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Cycles of domination and resistance: A performance autoethnography of a Black woman
at a PWI
Savannah Brown

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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FACULTY COMMITTEE:

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Abstract

This thesis is a performance autoethnography that examines and unpacks my experiences as a Black woman who attends a predominantly white institution. Through narratives, letters, and photos, I reveal and analyze the ways in which I navigate both systems of domination and resistance between my interactions with spaces, people, discourses, and objects. As I use Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, and performance studies as my theoretical underpinnings, I can understand how my Black, female body is situated and contested within the institution that I refer to as Everywhere University. While this project shows my experiences with concepts such as racism, whiteness, tokenism, and silence, it also emphasizes how I use resistance in spaces of constraint

Cycles of domination and resistance

Dear Dr. Jim Tiller and Fellow Administrators,

You say: We encourage critical thought and multiple perspectives.

You say: Let's be the change and make your mark at Everywhere University.

You say: We love *all* our students.

You may not know me, but I watch you. I listen. Six years, from the inside out--in my dreams, you consumed me, you consume me. I consume my morning cup of coffee, and I walk to the campus that has carefully and constructively designed this nightmare.

A mosquito with endless supply to my blood.

My consciousness aches. Territorial, she rests her heavy weight above my left breast pressing harder, a firm push. Moving up my chest towards my neck, she nests and cradles in my throat rendering me silent. I drop to my knees and beg for drops of her mercy. Is it her mercy I seek? She pulls me up. My wrists. Day. After Day. Please regard this letter with your utmost urgency and consideration.

Sincerely,

Savannah Brown

The cycle repeats

Chapter 1: Introduction

iron sets. 450 degrees.

pull.

pull.

pull.

pull.

pull.

iron burns. iron transforms.

iron says,

“Speak.”

“Behave.”

If you don’t listen, iron will burn your throat and trap your words.

You choke.

You speak as iron wishes. Words are not yours. Silence.

You don’t remember the words that were once yours.

Act as iron wishes. You are no longer your own.

iron burns and iron kills. Look at the marks that it has left on you. Purple. Black.

Look as iron wishes. Not because you want to. Survive.

Please survive.

Step 1: Mix dime size amount of shampoo with conditioner. Do not use excessively, or hair will be dry.

Step 2: Deep condition curls. Detangle with wide-tooth comb. Wash. Add more conditioner. Detangle again.

Step 3: Let hair dry slightly. Add oil. Add heat protectant. Add oil once more.

Step 4: Section hair into 5-7 parts. Blow dry. No hair should be damp after this point. Add oil.

Step 5: Keep hair in sections. Set straightener to 450 degrees. straighten. Oil. pull. Oil. stretch. Oil. straighten. Oil. straighten.

Step 6: Spray finishing gloss until hair is shiny and smooth. Do not get wet.

The iron burns. I no longer want its scars.

Cool Water relieves the pain, even if momentarily.

Twisting.

Winding.

Curling.

Water replies, "Cool down. Let me take away that pain. Where are you?"

Step 1: Go into shower. Leave shower cap in the cabinet.

Step 2: Place head directly under shower head.

Step 3: Let hair soak up all incoming Water. You should notice curls beginning to form.

Step 4: Skip shampoo. Don't want to shampoo too much. Avoid damage.

Step 5: Cover entire head with conditioner and apply over scalp.

Step 6: Detangle with a detangler comb.

Step 7: Repeat steps 5 and 6.

Step 8: Work in a dime size amount of conditioner to leave in hair. Do not wash out.

Step 9: Dry hair for 10 minutes. Avoid a towel. Instead wrap a silky shirt around the hair to minimize damage.

Step 10: Remove shirt. Apply leave in conditioner. Add oil generously.

Step 11: Look in the mirror.

Drink Water and let the words find you again. They will come. Keep drinking.

Gulp. Gulp some more. Refreshing, I know.

Jump into Water.

Watch as Water transforms.

Cool Water relieves the pain, even if momentarily.

Scars fade. Purple becomes pink. Black becomes blue.

Soon it will heal.

Find Water.

Find You.

And the cycle repeats.



Figure 1. Black Hair Products at Everywhere Grocery (own photo).

Here lies the un-silencing of my Black, female body. In this thesis, I share the stories that are often overlooked, ignored, and erased. Through a critical performance autoethnography, I place my body onto the page (Spry, 2011) in order to capture the ways in which I interact with spaces, discourses, people, and objects. Within each of these often interlocking systems, I navigate the constant interactions of power that I face within the everyday. In this thesis, you will find that my experiences as a Black woman at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) are complex and dynamic.

As you will see, I refer to the PWI I attend as Everywhere University to incorporate the “everywhereness” of institutional racism and white supremacy. This space, regardless of the institution, is inescapable from the systems of power in which it is placed within: domination, marginalization, and resistance. I intentionally create narratives to show how my body and mind are situated within the simultaneous relationship between domination and resistance. Along with performative pieces of writing, I incorporate photos that capture the small cuts of racism that have become all too common, further exasperating my overall well-being. When people ask me how I’m doing at Everywhere University, I typically respond with “I’m just tired.” However, while this sentiment is true, it does not capture the harm, abuse, and neglect that has been placed onto me during my six-year relationship with this institution. Boylorn (2020) suggests that this form of violence is absorbed within the Black body, leaving my body physically, emotionally, and spiritually weathered. With the theoretical lenses of performance studies, critical race theory, and intersectionality, it is my hope that throughout this thesis, you will see how my body got here, and how it operates as a site of resistance.

My project unpacks my experiences as a Black woman to show moments of discrimination, pure rage, apathy, pain, silence, liberatory resistance, and life-making. To give readers a look into my beautiful, Black world, I list a few of my guiding research questions to keep in mind as you further delve into my project.

- 1.) What was a critical moment that shaped my time at Everywhere University?
- 2.) How is my Black, female body situated within the spaces, discourses, and other interactions at Everywhere University?
- 3.) How do I navigate the politics of my voice?
- 4.) What systems of domination and/or resistance do I engage with?

As I synthesize and connect themes of domination and resistance that have emerged from my autoethnographic process, I hope to contribute to existing literature that emphasizes Black women in predominantly white spaces. As this project unfolded itself to me over the last year and a half, specific areas such as whiteness, silence, visibility politics, and life-making at a PWI are emphasized and examined within each autoethnographic piece. This thesis functions as a mode of resistance and disruption to unsilence myself in the communication studies field. To do so, I placed my body onto these pages to interrupt the systems and institutions that marginalize my humanity. I resist. Over and over again.

My thesis is divided into six parts consisting of the introduction, methodology and theoretical frameworks, three autoethnographic pieces with analysis and photos

intertwined throughout, and a concluding letter that details my thoughts on the future of autoethnography in the field of Communication Studies.

Chapter one consists of the introduction, as you just read, opening with a performative piece that invites readers into the tensions of both domination and resistance that I experience as a Black woman within a predominantly white university. I use my hair and the processes that go into Black hair maintenance as a metaphoric and visual representation of the ways I am suppressed and silenced. However, to reinforce the themes of both domination AND resistance, I also play with these metaphors to show how I find myself and enact forces of disruption and change. Further into chapter one, I identify four guiding research questions that sparked the autoethnographic process. Lastly, I introduce the theoretical lenses that I will be further investigating in Chapter two that specifically looks at the methodology and theories that I use for this project.

Chapter two provides the methodological and theoretical underpinnings that shape this performance autoethnography. Through the voices of existing scholars and literature, this section highlights traditional autoethnographic methods and introduces why performance studies is necessary to utilize within autoethnography as a Black woman whose fleshy, material body negotiates power within my everyday interactions. Furthermore, this chapter unpacks the scholarship surrounding Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, and performance. With my method and theories, I am able to create autoethnographic pieces that place and show my body, voice (or the lack thereof), and experiences within this thesis.

In chapters three, four, and five, I construct my autoethnographic pieces into three separate letters addressed to: My Tormentors, My Dementors, and My [Wo]mentors.

These sections are intentionally organized in a way that combines both narrative writing and critical analysis intertwined with each other. These sections have emerged from my journaling process, self-reflexivity, memory work, and meditations that I practiced in order to embrace the methodology of performance autoethnography. These pieces reveal and identify the oppressive forces of Everywhere University and show how my body is a contested, unwelcomed site for a predominantly white university. My stories of oppression and resistance provide the communication studies field with knowledge from “the bottom” (Matsuda, 1995). This knowledge contributes to existing scholarship that seeks to examine the experiences for undergraduate, Black bodies within predominantly white universities. While this scholarship is reviewed throughout my project, I also incorporate how and why these theoretical underpinnings are a necessary lens to make sense of my experiences.

Finally, Chapter Six is a written letter composed to the Communication Studies field. Here, I discuss where this research could take both me and the field itself, what I have learned throughout this writing process, and why performance helps the audience make sense of my experiences.

/Interlude/

Dear Dr. Jim Tiller and Fellow Administrators,

You don't say: Black Lives Matter and racism in all forms will not be tolerated.

You don't say: White, cisgender, heterosexual, male privilege is real.

You don't say: I'm sorry.

Six years. SIX YEARS. I cry out to you, "Our marginalized communities are in pain due to your actions, your choices, and your behaviors."

My rage remains. Silent. All-consuming. You apologize.

But not to me.

Instead, you send your condolences. To the oppressors who created this war.

To the white man who grips his "Don't Tread on Me" flag in his left hand, while holding a noose in his right.

To the white man who chants, "USA! USA! Make America Great Again!"

To the white man who storms the capital wearing a furry, buckskin hat over his head with horns peaking from its corners.

As the camera rolls and centers your face, I finally see you. I see them in you. You are them. You had me fooled for years. You showed up at events hosted by your Black students. You sat with us as you listened to our grievances and frustrations. I thought you loved us. Valued us. You trickster. That is not love. You deny the very truths of my existence, you incite an act of violence.

My right arm grips at my stomach as she makes herself known. She then streams down from the corners of my eyes leaving my face damp, red, and swollen. For the love of God, help me. Please regard this letter with your utmost urgency and consideration.

