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The Sharp White Background: An Autoethnographic Analysis of
the Experiences of Undergraduate Women of Color

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A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Art

University of Washington

2018

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:
School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences

University of Washington

Abstract

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Throughout my experiences in higher education, I have felt isolated, alienated, and inadequate. At one point I asked myself, are my school experiences as universal as I think they are, and if so, what are the footholds that allow women of color like me to persist in higher education? Existing literature confirms that students of color, particularly women, experience barriers to their academic success because of the white supremacy inherent in academia. Contemporary scholars describe the process of overcoming these barriers as the Racial Opportunity Cost. Using Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality as analytical frameworks, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork and interviews at the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT). Results from the observations and interviews indicated that the white racial *habitus* perpetuated and validated by educational institutions, including UWT, contribute to the difficulty and isolation women of color experience as undergraduate students. I recommend further research on the experiences of women of color in different capacities (i.e., faculty, graduate students, etc.) within academia and call for reevaluation of the way institutions handle diversity, equity, and inclusion. I suggest that

institutions first start with addressing the white supremacy present in their practices and campus culture to make a lasting difference in how women of color experience higher education.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis was made possible in part by the support of my committee, Dr. Asao Inoue, Dr. Ariana Ochoa Camacho, and Professor Tanya Velasquez. I named my committee the Dream Team, and it suits you because all the way through, working with you has been an honor and pleasure. Together you helped me craft a thesis I am proud of and that melds my academic self with who I really am.

To my family and friends, my small unit locally and the members near and far who have supported me in this journey, I thank you. Without your continued encouragement, motivation, and grace, this would not have been possible. Specifically, to my partner, thank you for believing in me and talking me out of quitting. You were down to ride the whole time, through it all, and I am grateful for that. To my little sister, I appreciate you for helping me take care of my small person while I studied. You could have been anywhere in the world, but you were with us, helping make my dreams come true.

Dedication

This is for all the brown kids out there,
young and old, and especially to my little brown kid:

I see you, I hear you, I am you.

Chapter 1. The Struggle to Persist: Understanding the Stakes for Undergraduate Women of Color

In more ways than one, attending college is a transformative experience. Through the media, we often see it as the best time of people's lives---where they begin lasting relationships, and for some people that's true. Sometimes it can be extremely isolating and alienating. There are so many different kinds of people converging in one place and trying to find commonalities and forge community can present as a challenge, especially if you are a woman of color attending a predominantly white institution (PWI). While I was fortunate enough to experience the former, it was not until the last couple years of my undergraduate experience that I felt like more than a number, and a Brown one at that. Even once I found community and established strong friendships through Latino and Black student organizations and my campus' multicultural center, I still struggled to connect with those around me everywhere else on campus. As a reflective introvert I always wondered, "maybe it's just *me*?"

As a graduate student, though things are slightly different, this is not something I have entirely escaped. I'm on a new campus now, one that boasts a 51%¹ student of color (SOC) population (UW Tacoma), but I still find that I move through the campus mostly alone and constantly struggling to connect. Through a short, thirty-hour study of undergraduate women of color (WOC) on the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) campus, I realized that it's not just me. What I experienced as a city kid in a Midwest college town eight years ago is very similar to what a wide variety of undergraduate women currently experience on this commuter-driven, metropolitan campus. While there is little research specifically on the experiences of

¹ This only includes students that indicated their race and ethnicity but excludes the category labeled "international students" (5%). I omitted "international" students because the label does not necessarily excludes white students.

undergraduate women of color from their own perspective, the literature available suggests that our experience is neither unpredictable nor unique.

Throughout the course of my master's program there have been times where I felt isolated and I wanted to quit. I felt shitty. That remained true all the way through to the end. In one of my last required classes, the queer, white, male professor called me, the only Brown female student, "defensive" –in front of the whole class. Even though I said the same things as my white female classmates, because the justifications came from my body, the writing was read as "defensive." The writing was my attempt at justifying some methodological choices and recognizing limitations, so I understand how that can come across as defensive. My classmates are all writing similar documents in which they have to justify their choices and recognize limitations in their research, but the feedback they received about how they discussed these things was different than mine. Again, I know that because the feedback is shared publicly. Contrarily, no one else's writing was described as "defensive." Instead, they received remarks like "insightful" and "self-aware." The problem with this word in reference to me, or any person of color (POC) is that white supremacy conditions people to read Brown bodies like mine as threatening, negative, "defensive," and dangerous. White supremacist conditions in school determine such judgements by those whites in such positions to make such judgements about others. The context of this interaction also made me really uncomfortable. To start, the professor is someone I consider an ally, and his subjectivity as a queer white man makes him easily identifiable. My intention is to show that even those doing their best to engage in anti-racist work are complicit with white supremacy. It's a script we are indoctrinated with and despite our best efforts to change the narrative, we often find ourselves reenacting established roles. In this example the trope that plays out is the one in which women of color are aggressive, passionate,

and confrontational, even if they are making a necessary point, in other words, the angry Black woman as Sapphire (Harris-Perry 2011, 29-33). Whereas the white women (my classmates) doing the same thing are praised for their insight and self-awareness.

