Holding onto Dread and Hope: The Need for Critical Whiteness Studies in Education as Resistance in the Trump Era

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O n November 9, 2016, many White1 progressive liberal Americans woke up with a sense of dread and disillusionment that Donald Trump was the President-elect of the United States (Mei, 2016). “How could this be? How could this be happening to our country?” they wondered. After all, “Make America Great Again,” a phrase whose ‘great,’ widely heard as ‘White’, was not some-

thing White liberals supported” (Irvin Painter, 2016). As the news circulated social media, ‘progressive’ Whites broadcasted their trepidation and their shock became evident. Voices from marginalized communities were far less surprised, given their everyday lived experiences in a heteropatriarchal, White supremacist society (Chang, 2016; Parker West, 2016). Critiques of White liberal disarray escalated even further when it was discovered that the culprits responsible for electing Trump were not just working-class, uneducated White men, as was sold by the liberal media. A total of 53% of the vote for Trump came from White women.

These figures led some progressives to believe that White women had ‘sold out’ by negating an allegiance to feminism (with Women of Color) and aligning with the patriarchy (behind White men) (Lett, 2016). This is not to suggest White women acted alone, as 62% of Trump’s votes came from White male supporters. The common denominator among these voters was their Whiteness (Coates, 2017). And while many White liberals quickly began labeling Trump supporters as ‘racists’ in an effort to demonstrate their own racial piety, critical race scholars remind us that all White people are complicit in perpetuating Whiteness, regardless of their political affiliation, awareness, or intentions (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Mills, 2007).

It didn’t take long after Donald Trump’s election for educators to see the backlash of a newly (re)empowered White America. For example, in P-20 spaces there was terrifying evidence of Whiteness being re-centered and racism moving from the covert to the overt (e.g., the “Make America White Again” dugout with swastika symbol (Wallace, 2016) and the banning of courses teaching ‘White privilege’ (Saxena, 2017)). Alt-right leaders, like Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos, descended upon colleges and universities across the country, challenging campus free speech policies and recruiting students for their cause (Arriaga, 2017). Emboldened movements of White supremacy and White nationalism have swept college campuses since Trump’s inauguration, including a horrific display of hatred, violence, and death in August 2017 at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia. Despite the rise in overt White supremacist movements after the election, Whiteness is and has always been embedded within the fabric of education in the United States. Indeed, all educators must consider how teaching practices, both subtle and overt, might influence people susceptible to racist ideologies (Chatelain, 2017). As racialized White educators and scholars, the authors of this essay belong to the population that they critique. Aronson is a racially White, ethnically Latina, cis-gender, heterosexual, female teacher educator. Her students are predominantly White female preservice teachers with whom she shares many similarities and experiences. Ashlee is a White, cis-gender, heterosexual, male, doctoral candidate who teaches master’s level student affairs courses. His students are predominantly White student affairs graduate students. While Aronson and Ashlee come from teacher education and student affairs backgrounds respectively, they are both charged with the task of preparing future educators who work directly with students in P-20 settings. Through their teaching, they also strive to work against the systems that have historically established and continue to perpetuate White dominance in education.

The purpose of this article is to critically examine how White higher education instructors work through the tensions of dread and hope while supporting and preparing educators during the Trump Administration. Through critical autoethnographic methodology (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014), Aronson and Ashlee demonstrate that White higher education instructors have a responsibility to critically teach about Whiteness and White supremacy in the classroom. Although racism has never been dormant, the current political climate featur-
ing overtly racist discourse from the highest elected officials in government, must compel White educators to take responsibility for dismantling White supremacy now more than ever. Using their own experiences of teaching Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) in the classroom as sites of generative possibility, the authors juxtapose the ideas of dread—acknowledging Derrick Bell’s (1992) argument that racism is permanent; with the idea of hope—believing that solidarity movements of collective action can lead to racial liberation. Ultimately, the most insidious form of White privilege that can easily escape any classroom is the ability not to have to think or talk about race.