Sincerely,

Savannah Brown

And the cycle repeats.



Figure 2.

January 6

(own photo).



Figure 3. Confederate Roads (own photo).

Chapter 2: Method and Theory

Methodology

Dear Communication Studies Discipline,

Throughout my time at a PWI, I navigated and negotiated the politics of my voice, behavior, and body. I lived within the contradictions of...

pain and numbness.

rage and apathy.

hope and hopelessness.

silence and voice.

black and white.

And all the spaces betwixt and between.

During my first year of graduate school, I took a qualitative research class with Dr. Melissa Alemán who gave me the opportunity to either conduct interviews or create an autoethnography. For the first time in my academic career, I felt an unexplainable pull to the method of autoethnography. A vibe. A ‘vibrant something’ (Bennett, 2010) that captured the experiences of both my mind and body (Spry, 2011). Questions consumed me as I started writing my first autoethnographic piece: 1.) Am I being self-centered by choosing autoethnography? 2.) Are my experiences worthy of sharing? 3.) Who is my inspiration?

Answer Key: 1) Yes. 2) Hell yes. 3) Me and my Black community at PWI’s.

Dr. Alemán always told me to “play with the page in stylistic/creative forms” and “engage with evocative writing.” Even with this new sense of creative freedom, I struggled with the balance of aesthetic, evocative storytelling, and scholarship. I found

myself slipping back into the styles of academic writing I had been taught that followed a formal structure. I quickly learned that autoethnography accepts and embraces my intersectional identities, body, mind, spirit, emotions, and the contradictions/complexities of my existence. As Dr. Hobson shared, “This methodology allows you to be vulnerable.” Bleed on the page (Behar, 1996). Bleeding on the page was (and is) a scary task. I am a Black woman who defaults to silence when confronted with conflict. I am a Black woman who masks emotions. I am a Black woman who didn’t realize I was allowed to feel and then *share* those feelings. I am a Black woman who has been made and compounded by layers of trauma.

In order to translate my mind and body onto the page, I use critical performance autoethnography (Spry, 2011). I intentionally use the word translation because in a way, that’s what this project seems to be right? A translation piece. During a conversation with my professor, Dr. Michael Broderick helped me better understand how my autoethnography doesn’t need to be explained to my Black roommate, my Black best friend, or my Black professors. Instead, my performance autoethnography is a translation piece for a white audience. Hopefully one that will disrupt the discipline of Communication Studies.

Critical Performance Autoethnography

I use “critical” and “performance” as a precursor to “autoethnography” to signify that this story, MY story, is about relationships, about intersectional bodies moving in and through

space with one another, and also about how power dynamics in my experience play out in connection to larger socio-political issues about race, class, gender, and sexuality- (Hobson, 2013, p. 40).

The methodology used for my thesis is critical performance autoethnography. Traditionally, autoethnography is a writing form that exists within the realms of autobiographical texts and ethnographic approaches to scholarship (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). As a woman of color, I never felt well represented within the field of research. Various scholarly works I engage with frame dominant experiences that often (re)center whiteness. I want to challenge this practice by using my embodied experiences as a way to decenter whiteness, thereby amplifying my Black womanhood, voice, and body by asserting myself into research. Autoethnography provides me with the means to “Become and embody the change I seek in myself and in the world” (Jones, 2016, p.235). It would be a disservice to myself and others if I did not take this transformative opportunity to research and document my experiences.

Autoethnography uses self-reflexive practices to engage with an embodied style of writing that studies an individual’s identities and lived experiences (Tracy, 2020). Self-reflexivity is imperative to use within this method because storytelling on its own is not enough (Fox, 2019) Similarly, Poulos (2021) informs readers that through reflexive practices and thick description, this research method is a way to, “illuminate the many layers of human social, emotional, theoretical, political, and cultural praxis” (p.5). In order to reveal these “many layers” researchers must balance both the telling and showing of one’s lived experiences (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011). Thus, researchers

must “bring readers into the scene...particularly into thoughts, emotions, and actions” (Ellis, 2004, p.142 as cited in Ellis & Bochner, 2011, p.277).

In my research, I use self-reflexivity as a way to understand my positionalities and identities in relation to myself and others. These “others” include other peers, students, professors, mentors, discourses, and overall aspects within a predominantly white university. This approach and method allow me to better critique the relationships I have within the institutions and environments I encounter.

Because my experiences are simultaneously complicated, uncertain, ugly, and beautiful, I want to use a method that best reflects these traits. In the words of Bochner, “The autoethnographic way of life originates in doubt and uncertainty. To be alive is to be uncertain...Autoethnography allows a person to lean into uncertainty rather than struggle against it” (Bochner, 2020, p. 6 as cited in Adams et. al, 2021, p.24).

I know I must embrace the uncertainty of this method. As a control freak, this is particularly challenging, but I let go. As best as I can. As best as I know how. I “bleed on the page” leaving readers with both an autoethnography that centers not only my mind, but my body as well. In the words of Richardson and St. Pierre,

“These performance texts are always:

political,

emotional,

analytic ,

interpretive,

pedagogical,

local, partial,

incomplete,
painful to
read,
exhilarating” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962 as cited in Denzin, 2014, p.87).

Performance autoethnography (Spry, 2011) emphasizes that the body is a cultural text where theory and embodiment co-exist together. While writing is a form of inquiry in autoethnography, Spry identifies the ways in which art, embodiment, and aesthetics intertwine as key modes of performance autoethnography. The body then becomes a way of knowing. As we further consider the body, Madison (1999) refers to performance as a theory of the flesh where “Mind and body are locked together in a divine kind of unity” (p.109). Furthermore, this theory of the flesh is not only meant to be read, but performed for an audience as well (Poulos, 2021).

As I utilize performance autoethnography, I investigate and capture how my intersectional body is situated within discourses, spaces, and relationships with others. Throughout my research, I realize that I cannot separate my body from my mind as I write. My body is made of flesh and material that informs and shapes how I experience and perceive the world. As my body moves and dances throughout various spaces, it informs my emotions, traumas, joys, triumphs, anxieties, microaggressions, etc. Performative writing extends beyond traditional autoethnography because, “For a performative autoethnographer, the critical stance of the performing constitutes a praxis of evidence and analysis. We offer our performing body as raw data of a critical cultural story” (Spry, 2011, p.19). This “raw” form of analysis unfolds into a call for

transformation, a societal critique that works to reject and challenge hegemonic forces and practices (Denzin, 2006). Through written accounts of my embodied experiences, I am able to expose and acknowledge larger, systemic issues. Jones (2016) states, “...autoethnography engages us in processes of becoming and because of this, shows us ways of embodying change” (p. 229).

Performance autoethnography is more than a methodology. This approach is a call for social justice that validates the lived experiences of marginalized communities. In a society that constantly invalidates (and kills) Black feelings, experiences, and overall existence, performance autoethnography acts as an intervention (Conquergood, 2002) to include the identities, emotions, and bodies that are often absent within greater narratives/contexts. Performance autoethnography equips me with the tools to better understand my intersectional, embodied experiences at a predominantly white institution.

Process of Methodology:

Throughout the year, I have engaged with various autoethnographic practices to better understand my lived experiences. I did so through a process similar to Fox (2019) that includes: 1.) Emotional Recollection 2.) Documentation and 3.) Embracement of partial reality. Through a journaling process, I engaged with memory work (Fox, 2021) to recall past events and epiphanies (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011) that have become critical moments within my life. This was done through journals with questions/prompts such as: What was a critical moment within my time at a PWI? What does it mean to be a Black woman? How do I perform Blackness? Write from the body. Free write.

These were only few of the prompts that I unpacked within my journaling experience. However, I knew I needed to listen to my body without the distractions of

pen and paper. I needed to allow my body to become the text, the paper, and the stage (Spry, 2011). In order to center the body, I incorporated meditations into my day. Sometimes, this looked like deep breathing as a way to ground myself. On another day, it was when I sat on the empty bench near the quad as I observed and acknowledged the messages my body was communicating. While I didn't take notes directly during my meditation time, I would come back to my journal later on and reflect on my body. Through the process of journaling and meditation, "I learn to still my mind enough to attend to my body, to really listen to her, even when she refuses to speak" (Metta, 2013, p.489). I so often remained silent, and I owed it to myself to listen to my body when my voice failed to speak.

Along with memory work and reflective journaling and meditation, I also collected pictures as a way to document the "little cuts of racism" I experience within the everyday. The process of both collecting and reflecting on these photos aided me in becoming more attuned to my surroundings. Through the art of paying attention (Birkerts, 2013), "ways of operating or doing things no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xi). These photos are a way for me to expose the places and objects that initiate bodily reactions of anxiety, anger, and disappointment within me. As I capture these pictures, I reject the invisibility of what is often pushed into the background left unnoticed.

As shown in the introduction of this chapter, I also incorporate letters as a way to express my close and personal relationships to whom the letter is addressed. Through the practice of writing performative pieces, letters, narratives, and the collection of photos, I am able to share a piece of what Fox (2019) would call my partial reality. My story.

As a woman of color, storytelling is a radical act that disrupts hegemonic systems of oppression (Corey, 1998). In the words of Gloria Anzaldua, “I write...to keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive...I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me...” (Moraga & Anzaldua, 2015, p.169). These moments of storytelling “...facilitate sense making processes...enlarge our interpretations...and shape our ability to anticipate the possibility of a multiplicity of meanings” (Alemán & Helfrich, 2010, p.21). Broderick and Gleason (2016) argue, “What is necessary is some type of narrative to activate or actualize the body” (p. 258). In order to reflect the chaotic nature of my experiences, I write my performance autoethnography in a way that not only tells, but shows my thoughts, feelings, body movements, and relationships with both people, objects, and discourses.

