

May 2018

# "Becoming a Multicultural Teacher: Reflections on Responsibility in First-Year Writing"

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BECOMING A MULTICULTURAL TEACHER:  
REFLECTIONS ON RESPONSIBILITY IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING

by

Ingrid Jayne Nordstrom

A Dissertation Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in English

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2018

## ABSTRACT

### BECOMING A MULTICULTURAL TEACHER: REFLECTIONS ON RESPONSIBILITY IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING

by

Ingrid Jayne Nordstrom

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2018  
Under the Supervision of Professor Mary Louise Buley-Meissner

Composition Studies teacher-scholars who are committed to working with multicultural student populations are trained to value writing from marginalized groups, recognize the intelligence that lies within “non-standard” forms, and encourage student writers to find and use their own voices. Too often, however, our thinking and writing focuses on what we teachers assume to be our responsibility: giving voice to the voiceless or empowering student success. This dissertation addresses this situation by re-conceptualizing responsibility itself, proposing that multicultural pedagogies are of limited use unless we examine the self-perceptions and preconceptions influencing our work with students in the classroom. Modeling a research-based narrative, I go through a process of critical self-reflection—of examining my deeply-ingrained assumptions, experiences, and privileges—so that I may begin to see in myself, and therefore reveal to readers, how our personal and professional lives are shaped by larger social narratives and ideologies. I demonstrate and argue that the process of narrativizing and theorizing our personal and professional experiences can help composition teacher-scholars to reexamine and reform institutional discourses around teaching, composing, student identities, teacher identities, language, and literacy and can more responsibly promote student-centered, progressive composition pedagogy in first-year writing classrooms.

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For Benjamin, Josephine, and Rosalie

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To all of my students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, thank you for challenging and inspiring me for the past seven years. A special thank you to Stephanie, whose excitement, curiosity, and willingness to learn and grow have been such a joy to witness.

I am deeply indebted to my dissertation chair, Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, for her generous and unceasing support and encouragement. Some of the greatest joys in my eight years of graduate school were our long conversations at Colectivo where we talked about everything under the sun (and sometimes my work, too). Mary Louise, you have demonstrated the value in being a whole person, always reminding me that our health and happiness and our families and friends are life-giving and essential. Thank you for your patience and excitement as my life and personal commitments evolved and thank you for never losing confidence that I had something worthwhile to say.

At the end of my preliminary exam defense, Chuck Schuster said, “Ingrid, you are no longer the student at the foot of the scholar. You are the scholar.” I laughed when he said this, because it was funny to think of myself as a scholar, but I have repeated this like a mantra every time I began to feel insecure and uncertain while writing this dissertation. Chuck, thank you for taking my ideas seriously since 2011 when I was a M.A. student trying to find my footing in this field. The joy you get out of learning *with* your students is the very best answer I have encountered to the question: Why teach?

And to the rest of my dissertation committee—Margaret Noodin, Donna Pasternak, and Todd DeStigter—thank you for a personally and professionally insightful and challenging discussion of our shared commitments in higher education. I left my defense deeply humbled, inspired, and motivated to continue this work. Thank you for demonstrating what it means to be reflective and committed activist-teachers.

I have been fortunate to work among a group of dedicated and skillful teachers at UWM, but I want to especially thank Jessica Nastal, Chris Lyons, Vicki Bott, Deb Siebert, Margie Mika, and all of the 095 instructors I worked with while coordinating and teaching in the writing program. You have taught me about the importance of cultivating a teaching community, of reaching out to share struggles and successes. Thank you for inspiring me, mentoring me, and for teaching me so much about what it means to be a responsible writing teacher and a good colleague.

I am so incredibly lucky to have a steady group of supporters in my life: Mary, thank you for the support you’ve given to Ben and me and for the time you’ve spent caring for and loving Josephine while I worked. I couldn’t ask for a more generous and kind mother-in-law. Eric and Anne, thank you for your interest in my project, for supporting me with advice on the job market, and for cheering me on as I finished each chapter and moved closer to completing this degree. Uncle Mike and Aunt Nancy, thank you for the encouragement and interest in my work you’ve shown me all along the way. Uncle Bill and Aunt Mary, thank you for sharing your perspectives on the joys (and sorrows) of graduate school and life in academia and for all of the advice as I wrote and revised this dissertation. Jenny and Andrea, my bosom friends, thank you for enriching my life outside of my work and for offering me immeasurable love and comfort. I

treasure you. And, finally, thank you to the Erica Esser Book Club for giving me something to read every month that didn't have anything to do with my dissertation (and for never judging me when I didn't do the reading (or even remember what book we were supposed to read), which I'll be the first to admit has been more often than not). Writing can be isolating, but my family and friends remind me that I am never really alone. Thank you endlessly for that.

Special thanks to Ash Evans, my kindred spirit throughout graduate school. You probably don't know how much sharing our concerns and doubts, experiences and ideas has helped me to persevere and reaffirmed my belief in the value and importance of teaching writing. I am thankful for our friendship and for the unflagging support you offer even when there are 1,969 miles of mountains and skies between us.

When I began writing this dissertation, most of my research, reflection, and drafting was done in isolation. Over time, I began sharing what I was learning with my mom who enthusiastically embarked on her own process of critical self-reflection. Mom, thank you for sharing articles, blog posts, books, interviews, and your own insights with me (I hope you notice how many of them are peppered throughout this project). Your dedication to service and commitment to lifelong learning serve as examples of how I hope to live my life: with curiosity, joy, and immense heart. Thank you for offering me compassion, support, and, when necessary, a gentle nudge as I worked on this project. I am so grateful for your friendship.

Before I could write or read, my dad built a desk in a corner of his home office where I would sit and scribble "edits," mimicking the work he was doing as an editor. Growing up, he always encouraged me to write stories, poems, and essays and often shared his own writing with me, interested in my response to his words. Dad, thank you for instilling in me a love of stories and language, for always taking my ideas and words seriously, for pushing me towards this career in teaching writing (even before I knew it was what I wanted), for your steadfast intellectual and emotional support, and for serving as my toughest, most attentive reader and editor. I will be forever grateful for the time and attention you gave to editing this dissertation. Thank you, too, for never doubting that I would finish this dissertation and degree. Your unwavering faith and support means the world to me.

My biggest, heartiest thank you to Ben, my husband and best friend. Walking home from campus after my first seminar class, shortly after I moved to Milwaukee to begin graduate school, I found myself hopelessly lost. I called Ben, crying, and he located me on Google Maps then stayed on the phone with me until I made it back to my apartment. Before I left for campus the next day, he called again to make sure I knew which roads to walk to get home later that day. Ben, I don't have words to thank you for helping me to find my way, both literally and figuratively, through all of these twists and turns: from late nights of drinking "bull's blood" in Szeged, to joining and quitting the Peace Corps, to teaching in Nagasaki, to beginning what became a very long trek through graduate school, to planning a truly spectacular wedding, to becoming parents, and to surviving the job market. Thank you for giving me the mental and at times physical space I needed to finish this degree. Thank you for pushing me to continue when I felt ready to quit. Thank you for feeding our family delicious and brain-nourishing food. And thank you for helping me to build a fulfilling and joyful life that has enriched and enlivened my work. I would not have completed this dissertation without you.

And finally, thank you to Josephine and Rosalie. I discovered I was pregnant with Josephine while I was in the preliminary stages of proposing and writing this dissertation, and as I put the finishing touches on this project two years later, I feel Rosalie kicking, rolling, and hiccupping in my belly as she grows and prepares to join us soon. Josephine and Rosalie, here is what I want you to know: The world we live in is often dark and full of despair. It's okay for you to feel sad about that at times. But, sweet babies, don't wallow in sadness and shame, because you can decide how to participate in this world. Better yet, you can transform it. Be kind, be brave, be curious, and most of all, be useful. You have my whole heart, always.

“How many nights must it take  
one such as me to learn  
that we aren't, after all, made  
from that bird that flies out of its ashes,  
that for us  
as we go up in flames, our one work  
is  
to open ourselves, to *be*  
the flames?  
—Galway Kinnell, from “Another Night in the Ruins”

## **Preface**

Zhuravka, Ukraine / Fall 2007

I walk into the room and see thirty pairs of eyes staring at me, assessing me, wondering who I am and, perhaps, why I have decided to travel 5,071 miles from my home to teach conversational English in their village in central Ukraine. Still in training, I co-teach with a Ukrainian English teacher. I read sentences in English out loud from an outdated textbook, and the students repeat each sentence after me—an exercise in decontextualized memorization. As we make our way through the circle of students, asking and answering, reading and repeating, I notice three boys seated at the back of the classroom who are routinely skipped as we go around the room. No one pauses; no one seems puzzled as to why they are not called on. I try to hide my concern for the hour. The bell rings and the students file out of the classroom, smiling at me shyly as they pass.

Later, while sitting with my co-teacher who has pulled a bottle of vodka from her desk drawer, I ask her why these students weren't participating in the classroom exercise and why no one seemed to think anything of it. She responds, "Those boys are trouble. Everyone knows they aren't worth dealing with."

Stevens Point, Wisconsin / Fall 2008

I've returned to the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point to work on a certificate in teaching with the goal of becoming a high school English teacher. As part of the degree requirements, I am enrolled in a two-credit Multicultural Education course titled "Teaching for Pluralism." Knowing that Stevens Point has a large Hmong American population, I am disappointed and disturbed when our professor offers no explanation or discussion on the

cultural differences which he asserts are inevitable between Hmong American parents and middle-class, white American parents. The vast majority of students enrolled in the course are white. The comment is left to stand on its own, as if its self-evidence requires no further discussion as to what this vague assertion might mean for us as future teachers of Hmong American and white students.

I leave the classroom wondering: What do we *do* with this knowledge?

Milwaukee, Wisconsin / Spring 2012

One of my strongest students, an eighteen-year-old African American woman, abruptly stops attending class midway through the semester. She misses a week of classes, her writing center appointment, and an important assignment deadline, so I email her to check in, find out where she has been, and let her know her class standing is in jeopardy.

She doesn't respond, but the following week she returns to class. After class, she lingers behind as her classmates filter out, then approaches to tell me that her grandmother was diagnosed with cancer and her mother expects her to serve as her grandmother's primary caretaker. She confides that her mother, who considers higher education to be a waste of time, has been undermining her efforts to succeed at the university by asking her to care for her younger siblings and pick up groceries when she should be attending class or doing homework. She is torn between her responsibility to her family and her desire to get a college education so she can one day realize her career goal to become a forensic technician.

I try to encourage her by telling her that she is a talented and capable student and that I will do everything I can to help her succeed in the classroom. Soon after, she stops attending class, does not answer any of my emails, and fails the course.

Indianapolis, Indiana / Spring 2014

I'm attending the Basic Writing pre-conference workshop as part of my week at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Eighty basic writing teachers are split into ten smaller groups for discussion of access, technology, and the future of basic writing. When my group turns to the challenge of talking about race in the basic writing classroom, I admit with some trepidation that my students seem tired of having to talk about race and that getting them to do so has been frustrating and tiring for me as well.

An African American woman seated next to me shakes her head and says, "No, your students aren't tired of talking about race. They just haven't had the opportunity to have these conversations in an intelligent and thoughtful way."

\*\*\*

From these stories and experiences, this dissertation emerges.

## Chapter One: First Steps

“The stories we tell also tell on us.”

—Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington, *Questioning Authority: Stories Told in School*

“Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

—James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*

National studies demonstrate that classrooms across the United States are becoming increasingly diverse, a trend reflected at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), where I have been teaching and studying for eight years. As of 2018, 25,412 students are enrolled at UWM: 3,089 of those students self-identify as multi-ethnic, 1,796 as African American, 723 as Hispanic, and 92 as American Indian or Alaskan; nearly 40% of the student body are first generation college students; more than 8,000 students are over the age of twenty-five; and more than 1,500 international students representing over ninety countries are enrolled (“Discover UWM”). As a result, classrooms at UWM are populated with a diverse group of students who bring with them a wide range of social, linguistic, economic, and educational experiences.

Yet as a first-year writing teacher and Rhetoric and Composition graduate student, I have observed that even though UWM boasts that it is the most diverse campus in the UW-System, it does not always meet the needs of its diverse student population. For example, according to African American Student Academic Services (AASAS), only 19% of African American students graduate within six years (Abdul-Alim), a percentage that is trending downward, whereas 45.8% of white students graduate within six years (CollegeMeasures). At equivalent public urban universities such as the University of Illinois-Chicago and Temple University, the percentage of African American students graduating within six years is 38.8% and 62.2% respectively, and the percentage of white students who graduate within six years at these same

schools is 59.4% and 66.6%, with an upward trend for both groups at both schools (CollegeMeasures). While these schools may show better statistics than UWM—leading me to question whether or not UWM is doing everything it should to meet its multicultural students’ needs—overall the statistics are dismal at all of these universities.

Johannes Britz, UWM’s provost, offered one explanation for UWM’s low graduation rate: UWM is an “access” institution, meaning that more than 90% of applicants are admitted, even though many are not adequately prepared for college. In his view, “We need to create equal opportunity for everybody. But we cannot guarantee that if we create an opportunity they will be successful” (Abdul-Alim). Although success cannot be guaranteed, especially at an open access university, where the graduation rates are necessarily going to be lower than at a selective admissions university, if the university’s mission is to create equal access opportunities for all students, then it is our responsibility as teachers and administrators to resist the idea that failure for some students is inevitable.

In his Chair’s Address at the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), Dr. Adam Banks described First-Year Composition (FYC) as a university transit station with the potential to “touch every student as they make their way in academic work.” Indeed, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) estimates that thousands of institutions require some form of FYC, and tens of thousands of students pass through these courses each year (Duffy). We certainly see evidence of this at UWM, where roughly 3,400 students enrolled in one of our First-Year Writing Program (FYWP) courses during the Fall 2014 semester. Because most universities nationwide require composition classes, and because the college student population continues to diversify, it is essential that we teacher-scholars of composition reexamine our practices to determine how we might most

effectively teach writing to students from different cultural backgrounds. Terry Dean, for example, asserts that it is the teacher's responsibility to know her students and to "structure learning experiences that both help students write their way into the university and help teachers learn their way into student cultures" (23), a daunting challenge in classrooms that are racially, linguistically, economically, and educationally diverse. It begs the question: How can we really know our students while teaching them the skills they will need to meet course requirements and to succeed in the university and in their professions?

In *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, Parker Palmer describes three types of questions we commonly ask as teachers: "what" questions (What subject shall we teach?); "how" questions (What methods and techniques are required to teach well?); and "why" questions (For what purpose and to what ends do we teach?) (4). As a new doctoral student, I began my work as a teacher-scholar with these questions and challenges at the forefront of my mind. What does it mean to "know" the students sitting across from me in the classroom? Who are they? Where do they come from? What kinds of cultural and linguistic knowledge do they bring with them into the classroom? How does that knowledge shape their writing? What kinds of knowledge and skills do they need to acquire before they can succeed as writers at the university and beyond? How should I teach them the skills they need to be successful? And in my darker moments, I wondered: Why have I chosen to pursue a graduate degree in composition—a subject that many in English Departments and research universities do not even consider a worthwhile subject area?

Throughout my first year as a teacher, the pedagogy inspiring such questions seemed to work. Because so many of my students had admitted to struggling in past writing courses, many of them noting their disdain for writing in their reflective essays, I used writing assignments to

demystify the writing process, to give them more confidence in their ability to communicate in writing, to show them that they had stories to tell and that those stories were worth sharing. I aimed to create space for my students to respond truthfully and personally in their writing and in class discussions. This approach seemed to succeed as reflected in responses I received from students in spoken and written evaluations at the end of that first semester. Overall, the students emphasized their growth. One student wrote, “The way [the class] was organized helped us grow and go deeper into analyzing the texts. I loved it.” Another student sent me an email at the end of the semester saying that he had never had any interest in writing before, because he never thought of himself as being very good at it. But after taking my class, he said that he was determined to write more often and attempt to express himself more honestly and creatively through his writing.

Most of my students passed the class (those who failed tended to fail because they stopped attending midway through the semester and never officially dropped the class); several students even won program-wide awards for their essays. I thought that focusing on my students’ experiences was what made me a good teacher: I cared about them not only as students but as people, and I worked hard to make sure that their views were valued during class discussions and in my assessments of their writing throughout the semester. I collected techniques and strategies like baseball cards, storing print-outs of other teachers’ classroom activities in three-ring binders I kept on my office shelf.

Despite the successes and positive comments of some students, I felt something was missing. When I talked about my teaching with colleagues, I felt inspired and engaged; in my classrooms, however, despite the kind words and remarkable success of a few students, I found the disengagement and apathy of many other students disconcerting and discouraging. When a

student fell asleep midway through our discussion of “Coming into Language” by Jimmy Santiago Baca, for example, I felt confused because this essay was supposed to be engaging. In fact, I had chosen it because I was sure my students would relate to the issues and ideas that the author was discussing. *How could a student fall asleep while we were discussing Baca’s harsh imprisonment and self-taught literacy?* During a freewriting exercise, I caught another student texting. Why did I have to keep reminding students to put away their phones? I wasn’t assigning them the “traditional academic writing” they so disliked; I was asking them to write about what interested them! *Couldn’t they see the value in the generative writing I was asking them to do?* The way I talked about my students and the work I wanted to accomplish when I was at instructor meetings often did not match up with classroom results. A certain tension became evident between what I was doing as a first-year writing teacher and what I was expected to learn, value, and question as a doctoral student and teacher-scholar.

Over the several years since my initial teaching experiences, I have come to believe that my sense of self in the classroom was deeply flawed. I envisioned myself as a transformative, liberating teacher-hero who would inspire her students, the Hollywood version of the English teacher helping her troubled, disaffected students discover their true love of the English language in general and writing in particular. While these idealistic visions of my teaching self were self-comforting, at those times when I was being truly honest, I reluctantly understood that my primary concern while standing at the front of the classroom was what students were thinking about me.

Jane Tompkins admits that throughout much of her own teaching career, she was focused on “(a) showing the students how smart I was; (b) showing them how knowledgeable I was; and (c) showing them how well prepared I was for class” (654). Tompkins continues, “I had been

putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help the students learn but to act in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me” (654).

My insecure self wanted my students to like me. My idealistic self wanted to help them enrich and even transform their lives through writing. But the question arises: Does the one goal get in the way of the other? Palmer argues that another kind of question “should be asked wherever good teaching is at stake, for it honors and challenges the teacher’s heart, and ... invites a deeper inquiry than our traditional questions do” (4). Palmer asks, “Who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form—or deform—the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world?” (4).

Throughout those early years as a teacher-scholar, I was not very self-reflective in any sort of objective way regarding my self and my identity in relation to my students. But I did strive to know my students, that is who *they* were and how *I*, as their writing teacher, could offer work to which they would relate and respond. By the end of my two years of doctoral coursework, I had become deeply invested in the value of narrative and storytelling to help students use their reading and writing to become more self-reflective and critically aware citizens. I believed—and still believe—that by sharing stories in discussions and through writing, students can begin to understand how social and societal forces around us have shaped who we are. Classroom results were encouraging: One student enrolled in my Introduction to English Studies class told me that our work felt “relevant” and “personal.” She especially enjoyed talking with her classmates in small groups, because everyone was open, everyone talked; they were willing to share their own life stories. I was pleased. This was exactly what I had intended. My goal was not simply to have students share personal stories; rather, I wanted to “help move students from stories about their lives to stories in their lives, from a narrative that skims the

surface of experience to one that unearths it” (Maclurdy 177). By reading an essay and responding to it personally, through storytelling, I believed students would begin to see connections they could make between their experiences and the work we were doing in class.

Contemporary scholarship has reinforced my belief in the power and utility of stories. In her essay, “Telling Stories: The Subject is Never Just Me,” Terry Myers Zawicki describes a process of storytelling and theorizing. She asks students to begin by writing autobiographical stories, then pushes them to complicate their understanding and definitions of identity and experience by asking and answering questions about their stories that “make visible to them the cultural scripts they write and by which they are already written” (44). In other words, by asking students to move through this process in a supportive and challenging classroom space, they reveal for themselves how sociocultural forces and ideologies affect their language, beliefs, traditions, attitudes, and relationships. Importantly, the writing students do in these kinds of assignments is more than simply personal; it couples the personal with the academic.

As a new teacher, this approach was my eureka answer to a question that was central to my experience as a first-year writing teacher-scholar: How do we teach students the necessary skills to meet course requirements and to succeed as writers while valuing their individuality, including their familial, social, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds? I did not and do not want my students to write their way into the university by learning to “speak our language” or to mimic the “peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our [university] community” (Bartholomae 4). Rather, I wanted to help students write their way in by telling stories that help them better understand the places from which they are coming, the objective and subjective reasons they are where they are currently, and the steps they need to take to define and eventually realize their goals. If students

could envision their experiential and cultural knowledge as an important foundation upon which they might build their success in the university, they might create the bridge connecting their lives inside and outside of the classroom.

But one thing was missing. In all of my research and planning, I never considered the stories I would tell if asked to complete the same assignments my students were writing. I could not answer Palmer's question, "Who is the self that teaches?" with any real authority or substance, because I had not given much thought to my own personal and academic history, including how my upbringing in a white, middle-class community southwest of Milwaukee might affect how I relate to my multicultural students; how my experiences as a student in Poland and Hungary or as a teacher in Japan and Ukraine influenced my work as a graduate student and first-year writing teacher at UWM; how my father's work as an editor and poet and my mother's work as a librarian somehow led me to English as a college major and, eventually, to the teaching profession in spite of my undergraduate insistence that I would *never* use my English major to teach. Palmer insists that *knowing* our students and our subjects depends heavily on self-knowledge: "When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well" (3). Thus, techniques and skills were not enough. In striving to enact a multicultural, progressive pedagogy, I had to begin by examining the self-perceptions and preconceptions—the deeply ingrained assumptions, experiences, and privileges—that influenced my work as a writing teacher.

This dissertation is the culmination of my efforts to better know myself as a first-year writing teacher. To accomplish this successfully, I also had to embark on the ongoing process of knowing and understanding myself as a white woman committed to the work of teaching

multicultural undergraduate students. While student bodies across the nation are growing increasingly diverse, the teaching force remains largely white and female. Given this social reality, Arnetha F. Ball and Ted Lardner insist that composition teacher-scholars must begin to know their students by recognizing and questioning prevalent misconceptions of minority and majority groups' cultures, customs, histories, and values (19). Robin DiAngelo further argues that "although we can't fully walk in others' shoes, we can learn to draw connections, contrasts, and parallels between their experiences and our own. But in order to do this, we must first begin with an understanding of our *own* glasses; considering those of others requires that we are able to consider our own" (*What Does It Mean* 40).

In the forthcoming chapters, I model a research-based narrative and argue that it is essential for all first-year writing teachers to engage in a similar process of critical self-reflection if they are to promote student-centered, progressive composition pedagogy. To be clear, my aim here is to do more than share personal stories, an activity often critiqued in Composition Studies scholarship. In *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, Stephen North dismisses stories, or what he calls practitioners' lore, as "a knowledge characterized by contradiction because it is driven by the pragmatic logic of 'what works'" (23). Such knowledge is problematic, he explains, because what works for one teacher will not necessarily work for another teacher. Similarly, Joy Ritchie and David Wilson explain that narrative is often disregarded in academic circles as being "too personal, too local, and therefore invalid" (15). Rather than presenting readers with teaching lore and simple stories, I will critically analyze my stories so that I may begin to see in myself—and therefore reveal to readers—how our personal and professional lives are shaped by larger social narratives and ideologies (2). Through the process of telling and critically analyzing our stories, we can begin to see how sociocultural forces and ideologies

affect our language, beliefs, traditions, attitudes, and relationships as teachers.

