in conversation and critical dialogue, reflecting on how our retreat experience was (and continues to be) situated within (largely unnamed) racial dynamics. We reached a turning point when we decided that after a couple years of engaging in difficult but also relatively safe exploration, we needed to lay it all out on the page, so to speak, in the form of personal letters to each other.



Our letters emerged out of this engagement as a form of “cross-talk” (Brydon, 2004)<sup>6</sup> doing away with politeness and embracing the necessary discomfort, conflict, and tension needed to speak honestly about White supremacy and the ways it shows up between and through us. Brydon (2004) speaks to the important work of cross-talk, of working through “misguided notions of politeness” that act as a barrier to debate, and finding strategies to bring such “muted disagreements” to attention “in ways that allow them to do their productive work” (p. 81). We were buoyed by the possibility of engaging in both the witnessing of one another through our contemplative practice combined with the more direct cross-talk, and grappled with the real on the ground potential it might have for racial justice, believing that this work must happen at all levels: the personal, interpersonal, ideological, and institutional. But in our exuberance at the thought of having “arrived” at some new, cross-racial, anti-racist place, we have since marked the ways in which Whiteness alluded us all along, the ways in which it was always present between and within us, but to which we were (un)wittingly ignorant, for fear of losing our friendship. Our methodology then has embodied a kind of ongoing witnessing and cross-talk as praxis, that is, like us, unfinished. Our thinking has gone through multiple iterations, has created possibilities for deeper exploration and conversation, has unearthed multiple wounds, and continues to undergo revision. And so what we offer in what follows is one such crossing, in which we revisit the latest version of our letters merged with our ongoing critical observations of ourselves and others engaged in cross-racial friendships committed to racial justice. We pull out excerpts from our letters to mine them for their attachments to and perpetuation of Whiteness, and place them in conversation with our ongoing observations of the cross-racial friendships engaged in solidarity work around us.

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<sup>6</sup> In a subsequent essay, Brydon and Marta Dvořák (2011) turn to the compound word “crosstalk,” instead, to emphasize that this crossing is “continuous, ongoing, and

## Critical Reflections

What we have observed, first and foremost, is that interpersonal racial solidarity work requires the recognition of a central paradox: that cross-racial connection is necessary to the work of racial justice, and that it can simultaneously reinforce White supremacy. In tracing our conversations and critical reflections over the past two and a half years, we have observed the workings of Whiteness in our relationship, including the way it dehumanizes us both and protects White racial innocence and emotionality at the cost of harm to people of colour. Part of the process of dismantling interpersonal instantiations of Whiteness in our anti-racist work, as we will detail below, requires prioritizing racial justice over White emotionalities, embracing conflict and discomfort, divesting from White kinship, and recognizing the inconspicuous ways that relationships to people of colour can become extractive, instrumental, and exploitative, even in the context of racial solidarity work.

### Whiteness as Dehumanizing

When we first started this work together, our conversations centered the ways that Black, Indigenous and racially oppressed people are harmed by White supremacy, and the accountability necessary for White people to change systems and structures that disproportionately harm people of colour. We explored the idea that under a divisive and antagonistic logic of Whiteness, the White subject is always separate and sovereign, and *in a relation* of dominion to an objectified “Other.” When we turned the gaze inward, we noticed a parallel severing or process of dehumanization, one that makes it possible to pathologize, dehumanize and treat parts of ourselves as alien. We began by exploring how Whiteness dehumanizes White people. In her letter to Michelle, Vidya describes experiences of Whiteness:

co-constructing” benefiting from “multi-voiced narratives” and requiring “friction” for any sort of movement to occur (p. 8).



You see, I have come to see the façade of Whiteness—the deeply depraved and empty existence that Whiteness fosters, operating in you and me. Whiteness is bolstered by this idea that you can take everything that you fear, that you hate about yourself and the world, and literally project it onto entire groups of people because you're too fragile to address it. Whiteness drives White people to spend so much of their time creating and maintaining an illusion of control and righteousness and objective truth and having it all together, which both masks and perpetuates the deep emptiness and brokenness inside. It acts as a collective gaslighting for *all* of us.

These reflections echo Thandeka's (1999) sentiments about the shame experienced in being *made White* in a White supremacist society, as a "battle by a self against itself in order to stop feeling what it is not supposed to feel: forbidden desires and prohibited feelings that render one different. Such desires or felt differences must be repressed or blocked off in some way because one's community deems them to be bad" (p. 12). We differentiate here between the idea that Whiteness is an injury White people can claim upon learning that they are White (Ahmed, 2004), as we see in claims to reverse racism, from the idea that to be socialized in Whiteness is to be socialized into dehumanization.

In other words, the process of being *made White* engenders emotional and spiritual deficits in White people. We wonder how deficits have accrued and magnified over generations of fragmentation and separation and how they have informed White identity and a history of White terror (hooks, 1992). Here, we heed Tanner's (2019) concern that if White people cannot acknowledge and address their divided self, then they will continually turn to "people of color as though they are always *the only* subjects in matters of race" as "a way for White people to avoid reckoning with a White racial identity" (p. 183). This recognition was profound for us both in different ways. For Michelle, it meant coming to grips with this dehumanization and its impacts on her life. Michelle reflects: "It's so clear how patriarchy and capitalism centre my worth in my

body and productivity, but Whiteness makes invisible the inwardly and outwardly dehumanizing process through which I have learned to be White, and the complete disconnect between that process and the perpetuation of terror. It makes invisible to me how deeply attached I am to being a good and moral person, with no shadows." For Vidya, it meant reckoning with how an approximation of Whiteness plays out in her Brown body as a source of dehumanization and fragmentation. Vidya writes: "Being in deep relation with you has invited me to collapse romanticized binaries of good Brown person/bad White person and has allowed me to deeply reflect on the ways in which Whiteness operates in and through me, too, as a Brown person." These deficits, most evident in White bodies, but also evident in bodies that desire and chase an approximation of Whiteness, dangerously limit expressions and experiences of humanity. When they are met with the support of economic, social and political power, they have devastating consequences on the lives, livelihoods and quality of life of those deemed to be subhuman "Others".

In reflecting on our letters and the gravity of naming Whiteness as dehumanized, in addition to Whiteness as dehumanizing, we noticed the ease with which we recentered Whiteness. Michelle writes: "I am afraid of who I will be and how I will hurt you." Even in an acknowledgement of deficit, in naming the fear of self that may turn on itself (Thandeka, 1999), there is a recentering of the White subject. The shuttle between "I caused harm" to "I am harmed", between White guilt and White shame/victimhood, are both variations of the same declarative statements that Ahmed (2004) cautions against. They are versions of "I am racist," "I am ashamed of my racism," that, while on the surface appear to be anti-racist, support racism in the illusion that in the naming, there is an undoing of the very thing that requires naming. And so, while naming Whiteness as dehumanizing for both White people and people of colour is necessary to acknowledge how Whiteness operates as a system to which we are all subjected, unequally, we also see how in the

owning of harm to self and other, the White subject is recentered.