Throughout my thesis, my narratives and performative pieces of writing reflect the six years I spent at a PWI and the ways in which I negotiate identity, power, voice, and behavior. As I embrace my theoretical lenses, I show the relationship between life and theory as we are not separate entities (Madison, 1999). Ferdinand (2009) echoes this sentiment as she discusses the tethered relationship between our stories and theory within autoethnographic works. In particular she claims, “Autoethnographic texts are much more than dramatic episodes...they present stories coupled with theory, an individual locked in a social context, and limited engagement with people, time, culture, and space” (Ferdinand, 2009, p.8). As you continue reading, it is my hope that readers will understand why I not only utilize Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, and performance studies, but why they are a necessity to understand and conceptualize the negotiations of power I am situated in within the “everyday” at the “everywhere.”

Theoretical Lenses

Critical Race Theory

As I write this, I reflect on an incident that occurred just nights ago at Everywhere University. I was walking on the sidewalk near the student center with my roommate (who is also a Black woman), when a car full of white men passed us. There was a white man with long, brown hair who tilted his head out the window and yelled, “Sup n*ggers.” While this was not the first time I have been called the “n” word, this was the first time I experienced the hard “er” at the end of the word. Let me tell you. In that moment, the rage of my ancestors consumed my spirit. My first instincts:

Tightly grip my pepper spray.

I don’t have the privilege to react.

Yell back?

No.

Put up my middle finger with a huge, “FUCK YOU!”

Can’t do that either.

We must survive (Scott, 1990).

Just moments later, after the car drove away, a different car filled with white men harassed us with monkey-imitations as they zoomed along the street. My pace quickened and my mind was fixated on a single thought: Car. Car. Car. Just get to the car, Savannah. We’ll be safe then.

To this day, I wonder why white people are so damn concerned about my walking on the street. Why does this irk them to their inner core? After my own reflections, I understand exactly why I need Critical Race Theory. I recognize now that our Black

bodies are contested, material sites for this form of violence. We are two Black women at a predominantly white university, and that disrupts the systems of white supremacy that function to suppress our livelihoods. White supremacy aims to deny and ignore the racial abuse that it manifests and thrives upon. However, as I will explain further, Critical Race Theory calls out the systems of marginalization and oppression that those white boys are an active part of. That is why they are angry. That is why my Black body is treated as a site for violence.

As I navigate institutions, spaces, and discourses, I use Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework to better inform my relationships to these systems. CRT was initially rooted within legal studies to understand the ways in which the law maintained and reproduced systems of marginalization and domination over Black and Brown bodies (West et al., 1995). Furthermore, CRT has expanded beyond the legal realm to also encompass "...the ways...race and racial power are constructed and represented in American society as a whole" (West et al., 1995, p. xii). I use CRT to better understand my ontological positions as a Black woman at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Such ontological positions require self-reflexivity, self-awareness, and bodymindfulness (Nagata, 2004) in order to remain cognizant of social structures and the ways in which power functions (Hylton, 2012). This form of constant cognition and awareness is not difficult. In fact, I argue I have a hyper-awareness of existing social structures. I don't have much of a choice.

In order to examine these power relations (such as the one my roommate and I experienced that night), CRT works to critique and challenge the institutions in which society has been built upon. In particular, CRT "Questions the very foundations of liberal

order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and...constitutional law” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p.3). Orbe and Allen (2008) clearly identify five key components of CRT that move beyond the legal sphere to also include how CRT examines power within systemic practices and institutions as well. These factors are direct ways to question the foundations of liberal order that Delgado and Stefancic emphasize in their writings. CRT works to:

- 1.) Identify that racism exists structurally and systemically.
- 2.) Acknowledge that race is not neutral.
- 3.) Recognize historical contexts of race must be considered to understand how it is functioning presently within our society.
- 4.) Look to marginalized bodies as sites of knowledge and experience.
- 5.) CRT is a theory for (re)imagination, deconstruction, and reconstruction.

Throughout the performative and narrative pieces of writing in my thesis, CRT is used as a lens to better conceptualize my Black experience at a predominantly white institution. It is my hope that in this thesis, you will clearly see and engage with these five, major components of CRT. In their research, Anguiano and Castaneda (2014) emphasize one of the major functions of CRT is to provide “consciousness raising” through the use of counternarratives by providing BIPOC the opportunity to share their realities and truths. This form of awareness amplifies Orbe and Allen’s (2008) consideration of CRT as a way to amplify and learn from marginalized voices. Similarly, Atwood and Lopez (2014) embrace CRT’s counterstory approach as a way to “interrogate and unpack the racial policies of the everyday and highlight some of the ways in which racism is manifested on a daily basis” (p. 1136). In my thesis, the

“everydayness” and “everywhereness” of racism is crucial in the understandings of my experiences as a Black woman.

As I use CRT as a theoretical lens, I want to unpack and critically consider the ways in which whiteness is hegemonically reinforced within the PWI I attended and its surrounding areas. Through the use of CRT, scholars are able to better understand how whiteness functions within society. At its core, whiteness studies examines the meanings, privileges, and dominance that is associated with being white (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Existing scholarship seeks to critique and illuminate the invisibility of whiteness that is embedded within hegemonic systems of society (McIntosh, 1989). Similarly, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) examine the discursive modes of whiteness through the use of nominalist rhetoric. Through the power of naming, nominalist rhetoric “...names whiteness, displaces its centrality and reveals its invisible position” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p.292). Thus, naming whiteness renders it visible. Furthermore, Harris (1993) argues that whiteness as a property upholds systems of dominance and privilege while further oppressing people of color. In particular, Harris (1993) states, “...the law...acknowledges and reinforces a property interest in whiteness that reproduces Black subordination” (p.1731). Furthermore, whiteness as a social construct has been afforded protection and conservation within our institutions. As a property, whiteness has been granted rights that include, but are not limited to rights of “disposition...use, exchange and enjoyment, reputation...and the right to exclude” (Hughes, 2020, p.155). Thus, whiteness as property serves to maintain systems and powers of white supremacy as it simultaneously harms Black bodies.

As whiteness is further researched, white supremacy inevitably joins the conversation. Moon and Holling (2020) discuss white racial frames and white epistemologies to conceptualize how white supremacy is reinforced through dominant ways of knowing and understanding the institutions and systems within society. These white frames are used as ways to (in)visibly partake in discrimination and racism while upholding whiteness. However, when one's whiteness is threatened, they may embrace white fragility as a way to use their whiteness as preservation and protection. White fragility seeks to understand these defense mechanisms and how they manifest within white individuals (DiAngelo, 2011; Jones & Norwood, 2017; Liebow & Glazer, 2019). As I consider CRT and whiteness in relation to my experiences at a PWI, I want to dive deeper into what it means for me specifically as a Black woman.

Intersectionality

As a Black woman in academia, it is crucial to understand and unpack my intersectional, lived experiences. When I took my first women's studies course during my first year of college, I was not represented in the curriculum. Even more so, I felt simultaneously ignored and erased by the forms of "feminism" taught. We were stuck in the second wave, and I drowned over and over again. At the time, I did not have the vocabularies to communicate why I felt disengaged and separated from the course material. You know that experience when you know something feels off, but you just can't put your finger on it? I now understand my deep discontent for this course because of its hegemonic reproduction of white womanhood as the symbol of what it means to be a woman (Crenshaw, 1989). This reproduction is a form of violence to my material body within the classroom. Every Tuesday and Thursday when I would enter the lecture hall, I

was well aware of my body. A 160-person class, and the only Black woman I could identify was me. When my Black experiences were erased from the curriculum, I too was erased within the physical space that was overshadowed by whiteness. My professor needed to embrace an intersectional pedagogical approach that would embrace, acknowledge, and appreciate difference in all its forms (Ruiz-Mesa, 2021).

Jordan-Zachary (2013) posits that, “Black womanhood is socially produced, via discursive practices; thereby producing a particular form of Black female subjectivity” (p.103). The experiences of this subjectivity are often erased in the discriminatory systems of both sexism and racism (Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, research and scholarly works must consider the intersectional experiences of Black women to illuminate the many complexities of our lives. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) states:

If Black women cannot conclusively say that “but for” their race or “but for” their gender they would be treated differently, they are not invited to climb through the hatch but told to wait in the unprotected margin until they can be absorbed into the broader, protected categories of race and sex (p.152).

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” as a metaphor that focuses on how one’s identities such as: race and gender intertwine to create interlocking systems of marginalization/oppression for an individual within society (West et al., 1995). According to Collins (2019), “Using intersectionality as a metaphor provided new angles of vision on each system of power and how they cross and diverge from one another” (p.28). Similarly, Lorde (1984) reflects intersectional thought as she acknowledges the ways we do not live “single-issue” lives (p.138). Collins then expands on the scholarship of Crenshaw to move beyond the metaphorical sphere of intersectionality to incorporate

how intersectionality functions within the frameworks of institutions, thought, and selves. In doing so, Collins draws from scholarship such as Black feminism, critical theory, and post-colonialism to also consider the role(s) and negotiations of power within these relationships.

Through the use and lens of intersectionality, I am able to research how my intertwined identities are impacted and influenced by Everywhere University. More specifically, I transcend the metaphoric conceptualization of intersectionality to instead incorporate the framework given by Collins to also include the navigation of power that I negotiate within the everyday at a PWI. This is shown throughout my narratives as I place my intersectional body within the contexts of Everywhere University. I as a Black woman go through a series of happenings and my identities are inextricable to the events that take place during my time at this institution. Whether it's on the sidewalk, classroom, or in the spaces I feel at home, I am a Black woman who negotiates and navigates power every single day.

Through the process of journaling, capturing photos, memory work, and living through my embodied experiences, I have written performative and narrative pieces to show the interconnection of my identities. Furthermore, I want my performance autoethnography to both show and tell (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011) how these identities, my identities, are shaped and situated within the spaces, objects, people, and discourses surrounding me. Throughout my research, a guiding question that I find myself asking often is, "How am I both *being* and *becoming* a Black woman at any given moment?" Intersectionality helps me better understand the constant and simultaneous process of being and becoming. In conjunction with intersectionality, performance

studies offers me perspectives of scholarship that center both the mind and body as a site of knowledge.