For example, I could tell the story of how I learned to love writing by sitting at a desk in my dad's at-home office with a stack of blank paper and a jar filled with crayons and pencils. This could be a charming story about a poet passing on his love of writing to his daughter, and yet that story ignores all of the built-in social privileges: having the space in our home for an office, having a father who valued writing and reading and took time to share those values with his children, learning to write and read in ways that were later reinforced in my classrooms, and so on. Ritchie and Wilson insist that we should begin by telling our stories, but that those stories should then be "the catalyst for questioning the ideologies and contexts that have constructed that experience" (57).

By telling my stories of personal and professional development, I make my interpretive lens central while at the same time inviting readers to "look over my shoulders" to see things for themselves (DeStigter, *Citizen Teacher* 34). In her introduction to *Becoming Multicultural Teachers*, Geneva Gay explains that the point of stories is to "model and motivate self-consciousness, self-reflection, and self-critique of our own knowledge, feelings, beliefs, and practices and to offer opportunities for camaraderie in a common cause" (6). I believe that narrativizing and theorizing our experience can help us to reexamine and reform institutional discourses around teaching, composing, student identities, teacher identities, language, and literacy.

Palmer points out that intersecting forces shape our lives and identities: "My genetic makeup, the nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me harm, the good and ill I have done to others and to myself, the experience of love and suffering—and much, much more" (13).

Identity is a “moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am” (14). DiAngelo agrees: “Our identities (or glasses) are a complex intersection of the personal, historical, and cultural; they are formed within a social context” (*What Does It Mean* 41). It is important for teachers to have opportunities to understand that identity is not fixed; it is not innate or inevitable. Rather, identity is a performative act, a construct, or an effect (Ritchie and Wilson 14). In other words, our identities are influenced by our environment; we perform different identities depending on who we are with and where we are located in the moment.

Reflecting on the forces that constitute my identity, immediately I think of my family. In *White Like Me*, Tim Wise asks, “What does your family’s past have to do with you?” (21). He answers, “My life was already a canvas upon which older paint had begun to dry, long before I arrived. My parents were already who they were, with their particular life experiences, and I was to inherit those, whether I liked it or not” (1). My own parents are highly educated writers and readers from Toledo, Ohio who have traveled widely, spending their first year of marriage in Paris, France, before moving to Milwaukee, Wisconsin—six hours (five and a half on a particularly good travel day) from their families—for graduate school and deciding to stay because they loved the community and independence; parents who had two children while finishing their graduate degrees, beginning their careers, and saving, saving, saving so we could move out of the city and into a four-bedroom house with two acres of tree-lined land that glistened with lightening bugs and both thrilled and terrified my brother and me on summer nights; parents who pushed my brother and me to excel, to never settle for mediocrity, to explore the world through books, education, and travel, which we did and continue to do as adults; parents who read to us every night, who encouraged us to write and play music and participate in sports, who helped us with homework before tucking us into bed, who taught us “table manners,”

who required us to work part-time if we wanted gas and spending money; parents who maintained and demonstrated a deep and loving commitment to each other and provided a strong and steady foundation from which my brother and I were free to grow.

Rereading this, I clearly see that my inheritance is one of privilege in general and *white privilege* in particular. While my family certainly struggled financially at times, particularly during a short period when I was in seventh grade when my dad lost his job and we had to rely solely on my mom's income, these struggles did not affect my ability to continue with piano lessons, to participate in volleyball, to go to the movies with friends, or to eat nourishing meals three times a day. That I was raised in a firmly middle-class family cannot and should not be divorced from my identity. At the same time, however, I never struggled to fit in, and I saw representations of myself in textbooks, library books, TV shows, and movies. I could perform well or misbehave and not have people attribute my behavior to my race. I was able to saunter through the majority of my life without having to think about how my white skin might be affecting the way I was perceived in public. As Peggy McIntosh asserts, all of this is a consequence of my having been born white. DiAngelo argues, "Often in multicultural education endeavors, we learn about the experiences of people who are in marginalized groups, but seldom are we asked to consider what it means to be in a dominant group" (*What Does It Mean* 39). My privilege gave me a steady perch from which to view the problems others were experiencing. But the problems I saw were "out there" and seemed to have little to do with me.

Feminist scholars remind us that the effects of different forms of discrimination (racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, and converge in a complex and cumulative way. According to theorists of this process, commonly referred to as "intersectionality," carefully examining the interrelationships among these aspects of identity ensures that the challenges

faced by people who belong to multiple marginalized groups are not overlooked by activists and scholars (Crenshaw, hooks, Collins). This term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in a 1989 essay in which she explained why feminist theory and antiracist politics fail to address the experiences of African American women: “Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (140).

DiAngelo explains that everyone occupies multiple groups, both oppressed and privileged, and that these positions intersect in a complex way (*What Does It Mean* 215). For example, while poor white people are oppressed through classism, they are also elevated by racial privilege; consequently, the experience of being poor and African American is not the same experience as being poor and white. Further, while a poor white woman will have to deal with sexism and classism, she will not have to deal with the racism that a woman of color would face (215). Ijeoma Oluo emphasizes, “What keeps a poor child in Appalachia poor is not what keeps a poor child in Chicago poor—even if from a distance, the outcomes look the same” (13). DiAngelo clarifies, “Facing oppression in one area of social life does not ‘cancel out’ your privilege in another; these identities will be more or less salient in different situations” (215). The challenge for us, she explains, is to identify how our identities “play out in shifting social contexts” (216).

Although class is much less flexible than we Americans are led to believe, it is “one of the social groups that it is possible to change over the course of one’s life” (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 220). Given the intersecting nature of features of their identities, it is important for white people to both understand their own internalized oppression—“the ways in which we

impose limitations on ourselves based on the societal messages we receive about the inferiority of the lower-status groups to which we belong” (221)—and to face the internalized dominance that results from being socialized in a racist society—“the ways in which we consciously or unconsciously believe that we are more important, more valuable, more intelligent, and more deserving than people of color” (221).

Thus, while a range of features constitute my identity as a person and teacher—such as race, gender, class, level of education, religion, and ability—in this dissertation I have chosen to focus on race, on whiteness, for two primary reasons. First, in the United States, race often transcends other identity markers such as class. DiAngelo concedes, “Regardless of one’s other locations, white people know on some level that being white in this society is ‘better’ than being a person of color, and this, along with the very real doors opened by whiteness, serves to mediate the oppression experienced in those other social locations” (*What Does It Mean* 221). To understand how social locations may engender racism, DiAngelo has asked herself questions such as “how I learned to collude with racism as a Catholic and a woman. How [my religion shapes] my sense of racial belonging, of racial *correctness*, to be presented with God, the ultimate and universal authority, as white?” (221, emphasis hers). Similarly, she has asked, “How did I internalize racial superiority through the culture’s representation of white women as the embodiment of ultimate beauty? What has it meant for me to have a key signifier of female perfection—whiteness—available to me?” (222). By deciding to center race in this way, I am not denying other minoritized positions; rather, I am choosing to address the complexity of my many different social locations (222). As Oluo explains, “Just because something is about race, doesn’t mean it’s only about race” (18). By focusing a conversation on the disadvantages of people of color, we are not erasing the struggles of white people; rather, they are two issues that require

two different conversations (18).

The primary reason I have chosen to focus on racial identity, however, is because I had left my racial identity largely unexamined until I was twenty-seven years old and enrolled in a Multicultural Literacies graduate seminar. Indeed, the recognition of that fact still astounds me. While throughout my life I did occasionally reflect on my class, gender, and sexual orientation, I am not exaggerating when I admit that I never considered how my whiteness influenced my thinking until the professor in the Multicultural Literacies course asked us to spend fifteen minutes privately reflecting on a time, early in our lives, when we became aware of our own race. Though intrigued by the question, I sat and stared at my sheet of unlined paper, completely stumped. I had always checked the correct box when filling out applications; I knew I was white. But this fact—that I was white—never held any real meaning for me with regard to how I viewed the world. Growing up, I was enclosed in a community of ignorance that is a luxury not “available to people who live outside of dominance and must, for their survival, understand the essential social nuances of those in power” (Howard 15). Gary R. Howard contends:

Many privileges have come to Whites simply because we are members of the dominant group: the privilege of having our voices heard, of not having to explain or defend our legitimate citizenship or identity, of seeing our images projected in a positive light, of remaining insulated from other people’s realities, of being represented in positions of power, and of being able to tell our own stories. These privileges are usually not earned and often not consciously acknowledged. (66)

While I was not aware of my race, nonetheless I was reaping the benefits and privileges afforded to me because of my race.

The process of critically analyzing my whiteness has helped me to see more clearly how my racial identity influenced my work as a first-year writing teacher. For example, reflecting on my interactions with students during class discussions, I realized that I was much more willing to call on white students than on students of color. Admittedly, my own visceral memories of sweaty palms and a racing heart when I worried that a teacher would call on me, even when I knew the answer, makes me empathize with any students on whom I might call; but when calling on students to move the class discussion forward, my inclination was to call on white students. This isn't because I thought white students had more of value to add to the discussion; rather, I was deeply afraid of mispronouncing students' names. During a recent semester, for example, I had a Hmong American student whose name included a "g"; for the life of me, I couldn't remember whether it was a hard or a soft "g" and, rather than asking him, I simply avoided saying his name. He was extremely shy and reserved, so he too never volunteered to speak. Ultimately, our fears merged and resulted in his being silenced for the majority of the semester.

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks notes that she often hears white professors voicing concern about their nonwhite students who do not talk in class, but she counters, "[Students of color] have told me that many professors never showed any interest in hearing their voices" (40). She explains that teachers must consider who speaks and who listens if they wish to demonstrate their respect for all students' voices and for the diversity in classrooms. Although fear of mispronouncing his name stopped me from calling on this student, I was even more afraid to be seen by the class as another white teacher who cannot pronounce ethnic students' names. As Jane Tompkins admits, I was afraid "of being shown up for what [I am]: a fraud, stupid, ignorant, a clod, a dolt, a sap, a weakling, someone who can't cut the mustard" (654). What would my students have thought if they realized that, halfway through

the semester, I still couldn't remember how to pronounce a student's name? In short, I was afraid of looking like a racist.

The stories I tell in the forthcoming chapters are often discomfiting, because I attempt to confront more than my “noble features, or the good deeds [I have done], or the brave faces [I] wear to conceal [my] confusions and complexities” (Palmer 13). As Palmer explains, the work of critically analyzing stories has “as much to do with our shadows and limits, our wounds and fears, as with our strengths and potentials” (13). Thus, while the stories I reveal throughout this project are embarrassing, they are also real. I hope that they model for readers the difficult and liberating process of critically analyzing our experiences, so that we can reconceptualize our responsibilities as teachers of writing, particularly our relationship to students from backgrounds which may be very different from our own.

In Chapter Two, I narrate a scene from my basic writing classroom in which a student resisted engaging in a conversation about race, forcing me to confront my assumptions about basic writing students in general and students of color in particular. In Chapter Three, I examine my educational, social, and family background to critically reflect on experiences that led me to unwittingly identify as both white intellectualist and teacher-hero. Chapter Four grapples with the ways in which my self-perceptions have conflicted with my desire to enact a progressive, multicultural pedagogy in my writing classroom. Finally, in Chapter Five I reflect on my personal and professional development and re-envision what it means to be a responsible writing teacher.

Joy Ritchie and David Wilson assert, “When teachers can consciously locate the sites of their resistance to prescriptive ideologies of personal and professional identity, they have the

possibility of intervening in them and contesting them” (14). This dissertation represents my efforts to begin that work.

### **Definitions of Key Words**

Before I begin, it is worth discussing and defining some of the terms I will be using throughout this project. Although many of us are taught that distinct biological and genetic differences among races account for the physical differences we can see with our own eyes (for example, hair texture, skin color, and eye shape), modern science informs that there are no distinct genetic differences among races in the human species (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 97-98). In other words, race is not a biological reality; it is a social construct. As Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it, “Race is the child of racism, not the father” (7). DiAngelo explains, “The differences we *do see* with our eyes, such as hair texture and eye color, are superficial and emerged as adaptations to geography. ... The differences we *believe* we see ... are a result of our socialization; our racial lenses” (98, emphasis hers).

That said, race does have real effects on everyone in society. To say that race is socially constructed “is to acknowledge that the meaning assigned to ... superficial differences is real in its consequences” (102). For example, race often determines where we are likely to live, which schools we will attend, who our friends and partners will be, what our careers will be, how healthy we will be, the likelihood we will be incarcerated, and how long we can expect to live (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 98). For many white people, these racial messages are subtle and difficult to see; although we learn early in our lives about race, much of what we learn is “below the level of our conscious awareness” (131). Thus, while race does not have any biological meaning, it certainly has social meaning, and it is that meaning I am examining in this dissertation.

In *So You Want to Talk About Race*, Ijeoma Oluo describes the two most used definitions of racism: 1) any prejudice against someone because of their race; and 2) any prejudice against someone because of their race “when those views are reinforced by systems of power” (26). Although the definitions are similar, the second definition, she argues, and I agree, is more accurate because with the first, “we inaccurately reduce issues of race in America to a battle for the hearts and minds of individual racists—instead of seeing racists, racist behaviors, and racial oppression as part of a larger system” (27). While changing an individual’s racist perspective is certainly positive, it doesn’t do anything to challenge the very serious systemic problems that exist in American society such as police brutality, income inequality, food deserts, or incarceration rates (29). Oluo explains:

So much of what we think and feel about people of other races is dictated by our system, and not our hearts. Who we see as successful, who has access to that success, who we see as scary, what traits we value in society, who we see as ‘smart’ and ‘beautiful’—these perceptions are determined by our proximity to the cultural values of the majority in power, the economic system of those in power, the education system of those in power, the media outlets of those in power. (29)

While an individual certainly may hold misguided beliefs about a person of color, that individual is “interacting with the system in the way in which it’s designed, and the end result is racial bigotry that supports the continued oppression of people of color” (29).

Additionally, when I speak of “white people” or “white students,” I am referring to those people, typically of European descent, who because of their skin color or national origin and culture are conventionally perceived as white (Wise xii). Those who are perceived and categorized as white “are granted social, cultural, institutional, psychological and material

advantages” (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 101). When I say “people of color” or “students of color,” I am referring to non-white racial groups and, in doing so, I am emphasizing the shared experiences of systemic racism. This term is not to be confused with “colored,” which refers offensively to African American people; “people of color,” on the other hand, traditionally refers inclusively to non-European American people, implying solidarity among these groups for political and social action on behalf of disenfranchised or marginalized people (*The American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style*). Its intent is to be inclusive. In the *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity and Society*, Salvador Vidal-Ortiz summarizes:

People of color explicitly suggests a social relationship among racial and ethnic minority groups. ... [It is] is a term most often used outside of traditional academic circles, often infused by activist frameworks, but it is slowly replacing terms such as racial and ethnic minorities. ... In the United States in particular, there is a trajectory to the term—from more derogatory terms such as negroes, to colored, to people of color. ... People of color is, however it is viewed, a political term, but it is also a term that allows for a more complex set of identity for the individual—a relational one that is in constant flux. (qtd. in Malesky)

In using these terms, I do recognize their limitations, most problematically that few will fall neatly inside one of these categories. Where, for example, would a multi-racial person fall? The term “people of color” is especially limiting, because it pits all people who “have a color” against people who do not or who possess “whiteness,” thereby reinforcing the hierarchical binary between white and non-white that establishes white as the standard by which all others are labeled (Moses). Perhaps more problematically, “people of color” overgeneralizes and does not acknowledge the ways in which people and communities self-identify as having their own

unique and vibrant cultures and heritages. As DiAngelo explains, “nested within these groupings are deeper levels of complexity and difference based on the various roles assigned by dominant society at various times” (*What Does It Mean* 7). But as Yolanda Moses reflects, “At this cultural moment in the [United States], we still live in a racialized social and cultural hierarchy, and our language continues to reflect our ongoing attempts to grapple with that reality.” Racial terminology is daunting and conflicted, even for those who write about and research race. With this in mind—and in spite of these very serious limitations in terminology—I follow DiAngelo’s lead: “I use the terms *white* and *people of color* to indicate the two macro-level, socially recognized divisions of the racial hierarchy” in the United States (7, emphasis hers). The only exception appears when I am quoting an author who chooses to make use of alternative terms.

Another word essential to this dissertation is “whiteness.” Here I also make use of DiAngelo’s definition: “Whiteness” is a term that captures

all of the dynamics that go into being defined and/or perceived as white and that create and reinforce white people as inherently superior through society’s norms, traditions, and institutions. Whiteness grants material and psychological advantages (white privilege) that are often invisible and taken for granted by whites. (103)

This goes deeper than the idea that white people are superior to people of color. In American society, white people are widely regarded as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as the deviation from that norm (148). Whiteness is largely invisible to white people unless referring to people of color such as “the black actress,” the “Asian police officer,” or the “Latinx teacher” (148).

Ruth Frankenburg defines whiteness in three ways: “Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a ‘standpoint,’ a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, ‘whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (1). Claiming that whiteness is a “location of structural advantage, or race privilege” means that to be seen as white is to be seen as an insider, to have a privileged position within society, whether or not we have earned those advantages. When Frankenburg describes whiteness as a “standpoint, a place from which whites look at ourselves, at others, and at society,” she is describing a specific attitude or outlook, which is, as DiAngelo explains, to “see oneself as an individual, outside or innocent of race—‘just human’” (*What Does It Mean* 151). Finally, when Frankenburg says that whiteness “refers to a set of cultural practices that are unmarked and unnamed,” she is referring to racism—a “network of norms and practices that consistently result in advantage for whites and disadvantage for people of color” (152). These might include “basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives, and experiences purported to be commonly shared by all, but which are actually only afforded in any consistent way to white people” (DiAngelo 152) and which result in white privilege.

Ta-Nehisi Coates powerfully explains the power and presence of whiteness and the ways in which whiteness works to maintain racism:

They have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them, for a century, to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs. They have forgotten, because to remember would tumble them out of the beautiful Dream and force them to live down here with us, down here in the world. I am convinced that the Dreamers, at least the Dreamers of today, would rather live white than free. (143)

Coates is describing white people as “Dreamers,” people who cling to an identity of false superiority, averse to reckoning with the dream lest they lose their socially constructed status and power. Yet Coates insists, “The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all” (151).

The problem with whiteness as an identity is that white people tend to believe that racism is a thing of the past or that we are living in a post-racial society, a denial that serves only to reinforce existing oppression and racial hierarchies, thereby maintaining racism. Racial disparity between white people and people of color exists in every institution, and in many cases, it is increasing (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 109). While segregation makes the effects of racism difficult for white people to see, we often deny race matters even as we are living in and benefitting financially and socially from a deeply racialized society.

It is also important to examine the differences between racism and prejudice, because as DiAngelo explains,

I may be told that everyone is equal by my parents; I may have friends of a different color; and I may never tell a racist joke. Yet I am still impacted by the forces of racism as a member of the society; I will still be seen as white, treated as white, and experience life as a white person. My identity, personality, interests, and investments will develop from a white perspective. (24)

When many white people hear the term “racism,” we bristle and immediately grow defensive. We may even attempt to shut down any uncomfortable discussion about racism by making arguments such as “I’m not racist, because I have black friends” (260); by insisting that it is racist to talk about racism (269); or by arguing that people of color are just as racist as we

are (263). As I explain in greater detail later in this dissertation, white people have been socialized to believe that racism is revealed by overt acts such as name calling or physical violence. However, they may not understand that racism is rooted in systematic oppression, a perpetuation of unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power between white people and people of color (108). The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “racism” as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race” and as “a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles.” What’s important about these definitions is that racism is systematic and is “supported intentionally or unintentionally by institutional power and authority and used to the advantage of whites and the disadvantage of people of color” (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 108).

Prejudice, on the other hand, is the “learned prejudgment based on stereotypes about a social group that someone belongs to” (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 355). While racism is institutionalized and systematic, prejudice occurs at the individual level. While all people may hold prejudices and discriminate, in the United States only white people hold the social and institutional power for prejudice to transform into racism (109). DiAngelo explains, “The direction of power between whites and people of color is historic, traditional, and normalized in ideology” and therefore, in the United States “only whites can be racist” because “only whites have collective social and institutional power and privilege over people of color” (108-109).

This differentiation between racism and prejudice was essential for me as I began this process of exploring my white identity, including how it has connected my history and my work as a first-year writing teacher. The point of this dissertation is not to make the argument that white people are inherently racist, nor is it to erase or apologize for my whiteness and my

culture; rather, I am trying to re-conceptualize the responsibility of white people in general and white writing teachers in particular to understand how our subconscious self-perceptions and preconceptions inform and complicate our lives as teachers and our relationships with students.

In an interview with Krista Tippett, Eula Biss explains that a major problem we as Americans have when talking about race is language. Because language is so fraught, the wrong word can be taken as an offense. Biss insists, “I do think that when it comes to racism, we pay too much attention to language, and we give language a power that I don’t believe it actually has.” It isn’t that language is unimportant, Biss carefully explains. Rather, “there’s extra energy put into that policing because we aren’t sure how to address the real problems, and how to address the kind of systemic racism that happens without anyone ever saying anything that would look to us like racism.” In that spirit, please be patient as you see me stumble through “imperfect language and imperfect sentences” (Biss) in the service of a larger truth.

### **A Final Note**

Yes, I am a white writing teacher speaking primarily to other white writing teachers in the United States. While writing this dissertation, I have struggled with this identity, worrying that what I am saying will have little value to others, that I am placing myself at the center of conversations about race and racism. Audre Lorde’s statement that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (qtd. in DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 6) must be taken seriously. Lorde was critiquing white feminists who claimed to represent all women but whose actions were focused primarily on the concerns of white, middle class women. In her view, feminists were reinforcing the system of patriarchy by “re-inscribing racism and classism (among other forms of oppression) in the name of eliminating sexism” (6). By speaking as a white person to

white people, by placing my ideas and issues related to my whiteness at the center of this story, am I reinforcing white racism?

Truthfully, I continue to grapple with these questions, but I am buoyed by Parker Palmer's insistence that the work of critically reflecting and coming to a better understanding of ourselves is essential to becoming more responsible teachers. In order to know our students, he advises, in order to teach them well, we must first know ourselves. Likewise, Joy Ritchie and David Wilson see the development of a professional identity as inseparable from the development of a personal identity:

When personal and professional development are brought into dialogue, when teachers are given the opportunity to compose and reflect on their own stories of learning and of selfhood within a supportive and challenging community, then teachers can begin to resist and revise the scripting narratives of the culture and begin to compose new narratives of identity and practice. (1)

In other words, critically reflecting on how our personal histories—and the complex cultural assumptions we learn along the way—influence our educational and professional lives allows us to better understand the implications of our identities for our students and for our profession.

In this dissertation, I model the kind of recurring self-interrogation and reflection that is necessary to becoming what Todd DeStigter and Jay Robinson call a more critically empathetic teacher. “Critical empathy” refers to “the process of establishing informed connections with other human beings, of thinking and feeling with them at some emotionally, intellectually and socially significant level, while always remembering that such connections are complicated by sociohistorical forces that hinder the equitable, just relationships that ... we desire” (DeStigter, *Citizen Teacher* 318). With this in mind, I present my research narrative to reveal how my

assumptions about students—gleaned from Composition Studies lore and Hollywood movies— influenced my curriculum and preparation. Before entering my first basic writing classroom, for example, I expected to encounter a group of primarily African American and Latinx men who would be angry at having been placed in a required course for which they would pay but receive no credit toward graduation. My job would be to inspire my students; to recognize the intelligence in their errors; and to help students identify and correct those errors. Yet by the end of that first semester, I realized how misguided and problematic my assumptions were. I began to examine how my race was a feature of my identity by peeling back, as DeStigter describes, the “‘layers of determinateness,’ not expecting to find a ‘real self’ underneath, but to understand more clearly how those layers themselves constitute who we are in that they influence our interactions with others” (320). Teaching and learning are processes enhancing our own education as well as our students’. Thus, my dissertation is only the first step of what I know has become a lifelong project.