Evidence of burgeoning White supremacy leading up to and following Trump’s election left many marginalized students on campus feeling isolated, scared, and unwelcomed. As White educators on this campus, Aronson and Ashlee believed it was their responsibility to address the rise of White supremacy in education happening around the nation, and at their institution. Despite a call from the university administration to remain politically neutral in the classroom, they felt the need to address student’s escalating dread about the campus political climate and perceptions of safety. Additionally, they felt a responsibility to remain positive, orienting students toward effective strategies for taking action, resisting, and moving forward. Guided by a theoretical lens of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), the authors use their own critical autoethnographic narratives of teaching to illuminate the need for higher education instructors to maintain critical hope in education and to prepare students to be racially-just educators during the Trump Administration.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Whiteness Studies

As White educators working with White students, Aronson and Ashlee occupy a troubling positionality which lends itself to problematic outcomes when left unexamined. While it is crucial to center the experiences of racially-minoritized students, exclusively doing so enables White educators and White students to leave their privilege on the shelf. Indeed, when educators confront White students with the realities of history from the perspective of people of Color without addressing the systemic constrictions of Whiteness, marginalized voices are silenced and learning is delayed (Leonardo, 2004; Reason & Evans, 2007). Incorporating elements of CWS (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997) into their curriculum, Aronson and Ashlee sought to examine the socio-historical construction of Whiteness, White privilege, and White supremacy in the United States.

Critical Whiteness Studies is a field of scholarship dedicated to identifying and deconstructing the racial construct of Whiteness. Broadly, CWS is a theoretical framework employed to analyze the historic, social, political, and cultural elements of White supremacy. Emerging from African American intellectual traditions, CWS began with observations about what it means to be White in the United States from Black scholars including W. E. B. DuBois (1920), James Baldwin (2010), and bell hooks (1994). Additionally, CWS draws further origins from Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theoretical framework that aims to prioritize and center the experiences of people of Color through personal accounts which challenge the hegemonic narrative of White supremacy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Within education, CWS emphasizes that “[w]hiteness, acknowledged or not, has been a norm against which other races are judged” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, p. 1) and works to equalize that power. CWS as an educational approach examines the ways in which history, law, culture, and pseudoscience have contributed to the construction of Whiteness, racism, and White supremacy in the United States. The establishment of these systemic mechanisms result in several privileges for White people, including the ability to achieve upward social mobility despite class disparities. Ultimately CWS offers an educational imperative, namely that “whites may – and should – study race, including their own” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, p. 605).

Literature Review

In addition to serving as a theoretical framework, guiding pedagogy, many scholars have used CWS to interrogate Whiteness in the classroom. For example, researchers such as Christine Sleeter (1992) and Alice McIntyre (1997) examined how White pre-service teachers avoided conversations on race and racism, which contributes to the oppressive influence of Whiteness within education. Although scholars have begun to address the need for educators to critically examine Whiteness, there is a dearth of research related to CWS in higher education (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017). Much of the CWS analysis in higher education has looked at ways White college students make meaning of Whiteness. For example, a national study which surveyed over 1,000 college students, found that most White students ultimately held underlying racist beliefs and attitudes (Picca & Feagin, 2007). Reason and Evans (2007) found White college students...
who strive to be racial justice allies, on the other hand, must continuously and critically examine their White-ness. Both these findings suggest that educators must—or should bring college students/‘racial interactions’ to the forefront and create an environment where White students can hold each other accountable for racist behavior.

Ultimately, the most insidious form of White privilege that can easily escape any classroom is the ability not to have to think or talk about race (Reason & Evans, 2007). Colorblind racism is commonplace among White students at predominantly White institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), but even more alarming are White higher education instructors who either choose not to engage in the topic of racism with students or do not feel they know how. For both White students and White instructors, White fragility leads to White silence, White comfort, and White supremacy in the classroom (DiAngelo, 2011). On the contrary, White educators might also reinforce White supremacy through discourses encompassing ‘morality’ (Applebaum, 2005). By situating moral responsibility as an ‘action’ that focuses on the individual, this relieves a [White] educator from ever acknowledging how they are situated within larger systems of power, oppression, and social privilege” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 19). Aronson and Ashlee intended to ‘collaboratively cope with the ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions’ in their work (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011, para. 23). At the end of the Fall 2016 semester, they each wrote a narrative account of their teaching experiences. They shared these narratives with one another and provided questions as well as feedback. These narratives undergird the authors’ overarching argument for CWS as an essential tool for higher education instructors in preparing racially just educators. It is through personal reflections, memories, and dialogue with each other that the authors present their data in the form of autoethnographic narratives, which ask readers to enter the world of the researcher and join in this process of reflexivity.