Performance Studies

To place my body on the page to show my relationships with power, people, objects, and discourses, I use the theory of performance. Conquergood (2002) argues, “Performance studies struggles to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice” (p.145). Performance allows one to use our fleshy, material bodies as a site of knowledge (Johnson, 2020). This disrupts the white epistemologies and white racial frames that (re)produces white supremacy (Moon & Holling, 2020). In addition, performance invites creative and artistic ways of knowing that disrupts institutions by amplifying and uplifting marginalized bodies/knowledges.

Marginalized knowledges have been erased and existing scholarship values written texts, or in other words contributes to “scriptocentrism” (Conquergood, 2002, p.147). This form of epistemological injustice reinforces the erasure, silencing, and invisibility of subjugated groups, thereby participating in an act of violence (Collins, 2019). Madison (1999) shifts away from a scriptocentric framework to instead embrace the mind and body as she states, “the theory knows and feels, and the performance feels and unlearns” (p.109). Thus, the body is a site of knowledge that informs our experiences.

Furthermore, Conquergood (2002) argues that performance studies is more than a practice; instead, it “Makes its most radical intervention by embracing both written scholarship and creative work, papers, and performances” (p. 151). Similarly,

performative writing accepts the pain, trauma, and triumphs while also creating an evocative experience for the audience (Denzin, 2014). While performance studies centers the mind and the body, Brisini and Simmons (2016) enter the conversation from a post-humanist perspective to include both living and non-living objects as performers. My research heavily focuses on my Black, female embodied experiences; however, I appreciate the scholarship from post-humanism as it helps me consider my co-stars on stage, animate and inanimate.

Through performance theory, I am able to “re-present” my life through various writing forms that depict my multiple and complex identities (Spry, 2011, p.57). In doing so, my body, along with its negotiations with other people, places, objects, and discourses became the stage in which I use narratives, vignettes, letters, and photos to perform.

Over the past year and a half, I practiced reflection, reflexivity, and a (re)experiencing of moments, both good and bad, at this institution. When I first started unpacking my experiences, I was invulnerable both internally and on the page. Stoic. Or as some would say, a cold Scorpio. However, as I kept writing and reflecting on my embodied experiences, I gave myself the permission to feel. Narratives, letters, and photos were all used in my project to best represent my messy, complicated, and complex embodied experiences. Through this thesis, I use CRT, intersectionality, and performance studies as my theoretical approaches as a way to situate myself as a Black woman in a PWI.

Now that I have unpacked my methodology and underlying theoretical lenses within my project, I will now explore how my body has been used as a site for

contestation here at Everywhere University through performance autoethnography. My body is not an apolitical, contained object that navigates itself within neutral spaces. Rather, my Black, female body is complicated and contested within society, including that of Everywhere University. I know my body is a problem within this space. I need Critical Race Theory. I need intersectionality. I need performance. These are necessary to make sense of my experiences, but the university would rather silence and ignore Me. My body. My experiences. I will not let you erase me because, "...maybe, just maybe, something about my resistant voice in this moment will be heard, taken in, and taken seriously. Maybe" (Griffin, 2012, p.139). Here is a glimpse into my story. I'll tell you what I want you to know.

Best,

Savannah Brown

*/Interlude/***Dear Dr. Jim Tiller and Fellow Administrators,**

You walk into our space. The one that I call home. My homeplace that functions as safety net where black people can find refuge and relief from the abuse that is inflicted upon us by racism (hooks, 2014). You. Your tall, wide-framed, white, dominating body. A Disney mascot on a summer camp campus. How dare you enter this sacred place when you protect and comfort those who wish to marginalize, harm, and kill the people? Yet, you smile at us. You raise your left arm as you strategically angle the camera on your phone, beginning to film an Instagram story. We are the precious, tokenized students used as a spectacle. We are nothing more than exploited optics. I exchange a smile with you as she squeezes my chest.

Rather, I should say you *take up* the space that I and others like me call home.

Do I personally want your apology?

Absolutely not.

Do you owe it to the women on this campus?

Yes.

Do you owe it to your students of color?

Yes.

Do you owe it to your LGBTQ+ students?

Yes.

Do you owe it to your queer students of color?

Yes.

Do you owe it to the white, privileged communities who deny the real systems of privilege and marginalization?

No.

But that's the party you choose to both host and attend.

If I haven't made myself abundantly clear thus far, I need YOU to do better. We need YOU to do better. Existing in this market economy called college (Alexander & Warren, 2002); I refuse to be \$Blackstudent.001. Please regard this letter with your utmost urgency and consideration.

Sincerely,

Savannah Brown

And the cycle repeats

Chapter 3: Letter To my Tormentors

Dear Everywhere University Tormentors,

We gather in our freshman year dorm room as we blast Beyoncé, Rihanna, Alicia Keys, and the occasional Cardi B. The space is limited, and our bodies fill the room from corner to corner. We remain mindful of “quiet hours,” but this fails to interrupt our festivities. Thirsty Thursday! I peek my head out of the door to make sure Karen, our prick of a RA, is nowhere in sight. After I discreetly shut the door and rotate the lock, I pour room-temperature cherry burnetts into our DIY shot glasses. I find myself pouring five shots...one for me and one for Zaria, Keyla, Tani, and Ana. We call ourselves: The Black Girls of MGL.

MGL: a shared dormitory that centers rest, self-care, companionship, and whiteness.

The five of us make up the totality of all Black women in the building.

[Zaria]: sporadic, bubbly, my soulmate.

[Keyla]: confident, caring, jokester.

[Tani]: risk-taker, easily annoyed, tough lover.

[Ana]: motivator, hard worker, outspoken.

[Me]: unintentionally funny, sensitive, mom of the group.

This seems to go without saying, but our lituations (lit situations) on Thursdays go beyond the casual “partying” that takes place around campus. Beyond the sweaty and beer infested frat parties. *No*. Our Thursdays are a celebration of our Blackness. We made it another week at a predominantly white school. This calls for a *twerk fest*.

“To the Black girls of MGL!” I exclaim with my arm extended into the air.

Shot one burns down our throats as we wrinkle our noses and frown from the offensive sensation left on our tongues.

Our curly hair begins to frizz as the room warms...even though it's 65 degrees. Our five bodies move together to the rhythm of the music, rarely slowing down.

Beyonce's voice fills us, *"Skin just like pearls...Same skin that was broken be the same skin takin' over...But when you're in the room, they notice you...with you and all of your glory...Your skin is not only dark, it shines and it tells your story."*

"Time for shot 2, but let's make it a double." Zaria demands.

This takes little to no persuasion, and we each gather our chasers as we prepare for this bad idea.

"To the Black girls of MGL!" we say simultaneously.

We swallow once again and ignore the foul taste. We spin, twerk, bounce, and grind our bodies to the music...this time it's Cardi.

"Savannah, where is your rhythm girl? Your white half is showing!" Keyla jokes.

I laugh as I continue my off-beat dancing.

Shots 3 and 4...then 7 come by and I'm hot. Everyone seems to enjoy the song selection, but my body is overheating, and I can't find my shorts and black crop top.

UGHHH where are they?

Reaching for my phone, I quickly text:

I needa go outside for a little. I'm too hot
and it's making me angry. i know it's late.
i won't be out for long.

Girl, I am so glad you said something bc I'm hot too. Hold up. We all gonna go for a little walk.

The music.

Stops.

We return to a more present state as our bodies adapt to the quietness of the room.

Zaria relays the message to the rest of the girls, and we begin tearing the room apart as we search for our shoes. I grab the room key and we make our way to the sidewalk encompassing our building.

It's a dark night, the streetlights illuminate our bodies as we stroll along the sidewalk. Immediate relief rushes through me as the cold wind gently brushes against my chest.

A white car swerves near our direction.

Five, white, male faces yell: "N*ggas!"

Looking at us.

Five Black women.

On the street.

Alone.

They slow down as they approach. Closer and Closer and Closer.

My fists clench and cross around my chest. *Should I run? Grab Zaria? Run after the car? Scream?*

Something flies from the passenger's window. A specimen coming towards us in the air, but I can't distinguish its features. Frozen. My everlasting stillness corrupts the ability to invite logic into my body. My mouth drops in pure fear and a sudden gasp releases from my tongue as it disseminates into thick air.

Inhale...exhale

This is when I get hurt. Will this cause permanent damage to our bodies? I

immediately feel a wetness on my skin, and my eyes scan down to the bottom of my left leg.

It's sticky. It's dark. It's soda.

With a harsh tone and soda dripping down her ankles, Ana screams, "WHAT THE FUCK! Let's chase their car!"

Filled with adrenaline, Keyla yells, "Yes. Seriously. Let's beat their asses."

Zaria and Tani nod their heads as they ball their right hand and punch their left. Signaling they too, are ready to fight.

I am no fighter.

The girls chase the white car down the road.

VROOM VROOOOOO.

They stop. Out of breath. Filled with rage.

I wish there were no streetlights.

When will I feel safe here?

Attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) is no simple or essentialized experience (Grant, 2012). Rather, it's filled with complexities and contradictions. On one hand, I experience what Jones, Castellanos and Cole (2002) refer to as "social climate stresses" that cause my Black, heterosexual, female body to be discriminated against, alienated, and marginalized within the university (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2018). I'm tired. I didn't know how to conceptualize my exhaustion until Corbin, Smith, and Garcia (2018), stated, "...Black college women in predominantly white spaces become prone to experience racial battle fatigue as they attempt to reconcile...their own selfhood in the

face of racial macro-and microaggressions and misogynoir” (p. 630). *Yes. A mental and physical fatigue. A battle. That’s exactly it.*

The authors further suggest that Black women at PWIs engage in a process of the identification and judgment of racist acts (Corbin et al., 2018). Using my narrative above, there is a white car with five white, male faces approaching us: Identification. *Should I run? Grab Zaria? Run after the car? Scream?* I stand still and refuse to fight or chase after the car: Judgment. When such acts occur Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt (2012) consider multiple coping strategies: 1.) Speaking up 2.) Challenging eurocentric norms 3.) Surrounding around supportive people 4.) “Becoming Black Superwoman” and 5.) “Becoming desensitized and escaping” (p.51). My girls are great at speaking up and embodying the “superwoman” character trait. However, I choose silence. At least this time I do. That’s strategic, right (Bell & Golombisky, 2004)?