## Chapter Two: Class Dismissed

“You can’t teach what and who you don’t know.”

—Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*

“If we ourselves are not changing, I suspect we are not permitting ourselves to be put at risk by our students”

—Rose O’Reilly, *The Peaceable Classroom*

One of my favorite movies growing up was “Dangerous Minds” featuring Michelle Pfeiffer as LouAnne Johnson, an ex-Marine who applies for a teaching job in New York City. At LouAnne’s interview, the high school principal describes her students as “bright kids, with little or no educational skills, and what we politely refer to as social problems”; later in the movie they’re described a bit less politely as “rebels from hell.” The movie presents a familiar narrative in which a dedicated and passionate (white) teacher takes on a classroom full of “dangerous” (African American and Latinx<sup>1</sup>) students and wins them over with her unorthodox approach. In one scene she even does karate in the classroom. As a thirteen-year old middle-class white kid living in a middle-class white community, I was inspired by this young, white, female teacher who performed karate in the classroom and forever changed the lives of her at-risk students.

A major factor informing my decision to enroll at UWM for my doctoral degree was the opportunity to work with a diverse student population. As an open access, urban university, UWM enrolls what one professor referred to as “the top 50% of a high school graduating class and the bottom 50% of a high school graduating class.” One veteran basic writing teacher who helped to prepare me for my first semester teaching the course described his students as “hailing

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<sup>1</sup> “Latinx” is the gender-neutral alternative to Latino or Latina often used by scholars, activists, and some journalists. This term makes room for people who are trans, queer, agender, non-binary, gender nonconforming, or gender fluid. I make use of this term throughout my dissertation unless I am referring to a specific gender or an author I am quoting chooses to use an alternate term.

from anti-intellectual homes.” These students, he told me, struggled just to make it to campus each day because they were so consumed by their troubled home lives and adult responsibilities. Although I didn’t know karate, this characterization of the students I would be working with reinforced my Hollywood-inspired notions of fighting for and winning over these at-risk students.

At the beginning of the semester, I welcomed fifteen new students into my very first basic writing class with a clear picture of what my students would look like and how they would act. They would be young, male, mostly African American and Latinx; their writing and speech would be marked by the grammar and syntax of non-standard dialects. As I introduced texts and distributed assignments, they would grumble and express their disdain for writing and frustration at being placed into a required writing course for which they would have to pay but would receive no credit toward graduation. Nevertheless, after a period of struggle, my innovative, progressive pedagogy would win the day, successfully transforming their writing as well as their attitudes and lives.

Upon meeting my students, however, I was surprised to see that many were white and that women outnumbered men. The class was also more racially and economically diverse than I had anticipated, with Egyptian, Mexican American, Puerto Rican American, Native American, Hmong American, African American, and European American students from the inner city of Milwaukee as well as rural areas in central Wisconsin and more wealthy Milwaukee suburbs. Some students were returning to school after spending “too much time partying” during their post-high school years or raising children of their own. Others were still basking in their high school post-prom glow. I was pleasantly surprised to find that in general they were warmer and more open than I had expected, some even eager to begin our classroom journey together. In one

of the reflective essays I collected on the first day, a white student (who earlier in the class had introduced himself by proudly announcing his love for the Green Bay Packers) wrote, “We know we need extra help. That’s why we’re in this class. We trust you.”

Looking at the students seated in front of me that first day, I asked myself: Why did I presume most of my students would be African American, Latinx, and male? Why was I so startled to see Egyptian and Hmong American students seated next to white students from the suburbs? I had no answers so I quickly buried the questions beneath my “to do” lists for the term—until that day when a student directly resisted my plans for a classroom activity.

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I unlock the doors and flick on the lights. Students file in after me and take seats at tables arranged in a makeshift circle, careful to leave one chair between them and their neighbor. The heating system whirs but the room is still cold, so one student drapes a wet paper towel over the thermometer on the wall—our way of tricking the heating system to warm the room faster. Students leave their coats on but take their backpacks off, setting them on the floor near their chairs. I look around the room to gauge their mood: tired and distracted, although one student recites a joke he heard over the weekend to no one in particular. I feel a bit disconcerted that no one takes the initiative to pull out notebooks and folders. *Did they read the essay?* I wonder. *How much time did they spend on their writing assignments? Are they prepared to make comments and ask questions as instructed?*

I focus on organizing my materials on the table: assignments, discussion questions, and my highlighted copy of the day’s assigned essay: “Writing Like a White Guy” by Jaswinder Bolina. In this essay, Bolina discusses the place of minority poets who do not write about identity or what he calls “minority issues.” A well-meaning colleague tells him, “With a name

like Jaswinder Bolina, you could publish plenty of poems right now if you wrote about the first-generation minority stuff. What I admire is that you don't write that kind of poetry." Bolina admits that he tends to "eschew/exclude/deny 'that kind' of subject" in his poetry even though writing about his racial and ethnic identity would probably "open editorial inboxes." He describes how he has been conditioned by his education and by his family's socioeconomic privilege to "resist making race the essential issue," and notes that as a poet he would prefer to express himself without reference to racial and ethnic identity. Yet he also acknowledges, "The one thing I least believe about race in America is that we can disregard it." In other words, even if he chooses not to address racial identity in his poetry, his readers will view his work through a racialized lens. Thus, Bolina faces a conundrum: "Am I a writer or a minority writer?"

When I chose to include this essay in my basic writing assignment sequence, I wanted our class discussions to focus on Bolina's conclusion: writers do not need to choose between "being the brown guy writing like a white guy or the brown guy writing about being Othered." He explains, "Language, like a hammer, belongs to whoever picks it up to build or demolish. ... When I write, the hammer belongs to me." He alone chooses what and how to write. I expected my students to share their own stories about encountering racial and linguistic discrimination, stories that would lead us into discussions about the power of language to both liberate and oppress. Together we would acknowledge our assumptions about Edited American English (EAE), and by the end of the semester, my students would feel free to use their dialects or home languages deliberately and powerfully in their essays. I wanted them to wield their hammers with purpose and precision.

To begin this process, I plan to ask students to reflect on their own literacy experiences. I am armed with questions such as, "When you were growing up, what did you notice about the

power of language in the lives of the people around you?” and “Through grade school, high school, and college, how have your perceptions of yourself as a reader and writer changed?” By giving them the opportunity to reflect on how reading and writing have shaped their identities, family and community relationships, educational goals, and world outlook, I hope they will begin to make connections between their personal lives and their academic aspirations.

Before we begin those discussions, however, I am eager to hear my students’ initial impressions of the essay. I imagine they enjoyed reading the essay and will be excited to talk about it. When class begins, I sit relaxed and casual on the edge of the table and ask, “So, what’d you think?”

Silence. Then, finally, a non-traditional African American woman slouching in her chair near the back of the room, fur-lined hood pulled over her head, responds, “I didn’t like it.”

I feel my smile beginning to fade. “Okay, why?” I ask.

“Because it’s all about race. I don’t like reading about race. It reminds me too much of things I’ve gone through. Too many of the characters remind me of people I know.”

Now it’s my turn to remain silent while my mind races: *She resents me. Everyone’s staring at me. They think I’m a joke. What should I say?*

Everyone waits for my reaction. I’m on display, but no one will step in to ease the tension.

In full-out retreat, I abandon my carefully laid-out discussion questions, instead breaking the class into small groups to answer a new, more specific question: “What is the purpose of this essay?” As I write their responses on the chalkboard, I hear only platitudes: “Be who you are.” “People will always judge you, but don’t listen to them.” “Speak the way you want to speak.” When the students don’t say anything to challenge these bumper sticker slogans, neither do I.

At the end of class, I distribute their homework, then offer a “see ya next class” and a quick smile as they stuff papers into folders and folders into backpacks. Class dismissed.

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After class that day, I was plagued with doubts about my effectiveness as a teacher. When I decided to make room for discussions on race, racism, language, and identity in my curriculum, I knew it might make some students uncomfortable. I even expected some students would remain silent during class discussions and avoid politically charged discussions in their assigned responses. But what I had not anticipated was how unnerved *I* would feel if a student deviated from my carefully contrived script.

Looking back on that day, I realize that in the moment my student spoke up, I was consumed by what Gary Howard calls an “overwhelming flood of narcissistic trivia” (14). Although my student had focused on her reaction to and experience with the essay, which was exactly what I had repeatedly instructed students to do in class discussions, I felt certain that her response implied a direct challenge to my pedagogical choices and leadership position in the classroom. *What did she and the other students think of me? Do they think I’m racist? Do they like me? Do they believe I’m even qualified to teach this class? Am I even qualified to teach this class? Of course, I’m not racist, I answered myself. Isn’t the very fact that I included this essay as a course assignment proof enough?*

I have always behaved the way a good liberal should, shaking my head in dismay when Oprah was turned away from a fancy department store in Paris, when Henry Louis Gates was arrested for breaking into his own home, when white friends and colleagues argued that we were living in a post-racial society, when they boasted that they no longer even saw race. I knew that racism was alive and well, that it continued to thrive in individuals and institutions. Yet I had

read so many articles on antiracist, progressive pedagogy that I believed I had been educated out of racism.

Suddenly, however, my bona fide liberal credentials were being challenged and disturbing questions floated slowly to the surface: Would I have been consumed by such guilt and fear if the student who had spoken up had been white? Is it possible that my research and good intentions didn't make me less racist? What if they just made me differently racist? For the first time, I was beginning to see through my thin, liberal veneer and into the unnerving complexity of my own prejudices.

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When I began teaching first-year composition, I avoided engaging in conversations with students about personally and politically charged topics like race and racism. Though professionally I was becoming interested in the relationship between racial and linguistic identity, I did not see a place for these conversations in the classroom. In fact, I often wondered why so many of my colleagues used the basic writing classroom as a space to challenge racism and discrimination. Why were these conversations so much more essential to the work we do in basic writing than in other first-year composition courses?

Yet many of the basic writing students enrolling at my university *are* first-generation college students who, as my colleague asserted, “hail from anti-intellectual homes.” During the spring 2013 semester, my first semester teaching the course, thirty-nine students enrolled in a section of basic writing: eleven students were white, twelve African American, five Hmong American, three Latinx, and seven international. In other words, twenty-seven out of the thirty-nine students enrolled in basic writing were self-identified students of color.

These statistics reinforce the historical reality that ever since basic writing was developed as a field of study, a disproportionate number of racial, ethnic, and economic minority students have placed into basic writing courses compared with their middle-class, white counterparts. Basic writing, sometimes called “remedial” or “developmental” writing, emerged in the 1970s when many four-year colleges across the country adopted open admissions policies allowing any student who had earned a GED or a high school diploma to enroll. Many of these new students struggled to adapt to college, which was particularly evident in their performance in required writing courses. In *Errors and Expectations*, a classic text published during this period, Mina Shaughnessy characterizes her basic writing students as having grown up in one of New York’s “ethnic or racial enclaves,” where they are seen as not modernizing, not assimilating, and isolated from the rest of society. She continues, “Many [students] had spoken other languages or dialects at home and never successfully reconciled the worlds of home and school” (3). These students were “strangers to academia.” They were “unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life, unprepared for the sorts of tasks their teachers were about to assign them” (3). In her attempt to make sense of her students’ writing, Shaughnessy systematically analyzed 4,000 placement essays written by incoming freshmen, focusing on the ways in which basic writing students use and misuse punctuation, verbs, nouns, and pronouns. Shaughnessy concluded that when basic writing teachers recognize errors as intelligent, patterned choices, they can begin to help students to make better choices.

Contemporary composition scholars have subsequently found that Shaughnessy’s detailed attention on grammar instruction and error can be counterproductive for students who need help with larger concerns (Allen, Bartholomae, Lyons). Min-Zhan Lu, for example, asserts that Shaughnessy’s pedagogy “enacts a systematic denial of the political context of students’

linguistic decisions” (37), because it “overlook[s] basic writers’ need to confront the dissonance they experience between academic and other discourses” (26). However, in much of the basic writing scholarship I read and studied before teaching the course for the first time, basic writing students are routinely characterized as misunderstanding or being ignorant of formal written English—punctuation, syntax, spelling, and vocabulary—as well as underdevelopment of ideas. As a result, basic writing courses tend to be what Mike Rose refers to as “skills and drills” courses that “begin with simple writing courses and include a fair amount of workbook exercises, mostly focused on grammar and usage. The readings in such a course are also fairly basic, both in style and content” (128).

Research has shown how students’ problematic writing skills lead even committed basic writing teachers to assess students’ thinking skills as deficient. For example, in “Remediation as Social Construct: Perspectives from an Analysis of Classroom Discourse,” Glynda Hull, Mike Rose, Kay Losey Fraser, and Marisa Castellano examine the verbal interactions between a student and teacher in a basic writing classroom and find that the student’s deviating interactional patterns (i.e., inappropriate interjections and frequent non-sequiturs) become “not just an annoying conversational style, but the barometer by which to measure her cognitive abilities” (311). For example, although the student wrote fairly well and even enjoyed writing, the teacher believed that her problematic speaking patterns reflected problematic thinking patterns. According to this teacher, the student had “thinking continuity problems” and probably would not pass the next writing class because it required “coherent thinking” (310). The researchers note that the teacher’s leap from pointing out a classroom problem to making a judgment about the student’s cognitive capacity unearths “deeply held, unarticulated assumptions” (315) about basic writing students that have long been part of educational thought.

They conclude, “Our ... habits of mind for sorting and labeling individuals ... are the frames of mind which make it possible, even unremarkable, to assume that talk that is occasionally non-synchronous with the talk in a classroom indicates some fundamental problem in thought” (316). As Jacqueline Jones Royster and Rebecca Greenberg Taylor put it, “Sometimes teachers and researchers focus the definitional act on the students' written products as metonymic stand-ins for the writers themselves” (31).

Many institutional and public conversations about basic writing tend to focus on “the ways that basic writers’ processes or texts are marked by difference or deficit” (Adler-Kassner and Harrington, *Basic Writing* 15). The very label—“basic” or “remedial”—carries with it a judgment of deficiency. In fact, the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines “remedial” as “intended to correct or improve deficient skills.” By extension, basic writing students are often considered deficient, deviant, and in need of correction. Many administrators argue that if students need to enroll in basic or remedial courses, then they should not be accepted into the university. Because of this, basic writing teacher-scholars are constantly defending the academic potential of their students and the value of their contributions to the university; they must advocate that underprepared students be admitted while also explaining to those outside of the field that instruction must go beyond grammar instruction.

Recent basic writing scholarship often questions “elements of the institutional structures whereby basic writing and basic writers are constructed and perpetuated” (Adler-Kassner and Harrington, *Basic Writing* 28). This scholarship critically examines the placement and assessment practices that lead to the marginalization of students of color within the university and recognizes the social dimensions of students’ linguistic decisions (Lu 38). In “Issues of Race and Ethnicity in the Basic Writing Classroom,” Morris Young argues that the “category of basic

writer is perhaps one that we still easily associate with our examinations of race and ethnicity in the study of writing.” The basic writing classroom often becomes a place where students and teachers directly address issues of race, racism, and literacy. In fact, in *Basic Writing as a Political Act*, Linda Adler-Kassner and Susan Marie Harrington argue that basic writing teachers should make the politics of basic writing—its institutional, social, and ideological contexts—central to the work of the course. One approach the authors describe is to deconstruct the institutional construction of the basic writer by working with students to critically examine the university assessment tools that place students into basic writing courses. Other composition scholars advocate for teachers to empower students by “including writing from marginalized groups; recognizing the value of ‘non-standard’ forms; and encouraging writers to find and use their own voices” (Young).

This research helped me as a new basic writing teacher to understand the field’s political and institutional contexts. While immersed in this research, I realized that to be a responsible teacher, I needed to understand that the politics shaping the way students are positioned in the university matters to the students and should be a topic of discussion in the classroom. I did not want to just make my students angry; I wanted to offer students a framework for responding to their unique situations.

The problem, however, is that I did not yet understand how basic writing research was working with my deeply ingrained biases to shape my perceptions and expectations of students. In my case, the process of stereotyping was intellectualized and rationalized by my research (Paley xviii), but my assumptions about students and people of color existed long before I began graduate school. Growing up in a middle-class family and attending a majority white high school in a small town approximately thirty miles southwest of Milwaukee, I didn’t know what “basic

writing” was when I was growing up. The successful students in my school were almost always white. Moreover, because I encountered so few people of color in my daily life, what I “knew” about people of color was limited to what I saw in movies or on the evening news. I rarely saw a positive story or image of a family of color on TV; those I did see, such as the Huxtable family featured on *The Cosby Show*, were exceptions rather than the norm.

My students that first semester were some of the best students I had while teaching at the university. However, while they often engaged in lively class discussions, I was disappointed that they generally did not appreciate my attempts at unconventional writing assignments. For example, after discussing with my students the College Composition and Communication Executive Committee’s “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” policy statement, I challenged them to compose an essay with code switching (alternating between languages or language varieties). One white student incorporated “text talk” into his essay, which he proudly read out loud before class, but no one else even tried. One student, an Egyptian man who had attended high school in Milwaukee, admitted that he didn’t think this kind of writing was appropriate for a college classroom because it could come across as rude and disrespectful. I was disappointed, but I couldn’t blame them: they weren’t receiving any credit for their hard work, and they needed to pass this course to move on to English 101. I held the key to their academic progress.

Aware of the challenges facing these students, I intended to teach them strategies that would enable them to achieve success in my course and beyond. However, as Geneva Gay asserts in *Culturally Responsive Teaching; Theory, Research, and Practice*, awareness and good intentions are not enough when working with multicultural students. One of the reasons students of color struggle disproportionately in school is the “discontinuity between what students experience at home and what they experience in school” (Ladson-Billings, “But That’s Just

Good Teaching!” 159). Because students are more likely to engage with their education successfully if it aligns with and acknowledges their cultural identities, many multicultural education teacher-scholars advocate for culturally responsive or culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g., Gay, Ladson-Billings, Ginsberg and Wlodkowski, and Villegas), that is, a pedagogy that uses “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching* 49-50).

Culturally responsive teaching improves gaps in student achievement by “teaching diverse students *through* their own cultural filters” (Gay, *Culturally Responsive* 50, emphasis hers). Thus, a culturally responsive teacher might use the cultural heritages, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as resources, allowing students to make use of their cultural knowledge and life experiences to select research topics and develop ideas for essays. Gloria Ladson-Billings states, “Culturally relevant teachers utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (“But That’s Just Good Teaching!” 161). For example, a report from the Southern Education Foundation examining barriers that low-income African American students face when they enter developmental classes found that historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are successfully engaging in culturally responsive teaching to improve African American student achievement (Smith). Morgan State used “an integrated curriculum that combined developmental reading with world history and a focus on the African diaspora” (Smith). At the end of the semester, students in the integrated course outperformed those enrolled in the traditional course. Teachers and administrators have found that this approach enriches classroom experiences and keeps students engaged, because students thrive when they are in classrooms that connect their

school learning with their cultural backgrounds and lived experiences (“Being Culturally Responsive”).

To enact this pedagogy, culturally responsive teachers may incorporate students’ social experiences into the curriculum; use students’ cultural and linguistic resources to solve academic problems; and assign culturally familiar content. For example, Ladson-Billings describes a teacher, Patricia Hilliard, who shared her love of poetry with her students by connecting it with their own love of rap music. “The mother of a teenaged son, Hilliard was familiar with the music that permeates African American youth culture,” Ladson-Billings explains. She continues:

Instead of railing against the supposed evils of rap music, Hilliard allowed her ... students to bring in samples of lyrics from what both she and the students determined to be non-offensive rap songs. Students were encouraged to perform the songs and the teacher reproduced them on an overhead so that they could discuss literal and figurative meanings as well as technical aspects of poetry such as rhyme scheme, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. (“But That’s Just Good Teaching!” 161)

By using music as a bridge to school learning, the teacher helped students learn more about poetry than was required by the state department of education or the local school district. Gay affirms, “Practices such as these, and the effects they have on student achievement ... support the transformative effects of sociocultural contextual factors on the academic achievement of students of color” (*Culturally Responsive* 15-16).

Given the diversity encountered in my basic writing classes, this pedagogy seemed consistent with the kind of supportive yet challenging environment I sought to foster in the classroom. I designed an assignment sequence to facilitate this approach: I chose texts that I

thought would be relevant to my students (“Coming into Language” by Jimmy Santiago Baca and “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” by Gloria Anzaldua in addition to the Bolina essay); made sure to include writing from marginalized groups; assigned work that challenged students to incorporate multiple voices and dialects; prepared discussion questions designed to help students make connections between their lives outside and inside the university. I was prepared to discuss tough and sensitive topics with students, hoping to create a classroom environment in which students could comfortably share their experiences with racism through their storytelling and writing.

While these objectives were laudable, I left one important factor out of the success equation: I did not include myself as a key player in the classroom environment nor consider how my reactions might influence discussion. While I was very careful and intentional when writing assignments, choosing texts, and planning discussion questions, I did not reflect critically on *my* response to the texts we would be discussing: how did I fit into the conversations I was attempting to nurture, and what was my experience with race and racism? In other words, these texts were to speak to my students’ experiences, not mine. While people of color had to deal with racism in their daily lives, it had little bearing on my life. I could close my books, turn off my computer, and resume my life blissfully unaware of the racism pervading the broader society.

What I “knew” about my students had more to do with my own culture and experiences growing up white, surrounded by people who mirrored my own cultural beliefs and norms. In other words, everything I knew about my students and experienced with them was being “filtered through my white middle-class sociocultural lens and thus [was] colored by ways of perceiving the world with which I [was] familiar” (DeStigter, *Citizen Teacher* 32). Rather than seeing my students clearly in their own light, I saw them in distorted images projected in *my* light (Howard

79). Ultimately, this created a disconnect between my expectations of students and expectations of myself. While my professional self was concerned with my students' racial identities, I failed to consider how whiteness was a factor in my personal identity and how the personal self and professional self are entwined.

Limited self-awareness led me unwittingly to reinforce racist practices in my classroom. I have never been blatantly racist: I have never used a racial slur and I don't tell racist jokes. As Ruth Frankenberg bluntly states it in *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, "I never knew I was being racist, never set out to be racist, but that had little effect on the outcome" (3). In effect, I was behaving as what Gay describes as a "cultural hegemonist," meaning that I expected my students to behave according to my standards of what is considered normal in a white, middle-class community (*Culturally Responsive* 48-49). If my students were going to diverge from what I considered "normal," they would do so in predictable ways. Worst yet, I assumed that all of my students of color would have the same set of experiences: they would arrive to my classroom from poor, often violent communities, speak and write in non-standard dialects, and struggle to adapt to the university environment. Danielle Moss Lee argues, "It's easy to forget that, despite the myopic perspectives on race we see in mass media, there really isn't one black or Latino community." Superficially I understood that of *course* there is diversity among racial and ethnic communities. Yet I held onto deeply ingrained assumptions about people of color, particularly basic writing students, that had shaped my worldview. Like Bolina, I was forced to ask myself: Am I a teacher, or am I a white teacher?

George and Louise Spindler argue, "Teachers carry into the classroom their personal cultural background. They perceive students ... with inevitable prejudice and preconception" (qtd. in Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching* 9). Similarly, Danielle Moss Lee asserts, "Even

well-intentioned teachers can perpetuate the structural racism built into the fabric of our education system if they are not conscious and do not take active steps to address their own biases and recognize how those biases can affect practice and decision-making.” Thus, as much as I advocated for the richness of a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-class student body, my biases undercut those principles and goals.

