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## (Re)negotiating and (Re)envisioning Our Feminist Journeys: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Five Women of Color Doctoral Students

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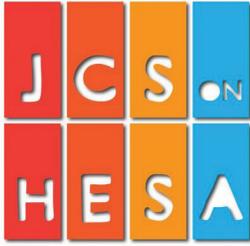
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## **(Re)negotiating and (Re)envisioning Our Feminist Journeys**

### **A Collaborative Autoethnography of Five Women of Color Doctoral Students**

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#### **— Abstract —**

This study utilizes critical collaborative autoethnography to explore the development, identity, and experiences as a feminist from five Women of Color doctoral students. Given that existing research on the experiences of doctoral women of color remains sparse, the purpose of this study is to expand the knowledge by highlighting and validating the lived experiences of doctoral women of color in the academy from a feminist perspective. Through the use of collaborative autoethnography, the authors explore and interrogate their individual journeys as self-identified or aspiring feminists. The findings present the living reality and complexity involving history, contexts, intersection of identities, conflicts, inter-/intra-racial coalition, and activism through these Women of Color doctoral students.

Keywords: collaborative autoethnography, critical race feminism, women of color, doctoral students

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## Introduction

As students began entering the classroom on the first day of their feminist theories and methodology course, five Women of Color (WoC)—Dajanae, Ting-Han, Megan, Vanessa, and Amy—met eyes and acknowledged each other's presence as the few racialized bodies in the predominantly white<sup>1</sup> space. There was a flurry of excitement among the class when the professor, a white woman, began by asking students about their expectations and learning goals. As we listened to each other's responses, we recognized an unspoken uncertainty when the course conversations gravitated towards a dominant narrative of white feminism that often erases and invalidates the racialized experience of WoC (Kennedy, 2002; McNamara, 2009).

Tensions grew as the course progressed. Selected course readings acknowledged race as an integral component of one's identity, but these narratives were often monolithic and did not sufficiently reflect the complexities of WoC feminism. Assigned to examine a topic using a feminist research methodology, we decided to explore possibilities for advancing scholarship about WoC feminism by centering our narratives and life histories as valid knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we chose to engage critical literacy (CL) to navigate the learning process of how we came to make sense of

feminism and how our racialized and gendered identities influenced our understanding of feminism.

We engage CL through a critical race feminism (CRF) perspective using collaborative autoethnography (CAE) methodology to examine our learning process about feminism, thereby highlighting WoC graduate student experiences as a form of valid knowledge. CL entails a process through which one critically produces, reads, analyzes, or interprets texts and discourses to examine relations of power and investigate how knowledge is contextually constructed (Luke, 2012; Vasquez, Janks, & Comber, 2019). Additionally, CL has a specific focus on challenging inequitable dominant narratives and centering the knowledge, experiences, and identities of marginalized people to establish new ways of knowing and being (Luke, 2012; Vasquez et al., 2019). CL involves a learning process to critique and make explicit connections among experience, power, and identities (Vasquez et al., 2019).

CAE methodology engages CL by providing opportunities to write, read, analyze, and connect stories and personal knowledge to (re)negotiate and (re)envision the scholarly knowledge of feminism. Through CAE, we contest traditional research by positioning ourselves as both researchers and participants. Sharing our collective voices amplifies WoC graduate student experiences and knowledge. In both the academy and greater society, there is a tendency to normalize whiteness and maleness. Our realities are deemed illegitimate forms of knowledge, necessitating that we challenge the existing structures through validating our experiences as funds of knowledge<sup>3</sup> (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). We intentionally do not present our study as a traditional academic paper and instead utilize CAE to promote CL. We aim to deemphasize the dominant heterosexual, white male academic standards by foregrounding the ways we—women with multiple marginalized identities—have confronted racism, sexism, and patriarchy throughout our lives (Evans-Winters, 2019; hooks, 1994). We demonstrate how using CAE in tandem with CRF validates the lived experiences of WoC graduate stu-

<sup>1</sup> We intentionally do not capitalize white when referring to race as a form of disrupting racialized norms and calling attention to the role of language in maintaining power (Gines, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> We want to acknowledge that this class assignment included Andrea S. and Megan H. They were integral to the data collection process and the identification of the six preliminary findings. We honor and thank them for adding to our collective work for the course. We presented the preliminary findings as a theatrical play with different acts that took the reader through a journey of our feminist sensemaking. This current study is a shift from the drama and a more focused study on the journey of five WoC doctoral students studying higher education.