Clinging to the very notion of innocence is another way that Whiteness works to deny White people access to their full humanity by upholding ideas of goodness and purity. As somatics teacher and racial justice activist Prentis Hemphill (2019) reminds us, “Innocence offers safety, while guilt leaves you at risk for expulsion and isolation.” If we understand that this very binary, the assignment of innocence or guilt, is integral to White kinship, it makes sense that such a kinship would be based not on love or genuine connection, but on surveillance (even self-surveillance) (Matias & Allen, 2013), and also lays bare the lengths to which White folks will go to maintain that innocence, lest they be shunned or alienated from the group. Innocence has always been afforded to White people to maintain an image of racial purity, all too often at the cost of physical and psychic harm to people of colour. This innocence, evident in the erasure of histories of colonialism, displacement, and slavery and protected by law, is held together by interpersonal relations, both those unapologetic in their racism and those working toward anti-racist solidarity alike.

But what if, as Hemphill (2019) asks: “we could see ourselves less as innocent, but as harmed and harming, more or less honest, more or less able to be conscious when triggered, more or less manipulative, more or less taking responsibility for our own change, more or less caught in patterns?” Racial justice work is not immune to bids for innocence, whereby the act of vying for White innocence is dependent on, and in relation to the guilty racialized “Other.” We see the innocent/guilty binary as precluding any authentic conflict, inimical to the full expression of our humanity, and the cause of disproportionate and unnecessary harm and exploitation. To be clear, we are not suggesting a

move away from notions of innocence and guilt as a way of avoiding accountability and culpability for harm; rather, we are situating these notions in the context of White kinship, and suggesting that the White obsession with innocence is part of the process through which further harm and dehumanization of racially oppressed people proliferates, even in spaces and relationships claiming to do the opposite.

### Whiteness and the Politics of Care

Throughout this work, we noticed that even our instincts to protect one another, to care for one another, and to stay connected to one another, were, at times, expressions of White supremacy. In Vidya’s reflections, she noticed a tendency to paternalize her relationship to Michelle in the congratulatory way she affirmed Michelle’s learning, reinforcing Michelle as the exceptional White subject, as opposed to *expecting* Michelle to engage in the necessary work of dismantling structures of White supremacy. In offering validation to Michelle, Vidya was restoring Michelle’s White “anti-racist” comfort, in attending to her need to know she was “doing anti-racism right.” We have also noticed this pattern in other cross-racial relationships committed to racial justice. These reflections take on particular significance when held alongside the fact that even as Whiteness has socialized White people into self-fragmentation and self-dehumanization, White vulnerabilities and power have the benefit of state protection when “negative” White emotions such as anger, fear, guilt and shame surface.<sup>7</sup>

We noticed how our care was politicized. On the one hand, Michelle is aware of the ways in which the expertise and experiences of Indigenous, Black and racially oppressed people are devalued, and that as a White person, she will always be in a stance of learning about race and racism. She is also conscious to not take up too much space in what, how and when she speaks or

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<sup>7</sup> White people are all too aware of how these differential emotional protections operate, with an equal level of awareness of how their emotions can be wielded as weapons; we see this in the recent example of Amy

Cooper, a White woman, who understood very clearly that her perceived “fear” of birdwatcher Chrsitan Cooper, a Black man, could result in his imprisonment or death (Witt, 2020).

acts. On the other hand, Michelle, like many White people doing racial justice work, is hesitant to question Vidya, to challenge her ideas, to engage with her as she would a White colleague or friend. Michelle is especially hesitant to challenge whether and how Whiteness is operating through Vidya. Some of this hesitancy is in Michelle's desire to protect her connection with Vidya, which makes it difficult to develop a genuine relationship, and some of this hesitancy is to avoid conflict under the guise of care. Vidya has caught herself protecting Michelle's need for connection and avoiding conflict that she would not avoid with a colleague or friend of colour committed to anti-racism, as a way of showing care; she equated care for her White friend with maintaining her White racial innocence, repositioning Michelle, as the social ideal (Ahmed, 2004).

In conversation, Vidya has expressed that she experiences greater levels of trust when Michelle prioritizes a commitment to their individual and shared humanity through an ongoing divestment in Whiteness, over their personal connection as friends. The slipperiness of Whiteness requires that trust in relationships, and the very relationship itself, must be earned or that relationships may end or change. Vidya writes: "When your Whiteness limits my capacity for humanity, I will (re)claim my fullest of selves again and again. I need the love you have for me to be willing to hold my truths, even if my truths make you feel reduced, scared, ashamed or guilty. I need to be in conflict with you, again and again, and for that to be a space that you welcome as generative and hopeful." In giving up the protection of innocence, new relationships between Whiteness and White supremacy, and between people of colour and White people, might be born.

### Exploitation, Extraction, and Instrumentalism as Mechanisms of Whiteness

Another feature of our critical work has been to notice how interpersonal interactions, even

those committed to racial justice, can serve to be exploitative or extractive of people of colour. In her letter to Vidya, Michelle writes: "I am afraid of this relationship breaking." We are curious about how a fear of disconnection might serve to uphold Whiteness? What mechanisms do White "anti-racists" use to maintain connection? And what lies beneath this fear of disconnection? When is the need for connection, validation, and friendship a mask for the protection and maintenance of White racial innocence? We see this tension playing out in all kinds of bids to proximity. While White people have instrumentalized proximity to a friend or loved one of colour as proof of being "not-racist" (i.e. innocence-by-association), we have witnessed similar mechanisms used to legitimate an exceptional "anti-racist" identity. While White liberals extract knowledge and connection in lieu of taking "anti-racist" action, we have seen White, self-proclaimed anti-racists extract knowledge and connection for professional and academic advancement in spaces committed to racial justice. While the White liberal fears loss of connection to the White race, White folks committed to racial justice fear loss of connection and legitimation from people of colour and "anti-racist" White folks. At times it has been difficult to decipher which part of Michelle's proximity to Vidya has been grounded in genuine relationship and which part has been used to maintain racial innocence or for professional benefit. For example, Michelle and Vidya have questioned the boundaries between sharing ideas and supporting each other's work, and the regular, free, informal learning opportunities that Vidya provides Michelle both in person and on social media. We have seen similar patterns in our respective circles, even among activists of colour that recognize and name the injustice in their free labour.