I am certainly not alone in this. At a meeting of basic writing teachers—all of whom were white—the course coordinator asked us to begin by sharing successes and struggles from our classrooms. One by one we shared concerns about our students’ reading comprehension, their struggles to interpret texts; these concerns were punctuated by a few positive moments in the classroom, such as a particularly insightful class discussion or a successful revision.

One of the teachers teaching the course for the first time described her struggles with three students, all women, who she called “confrontational,” “loud,” and “disrespectful.” These students sat together in the back of the room and, the teacher felt, showed very little interest in the work of the class, often disrupting class discussions and interrupting other students when they were speaking. The teacher had tried to be patient, had asked them to quiet down, but nothing seemed to be working. As a new teacher, she was unsure how to handle the students and was turning to her more experienced colleagues for advice.

After some follow-up questions, we learned that the three students were African American women. There was a collective sigh around the room, the nodding of several heads. One veteran teacher reflected, “That population doesn’t have a filter for their emotions.” Another agreed, “They just put it all out there.” No one offered any sort of advice for another approach or solution. Without saying so explicitly, the group seemed to agree that because these students were African American, they were necessarily going to have behavioral problems. I was

momentarily startled by how easily these teachers accepted racist generalizations about our students. But no one said anything. I remained silent as well. I still wonder what happened when that teacher went back to her classroom with her negative impressions of and responses to the students confirmed by the reactions of her colleagues. Inadvertently, did very dedicated and experienced teachers confirm this new teacher's negative expectations about her students and thus allow her to dismiss them as ill-prepared for college or, worse, as uneducable?

One year later, when I was serving as the basic writing coordinator, a group of students affiliated with the Black Cultural Center reached out via email to the writing program administration (WPA) team—all of whom were also white—to inform us that they were struggling in English 101 and failing more frequently than their white counterparts. Some members of the WPA objected, saying that a small group of students should not be seen as representative of African American students enrolled in the courses. Yet university records reveal that African American students at UWM do fail disproportionately in comparison with their white counterparts. During the Fall 2014 semester, for example, 158 English 101 students who self-identified as African American were assessed at the end of the semester: 71% of these students passed English 101 and 29% failed, whereas 88% of white students passed and only 12% failed. Learning this, I suggested that we host a forum in which teachers could discuss the serious problem that a quarter of our students are failing English 101; my hope was to at least share our experiences and insecurities about working with diverse student populations. However, most of the other members of the WPA shrugged it off; one person even admitted that conversations about race made her feel “yucky.” It is far too easy for white teachers to ignore the problem, to shrug and say not now, maybe later.

I believe that all teachers have a responsibility to think critically about how race and privilege influence what happens in our classrooms. However, scholars such as Jacqueline Jones Royster and Rebecca Greenberg Taylor remind that “making a quick reference to my own race/class/gender at the beginning of my own scholarship is not enough” (32). If I want to understand why I assumed the majority of my students would be African American and Latinx, why I was so startled when an African American student told me she didn’t want to talk about race, then naming who I am isn’t enough. I have to find resources, do research, ask questions, and, most important, challenge my assumptions (Tansey). In other words, before I can hope to be a good educator inside the classroom, I have to educate myself outside the classroom. And I will have to reeducate myself continuously through reflecting on my personal interactions with students and how my pedagogical choices affect these interactions.

As a first-year writing teacher, I must try to understand not only *who* I am, but also *why* I am who I am, including how my identity impacts my teaching, that is, my ways of valuing student texts, determining what I consider meaningful, and communicating with all students, but especially students of color. This is what bell hooks calls “looking back”—a process of moving into the past and examining it in relation to the present in order to find moments when whiteness has made its imprint in her psyche and life. Of course, hooks writes from the perspective of an African American woman, and my intention here is not to appropriate her purpose, which is to examine and explain the way African Americans conceptualize whiteness as a “terrorizing imposition, the power that wounds, hurts, tortures” (“Representing Whiteness” 169). Rather, I am looking back to better understand how racism and whiteness have made their imprint in my own psyche and life. How I, too, have been terrorized, wounded, and hurt by whiteness. Debby Irving asserts that as much as people of color, “devastated by racism, need to be retaught their

loveliness,” so do we, as white people. She continues, “Racism demands an artificial and divisive construction of humanity, in terms of how I made sense of others and also how I envision myself” (246).

To better understand those sociocultural forces that are affecting my beliefs, attitudes, biases, and relationships, I need to step back and examine myself: my deeply ingrained assumptions, my experiences, and my privileges. In doing so, I can begin to explore what drives me to work within the context of a first-year writing classroom, what I expect of my students, and how I have constructed those expectations.

### Chapter Three: Good White Person

“Let’s take the ‘house’ of racism and examine it, brick by brick.”

—Ruth Frankenburg, *Names We Call Home*

“Good or bad, the past is a fact, and it often holds the keys to who we are in the present, and who we’re likely to become in the future.”

—Tim Wise, *White Like Me*

I did not always see myself as having a race. White for me was the norm, a “raceless race” (Irving xi), and the other categories like “Asian, African American, American Indian, and Latino, were the real races” (xi). Awareness of my white skin came when I traveled to Japan at age nineteen. While walking down the street in Aso, a small town on Kyushu, one of the southernmost islands, a group of elementary school students spotted my bare legs and ran up to touch them. An initially awkward encounter became a positive experience when I realized they had never seen white skin in person before; their excitement and curiosity did not pose a threat. Although the students noticed that I was different, they saw me, I believe, as attractively different, making it easy to feel good about myself as I laughed off the interaction.

This experience did make me think about racial difference, albeit superficially. I was fascinated by Japanese culture, proudly announced “my favorite ethnic food is Indian,” enjoyed watching and re-watching *Aladdin*, and, when I was young, playing with my favorite brown skin doll. Each of these “favorites” highlighted what I found entertaining or pleasurable in other groups, a kind of curated awareness of “the other” that served to reinforce my white social status by allowing me to pick and choose how I wished to interact with other races and cultures. Growing up in a small town outside of Milwaukee with a largely white, middle-class population, I came into contact with few people of color. According to the 2010 census, the racial makeup of the town was 97.4% white, 0.2% African American, 0.2% Native American, 0.9% Asian, 0.1% Pacific Islander, 0.3% from other races, and 0.9% from two or more races. Hispanics and

Latinx of any race were 3.2% of the population. More recent surveys show that these numbers are holding steady: as of 2015 the town remains 97% white (“QuickFacts”).

My family moved from Milwaukee to Mukwonago shortly before I turned eight years old. We lived in a red, four-bedroom house set on a small hill surrounded by two acres of land lined with trees. My parents wanted to get away from the congestion of the city and offer more space for my brother and me to roam as we grew up. When we first moved into our new house, I can remember evenings spent chasing fireflies with my brother and daring each other to run to the bottom of the hill to touch the trees where our yard ended and the woods began. Minus the streetlights, we were exhilarated, and a bit frightened, by the star-filled sky. I spent my summers riding my bicycle to my best friend’s house only a few blocks away, picking dandelions in a field by my grade school, building forts in the woods behind our house, and playing tag in the knee-deep snow with my family.

Idyllic as this was, my parents recognized that Mukwonago lacked diversity and was more politically and socially conservative than they would have preferred. They expressed concern when the school district failed to acknowledge Martin Luther King, Jr. Day when we first moved to town, whereas our school in Milwaukee would have given us the day off and integrated King’s life and work into the curriculum. My parents worked hard to prevent my brother and me from becoming isolated in our comfortable, white, middle-class home and community. They took us to plays and museums in Milwaukee and Chicago; volunteered with us at soup kitchens and Special Olympics events; suggested we read books like Alex Kotlowitz’s *There Are No Children Here* about two young boys growing up in a public housing project in Chicago; and talked to us about the images and ideals presented by rough and tough G.I. Joes and perky, blonde Barbie dolls. They tried to instill in us a sense of social responsibility, to show

us that the world was bigger than our small town. Nevertheless, people of color existed at the periphery of our family experience. We could choose when and how much to acknowledge and interact with racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. I could count on one hand the number of students of color I interacted with while growing up in Mukwonago schools. Nearly fifteen years after graduating from high school, I could describe in detail what they looked like, but I wouldn't be able to tell you anything about them or their families, because I rarely had any meaningful interactions with any of these students.

The dominant message I internalized as a kid was that a “good person” does not “see” race: everyone is equal, so race does not matter. However, when we drove into Milwaukee, I couldn't help but notice that as the streets grew dirtier and more congested and the houses more dilapidated, most of the people walking those streets had black or brown skin. Watching the news in the evening with my family, I noticed that most of the murders and crimes occurred in Milwaukee's inner-city African American communities. The white people mentioned in these news stories were usually either police officers or victims. Because we didn't talk about these issues as a family, I learned to stay quiet too.

White adults often mistakenly believe that talking about race with children will encourage them to notice racial differences and thus make them more likely to become racist. However, studies show that adults who remain silent about race or teach the “colorblind” narrative actually reinforce the development of racial prejudice in children (Polite and Saenger 275). Children as young as three months old begin to notice visually apparent racial differences (Kelly et al. 87). As they get older, children start to see patterns in their social environment—who lives where, who is the more likable character in a movie, who works at the doctor's office, grocery store, restaurant, or school—and begin assigning rules to explain what they see. When

adults remain silent about the structural racism that maintains these patterns, children conclude that these patterns “must [be] caused by meaningful inherent differences between groups” (Bigler and Liben 164) and that racial inequities are natural and justified.

Further compounding this problem, children are “developmentally prone to in-group favoritism” (Bronson and Merryman 53); that is, children show preference for those who closely resemble themselves. Bronson and Merryman further explain, “The child extends their shared appearances much further—believing that everything else he likes, those who look similar to him like as well. Anything he doesn’t like thus belongs to those who look the least similar” (53). Because it takes years for children to develop cognitive abilities that allow them to use more than one attribute to categorize others, they initially categorize people according to their most visible traits (such as skin color, hair texture, facial features, etc.). In this way, children form preferences based on superficial racial features on their own, even if no parent or teacher mentions race (52-61).

If I had been raised in a more diverse environment, perhaps my perspective would have been different. But maybe not. In *Nurture Shock: New Thinking About Children*, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman describe what they call the Diverse Environment Theory, whereby for children raised with exposure to people of other races and cultures, the environment becomes the message. In other words, parents do not have to talk about race; rather, exposing children to diverse environments will make diversity normal for them (55). Even so, studies show that exposure to a diverse environment does not necessarily lead to more cross-race friends; often it’s the opposite (60). Dr. James Moody compared data showing the number of high school students’ cross-race friendships with the school’s overall diversity and found that the more diverse the school, “the more the kids self-segregate by race within the school” (Bronson and Merryman 60).

Moody concludes that while students in diverse schools may have more opportunities to interact, they also have more opportunities to reject one another, which is what studies show is happening. Bronson and Merryman confirm, “The odds of a white high-schooler in America having a best friend of another race is only 8%. ... For blacks, the odds aren’t much better: 85% of black kids’ best friends are also black” (61).

The problem with the Diverse Environment Theory is that parents may assume that exposing their children to diverse environments is more powerful than initiating explicit conversations about race—conversations that may be uncomfortable for many parents, but particularly white parents who may carry guilt and denial about the causes and effects of systemic racism and their role in supporting this system. Robin DiAngelo refers to defensiveness around discussions on race and racism as white fragility: “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (“White Fragility” 57) including emotional displays of anger, fear, and guilt as well as behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and retreating from the stress-inducing situation (*What Does It Mean* 247). Although most parents want their children to grow up free of racist and prejudicial thoughts and feelings, white parents often do not know how to address these unconscious and reactive behaviors in themselves. Thus, they tend to remain silent, hoping that giving their children books featuring people of color or sending their children to diverse schools will solve the problem for them.

Children, however, typically absorb and internalize the unspoken messages around them. For example, as Bronson and Merryman illustrate, when a child points out a stranger’s skin color, as in, “That man is black,” she is likely to be hushed immediately with the warning that it is rude to talk about another person’s skin color. However, if that child points to the same

stranger and announces, “That man is strong,” her parents would probably smile or laugh. Even though both comments note a person’s physical characteristics, observing racial characteristics is deemed rude and socially unacceptable. In this way, white people are socialized not to speak of or even “see” race. Children learn that certain attributes, like race, are inappropriate and even offensive to mention (Polite and Saenger 275). When parents choose silence over conversation, children interpret that silence as indication of their parents’ negative feelings toward people of color (Bronson and Merryman 52).

In my home growing up, we did not have explicit conversations about race, and to the best of my memory, when race or racism came up in primary, middle, and secondary school, more often than not the white actors in the tales were heroes: helping slaves escape via the Underground Railroad, speaking up for those who could not speak for themselves, providing opportunities for people of color. In school we learned about slave owners, but they were treated like evil Disney villains. In fourth grade, we endured an entire unit devoted to the explorers who “discovered” America. I drew pictures of Louis Joliet and Jacques Marquette, whose explorations of the Mississippi River encouraged the influx of other explorers, traders, and missionaries into Wisconsin, but the curriculum failed to mention the devastating effects on the Native American populations already living on the land the Europeans were “discovering.” Throughout my schooling, class discussions focused on white people as either benign, sometimes even saintly, explorers and saviors or evil racists who oppressed people of color. Our units on slavery and the Civil War taught us that the black slaves needed white heroes. Simplified discussions of the Underground Railroad described white anti-slavery activists guiding escaped slaves to freedom in the north where they were safe and welcome to live as free men and women.

When teachers talked about the Civil Rights Movement, they described Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks as heroes who solved the problem of racism for American society.

Studies show that educating students about the history of racism in the United States is typically superficial in approach. The Teaching Tolerance project, which surveyed nearly 1,800 K-12 social studies teachers, found widespread agreement that “teaching and learning about slavery is essential to understanding American history”; however, many teachers reported that they were uncomfortable addressing slavery, particularly without any assistance from textbooks or state curriculum standards (Turner). One teacher confessed:

I find it painful, and embarrassing (as a white male) to teach about the history of exploitation, abuse, discrimination and outrageous crimes committed against African Americans and other minorities, over many centuries—especially at the hands of white males. I also find it very difficult to convey the concept of white privilege to my white students. While some [students] are able to begin to understand this important concept, many struggle with or actively resist it.

(Turner)

A Southern Poverty Law Center report, “Teaching Hard History: American Slavery,” lays out key problems with the way slavery is taught in schools. Textbooks and teachers tend to emphasize the positive by focusing on heroes like Harriet Tubman or Frederick Douglass without offering the full historical, economic, and political context of slavery; instead slavery is often explained as primarily a Southern problem. Moreover, the actual experience of enslaved people is too often neglected. Rather, the focus tends to remain on the experiences and actions of white people (Shuster).

In my experience, from grade school through high school, the curriculum would include multicultural units that offered the work of diverse authors and histories for a few weeks. In college, a multicultural literature course was required to fulfill a “diversity” credit. However, these units and courses were not integrated with the more “traditional curriculum” emphasizing white history, white literature, and white culture. Thus, for me, these school experiences reinforced the notion that the “bad” white people were long gone and that most white people living today were “good.” We were not encouraged to consider how the actions and events of the past continue to reverberate today or to examine how white people benefit socially and economically from institutions and societal attitudes aligned in their favor. As DiAngelo shows, despite the fact that there are no biologically or genetically distinct races, a racial group has profound meaning as a social group (*What Does It Mean* 197). She observes, “On every measure: health, education, interaction with the criminal justice system, income and wealth, there is disparity between white people and people of color, with people of color consistently relegated to the bottom and white people holding the consistent advantage” (196). She also asserts that generationally accumulated wealth continues to have significant benefits for white people (197). In the 1950s, she notes, “people of color were denied Federal Housing Act (FHA) loans ... that allowed a generation of whites to attain middle-class status through home ownership” (197). As a result, today the average white family has thirteen times the wealth of the average African American or Latinx family (197). Facts such as these were not discussed in school. We never discussed the ways in which white people benefit from a society in which racism is deeply embedded in its institutions. I was not forced, or perhaps more accurately given the opportunity, to reflect on how I might have personally benefited from the privilege of being white.

In other words, it became possible for me to believe in what DiAngelo refers to as the “racist=bad, not racist=good” binary. Racists are “ignorant, bigoted, prejudiced, mean-spirited, old, and southern,” whereas not-racists are “progressive, educated, well-intentioned, open-minded, young, and northern” (*What Does It Mean* 24). As a good, well-meaning liberal, I would have placed myself firmly on the “not racist” side. But as with most binaries, this simplistic conclusion obscures rather than enlightens. DiAngelo warns, “Whites who see ourselves as open-minded can actually be the most challenging population of all to talk to about race, because when we believe we are ‘cool with race,’ we are not examining our racial filters” (5). Further, when we position ourselves as “liberal,” we often “opt to protect what we perceive as our moral reputations, rather than to recognize or change our participation in systems of inequity and dominance” (248-49). Because our sense of ourselves as open-minded or colorblind is so central to our self-perception, we “actually *resist* any suggestion that there might be more going on below the surface” (5). One of the privileges afforded to white people is the power to choose when, how, and how much to address or challenge racism (5).

I was twenty-one years old and studying in Krakow, Poland the first time someone pointed out my own racist thoughts. Back home in Wisconsin, my childhood community was undergoing a controversial battle over the school’s team name and mascot: the Mukwonago Indians.<sup>2</sup> Growing up, I wasn’t particularly invested in school pride and only went to a handful of football games. But when I did attend, I never hesitated to slam my hand down like an axe in the “tomahawk chop” and raise my voice to howl the “Indian battle cry,” school traditions we insisted were meant to be fun and not intended to insult anyone. But when a friend brought up

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<sup>2</sup> At the time, the mascot was a depiction of Native American man wearing a headdress. Although as of now, the school’s nickname remains the same, during the controversy the school changed the mascot to an “M.”

the controversy, I shrugged it off and responded, “People are too sensitive.” When he told me my support of the mascot—even if somewhat apathetic—was racist, I grew angry and thought, “No way. I’m a good person. I can’t be racist.” Overt acts such as name-calling or violence indicated racism; they revealed what DiAngelo refers to as “conscious dislike” (*What Does It Mean* 128). I didn’t dislike Native Americans, and I was well aware of their mistreatment at the hands of white colonizers. But those problems had been solved. Like many of my classmates, I believed that the mascot was intended to honor our community’s Native heritage.<sup>3</sup>

After college, I befriended a woman from the Oneida Nation who patiently taught me to recognize the insidious, and sometimes subtle, nature of racism against Native people, including the reality that mascots are caricatures perpetuating harmful and negative stereotypes of Native Americans. Even though supporters of the mascot insist that it honors our community’s Native American history, that mascot has serious psychological, social, and cultural consequences for Native Americans, particularly Native youth, which led one student to file a complaint with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction in 2009 to change the school mascot (National Congress of American Indians).<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the perception of myself as an open-minded and

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<sup>3</sup> Although this is certainly in conflict with the way Native American history was taught when I was in school: representations of Native Americans were stereotypical and degrading, and the history of genocide against them was minimized in our textbooks (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 312). Our claims to be honoring local Native American history were particularly empty given the fact that I cannot remember learning about this local history in any of my classes, a clear violation of Wisconsin’s Act 31, which refers to the requirement that “all public school districts and pre-service education program provide instruction on the history, culture, and tribal sovereignty of Wisconsin’s eleven federally-recognized American Indian nations and tribal communities” (“State Statutes”).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that in spite of this student’s formal complaint, the district continues to resist all efforts to change the high school’s nickname. In 2010, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction stripped the school of its nickname and logo, calling the mascot “unambiguously race-based.” Even so, the team nickname remains the “Mukwonago Indians.”

progressive person prevented me from recognizing how my actions were prejudicial against Native Americans; in fact, I vehemently denied this possibility and resisted the idea that by participating in the “tomahawk chop” and the “Indian battle cry,” I was perpetuating racist, degrading, and harmful stereotypes (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 194).

In this chapter, I attempt to illuminate the dark underbelly of my own prejudices, a process which began when I enrolled in a Multicultural Literacies seminar during my first year as a doctoral student. Even with the support of a patient professor and classmates who challenged me to think more critically about my experiences and biases, the process of understanding why I am who I am has been difficult and at times deeply embarrassing. Robin DiAngelo’s framework on white racial identity developed in *What Does It Mean to Be White: Developing White Racial Literacy* has been particularly useful and enlightening as I have tried to understand my white socialization. In this book, DiAngelo analyzes the process of white socialization, describing how race shapes the lives of white people; explains why it is so difficult for white people to recognize their own racism; and identifies common white racial patterns. DiAngelo emphasizes that identifying the daily effects of white privilege in my life has less to do with something I have “done” to perpetuate racism and more about “how racism has shaped my consciousness and identity and how it has granted me unearned yet powerful advantages that *result* in disadvantages for people of color” (158).

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Riding the bus home from school one day when I was in fifth grade, I overheard a sixth grader harassing Tory, a younger, African American boy who was, to my memory, among the very few African American students in my grade school at the time. I was shy around kids I did not know well and preferred to daydream quietly with my best friend during our short bus ride;

further, I was always intimidated by this older sixth grader who, with her Lisa Frank pouch full of tinted chapsticks and nail polishes, always seemed much more worldly and cool than I could ever hope to be. But even as a kid I knew that there was only one truly unspeakable word, only one word so damaging and violent that it should not even be spelled out: the “n word.” So when I heard this older girl calling Tory the “n-word,” I was shocked.

I turned to see Tory huddled in his seat, his mouth tightly shut and his eyes cast down. At first I let it go, remained silent, but when the girl said it again, this time louder, I stood and shouted, “Leave him alone.”

As I recreate this scene in my mind now, I picture myself standing firmly, my voice strong, my commitment to racial justice unwavering, even at the tender age of eleven. But I’m being generous to myself, because the reality is I can still remember the lump I felt in the pit of my stomach as I stood up to face the sixth grader, my flushed cheeks as the blood rushed to my head, the mortification I felt when I realized that everyone on the bus was staring at me. Despite my insecurities, my outburst was enough to quiet the sixth grader who, with a slight sneer, sat back down. I, too, sat down, staring at my hands in my lap until I got off the bus what felt like hours later. When I got home, I must have told my parents, who were probably pleased and proud that I spoke up when I saw an injustice being done.

Looking back, I now realize that more pressing than my concern for Tory was my shock and anger that the sixth grader had broken what I thought was an unspoken rule about language: you never say “the n-word.” As a kid I appreciated and respected language rules. My dad, an editor and writer, often taught me new words, asking me to pronounce them, spell them, and use them in context. He took pride when I learned to use them correctly.

I more or less forgot about this episode until twelfth grade when a teacher asked us to write about a time when we stood our moral ground on an issue. I narrated this story in an essay that my teacher encouraged me to submit to a national high school writers' zine. The published essay, told exclusively from my perspective, reinforced one of the dominant ideologies in popular culture: that "white people are saviors of people of color" (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 171). I was a "good white" and the sixth grader was a "bad white," and though the story is factually accurate—and I am still proud that I spoke up instead of remaining silent—my remembering and telling of the story represents my perspective on events. As DiAngelo would prompt me to consider, what might I have omitted or exaggerated to make the story more exciting or to turn myself into an even bigger hero? (171-72).

I cannot not answer these questions, even today. This story—or my telling of it—has become such a central feature of my identity that I can only see it as I have represented it here. But I do know that I never spoke to Tory again, even though he lived down the street and rode his bicycle past my house nearly every day in the summer.

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Even though Jenna and Michi were a year ahead of me, I knew who they were. Everyone did. They were the only Asian American kids in my grade school. But it wasn't until my junior year at Mukwonago High School, when we worked together in the kitchen of an assisted living facility, that I had the opportunity to get to know them. As infants, Jenna and Michi were adopted from Korea by a white family. I don't know anything about their adoption because I never asked, and they did not seem interested in talking about it, but I do remember Jenna telling me she had no interest in learning more about Korea or her birth parents. "I'm American," she would patiently remind friends whenever the subject came up.