I think back to my older friends during my time as an undergraduate and how they seemed so different in their role as graduate students. The graduate students appeared so much more knowledgeable, comfortable, and confident than I ever was. They knew everyone and everything and fit in wherever they were. When I started my graduate program, I thought that being a graduate student I would both exude and embody those same characteristics. I thought I would be the same. My graduate experience has not lived up to that though, not even a little. Within my cohort, I am the only person of color, and I'm often the only person of color in my classes. This is not to say my classmates are unwelcoming, but it is an obvious and constant reminder that I am different. As much as I would like to say I do not feel (social) pressure to employ strategies I have used throughout my education in order to make myself feel like I belong, I can't. Whether it is through censoring my voice to avoid using AAV², (not) wearing my hair certain ways to avoid awkward hair conversations, or taking on extra work to avoid seeming lazy, I do all of the same things now to be accepted by my peers and professors that I have always done to be accepted at school. If anything, the toll this takes on me is greater now because I am aware of and understand what I am doing and why, and yet I feel like I can't stop myself. It is necessary to my survival.

² AAV is the African American Vernacular, commonly understood as "Black English" or Ebonics. It is a dialect used primarily by the Black community but might also be spoken in varying ways by other POC. You can read more in Geneva Smitherman *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*.

Students of Color and Academic Success

Over the past several decades, many scholars have studied the reasons for educational success in racially disadvantaged groups. Some factors researchers have studied include the strategies students use to thrive in school (Flores-Gonzalez 1999; Fordham 1991; Wilkinson 2010; Witherspoon et al. 1997; Locke et al 2017; Venzant Chambers 2011), women and girls of color in schools (Raby and Pomerantz 2015; Okwako 2015; Locke et al 2017), and the relationship between student identity and academic success (Locke et al. 2017; Venzant Chambers 2011, 2014; Wrigley 2014; Bemak 2005; van de Werfhorst & Hofstede 2007; Vera et al 2007; Wildhagen 2009; Whitesell et al. 2009). However, much like any social issue, as times change, so do perspectives. As a result, new research methodologies develop and literature regarding the reasons for climate issues for racially minoritized students on college campuses change as well. For more reasons than one, women of color are attending college and earning degrees at increasing rates. With multiple intersecting historically underrepresented and underserved identities, what are the challenges unique to women of color as students, and what are their strategies for navigating a system originally created without them or their success in mind?

In the rest of this chapter, I open a discussion on the realities of being a woman of color in higher education in terms of the barriers they have to navigate as well as the coping strategies they use to achieve academic success. Specific points I discuss below are the way whiteness is both a tool for student success as well as a barrier to the success of students of color. I also address the particulars of being a female student of color and how gender necessitates unique success strategies. This chapter culminates with an overview of these barriers and negotiations within my own experience and situates me as a researcher.

Whiteness as a Tool for Success

One set of studies found that when students of color assert themselves--that is muster up the courage to actively engage in hostile educational environments--or adopt so called "white" behaviors, they tend to perform better in schools. The students identified "white" behaviors as raising their hands to participate and asking for help from teachers (Wilkinson 2010). Specifically, Flores-Gonzalez (1999), Fordham (1991), and Wilkinson (2010) separately recognized that students of color struggled with developing and maintaining an identity in line with their race and achieving academically, all while running the risk of having their academic success associated with "whiteness" or "acting white" by their peers, family, and or community members. Both Fordham (1991) and Witherspoon et al. (1997) observed that despite the societal goal of racelessness students of color (particularly African American ones) felt supported by peer and family groups when they succeeded academically, which further complicates students' difficult task of balancing their identity(ies) with their academic success.

This begs the question whether it is about cultural or racially specific behaviors on our part or about the public's reception, acceptance, and approval of "white-washed" students of color whose presence functions as symbolic diversity without de-centering culturally white dominant ways of knowing and being. They are tasked with being appropriately pleasing. By exclusively validating the white student behaviors and practices SOC display, schools essentially sustain and replicate the white supremacy inherent in the education system. Over time, this cycle keeps students of color complicit in their own oppression and out of college.

The problem with this dynamic is the implication that the binary between students that are white and students of color parallels the binary between academic success and academic failure. That is to say, only white students can take an interest in and achieve academic success

and that for students of color to do that, they are working towards erasing their race. This reinforces a racial frame that suggests success exclusively belongs to those who are white and those who perform whiteness. In this way, learning institutions can perpetuate white supremacy by turning a blind eye to students of color who excel on their own while simultaneously elevating those who assimilate. This in turn limits student expressions of agency and resistance. While these studies discussed the significance of whiteness and its role in student experiences as well as their academic success, these studies discussed high school students of color indiscriminate of gender. Whiteness and white supremacy are central to my discussions in the rest of this thesis, but I look specifically at how it impacts the experience of women of color in college the way it plays out in higher education.