These instrumentalist approaches in anti-racist spaces are also evident when White folks play one friend of colour against another, turning to a second friend of colour to reinstate their innocence when their first friend of colour questions their actions or commitment to racial

justice. Some White folks, when called out, which in and of itself is an act of care and trust, respond, often right away, with a list anti-racist actions they are taking and the learning they are doing to reinstate their exceptionalism, in a bid to return to connection and innocence. Others attend to the emotional needs of friends/colleagues of colour as a way of cementing connection that is more rooted in the fear of loss of connection, than it is in genuine care and love. In fact, Vidya has questioned whether she has used this “mechanism” with Black and Indigenous colleagues and friends, further confirmation that Whiteness lives in all bodies. Michelle, on the other hand, has noticed her own tendency to self-efface, self-flagellate, or act as an apologist (Kumashiro, 2020, July 23) as a White racial subject in relationships with people of colour in a move that might on the surface appear to be about giving up space, but upon reflection is a way of maintaining racial innocence and assuaging feelings of guilt.

### **Towards Cross-Racial Solidarities**

Our friendship has taught us some important lessons about different models of interpersonal solidarity or cross-racial mythologies of progress. We share what we have learned and we invite others into this process, by laying ours bare. It is a messy, incomplete, non-prescriptive process of interpersonal, cross-racial accountability. We entered into this experience of analyzing and re/writing ourselves collectively not knowing how it would impact our friendship. This work has necessarily changed our friendship; we are more conscious, more accountable and more direct about the interventions we can make towards racial justice. And we are closer. We say this hesitantly so as not to reinforce the hope of renewed connection or teleological narratives of progress; we have intimately scrutinized how mediating needs for connection, validation, and self-improvement through people of colour is another guise through which Whiteness operates. We also say this tentatively, knowing that this work is unfinished, and that we may come back to this paper in a year, finding new, slippery ways

in which Whiteness is operating to undermine our commitments and capacities towards racial justice. From this place, we might consider a semblance of racial solidarity.

We have often remarked on how easy it is to hide behind theory in this work. The work of racial solidarity, in our estimation, must move beyond the page and venture into an unearthing of the affective, intimate, spiritual, and embodied planes of existence. This is where Whiteness also lives, breeds and grows, and how it comes to inform our instincts and habits that keep us separate. We see the body as a site of knowing and we see the necessity for what Thandeka (1999), Love (2020), Singh (2019) and others call in one form or another, racial healing or anti-racist therapy. Racial healing, for all of us, but especially White folks, asks us to reflect critically on our racial identity: how have we come to know that we are raced? How have we internalized Whiteness? How do our racial identities exist in relation to each other? How might this lead to greater fortitude, discernment and capacity to dismantle Whiteness in ourselves, in our relationships, in our systems and in our ideas? In our friendship and in our witnessing of others committed to racial justice, we have also learned that racial healing work is necessarily relational and communal. We agree with Tanner (2019) that White people need to both engage in their own racial healing and accountability work that does not burden people of colour, *and* forge coalitions with people of colour to resist White supremacy.

Anti-racist solidarities and racial healing must also hold the possibility of attending to and centering conflict. Relationships that do not make space for conflict, pain, non-closure and departure, and instead remain positive, polite and passive aggressive, support and uphold White innocence. For these relationships to prioritize the harm done to people of colour, they need to engage in disagreement and challenge. Conflict requires the willingness to give up connection, but it also requires the need to give up the protection of White innocence. This requires White people to *experience* the very feelings,

desires and impulses they reject and project onto racialized “Others;” such projections serve to buffer themselves from real and perceived pain and discomfort that maintains their separateness, deficit and dehumanization. Without the capacity to experience this fuller range of human experience, “Others” will always be needed to protect an innocent, pure, exceptional, positive White subject. What might theories and practices that center despair, negativity, and despondency offer us here? How might attending to this larger range of human experience attune White people and people of colour steeped in Whiteness to the ways in which we inflict violence in our silences and complicities every single day, and provide a path to its disturbance?

We have observed that White people and educators committed to racial justice need to be willing to give up the very thing that Whiteness has promised them - connection and kinship, whether to White people (Matias, 2016) or people of colour, in spaces that seek racial justice and in spaces that don't. White bids for White connection offer state-protection and safety, innocence and in-group membership. White bids for connection to people of colour in “anti-racist” spaces offer acceptance, professional advancement, self-validation, exceptionalism and anti-racist capital. White people need to be willing to give up connections, the vast majority of which are made through Whiteness, in *every* relationship - with colleagues, acquaintances, friends and family. There are no back doors through which they can maintain the illusion of racial innocence to lessen the blow of disconnection in other spaces. As Christina Sharpe (2016) writes, “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” (para. 10). Therefore, White racial accountability requires White people to regularly experience disconnection, to stand alone, to risk losing kinship and relationships to both White people and people of colour. The work of racial solidarity must prioritize justice over

individualized connection, given that for Black, Indigenous and racially oppressed people, the terms of engagement and access to protection have always been conditional on White emotionalities (Matias, 2016). This demands a legal, familial, and political divestment from White kinship (Witt, 2020). When individual connection is prioritized over justice, justice becomes as fleeting, as conditional, as contingent, as embroiled in narratives and needs of the self as we see at play in bids for love, connection and acceptance. When we name the importance of divesting from White kinship, we heed the words of Kevin Kumashiro who argues that while cross racial solidarity requires listening to and being in the service of Black Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC), it does not assume a stance of White subservience (Kumashiro, 2020, July 23), nor does it assume a dynamic of the romanticization and fetishization of BIPOC, as both risk further minimizing human complexity.

### Concluding Thoughts

This experience has had tremendous significance on us individually. We have gone into parts of ourselves that we were unaware of, unearthing wounds and traumas that were limiting how and why we showed up in the world. In her work in anti-racist leadership, Vidya has been more vocal about how White people, who are most disconnected from their humanity and most at-risk of a fuller range of human experience, are leading schools, institutions, businesses and nations. It is informing her research and work with school districts as she puts forth claims for additional, board-mandated courses for White teachers and leaders to un/learn their Whiteness. In her work at the intersections of the arts and mental health, Michelle is noting and intervening when a desire for innocence, positivity, and connection obstruct the work of dismantling White supremacy at the board, staff, and funding level. Instead she is bolder, more direct and more pessimistic about the work that needs to be done, which is influencing everything from budgetary priorities to strategic planning to the facilitation



of meetings. On a personal level, reckoning with her Whiteness means challenging the terms of Whiteness - including the cost of its membership - within her family and between friends, neighbours, and colleagues.