<sup>3</sup> We use the definition from González, Moll, and Amanti (2016) that "people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (p. ix-x).

dents as valid knowledge and disrupts the inequitable and complex structures of racism and sexism within the academy.

In the following sections, we first introduce CRF—the primary framework undergirding the study. Next, we present an overview of the relevant literature. We then introduce critical CAE methodology and our data collection and analysis process. We present three themes that emerged across our narratives. Finally, we discuss how this study promotes CL, extending the existing knowledge on feminism and the use of CAE to elevate the lived experiences and knowledge of WoC graduate students.

### Critical Race Feminism

CRF integrates critical race theory (CRT) and feminist theories to explicitly focus on the intersectional experiences of WoC (Kridel, 2010). CRF is rooted in Black feminist thought and emerged from the need to understand the unique experiences of Black women. Scholars extended CRF to illuminate the intersectional experiences of WoC accounting for power and oppression (Wing, 1997). Feminist theories interrogate how patriarchal power and dominance reinforce oppression, aiming to disrupt the normalized and oppressive structures of patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, and gender inequity (Croom & Patton, 2015). Feminist legal theory emphasizes the role of gender, creating an analysis that essentializes and presents a monolithic gender experience based on white women (Crenshaw, 1991; Harris, 2000). By incorporating CRT, the CRF perspective addresses the absence of a racialized lens through centering race and racism to interrogate power, privilege, and oppression that creates and perpetuates hegemony and white supremacy (Patton & Bondi, 2015). The central components of CRT include (a) the principle that race is embedded in the structure of society, (b) a critique of liberalism's colorblindness, (c) a commitment to racial justice, (d) the acknowledgment of whiteness as property, and (e) the understanding of intersectionality (Delgado, 1989; Kridel, 2010).

CRF emphasizes the legitimacy of WoC by validating their lived experiences and challenging the inequitable structure of racism and sexism (hooks, 2000). Since CRF scholars recognize that racism shapes dominant narratives and creates whiteness as the norm, they use counter-storytelling to center the voices and experiences of WoC, thereby challenging dominant narratives and knowledge ingrained in whiteness and patriarchy (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Wing, 1997; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). Praxis (theory in action) is a central component of CRF. Beyond centering the experiences of WoC, scholars must incorporate praxis into their critiques of institutional racism and patriarchy (Evans-Winters, 2019; hooks, 1994). Scholars could embed feminist epistemologies within course curricula or form WoC collectives. CRF provides a perspective that informs the analyses of the researchers' consciousness-raising processes. We use CRF to understand how our experiences and multiple identities are entangled within the dominant narratives and scholarly knowledge about feminism. Counter-storytelling centers our voices in traditional scholarship that marginalizes WoC voices. The use of counternarratives aligns with CL's explicit goal of critiquing dominant ideologies and engaging counter-stories to center marginalized communities (Luke, 2012). Therefore, CRF is a suitable framework to engage CL—one that allows us to investigate how our knowledge of feminism is constructed and consider the context of our experiences, identities, and power.

### Literature Review

In this section, we present a literature overview pertinent to the study. The literature covers WoC doctoral students' experiences, emerging critical studies on WoC graduate students' experiences, and the use of CAE methodology in higher education. WoC are marginalized in the academy due to the lack of attention paid to the intersections of race and gender, which make them choose between addressing issues of race or gender (Squire & McCann, 2018). A growing body of scholarship examines the experiences of WoC

graduate students navigating and confronting the oppressive education system (e.g., Horsford, Carolan, & Johnson, 2019; Leigh, Park, & Phuong, 2020; Zeligman, Prescod, & Greene, 2015). For instance, Zeligman et al. (2015) highlighted two factors that shape WoC graduate students' persistence, the first being a personal commitment to their community or to create greater access for other WoC. WoC graduate students also identified meaningful support, nurturing faculty relationships, and caring communities as crucial components of their persistence (Horsford et al., 2019; Zeligman et al., 2015). Limited qualitative studies utilize critical theories, such as Black feminist thought and CRF to examine WoC graduate students' experiences with challenging racism and sexism in academia (see, e.g., Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikari, 2017; Rasheem & Brunson, 2018; Rendon & Al-Asfour, 2019; Williams, Brewley, Reed, White, & Davis-Haley, 2005 as exceptions). Scholars highlight WoC graduate students' resilience through their commitment to giving back to their communities (Williams et al., 2005), having critical support and community with peers and faculty (Ashlee et al., 2017), gaining validation of their cultural backgrounds (Rendon & Al-Asfour, 2019), and determination to be role models (Rasheem & Brunson, 2018). These studies indicated that CRF is useful for generating knowledge that considers a more comprehensive, nuanced, and complex understanding of WoC graduate student experiences and their development as scholars.