Throughout their childhoods, they encountered curious strangers who asked, “Where are you from?” and “Can you speak Korean?” When we were in college in Central Wisconsin, Jenna went to a hair salon in downtown Wausau and as the stylist ran her fingers through Jenna’s hair, she called another stylist over to touch her “thick, Asian hair.” Jenna didn’t know how to respond to these comments, because having grown up in Mukwonago surrounded by middle-class white kids, both girls seemed to identify more with white Americans than Asian Americans. On our way home from the salon, a confused Jenna lamented, “I’m whiter than most white people!”

DiAngelo argues that society continuously sends messages that it is better to be white than to be a person of color. For example, white people in media and advertising have traditionally set the norms and standards of beauty with an emphasis on straight hair, blue eyes, slim hips, narrow noses, and almond-shaped eyes. Popular TV shows centered around friendship circles such as *Friends* and *Sex and the City* feature all white characters, even though the action takes place in racially diverse cities such as New York (*What Does It Mean* 134). It is important to note that people of color view and absorb the same messages about racial difference as do white people, although these messages have a decidedly different impact. DiAngelo refers to this as “internalized racial oppression,” whereby “largely unconscious beliefs and related behaviors are accepted by people of color who are raised in a white supremacist society” (153).<sup>5</sup> In other words, people of color come to believe, act on, and internalize these attitudes about themselves and members of other non-white racial groups resulting in feelings of self-doubt, inferiority, self-hate, powerlessness, hopelessness, apathy, and fear or anxiety (153-54).

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that for most American readers “white supremacist” conjures images of extreme hate groups and the “Alt-Right” movement, but when DiAngelo uses this term, she is trying to capture the pervasive and normalized nature of white dominance and assumed superiority (*What Does It Mean* 148).

DiAngelo discusses a study conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark that illustrates internalized racial oppression. The Clarks asked African American children to choose between a white doll or a black doll. The questions they asked included, “Give me the doll that you like to play with,” “Give me the doll that is the nice doll,” “Give me the doll that looks bad,” and “Give me the doll that is a nice color.” The majority of children, regardless of where they lived in the United States, chose the white doll as the preferred and nice doll, demonstrating that African American children had begun to internalize the message that they were inferior to white people as early as age three. By age seven, the Clarks found, this message was firmly established (154).

Jenna and Michi were stuck: both girls seemed annoyed by the ways in which they identified themselves and the identity that was imposed upon them by others. The color of their skin, the shape of their eyes, and the texture of their hair stood out as different in our white majority community. Despite spending nearly their whole lives in Mukwonago, they were not allowed to be fully American; their Americanness always had to be qualified: *Asian* American. Why was I, a girl with relatively recent Polish, Swedish, and Finnish ancestors, allowed to be fully American and they were not?

I did not have the self-awareness to grapple with these questions at the time. Instead I laughed and agreed with them that they were whiter than most white people, proudly stating that I never noticed they weren't white. But while walking with them through the mall one afternoon, I caught myself scoffing at the groups of exclusively white girls around us: clearly those girls were not as open and accepting as I was. Flanked by my two Asian friends, I wore their difference like a badge proclaiming that I was a good white person.

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After graduating from high school, I enrolled at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point (UWSP), a university in the center of a small city in Central Wisconsin. Although UWSP was more diverse than my small home town, the university is 86.6% white (“University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Diversity”), so again I found myself insulated in a dormitory with primarily white, middle-class women. While working at the university writing center, I befriended Donny, a lively, passionate, and proud African American man from Chicago studying to be a high school English teacher. We worked together as reading and writing tutors on campus and spent our slow shifts sitting at the back table chatting about homework and books. He was the first African American person I had ever had a sustained conversation with, and he welcomed conversations about race and racism. Usually, however, I felt too nervous and worried I might say something wrong to engage honestly in those conversations.

In the spring, I invited him to a potluck at my apartment where he was the only person of color in attendance; I did not think anything of it, and he, being one of the most social people I had ever met, quickly made friends. Late in the evening, Donny turned off the music and inserted a DVD of Lisa Lampanelli’s 2007 comedy special *Dirty Girl*. Everyone gathered in the crowded living room and laughed as she cracked racist jokes: “What do you call a black woman who’s had seven abortions? A crime fighter.” I was baffled. How could she get away with telling these awful jokes—as they were criticized in progressive media—without being booed off stage?

DiAngelo argues that one of the ways in which race shapes the lives of white people is by awarding us for our racial silence. She explains, “White solidarity is the unspoken agreement among whites to not talk openly and honestly about race and to avoid causing other whites to feel racial discomfort by confronting them when they say or do something racially problematic” (*What Does It Mean* 180). This silence protects and maintains white racial privilege by

outwardly denying that racism exists. DiAngelo insists, “I am *rewarded* for not interrupting racism, and *punished* in a range of ways—big and small—when I do” (182, emphasis hers). Yet it was Donny, the only person of color in the room, who laughed the hardest at these jokes. Did his laughter make it acceptable for the white people in the room to laugh along? I was used to hearing white people tell jokes that reinforce racist stereotypes, particularly about African American and Latinx people, but this usually happened when people of color were not present—in what DiAngelo refers to as “backstage settings” (141). Confused, I headed literally backstage, remaining in the kitchen washing dishes.

Donny must have noticed my discomfort at the potluck, because during our writing center shift the following week he told me that while living in Stevens Point he had learned that his presence and his dark skin made people uncomfortable. It’s not that he was constantly encountering racism or that he felt particularly at risk; rather, it seemed that most white people he met needed to prove to him that they weren’t racist. They would tell him they didn’t notice skin color, they would act overly nice, they would carefully refrain from using racial terms and labels (DiAngelo 141). He saw through their good intentions and tried to confront their discomfort by highlighting his blackness, by claiming it and even laughing at it, thereby allowing them to laugh too.

I was surprised by Donny’s admission and did not know what to say. Because of my very limited experience talking about racism—particularly with a person of color—it felt racist to talk about race. DiAngelo explains that this perspective “is rooted in the concept that race doesn’t matter; thus, to talk about it gives it a weight it should not have” (*What Does It Mean* 268). This denial, she continues, is fundamental to the maintenance of unequal racial power: “The denial only serves those who hold racial power, not those who don’t” (268). When Donny confided in

me, he was offering me an opportunity to increase my cultural competency, to learn more about the experience of being a person of color in a white university and community. However, I responded by telling him that Lampanelli's jokes were offensive and that at future potlucks we should just stay with the music I had picked out.

In other words, I chose to define Donny's experience according to my own terms and in doing so fought to maintain my limited world view rather than to expand it (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 240). I could not admit, even to myself, that I did not want race to be a topic at my potluck—*especially* with Donny in the room—because it would lead to uncomfortable conversations. It was much safer to pretend that Donny's experience as an African American man was basically the same as those of the white people in our group. I'm sure Donny saw through my pretense, because from that point on he politely turned down future invitations and avoided me outside of the writing center.

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Jason was a twenty-year-old student enrolled in my 8:00 a.m. section of English 101 during my first semester as a graduate teaching assistant at UWM. As a new teacher, I wanted to like my students and, more important, wanted them to like me. As a student myself, just a few years older than most of my students, I felt, as I'm sure many if not most new teachers feel, insecure, an imposter unprepared to teach college-level writing courses. My troubles with Jason began when we met one-on-one to talk about his work three weeks into the semester. I used these meetings as an opportunity to chat with my students, to elicit concerns and comments from voices that had thus far remained quiet in the classroom. At the end of each conference, I asked the same questions: "How is the class going for you? Is there anything you would like to see changed or that isn't working well for you?"

Jason leaned back in his chair, and mumbled, “Well, it’s not a concern but…”

I pressed him to continue: “What is it? If something’s not working for you, I’d really like to know.”

“It’s just something that some of the guys talk about in small groups.”

I remember shifting in my seat. I remember his aggressive stare and the disconcerting silence that followed. In class, Jason was quiet, but I had often noticed him watching me closely while I was leading discussions or explaining assignments and activities. I repressed any feelings of discomfort and instead chose to take his watchful eyes as a sign that he was engaged in the course. Although up to this point in the semester Jason hadn’t said or done anything overtly troubling, something about his demeanor—his smirk, his confrontational eye contact—made me hesitate a bit before asking again, “What is it, Jason?”

He smiled and said, “It’s something that I think about sometimes.” After a pause he added, “You’re an English teacher, so you probably understand what I’m trying to get at here.”

While he never explicitly stated what he and his classmates talked about, his mannerisms and tone were sexually charged. Instead of discussing our course texts, he and some of the other male students were watching and discussing me in sexual terms. Jason’s comments literally knocked me off balance. I turned red, leaned back in my chair, and hit my head on the wall. Then, while rubbing the back of my head and trying desperately to recover, I intoned, “If you don’t have any concerns about the class, then we’re done here.”

Throughout the semester I replayed that conversation with Jesse in my mind, cringing each time I recalled hitting my head on the wall. I berated myself: *How could I have been so weak?* I ran through a laundry list of how I dressed, acted, walked, talked; I wondered if I smiled too much, or if I was too open and unguarded in the classroom. Standing at the chalkboard, with

my back to my class, I worried that my pants were too tight or that my students could spot my bra strap beneath my blouse. What were they seeing when they looked at me?

Later that year, this story became the basis of my Master's project, a fifty-page research-informed narrative in which I questioned my feelings about my students and even my passion for teaching. My central question at the time was, "How does a young female teacher not much older than her students deal with the sexual fantasies of young male students?" While I still see value in this project, when I wrote my thesis I left out one major factor in my relationship with Jason: he was African American. I was aware of this omission as I wrote my thesis, but I did not address it partially because no one on my committee asked, but also because at the time I did not think that it affected the way I perceived and responded to Jason's behavior. Much of my training (which at the time, I admit, was limited) and my own educational background led me to believe that as a teacher, I was not supposed to notice my students' race; rather, I was supposed to be colorblind, to treat all of my students the same regardless of their race.

DiAngelo asserts, "All humans have prejudice; it is not possible to avoid" (*What Does It Mean* 48). If I know a social group exists, I have information about that group that I have picked up from society and that helps me make sense of the group from "my cultural framework" (48). We are born into this system and do not have a say in whether or not our behaviors will be affected by it (265). Further, most often prejudice does not display itself in outright acts of hatred; rather, it is "instantaneous and occurs at the pre-cognitive level" (48). Therefore, because my experience with people of color was so limited, I subconsciously relied on the problematic images and representations I saw in movies and on TV of African American men as hyper-sexual and violent. These insidious images were so deeply ingrained that I was not aware of how they influenced my interactions with Jason.

I told myself that Jason's race was not a factor in my fear of him and my reaction to him, but I feel fairly certain now that if Jason had been a white man, I would not have felt so unnerved that I would have remained silent. I believe I would have pulled him aside and addressed the problem directly, making it clear that his behavior was unacceptable in my classroom. But with Jason I avoided confrontation because I was afraid that he would interpret my negative response to his behavior as a negative racial response. My whiteness and his blackness muddied the situation. So instead of confronting him and the situation directly, I fumed privately, then wrote about it in a project I knew he would never read.

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When I look around at my overwhelmingly white world, two features of my identity become painfully obvious. First, more often than not I have positioned myself as a savior, as a hero in the racism narrative. The white savior trope is commonly used in books, films, and historical representations of white people. Typically, this character rescues people of color from societal and internalized oppression. Even when white people are positioned as evil characters, such as in films and books about slavery, these narratives attempt to balance outcomes with exceptionally good white people who help African Americans achieve freedom. Matthew W. Hughey argues, "This trope is so wide-spread that varied intercultural and interracial relations are often guided by a logic that racializes and separates people into those who are redeemers (whites) and those who are redeemed or in need of redemption (nonwhites)" (2). Nonwhite characters and culture are presented as essentially "broken, marginalized, and pathological," while white characters emerge as "messianic characters that easily fix the nonwhite pariah with their superior moral and mental abilities" (2).

English teachers are especially popular in white savior narratives: typically, a white teacher enters a diverse classroom filled with troubled, aggressive, and disrespectful students and changes their hearts and minds, leading them to opportunities they would not have been exposed to on their own. (As I mentioned in Chapter Two, Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds* was my childhood favorite, but there are many others including *Freedom Writers* starring Hilary Swank<sup>6</sup> and *Music of the Heart* with Meryl Streep.) Celia Edell argues that these white teacher narratives ignore “the reality that communities of color have their own leaders and they’re not being saved by white people. It also exoticizes the young people and positions them as being automatically broken and needing saving, just because of where they live or how they look.” To put it simply, the problem with this narrative is that it implies that people of color always need saving and that white people are the only ones who are prepared—and able—to save them (Edell).

As discussed earlier, I have dealt with my own issues of pride for defending a person of color during a time of need, viewing people of color as people in need of help: Tory needed me as his advocate, and Jenna and Michi needed me as their white ally. They needed me to be there for them to affirm their acceptance in our, or should I say my, community. Howard argues that many white people take this stance when working with marginalized groups: “Even in our postmodern rhetoric related to the deconstruction of dominance, Whites often speak of ‘giving voice’ to marginalized groups, as if *their* voice is *ours* to give” (66). I was empathetic, able and willing to walk in the shoes of others who were unlike me; I would even be willing to fight for those who could not fight for themselves, to give voice to the voiceless. In my relationships with

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<sup>6</sup> During my first semester teaching basic writing, one of my white students told me I reminded him of Hilary Swank in *Freedom Writers*. He meant it as a compliment, but the fact that a student was making this connection reveals how pervasive and powerful the teacher-hero trope is.

people of color, as I perceived them, I was the catalyst for change, the good liberal committed to defending the helpless against injustice. While my intentions and actions may have been laudable (after all, one should not remain silent in the face of oppression), my subsequent interpretation of my actions as the generous white savior ignored how such stereotypes contribute to existing oppressive hierarchies.

Research shows that such attitudes can have deleterious effects on students of color. For example, Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson showed in several experiments that African American college freshmen and sophomores performed more poorly on standardized tests than white students when their race was emphasized by asking students to fill out a demographics questionnaire before completing the test, whereas when race was not mentioned, African American students performed the same as or better than their white peers. Steele and Aronson refer to this phenomenon as “stereotype threat,” meaning that a student’s academic performance can be negatively affected by the awareness that their behavior might be viewed through the lens of racial stereotypes. Stereotype threat has serious consequences on students of color, including decreased performance in academic and non-academic contexts, increased use of self-defeating behaviors, and disengagement (Steele and Aronson).

In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, bell hooks argues, “It has become more fashionable, and at times profitable, for white folks in academic environments to think and write about race. ... White folks who talk race ... are often represented as patrons, as superior civilized beings” (27). hooks would agree that our thinking and writing about race too often revolves around what we do for our students: the white teacher giving voice or agency to the minority writer. While it is tempting to believe that we are living in a post-racial society, hooks argues that this claim is a troubling feature of “white supremacist culture” (26).

Yet many white people take this stance when working with people of color. Julie G. Landsman admits, “We can feel comfortable when the discussion rests on the misfortunes of others and does not come back to our own place in the story, having to do with our experience, responsibility, complicity, and advantages as Whites in America” (13). I may not actively and consciously participate in racist practices, but how often have I taken the time to reflect on how I have personally benefited from racism and white dominance in the wider culture? Furthermore, when I do reflect on and identify evidence of my privilege, what will I do with this realization? How do I challenge it?

After more than twenty years in school, I believed I had been educated out of racism. I had read too much, become too aware and too smart to be racist. When I shut down the conversation with Donny and ignored race as a factor in my response to Jason’s sexual overtones, I attempted to combat racism by ignoring race. I was too smart to be affected by race. I was beyond racism. I do not think there is anything unique about my response. I have seen ample evidence of this perspective in many hallway and mailroom conversations I have had with coworkers, in seminar course discussions about activist pedagogies, and in my peers’ social media posts. For example, in September 2013, *The Washington Monthly* published an essay by Jamaal Abdul-alim, a UWM graduate, that went viral among graduate students and faculty at UWM. Abdul-alim’s article examined the abysmal graduation rates for African American students at UWM: only 19 percent graduate within six years. Abdul-alim prompted us as a university community to ask whether UWM is serving its students as it should in light of the very low graduation rate for historically minoritized groups.

This article was circulated among instructors and graduate students on Facebook and via email and was discussed in several of my graduate seminars. While everyone was appalled by

the statistics, missing from our conversations was any reflection on the First-Year Writing Program's culpability and contribution to these statistics, despite the fact that students of color—and at my university, African American students in particular—failed our courses disproportionately compared with their white peers. As I previously noted, during the Fall 2014 semester (one year after this essay was published), 158 English 101 students who self-identified as African American were assessed at the end of the semester: 71% of these students passed English 101 and 29% failed, while 88% of white students passed and only 12% failed, troubling statistics that remain consistent across semesters and across First-Year Writing courses. This article could have presented an opportunity for all of us—teachers and administrators—to reflect on how our course texts, assignments, placement and assessment methods, and professional development opportunities might have contributed to the achievement gap. Instead, we bemoaned the injustice while reposting and forwarding the article, as if pressing the Facebook “Like” button was enough to solve the problem. Weary of the negative reactions on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, a friend pointed out, “It’s just a bunch of white people talking to other white people about racism.”<sup>7</sup>

Throughout graduate school I have been profoundly influenced by work in Composition Studies and Multicultural Education examining how cultural contexts shape student knowledge and inform student writing (Ball and Lardner, Carter, Delpit, Gilyard, Richardson, and Soliday).

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<sup>7</sup> This kind of shallow activism has come to be known as slacktivism: “The practice of supporting a political or social cause by means such as social media or online petitions, characterized as involving very little effort or commitment” (“Slacktivism”). Social media users can “like,” “share,” or “tweet” about something they saw on the internet, allowing them to express their concern with minimal thought or effort. While this kind of activism may raise awareness in people, often times “slacktivism” campaigns are based on bad information. Further, a 2011 study found that there was a very small positive correlation between college students who engage in online politics on Facebook and those who engage off of it (Vitak, Smock, Carr, Ellison, and Lampe).

Essential to my teaching philosophy is the recognition of the socially-constructed nature of knowledge and language (Bartholomae, Berlin, Bizzell, Harris, Horner and Lu, and Pratt), as well as Critical Pedagogy, whereby students learn to speak with greater authority because they draw on knowledge they already possess (Freire, Giroux, and Goleman). From these works I have learned how internalized oppression affects students' academic performance and self-esteem; the ways in which African American English (AAE) follows a set of complex linguistic rules that should be appreciated and affirmed in classroom settings; and the importance of teachers teaching students the skills they need to enter what Lisa Delpit calls the "culture of power." However, while all of these various influences have helped me grow in terms of my intellectual approach to teaching, my studies and reflection on the issues surrounding white privilege has had the most profound personal effect on me with regard to my work with first-year writing students.

In my graduate school seminars or my work as a member of the writing program administration, I was rarely challenged to think critically about the whiteness of my self-identity (Titone 163). As a result, I became what Connie Titone refers to as a "white intellectualist"; that is, my studies made me intellectually aware of my privilege and the impact of racism in education and outcomes, particularly for students of color. While every teacher needs to establish a theoretical foundation for their work, Titone insists that knowledge alone is not sufficient "for an antiracist, white educator" (163).

In her forward to *"I Don't See Color": Personal and Critical Perspectives on White Privilege*, Eula Biss distinguishes between seeing whiteness and seeing *through* whiteness. She explains, "When we study art history or anthropology or poetry we are very often taught in terms of whiteness, bounded within the limits of whiteness. But what happens to whiteness there is the

opposite of study—whiteness isn't being looked at so much as looked through" (viii). Todd DeStigter puts it this way: "Culture is not only something teacher-researchers study but also something *from* which they study" (*Citizen Teacher* 304). It is essential for white teachers to shift from looking through whiteness to looking at whiteness, though Biss acknowledges how difficult this task can be. She reflects, "Looking at something we've been trained all our lives to look through can be like grasping water or examining glass" (viii).

The personal reflections I share in this chapter have helped me see and understand how racism works in and on me, specifically the ways in which white privilege has affected my beliefs, attitudes, biases, and relationships with people of color. I viewed myself as the white savior, convinced that education and knowledge was enough to plant me firmly on the "not racist" side of the "racist-bad/not racist-good" divide (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 193). I far too easily and conveniently dismissed racism as having nothing to do with me. DiAngelo asks, "If, as a white person, I conceptualize racism as a binary and I see myself on the 'not racist' side, what further action is required of me? No action is required at all, because *I am not a racist*" (194, emphasis hers).

We are all raised in a specific cultural context. Even with "years of what may well be focused egalitarian thinking, academic training, and professionalization" (Croovitz 153), it goes without saying that not all of our childhood prejudices are "accounted for and safely purged or neutralized" (153). As a first-year writing teacher, particularly one who has chosen to work with historically minoritized student populations, it is not enough to value writing from marginalized groups. It is not enough to recognize the intelligence that lies within "non-standard" forms. It is not enough to encourage student writers to find and use their own voices. These practices are of limited value if we fail to examine the self-perceptions and preconceptions that influence our

work with students in the composition classroom. If we can accept this premise, then we can turn to critical reflection on how these self-perceptions and preconceptions inform and complicate our work as first-year writing teachers.

## Chapter Four: A Humbling Challenge

“A fool thinks himself to be wise, but a wise man knows himself to be a fool.”  
—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

“Learning is what happens when the heart is uncomfortable with its lack of knowing.”  
—Kao Kalia Yang and Aaron Rudolf Miller Hokanson, “Reflections on Education: A Two-Way Journey”

In “Multicultural Classrooms/Monocultural Teachers,” Terry Dean argues that it is the writing teacher’s responsibility to know her students and to “structure learning experiences that both help students write their way into the university and help teachers learn their way into student cultures” (23). He concedes that this can be a daunting challenge in contemporary classrooms that are racially, linguistically, economically, and educationally diverse. Nevertheless, his rationale is convincing to me: “How students handle the cultural transitions that occur in the acquisition of academic discourse affects how successfully they acquire that discourse” (23). Dean provides writing teachers with specific techniques such as assigning topics on culture and language that allow students to explore different value systems and to apply a variety of problem-solving strategies: arranging students into peer response groups that offer students a sense of belonging on campus and ensuring that discussions of difference and assimilation are central to their coursework (28-32).

While Dean’s approach seems reasonable, I also agree with Kao Kalia Yang and Aaron Rudolf Miller Hokanson, who assert, “Our emphasis is too often on knowing or understanding the [students] we work with” (28). In a multicultural classroom, we may work with students who do not know the underlying culture in our curriculum, such as protocols of speaking and listening that many middle class white teachers take for granted (28). Lisa Delpit insists that students are too often “held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly

informed them” (“Lisa Delpit on Power and Pedagogy”). Scholars such as Ronda L. Schelvan and Brenda Smith Myles refer to this as the “hidden curriculum,” meaning the transmission of norms, values, and beliefs conveyed in the classroom and social environment. The teacher’s use of language, choice of assigned texts, disciplinary measures, curricular priorities, and assessment all contribute to the hidden curriculum which, in turn, reinforces existing inequalities. Delpit holds that students must be explicitly taught the skills and language they need to fully participate in their education and in “mainstream American life” (“Lisa Delpit on Power and Pedagogy”). Thus, it is much more important, Yang and Hokanson argue, to admit to what we cannot ever know about our students. Rather than trying to acquire or attain “cultural knowledge” as if it is an educational commodity, our focus instead should be on caring for students. Yang and Hokanson clarify, “It is more important to care than to understand; more important to care than to know” (28). Hokanson continues:

As White teachers in diverse classrooms we need to realize that the world is much bigger than what we know, or what the classroom can allow. We need to accept the reality that our students often have many teachers besides us. We need to worry less about how to ‘reach out’ or ‘welcome’ these students and focus more on how we care about them and the places they come from. (29)

It is important to note that Yang and Hokanson’s emphasis on “care” might seem, to some, to support a feminized, maternal approach to teaching whereby “caring” for students somehow devalues the knowledge-based professional qualifications required for teaching. In this context, however, “care” refers to the teacher’s ability to place students at the center of classroom learning, thereby turning their personal interests and strengths into opportunities for academic success (Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching* 50). Gay contends, “Caring-based education has

academic, civic, social, personal, cultural, political, moral, and transformative learning goals and behavioral dimensions” (51). That said, a caring-based approach does not preclude or diminish the intellectual rigor required of teachers. Rather, the one complements the other.