This would not have been possible without a deep interiority, a painful and honest reckoning with the ways in which Whiteness lives in, and affects us, differently. Our relationship has been a site of necessary negotiation of this work. We are cautious of claims that position solidarity as certainty, or even possibility; as with claims to “anti-racism”, the naming often renders the work performative, especially when structures remain unchanged. We offer a parallel approach to movement building for racial justice with a recognition that fragmentation and separation in our personal relationships are mirrored in larger social movements or efforts at institutional change. How can we possibly address unfathomable levels of dehumanization, when we, as individuals in systems steeped in Whiteness, in White and even racially oppressed bodies, are fragmented and separated from ourselves and one another *because* of Whiteness. We also recognize that like anti-racism, solidarity is a moving and potentially unreachable aim that is perhaps more aptly experienced as partial and fleeting. Tuck & Yang (2012) remind us that solidarity is a process that is “an uneasy, reserved, and unsettled matter that neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict” (p.3). How might we expect and presume both present grievances and future conflict as an expression of love, justice, and the work of ongoing repair and accountability? Our practice of documenting and analyzing the inner workings of a relationship committed to racial justice helps identify some of the slippery ways that Whiteness operates at the interpersonal level to undermine larger movements towards racial solidarity. It also reminds us that there is no end to this work of racial becoming and being in solidarity.

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## Polyclub: Oceanic Literacies of Interconnectivity and Fluidity

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### Introduction

Afternoon light streams across the checkered linoleum floor of Spartan High School<sup>8</sup>; the silhouettes of birch tree splay over the school colors painted on to the floor. The cafeteria peaks with activity at lunch hour as two shingled metal windows open up to a hot bar of free and reduced lunches. Once the final school bell rings and most students make their way off campus, a few Polyclub students begin to trickle into the emptied cafeteria. They enter with dark hoodies embroidered with school and NFL logos, drop their bags, and dawn bright green, yellow and purple lavalava decorated with floral prints and the outlines of Pacific Islands. They push the long lunch tables to the perimeter of the room and sync their phones with the portable amplifier. Khalid and Travis Scott rattle the windows. Their entrance starts the transformation from cafeteria to dance studio, a family space, a hālau.

The instructors of Polyclub arrive, expectedly, a bit late. “Let’s go - girls, what are you doing?! Boys - come get ready!” Soana shouts as she enters, her two small children sprint into the arms of several of the students. The boys, who had been milling in the food prep area tossing around a rugby ball, emerge and start shaking out their limbs in between playful shoves and taunts. The girls stretch, make their way towards the center, warming up with casual milly rocks and shoots.

“Can I keep my shoes on today?” asks Latasha.

“You already know the answer,” Soana responds. Latasha takes them off.

“Today we’re working on Fiji and Tahiti. Boys, you’re working on haka.

Okay, let’s go.”

The rhythm of a tariparau replaces the boom of trap music, and the dancing switches to the opening movements of the entrance to their Tahitian performance. Polyday is still months away, though the anticipation is building. The other Polyclub students, mostly Tongan, but also Black, Asian and Latinx, ring the center floor, looking on, laughing, and preparing for their turn.

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The analysis that follows is an engaged noticing alongside the students and teachers of a dance<sup>9</sup>-focused Polynesian after school club in Spartan High School--a large, metropolitan high school in Northern California--and a response to a “crisis” concerning Pacific Islander (PI) students in the district who have been marked as unacademic. In contrast, these students have in fact been practicing embodied literacies of interconnectivity and fluidity through Pacific Islander dance that spans movement, bodies, ancestries and oceans. Aptly, the students of Polyclub are enacting a pedagogy connected to the Ocean, a relationship imbued with its qualities, inherited through family and history and reappropriated from a new position on their rim of the Pacific. Simply put, the pedagogical practices of Polyclub have much to offer PI students (and the Black, Asian and Latinx

<sup>8</sup> All identifying names and places have been anonymized through pseudonym. Effort has been made to retain culturally significant markers of language group, ethnicity and/or gender when requested by study participants.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term “dances” here as it is the most commonly translated English word to represent concepts of hula, haka, sa‘a and other Oceanic cognates of dance accompanied by chants or singing. This translation may lack the ceremonial or spiritual connotations that are sometimes retained by the Oceanic terms.

Polyclub members) and can expand the boundaries of what is regarded as academic.

This analysis is not meant to evaluate nor equivocate the moves of Polyclub members, be they educational or political; that sort of study would best be developed by the students and instructors themselves. Rather the purpose is to depict how these students (and by extension their family and kin) contend with an educational system predicated on a history of cultural assimilation and eradication through reclamation and reconnection with ancestral and familial epistemologies. In doing so, questions emerge: What motivates these students and families to create and maintain this space? What might be the significance of their literacies of dance and movement? What sort of norms of Western education are problematized by Polyclub and what alternatives may emerge because of their efforts? Again, in avoidance of an ugly history of anthropological reports that have catalyzed colonial remedies for indigenous peoples, this paper is not meant to be a universal description of all Pacific Islanders, their practices or philosophies. Rather it is meant to be one arrangement of contradictions and adjacencies that spell new constellations of abundance, alternativity and pathway. Though misrecognized by local school officials, profound learning is happening at Polyclub. From static notions of text and embodiment towards learning as motion, norms of literacy are refashioned here, akin with fluid and interconnected properties of the Ocean (this connection will be expanded upon later). I will begin by contextualizing Polyclub's local history and Oceanic origins as well as normative assumptions of Pacific Islander (PI) education. Included is a brief discussion of Oceanic epistemologies and New Literacies, both of which intersect with their efforts to reclaim and expand notions of literacy and knowledge. Interwoven is my involvement in their already-in-motion work and discussion of methods and responsibilities.

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<sup>10</sup> *Pasifika* is Samoanization of the term Pacific, meant to describe broadly the Pacific region and culturosphere, as well as

The analysis is framed around two sections: the usage of dance as an embodied and interconnected literacy and movement as a pedagogy of fluidity, both of which are necessary to the needs of PI students to reclaim and rearticulate culturally based educative practices. This paper concludes with future directions and possibilities.

### Contexts

While diasporic Pacific Islanders' educative work is the focus of this portrait, their efforts are interrelated with an ongoing history of colonization and displacement in Pasifika<sup>10</sup>. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, attacking and suppressing the traditional ontologies of Pacific Islanders has been central to the European project of settler-colonialism of Pacific Islands. Initially, the arrival of Christian missionaries (who brought with them Western print literacy) heralded European conquest and occupation which would reorder the legal, intellectual, and spiritual relationships of Oceanic peoples with their land and seascapes into a global, capitalist market (Banivanua-Mar, 2016; Kulick & Stroud, 1990; Mühlhäusler, 1996). In this next century, climate catastrophe promises to accelerate this displacement and destruction as Pacific Islands are on the frontlines of acidifying, rising seas and massive environmental reordering which will disrupt cycles of ecological, cultural, spiritual and social sustenance.