In higher education research, scholars utilize CAE as a methodology to highlight the experiences of marginalized groups, such as WoC leaders (e.g., Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017), foreign-born WoC faculty (e.g., Hernandez, Ngunjiri, & Chang, 2015), and WoC graduate students (e.g., Ashlee et al., 2017). More literature needs to uncover how WoC graduate students make sense of feminism, which accounts for their identities and experiences within the racialized and gendered academy. As graduate students, we impart personal knowledge, our life histories, and connections with our communities to the academy as we

come to understand our identities as scholars. Our reality implies that systems of oppression shape the experience and development of WoC and indicates a need for more critical scholarship to explicitly highlight the role of power, privilege, and identity. Examining WoC graduate students' development toward understanding feminism provides an opportunity to interrogate how we develop our knowledge and identities as feminists.

## Methodology

Typically conducted as solo works, autoethnography is a qualitative research method centering a researcher's personal story. Researchers collect written and recorded autobiographical data and analyze them to develop socio-critical literacy that enables researchers to gain a greater understanding of themselves in connection to larger societal contexts (Camangian, 2010; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography legitimizes personal narratives as a way for researchers to interrogate their experiences (e.g., Chang, Longman, & Franco, 2014) and presents opportunities to heal from trauma (Camangian, 2010). To center our collective stories, we utilized CAE, which encourages collaborative work among two or more researchers to account for their shared experiences.

In CAE, multiple researchers collectively gather autobiographical data and analyze data through discussions and reflections (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2016). This process enables researchers to connect their narratives to understand the broader context in which they are situated (Chang et al., 2014; Coia & Taylor, 2013). CAE is appropriate for this study because of the methodology's focus on elevating silenced or diminished stories. CAE is also useful as we sought to extend our CL by drawing from our lived experiences to deeply interrogate the intersections of our racialized and gendered identities (Camangian, 2010). CAE also makes explicit sense-making processes through deep reflexivity (Chang et al., 2016; Colombo, 2003). CAE is fitting for collective storytelling and invites readers to tangibly connect

with our lives and stories. By presenting personal narratives of our identities and relationships with feminism, our use of CAE provides a generative opportunity to “define our own realities *on our own terms*” (Collins, 2000, p. 274, italics in original). CAE also compliments our framework of CRF since our goal is to interrogate the construction of knowledge. By using CAE, we extend existing discourse on WoC feminism by offering a cross-racial examination given our racial identities as Black, Asian, and Asian American women. Lastly, CAE promotes a process for us, as both the researchers and participants, to create collective spaces to nurture, resist, and grow in our feminist identities. Table 1 highlights the backgrounds of the five authors/participants to situate our diversity of knowledge.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Our study included two phases of data collection. In phase one, each person drafted a personal autoethnography in response to the question: *How have we come to learn and/or understand feminism?* This prompt invited us to reflect on our individual life histories and how those experiences led us to under-

Table 1. Authors’ Background

Ting-Han...	a Taiwanese international Ph.D. student. She identifies as a woman and this is her sixth year living in the U.S. and Indiana is the fifth state that she has lived in.
Megan...	a Black American first-generation Ph.D. student whose family originates from the Appalachian area of Virginia. She is the product of a single-parent home and historically Black university, North Carolina A&T.
Vanessa...	a Khmer American doctoral student who identifies as a scholar-activist. She is the daughter of Cambodian refugees, raised by a single-mother, and calls Denver, Colorado home.
Dajanae...	a Black woman Ph.D. student, from Southern California, new to the Midwest, and comes from a larger tight-knit family.
Amy...	a doctoral student who also identifies as a Chinese American woman and is originally from Houston, TX.

stand feminism. This prompt encouraged us to utilize a feminist methodology that centered a collective “us” to understand the entanglement of self and knowledge and honor the feminist commitment to critical consciousness-raising. Autoethnography emerged as a generative option as our initial conversations motivated us to explore our varying orientations and connections to feminism.

We shared our completed autoethnographies with each other using a shared Google Drive folder, and we reviewed each reflection and drafted individual memos on shared themes. Next, we recorded a 1-hour-long dialogue through Zoom where we shared our reflections from the writing and reading process and discussed commonalities, differences, and themes that stood out to us across each person’s stories. Through the discussion, we generated more questions about ourselves and each other to continue the unpacking process. We created six additional prompts at the end of the discussion to facilitate another round of reflection. The following are our preliminary themes from the six prompts: (a) influential female figures, (b) the interpretation of feminism as oppositional to patriarchy, (c) the historical context of feminism rooted in whiteness, (d) the intent versus impact of feminism, and (e) gender socialization.