According to Laura Micciche’s research in Composition Studies, pedagogical scholarship too often focuses on student transformation and neglects the teacher’s responsibilities in the classroom when students do not respond as the teacher expects (30). As a result, teachers schooled in “emancipatory” teaching practices such as feminist and critical pedagogies may be practiced in helping students question cultural values, but ill-prepared for the responses this form of questioning might elicit from students (26). Micciche argues, “Prevailing conceptions of [empowering] teachers do not seem to take into account that an empowering teaching situation is complicated not only by the diverse students who populate our classrooms, but also by the teacher’s cultural location and his/her willingness and ability to see beyond it” (32). Here, “cultural location” describes the ways in which the teacher’s actions, such as the texts they assign or the questions they ask, reveal their dispositions, presuppositions, and values influencing their work and their relationships with students.

Our personal identities and our professional work as teachers are intimately connected. Connie Titone insists, “White educators who have the professional look but not the identity development of antiracist teachers cannot accomplish the difficult adaptive work required to move us ahead into the new century” (160). In other words, if knowing our students is necessary for our work in developing a multicultural progressive pedagogy, we also must acquire knowledge of the self—how our “cultural perspectives shape our thinking and actions” (Hidalgo 101). As I have argued throughout this dissertation, it is essential that writing teachers recognize and reckon with our limitations and deeply ingrained biases about racial identity and white

privilege. Concomitantly, we must strive to understand how those biases are shaped by our social contexts and how they influence our teacher-identity and our work with students. But as I also have come to realize, this is a difficult—and deeply humbling—challenge that many teachers are not prepared to undertake.

In Chapter Two, I claim that practices such as valuing writing from marginalized groups, recognizing the intelligence that lies within “non-standard” forms, and encouraging students to find and use their own voices is only useful if we also examine the self-perceptions and preconceptions shaping our work with students in the composition classroom. In Chapter Three, I describe several experiences to illustrate and reflect critically on how racism has worked in and on me, including how my cultural knowledge has been informed and affected by my white privilege. In this chapter, I return to my work as a first-year writing teacher, looking back at the ways in which my self-perceptions as a hero-teacher and white intellectual conflict with my desire to enact a progressive, multicultural pedagogy. Analysis of these self-perceptions highlights the biases and assumptions influencing and complicating my well-intentioned work as a teacher, particularly my curriculum design and interactions with students during class discussions. As this chapter demonstrates, progressive pedagogies such as culturally responsive teaching can succeed only to the extent that the teacher as well as students cultivate critical self-awareness.

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How do I teach writing responsibly? As a graduate student, this was the central question driving my research. More specifically, how do I give students the skills they need to be successful without asking them to abandon their cultural identities in the process? This concern emerged from my reading of *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* by

Richard Rodriguez and *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence* by Keith Gilyard. In these autobiographical narratives, the authors recount and analyze their education, ultimately disagreeing with each other about the purpose of education. Rodriguez believes educators should strive to change minority students, transform them into majority stakeholders, even if that results in a painful separation from family and culture. Gilyard, in contrast, believes educators should respond to the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of their students. He contends, “If we are asking if ... cultural loss is a desirable aim of public education, this question only has one answer: No!” (160). Gilyard additionally asserts, “A pedagogy is successful only if it makes a knowledge of skills achievable while at the same time allowing students to maintain their own sense of identity” (11). This is the kind of responsible and fair-minded pedagogy that writing teachers should work toward, but as a new teacher, I struggled with what I experienced as a disconnect between theory and practice. What does this pedagogy look like? How is it implemented in the writing classroom?

Much of my seminar work focused on “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (“SRTOL”), a policy statement drafted in 1972 by a committee affiliated with the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in response to the social upheaval of the 1960s and the adoption of comprehensive Open Admissions policies at many four-year colleges across the country. These policies allowed any student who had earned a GED or a high school diploma to enroll even if they were considered, by traditional standards, minimally prepared for college admission. Writing teachers struggled to determine what to do about the language habits of students who came from a broad spectrum of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds: should the schools uphold language variety, modify it, or eradicate it (CCCC Executive Committee)?

“SRTOL” declared that writing teachers and schools were responsible for upholding and honoring students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, the committee also recognized that major mandated changes in writing instruction would be met with resistance. Thus, two years later, the committee also published a lengthy explanation and reference to research on dialects and usage in a special issue of *College Composition and Communication* (CCC). Here the committee asserted that students have a right to “their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style” and challenged teachers to consider whether they were rejecting students “based on any real [flaw] in the dialect or whether [they were] actually rejecting the students themselves ... because of their racial, social, and cultural origins.” The committee cited years of linguistic research as it encouraged teachers to develop awareness of dialects in relationship to students’ learning.

The problem with the policy is that it did not clarify *how* to affirm a student’s language rights while promoting students’ learning (Perryman-Clark, Kirkland, and Jackson 2). As a result, forty years after the policy was published, there is still very little research on its explicit application, paving the way for teachers and administrators to argue that while in theory we respect students’ right to their language, in practice students still need to learn Edited American English (EAE) if they are to succeed in the university and beyond. In other words, students may be given permission to speak and write in their own dialects early on, but eventually they will have to translate that language and their ideas into EAE. To many teachers, this situation reflects economic reality: “Students need to be familiar with the conventions associated with [EAE], especially since many employers supposedly desire employees with [EAE] proficiency” (Perryman-Clark, Kirkland, and Jackson 5). As Rosina Lippi-Green observes, “The teacher

discriminates because the employer does, the [student] pays the price of that discrimination by accommodating and assimilating” (85). Even those who agree that all language varieties are equally intelligent and complex tend to debate the contexts in which various language varieties are appropriate.

As a teacher in the First-Year Writing Program, I believed that teachers and administrators should uphold policies and practices that respect, value, and affirm the usefulness of all students’ linguistic resources. Even so, I struggled over this tension between theory and practice. On one hand, I agreed with research showing that no one language variety is superior to another; but on the other hand, I worried that not teaching EAE would mean setting up some students for failure in other university courses or as they entered the workforce where they would be expected to communicate effectively in EAE. During my final semester of graduate coursework, I enrolled in a Sociolinguistics class where I frequently addressed this struggle in my writing and in group discussions. Near the end of the term, an African American woman who was working on her M.A. degree in Education challenged my ideas on the role of “Standard English”<sup>8</sup> in the writing classroom, a term which had been used freely and without question by the seminar group throughout the semester. By this point in my education, I had grown comfortable arguing that we writing teachers should no longer exclusively teach EAE; that the idea of a “standard” variety of English was a myth doing more harm than good; and that society

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<sup>8</sup> Standard English typically refers to the variety of English used in professional communication in the United States and taught in American schools. It has distinct political connotations, because it implies that there is a standard dialect within the United States and that “non-standard” varieties are somehow deviant. I choose to refer to this dialect as “Edited American English,” which is a variety of English typically used in academic writing. This phrasing treats this academic variety of English *as* a variety rather than as the standard, thereby reinforcing the idea that all language varieties are—and should be treated as—equal in complexity and intelligence.

needed to evolve beyond privileging EAE to changing the way minoritized dialects are perceived. However, my classmate argued that writing teachers *must* correct grammar and uphold EAE as the “standard” variety, specifically because students must communicate in EAE to achieve success in their university courses and careers. Her argument echoed Richard Rodriguez’s critique of bilingual education: “Supporters of . . . bilingualism toy with the confusion of those Americans who cannot speak standard English as well as they do” (39). The teachers who are advocating for bilingual education, Rodriguez believes, have already mastered “standard English”; ironically, by not insisting that students’ grammar and syntax conform to the standard variety, they are ensuring that the students most in need of help will be left behind.

I had seen evidence supporting my classmate’s viewpoint when a student confided that she was confused by her grades: while she was earning an A in my writing class, she was receiving failing grades on her essays for a Sociology course. After reading and comparing her essays for both classes, I recognized that my grading was based on idea development and critical thinking, while the Sociology professor was assessing grammar and mechanics—the student’s ability to clearly and “correctly” communicate her ideas. This student’s dilemma clearly illustrated the high stakes situation students find themselves in. This said, I still wanted to find ways to teach writing in a way that would honor and affirm students’ linguistic and cultural skills.

In my own Sociolinguistics class, the debate with my classmate over the teaching of EAE ended when she dismissively called me “naïve,” leaving me feeling not only antagonized, but also self-righteous, a feeling that was reinforced by my professor’s uncomfortable silence during our discussion and her deliberate shift in discussion topics. When I went home and described the incident to my family, I knew they would offer the affirmation I needed: undoubtedly I was a

caring and thoughtful teacher, which immediately restored my self-confidence. Yet clearly the class debate still rankled.

Upon deeper reflection, however, I now see that a major, unacknowledged difficulty in the Sociolinguistics debate with my classmate was that we had very different educational experiences. For me, when this discussion occurred my education was mostly benign, even benevolent in that I was fortunate enough to be able to devote all of my time and energy to my studies; reading, writing, and thinking were the central activities of my life. My classmate, on the other hand, experienced education as work that she was doing *in addition to* raising a family and teaching full time. Furthermore, she was deeply concerned about her own children, two African American teenagers who might be left behind if well-meaning but ultimately naïve teachers like me withheld from them the tools they would need to be successful as writers and communicators. In other words, she was right that I could not identify with, much less comprehend, the seriousness of those conflicts and responsibilities.

Yet at the time of our argument, I believed my points were more persuasive than hers because I was more informed about pedagogy and research. While criticizing the dominant cultural viewpoint that EAE was superior to other varieties of English, I also acted upon what Darren Crovitz refers to as “a certain sense of middle-class European American privilege and entitlement that . . . misrepresented or disregarded other viewpoints” (153). In other words, I was perceiving myself and portraying myself as a progressive, concerned, multicultural writing teacher, a “crusading enlightener” (153), who could inspire and liberate students. I believe that my attitude, or my naiveté, effectively dismissed my classmate’s very real pain and experiences. When I left the class that evening with my self-image bolstered, I was ignoring the “more deep-seated biases hidden beneath the layers” of my own socialization (153).

In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, bell hooks argues that it has become “fashionable” and at times “profitable” for “white folks in academic environments to think and write about race” (27). She elaborates, those “white folks who talk race ... are often represented as patrons, as superior civilized beings,” yet “their actions are just another indication of white-supremacist power, as in ‘we are so much more civilized and intelligent than black folks/people of color that we know better than they do all that can be understood about race’” (27). This was embarrassingly true in my argument with my Sociolinguistics classmate. As Gary R. Howard posits, “Too often as white educators we have seen the problems as ‘out there,’ and we have conceptualized our role as one of ‘helping minority students’” (5). Similarly, I saw myself as a burgeoning expert on teaching writing with a particular interest in attitudes about language and racism. During our classroom debate over EAE, my unspoken goal was to convince my fellow classmates that I was not racist and that I was a progressive advocate for social justice. *Wasn't the fact that I saw African American Vernacular English as equal to EAE enough to rest my case?* My self-perceived intellectual superiority led me to ignore my own relationship and experiences with race and racism.

This still troubling, and humbling, incident reminds me of a “Project Implicit” quiz that I took while enrolled in a Multicultural Literacies graduate course. Developed by psychologists at Harvard, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington, the quiz was designed to measure unconscious or automatic biases. The researchers argue that people can be consciously committed to egalitarianism yet still possess hidden prejudices and stereotypes (“Test Yourself”). Their aim is to tap into and jumpstart examination of hidden biases: “Where do they come from? How do they influence our actions? What can we do about them?” (“Test Yourself”).

My quiz results showed that I preferred white people and that I harbored biases against people of color, particularly African American men. These results did not surprise me. I had already begun the process of critically reflecting on my privilege and my experiences as a white woman who had grown up in a middle-class white community, and I was aware that my socialization in this white community affected the way I perceived and treated people of color. Looking back, however, I am surprised and disturbed by my belief at the time that I had no need to look more closely at the tangled roots of my prejudices. Confident that I was an antiracist, progressive teacher, I believed that I had become, or at least was well on the way to becoming, “bias- and stereotype-free” (Crovitz 153). Thus, while sharing my results with my classmates, protected by my identity as a good liberal who had already recognized, addressed, and corrected the problem within herself, I did not feel shame. Rather, I felt pride in my ability to talk about my privilege, to reflect on my biases in writing with classmates and colleagues. Howard asserts, “Seldom have we [white educators looked] deeply and critically at the necessary changes and growth we ourselves must achieve if we are to work effectively with the real issues of race, equity, and social justice” (5). In my case, I was not compelled to look deeper into myself, to grapple with what these test results might mean, to ask the next logical question: How were these biases continuing to affect my daily life, particularly my interactions with and perceptions of people of color?

In an essay on racism within the Buddhist community, bell hooks contends, “They [white people] are so attached to the image of themselves as nonracists that they refuse to see their own racism.” Similarly, in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, hooks describes discussions she has had with students in classroom settings in which they tell her that “racism really no longer shapes the contours of [their] lives, that there is just no such thing as racial difference, that

‘we are all just people’” (25). These comments prompt hooks to pose a question to her students: if they were about to die and could choose to come back as a white male, a white female, an African American female, or an African American male, which identity would they choose (26)? She explains that every time she has asked this question, most of the students, irrespective of gender or race, choose white male. Upon questioning, the students will do a “sophisticated analysis of privilege based on race” (26). White progressives often have what hooks calls a “grandiose” sense of themselves, that is, “a confidence that [they are] anti-racist and not all vigilant about making the connections that would transform [their] behavior and not just [their] thinking” (29). She explains, “This disconnect between their conscious repudiation of race as a marker of privilege and their unconscious understanding is a gap we have to bridge, an illusion that must be shattered before a meaningful discussion of race and racism can take place” (26).

Looking back at my experiences in my Sociolinguistics and Multicultural Literacies courses, I am struck by how certain I was of myself as a progressive, anti-racist educator. I understood multicultural issues intellectually. I talked about my privilege and could explain how that privilege was working in my life. I studied and worked to enact multicultural, progressive pedagogies that would appeal intellectually and emotionally to my students. At the same time, however, I carried with me a feeling of superiority, of enlightenment—an unearned confidence in my abilities that protected me from asking the tougher questions I needed to explore and ultimately prevented me from coming to terms with myself as a white woman and a white teacher in a multicultural classroom. In her essay, “The Painful and Liberating Practice of Facing My Own Racism,” Courtney E. Martin acknowledges, “One of the delusions of white (progressive) culture is the assumption that if we stay vigilant enough, if we do enough ‘work,’ then we can achieve some sort of permanent state of goodness; i.e. prove that we are definitely

not racist.” Going through an undergraduate degree in English and on to a Master’s and now a Doctorate in English should mean that I have let go of racism—or racism has let go of me. Yet while professing to embrace critical pedagogies as I developed my curricula, responded to and assessed student writing, and carried out related research, all of this work remained at the intellectual level, safely distant from my inner life.

When I began teaching basic writing, I was not self-aware enough to recognize how my deep-seated prejudices affected my work as a writing teacher; however, I did have many opinions and long-held assumptions about the kinds of experiences that my students of color were likely to have lived. Robin DiAngelo asserts, “At the same time that most whites have a very limited understanding of race and racism, I have never met a white person who does not have an *opinion* on race and racism. In fact, I have seldom met a white person who doesn’t have a strong, *emotional* opinion on race and racism” (*What Does It Mean* 20, emphasis hers). The problem is that most of these opinions address race in superficial ways because we tend to confuse opinions with informed knowledge (20). She explains, “Many people feel that taking a class, reading a book, attending a workshop, having a friend, or just being a generally nice person are sufficient to ‘cover it’ and thus lack the humility that is afforded other disciplines” (20). In my case, I had plenty of anecdotal evidence and enough book-learned research to support my opinions and observations, so when I began teaching I unhesitatingly made linguistic racism the central theme of my course—a topic in which I had become professionally invested.

When we began the semester, my students seemed enthusiastic about following my curriculum; their personal stories initially confirmed my expectations and resonated with the research I had undertaken to prepare for our semester together. For example, several English Language Learning (ELL) students shared troubling memories of being pulled out of high school

classrooms and sent to the “special room” where they filled out worksheets with other non-native English learning students, even though they felt they would have benefited from remaining in their classrooms. An African American student who grew up in Whitefish Bay, a wealthy community in Milwaukee I have often heard referred to as “*Whitefolks Bay*,” reflected that in her high school, what she called the “low level track,” which was purportedly designed to support struggling students regardless of race or socioeconomic background, was commonly known by all students as the “black kids’ track.” Another African American student confided in me that her mother did not support her decision to go to college; considering it a waste of time, she actively created obstacles to prevent this student from attending class and getting her homework done. These stories reinforced my conviction that basic writing was the perfect place for my teacher-as-savior self-identity to be publicly recognized; as their hero, I would give these poor, unfortunate students the confidence and skills they needed to succeed in college and beyond.

In much multicultural education and composition research, the dominant teaching narrative presents the teacher as hero, an “outgrowth of the fictional hero plot that most English teachers learned in pursuing their degrees” (Tassoni and Thelin 4). In the typical hero narrative, a conventionally male protagonist embarks on a quest to save others, meets obstacles, implements strategies to overcome those obstacles, and succeeds (4-5). Tassoni and Thelin explain that the problem with this narrative is that the “‘others,’ whether they be villains or victims, have no true perspective to offer to the plot” (5). Tassoni and Thelin add: “The common image of teachers in writing classroom narratives and similar pedagogical re-creations found in journals and books displays the instructor in the role of undisputable knower/hero of classroom practice and the student as either listless or resistant, a figure in need of rescue” (4).

In these narratives, the teacher spots the problem, explains a solution, then shares with readers (or viewers, as in the case of movies such as *Dangerous Minds*, *Dead Poets Society*, or *Freedom Writers*) how they implemented the solution. On the one hand, research-based narratives by teachers—e.g. Vivian Grace Paley’s *White Teacher* and Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*—highlight important issues such as the impact of race, ethnicity, social class, and language on writing instruction. On the other hand, I now question why such narratives focus primarily on teachers’ heroism, their ultimate success in the face of adversity, while avoiding the nuances and tensions that exist between teachers and students and that might reveal the limits of progressive teaching—or as Thelin and Tassoni describe, those times when “economic realities, academic hierarchies, and social assumptions collided in the classroom, making us wonder what we had done and what we could ever do” (2).

When I was an undergraduate and graduate student in English, the most appealing narratives made me feel good about myself as a white woman, because more than anything, I wanted to be a good teacher. More specifically and more truthfully, I wanted to be *seen* as a good teacher. I wanted a star on my evaluations each semester to affirm to myself and to others that I am not just a good teacher, but I’m more specifically a good *white* person and a good *white* teacher. I clung to these narratives as a new teacher because they confirmed what I believed to be the purpose of teaching first-year writing: to give students the skills they needed to be successful in college and beyond. Further, they confirmed what I understood to be my role: to give my students voice, to transform them into successful and confident writers.

Geneva Gay explains that to enact a responsible multicultural pedagogy, teachers must see what is “positive and constructive among people and communities most disadvantaged in mainstream society” (54). How teachers think about their students is of central concern to

successful teaching (Ladson-Billings, “Yes, But How” 35). For example, if teachers expect students to be low achievers, they almost inevitably will act in ways to ensure this will happen regardless of their intentions or goals for their students. This concept, known as the “self-fulfilling prophecy,” was developed by Rosenthal and Jacobson in a 1968 study of teacher expectations regarding students’ learning experiences and achievements (*Pygmalion in the Classroom*). They found that teachers’ assumptions about students’ intellect and ability shaped how they treated those students in the classroom, which, over time, influenced the students’ opportunity for learning. Focused on high-achieving, “special” students, Rosenthal and Jacobson found that because teachers believed these students would succeed, they treated them in ways that stimulated achievement.

Profoundly influential in multicultural education, this study has led to more recent research looking specifically at the effects of teacher attitudes and assumptions on their interactions with high and low achievers (Good 415). For example, Thomas L. Good and Jere E. Brophy conducted a study in which they described six steps that lead to the self-fulfilling prophecy effect: (1) Teachers expect specific behavior and achievement from particular students; (2) because of these expectations, the teacher behaves differently toward different students; (3) the teacher’s behavior conveys to students the behavior and achievement the teacher expects from them; (4) students internalize expectations affecting their achievement and behavior; (5) over time, students’ achievement becomes attuned with the teacher’s expectations; and (6) if these behaviors remain consistent and no interventions are in place to disrupt these effects, students’ academic achievements will be affected (365-366). Reba Page explains that teachers’ “perceptions are potent and assume a life of their own: they furnish a rationale for curriculum decisions and thereby provide the conditions for their own re-creation” (77). Those who are

viewed positively will benefit from these instructional interactions; those who are viewed skeptically will be disadvantaged (Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching* 60).

Steve Stroessner and Catherine Good clarify that everyone is vulnerable to stereotype threat, because “everyone belongs to at least one group that is characterized by some sort of stereotype.” Their examples include women in math; white people with regard to appearing racist; students from low socioeconomic backgrounds compared to students from high socioeconomic backgrounds on intellectual tasks; men compared with women on social sensitivity; white men compared with Asian men in math; white people compared with African American and Hispanic American people on tasks assumed to reflect natural sports abilities; and young girls whose gender has been highlighted before completing a math task. Given the long history in the US of overt and institutionalized racism and conflict among people of color and white populations, many studies have focused on how stereotype threat affects students of color. For example, Steele and Aronson show that African American freshman and sophomore college students perform more poorly on standardized tests than their white counterparts when the students’ race is emphasized. Aronson and Good conclude that a student’s academic performance can be hindered by an awareness that their behavior might be viewed through the lens of racial stereotypes.

Emerging from this research is the conclusion that teacher expectations and interactions with students interfere more with students’ academic engagement than do the topics being discussed (Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching* 62). Gay asserts, “Values do not necessarily translate to behavior, but beliefs and expectations do” (63). Similarly, as I listened to my basic writing students’ stories, rather than listening through their stories to see something positive, the stories reinforced what I already believed about my students: they were struggling and

desperately needed a teacher who would inspire and liberate them. They needed *me*. I saw the work I was doing as remarkable, as going above and beyond what was expected of me as a graduate teaching assistant, a self-perception that was reinforced when one of the administrators on the hiring committee told me that they only chose the most dedicated teachers to teach basic writing. This comment made me feel special, as if I actually was fulfilling a mission meant for my talents. Furthermore, I pitied students who I was sure had long suffered from being told they weren't "enough": weren't smart enough, good enough, behaved enough, or pretty enough. Janice Erlbaum admits, "Feeling sorry for someone is often another way of diminishing them." Based on this definition, I was without question diminishing my students, though I had no idea I was doing this at the time.

Ultimately, the teacher-hero narrative "flattens the complexity of classroom life" by portraying teacher-heroes as "unchallengeable authorities" and students as "objects for pedagogies to act upon, rather than speaking subjects developing skills and values necessary to citizens in a democratic society" (Tassoni and Thelin 5). As Gloria Ladson-Billings explains in "Yes, But How Do We Do It? Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," the notion of the teacher as hero "inadvertently transmit[s] a message of the teacher as savior and charismatic maverick without exploring the complexities of teaching and nuanced intellectual work that undergirds pedagogical practices" (33).