The Female Factor

There has been some research on WOC in schools. Raby and Pomerantz (2015) and Okwako (2015) found that gender plays a role in students' academic achievement in marginalized populations through their study of middle and high school girls (Raby & Pomerantz 2015, 507; Okwako 2015, 76). A recent study by Raby and Pomerantz (2015) shows that female students used code-switching³ in order to navigate their way through the schoolhouse, both academically and socially. Specifically, they assert their self-labeled "smart girl" identity when it benefits them and disassociate with being smart when it may be damaging with their peers (Raby & Pomerantz 2015, 507). Additionally, Okwako's study of African immigrant girls found that they succeed academically when they have an understanding of the school system and its operations (Okwako 2015, 76). Okwako found that female, African immigrant students who

³ NPR has a podcast called "Code Switching" that I highly recommend. You can also find a short discussion of it in Sensoy and DiAngelo's "Is Everyone Really Equal?" on page 57.

have good relationships with their teachers were more likely to seek help when they needed it, and among the girls interviewed, this reaching out was never perceived as a “white” behavior (Okwako 2015, 76-77). Together, these studies investigate the complexities unique to being a woman (or girl) of color and a student such as censoring knowledge in social and academic situations as well as the need to have a rich understanding of school systems in order to get necessary support. It is also important to note that these studies looked at middle and high school girls, not college aged women (Raby and Pomerantz 2015; Okwako 2015). Additionally, Okwako (2015) focused specifically on African American immigrant girls. The study I conducted and discuss in chapter three addresses this gap in its focus on college aged women with varying cultural and racial identities.

(In)Validation: Who Gets to Have Cultural Capital

Expanding on the relationship between student identity and academic success, Beckett and Wrigley (2014), Bemak (2005), van de Werfhorst & Hofstede (2007), and Wildhagen (2009) found that cultural capital and self-concept impact achievement. *Cultural capital*⁴ is typically used to promote social mobility through non-financial means, and the studies found that students’ knowledge of this may impact their academic achievement (Beckett & Wrigley 2014, 220; van de Werfhorst & Hofstede 2007, 392-393; Wildhagen 2009, 175). Cultural capital can be a lot of things, but universally recognized cultural capital is typically in proximity to whiteness as a dominant cultural way of knowing. Professor Cole (2018) states it this way, “Cultural capital is the accumulation of knowledge, behaviors, and skills that one can tap into to demonstrate one’s cultural competence, and thus one’s social status or standing in society.” It can range from things

⁴ Cultural capital is a term originally developed by Pierre Bourdieu. More about the concept can be found in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste and Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*.

like taking classical dance and music lessons to being related to or knowing a lawyer to owning or having family who own property. Where WOC are concerned, the example above is an instance in which there was a perceived deficit in my cultural capital. The professor identified me as not having the kind of cultural capital that would allow my writing to be read as anything other than defensive. In this case, the cultural capital is rooted in white racial *habitus* (discussed below). Whites and their language are read as neutral and objective. They are not tainted with complications like race, color, or culture considered subjective. No matter what, language that comes out of my Brown body is associated with my Brownness. It's subjective and biased all because of its inextricable relationship to me.

Two different studies found that students' educational ambitions and successes were more highly impacted by their concern with downward mobility and self-imposed expectations than pressure from their teachers or society (van de Werfhorst & Hofstede 2007, 409-412; Wildhagen 2009, 192-193). These studies also found that an issue students of color face is the qualification of their cultural capital. For example, knowing how to play the piano or dance ballet are seen as complementary to academic success whereas participating in *Baile Folklorico*⁵ or playing in a garage band are either not recognized for their positive academic impacts or they are delegitimized and seen as potentially harmful to academic success. This illustrates the way cultural capital is systematically validated according to dominant Eurocentric cultural standards. It's about "high art" versus cultural folkways. Certain skills and activities are deemed more valuable than others because of their proximity to whiteness. The cultural capital valued most in schools is the kind that aligns with or at least approximates a white racial *habitus*.

⁵ Traditional Mexican folk dancing

Habitus is a term from Bourdieu that describes the things people know without knowing. They are the habits, skills, and ways of being that are so ingrained in society that they are almost natural. Inoue (2015) offers

For Bourdieu, *habitus* is multiple, historically situated structures composed of and conditioned by practices, material conditions, and discourses, that iterated into new structures (i.e., structuring structures), all the while these structures are durable and transposable, even when history and conditions alter them superficially (43).

In this way, *habitus* is like a manifestation of cultural capital -- there are things that are “good,” that people prefer, but they do not know why they associate positive feelings with these things other than it feels right (Routledge 2016). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva conceptualized a racial *habitus* and a white *habitus* (Inoue 2015, 47-51). Racial *habitus* works as a set of markers, often marked outwardly on bodies, through language, or the different ways we present and interact (Inoue 2015, 42-43). White *habitus* is a racial *habitus* that is part of the socialization of white people that informs their general world view in things like preferences, taste, and feelings as well as their outlook on racial issues (Inoue 2015, 46). White racial *habitus* then refers to the habits, skills, and ways of being that are normalized as valid and valuable because of their association with whiteness.