The second phase of data collection focused on our written responses to the reflective prompts. Guided by CRF, we crafted these prompts to help us make explicit the complexities of our identities and attend to power, privilege, and oppression in our reflections of moments in our lives that led towards our understanding and/or (re)conceptualization of feminism. For instance, one prompt asked: How has being a WoC shaped our doctoral student experiences thus far? We wrote down our responses to the prompts through individual reflection and documentation of our personal narratives. It was not required to respond to all six prompts, as we wanted to provide agency for each of us to genuinely reflect upon what was most relevant or salient in our lives. We then collectively shared and reviewed our documents with each oth-

er through the same Google Drive folder, leading to another 1-hour-long virtual discussion. Our stories serve as a form of data by providing counternarratives to dominant doctoral experiences centering white and male perspectives. Our journaling, an example of our engagement with CL, offered us an opportunity to deeply explore the impact of power, privilege, and oppression through critical reflection on our past and present experiences.

### Findings

We found three notable themes: (a) More than “just as women”: The complexity of one’s identities, histories, and contexts; (b) Feminist identity development: Consciousness-raising and reconceptualization; and (c) Activism: Commitment toward feminism through questioning and resisting the dominant patriarchal narratives. We present these findings as vignettes of our reflections to illustrate how we connected our life experiences to our feminist identity development. Additionally, we explore the possible limitations of feminism in accounting for WoC knowledge and experiences.

#### More than “Just as Women”: The Complexity of One’s Identities, Histories, and Contexts

Our narratives revealed complexity in how we unpacked our experiences and sensemaking. Each of our histories, backgrounds, and contexts also complicated our understanding of these experiences as more than “just as women.” For example, Dajanae shared a personal story underlining the importance of her context, upbringing, and identities in shaping her knowing of the world as a Black woman:

*I grew up in a diverse city that is somewhat seg-*

<sup>4</sup> In this example, Vanessa’s intentional use of womxn calls attention to the ways normative language is gendered and contests patriarchal, cisgender, and heterosexist ways of knowing and being (Ashlee et al., 2017). Additionally, we recognize that the utilization of this term requires gendered context and can be incomplete or insufficient in describing femme identities, experiences, and narratives.

*regated. Most of my interactions in the traditional learning space as a child centered around whiteness. I attended a private school that took me out of the neighborhood with my fellow People of Color. I learned from my mother there was a uniqueness in the experience of Black people. When I was young—maybe 5 or 6—I attended my first protest. There was a killing of an unarmed Black woman by the police in the city. The rallying of support I witnessed was from the Black and Brown community, fighting the injustice at the hands of police violence. My mother played a role in rallying people and protesting. My mother began instilling in me with Black feminist ideology through her transformative work in our community. And, I learned to become a change agent to help myself and others whom I love and support.*

Vanessa shared in detail the roots of her story and how her communities and their immigration histories helped her learn about her salient identity as a Cambodian American womxn:<sup>4</sup>

*My family’s life was uprooted on April 17th, 1975, when Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge. My grandparents shared with me the Khmer Rouge rode into the city and announced over its loudspeakers that the United States was going to bomb the city. They were told to evacuate to the countryside and that they would be able to return home in a few days. My family and many others would never be able to go back. In the course of a 14-month period, over 3,600 secret B-52 bombing raids were conducted in Cambodia. I learned my mom evaded bombs, dodged bullets, endured 10–12 hours working in a labor camp, all while she was 9- and 10-years-old. I will never be able to comprehend how she overcame those experiences and be as loving and caring as she is today. It took me a long time to comprehend the journey my family*

*underwent. Growing up, much of the narrative I read about Cambodia was in small excerpts in history books written by American historians. That's it. We weren't important enough to warrant a paragraph. To this day, I rarely read about my communities. It's a very subtle and dangerous way of making communities invisible. This was when I began understanding the importance of writing and speaking my truths into the world... because if I didn't—if we don't—who will?*

As a foreign-born national from Taiwan, Ting-Han shared a different context when reflecting upon her background, early experiences, and understanding of the world as a girl in a patriarchal society:

*Male dominance and preference are deeply ingrained in Taiwanese societal and cultural values. One of my most salient experiences is recognizing the role of patriarchy when my mom told me she cried for 2 whole days when she found out my gender after giving birth to me because I was not a boy. I later learned she had my younger brother because my maternal grandfather requested her to have another child, specifically a male descendant, to carry his last name. Passing down the family's last name (for future generations) is one of the most important values in dominant Taiwanese culture when having kids. People prefer having male descendants because they symbolize superiority and success, as they are considered legitimate in passing down the family's name. It didn't matter which last name I had because, as a girl, I was considered by the family (and society) to not have the legitimacy to pass down my last name. This often made me feel resentful or "not wanted" growing up because I was a girl.*

These narratives demonstrate how our relationships with feminism closely connect with our respective sociocultural and historical contexts. CAE and

CRF help shape our process of CL as we came to understand our gendered experiences as inseparable from our multiple identities in context. For example, Vanessa showed her learning process of CL by sharing her family's immigration history. She critiqued the problem of not learning about her family and communities' stories and histories through formal education. Her sharing further identifies the problematic and inequitable ways institutions dismiss integral parts of her identity and background.

### **Feminist Identity Development: Consciousness-Raising and Reconceptualization**

The development of our feminist identity involved constant reconceptualization of our identities and consciousness-raising, whereby we began to create explicit connections of our gendered and racialized identities to larger systems of oppression. For example, Vanessa reflected on her feminist orientation by recollecting on her mother's strength and knowledge in combating patriarchy in her efforts to support her family. Her reflection became a crucial consciousness-raising moment for Vanessa's understanding of what it meant to embrace a meaningful feminist identity.

*One evening after returning from an internship excited about my identity as an Asian American feminist, I was talking to my mom about feminism. I used terms like patriarchy, capitalism, and misogyny...getting frustrated, I had to explain them to her. My mom went silent, and she gave me that stare refugee mothers often do. I realized, although I had learned all these new fancy words, I was not above my community. Learning new concepts and language should enable us to make space for our community, not away from it. Some of the most powerful change agents, for me, are the folks who are doing everyday work, who rarely get recognized, yet do the most for our communities. They often show us what feminist communities look like before we*

*learn the language for it.*

*This experience led me to reflect on my mother's feminist journey to better understand my own. My father was caught between Asian American masculinity and the ownership of women (his wife and daughters). We felt small, silenced, and invisible. My mom was in a marriage held together by societal expectations. She made the difficult decision to raise us on her own. I realized Asian American women who choose to independently care and nurture themselves are shamed for being powerful. People from our own community called us broken. There would be whisperings of how we would grow up to be "incomplete" without a father. My frustration with how my mother was treated served as a catalyst for me to fully embrace my identity as a feminist.*

Dajanae reflected on the messages she received growing up about how she should advocate for herself and others. Her socialization in predominantly white academic spaces contributed to her consciousness-raising and development as a feminist.

*I understood my presence as loud yet silenced. I learned early to be vocal for myself. Most of the stories I've heard about younger me center authority and self-confidence in my words. My voice was met with opposition, and people undermined my words. Growing up, it manifested in people calling me "bossy" or a "bitch." I try to not resonate with the backlash because I believe in speaking up for myself. My voice is most often requested/demanded to speak up for others. Too many times, I am elected as the fearless one to speak up in situations. My tendency to be outspoken is a learned behavior from the women in my family. My grandmas, mom, and stepmom are strong, opinionated women. Their confidence is amazing to witness. Upon reflection, I see how my race and gender played a role in how people reacted to my strength. I am cognizant of how I*

*am/will be treated because of my strength and self-confidence.*

As for Megan, she recalled her early involvement in her church. She experienced dissonance when church activities continued reinforcing a patriarchal view by imposing differential treatments and expectations between different genders.

*I grew up in the Black Christian Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C), where Sunday morning service begins early morning and does not end until late evening. I always had a natural attraction to the drums, so since I had no choice whether I attended church, I decided to focus on the aspect I enjoyed—the music. I taught myself how to play by sitting in the pew behind the music section (organ and drums) and studying everything about the two male drummers and their beloved instruments. Unfortunately, learning to play did not shield me from eventually learning that, apparently, only men could play the drums. I was told repeatedly that I could not play the drums because I was a girl but was invited to sing or play the keyboard as much as I wanted to. I would sneak onto the drum set after church, thinking that proving I could play might change the minds of those who were silencing my gift simply because of my gender. It was not until I left the conservative town I lived in for Norfolk, Virginia—a city more urban and slightly less conservative—that I found people who were often impressed I could play the drums because I was a girl. Over time, I became the drummer for the church we attended, giving me something to look forward to in church. I was not only told I could not be a drummer because of my gender, but I was being told I could not be myself and was denied the opportunity to explore my potential because of it.*

Amy also shared a memorable story from her child-

hood when she came to recognize the unfair reality she had as a girl in a patriarchal, Chinese family and culture. This tension turned out to be a consciousness-raising moment for her development of self-advocacy.