This incessant attunement to my own surroundings makes me wonder where I can call home at this PWI. The dorm? No. Haynes (2019) argues that dormitories at PWIs are colonized spaces that center and maintain whiteness, thus creating hostile environments for people of color. Thank God I have the Black Girls of MGL. They are my family. Winkle-Wagner, McCallum, Luedke, and Ota-Malloy (2019) consider relationships such as the Black Girls of MGL as meaningful friendships with a familial tie that connects us based on our shared experiences. I learn more about myself and my identities through my interactions with them (Porter et al., 2020).

As stated earlier, there is no singular experience for Black women at PWIs. I am grateful for my girls because together we can reclaim and celebrate our Blackness. This life-making process (Mustaffa, 2017) allows us to reimagine future possibilities by disrupting and rejecting whiteness. Through life-making, I hold the power to label myself

and my own identities (avowed identities), rather than drown in the consumption of labels and identities given to me by others (ascribed identities) (Antony, 2016). Ascribed identities will always find me; however, life-making, celebration, and identification occurs when I fully claim my own, avowed identities.

To My Tormentors,

As I write this letter, I want to be clear that in no way, shape, or form do you deserve my acknowledgement, attention, or time. The energy I exude here is purely for my own selfish Black benefit. See, you and I, we dance together in an embedded system of whiteness here at Everywhere University. You take the lead by forcing my body into this dance with you. This educational apparatus supports and reinforces your behavior by navigating whiteness as a way of knowing, being, and understanding the systems that our bodies are situated within (Finney, 2014).

No wonder you behave the ways you do! I know that my existence pisses you off. Makes you uncomfortable. Trust me when I say this: I do not need you to call me n*gga or throw soda in my direction to inform me of my unwelcomed body. “One does not need to see a whites only sign to feel that he/she is not welcome” (Finney, 2014, p.62). I am well versed to the ways in which society and this university values whiteness as a welcomed point of entry to its institutions, beliefs, policies, and overall humanity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

The threat to your white, male privilege makes you shrivel up like a child whose most precious blankie has been ripped away from them. You wince in severe pain when a Black woman...

lives.

You become filled with your ancestral rage and tendencies. So much so, that my walking down the sidewalk becomes a site for you to humiliate, abuse, and torment. Would you do this to a Black man? Or is the violence rooted in both racial and gender oppression (Crenshaw, 1989)? Oh, but I bet this is a conversation you wish to ignore. In fact, one you silence. You support your governor who doesn't want to talk about Critical Race Theory and how it was established to critique the marginalization of people of color in order to maintain systems of white supremacy (West et al., 1995). You don't want to unpack that invisible knapsack of whiteness (McIntosh, 1989) because why would you? That would require you to practice self-reflexivity in order to understand systems of privilege. You have been raised and groomed by the benefits of white supremacy, and it is clear that you want to maintain and preserve this reign. God forbid people find out how communities of color are treated within institutions. God forbid that you be held accountable for your nasty actions.

You will not mute me. I place my angry Black voice, body, and experiences here as a disruptive and resistant act (Griffin, 2012). My often silenced voice magnifies to a volume level so loud, you grip your ears and scream. You will no longer dictate how my experiences are communicated and understood both within this university, but society as well (Boylorn, 2013). I challenge the public transcript that you attempt to compose for me (Scott, 1990). I tell my own stories because it's time to learn from marginalized experiences, or as Matsuda (1995) suggests, look to the bottom where "those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen to" (p.63). Dammit, my voice is special, and you're gonna hear me!

I know you would be lost without white supremacy. You wouldn't know what to do without blue lives matter flags. Without tributes to the confederacy. Without political

figures who protect your whiteness at all costs. Without your white-washed Jesus who wears a MAGA hat while holding guns in both arms. Without your skin color being your guaranteed ticket to survival. I'll let you in on a little secret, I know what I would do. I reimagine this possible future because I am a Black woman who has "tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise" (Hartman, 2019, p.xv). I am not here to only critique white supremacy, policies, race, and power, but I'm here to actively change it (West et al., 1995). That scares you, and I'm okay with that.

/Interlude/

Dear Dr. Jim Tiller and Everywhere University Administrators,

This dance with you brings upon an illness.

Lingering in my body.

One that even the most new, innovative medicine cannot fix.

Breaking away from your grip,

My body falls to the ground.

It hurts.

Everywhere.

But I get right back up.

I will every time.

(fuck you) Sincerely,

Savannah Brown

And the cycle repeats



Figure 4. Blue Lives Matter? (own photo).



Figure 5. Political Protectors of Whiteness (own photo).



Figure 6. The Holy Trinity (own photo).



Figure 7. One Nation Under God...And Trump (own photo).

Chapter 4: Letter To my Dementors

Dear Everywhere University Dementors,

RING RING RING! The alarm sends a disappointing shock throughout my body as I reach for snooze. I move slowly as my right arm and fingers stop tingling from the heavy head resting on them all night. I finally approach the red, round button: 7:30. 7:30? *Oh no! I cannot be late!*

“Savannah! Hurry up and turn off your alarm! I can hear it all the way across this apartment!” Tani yells.

When we lived in the dorms, Tani’s room was three doors down from mine. Only Zaria is familiar with the sound of my obnoxiously loud alarm.

“Sorry, Tani! I’m turning it off right now.”

I leap off the bed and gather the outfit I prepared the night before...light blue jeans and a teal blouse that contrasts nicely with my brown skin.

No, Savannah. you do not have time to put on your makeup. It's the first day of class. What kind of impression do you want to leave on your professor?

As I throw my makeup aside, I grab my bristled hairbrush to sleek down my thick curls. With every inhale, I am reminded of the copious amounts of Cantu oil and eco-styler in my hair.

7:54am. Shit, the bus. I need to check the schedule! I think to myself.

Once I finish my hair, I sprint out of my apartment and flag down the bus driver. Thankfully, he stops in the middle of the street to make sure I make it to campus on time.

As I step off the bus, I stand in front of Lewis Hall ready for class to begin.

Perfect timing, it's only 8:27, and I have three minutes to spare.

Relieved, I enter the classroom and scan the room to find available seats. I shiver as my head nods back and forth looking for an empty chair. *Of course, I didn't remember a sweater.*

Well, I don't want to sit too close to the back, but I definitely don't want to be in the front.

"Hey, Savannah!" Lara shouts as she interrupts my hunt for the perfect seat. Seeing her places a smile on my face. I especially appreciate her shirt that reads:

BLACK LIVES MATTER. YESTERDAY. TODAY. TOMORROW.
FOREVER.

"Lara! I'm so happy you're in this class too. Do you mind if I sit next to you?"

"Of course! I hope this spot at the end of the aisle works for you."

As I unpack my five-subject notebook, pencil case, and calculator, I notice our professor making her way to the front of the room. She waves and smiles at the students as she marches down the aisle to her table. Her tall body hunches over her desk as her hands frantically shuffle around in a large, brown tote. I imagine she's searching for a pen, but she pulls out her reading glasses and places them on top of her frizzy, reddish-blond hair.

Sarcastically, Lara whispers, "She's giving off a strong chaotic energy right now."

"Hahaha, but actually. She's giving me a headache by just watching her." I sigh, shaking my head.

I organize all of my belongings in front of me and patiently wait for class to begin.

"Welcome everyone! I am looking forward to this semester with you all. Before we start discussing the logistics of this physics class, I want to first take attendance." Dr. Loro exclaims as she stands in front of us.

"Jake?" she calls out loudly.

"Here." he replies.

"Savannah?" she questions.

I raise my hand and softly respond, "Right here!"

"Savannah!" she wails piercingly.

Her clogs smack the ground as she steps down the middle of the aisle.

click clack click

Why is she approaching me?

me?
CLACK CLACK CLACK

Why is everyone looking at

CLICK CLICK CLACK

Did I do something wrong?

After she finds her way to my seat, she lifts her long-sleeved, green shirt and holds her pale arm next to mine. Her warm hand grips my arm as she places her face inches away from mine.

Why the fuck is she touching me?

Why does she keep pointing to her arm and then back to mine?

When will that frightening grin go away?

"Class, please pay attention. This! This is so important! Diversity is so important! Thank you for choosing and coming to Everywhere University, Savannah!" Dr. Toro exclaims.

Where else should I have chosen? Do not say you're welcome, Savannah. Don't be kind right now.

"You're welcome! I love Everywhere University!" I lie.

My shoulders slouch as I place my weight onto the desk in front of me. My body fills with heat and I no longer need the sweater I once hoped for only moments ago.

As Dr. Toro walks back to the whiteboard, Lara places her hand on my shoulder and asks, "Are you okay, Savannah? That was not okay."

Am I okay? Of course not. How could I be okay right now?

"I'm good! Is anyone still looking at me?" I mumble quietly.

"No." Lara answers.

With my fists clenched and holding my chest I wonder...

When will I belong here?

I don't have the privilege of belonging in every space I enter. As I navigate a PWI, I don't expect or assume that this environment is made for me. It's not. When Black and Brown students attend predominantly white institutions, there is a complex duality of invisibility and hypervisibility.

I resonate with Haynes, Stewart, and Allen (2016) as they illuminate the ways in which invisibility politics may cause Black women in college to experience feelings of neglect, rejection, and uselessness. No wonder I'm an Angry Black Woman (Griffin, 2012)! I constantly navigate these tensions in my mind, "I wish I was seen right now." and "I wish no one could see me."

While Blackness is often invisible at a PWI, it is also "stereotyped as abnormal, hypersexual, highlighted, and often implied to represent means for exploitation and violence" (Mowatt, French, & Malebranche, 2013, p. 645). This hypervisibility is a

pathway to tokenization. My Blackness becomes the lens in which I am seen. In this moment, I become an “other” who encounters a “lack of support, scrutiny...and an unstated requirement to work harder to gain recognition and respect” (Neimann, 2016). This form of “othering” (Peters, 2015) has the ability to create uncomfortable and tense environments that promote discrimination, racism, and microaggressions (Lee & Hopson, 2019). While mentorships and relationships with faculty can aid in the navigation of these experiences, Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) note how Black students in particular experience alienation and othering when they feel white faculty being “culturally insensitive.” Dr. Toro’s cultural insensitivity leaves me simultaneously visible, invisible, and othered.