Brittany’s Narrative

Fall 2016 was a contentious time to be in any classroom, especially one that was centered on justice-oriented ideologies, pedagogies, and frameworks. For three consecutive years, I taught an undergraduate course for pre-service teachers required in the Leadership class. To explicate, this course was designed to ‘challenge and shape each student’s conceptions of school organization, school culture, professional development, teaching, curriculum, and school leadership for teachers committed to social justice’ (EDL 318 Course Syllabus, Fall 2016). Mirroring the racial demographics of teachers nationwide (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2016), my students consisted of predominantly White, female, Christian teachers from rural or suburban communities in Ohio. There were some other forms of identities represented in that I had three White male students, three students who identified as Jewish, and one Black female who identified as Muslim (of my 28 total students).

As part of my personal commitment to work for racial justice, I used CRT and CWS as part of an explicit framework. On the first day of class, I tell students they will more than likely be uncomfortable, and this is a part of the learning experience. In my experience, it is usually by week three that students start to resist and become angry with me after I have them watch White Like Me by Tim Wise and read “Why Do You Make Me Hate Myself?” by Cheryl Matias. However, as we continue to work through the semester, they lead projects on justice topics and create a positionality project interrogating themselves that allows for them to continue to work through their own emotional (Matias, 2016a, emphasis added). This past semester, I had some unexpected challenges, when I mistakenly thought several of my students were “buying in” to what we were talking about in class, yet on the midterm evaluation, I had been accused of “White-shaming” and not creating a “safe space” for others to express their views. This wasn’t the first time I had heard feedback like this before. But, for some reason, I took this feedback extremely personally. As I read these words, I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. Perhaps it was the climate. This was right before the election in late October. Perhaps it was also me. I got overconfident in my abilities to reach the privileged. I had grown to know enlightened,

I would like to begin by saying that as a racialized White female teacher educator, I am ethnically Latina but can and have often benefited from White privilege my entire life. While I believe identity is complex and White is not monolithic, most of my White female students can easily relate to the powerlessness and invisibility of my experience. Part of my work is in understanding the implications of color and race. This paper is not an attempt to argue for race as a hierarchy, but something we cannot avoid in future publics. Therefore, my acknowledgment of sharing racially White is a means to recognize the privileges I have been granted.

More than ever, the work for racial justice and radical love (hooks, 2000) was needed, and as a privileged racially White woman I had to shake myself out of my misery and regain perspective as to my role in this battle we would inherently face these next four years.
we note that often when you are not feeling “safe” really this means “uncomfortable.”
I gave them some additional resources and they went through their way. I felt depleted. I felt like I had failed. Then the election happened.
I was one of those people we wrote about in the introduction. As I sat in my small apartment watching the live coverage of the election on November 8, 2016, I was not too worried about it. But as the hours passed and state by state turned red, I was in disbelief. I woke up the next morning feeling a dread I had never experienced before. I didn’t know this feeling as I had lived in the “safe space” mentioned above that I critiqued my students for craving. I reached out with a colleague to go to the National Association of Multicultural Educators of America conference hosted in Cleveland (which sickeningly was held in the newly constructed Hilton Hotel that had been built for the Republican National Convention that summer before), I had hoped this would be a space for rejuvenation, for inspiration, for comfort. But I imagined everyone was feeling this way. I felt little hope at that moment. Everyone was feeling this way. I had hoped this was an opportunity for healing in the best way I knew how at that moment. Students listened, I talked. They listened. Those who felt comfortable shared their political views. No one explicitly stated that they voted for Donald Trump, although they talked about how their families had. I could relate as I had family members who did as well. We worked through our confusion about this. They asked me what to do, how to handle what they were seeing happening in schools. I didn’t have answers as I sat there vulnerable with them in this moment. The only thing I could muster up was don’t stay silent. I did ask the class to be aware of what was happening on our campus. I sent them several emails the next few days about events organized by students who had been and will continue to be marginalized under the Trump Administration (and their allies). None of these dialogues or lessons that we had the last day of class was a part of my syllabus or my objectives. I was aware that I could have easily offended a student or been scrutinized on my off-the-semester evaluations for these political conversations (which I was not). But when the personal is political, this doesn’t always matter.2
Kyle’s Narrative
In the fall semester of 2016, on the cusp of one of the most divisive presidential elections in recent history, I began co-teaching the first ever graduate-level course at my institution on the topic of critical Whiteness. Located in the heart of “Trump Country,” the Mid-West university where this class was held is home to mostly White, upper-middle class students. Through exploring the literature and observing race dynamics on my historically White campus, I discovered that White students were often forced to put their own learning aside to teach about race (Linder, 2015; Reason, 2015). As a Ph.D. student, I designed the Whiteness course alongside a faculty mentor with the hopes of engaging future educators in learning about conversations about race and racism in the United States. The goal of the course was “to expose individual, historical, and systemic conceptions of Whiteness” (Linder, 2015). During the first two weeks of class, we engaged in discussions about race as I shared my own story about my family’s experience of being lockdown. I shared my fears in what had been happening in schools around the country post-election. I had planned to share my letter with students and then move on into our objectives for the day to discuss curricular perspectives next. That never happened.
One student raised her hand and asked me what I was talking about—she knew there were a lot of protests after the election, but with being in her field placement and staying so busy with her own school work, she hadn’t been following social media as closely. Before I could even open my mouth, others started sharing the many hateful events happening in schools all across the country. And then, the ones they had witnessed in their school buildings the past week. One student shared, “yes, we heard the build a wall chant ing several times this past week. Another shared how their cooperating teacher was very pro-Trump and saying derogatory things about Hilary Clinton, such as now we can lock her up. I sat thereFinish the text...
States were at a breaking point. From heated conversations to cultural events, the racial tensions in the United States have been exacerbated by the current political climate. My co-instructor's comment provided an opportunity to discuss the mechanics of Trump's racially charged rhetoric in conjunction with content from the course.