Indigenous peoples, scholars and settler-allies (Trask, 2000) in the Pacific have criticized and confronted colonial practices in a variety of ways including indigenizing identity and history (Banivanua-Mar, 2016; Kauanui, 2008; Silva, 2004), calling for independence, coalition and nationhood (Hau'ofa, 2008; Trask, 1999), revitalizing language and culture (Ka'ili & Māhina, 2017; Diaz 2011; Wilson & Kamanā, 2011; Stillman, 2001), decolonizing research (La Valle et al., 2019; Oliveira & Wright, 2016; Smith, 2012), protecting sacred sites (Fujikane,

the pan-ethnic, diasporic peoples and cultures that have ancestral connections to Pacific Islands.

2019) and engaging in ecological restoration (Ledward, 2013). These efforts are all interrelated and predicated on refusing Western philosophical, political and economic orientations which threaten the existence, health and perpetuation of Pasifika peoples, lands and seas. However, as Lisa Hall (2015) alludes to in her discussion of diversity of Pacific Islander peoples, resistances and remedies to these shared challenges are not uniform.

The Pacific Islander communities in Northern California are inheritors of these legacies. One of the many results of this history has been mass displacement of Pacific Islanders towards the metropolitan centers on the Pacific Rim (Keck & Schieder, 2015), where Pacific Islanders often seek better economic opportunities in the labor market. This migration, alongside the draw of the Mormon church and the promise of Western style education, has motivated many Tongan families to migrate to the area since the mid 1960's. As we have seen with other populations, the success in Western schooling has come at the price of cultural assimilation into Western hegemony (Hokoana & Oliveira, 2012); elders and current Polyclub students I spoke with described their classrooms as culturally alienating both in terms of content and instruction<sup>11</sup>. The primary tool of literacy instruction remains English and text-centric, a political dimension that some literacy scholars argue as Eurocentric and colonial (Heath, 1980; Sywed, 1981). For their part, many school systems frame this process as one of multicultural "inclusion", where access to a colonial and racist school systems is granted to "diverse" or "underserved" students. While culturally additive initiatives, like multicultural week or occasional curriculum content authored by people of color, are meant to encourage students to feel represented in school, they often fail to challenge the centrality, if not presumptive superiority, of Eurocentric schooling norms.

The Polyclub at Spartan High School is one of several related, but otherwise independent, after-school dance clubs in high schools within the region. The club at Spartan High is the oldest of its kind, founded by Tongan students nearly 25 years prior, and has been otherwise maintained through generations of volunteerism from the community. The club is centered around the teaching, practicing and performance of Oceanic dances; Tongan, Samoan Tahitian, Hawaiian and Māori dances are most common, though occasionally other traditional island dances are studied. The club is made up mostly of Tongan and Tongan-Americans students. However, the club is intentionally ethnically and racially inclusive; roughly a third of the club is made up of Black, Asian and Latinx students, many of whom identify with multiple ancestries and ethnicities as well.

The culminating performance known as *Polyday* is an all-school assembly in the spring that the students design, organize, fundraise and practice for, and perform in, sometimes dedicating as much as 20 hours a week in its preparation. One condition of my being present at Polyclub is that no recording of any of the dances were meant to be released ahead of the Polyday. Afterwards they may recycle the dances for other public events such as Multicultural Week, but these dances being created by the instructors and passed on to the students were important in a city-wide, friendly, but also serious competition. While the event is well-regarded by the school body and faculty at large, members and alumni of the club express dismay that Polyclub is often misread as a site of exotic cultural presentation and/or neglected as a space of learning, cultural rearticulation and generation. This reaction speaks to theories of *safety zone* as advanced by Lomawaima & McCarty (2006) and Goodyear-Ka'ōpua (2013), who describe how decolonial pedagogy is often actively suppressed by colonial state policies, foregrounding sanitized and depoliticized

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<sup>11</sup> As of writing this, there are currently no Pacific Islander faculty throughout the entire district of over 2,300 teachers.

exchanges of culture as “inclusive” multicultural successes. All but invisible in official racial data collecting, PI students are situated in an awkward racial double bind: they have the dubious misrecognition as API<sup>12</sup> (Asian Pacific Islander) in educational bureaucratic discourse (Kauanui, 2008) while also being raced as large, brown, unintelligent and prone to violence (Davis et. al., 2015).

Aligned with this view, the presiding school district recently produced a report identifying PI students as having the lowest literacy rates and highest rates of absenteeism per capita of any ethnic/racial group in the district, trends that are echoed in similar reports documenting PI academic outcomes (Teranishi et al., 2013; The Education Trust – West, 2010). Since the report, the district’s response has been to rush towards typical interventions: more childhood literacy tools (bilingual Tongan-English materials) and an emphasis on celebrating school achievement (college night and honor roll celebrations). These are not terrible ideas unto themselves, but an assimilative logic undergirds the efforts; literacy is facility in English and learning takes place in classrooms. In simple terms, a commonsense understanding of a typical Tongan student from a district perspective is subliterate and delinquent. These presumed deficiencies reinforce notions that PI students are unfit for college or the labor market while their low performance on tests and/or absence from classrooms threaten district funding and reputation.

### Oceanic Sensibilities

Epeli Hau‘ofa (2008), the late Tongan poet and scholar, spoke of the “sea as pathway to each other and to everyone else, the sea is our endless saga, the sea is our most powerful metaphor, the ocean is in us.” His words stand in contrast to commonsense notions of the Pacific which divided the Ocean into disconnected sociocultural zones: Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia. Hau‘ofa saw these lines as imaginary, drawn on the ocean surface to

promote colonial mentalities of people of the Pacific (far flung and isolated) and reaffirm dependency on continental peoples and politics. Instead, Hau‘ofa advocated for Pasifika people to unimagine this version of the Pacific and reencounter it as it always has been: a holistic, dynamic and all-encompassing space of peoples with long histories of interwoven trade, politics, language and genealogies. Ingersoll (2016), too, writes of seascape epistemology, encouraging thinking through metaphorical qualities of the Ocean in constant motion: circling transoceanic currents, ebbing and flowing tides and vortexes, and the boundless reach of evaporation, condensation and precipitation which takes the ocean on a cyclical life-giving journey over the land and sea. The ocean, when seen in this way, is a generative symbol for the interconnected practices and fluid pursuits of Polyclub students and “anyone who is committed to Oceania,” as Hau‘ofa put it. This paper builds from these scholars in framing the pedagogies of Polyclub as an extension of their work of reclaiming ancestral pedagogies, providing alternate pathways to assimilative modes of education.