And so, it happens yet again where I remain silent. I choose not to speak to Dr. Toro. Not because I’m at a loss for words, but because I need to strategically decide “to speak or not to speak and for whom and for what purposes” (Robinson, 2013, p.161). Hao (2011) further warns me that while silence can function as resistance to whiteness, I must use caution because silence can be interpreted as threatening to the educator. I constantly negotiate the politics of my voice within the classroom (Bell & Golombisky, 2004). Do I speak up? Use silence as resistance? Or do I “bite my tongue so hard that it bleeds to protect my body, mind, soul, loved ones, or even my life” (Griffin, 2012, p. 139)? I have only brief moments to decide. I must survive.

My jaw clenches as I forcefully shove my Diversity 302 textbook in my backpack. My dentist would not be very pleased with me right now. He always nags

about how I need to stop tightening my jaw when I become angry and anxious. I can't help it. It's one of those tics that I can't seem to shake off. Sorry Dr. Overton!

White privilege is an overused term? Are you kidding me?

"Savannah, can you stay after class? I would like to speak with you if that's alright." Dr. Diaz inquired.

Hmm this sounds rather familiar. Why does this keep happening to me? It's comical at this point.

Cold and direct, "Sure." My eyes look ahead meeting hers.

Does she not remember what she JUST taught to a room full of white students just moments ago?

"When we talk about diversity, it's important that we consider all forms of our identities. You have a favorite color? You have a favorite hobby? These aspects of yourself make you unique. These interests make up diversity...even in this classroom. Oftentimes, when people think of diversity, they default to race, gender, class, and sexuality. For example, I'm a heterosexual Latina. But we can view diversity in many ways, and it's crucial we include identities such as your major, favorite sport, favorite subject in school, and all the things that make you...you. In this class, we will discuss diversity from this perspective. You know what term we will not discuss? White privilege. It's too overused and it immediately shuts people down. We want to create a space that welcomes dialogue and learning in a safe way."

"Thank you for staying. I noticed when I mentioned white privilege your facial expression changed. Your forehead tensed up. I just wanted to check in with you and make sure you're okay." Dr. Diaz says softly.

My throat tightens, and I forcefully push words out of my mouth.

I hate when this happens, my voice begins to shake, and it sounds like I'm about to cry, but really, I'm just angry.

Unfiltered response: "Oh you saw my forehead tense? Maybe because you just told a room full of white students that white privilege is too overused. Maybe because I had higher hopes and expectations for a Latina professor. I trusted you. Maybe it's because I am physically and spiritually sick and tired of comforting white people. Maybe it's because when you scan the room you don't see me. Maybe it's because this university and professors like you are a danger and threat to my very existence. Maybe because I'm Black and you don't seem to care."

Filtered response: "I disagreed with what you said. White privilege is not an overused term for people who are harmed by it. White privilege is not overused at a predominantly white institution that has the privilege to forget it's white. In my communities, we talk about white privilege because it is affecting our lives."

As she nods her head and places her hand on my shoulder, Dr. Diaz says, "I am sorry you feel this way. I understand what you're saying, but I just don't think your peers are at that level yet. I don't want to push them away and make them feel uncomfortable about diversity."

My fists clench. My arms embrace my chest.

"Well, I think we need to lean into discomfort." I say as I exit the room.

"Savannah! Wait!" she squeals as I approach the middle of the hallway.

My head whips around at the piercing sound thinking she just fell and hurt herself.

“Savannah, I don’t want to discuss white privilege in my classroom, but maybe we can have a day where you speak to the class and answer any questions they might have. That way, you can talk about being Black at a PWI, and we aren’t using the vocabulary of white privilege.”

Do not agree to this Savannah. You’ll just be subject to ridicule and embarrassment.

“It will be difficult to discuss my Black experience without mentioning white privilege. However, I would be open to a dialogue with the class.”

With great relief, “Awesome! Thank you, Savannah. I’ll set this up for next week.”

She waves good-bye with a satisfied grin resting on her circular face.

Why is it so hard for me to say no? I dread next week where both my body and voice become tokenized (Robinson, 2013).

As I walk down the hallway, my right-hand massages the back of my neck with the hopes of easing some pain. I have never been bold with a professor before, and I need my girls to help relieve this stress. In times like this, I call Zaria. People say you can have multiple soulmates, but even when I’m (hopefully) happily married to my husband, I don’t think anyone can replace my twin flame.

I place the phone to my ear and cry, “Zaria, I can’t do this anymore. I hate this university. My professor really said that white privilege is overused and shuts people down. Now she even wants me to share my experiences as a Black woman to the class next week. Only me! I’m the only Black girl in there.”

“I’m so sorry, Savannah. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to support you right now. Also, I just want you to know that Ana and Keyla are with me, so they can hear you too.” Zaria replies.

“Savvvvv. It will get better.” Ana assures me.

“Yeah. You’re right. I just can’t stop thinking about what she said. When you hear it enough, and see it enough, you start to believe it, ya know? Anyways, I’m about to go to my apartment. Y’all meet me there okay?” I questioned.

“Will do.” they say simultaneously.

“White privilege.

It’s too overused...”

Their comfort matters. Their safety matters.

When will mine?

Since I was a young child, whiteness has been embedded within my education. When I learned about Thanksgiving for the first time, I truly thought the “pilgrims” and “Indians” shared a meal of solidarity and friendship. When I attended a private, Christian school, I was shown pictures of white Jesus saving little Black and Brown children. White-washed curriculum has been forcefully fed to me without consent over and over and over again. It is an understatement to say I have deeply rooted trust issues with my educators.

Within educational spaces, the pedagogical approaches and curriculum are used as sites that frame and center whiteness. I need Dr. Diaz to acknowledge race and white privilege without tokenizing me in the process. It is perilous to talk about diversity without engaging in discussions of race, gender, sexuality, etc. Topics such as white privilege, racism, and colorblindness are critical to understand in order to become

culturally aware members of society (Priester, Pitner, & Lackey, 2019). She's scared. She's scared to make white people uncomfortable. Liebow and Glazer (2019) argue that because white fragility manifests as guilt and/or other emotional responses, it is challenging to have dialogues about race.

In an analysis of the absence of discussions of race within education, Peters (2015), reflects Gillborn's (2005) and Diggles' (2014) acknowledgments of colorblind perspectives when he distinguishes the term "white philosophy" as a way to emphasize how topics of race are institutionally ignored or erased within America. Here, whiteness is used as a property to understand the ways in which it holds power, privilege, and freedom within a societal system that reproduces and maintains whiteness (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). I'm afraid if we don't acknowledge white privilege then we continue the endless cycle of whiteness and white comfort within the classroom.

What bothers me the most is that you have no awareness or comprehension of the pain you have afflicted upon me. It's been five years since I've seen you last. You go on. Meanwhile, the memories I have with you linger in my mind and body. I fear for the Black student in your class who is forced to endure the exhaustion and drainage that we did not ask for. You will continue this torture in the name of good faith. Good intentions. Good teaching.

When you have the absolute audacity to ignore race and claim that white privilege is an overused term, you uphold a "colorblind" pedagogical practice that marginalizes people of color while further perpetuating white supremacy on this campus. This act of erasure and nonconfrontation is "perverse when it stands in the way of taking account of difference in order to help those in need" (Delgado & Stefaniec, 2012, p.26). It pains me

that a Latinx woman would cater to the needs and comfort of her white students, while suppressing the bodies, knowledges, and feelings of her BIPOC students.

You feed into the systems of white fragility and you (c)overtly affirm white students that it is their well-being that matters. How is this white fragility you might ask? Let's first consider your classroom space. "Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize, and make it function..." (de Certeau, 1984, p.117). The space you create within your classroom orients to, situates, and temporalizes white feelings, thus creating a space of whiteness that emphasizes intentional comfortability for your white students. This approach is violent in nature and harmful for students of color that sit in your class day after day (Applebaum, 2017).

You need to embrace an intersectional pedagogical approach in order to acknowledge and consider the social injustices and systems of marginalization/domination that are occurring right in your class. In contrast to your beliefs, race matters. Class matters. Gender matters. Sexuality matters. By framing and centering intersectional identities within the classroom, you can reject the silencing and erasure of marginalized bodies (Aguilar-Hernández, 2020). If you fail to do so, you are maintaining the hegemonic practices of white supremacy within your own space.

It would behoove you to reflect on the words from Ruiz-Mesa (2021) who states, "Intersectionality in teaching necessitates that we critically analyze and reflect on how our course materials, assignment requirements, and instructional communication practices facilitate complex understandings of difference" (p.334). Difference is okay, and you must embrace it. As a professor, you hold power within the classroom, and what you claim to value matters. Your actions and beliefs make me wonder:

Am I just liberal, old fashioned, and radical inside enough to hear and protect my own Black political hide? And, my skin is unqualified for this academic ride? Still I rise, fail, fall, and rise above eyes of prejudice pride (Hughes, 2020, p.151).

My skin. Unqualified.

How is my skin (ab)used by you?

Skin.

When you fail to teach the very systems that are a threat to my skin, you are telling me that not only am I unwelcomed in this space, but you are performing a violent act against me as a Black woman. My skin fights for its life everyday here at Everywhere University, but you do not want to talk about that fight. No, that would be too unsafe and uncomfortable for your white students. My skin must survive the cuts you place upon it, bleeding uncontrollably.

Skin.

When you place your white, pale arm next to mine, you are using my skin as a spectacle within the classroom. Diversity matters, yes. But do not use my skin to teach your class a lesson. See me. See my difference. But never, ever tokenize me. My skin is not here to serve you, and it never will be. My ancestors would be pissed if I let that happen.

Skin.

A protective barrier. A barrier I must protect.

Because you won't.

Do Better.

/Interlude/

Dear Dr. Jim Tiller and University Administrators,

Simultaneously,

erased and tokenized.