*In parts of Chinese culture, the tombstones of the deceased are engraved with the names of their descendants. This includes children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren should they live long enough to witness their conception. I was 8 when I learned about this tradition when my great-uncle passed away. To help me understand, my dad showed me a picture of my great-grandfather's tombstone. I scanned the names and saw mine was not listed, yet my brother, who had not yet been born, had already been named and engraved below my dad's name. When I asked why mine wasn't there, I was told women were not added since they did not carry the family name. "You are not a part of our family" is the message I received. This caused me to question my place in my family, my value, and my worth. I learned early that I would have to fight for my existence and validation.*

Ting-Han talked about learning opportunities in graduate school, which helped her with consciousness-raising while also challenging her previous understanding of feminism.

*My learning and consciousness-raising about the greater impact and implications of patriarchy did not explicitly emerge until I was in graduate school and learned about the oppression of whiteness and racism as systemic inequities. It was not until I took a race and racism class that I started learning to not be a passive consumer who accepts knowledge delivered through formal educational settings as the objective truth. These moments were eye-opening, liberating, and intellectually stimulating. I learned and recognized*

*the social reality of having systems of oppression in place and how racism is ingrained in U.S. society. My curiosity and passion for unpacking racism and the complexity of intersections of other forms of oppression further motivated me to be more attentive to issues related to sexism and gender inequity. I also came to understand, especially in the U.S. I had to navigate not just being perceived as a woman, but also a petite, Asian, foreigner, person of color, and English learner. People do not merely see me as a woman; instead, they more often perceive me as a combination of some of these tangible appearances.*

These personal narratives show how CAE and CRF are useful in supporting CL as we came to develop greater consciousness and critical connection to feminism. In the process of developing CL, we also recognized a dissonance through observing and/or facing the oppression toward women at a personal, familial, cultural, or societal level. By writing, analyzing, and interpreting our counter-stories, we identify the prescribed symbolic meaning of our womanly presence in varying spaces. This critical consciousness-raising process involves making sense of the conflict and dissonance, particularly when our understanding was at odds with patriarchal norms permeating society.

### **Activism: Commitment Toward Feminism Through Questioning and Resisting the Dominant Patriarchal Narratives**

Our final theme demonstrates how our community commitments and life knowledge of feminism led us to resist patriarchal and/or mainstream white feminist narratives. For example, Dajanae discussed her connection and commitment to being a Black feminist:

*I am a Black feminist who loves women. I have always valued strong women friendships. I aim to use my research and place in the academy to center the voices of marginalized groups. I re-*

*cently read Britney Cooper's memoir, Eloquent Rage. She provided me with the language to describe certain issues I noticed but did not know how to articulate. Cooper discussed that when drawing attention to problematic ways or actions, we should also help provide tools to address their actions. I should not always have to educate someone but can help steer them in the right direction. Currently, I engage with issues only when I have the energy to address them. Since I cannot consistently outpour and give up my energy, I know to limit my engagement with problematic people and triggering topics. As such, until I learn better restorative practices, I am selective about when I will use my time and energy to engage with certain issues.*

Amy attributes her feminist orientation of resistance to patriarchy to her mother's intentional encouragement and empowerment to prepare her for a world riddled by sexism:

*My mother always called me a smart kid—much smarter than my brother. She always reminded me I was important—just as important as my brother. I had skills—something my brother did not have. I did not understand at the time, but she was trying to negate the patriarchal environment created by my dad. She taught me from a young age that I was capable of fighting patriarchy. I should fight patriarchy. She was the first to show me what it meant to be a strong woman, what it meant to resist, what it meant to challenge.*

The subsequent responses demonstrate how we envision this resistance to patriarchal systems. Megan discussed the importance of being able to show up as her authentic self in all settings as activism in combating patriarchy:

*My goal is to find a way to be myself in any*

*setting, whether professional or personal. I only want to be committed to living my truth and continuously challenging past beliefs and perspectives. I do not yet identify as a feminist, and I'm learning that I will be okay with myself if I never do. I do, however, want to be able to educate other people on what feminism is and assist them in determining their own identities within it. I also am committed to fighting for equity wherever I am, and I believe feminist ideals come as a part of that. In summary, I want to have the opportunity to be myself and tell people who I am and what I believe without being restricted by any labels (i.e., feminist, Black feminist, etc.). I want for myself and the people around me to never stop raising their consciousness and challenging others to do the same. I want to always play my role in making this world equitable, with special regard to the Black community and to Black women.*