All Signs Point to Racial Opportunity Cost

Ultimately, most of the research on the experiences of students of color in PWIs reveal an additional cost that POC must pay in order to get an education. Education scholar Terah Venzant Chambers studies the experience of high achieving students of color, primarily focused at the high school level. She, along with her colleagues, developed the theory of “racial opportunity cost” (ROC), and defines it as “the price high-achieving students of color pay in their pursuit of academic success” (Locke et al. 2015). Examples of this price are things like performing racelessness, feeling isolated from their peers and culture, feeling like a token representative of

their race, or giving into established racist norms. An extension of Venzant Chambers' 2011 and 2014 research found that students, specifically those from the Latinx community, face considerable racial opportunity costs in order to be academically successful (Locke et al 2015 802-803, 806). As defined by Venzant Chambers, racial opportunity cost is "the price high-achieving students of color pay in their pursuit of academic success" (Locke et al 2015, 802).

Performing whiteness--what students have called "acting white" --seems similar to performing racelessness, but there is a nuanced difference. Performing racelessness is less about acting white, and more about rejecting their racial identity and existing in a neutral area. Students take an apolitical stance, meaning they refrain from expressing or refining a deep understanding of how race and racism impacts them or their communities. Their identities and behaviors are more focused on repressing tension and focusing on "getting along." One way this can be enacted is by students avoiding classmates of their same race or exhibiting a reluctance to embrace aspects of their racial identity (i.e. joining a racial or ethnic affinity club). Feeling isolated from peers can happen as a result of proximity, for example if a student of color is the only one in an upper level class or at a more affluent school, but it can also show up socially, through speech patterns and code switching. One student recalled for Venzant Chambers (2011) a common exchange they have with peers that demonstrates the backlash they receive for speaking "properly" and sounding smart

They'll just be like, "Why you talk like you white? Sell out. Why you talk like you white? Why you talk like you white" You hear that a lot. Or, "You think you smart. You think you smart. Blah. Blah." But they say it as if it's a negative...But along the way, you are kinda assimilating into that culture (15).

In this example the student shows how using "proper" grammar is considered "talking white" and makes them an outcast in their social and racial groups. Even though the student recognizes that speaking in accordance with dominant discourse is not a bad thing, they admit that they do

feel like they are actively buying into dominant culture. Which makes sense because language is part of one's *habitus*. At the same time though, a student in this situation can't win for losing. No matter how well they imitate white racial *habitus*, they will never be white, so they will never be fully accepted. Within their own culture, the more the student panders to whiteness, the more they are rejected by their community.

A common example of feeling like the representative of their race is having teachers ask a student of color to speak on behalf of their entire race or ethnicity when dealing with issues unique to that student's community, like "How did your people feel during the civil rights movement?" as if the experience is monolithic or "What is it like to cross the border" can be shared so easily, regardless of whether or not that student can speak to that experience. It can also be self-imposed. Some students (myself included) experience real anxiety around punctuality because they do not want to perpetuate the stereotype that people of color operate on their own time (often referred to as "Colored People Time" or CPT, "Standard Brotha Time" or SBT, or "Island Time" to name a few).⁶ While I personally have experienced and acted out all of these coping mechanisms in one way or another, one that was not mentioned and impacts me the most is the forfeiture of goals. Using myself as an example, on multiple occasions throughout my academic career, there have been things--research opportunities, jobs, fellowships--that I failed to take advantage of or pursue because of what I initially thought of as a refusal to play the game. I refused to be a token, to perform racelessness, to be anybody's mammie or to give up any part of myself in order to join the proverbial club. In retrospect, I recognize that I remain bothered

⁶ It is worth noting that this stereotype, like most is based some truth, but is harmful because the way it's applied and understood is a result of misinformation. Many communities of color historically come from collective societies that interact with time differently and prioritize relationships and service over schedules (i.e. meals, favors, caring for family, etc.). On the other hand, folks from individualistic societies tend to be compelled by the clock and outcomes, not people. One might also look to Barbara Adam's (1998) work on "timescapes" that theorizes for sociologists the various ways different groups conceive of and use time.

because I have voluntarily stymied opportunities for success in order to avoid the mental and emotional toll it would take on me to be Brown in those spaces. This is part of my cost and the way white dominance in those spaces is reinforced.

On the other side of this, there are strategies that, in the spirit of talking back, involve a sort of acting back, instead of giving in. As described by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988, xix-xxi) in *The Signifying Monkey*, a POC employing these strategies resists acting in a way that signifies compliance. Instead of arriving early or on time, they *take their time* to resist dominant, white cultural notions of time. My mom used to say things like, “I’ll be there when I get there.” I thought it was her making excuses for us running or arriving late or for carelessness, but really it is a way of prioritizing and recognizing the validity of the way we lived. Gates (1988) discusses the way Black folks do this with language, specifically regarding the Black vernacular, but I see its resonance across cultures and outside of language. In spaces like schools, this acting back manifests in a number of ways including retaining and using mother languages, going by family or given names instead of a nickname or simplification, or refusing to participate in tokenizing oneself. All of these actions are the taking back of agency that environments like schools often strip from people of color. In this way, our choices which may look defiant, remiss or laissez faire, but they are actually sly, even subversive, signifiers that suggest resistance to the keepers of dominant white culture, whether or not they interpret it as such. Acting back, or signifying, can achieve temporal dominance in an unequal system where whites are challenged by the behaviors that undercut control and power.