Seen and Unseen.

My body lives here,

in between.

You pull me in one direction,

I'm then yanked by the other.

pull

pull

pull.

You pull so hard,

my skin breaks.

It bleeds.

(fuck you) Sincerely,

Savannah Brown



Figure 8. Bandaid for your (white) fragile body (own photo).

/Interlude/

"It doesn't matter if you don't love the place; you love the people residing there.

It is as close to a home as you'll get" (Hartman, 2019, p.23).

Come sister,
let me tell you somethin'

You clever soul,
A genius who should not be silenced.
Let words reveal your truths.
When approaching the tip of your tongue,
use them as an act of resistance because
you are powerful.
More than you know.

You beautiful soul,
with your gold hoops, nose ring,
and fresh set of acrylic nails.
Mermaid hair flowin down your back
as colorful and vibrant
as you.
You enter a room and
your energy fills the space.
You are seen and heard.
Radiant,
vulnerable,
Alive!

You gentle soul,
with a comforting embrace,
big hugs
as a reminder:
it is ok
to not be ok.
Always present with a listening ear.
Supportive and enthusiastic.
Quiet, yet disruptive.
Silent Storm,
you are a force of change.
You hold space for others,
and create spaces out of none.

While you journey to new places,
you are always welcome home.

With us.
Sincerely,
Savannah Brown

The cycle skips
a
Beat

Chapter 5: Letter To my [Wo]mentors

To my Everywhere University [Wo]mentors,

I would like for you to accept this letter as my official thank you card. You know who you are, and as I write this, I hope to capture even just a glimpse of the appreciation, love, and respect I hold for you. As I complete my journey here at Everywhere University, you must know that you became my homeplace (hooks, 2014); my space of refuge and happiness at a university that has made it so clear that I am not welcome here. I try to find the words to express the love I have for you, but nothing I think of is good enough. So instead, I will use your words.

The faces over the years become familiar. They don't seem to change. I hope to see something different as I scan the room, but yet again, white walls encompass me as they slowly begin to close in. Left with no space to breathe, I must persist. *Inhale...*

"Hello class, please sit and we will begin with a discussion on the representations of Black women within the media. Please form a circle with your desks." My professor states.

I tilt my seat and squeeze it into place until a circle begins to form with the desks around me. My eyes automatically gaze to the front of the classroom as I wait for Dr. Mutira to begin. Surprisingly, she makes her way to the circle of desks. She sits between me and another student, Abby. As she prepares her materials for class, I grab my crisp, green folder and pull out the syllabus.

Syllabus for Fall 2019 Semester

Course: Cultural Representations of Black Women

Professor: Dr. Mutira

Teaching Ethos: As your instructor, I am determined to create a brave and safe learning environment for all identities (race, sexuality, gender, religion, etc.). Learning can be challenging, and I encourage everyone, including myself, to lean into discomfort. You are welcome here.

Reading List: bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Jamaica Kincaid

Is this what empowerment feels like? I have never studied this many Black, female scholars before. In this moment, I'm seen.

With the incorporation of subjugated knowledges, educators have the opportunity to include strategies that investigate oppression and marginalization through antiracist curricula (Sefa Dei, 2001).

"I am not here to teach *at* you all. I want this class to hold dialogue with one another. This will be a space where we learn from each other and create room for reflection and self-reflexivity." Dr. Mutira declares.

Sefa Dei (2001) argues, "change begins with the self and our understandings of the relationship of the self to others and the collective" (p.134). Dr. Mutira engages with education as a reflexive, antiracist space that supports social justice ideals. There is a "process of humanization" (Dewhurst, 2011) that has the ability to create a historical, cultural, and reflective transformation within educational practices (Blakeney, 2005). Nonetheless, in order for antiracism to transform current educational practices, all individuals within the educational institution need to embrace the praxis of self-reflexivity and practice to create change. Dr. Mutira highlights this point to all of her students right away.

A smile spreads across my face, allowing my dimples to appear. For the first time in my college education, I have a professor who looks like me. Usually, I'm taught about myself without the reciprocity and connection. *Exhale...*

September:

Learning from her is liberating.

October:

I look at her with pure awe.

November:

It is nearly impossible to capture in words how grateful I am for this woman.

"Come prepared next class everybody. I can smell BS each time a student who didn't read tries to participate. Don't speak if you didn't read. I will know. You will lose points. Also, Savannah, after class, come by my office. I need to speak with you." Dr. Mutira demands firmly.

Did I do something wrong? I have never been called to a professor's office before...why now?

"Will do! I look forward to meeting with you!" I say with fake confidence.

Once class ends, I make my way outside. Her office is located in the building right across from the quad. On a normal day, I scan the quad for my friends and puppies. One of the two will inevitably be there. However, today is not an average day. *Sigh.*

As I walk to her office, more like a stumble from the unrelenting shake in my left leg that I can't seem to get rid of, I reach in my purse and snatch my phone.

"Zaria, Dr. Mutira wants me to go to her office. She didn't tell me why. We had a test last week, so maybe I didn't do so well," the words stumble out of my mouth.

“Savannah, take a deep breath, I’m sure everything will be okay. Whatever she wants to meet you for will probably help you in some way. It will all be just fine.” she assures.

She’s the best. Black Girls of MGL. Forever.

“Thank you, I finally made it to her office, so I’ll keep you updated. Love you.”

OFFICE 301B

I knock firmly, but apprehensively, three times.

“Welcome, Savannah. Please sit.” Dr. Mutira points to the small couch in front of her chair. I find my seat as she suggests. Intimidated by her fully stocked bookshelf that surrounds her entire office, I decide only to make eye contact with her. Her dangly, silver earrings frame her round, make-up free, and natural face. The silver on her Black body is as mesmerizing as the brightest star in the night sky. I remain stunned by her beauty and confidence. She may be 5’2, but when she enters a room, her presence and aura fully capture the attention of all. I briefly break my gaze to better understand her space. The room inhales bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. With every exhale, a spiritual connection to these women and all Black women takes place. I like to think of these women as my literary othermothers (Guiffrida, 2005).

As I scan the room once more, I see shoes to my left. *Shoes?* Noticing my apprehension, she smiles widely, “Yes, I have so many shoes here. I keep them to make sure I have some comfortable ones to change into.”

Before I can respond, she grabs her wooden mug of coffee and situates herself in her leather chair as she directly faces me.

“Anyhow, enough about shoes. Savannah, I want you to look at your test.” she orders as she hands me the familiar, stapled papers.

My eyebrows meet as I stare at my exam. I lean back and bring my eyes back to her.

Perplexed, "I got a 100%?"

"When I meet students of color who have potential, I try my best to take them under my wing and mentor them. You completed this exam like no other student. You are very smart, but I notice you reserve yourself. You only speak in class when you feel it's appropriate. So, here's my advice: Speak more. Doubt yourself less." Dr. Mutira asserts.

My throat is closing and I'm fighting with my tears as they try to fall down my face.

Tears win.

"I need to quote Marianne Williamson for you... "Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure."" Dr. Mutira murmurs softly. My fists unclench and I open my arms to embrace my new mentor.

"You are powerful, Savannah." she says.

I am?

I am.

Whenever the opportunity arises, Dr. Mutira introduces me to her colleagues. "Dr. Bryan, let me introduce you to Savannah Brown. She is family. Matter of fact, I actually call her my daughter. She is a star. When she comes here for grad school, she will be joining us for Sisters in Session." The truth is, I am her daughter, and she is my "othermother" (Guiffrida, 2005).

In its original conception, othermothering is described as, "women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (Collins, 2000, p.178 as cited in Guiffrida, 2005, p.715). My othermother. I tell her my plans about traveling with her to

Africa one day, not only to visit the Motherland, but to also meet her family. She smiles and entertains the idea. Dr. Mutira exceeds her duties as a professor to instead accept the roles and responsibilities of my overall well-being and success (Guiffrida, 2005). I'm comfortable around her. I tell my othermother everything. No secrets.

My literary othermother, Audre Lorde (1984), writes to her daughter:

You're never really a whole person if you remain silent because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside (p.42).

Silence does not crawl and cradle into my throat. With her, my silence transforms into words and action (Lorde, 1984). I don't need to "adopt silence to avoid drawing the anger and hostility of teachers" (Bell & Golombisky, 2004, p.305). Instead, I embrace my body, mind, soul and voice. In return, Dr. Mutira sees me for who I am: a whole, complex, Black, female person.

The first time I saw Dr. Mutira, my whole body exhaled in relief. My shoulders dropped from both ears. My headache disappeared as if she was the cup of Strong, Bold, Black coffee that I needed. She was. She is. Black, female mentorship allows me to connect with her not only on an academic and professional level, but a cultural, emotional, and even spiritual tie as well. Green and King (2001) support this sentiment as they discuss how through same race/gender mentorship, there is an "...increased awareness of Africentric social, cultural, and spiritual values..." (p.164). They continue to suggest that group mentoring relationships specifically centered around Black women (such as the aforementioned Sisters in Session) create a space that validates and affirms our lived and shared experiences within the academy (Green & King, 2001).

As I navigate academic environments that have historically failed to support the educational and personal needs for students of color (Dahlvig, 2010), I appreciate the mentorship from Dr. Mutira and every woman who has guided me throughout the university. While marginalized communities face discrimination within educational spaces, research suggests that students of color, in particular Black students, are more successful in college if they have relationships with faculty (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010) and mentorships that aid in professional and personal development (Dahlvig, 2010).

Had it not been for the othermothering, mentorship, and guidance from Dr. Mutira in my undergraduate experience, I would not be where I am today as a graduate student in the university. That's what life-making is all about right? Reclaiming my education. Forming bonds with Black women. Resisting the oppressive systems of the university. Celebrating Blackness in all its forms. As Mustaffa (2017) states, "Black life-making cannot just highlight education violence...it must also start to define a future beyond the logics that make the past and present circumstances possible" (p.724). This quote directly reflects my relationship with Dr. Mutira because not only do we critique whiteness and other systems of marginalization within society and higher education, but we also imagine a world of possibility.