While there are, of course, heroic moments in the classroom, the errors themselves—or what Tassoni and Thelin refer to as "blunders"—need to be a bigger part of the story (5). They argue, and I agree, that by focusing on the blunder, we "shed light on learning" in a way that allows us to "reconfigure teaching as an activity, not as a presentation nor as a script" (5). Thus, I would like to turn again to the teaching blunder I described in Chapter Two in which my student,

when asked for her response to Jaswinder Bolina's essay, "Writing Like a White Guy," asserted, "I didn't like it. . . . Because it's all about race. I don't like reading about race. It reminds me too much of things I've gone through. Too many of the characters remind me of people I know." In my teaching that semester, I experienced what Parker Palmer refers to as "a critical moment": "One in which a learning opportunity for students will open up, or shut down—depending, in part, on how the teacher handles it" (150). Therefore, I want to focus on my response: my immediate fear and embarrassment; my decision to abandon the activity I had planned for that day and refocus my students on a discussion of the purpose of the essay; and on the ways in which I allowed this student's seemingly inconsequential comment to undermine my efforts in that class for the rest of the semester.

Most important, I want to address the kind of decisions writing teachers must make constantly. Should I respond to my student directly or ask her to clarify her point based on the text? Do I ask a question or encourage the rest of the class to get involved in the discussion? As Judith Newman explains, teachers do not have much time to weigh their options, so our choices are determined by a number of factors: our assumptions about the purpose of teaching writing, what we believe would be useful for students in that moment, awareness of our own teaching and learning strategies, and our experience and skills as a teacher (Newman 7-8).

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Before this incident, students had challenged my interpretation of texts and had shared with me their honest opinions about the kind of writing I was assigning them, and generally I appreciated their honest opinions and feedback. Over the years I have redesigned my courses and revised my assignments significantly as a result of students' feedback. Consequently, when I asked my students what they thought of Bolina's essay, I thought I was kicking off a vigorous

and enlightening discussion about language and identity that would surely lead to some disagreement. In fact, I explained in my syllabus the personal and political nature of the discussions we would be having throughout the semester: “Our class discussions and the texts may raise controversial and personal issues. I expect you to approach these discussions maturely. Intolerance and disrespect will not be accepted.” Yet when my student responded, “I didn’t like it. . . . Because it’s all about race. I don’t like reading about race. It reminds me too much of things I’ve gone through. Too many of the characters remind me of people I know,” my response was to shut down the conversation, to silence this student by ignoring her critique. If my goal for the course was to help my students become independent thinkers who could communicate their ideas clearly and ethically in their writing, why did her comments alter not only what I did during that class session, but also how I approached the class for the rest of the semester?

First, I should acknowledge that my rational thoughts were clouded by fear and guilt. DiAngelo explains that many white Americans are living in a social environment that “insulates them from race-based stress” (“White Fragility” 55). We are surrounded by what Michelle Fine describes as “protective pillows,” an insulated environment that protects us from racial discomfort or stress. When our protective pillows are ruptured, or when we encounter an interruption to what is racially familiar to us, we respond with a range of defensive moves, including the “outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation” (DiAngelo, “White Fragility” 55). These behaviors, DiAngelo explains, help to “reinstate white racial equilibrium” (55). In my blunder, instead of asking questions about my student’s negative response to the essay or the experiences that were informing her reading, I ended the discussion, ignored the student’s response, and, ultimately, silenced her. In “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone,” Richard Miller

explains that if teachers truly want to use their classrooms as a space to advocate for social justice issues, then taking offense at student resistance is “exactly the wrong tactic” (405). If I believe that my classroom can be used “as a force for positive social change,” I cannot “exile students to the penitentiaries” (408) for responding to my assignments critically.

Yet my response *was* to silence my student by rerouting the discussion in a direction that had less value but that I could handle more comfortably: that is, to focus on the “purpose” of the essay. In doing so, I quickly restored order and returned to the safety of my lesson plan.

DiAngelo explains that “whites have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides” (*What Does It Mean* 55). Genuinely desiring to be a culturally responsive teacher, I was not yet up to the task. I was not ready to engage in the kind of discussions with students that were likely to occur when language and racial identity were central in my basic writing course.

In “The Arts of the Contact Zone,” Mary Louise Pratt asks, “What is the place of unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique in the imagined classroom community” (39)? If my student had written and submitted a reflective essay in which she explained her negative response to the assigned text, I probably would have pasted stars all over her paper. Reading her essay in the safe confines of my office, I would have had the luxury to carefully consider her criticism objectively at a safe distance from my *self*. But when she voiced her dislike of the essay in front of the class, she deviated from the carefully contrived script in which I played the role of informed and aware white teacher. Standing in front of sixteen students awaiting my response, I realized I didn’t *have* a response. In that moment, I was confronted with what I was afraid to expose, namely, my fraudulent self-presentation as the

masterful teacher who was ready to answer all questions and resolve any problems raised by my students.

In *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks describes the ways in which a privileged voice tends to overtake or colonize a less privileged voice:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk. (151)

While preparing for the semester, I thought about the kinds of experiences my students would bring into the classroom, and I expected them to share stories about those experiences. Actually meeting my students did not do much to alter those ideas and expectations. I *imagined* my students rather than ever getting to know the actual people seated in my classroom (Yang and Hokanson 28). Although I would have insisted that I wanted my students to respond to this essay honestly, in reality I wanted them to respond positively. I wanted them to be inspired to share their stories of facing discrimination and prejudice, so that I could lessen their pain by being supportive and teaching them to write about and through it. Ironically, however, my student *was* trying to share her stories. She just wasn't doing so in the way I anticipated and planned. Not until much later did I learn that a class session—or even an entire semester with students—is not scriptable. Each student will inevitably arrive at and leave with insights that I am not able to anticipate.

So *why* did I presume all of my students would respond positively to this essay?

My self-perception as a teacher-hero prohibited me from understanding the ways in which I was diminishing students by overgeneralizing their experiences. In other words, though I was striving to implement a culturally responsive curriculum, I was designing that curriculum according to my perceptions of myself as a teacher-hero and my students as in need of rescue. When I envisioned my students being inspired by Bolina's essay, that vision was based on my preconceived assumption of who my students were and what was relevant to me. In fact, each of the essays I selected for students to read reflected my stereotypes about what it means to be a person of color in the United States. For example, in addition to reading "Writing Like a White Guy" by Jaswinder Bolina, we read "Coming into Language," which focused on Jimmy Santiago's experiences in prison where he taught himself to read and write poetry, which he later published to great critical acclaim. We also read "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," Gloria Anzaldua's painful and poetic account of experiencing painful linguistic racism as a child growing up along the Texas and Mexico border. Because I assumed that all of my students would be people of color from poor communities, I thought that these essays would generate the most thought and discussion, that they would be the most relatable and useful for my students.

I was proud that we were not reading any essays written by white authors, that I was creating space in my classroom for the multicultural voices that are too often silenced; and yet the essays we did read exceptionalized people of color, heralded their triumphs over adversity. Though they represented the experiences of people of color, they did not—and could not—represent "The African American Experience," the "Indian American Experience," or the "Mexican American Experience." Todd DeStigter reminds that there is "great power in the language teachers use to conceptualize our students" (*Citizen Teacher* 311). I would add that there is also great power in the images teachers use to conceptualize students and in the thinking

teachers do about students. Richard Milner explains, “Teacher thinking bears on how they develop the curriculum, how they formulate questions to expand the curriculum, whose voice they allow to speak in the classroom, what they are willing to try differently in the classroom with different students, and how they enact and teach the curriculum” (61).

I am not arguing that I should not have taught these essays. It is important for all students—not just students of color—to have opportunities to read and hear the voices and experiences of people of color; and I do not think we should pretend that racism is not an important feature of those voices and experiences. But focusing all of our reading and discussions on the racism that people of color face seems to have had two primary consequences in my class: 1) students of color were put in the position of having to read and speak to issues that they may not have felt compelled to address in the classroom; and 2) white students were permitted to think that the problem of racism is “out there,” that “*they* [people of color] have race, and they bring race with them, to *us* [white people], who are outside of race” (DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean* 267). Thus, in spite of my good intentions, I reinforced existing racial hierarchies in which people of color are expected to speak about their experiences with racism while white people are given permission to remain silent, to be protected from exploration and discomfort. Richard Milner asserts:

While teachers’ good intentions are necessarily appropriate, they are inadequate—and frankly are not enough—for the complex work of teaching in various social contexts across the United States. . . . Teachers, in particular, sometimes do not have the repertoire of knowledge and skills necessary to construct meaningful instructional practices for their culturally diverse students. (Milner 57)

Though I certainly had the best of intentions, I did not have the self-knowledge, cultural and social awareness, or pedagogical skills to responsibly enact this pedagogy.

It would be easy, after reflecting on these experiences, to decide that it is safer to remove conversations about race and identity from my curricula, to conclude that there is no room for these topics in the composition classroom. Certainly precedent exists for this argument. In 1992, Maxine Hairston decried the politicization of first-year writing: “I see a new model emerging for freshman writing programs, a model that disturbs me greatly. It’s a model that puts dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student” (180). While students used to be assigned literary topics, she is concerned that they are being required to address topics drawn from teachers’ political agendas. More recently, one of my friends and classmates insisted that politics should not be made central in first-year writing, that he preferred to choose more “neutral” subjects such as baseball for his classes, perhaps forgetting the fact that subtle and not so subtle racism is deeply embedded in America’s pastime. In fact, African American people were excluded from playing the sport for roughly one third of its 150-year history.

As James Laditka explains, “All teaching supposes ideology; there simply is no value free pedagogy” (361). He insists that it is essential for writing teachers to examine critically the assumptions “that govern our personal lives and professional practices,” not only to avoid unproductive and even “wrongheaded” techniques, but also to “understand the implications of classroom practices for changing our students’ lives and perspectives” (357). I firmly believe that one of our responsibilities as writing teachers is to help students evolve into more active and engaged citizens by learning to read and write rhetorically, to engage with audiences about issues that are important to them. Yang and Hokanson would seem to agree:

Frustration, confusion, uncertainty, and discomfort all have a place in the diverse classroom, these experiences deserve to be privileged. We should not seek ways to alleviate these, but rather ways to put them to constructive use; we need to make them the bedrock for meaningful relationships with our students, their families, and their communities. (29)

If I believe this to be part of my role as a writing teacher—and I wholeheartedly do—then I cannot turn away from political and social topics like race and identity even when I feel uncomfortable or personally embarrassed by these conversations. To open up discussion rather than shut it down, I have to turn toward that discomfort and embarrassment; I have to take to heart Yang and Hokanson’s reflection that “learning is what happens when the heart is uncomfortable with its lack of knowing” (30). I have to stop making the conversation all about me: the role *I* perform in my students’ educational lives, the knowledge *I* have to share with students, the discomfort *I* feel in response to something my student says. When our class discussions wander away from the script, I am learning to remain quiet, to consider, to recognize that I do not have all of the answers, and that I am not expected to have all of the answers. Instead, I should pause. Take a deep breath. And listen. Just listen.

## Chapter Five: Reflections on Responsibility

“Acknowledging that racism exists is not so hard. Knowing what to do with it is.”  
—Ruth Frankenburg, “When We Are Capable of Stopping, We Begin to See”

“Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one’s experience. It is using that telling strategically—to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects.”  
—bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

My dissertation began with a question: How do we teach students the necessary skills to meet course requirements and succeed as writers while valuing their individuality, including their familial, social, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds? My efforts to enact a multicultural, progressive pedagogy led to another question I needed to explore first: How do my self-perceptions and preconceptions influence my work as a writing teacher?

When I began teaching seven years ago, I thought my purpose was to transform my students’ lives and empower their voices. Those efforts centered on what I thought I had to offer my students, not the skills and experiences that they brought to our classrooms. Over the years, I have come to understand that although I am ultimately responsible for my students’ education—at least for the semester of our work together—it is a mistake to think of the teaching and learning process as a one-way route whereby students retain the knowledge that I provide. Ideally, it is a mutual interaction that nourishes the intellectual lives of both teacher and students.

When I was serving in the Peace Corps,<sup>9</sup> the more experienced volunteers often observed of their work with community stakeholders and students: “They teach me more than I teach them.” In fact, the desire to “make a difference” and “empower” people were the central reasons

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<sup>9</sup> A complicated and torturous three-month journey that ended early when my host father pulled his pants down in my doorway and stood there in his underwear, blocking my exit with a big smile across his face.

volunteers decided to dedicate two years of their lives to the Peace Corps; it certainly was one of my primary motivators. Yet such comments always seemed somewhat hollow to me, more like a self-congratulatory pat on the back than an honest reflection on the value of volunteering. After all, when making the decision to join the Peace Corps, I never seriously considered what kind of difference I wanted to make and what empowerment actually looked like, but I did see myself as noble and idealistic.

In *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*, Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest and founder of the largest gang intervention, rehab, and reentry program in the world, informs his readers that working with others should not be about giving and receiving: “It’s not about ‘It’s better to give than receive’; it’s not about ‘I received more than I gave.’ And it’s not about ‘I just wanted to make a difference’” (187). Rather, it is an exchange. When we make our work all about ourselves, then it becomes “‘collecting people,’ incessant ingratiating, and a frantic credentialing of self” (187). Boyle insists that the learning, the transformation—if, indeed, there is to be one—must be mutual. Todd DeStigter, reflecting on his own work as a teacher and tutor with the *Tesoros* Literacy Project,<sup>10</sup> agrees with Boyle that “efforts to change the realities that constrain people’s lives and literacies can in many cases be strengthened when people of diverse ethnicities, languages, and socioeconomic circumstances speak, listen, and act together” (“The *Tesoros* Literacy Project” 295).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire asserts that good teaching and learning cannot come from a banking theory whereby teachers view their role in education as “an act of

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<sup>10</sup> The *Tesoros* Literacy Project is a ten-week program that brings together Latinx English language learners and their at-risk white counterparts to read Spanish and English-language literature, write stories and poems that emerge from their personal and familial histories, and revise each other’s writing (DeStigter, “The *Tesoros* Literacy Project” 10).

depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (53). In such teaching scenarios, the teacher is the “knower” and students are the “learners” and “non-knowers” into which the teacher provides information that “students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (53). Freire advocates instead for a pedagogy that treats students as co-creators of knowledge. Richard Milner summarizes, “A teacher, then, works in collaboration with their students to construct knowledge, relevance, and meaning in the classroom” (66). If we want to be useful to our students, DeStigter insists that rather than asking “what can I do to or for others?” we need to ask “what is the nature of my relationship with this person? How can/should we *be together?*” (*Citizen Teacher* 318).

In this spirit, rather than entering the classroom with the goal of transforming and empowering students, now I approach the classroom with an openness and willingness to be changed by my interactions with students and by the learning that occurs throughout the semester. I do begin each class with a “script” in the form of a lesson plan and goals in order to keep our work focused and productive within a semester. However, I no longer try to anticipate how my students will respond during class discussions or to a reading or writing assignment. While I certainly consider their personal reactions in order to evaluate the appropriateness of what I am asking them to do, I clearly state my goals for the assignment, then prepare myself for their unexpected responses. For me this is a more honest way to approach my work as a writing teacher who is committed to addressing social justice issues with students. Although my education has earned me the benefit of some manner of expertise in terms of subject matter knowledge, when it comes to teaching I am not a master teacher—and I do not expect ever to be one. With new students every semester, I will forever be confronted with new possibilities and challenges. I must continually learn and relearn what it means to be a writing teacher. Ultimately,

I must enter the classroom with a mindset, a way of being in the classroom, that helps to make me more patient, more willing to pay attention to what my students and colleagues are saying—and to what they are silencing.

Of course, each of us must follow our own path as we develop a multicultural perspective; it is a process that involves a deep “personal awakening and call to action” (Nieto xviii), a learning journey whereby we confront our own racism and ethnic biases with the goal of becoming more responsible teachers. The work of becoming a multicultural teacher requires us to consider openly and honestly how our personal and social pasts affect our present circumstances and contexts. The skills and strategies that “work” for me right now, as a graduate student and teaching assistant at a public urban university, will not necessarily be effective when I move forward in my career as a writing teacher. For example, so much of the personal work I have done in the past six years focused on reconceiving what “diversity” means, particularly in the context of UWM’s basic writing program, where I spent much of my time as a teacher and administrator. Given the racial segregation of Milwaukee and the devastating failure statistics at UWM, particularly for African American students, much of my journey in writing this dissertation has focused on trying to understand how my whiteness relates to my feelings about and perceptions of people of color. More specifically, I had to ask: how are my interpretations of what it means to be a person of color defined by the images I have seen in the media, my experiences growing up in a majority white community, my liberal intellectualism, and my education? When I move to a new city and school in a few months, however, I will likely be confronted by a different set of deeply ingrained biases and prejudices that will require dismantling.

It has become abundantly clear to me that awareness of our racial identities is not the same as transforming those identities. Milner suggests that teachers must “transform and enact” our identities and intentions into mindsets that will enable all students to succeed in their schools (56). We must undertake the process of critical self-inquiry, which requires us to focus on ourselves as racialized people living within particular social contexts; to critically understand ourselves in relation to “the Other”; to go beyond what we previously may have been taught about our obligations. This reflective work will give us the opportunity to rethink what it means to be teachers, including what it is that we have to offer students and what it is that we can learn from students.

Although this kind of critical self-reflection is essential for teachers, Parker Palmer warns that it is possible to get lost in our self-reflections, to become self-delusional, to run in self-serving circles (146). Certainly my own process of self-discovery has revealed the ways in which it is possible to become overly focused on whiteness, to try to over-identify with our students of color, to become overly apologetic. For example, in classroom situations I have been reticent to call on Hmong American students during discussions of Kao Kalia Yang’s memoir, *The Latehomecomer*; likewise, I have hesitated to ask Latinx students for their interpretations of Jimmy Santiago Baca’s memoir, *A Place to Stand*. Out of fear of essentializing these students, I have avoided putting them in the role of representative of their race or ethnicity, asking them to confirm or deny the author’s experiences as similar to their own. But is this fair to them or to the class? If they do not volunteer a response and I do not call on them, then our class never hears their voices or ideas. What have we all lost?

This fear of essentializing students emerged from the guilt I felt as a white woman teacher; and, early on, I consequently focused more on my own comfort than on students’ needs.

In a recent op-ed published in *The New York Times*, Thomas Chatterton Williams argues that “whiteness and wrongness have become interchangeable.” He explains that the roots of whiteness “lie in the national triple sin of slavery, land theft and genocide” and “the conditions at the core of the country’s founding don’t just reverberate through the ages—they determine the present. No matter what we might hope, that original sin—white supremacy—explains everything” (Williams). The guilt and shame that accompany this mindset inhibits rather than instigates the push toward equity among people of color and white people. Certainly it prohibited me from engaging with all of my students during class discussions.

Thus, while my sense of what it means to be a good white person or a good teacher has evolved throughout this dissertation, I still often wonder: at what point does my attempt to educate myself become an apology rather than a productive move toward greater self-awareness and responsibility as a writing teacher? As we go through the process of critical self-reflection to develop a more just multicultural perspective, what is our responsibility to our students? Put simply, now that I have some heightened self-knowledge, what do I *do* with it?

Joseph White, co-author of *Black Man Emerging*, describes three ways we can first understand privilege and then move beyond mere understanding to empathy and activism. First, he explains that we should *engage conceptually* by reading, going to conferences, watching television, and attending movies and plays focused on issues of race. Second, he recommends that we *engage in dialogue*, in person and, whenever possible, with people of color. He acknowledges that we may feel weary and anxious as we begin these conversations, but we must persist: we must spend time in both critical self-reflection and discussion with others. Third, he suggests that we *engage in behavioral interaction* with people from another culture, even—or especially—if that means we will find ourselves in the position of being the minority in the

room, for example, by accepting an invitation to dance at a pow-wow or to attend an intercultural dinner at a mosque.

Emphasized in each of these recommendations is the importance of engaging in and with a community. By joining in cultural and academic conversations about race, dialoguing with people of color, and participating physically and emotionally with cultural traditions different from our own, we are engaging in and with communities different from our own. The journey toward developing a multicultural perspective is personal and can be isolating and lonely, but it does not have to be this way. Geneva Gay explains, “By engaging in dialogue with ourselves and sharing our stories with other travelers, we can find confirmation, companionship, and community” (*Becoming* 5). Mayher emphasizes that “by transacting with these stories of unfolding journeys, we can enrich and enlighten our own parallel, but necessarily individual, roads” (xv). The connections we make in the process of critically reflecting on and sharing our personal stories challenge us to see ourselves in new ways. Similarly, Palmer writes, “I need the guidance that a community of collegial discourse provides—to say nothing of the support such a community can offer to sustain me in the trials of teaching and the cumulative and collective wisdom about this craft that can be found in every faculty worth its salt” (146). As DeStigter affirms, community provides us with a chance “to grow through our connections with others” and to have “interactions that keep us challenging ourselves and seeing ourselves in new ways” (*Citizen Teacher* 321).

I know from firsthand experience the power of participating in a teaching community. As mentioned earlier in my dissertation, I enrolled in a Multicultural Literacies seminar during my first year as a doctoral student at UWM, an experience that provided the foundation for the self-reflection I have gone through during my graduate education and in this project. When

registering for the class, I anticipated having the opportunity to read challenging texts and to learn more about teaching writing in multicultural classrooms. But upon entering the small classroom tucked at the end of a hallway, our professor took me by surprise when she asked us to reflect in writing on our personal literacy development. *What did my literacy development have to do with anything? Wasn't this class about teaching multicultural students to read and write?* Even so, I did my best to respond to the prompt, though upon finishing I felt too uncertain about my response to share it with the class. But others in the class did volunteer to share honestly and openly their experiences in and out of school and did not hesitate to include the more negative and troubling aspects of their literacy development.

This candor continued throughout the semester as we read scholarly personal narratives such as *Paper Daughter: A Memoir* by M. Elaine Mar, *African American Literacies Unleashed* by Arnetha Ball and Ted Lardner, and *Island of English* by Danling Fu. These books provoked us to consider what it meant to be caring and compassionate multicultural teachers; how as writers we might describe our personal literacy experiences to offer educational insights relevant to fellow teachers; and how together we could challenge and reconstruct political or educational narratives (Nash 18). Over the course of the semester, I developed friendships with two classmates who pushed and supported me as I confronted my white identity for the first time, a painful process that was made slightly less so by my classmates' honesty as they went through the same process—albeit focused on different aspects of personal and professional development. For example, one classmate was focused on self-actualization through reflection and interrogation of her personal history as a foundation for classroom dialogue. Many of her insights that semester focused on the ways in which she and her family used humor to reproduce racist ideology. The other classmate had been teaching high school English for several years and

concentrated her work on teacher efficacy. In her view, practicing critical rather than guilt-driven empathy allows teachers to develop self-efficacy regarding their abilities to encourage, foster, and respond to important conversations about race in the writing classroom. Though we had a different set of experiences that gave us a range of perspectives and responses, our collaboration and conversations throughout the semester were some of the most personally and professionally illuminating—and challenging—I have had the opportunity to engage in.

At the end of the semester, the three of us knew we had to bring these conversations out of the confines of the classroom by sharing what we had uncovered with a broader group of teachers. To this end, we submitted a proposal titled “Tackling Teacher Racism in the Composition Classroom” to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, which was to be held in Indianapolis the following year. We indicated in our proposal that we intended to represent the ideas and experiences of “three writing teachers who work in different teaching contexts (pre-service, high school English, and college composition),” who would “model and discuss the important role self-reflection plays in the development of critical empathy and the tackling of previously held presumptions and racist attitudes.” We were thrilled when our proposal was accepted.