While the report on PI educational outcomes is anchored by dominant concepts of literacy, the work of Polyclub speaks to more expansive frameworks. New Literacy scholars have pluralized literacy to encompass a wider range of acts beyond reading and writing alphabetic systems, seriously considering how the social context, function, and motivations of readers mediate the meanings of any literacy performance. Yet, less attention has been paid to non-textual semiotic events, such as dance. Considering this, I suggest that Oceanic sensibilities of these dances offer important non-Eurocentric grounding of these literacy acts. Echoing King Kalākaua’s sentiments that “hula is the language of the heart, and therefore the heartbeat of the Hawaiian people,” (Medeiros, 2018) hula scholars and practitioners (Stagner et al., 2011; Stillman, 2001) describe

<sup>12</sup> Up until 2018, Pacific Island students were asked to check “Asian” on school forms in the district.



hula<sup>13</sup> as a form of storytelling, comparable to the narrative and meaning making qualities prized in text-based literacy, which remains central in Western schooling. This shift also expands the possibilities of what constitutes “text” itself, including but not limited to the body and its movements.

### Methods and Responsibilities

Increasingly, Pasifika scholars advocate for genealogical protocols as integral to the research process. While I am not genealogically descended from Pacific Island communities, I believe the practice of tracing ancestral routes is important in disrupting Western research norms of disembodied objectivity. My father’s family is from Toisan, a Southern Chinese region that borders the Pacific. Traveling across multiple boundaries (Toisan to Ensenada to the United States) during the early part of the 20th century, collecting and employing multiple aliases due to exclusion policies and pogroms, has familiarized me with the politics of cultural transformation on the rim of the ocean. The Pacific Islander students at the school I went to and eventually taught at may have sensed a shared experience when they approached me a dozen years back to support their Polyclub as an advisor. Only later they told me that they had learned that I knew a haka and had been in a hālau, or that my partner and child are Native Hawaiian, relationships that make me relatively unique as one of their high school teachers. Importantly, while my life has intersections with the Pacific Islander youth who I am working with, they are not one in the same.

Unabashedly, I commit to notions that my narrative is merely one of many and is not meant to represent a singular, objective truth. Rather, it is constructed dialogically and relationally, with values of respect, reverence and responsibility (Windchief & San Pedro, 2019). In doing so, I aim to avoid “damage-centered” research (Tuck, 2009) as well as a whole host of extractive, colonial research paradigms (Smith, 2012).

This work is a narration based on participatory ethnographic fieldwork conducted alongside Polyclub during the 2018-2019 school year. This included observing, video recording and participating at dance practices and holding conversations and interviews with roughly 40 past and current Polyclub members, instructors and adjacent community activists and elders. The students who participated in this study were high school students of all ages and grades. Most identified as Tongan, including island-born participants as well as 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation American-born students. The alumni of Polyclub were mainly in their early 20s and often continued to be involved both directly or indirectly in Polyclub activities. In almost all cases, adjacent community members were directly related to current or past Polyclub members.

Interviews were semi-structured around questions which asked students to describe their experience with Polyclub and compare it with recollections or impressions of traditional classroom spaces. These conversations also included a self-reflection activity modeled on photovoice methodology (Wang & Burris, 1997), where participants re-watched and interpreted previously recorded Polyclub dance performances and practices. My analysis included my ongoing discourse analysis of the recordings, conversations and interactions. For the purposes of this paper, I summarize salient themes through my conversations and interactions with participants and also directly quote several individuals whose reflections spoke to these themes explicitly. I attempted to represent a broad array of positionalities and identities whenever possible.

Concurrent with these research methods is my involvement in working with community and district leaders to create a new Pacific Islander Studies course. In this sense, the work of Polyclub is akin to youth participatory action

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<sup>13</sup> Other Pasifika peoples have similar sentiments regarding the role and function of dance. Hula, or other Hawaiian specific references, are not meant to be a stand-in for all Pasifika

philosophies but appears here due to the convenience of Western citation norms.

projects (Cammarota, 2017) but was initiated without the outside intervention of academics. Student voices are often neglected at junctures of curriculum creation, and my role has been to advocate for them. My efforts have been directed at presenting viewpoints and data that challenge some of the modeling of ethnic-based curriculums which can lapse into superficial diversity and inclusion logics. My intention in both posing questions of power and culture in my conversations and interactions with club members and community is meant to invoke the political dimensions of their efforts, but is not meant to dictate nor assume a leadership position.

### Interconnectivity

In the weeks before the Polyday celebration, inside the gleaming Mormon Temple, Semisi and I sit down in between dance practices. It's *crunch time*, meaning the Polyday show at Spartan High is around the corner. Practices are now held after school every day, sometimes up to four hours and also during Spring break. The green carpeted room is deep within the cavernous halls of the temple which has drawn so many thousands of Tongans to the area. There are picnic tables stacked alongside polished teak pews. Semisi has a bright smile, affable, resting on the confidence built from playing center on rugby teams here and in Hawai'i. During dance practice, he's positioned similarly in the center; the other younger boys often look towards him to recalibrate their movements.

"I grew up here, but we moved around a lot," he tells me. "My mom is from here but my dad is from New Zealand". He recounts a genealogy that crisscrosses oceans: Tonga and Fiji, Samoa, Germany and France. "My mom side also is from Niue" he remembers finishing the list. "Their language is similar to ours - we speak Tongan at home".

He goes on to compare the dances he learns in Polyclub with the rest of Spartan High's classrooms: "In Polyclub, you learn things a lot faster. Like the dances. But a lot of kids, the non-Polys that come, they don't understand that the

dances mean stuff. But they kind of, as soon as they get the rhythm and stuff, it kind of flows. Their body understands the language, just not mentally."

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Unlike the commonsense notions of English instruction in Western schools which center an individualistic skill of decoding alphanumeric text, the literacy of Polyclub is both embodied and interconnected; their "reading" is multimodal (Jewitt, 2008), joining the body and movement with learning. In a transtemporal sense, it connects their learning with the movements of ancestral bodies. Their pedagogy is also a communal act, requiring an awareness of community and context, which is often missing from academic literacy instruction. The use of dances as "texts" in Polyclub operates in the same manner as commonsense literacy in that they are representative of narratives and storytelling that carry with them a variety of contextually-derived meanings. A common feature in the dances is the combination of chants, lyrics or prayers that accompany the movements, intentionally dependent on one another for meaning. While equivocation between certain gestures as representing individual semiotic units has been documented before in respect to Pacific Islander dance (Kaeppler, 1978), such atomization and decontextualization misses some of the important distinctions that these dances activate for Polyclub students.

As Semisi describes the "body" understanding the language, many other students in Polyclub described the significance of the dances as an interplay between movement and learning. This interplay departs from a Cartesian duality, which separates and privileges the mind as the premiere site of cognition. While textual literacy in the strictest sense requires decoding of symbols either through sight or touch, the dances of Polyclub are multi-textured; they include making meaning out of language, music, and movement simultaneously. Several members noted that the movements took on greater meaning when reinforced with the chants or lyrics, and when inversed, revealed some of the deeper poetics of

the language. Much is lost when the dances are separated into individual units of study: the music, the rhythm, the lyrics, the gestures. All of these components are interdependent in forming the literacy act. If academic literacy skills rely primarily on the sense-organs of sight or touch and perhaps thought (Scott, 2017), Polyclub literacy necessarily includes aural and kinesthetic modalities, as well.