Amy imagines a future for herself that exceeds stereotypes rooted in racism and sexism. She states:

*I want to be in a future where I never have to hear the label "angry Asian girl." Somewhere I do not have to question if I am speaking too much. Somewhere I can wear whatever I want whenever I want. Somewhere that does not have me fearing for other women's safety. Somewhere I feel liberated, valued, and honored. Most importantly, I want to be somewhere that loves women.*

Vanessa stressed her aspiration to center herself and Southeast Asian American womxn and all Womxn of Color:

*I hope I continue to struggle about what it means for me to be an Asian American feminist because it will mean I have not become complacent about creating my own space within and beyond the confines of patriarchy and other forms of oppres-*

*sion. There are so few experiences and counter-narratives for Southeast Asian American womxn in academia, forcing me to remind myself each time I enter the battlefield and make the decision to “hurt for the rest of my life” (Tuitt, Hanna, Martinez, Salazar, & Griffin, 2009, p. 71). I must remind myself I am capable, and this space must make room for me. When my mom was in the refugee camp, she did not know if she would wake up to see the sun the next morning. And yet, she continued to imagine futures of togetherness. She made her dreams a reality in the most impossible of circumstances. I must continue living that dream for her and remember my journey has as much to do with me as it does for all Southeast Asian American womxn and Womxn of Color, that being in spaces created for me by former Southeast Asian American womxn and Womxn of Color grants me the responsibility of creating more space for future Southeast Asian American womxn and Womxn of Color.*

Ting-Han’s commitment to feminism builds on her broader objective to dismantle systemic injustice of minoritized groups that may not fit neatly into a category because of the complexity of their multiple marginalized identities:

*My experiences have made me understand feminism from a more complicated way that tangles the intersections of identities, politics, activism, history, cultures, immigration, power, oppression, and coalition. For me, as a Taiwanese international student who does equity research in American higher education, I have always been conscious and reflective about my positionality and “my place” as an individual, a learner, a teacher, and an aspiring researcher within these respective contexts. I have come to the realization that I probably will never feel fully belonged in any space. However, I am committed and passionate about fighting oppression and injustice*

*for marginalized and minoritized groups, and I want to focus on channeling my energy in a more productive way. I want to focus on reflecting upon my responsibilities, the type of allyship I want to practice and demonstrate, and the direction of action I am moving toward in my commitment to equity and justice.*

We show our progression in CL and how CAE was useful in encouraging a collective process among us to reflect, analyze, and affirm our life experiences and knowledge. We engaged in a continual learning process by integrating our personal feminist standpoints because critical awareness demands we continue interrogating, negotiating, and building our epistemological stance with feminism. We demonstrated the value of intentionally locating oneself in the present moment by situating ourselves within the communities that support us in advancing justice for WoC and other minoritized groups.

## Discussion

The findings show CL has the potential to transform educational experiences for researchers, participants, and readers (Vasquez et al., 2019). By using CRF as the framework and CAE as the methodology, we illustrated a process of consciousness-raising by creating space for ourselves to reflect on and bring in our funds of knowledge to (re)conceptualize feminism for WoC in higher education. This process aligns with CL as it disrupts normative and harmful whiteness ideology, knowledge, and practices in higher education that constantly negate our participation in and contributions to the field.

Using CAE as our methodology provided us an opportunity to practice reflexivity—an integral component of fostering CL. We recounted oppressive experiences shaped by the patriarchy as moments when we learned about the dissonance, conflicts, and resistance between feminism and patriarchy. Our collective reflective process promoted CL by centering and reexamining our identities and interrogating how

feminism connects to our lived experiences. As we read and analyzed our narratives, we recognized that we have been experiencing (or practicing) feminism whether we use the term *feminism* or identifying as feminists. For example, Ting-Han and Megan did not identify as feminists, yet their narratives demonstrate their understanding of how racism and patriarchy have worked together to silence and oppress them in different contexts.