When I first met Dr. Mutira, little did I know that she would introduce me to most if not all of my [wo]mentors here at Everywhere University. She gave me their names and office numbers, while giving them a heads up that I was on my way to meet them. I easily found home in Office 1121 where spontaneous naps, talks about life, Starbucks coffee, and the occasional meltdowns were all welcome. Dr. Mutira knew I needed her.

Knock Knock Knock

"Hi, Dr. Howard! Dr. Mutira sent me here! It's so nice to meet you."

[Wo]mentors,
Let me tell you somethin'
When this cold-hearted Scorpio loves,
I love hard.
I love you, and I love your work.
Thank you for inspiring me to be
the woman, student, and scholar that I am.
If it weren't for you,
shit...
I don't even have to even think about that.
Because you've been here
all along.
By my side.
Thank you.

*My body exhales in relief.
Liberated and free.
Dancing with joy,
I fill the room.
You encourage me to take up space.
You see me,
as I am
Here,
I am.
Join me, sister.*

**With love,
Savannah Brown**

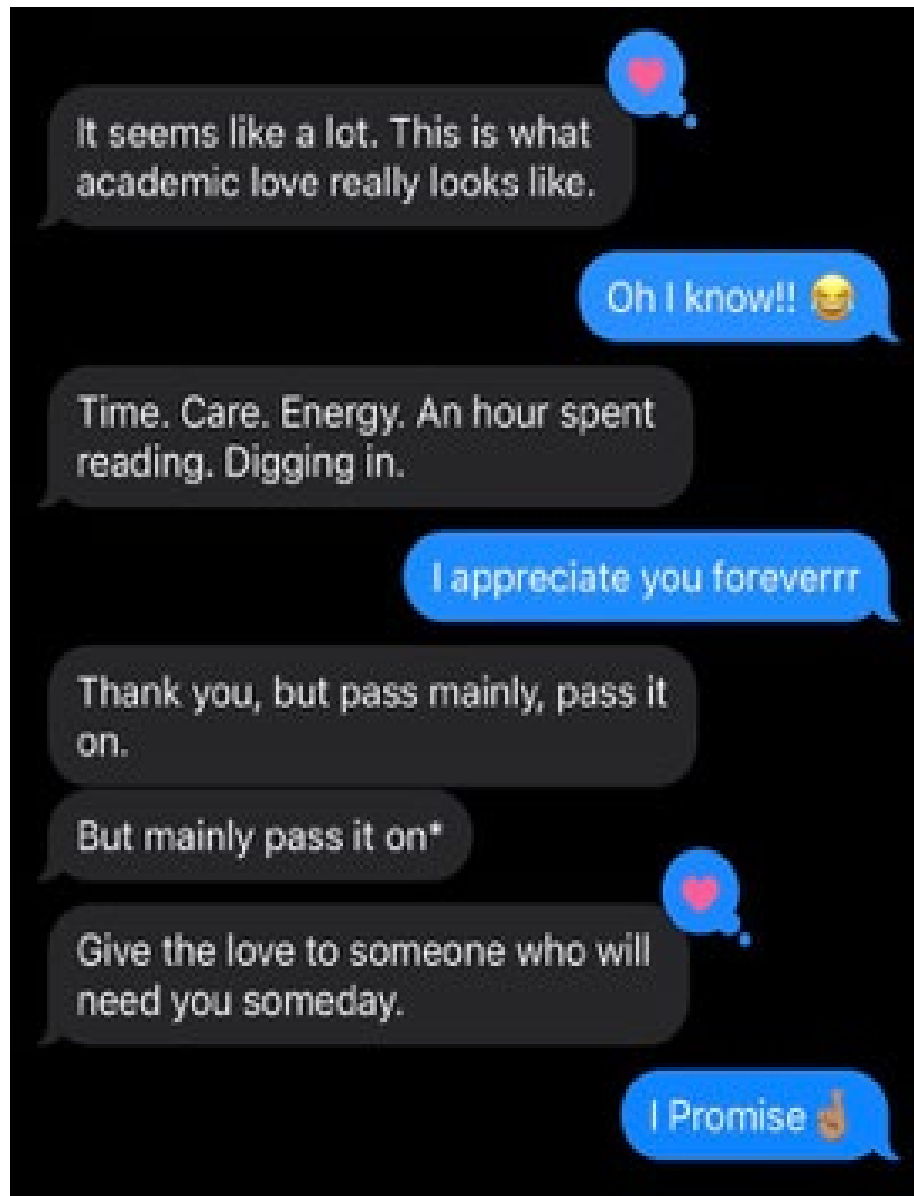


Figure 9.

Messages

with my

[wo]mentor

(own

photo).

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Dear Field of Communication Studies,

This thesis began with a Black woman who has experienced the complexities of domination and resistance at a predominantly white university. I knew I wanted to use autoethnography for its transformative/disruptive approach, but I needed to also account for my body. Why? Because the political material flesh that composes my body has experienced a weathering that has weighed on me for the last six years. I owe it to myself to pay attention to the vessel that has been a part of this journey and has experienced material impacts from the people, objects, and discourses at Everywhere University. It is my hope that you as a discipline will broaden your scopes of accepted epistemologies to include that of my Black, female body.

Performance studies helps make sense of my autoethnography because as someone who has been ignored, tokenized, invisible and/or hypervisible, I find it crucial to use and amplify my body as a way of knowing (Madison, 1999). Performance allows me to understand how to listen to my body in ways that I often neglect or suppress. As I was situated within various contexts at Everywhere University, my body was speaking and knowing the entire time, I just needed to take a moment to listen. I needed to attune to the pain, trauma, heartbreak, disappointment, joy, relief, and love that manifested itself throughout the body at every moment and second of the day. I knew I needed to find ways to perform resistance, and from this, I reclaimed my voice as well.

For example, during my time at Everywhere University I decided to join a diversity empowerment program during my undergraduate career. Here, I was able to facilitate dialogues that embrace what we call deep diversity (race, gender, sexuality,

socioeconomic status, etc.) rather than shallow diversity (favorite sport, major, hobby, etc.). Speaking up in this space was both my coping strategy and form of resistance within a PWI (Lewis et al., 2012). All of my coworkers were strong, Black women who wanted to educate our peers about deep diversity. We did not need to filter our words for fragile ears. Instead, our words “Are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out...share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives” (Lorde, 1984, p.43). And share them, we did!

The diversity program was not only a coping mechanism, but it also functioned as a resistant form of Black life-making at a PWI. As we challenged whiteness and incorporated an intersectional approach within our facilitations, we are directly engaged in “racial justice and disruptive action as a legitimate form of discourse” (Mustaffa, 2017, p. 721). In this brave space, we leaned into discomfort. I talked firmly as I resisted the systems that once nested into my throat blocking my ability to speak.

Throughout this thesis, you have seen how my performances as a Black woman navigate the politics of my voice, (in)visibility, and acts of resistance. You have also observed how my politically charged body is seen through the lens of my peers, professors, mentors, and self. This is crucial to consider within the field of communication because we are constantly engaging in performances through our communicative practices.

Alexander (2004) refers to this conceptualization of performance as our lifescritps that are “sedimented experiences of people, which both guides and dictates action; we are all complicit in performances that critique and illuminate racial and cultural politics” (p.391). Thus, not only do we use language to communicate with others, but our bodies are political and cultural entities that engage and negotiate power within all of our

communicative interactions. Throughout my project, I intentionally portrayed my own negotiations of communication and power through both the showing and telling of my performance autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011). At this point in my thesis, you may be wondering, “How is this performance autoethnography a communication studies thesis and not an education studies/pedagogical thesis?”

The everydayness and everywhere-ness of these lifescritps contribute to the larger field of communication studies. Here, there are no limitations to space and place. Instead, these lifescritps are omnipresent, occurring constantly, and performance gives us the ability to critically examine the actors, intersectional identities, socio-political forces, contexts, and scenes that we as a society are all situated within. In my research, Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, and performance all worked together to reveal the lifescritps at Everywhere University. This was in no way an easy task.

As I worked through this project, I had to embrace the vulnerability that autoethnography calls for. Vulnerability requires great self-reflexivity, reflection, memory-work, a (re)experiencing of trauma, and a willingness to bleed on the page (Behar, 1996). While I appreciate this methodological approach, it is my hope that the Communication Studies discipline, more in particular the autoethnographic field, will question what it means to ask a Black woman to be vulnerable. Even more so, how will you as a discipline move forward after bearing witness (Tracy, 2020) to my story? My vulnerability? I ask you,

In the midst of a massacre...as a storyteller opens her heart to a story listener, recounting hurts that cut deep and raw into the gullies of the self, do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand (Behar, 1996, p.2)?

Communication studies, what is it that will you do? In Ruth Behar's (1996) book *The Vulnerable Observer*, the author mentions an avalanche that covers an entire town and community of people in mud. Media outlets bombard the space trying to gain the best coverage of the current tragedy. In particular, the media is interested in a young girl who is trapped and restrained by the mud that encompasses her entire body. She is stuck, constrained, leaving her unable to move in the liminal space that is consumed by mud. Yet, the reporters and journalists watch her struggle. I share this story because as you read about my experiences at Everywhere University, I too am the girl who is trapped and restrained in the mudslide.

I ask again, what is it that you will do?

As I interject my body into this discipline, I practice an ethic of disruption that allows me to consider future possibilities and worlds. A world where my marginalized body is accepted as a legitimate source of knowledge and experience. A world that hears my voice and the ways in which it has been (un)silenced. A world that rejects reproductions of white supremacy. This is overall what my project has taught me. In spaces of constraint, life-making and world-making are the best tools for disruption and resistance.

While my thesis further contributes to scholarship that seeks to reveal and illuminate the experiences of Black women within predominantly white universities, I hope that you too can embrace my project as an invitation for disruption, transformation, and reconstruction within the Communication Studies field.

*I disrupt the mudslide that is Everywhere University.
I disrupt the mudslide that is white supremacy.
No longer silenced.
You hear me.
You see me.
Boo!*

Sincerely,

Savannah Brown

*The cycle skips
a
while*

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