My co-instructor and I believed that our classroom was an inherently political space. In the context of ignoring political issues and the impact they have on students' lives, we sought to create a space where students could share their lived experiences and the political context of their lives. Her comment about the similarities between Bacon's Rebellion and Trump's campaign was the first time the class discussed the former and the latter in the same breath, giving students the chance to reflect on their personal experiences and connect them to the broader context.

Much to our dismay, my co-instructor's comment fell flat. Like a college campus on the last day of classes, the energy in the room was quiet and still, an instant. Looking around the table and then at each other, we allowed the silence to linger for a few moments to see if anyone would react to the comparison of the two campaigns. To our surprise, no one felt comfortable discussing the racial implications of Trump's campaign strategies or even reflecting on Trump's racist campaign rhetoric like a parallel to Bacon's Rebellion. Whether embarrassed to realize their relatives held beliefs that resembled White supremacist strategies or simply afraid to say the “wrong” thing, our students chose to remain silent. Assuming that the political is indeed personal, my co-instructor's comment about Trump's racist campaign rhetoric likely hit close to home for many of our students. Indeed, on numerous occasions throughout the semester, our students commented about how they struggled to talk with their family members about White privilege and racism because they held differing political views. Whether embarrased to realize their relatives held beliefs that resembled White supremacist strategies of colonialization or simply afraid to say the “wrong” thing and appear racist, White privilege acted like a constraint, binding our students to their White comfort zones.

Taking the conversation a step further, my co-instructor drew a parallel between the divide-and-conquer tactics used by the wealthy European colonists during Bacon's Rebellion and the divide-and-rule tactics used by Donald Trump to pit poor southern White people against Mexican immigrants. In his presidential announcement speech on June 16, 2015, Trump said, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending you… They’re sending you the best. They’re not sending you… They’re sending you the flat. Like a college campus on the last day of classes, the energy in the room was quiet and still, an instant. Looking around the table and then at each other, we allowed the silence to linger for a few moments to see if anyone would react to the comparison of the two campaigns. To our surprise, no one felt comfortable discussing the racial implications of Trump's campaign strategies or even reflecting on Trump's racist campaign rhetoric like a parallel to Bacon's Rebellion. Whether embarrassed to realize their relatives held beliefs that resembled White supremacist strategies or simply afraid to say the “wrong” thing, our students chose to remain silent. Assuming that the political is indeed personal, my co-instructor's comment about Trump's racist campaign rhetoric likely hit close to home for many of our students. Indeed, on numerous occasions throughout the semester, our students commented about how they struggled to talk with their family members about White privilege and racism because they held differing political views. Whether embarrased to realize their relatives held beliefs that resembled White supremacist strategies of colonialization or simply afraid to say the “wrong” thing and appear racist, White privilege acted like a constraint, binding our students to their White comfort zones.

Given the volatility of the political climate in our country, the very real potential for any conversation about the presidential election to result in conflict, our students chose to remain silent. Assuming that the political is indeed personal, my co-instructor's comment about Trump's racist campaign rhetoric likely hit close to home for many of our students. Indeed, on numerous occasions throughout the semester, our students commented about how they struggled to talk with their family members about White privilege and racism because they held differing political views. Whether embarrased to realize their relatives held beliefs that resembled White supremacist strategies of colonialization or simply afraid to say the “wrong” thing and appear racist, White privilege acted like a constraint, binding our students to their White comfort zones.