While Venzant Chambers (2015) focused primarily on Latinx students and ROC specific to their population—feeling isolated and alone, lost connection to Latinx community, and pressures associated with "representing" for the Latinx community—the idea of racial

opportunity cost united the findings of other scholars and helped me define something I was unsure how to name. It is clear that scholars are aware of the fact that in order for female students of color at higher levels to successfully navigate education systems, they must understand the implications and consequences of their race and gender. However, not enough of the research on female students of color seeks to understand the experiences women of color have as students, and as undergraduates in particular from their perspective. While women of color continue to be drawn to academia, there is a lack of research that addresses why, given the toll seeking higher education takes, they push through and survive instead of thrive.

Although many studies include a variety of student voices, most worked to understand the experiences of high achieving high school students of color through the lens of ROC. The study that inspired my research question and that I used to model my study after was ‘If You Show Who You are, Then They are Going to Try to Fix You’: The Capitals and Costs of Schooling for High-Achieving Latina Students” (Locke et al. 2017). This study focused on assessing the cultural capital that Latina high school students brought with them into the schoolhouse and the barriers they faced once they got there (Locke et al. 2017). The researchers found that the relationship between school norms (dominant cultural norms) and norms embraced by students (cultural and familial norms, not necessarily aligned with white society) had a significant impact on creating positive school climates and conditions necessary for student success (Locke et al. 2017). The researchers identified three main types of racial opportunity costs students face including psychosocial costs, community costs, and representation costs.

My Stake in This and Why I’m Here

The primary motivation for most of my ambitions is my family. The women in my family are tough, smart, and strong, but we have not always had the occasion to seek an education. I

think this is because school was not a place in which we have seen ourselves thriving. This is particularly the case with my mother. I come from a line of Nuyoricans who I know to be the truest of organic intellectuals but whose schools pushed them out because they were too aggressive and opinionated. One of my mom's most memorable experiences with a woman educator of color was in high school. This teacher flunked Mom for absences even though she was doing the work. Mom was habitually absent because my younger brother spent the first three months of his life in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). When Mom tried to explain the extenuating circumstances, the teacher refused and told her, "Whether you pass or fail, I get paid either way." I feel angry for Mom and guilty over my better fate. This story always stays with me because I feel as women, and especially as women of color, we have a responsibility to strive to change the disempowered narratives so many of us live out. Not only do I feel compelled to gain social capital for myself, but Mom's experience also drives me to try and understand the realities of the rise. I question what happened to this educator to give her such a bleak outlook, especially when a young woman with whom she shared at least a couple identities needed her to have her back. The teacher was likely unable to recognize the difficult situation Mom was in and leverage her position and power to lift Mom up because of her conditioning. I think that without knowing it, the teacher saw in Mom something she hated about herself—her Blackness, womanhood—and prompted her to behave in an oppressive way (Lorde 1983). She was an agent of white supremacist conquering.

My experiences as an undergraduate also play a major role in my interests. I had a lot of negative experiences that impact how I experience academia, even as a graduate student. Roughly six years ago, I was finishing my sophomore year of college. I had spent the first year and a half as a Math Education major, and I did not have the best advisor or great relationships

with my professors. My dad is an engineer and I wanted so badly to be able to bond over similar degrees. For more reasons than one, I was emotionally and mentally exhausted from my experiences in the math department. Looking back, I can't tell if it was being called the "nigger in the class" or starting to believe what my advisor had told me about "people like me" tending to be happier and more successful in the humanities. In any case, I switched from math and graduated with a BFA, but a lot of those same things that burned me out initially - having racial slurs hurled at me, having my talents boxed in by how I look - never really went away.

These experiences continued, and arguably worsened in the art department. In the last year of my bachelor's degree, I experienced three situations with white female professors in which the "angry Black woman" trope was applied to me. On one occasion I was told my passive aggressive attitude would not get me anywhere in life and that I need to be more amenable. Another professor cried in front of the class and then again in a private meeting with the department head because, according to her, I was abrasive, controlled the class with my negative attitude, and rallied the other students against her. I took most of these encounters in stride. I filtered out the subjective and did my best to take what I could as constructive criticism. I even went so far as to seek advice from one of the most experienced professors, and before my last semester of undergraduate school, we met at her home. Thinking it was the beginning of a mentoring relationship, I was shocked when the advice she gave had less to do with my craft or networking and everything to do with my personality. She thought it would do me good to know that most of the professors I had were "afraid not to give me an 'A' because they thought I would make it a race thing." While this made me question the validity of my grades and performance for the last four years, I again did my best not to internalize these opinions. I am unsure how successful I was with that though. Despite my best efforts to speak positively to and believe in

myself, as I finished my senior year, graduated, and considered my next steps, there remained an urge inside of me to prove to the people who invalidated me throughout my education and to myself that I am worthy of being here, that I can learn the rules and play the game, and most of all that I am good enough how I am.