Additionally, CAE is a valuable method of developing CL in meaningful ways. We worked together by prioritizing collective experiences and relationships, which generated different understandings of sociocultural, sociohistorical, and sociopolitical contexts. If researchers are to redefine the differences between each other, then everyone must engage in research that considers the relationship researchers have to one another (Lorde, 2012). Central to CAE is the capacity to build communities, engage in solidarity building, and partake in a journey of self-discovery in a collective (Chang et al., 2016). CL prompted us to interrogate the conditions and contexts that have shaped our understanding and experiences. In this process, we also develop the capacity to name and articulate what is needed to foster more humanized environments that value, validate, and nurture our communal knowledge and experiences. With the goal of addressing racialized and gendered experiences within the academy, our critical CAE approach meaningfully engaged CL and transformed how we understand and care for our relationalities with ourselves, our communities, and society.

CRF provided a lens to foreground the multiplicity of oppressions we experience(d) due to our various identities. By telling our counternarratives to the cis-heteronormative, white male norm of academia, we uplift and center the voices of WoC. Feminist work makes the personal political; we emphasized the contentions between our knowledge and feminism to suggest the political potential and the power of diverse voices that we bring to the academia. In this process, we began to weave together new understand-

ings and networks of relationships across differences (Lorde, 2012).

Our learning process with CL continued beyond critical consciousness. We all expressed commitments to resisting patriarchy in all aspects of our lives. As a scholar-activist, Vanessa engages in developing her CL by centering the experiences of marginalized womxn in her research and work outside of the academy. She suggested we use CAE to bring collective power to our voices and provide an example for other WoC graduate students to disrupt whiteness and various forms of oppression. As WoC in academia, we engage in scholar-activism using CRF and CAE to cultivate our ability to dismantle systemic oppression and encourage our peers to engage in the process (Squire & McCann, 2018). This collective interrogation of our experiences as WoC in doctoral programs is a part of our action to call attention to the harm that shapes our participation in the academy. As WoC and emerging higher education scholars, our bodies are often on the frontlines of violence and harm perpetrated by institutions of higher education. By providing an intimate portrait of our feminist journeys through critical collaborative research, we enacted alternate possibilities of attending to this work in ways that meaningfully embed intersectional WoC perspectives as primary, rather than secondary.

Through interrogating hegemonic ways of knowing and being, WoC research can illuminate how even within critical spaces, the academy continues to uphold whiteness. Researchers and faculty must be more creative and riskier and engage in feminist methodologies aligned with the experiences of WoC in higher education. In doing so, scholars can create more authentic opportunities to include WoC voices and validate their knowledge. Like the classroom example described by Camangian (2010) and the one with our professor, faculty need to use culturally congruent methodologies in their classrooms to disrupt the normalization of whiteness and maleness by presenting opportunities for WoC. Faculty have the power to contribute to the liberation of marginalized students,

freeing them from the structures and curriculum that actively work to erase and silence their knowledge and experiences. WoC should not be tasked with the additional labor of seeking perspectives that reflect their own identities; instead, it must be readily available in the curriculum and prominent research journals. Additionally, feminist research methods (e.g., CAE) provide opportunities to extend a more comprehensive understanding of WoC in higher education. There are limited opportunities to fully engage with WoC, reflect on WoC experiences, and validate WoC knowledge in research and in the academy (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). By reorienting research *with* WoC and not *on* WoC, higher education research can work towards disrupting the dominant, white colonial orientation, which involves conducting research *on* subjects without their own autonomy.

Racism and patriarchy are still norms in the academy. Future research must continue to center and recognize intersectional feminism for the purpose of disrupting and dismantling the oppression of marginalized communities. In this study, we explored the connections and challenges of Asian international, Asian American, and Black women, but there is still a need to account for other identities (e.g., ethnic identities, immigrant identities, and socioeconomic status) using an intersectional feminist lens. These identities and backgrounds are not separate from consciousness-raising. Researchers need to be intentional about acknowledging the complexity of WoC scholarship and avoid potentially essentializing the experience of WoC. WoC have unique and worthy knowledge contributions to enrich academia.

### Conclusion

Our drive for this study is due to a lack of diverse stories that resonate with our experience. The study demonstrates how CRF, CAE, and CL work together to serve as a bridge for research and activism. CAE provides a tool for collective action and agency that contributes to our CL, which is a learning process toward critical consciousness-raising about the

knowledge of knowing, internalizing, and embracing feminism. Using our collective voice as WoC doctoral students, we call out the multitude of oppressions WoC face in the academy. This style of writing informs the readers while also evoking emotion to trigger action (Chang et al., 2016). Sparse literature exists on the experiences of graduate students and even less focuses on WoC. We add to qualitative research by using a culturally congruent methodology to study the experiences of WoC researching higher education. The experiential knowledge WoC bring to the academy is valuable, and through our collective voices, we provide a vulnerable example to other WoC to see value in their life knowledge as well.

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