Apart from technical aspects that bind movement and learning together, Polyclub reclaims genealogies by having students reenact dances composed by their forebears and foregrounding the value of those educative lineages. This embodied literacy then requires literally and figuratively the body to be present, animated, researched and enacted. Many PI students recalled that they learned their first dances from aunts and grandmothers, almost always family. To dance a *tau 'olunga*<sup>14</sup> composed by a family member goes beyond mastering the movements (though that is very important); it is also tied to a reenactment of the movements, creativity and spirit imbued in the particularities and ongoing history of the performance. The goal is not so much acquiring the technology to derive personal meaning from a text but is meant to sustain the continued passing on of those dances. Learning to reembody the movements and gestures of ancestors (either genealogical or cultural) has a profound effect on the students who feel that it draws them one step closer to those who have gone before. As nearly all the PI students critiqued, their classrooms were culturally alienating. Polyclub dances, however, are prized as representations of valuable knowledge that have the same if not more weight than the Anglocentric curriculum they typically encounter. One student recounted that their decision to participate in Polyclub was based in “learning something, anything, about my culture,” a sentiment which foregrounds the desire for relevant content, but also requires an appropriate method and form of learning as practiced in Polyclub.

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<sup>14</sup> A traditional Tongan dance form

Alongside the literal and symbolic act of connecting with cultural genealogies, learning to “read” in Polyclub is a communal act, inseparable from the positions and attitudes of those around you. All students pointed out the distinct character of “family” that permeates the club’s pedagogy—it was the single most common phrase used to describe what they were learning. The club features literal family members: three of the instructors are siblings who bring their children to practices with many of the students related through blood or marriage. The basic assumption in the club is that everyone is expected to participate in any number of dances, regardless of background, familiarity, familial or cultural connection to them. Apart from an occasional solo in a *tau 'olunga*, many of the dances require syncopation among dances, an awareness of the proximity and timing of bodies, in order to produce “good” or “beautiful” dancing and is a common critique offered by instructors when providing feedback. One of Polyclub’s instructors, Soana, described one of her priorities as getting students to be aligned with one another, both in their timing and gestures but also attitudinally. “When you walk in the door, you’re family here in Polyclub, no matter where you come from or what color you are,” Soana explained to me, “and we keep it old school, well kind of old school. We treat you like family. If you act up then the entire group gets punished, like running laps.” This exhibits itself as both an expectation for communal support, (metaphors of pulling together on voyaging canoes were commonly used in pep talks), and as commentary of the consequences of disassociating oneself from others. I witnessed group discipline via lap running several times, though the students seemed just as eager to run around the campus as a group as they were goofing off in practice. The result was a close bond among students, many of whom claimed they would not likely have formed friendships across ethnic, cultural or age divisions had they not joined Polyclub. Continuity in the dances is important for the instructors, who feel

obligated to teach the dances “correctly” as a matter of respect for the Oceanic communities who generated them. In this way, learning the dances of Polyclub is not merely focused on building individual skills as a dancer but rather learning how to connect with others as well as with a lineage.

### Fluidity

Sefina joins me for coffee on a busy shopping avenue in the city. I haven’t seen her since she was the president of the first Polyclub at our former high school. She now works in community health non-profits. She has a new tattoo on her upper arm with the characteristics of Samoan design - geometric diamonds and triangles swirl into a wave. She explains she got it in L.A. from an artist. “With Polynesian artists I’d give them the freedom to use my body as a canvas. I’m just like grateful to be even having an opportunity to be drawn on and these symbols are just like symbols from way back in the day, like from my ancestors.”

She tells me how she got involved in Polyclub in the first place - it was started by several Tongan students who had learned the template by cutting class at our school, navigating their way towards Spartan High to join their cousins during the school day. Sefina was at that time trying to organize relief for the victims of the tsunami that struck American Samoa. Her family had been among those impacted and the club seemed like the right space to further the cause.

I asked her to recall what she learned in Polyclub. “I remember a time we went to the waterfront - and Michael and Martel were dancing with these drums like doing the hula dances. And I’m here like ‘holy crap, they were videotaped and taking photos of – doing, like, the dance Kamuela was teaching” Sefina told me, her brow beginning to furl.

I replied that I remembered them both: former students who participated in Polyclub, learned hula from our *kumu hula*, and with eagerness, would practice on the street for passersby. Sefina nodded and continued, “See those are the things I’m still learning. Like keeping things in

mind. Being respectful. Like those dances. Those dances are more than just moves - and to show them off...” pausing slightly, her voice colored with exhaustion “They’re sacred.”

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The Carnegie Unit is the dominant system of counting educational time and space, effectively binding *seat time* to learning, a spatial and temporal assertion. School funding is attached to its significance; truancy and absenteeism amount to academic crime, perpetrated by a student’s vacancy. Accordingly, the school district’s concerns about the literacy rates for PI students is the result of their physical bodies being elsewhere. In contrast to this relatively static sense of learning and space, Sefina’s examples allude to fluid transnational and transformational learning happening in Polyclub. The literacies of Polyclub take on multidimensional significance through movement, both in their ability to reclaim and connect with cultural ways of Pasifika while also providing opportunities to rearticulate their meanings.

Polyclub members and community members described the need to be present at important familial and cultural functions at various Pacific Islands throughout the school year. Doing so was explained as acts of reciprocity: funerals, weddings, birthdays and the like were critical moments to reconnect with family, pay respects and tribute to communities that sustained you, and exchange gifts in a variety of ways. Severing these connections could amount to a form of social death. Unexpected events such as a funeral do not easily conform to the demands of a Western academic calendar, and many Polyclub students expressed dismay that many of their teachers and peers did not understand the significance, nor need, for funerals that may last past a week. Sefina’s recollection of gathering disaster relief supplies for family speaks to the proximity of familial and community connections despite being several thousand miles away.