Here I am about four years later as a graduate student at a vastly different institution, and I continue to encounter and observe similar treatment. I continue to wrestle with the same feelings of inadequacy. Most recently, I was hired to instruct a summer course. The interview happened over the phone. Prior to the start I had not met any of my colleagues in person. When I arrived at an orientation, I was repeatedly mistaken for a first-year student and asked to sign in. At the end, I made an effort to speak with one of the coordinators before leaving, but I was ignored three times. While this is not as overt as most of the other scenarios I detailed, the message to my Brown female body--that it does not belong in this space, or that it can be here, but in a very specific, limited capacity--remains the same. My body did not display the white cultural capital that my colleagues were expecting to see. Much like the situation with my mom's teacher, there are expectations for how WOC show up in certain spaces, and they are based in Eurocentric white dominant ideology. When I showed up as an instructor, young, Brown, and female and when my mom showed up to school young, Brown, female, and a parent, we deviated from the established norms and were punished accordingly. Even POC can enact white racial *habitus* that divides and conquers (Milloy 2016)⁷. It is important to call out that all the people who ignored me and mistook me for a student were POC, so again, it is clear that no one is exempt from being complicit with the structuring of white supremacy in school and our own behaviors, no matter how we identify ourselves. Throughout both undergraduate and graduate

⁷ Examples of POC enacting white racial *habitus* can be found in Thomas and Mary Edsall's *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights and Taxes on American Politics* and David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness*.

school, I have asked myself, many times, “why do you continue to put up with this bullshit?” After months of reflection and conversations with friends, what ultimately ended up being my preliminary research, I realized this is it, this is the thesis. I had to know, one, are my school experiences as universal as I think they are, and two, if they are, what are the footholds that allow women of color to persist in higher education?

Thesis Overview

In the following chapters I explore the questions posed in this introduction, specific to myself, according to existing body of knowledge, and from the perspective of a handful of women who attend the University of Washington Tacoma. You may notice an unconventional approach to this thesis. There are several reasons for that. On one hand, I am trying to do me. It is important that I honor where I come from in this work because without it shaping me, I could not be where I am. At the same time, it is an intentional choice, a protest if you want, of the dominant white voice in academia. A challenge meant to assist in dismantling the dominant narrative. This is an attempt to do that in a meaningful way. In the spirit of Critical Race Theory, I offer my story to the conversation. Chapter two elaborates on important terminology and theoretical frameworks necessary to understand the study. It also further situates me as a researcher within the context of the research. The study, “In the Thick of It” is discussed in the third chapter. I explore the experiences of women of color on the University of Washington campus as well as my own observations. Chapter Four concludes the study and offers discussion of my own experiences in undergraduate school, my suggestions for future action at UWT and similar campuses as well as recommendations for future research. The last section of the thesis is a coda, and it offers three alternative narratives to existing race relations on campus. I invite the

reader into dream worlds to help them continue to interrogate questions raised throughout this thesis.

Chapter 2. Your Problem with Me is You: White Supremacy and Women of Color in Academia

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously, or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? [They] say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.

-- DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

It is important to note that the title for this section was inspired in part by W.E.B.

DuBois' (2012) *The Souls of Black Folk*. A major part of my unlearning of "truths" about myself and the decolonization of my self-perception has been recognizing the ways in which my very existence is problematized by white supremacy. The other side of this though, closer to where I find myself now, is represented throughout George Yancy's (2015) *White Self-Criticality Beyond Anti-Racism: How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem?* Barbara Applebaum one of the authors featured in Yancy (2015) discussed the power in returning the gaze:

Yancy argues that the black counter-gaze from which the question "What does it feel like to be a white problem?" arises can function as a "gift." It can function as a gift when whites take up this question in a way that assists us/them to understand whiteness more effectively. Understanding that one is a problem in this sense can lead to ways of being newly accountable and can encourage an acknowledgment that there is always so much more to learn. And that feels like an incredible and genuine gift. Yet it is a gift that does not relieve one from doing work. Nor is it the type of gift that brings liberation, transcendence or consolation. And finally, it is clearly not a gift that releases one from being a problem. Rather it is a gift that encourages one not to rush to solutions and instead to negotiate complicity "not as injury" but "as a form of critique . . . that is the starting point and the condition of ethics itself (38).

I see this counter-gaze from me, a woman of color, as a gift to the white people I return it to and also to myself. I give myself the gift of relinquishing the burden of being a problem. Although my non-whiteness, my color, has traditionally been the problem, the truth is that whiteness and

white supremacy that whites perpetuate is the real issue. In this chapter I explore the ways white supremacy has problematized my experiences and those of other women of color.

At the end of my senior year of high school I was talking to one of my older friends, Tui, about his experiences in college after his first year. I asked him what I should know and be prepared for going in. And he told me, “Tey, don’t let college change who you are.” There was more to the conversation of course, but essentially, he told me not to let college take away who I was at my core; to always remain recognizable to my family and community. That was almost a decade ago, and over the years, this advice has remained with me. At times, it has been my moral compass, other times I have leaned on it to guide me in my studies. It is some of, if not the most, cherished advice I have ever received. But I will admit, at first, I didn’t really know what to do with it. We all go to college expecting to be challenged and to grow, so how was I supposed to not let college change me? I wanted to learn, I wanted to have my worldview shaken, and I think Tui wanted that for me too. The line between changing your mind and changing your character is fine though, and that’s where I had to walk. Now I know it is easier said than done. College attempts to take so much of you, especially as a woman of color, and I never realized how conflicted I would be between the demands of college and making this ask of myself.