When we walked into the meeting room on the first floor of the Marriott Convention Center, however, my eyes flashed to an African American man seated in the middle of the small group of attendees with a notebook balanced on his knee and an uncapped pen in his right hand. I immediately grew insecure. Up until this point, I had only engaged in conversations about my white identity with other white people. While there is nothing simple or easy about having those conversations regardless of with whom you are speaking, being surrounded by people who were making a similar journey into their prejudices provided a measure of comfort. How would this

African American man react to our panel discussion? What would he think when I admitted to and described my racist attitudes and actions? Nervously, I scanned my prepared comments: Was I about to unintentionally say something offensive?

When it was my turn to speak, I took a deep breath and presented what I had prepared. At the end of our talk, his hand was among the first to rise. He told us that he appreciated our honesty, commenting that he wished more African American conference-goers had attended our presentation—and, likewise, that more white conference-goers would attend panels focused on African American issues in Composition Studies. He asserted, “We need more cross-cultural communication—especially at a conference with the word ‘communication’ in its name.” Although our attendees asked tough questions that challenged us to consider new ideas and approaches to our reflective work, it was abundantly clear: I need not have felt so unsure of myself and of this man’s reaction to the ideas I was presented that day.

In spite of the work I had done to peel back layers of my whiteness, work I *knew* would be never-ending, this was yet another moment in which I allowed myself to be consumed by shame and the fear that I might be seen as a racist—which, of course, is ironic in that the title and topic of our panel presentation promised to admit to and “tackle” teacher racism, starting with our own. My fears notwithstanding, I left the conference feeling inspired to continue my work as a self-reflective, multicultural writing teacher, more aware than ever that this work is ongoing and unending. As Ijeoma Oluo emphasizes, “These conversations will never become easy, but they will become easier. They will never be painless, but they can lessen future pain. They will never be risk-free, but they will always be worth it” (52). To carry out this work, however, we need to engage with a community that challenges us to turn toward discomfort, reminding us not to look away when we begin to feel guilt and shame. Joy Ritchie and David Wilson explain the

value of putting personal and professional development into dialogue through stories:

When teachers are given the opportunity to compose and reflect on their own stories of learning and of selfhood within a supportive and challenging community, then teachers can begin to resist and revise the scripting narratives of the cultures and begin to compose new narratives of identity and practice. They can begin to author their own development. (1)

The process of reflection, critique, and revision of our stories is an ongoing process requiring a supportive climate of reflection and dialogue to sustain it (14).

I believe a key factor in this process is allowing ourselves to be vulnerable in a way that acknowledges and accepts that we will likely experience discomfort and some measure of pain, shame, and guilt. The relationship between vulnerability and teaching is nothing new. In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer concludes that teaching is “a daily exercise in vulnerability” (17). When we stand in front of a classroom full of individual students, we cannot predict how they will receive us or interpret our intentions. Yet we stand up there regardless. Geert Kelchtermans agrees that to teach is to be vulnerable; it is the way in which “teachers live in their job situation” (307). As Robert Bullough, Jr. further explains, teaching is “a demanding and uncertain environment where teachers confront ever present and constant reminders of their limitations as reflected in the eyes of a disappointed pupil or made public by a grumbling and dissatisfied parent” (23). It is difficult work both mentally and emotionally.

But “vulnerable” in my case refers specifically to the possibility of being exposed, “found out,” and called out for inadvertently saying something racist in the classroom and not running away from it, but rather remaining in the conversation despite one’s discomfort and embarrassment. This kind of work has powerful personal, political, and professional risks,

because it requires us to reconstruct our knowledge and even our identities and, in doing so, to “struggle against the fundamental beliefs and habits of mind of [our] experience, of our society, and of the local communities into which [we] move” (Ritchie and Wilson 181). Talking about race and white privilege is inherently an uncomfortable and painful process, and not just for white people. Oluo reflects, “As a black woman, I’d love to not have to talk about race ever again. I do not enjoy it. It is not fun. I dream of writing mystery novels one day” (44). But we have to deal with those feelings of pain and shame that come from being confronted with our own racism and privilege; we have to get over the fear of facing the worst in ourselves (224). We must have these conversations with ourselves and others, because ignoring or suppressing such feelings does not make them go away. Oluo quips, “There is no shoving the four hundred years’ of racial oppression and violence toothpaste back in the toothpaste tube” (43). As multicultural teachers, our responsibility is to break free from the familiar and the comfortable, because, as Oluo eloquently says, “Once you start to see yourself, you cannot pretend anymore” (4).

In *What Does It Mean to be White?* DiAngelo reflects on the evolution of her racial identity while learning how to be a diversity trainer.<sup>11</sup> During one of the training sessions, a white leader called out, “All the white racists raise your hand!” (2). DiAngelo was shocked to see every hand in the room go up immediately; though she realized she should raise her hand, she couldn’t: “*I was not racist*, and there was no way I was going to identify myself as such” (2, emphasis hers). This was her first experience talking about race in such a confrontational way, and though she struggled through these conversations, by the end of her training she realized she was not “looking out through a pair of objective eyes, I was looking out through a pair of *white*

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<sup>11</sup> A diversity trainer facilitates intergroup interaction with the ultimate goals being to 1) reduce prejudice and discrimination, and 2) to teach individuals who are different from one another to work together effectively (Lindsey et al. 605-606).

eyes” (2, emphasis hers). She realized that being misinformed was “not benign or neutral; it had profound implications for my sense of identity and the way I related to people of color” (2). Over time and with the support of her colleagues, DiAngelo became more comfortable discussing and responding to the ways in which white people tend to conceptualize race and racism. She explains, “As the foundation of the white racial framework became clearer to me, I became quite skilled at speaking back in a way that helped open up and shift perspectives” (4).

Engaging with a community requires us to make ourselves vulnerable, to take risks, to challenge our racial apathy and our desire for self-protection in the conversation, even when tensions arise as they inevitably will. Truthfully, remaining in the conversation is, for me, one of the most difficult aspects of developing a multicultural perspective. It is tempting to become defensive and to turn away as I have done when I changed the subject in class discussions, found reasons not to call on students of color, or remained silent when problematic assumptions and stereotypes about students were shared by colleagues. I suspect that engaging in these kinds of conversations will never not be uncomfortable. DiAngelo insists that because white people cannot “avoid enacting problematic patterns” (334), we should interpret each opportunity to examine our blind spots as an essential learning opportunity. DeStigter explains that the self-awareness achieved by connecting with others can lead to “a fundamental change in the way we teachers see our role in the world” because these interactions “keep us challenging ourselves and seeing ourselves in new ways” (*Citizen Teacher* 321). Thus, we can grow into more responsible teachers and human beings.

Though we can and should engage with communities different from our own, we as white people can never truly understand what it is like to grow up as a person of color. For much of my life, I thought that with enough education and awareness, I could learn to “walk a mile in

another's shoes." By watching movies or reading books, I could understand "the black experience" or "the Asian experience." DeStigter explains that too often "empathetic understanding is merely another type of construction of the other according to my view of the world" (*Citizen Teacher* 318). It is impossible to look at other people's lives objectively, to understand from the outside their experiences and feelings. My responsibility and task are to become a teacher who seeks to establish honest and empathetic connections with students, while remembering that these connections will always be "complicated by sociohistorical forces that hinder the equitable, just relationships that we [teachers] desire" (DeStigter 318).

Terry Dean insists that the teacher's responsibility is to know her students and to "structure learning experiences that both help students write their way into the university and help teachers learn their way into student cultures" (23). While this is a laudable goal, our knowledge of students is necessarily influenced by our own experiences and personal histories. What we need to develop is what DeStigter and others term "critical empathy." A critical empathy approach urges us to step back and examine our deeply engrained assumptions and our long-held privileges, so that we may understand how these affect expectations of ourselves and our students. DeStigter writes, "[Critical empathy] is a disposition which urges us to understand the powerful structures and ideologies that constrain people to think and act in prescribed (often exploitative) ways" (*Citizen Teacher* 319).

Although Gary Howard does not use the same term, he agrees that empathy is the ability "to feel with"; it "requires all of our senses and focuses our attention on the perspective and worldview of another person" (77). Howard, however, reminds us that we need to practice seeing our students "in their own light rather than through our projections of them in our light" (79). In

my view, critical empathy requires awareness that our understanding of students' lives inevitably will be blurred by our own experiences and expectations.

The process of critical self-reflection has allowed me to release the guilt I have carried into the classroom as a white first-year writing teacher. Guilt effectively ties us to the past. By letting go of guilt, we remove the focus on the self and shine it back out onto the broader world. In other words, I have had to move through the self to get back to the students, because ultimately my job, my service, is to teach students to write. When I focused on developing strategies to teach students the skills they would need to be successful in academia and beyond while simultaneously encouraging them to hold onto their cultural identities, I told myself that I was meeting students' needs while not paying sufficient attention to the inherent conflict between the two goals. Now, however, I recognize my deep fear that by teaching students to write I am changing an essential feature of their identities: their language. In certain contexts, and in certain curricula, I am inevitably teaching my students to "write like a white guy" (Bolina). In my effort to avoid internal conflict, I too often ignored the syntactical and grammatical errors of students of color when assessing their writing, choosing instead to focus exclusively on their idea development. Although grammar and syntax were not my primary focuses while assessing any student's writing, when reading a *white* student's writing, I felt more comfortable responding to grammatical and syntactic errors, because I did not worry about the personal and political consequences of "correcting" or "changing" their language.

Thus, I return to where I began. In light of what I have learned, how *do* I teach students the necessary skills to meet course requirements and succeed as writers while valuing their individuality, including their familial, social, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds? After all, my responsibility as a first-year writing teacher is to teach students to write. At the same time, I am

communicating attitudes about language, whether or not I intend to do so, through my choice of texts, my verbal and physical reactions to students' comments, the ideas I promote in class discussions, and my assessments of students' writing. I must be cognizant of the attitudes I bring to the classroom. My responsibility is to teach students to be aware of the rhetorical choices they make, but I can only do this if I am aware of the impact of my own choices. I must teach students about rhetorical situations and their role as writers within those situations. I neglect my responsibility if I fail to teach my students Edited American English (EAE); to ignore its predominant role in academia and the broader world is to fail to prepare them for success. While it is tempting to create a comfortable bubble of inclusion and language diversity within the classroom, I do not want students to become the victims of my wishful thinking when they step outside, such as when a former student received failing grades on her Sociology essays. I need to be responsive to the concerns of my Sociolinguistics classmate who worried about how her African American sons would be perceived and treated if they did not learn to communicate competently in EAE.

However, I also neglect my responsibility if I do not discuss with students the ways in which power is rooted in language practices or, put differently, the ways in which language can be used to create and maintain hierarchies. It is a mistake to reinforce the notion that EAE alone will provide the upward mobility that students desire. For example, if I only use EAE and only assign texts that use EAE, I risk communicating that this is the only acceptable language in academia and in the professional world. Plenty of writers have demonstrated that they can effectively and powerfully utilize more than one dialect in their scholarship (e.g., Smitherman, Richardson, Young, and Gilyard). Students can and should read various works that use different language strategies and dialects in sophisticated ways so they can begin to understand the ways

in which writers use language to express and communicate cultural and ethnic identities while contributing to academic conversations. Within this context, students also need to understand that language is a marker of class, race, gender, sexuality, age, region, self and other; they need to understand how these hierarchies are maintained and reproduced through language.

For example, central to my practice is my belief that students must learn that using a language or dialect other than EAE is not in and of itself indicative of poor writing. Conflating “correctness” with good writing is a myth: “Good writing can include writing that doesn’t follow the conventions of [EAE], and poor writing can follow the rules of [EAE] and still fall short of effective communication” (Perryman-Clark). After all, both good writers and poor writers may use sentence fragments in their work, but as readers we quickly understand which of the two is doing so intentionally. Staci Perryman-Clark outlines three steps teachers can take to move students toward a richer understanding of how language works: 1) understand that EAE does not correlate with intelligence and, therefore, carries no superiority from a linguistic or scientific perspective; 2) dispel the myth that EAE is the only correct form of English by educating those who make negative judgments and assumptions about intelligence based on language difference; and 3) understand and use languages and dialects strategically depending on audience, purpose, and context. Perryman-Clark’s approach allows students to determine for themselves which dialects or languages are most appropriate for a given context and audience. Although I strive to help students achieve sentence-level clarity by addressing EAE conventions, I teach grammar as “the internal patterns that a given language naturally follows” (Zuidema 688). To illustrate, one common error students make in their writing is to confuse homonyms (words that sound alike but are spelled differently), such as “they’re,” “their,” and “there.” Another common error is unclear pronoun references as in, “Because Bolina is less interested in writing about racial or

ethnic identity than in the sound of language, he sometimes chooses not to write about *it*.” What “it” is referring to is unclear. A revision might read: “Because of Bolina’s interest in the sound of language, he sometimes chooses not to write about *racial or ethnic identity*.” Ignoring such rules causes confusion for readers. Thus, instead of focusing on “correcting grammar” when assessing student writing I focus on eliminating patterns of error that distract from the meaning or purpose of their writing—a subtle but significant shift from the negative to the positive.

Quality teaching is a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” endeavor. Teachers can engage students in discussions of language and linguistic discrimination while simultaneously offering them opportunities to practice communication strategies with and for various audiences. Teachers can examine and reflect critically on the expectations of EAE while teaching students to master those same skills.

As I move forward on my journey to become a multicultural teacher, I will continue to assign texts that challenge students to consider a range of perspectives and identities, that question and critique society’s norms (such as the prevalence of EAE in education and the whitewashing of history). With these conversations, I anticipate a degree of discomfort and resistance from my students as well as myself. But when I am able to adopt a critically empathetic perspective, I allow myself in those moments to remain quiet, to consider what students are saying and how I am feeling, and to admit to myself and to my students that while there are no easy answers, we should push forward so that we can learn together. For me, this approach is both freeing and humbling. Instead of entering a difficult conversation pretending I know exactly what to say, I can open myself to the conversation, follow its threads, *with my students*.

While this work is difficult, challenging, humbling, and, yes, sometimes humiliating, it is

essential—and even liberating. I agree with DeStigter who explains that these conversations lead to “a fundamental change in the way we teachers see our role in the world” because these interactions “keep us challenging ourselves and seeing ourselves in new ways” (*Citizen Teacher* 321). Similarly, Julia Landsman argues, “To liberate ourselves from ignorance in this area is to liberate ourselves into the full potential of our humanity” (19). Through our connections with others, we grow as teachers and as human beings.

Yet the journey is long and extends far outside the classroom and into our daily lives. Not long ago, while walking down the sidewalk of a busy street in Milwaukee with a friend, a car drove past us slowly, made a U-turn, then parallel parked in a spot about twenty feet ahead of us. An African American man stepped out of the car and shut the door. Without saying anything, my friend and I slowed our pace and took notice of our surroundings. We were alone on a sidewalk in an area of Milwaukee where the university reported many of the burglaries and muggings being committed (predominantly by African American men). The tension and fear we felt were palpable as the man walked toward us. After a few steps, however, he turned up a driveway, climbed the porch stairs, and knocked on the door of a house.

We both sighed in relief and laughed uncomfortably. Would we have felt the same level of fear if the man had been white? I don’t believe so. At the moment the man was walking toward us, my response was instinctive. As our awkward laughter indicated, skin color evoked fear. I have worked hard to combat such prejudices.

And yet....

Good intentions are not good enough. While the battle against one’s own prejudiced and racist reactions and behaviors is not won, continuing the fight is critically important. I will continue to try to be the “good” white person, but without the idealization that blinded me before

to my limitations. By continually checking and critically reflecting on my outward and inward reactions to racially infused situations, I remind myself that it is impossible for me to view the world through neutral eyes. As Ijeoma Oluo reminds us, “You have been racist, and you have been anti-racist. . . . And you will be in the future even if less so” (218).

While shame and guilt are necessary in acknowledging complicity, if held onto they become self-defeating crutches that do little to heal thought and behavior. To do better—to be better—I must “be willing to hold [my] darkness to the light, [I] must be willing to shatter [my] own veneer of ‘goodness’” (Oluo 220). If I am to be a writing teacher committed to creating equitable opportunities for all of my students, I must examine my whole self, to confront and communicate with my privileges and prejudices. Self-understanding and self-reformation then make it possible to more responsibly practice and promote student-centered, progressive composition pedagogy in first-year writing classrooms.

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Young, Vershawn Ashanti. *Other People's English: Code-Meshing, Code-Switching, and African American Literacy*. New York, Teachers College Press, 2014.

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Zawicki, Terry Myers. "Telling Stories: The Subject is Never Just Me." *Questioning Authority: Stories Told in School*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2001.

Zuidema, Leah A. "Myth Education: Rationale and Strategies for Teaching Against Linguistic Prejudice." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 48, no. 8, 2005, pp. 666-675.

# CURRICULUM VITAE

## INGRID JAYNE NORDSTROM

### EDUCATION

- Ph.D. English: Rhetoric and Composition 2018  
Dissertation: *Becoming a Multicultural Teacher: Reflections on Responsibility in First-Year Writing*  
Director: Mary Louise Buley-Meissner  
University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee
- M.A. English: Rhetoric and Composition 2012  
Thesis: “Rendering Emotions in the Composition Classroom”  
University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee
- B.A. English; Writing minor 2007  
University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

#### *University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee*

English 240	Writing, Rhetoric, and Culture	F15
English 215	Introduction to English Studies	S15
English 201	Strategies for Academic Writing	F15, S16
English 102	College Research and Writing – Online	S14, S16
English 102	College Research and Writing	S13, F17
English 101	Introduction to College Reading and Writing	F11, F12
English 095	Fundamentals of College Composition	S12, F12, F13, F14

#### *University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point*

Reading X	Upward Bound senior-level reading course	Summer 2014, 2015
Reading 2	Upward Bound sophomore-level reading course	Summer 2014, 2015
Reading 1	Upward Bound freshmen-level reading course	Summer 2014, 2015
Writing 2	Upward Bound sophomore-level writing course	Summer 2014, 2015
Writing 1	Upward Bound freshmen-level writing course	Summer 2014, 2015
English '57	Independent Writing	2004-2007

#### *UW-Extension Continuing Education Course (“FE University”)*

Narrative and Knowledge	Summer 2014
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### PUBLICATIONS

#### *Academic*

“Playing the Border Lines: A Composition in Four Movements.” *Writing on the Edge*, Spring 2015.

#### *Popular*

“What It’s Like.” *Brightside Nightside*, edited by Callista Kearney and Travis Peterson, Stevens Point, WI, Barney Street, 2005.

“The Woman Who Listens to Music with a Cup to Her Ear.” *Brightside Nightside*, edited by Callista Kearney and Travis Peterson, Stevens Point, WI, Barney Street, 2005.

“The Space Between.” *A Complicated Kind of Ordinary*, edited by Chris Perkins and Maggie Hanson, Stevens Point, WI, Barney Street, 2005.

## **PRESENTATIONS**

### *National Conferences*

“Cultivating Ethics of Fairness, Hospitality, and Care in Composition.” Panel participant at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Portland, OR. March 2017.

“The High-Stakes Writing Classroom: Expectations, Risks, and Assessment.” Panel participant at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Tampa Bay, Florida. March 2015.

“Tackling Teacher Racism in the Composition Classroom.” Panel participant at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Indianapolis, Indiana. March 2014.

“The (Im)Possibility of Peerness: Graduate Students Tutors and Teachers in the Writing Center.” Panel participant at Midwest Writing Center Association. Madison, Wisconsin. September 2011.

### *Local Conferences and Workshops*

Workshop on teacher identity at UWM’s English 101 New GTA Orientation. August 2017.

“College Essay Boot Camp.” Workshop leader at UWSP Upward Bound’s Spring Workshop. March 7, 2015.

Workshop on strategies for editing and working with language conventions at UWM’s English 101 New GTA Orientation. August 2014.

“Academic Writing Conventions.” Workshop leader at UWM’s Bridging Our Communities Conference. April 2014.

“Reading and Writing Creative Nonfiction.” Creative nonfiction workshop leader at the UWSP High School Writers’ Workshop. December 2013.

“The Sexy Dance Party That Is Peer Response at Its Best.” UWM First-Year Composition Forum. October 2013.

Workshop on student-teacher conferences at UWM’s English 101 Orientation. August 2013.

“Authenticity in Fiction.” Fiction workshop leader at the UWSP High School Writers’ Workshop. December 2012.

Workshop on Editing and Language Conventions at UWM’s English 101 Orientation. August 2012.

“A Community of Pedagogies in the Composition Classroom.” Brown bag panel participant. April 2012.

“Discovering That Flicker of Individual Meaning.” Poster presenter at UWM/Marquette First-Year Writing Symposium. December 2011.

“Crafting Fiction.” Fiction workshop leader at the UWSP High School Writers’ Workshop. December 2011.

“Writing Place.” Fiction workshop leader at UWSP High School Writers’ Workshop,  
December 2010.

### **ACADEMIC SERVICE**

#### *University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee*

English 102 Mentor	2016
Mentor in Rhetoric and Composition’s Mentor Program	2013-2016
English 095 (Basic Writing) Coordinator	2013-2015
Writing Program Administration Member	2013-2015
Composition Advisory Committee Member	2013-2015
Member of Assessment Project on Writing & Critical Thinking	2013-2014
Virginia Burke First Year Writing Contest Judge	2012, 2014
English 101 Reader Committee Member	2012-2013
Discussion Leader, Common Read Experience	2013
UWM Writing Project Teacher Consultant	2012-
Rhetoric and Composition Graduate Student Representative	2011-2012

#### *University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point*

Upward Bound Reading/Writing Instructor	2014, 2015
Upward Bound Tutor/Advisor	2013
High School Writers’ Workshop Personal Essay Instructor	2013
High School Writers’ Workshop Judge	2010-2013
High School Writers’ Workshop Fiction Instructor	2010-2012

### **ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE**

English 095 Coordinator, First-Year Writing Program University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee	2013-2015
Writing Program Administration University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee	2013-2015

### **TUTORING EXPERIENCE**

Tutor/Advisor, Upward Bound University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point	2013
Writing Tutor, UWM Writing Center University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee	2010-2011
Reading and Writing Tutor, Mary K. Croft Tutoring-Learning Center University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point	2004-2007

### **COMMUNITY SERVICE**

FE University Creative Nonfiction Instructor UW-Extension, Iron County	2014
Hope House Poetry Workshop Leader Milwaukee, Wisconsin	2011
“Yeah, Write” Youth Writing Workshop Coordinator/Instructor SPYMCA, Stevens Point, Wisconsin	2008-2010

Conversational English Intern English for the Next Generation, Nagasaki, Japan	2009
Conversational English Volunteer United States Peace Corps, Zhuravka, Ukraine	2007
Lincoln Hills Poetry Project Volunteer University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point	2004-2007
Conversational English Teacher/Counselor JTB USA Summer Camp, Aso, Japan	2004

## **AWARDS**

### *University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee*

English Department Travel Award	2014, 2015, 2017
Graduate Student Travel Award	2014, 2015, 2017
Chancellor’s Graduate Student Award	2010, 2012-2016
James A. Sappenfield Fellowship	2015
Alice Gillam Award	2014
English Department Teaching Excellence Award	2013

### *University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point*

Chancellor’s Leadership Award	2007
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## **PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

Two-Year College English Association (TYCA)  
 Council on Basic Writing (CBW)  
 UWM Writing Project (UWMWP)  
 National Writing Project (NWP)  
 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)  
 Omicron Delta Kappa Leadership Society (ODK)

## **REFERENCES**

Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, Associate Professor of English, UWM  
 Charles Schuster, Professor Emeritus of English, UWM  
 Shevaun Watson, Associate Professor of English and Director of First-Year Writing Program, UWM