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Reflecting on the authors’ narratives, which of course come from the perspective of racially-White educators, reveals the important tension between dread and hope. Aronson was left with a somber feeling about her role as an educator, actively working to refuel her reservoir amidst feelings of hopelessness after the election. Ashlee on the other hand, expressed learning from moments that “fell flat” in the classroom, fostering optimism about engaging students in political reflection and transformative action. The opposing realities of these two narratives demonstrate the complexity of being an educator in today’s turbulent political climate.

On the one hand, there may be an overwhelming sense of dread about the realities of racism and White supremacy, which White educators perpetuate despite their best efforts. On the other hand, it can be empowering to leverage the privilege White educators hold to dismantle systemic oppression through an active critical examination of Whiteness. Rather than an immobilizing duality, these disparate truths provide an expansive opportunity to facilitate profound learning and growth, for themselves and their students.

Duncan-Andrade (2009) offers a form of critical hope which rejects staying fixed in a state of despair by becoming committed to the struggle for justice. Building from Tupac Shakur’s (1999) Roses that Grow from Concrete, he suggests a form of “audacious hope” that demands “solidarity to share in others’ suffering, to sacrifice self so that other roses may bloom, to collectively struggle to replace the concrete completely with a rose garden” (p. 186). With this understanding, dread and hope combine and are transformed into action.

The perceived hopeless struggles faced by many communities of Color, including systemic racism and poverty, must first be acknowledged and understood by White educators. Only after this acknowledgement becomes a consistent practice can White educators attempt to align themselves in solidarity with people of Color (we cannot simply claim ‘allyship’). This process of leaning into dread, which includes White educators confronting Whiteness, White privilege, and White supremacy, leads to hope through collective struggle. CWS gives White educators a place to start in their own critical self-reflection and in turn, their teaching. White educators have a responsibility to foster “audacious hope,” engaging future teachers and student affairs professionals in the process of suffering, solidarity, and struggle.

White educators cannot fall prey to singular narratives of either dread or hope. Despite the messiness, both worldviews are necessary to prepare future educators for a world that systemically oppresses Black and Brown students while simultaneously privileging White students. Replacing the concrete of White supremacy with the roses of collective struggle will not happen if White educators throw their hands up in despair and complacency. Nor will it happen if they evasively ignore the realities of racism and hope that mere sacrifice and complacency. Nor will it happen if White educators throw their hands up in despair and complacency. Nor will it happen if they evasively ignore the realities of racism and hope that mere intentions are enough. Both dread and hope are necessary because either alone is insufficient. When White educators and their students feel discouraged, they must utilize hope to move forward. When hope clouds their ability to recognize their own complicity in White supremacy, they must recognize dread and be in solidarity with people of Color.

At a time when the President of the United States espouses “All Lives Matter” (Levitz, 2016) because of a willing ignorance and support of White nationalist efforts (as evidenced by his selection of Steve Bannon and Jeff Sessions), along with his unwillingness to name the events in Charlottesville as acts of White supremacy, violence and rage, educators can no longer feign neutrality, pretending these conversations hold no place in classrooms. Nicole Truesdell (2017), the Director of Academic Diversity and Inclusiveness at Beloit College, recently argued there is a contradictory nature of being apolitical in classrooms by faculty who are hired to teach about institutional racism. Many higher education instructors are hired to do this sort of ‘work,’ and others must recognize the contradictions caused when they are asked to ‘stay neutral’ in the classroom. This façade is unrealistic, and the authors’ personal narratives are prime examples of the need to address political issues, especially those situated around race and racism, in the classroom. Despite the challenges that arise, White educators must persist in transgressing the dehumanizing depoliticization of the classroom, for their own liberation and the liberation of their students.

Aronson and Ashlee revealed vulnerability and failures throughout their teaching, which have led them to understand that both dread and hope are vital. In teaching future educators and through critical self-reflection, they are committed to creating space for the learning that can occur when the tension between dread and hope is foregrounded. Rather than canceling each other out, these opposing truths build upon each other creating something new, something radical, and something audacious. Indeed, this new “audacious hope demands that we reconnect to the collective by struggling alongside one another, sharing the pain of and they must continue striving for the victories.”

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*References: Can be found at the end of this special issue.