It is hard for me to broach this research because it forces me to be super honest with myself and really raw about why I am still active in academia. A lot of my curiosity stems from experiences women in my family have had, but I’d be a liar if I did not admit that a lot of the reason why I persevered through undergraduate and strive to complete my graduate degree is because I’m looking for something. I’m trying so hard to locate myself within a culture that I grew up revering. All of the “successful” people in my life went to college. My dad was in school throughout my childhood and it made his immigrant mother so proud, and it made me

proud too. It feels like going to school is what I am supposed to do. If I can be academically successful, then I can be “good.” There are times I feel shame because I feel like I traded *mi orgullo* (my pride) for success. It started off in undergrad with classmates and professors making overtly discriminatory remarks. But even towards the end of undergraduate school, there were other things that bothered me, like I am “aggressive” or “have a big personality.” It was easy for me to write that off as a circumstance of where I attended school (in the bellybutton of America or as some more affectionately describe it, the heartland), so I graduated, moved away, and tried to move on with my life. For a long time, I was unsure how to express the way I felt, but my journey through graduate school has empowered me to explore these feelings and exposed me to scholars who concern themselves with understanding and naming the experiences so many women of color have in academia.

In this chapter, I work through some of my personal experiences throughout my education and try to make sense of the role white supremacy has had in complicating my relationship with school. I use examples from my own life to show how learning institutions perpetuate white supremacy. This chapter shows the ways in which learning has cost me, and talk about why, even considering these racial opportunity costs, I continue to pursue an education.

Whiteness, White Supremacy, and My Brown Body

I intentionally chose the University of Washington Tacoma, a campus described as an urban serving commuter campus, over the main UW campus in Seattle because I was concerned that there, I would experience a lot of the same things I had in undergraduate school. The racial demographics at UWT painted the picture that it is going to be full of Brown people. I thought I would be escaping a lot of the white supremacy rampant at predominantly white institutions

(PWIs). To clarify, when I say *white supremacy*, I am not talking about that of David Duke or the Alt-Right, though the belief that the white race is superior to other races and therefore entitled to dominance is the same. What I'm talking about is the normalized, "natural" order of society (Delgado & Stefancic 2001, 76-77; Lipsitz 2006; Bonilla-Silva 2003), which is often encapsulated in white racial dispositions, performances, and ideals, in white racial *habitus*, and white cultural capital. Consider my desire to be good at school and my association with that as the measurement or benchmark for success: this idea of goodness and success by doing well in school is something I, like most people, was socialized into accepting without question. It also begs what good is in relationship to what as "bad?" To understand this, we first have to understand what allows these unspoken, invisible, but very real, norms to exist.

The dominant practices and ideas are often unspoken and unquestioned because that is the nature of dominance. This dynamic is captured in the concept of *hegemony*. Hegemony is a process based on one group's domination and ascendancy, which situates that group as "the norm" in society. Antonio Gramsci originally tied the term hegemony to class, but it has applications to race and other social dimensions because of how it describes unequal power dynamics as invisible. Hegemony, then refers to dominant group's control within a society, which sometimes we speak of as dominant ideology⁸, which is hard to avoid, and as a result subordinated groups give consent to these ideas because they are naturalized and go unquestioned (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017). The dominant group is able to control things by maintaining control over knowledge production within the dominant discourse and other structures in society. Power remains with the dominant group through cultural institutions like hospitals, prisons, and schools (Foucault 1995). In their discussion of white fragility, Sensoy and

⁸ Ideology here refers to the discourses, scripts, and ideas that explain and reproduce societal structures, which include the justifications for the "nature" of social hierarchy between the dominant group and everyone else.

DiAngelo (2017) explain that “[institutions] socialize us into compliance with norms” established by the dominant group through discipline by structuring our time, and through punishment and rewards like grading systems (75-76). These forces become so natural that we use them as benchmarks to measure ourselves but also as acceptable behaviors by which we self-police. The control and ownership of knowledge remains with the dominant group. Knowledge is produced and validated by the dominant group because they are the only ones with the authority and resources to create and approve it (DiAngelo 2017). Groups outside of the norm can mimic, imitate, and reproduce the knowledge, but their own unique knowledge is always measured against the dominant group’s established standards. Additionally, how knowledge is taught, ensures that white cultural capital gives a leg up to those in closer to proximity to power.

For example, in my own learning journey, I felt very pushed out of the math major I started college in. The majority of my classmates and professors were white males. Although I attempted to follow the “rules” laid out by the dominant group by asking questions in class, going to office hours, visiting the math resource center, and communicating with professors, I almost never got the support I needed. My classmates shot daggers at me every time I raised my hand. It was as if to say, ‘you don’t get to ask questions’ or ‘if you don’t understand, talk privately with the professor’. When I corresponded with the professors after class, in office hours, or via email, it tended to feel very sterile. I got the impression that they did not have time for me or that they could not help me. On more than one occasion I had professors tell me that I needed to find a tutor because they could not give me the kind of help that I needed. One suggested I hire a private tutor. In college. When I asked classmates about study groups or how they handled the material, most of the time the response was “I just get it.” Some students said their study groups were private and only open to members of their fraternities.