Polyclub is an important site for students to practice some of the required literacies that enable them to visit home communities in appropriate ways. Conversations with many

Polyclub members revealed consternation about losing fluency in heritage languages and customs that may make them unrecognizable to family. One student remarked how the dances were a significant part of exchange whenever he visited relatives in Tonga. Many church and cultural events expect youth to dance, and while he knows the Polyclub dances are “different though because we do it like as American boys,” Polyclub provided him a place to maintain his skills. He explained that “because the kids out there, they just think, American kids, us Tongan raised Americans, they think when we do it, it’s kind of like feminine<sup>15</sup>...they kind of hate on it. But at the same time, once they see us actually perform good, they actually compliment us and stuff.” While he understands the transformations that his “American” style of dancing may have undergone, they still signaled his commitment to maintaining connections to a Pacific Islander identity. As they travel across national, cultural and temporal boundaries, Polyclub dances serve as a vessel for remembrance of an entire catalogue of meanings (a gift from a father, narratives from a homeland perhaps never visited). The learning, practice, and performance of Polyclub dances mediated through protocols involve the body as a political and moral object (Diaz & Kauanui, 2001). The movements, though grounded in a history and tradition and accompanied by a discourse of appropriate skill and legibility, are also being remade in each performance. In Sefina’s experience, learning dances in a hālau and incorporating the permissions associated with them provided her with a meaning of what their use and purpose could be, something which clearly was (mis)interpreted by her classmates in a different way. Her appraisal of her friend’s breaking of the kumu’s instructions in maintaining the sanctity of the movements demonstrates an awareness of her roles and responsibilities to self, community, and ancestors.

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<sup>15</sup> The dynamics of gender alluded to here are significant and worthy of detailed discussion but are beyond the scope of this paper.

In terms Polyday performance, the school at large and students unfamiliar with the dances would often read the event as either a *safe zone* of sanitized cultural expression or colored by exotified sexualization of Pacific peoples (the loudest cheers from the general audience often came at girls Tahitian performances or boys haka), the importance of the event for the club members involved was different. Students from other Polyclubs, often direct relatives, routinely left or cut school to attend and watch one another’s performances. At Polyday, elders and extended family are present with the first 10 rows of the auditorium reserved for them. Though separated geographically throughout the school district, Polyday represents one of the few times that these students had a common space in the school to both read aloud and be read. The significance of audience and (mis)readings was also discussed as Sefina mentioned how her experience in high school led her to form a Polyclub in her undergraduate small, liberal private school. Unfortunately, the misreading persisted by audiences of the club as merely ‘cultural’, and after one performance she had an epiphany: “I need to perform this because you know I do this for my family, because I do this for my people. I don’t need to perform in front of a college, [that is] predominantly White, who see it as entertainment rather than tradition or ceremonial.” These new attestations are not politically neutral, but rather point to the impermanence of meaning in the movements, something which scholars such as Stuart Hall (1990) indicate as potential sites of cultural articulation which have the potential to shape political attitudes and behaviors. Sefina’s rereading of hula as a part of her genealogical cultural canon formed a basis for a counter-racist interpretation of cultural clubs and performances in liberal White schooling spaces.

At other times, Polyclub encourages *polyculturalist* playfulness, mixing various dance



codes in their Polyday performances. One of the instructors explicitly referred to this as a choice they make in their choreographies: “We like to keep it traditional, but also we mix a little bit of Spartan High into it”. The *little bit of Spartan High* is a reference to a mashup in their haka performance, which interchangeably switched between a traditional haka and Black aesthetics of contemporary dance (using *Old Town Road* and other top 40 R&B and rap inserts). During the Polyday performance, this received some of the loudest cheers from the majority African-American student audience. In conversation after the performance, the students mentioned they saw little issue with the appropriation of other cultural forms. “We grow up with the Black kids. They’re our neighbors” one student explained. “And we grow up learning their dances. Sometimes we know more about their history than our own” a nod to both the historicity of Tongan migration to the West Coast and dance as a vehicle in forming a historical and cultural self. As aforementioned, Polyclub operates as a racial and ethnically inclusive place, with nearly a third of the students not of Oceanic ancestry. This in itself is not evidence of racial equity, but the decision on the part of the students and instructors to commit to play and scramble the codes of authenticity indicates an interest in exploring the similarities and discords of culture and experience through mosaic and juxtaposition. While the Pacific Islander students may in another sense be “absent” from their traditional homelands, Polyclub is a diasporic literacy where they are sourcing dances and repurposing them to contingently reflect their new, and often unintended, social realities.

### A Pathway Forward

While the intentions of the report on PI student achievement was meant to bring attention to the needs of PI students, the actions which have followed it are still rooted in competitive neoliberal logical sensibilities of individual achievement and choice-making situated for a capitalist labor market. In framing the metrics of success as English literacy, (though tellingly,

omitting explicitly referring to English), the authors appeal to dominant notions of cognition and meaning making. Accordingly, the use of attendance as contributing to, if not outright causing, illiteracy places the onus of these outcomes on these students and families.

While many school officials and educational practitioners may overlook educative practices and spaces that sit outside of traditional classrooms, it is also important to note that the value of Polyclub is disputed among the families of many Polyclub members. In conversation I was asked, “What use is Polyclub?” or asked another way, “What use is fluency in Pacific Island dance in a world where investment in English literacy would be the most valuable?” One mother described this predicament: “We want our kids to keep learning Tongan, we want them to still be Tongan but nobody knows what they will do with that”. A student remarked that when she brings up Polyclub practice with her father, she only hears him say it’s “*maumau taimi*” - a waste of time. Overwhelmingly, while both parents and Polyclub members would like to see the creation of an accredited Polyclub class, the adults are most eager in seeing their children complete high school with a degree.

This account challenges notions of what makes for a cognitively rich and generative educational experience as well as the either/or binary that schooling creates through the ranking and standardization of academic outcomes. In inverting the logics of the achievement report, I suggest that absenteeism is not leading to disfluency, but rather schools and educational practitioners continue to frame literacy too narrowly, missing the incredibly rich and powerful literacies already possessed and practiced by supposedly “disaffected” populations. While much can be said about creating spaces of biculturality in schools, language immersion continues to preference acquisition of academic English no matter the consequences to heritage language. By extension, the process of making PI students academically successful often comes at the expense of cultural knowledges, connections, and lifeways. Again, in



the spirit of fluidity, I do not believe it to be a zero-sum game of educational seat-time. Schooling could afford a simultaneity of multiple forms of literacy. In the immediate sense, accrediting non-Western approaches towards education is one means of synchronizing schooling with culturally sustaining education. More broadly, shifting school away from singular notions of intelligence and literacy remains critical in the long-term transformation to a more pluralistic educational system.

The literacies learned and practiced at Polyclub are not the same as text-based ones for a variety of reasons. They are more contextually constituted than academic success measurements allow and more fluid than many school operations are set up to afford. They also will not, unto themselves, undo the legacies of Pacific colonialism nor the immediate consequences of those forces on PI students. However, if one of the intentions of literacy instruction is to provide a variety of meaning making tools, there is incredible value in the practices of Polyclub. It is through them, that there are possibilities to be both grounded and linked to ancestry and family, and more broadly, the communities which are connected through and committed to the Ocean.

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