When I talked to my advisor about my challenges, I was looking for advice on how to get the help I needed in the major I had chosen. Instead, she attempted to talk me into considering majors outside of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). On her own she said that girls struggled in math and that students of color often relate better to professors like them. While she is not wrong, why was the burden put on me? It is important to be clear; my advisor was only right because dynamics that create such conditions for women generally and WOC more specifically in STEM majors. In other words, the maleness and whiteness of STEM majors create learning environments in which women generally and WOC in particular are more likely to struggle. Strong evidence of this is present in Claude Steele's (1995; 1997; Rydell et al. 2010) work on stereotype threat. Steele's research show that in educational settings, stereotype threat causes students to "disidentify" with school (1995, 797; 1997, 613). This is not what happened to me though. I definitely felt the stereotype threat, but I was still in it. I wanted to stay in the math program, yet I was still pushed out. Instead of my advisor or one of my math professors recognizing the ways in which the department was excluding me and seeing that as the problem, I was asked to leave. This in turn made me the problem. Now if I were in closer proximity to power, things would likely have gone differently. If I had joined a sorority, had family with important or significant ties to the university, been white and male, maybe the answers would have been different. Not "we can't help you because of the kind of help you need, maybe you can't do this" but instead "you can do this, we just have to figure out what kind of help you need."

If the hegemonic is a product of white racial rule, then white supremacy is hegemonic in all aspects of our society. White supremacy exists alongside whiteness⁹ and white privilege¹⁰. In this thesis, white supremacy is used as an umbrella term that includes many aspects hegemonic whiteness. Scholars define white supremacy in a few different ways. According to J.M. Jones, as cited by Derald Wing Sue (2015): “White supremacy is a doctrine of racial superiority that justifies discrimination, segregation, and domination of persons of color based on an ideology and belief system that considers all other non-White group inferior” (155). Sue (2015) explains that white supremacy is different from individual acts of racism because it transcends a single person and lives on through the “institutional and cultural foundations of our society (155).” Robin DiAngelo (2017) uses a similar, but more encompassing definition of white supremacy: “White supremacy.... [is the term used] to capture the pervasiveness, magnitude, and normalcy of white privilege, dominance, and assumed superiority” (143).

So White supremacy refers to a doctrine of white racial superiority, as well as a set of hegemonic societal structures that reproduce white racial superiority in cultural and institutional practices, even those that seem at face to be about something else. In fact, white supremacy is often reproduced through practices and structures that are about other things, like standards for clear writing, students’ aptitude for certain subjects, or college readiness. Thus, white supremacy is an ever-changing process through which “experiences, relationships, and activities” are produced in such a way that white dominance is perpetuated as a hegemonic norm (Williams 1977, 112). White supremacy is always changing because what it means to be white is malleable

⁹ Whiteness is a facet of racism that elevates white people and white culture over POC and their cultures. Ruth Frankenburg (1993) is a good foundation for understanding whiteness.

¹⁰ White privileges are the unearned, unnoticed, and often undiscussed advantages white people are born into simply by being white. Peggy McIntosh’s *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, George Lipsitz’s *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, and Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* are good starting points for learning more about this concept.

and unstable. This historically evolving nature of race and racism is key to Omi & Winant's influential theory of racial formations and racism (2015). In this post-Civil Right era, where colorblind ideology prevails, within institutions white supremacy is often understood as an invisible system that both covertly and overtly recognizes, validates, and prioritizes white people while simultaneously disadvantaging people of color (DiAngelo 2011).

Now I know better. I'm not a naive little girl anymore who thinks of education as the great equalizer. I'm also not a bright eyed eighteen-year-old who thinks she can bring peace to the world as an educator either. The reality of who I am now and what I think I am capable of has everything to do with the difficult lessons I learned throughout my education. Now I know that no matter how hard I try, how good I am at imitating the dominant discourse, my Brownness makes it so that I will never be good enough, not as long as I am operating in a system built upon white supremacy. It took me until the writing of this thesis to realize that when I received that advice from Tui all those years ago that what he was talking about was resisting the urge to succumb to whiteness and white supremacy. He knew me to be strong willed, opinionated, and brave enough to speak my mind and always be true to myself. But he also knew that I was smart, that I loved school, and that school always loved me back. I think this is where his warning came from. He needed me to know going in that the standards by which I would be measured against, and potentially come to value myself, were never intended for me. After just one year of college, Tui was able to warn me about whiteness that has "haunted" me for almost ten years (Kennedy, Middleton, Ratcliffe 2017, 4-6). As I have learned though, as tightly as I clung to that advice, it was not enough to save me.

Critical Race Theory

The process of writing up this thesis has been uncomfortable, to say the least. Writing has required me to be really critical of the system of higher education generally and with particular regard to my current institution. I am calling out the structures and rules and behaviors that perpetuate white supremacy. As Kirsten Edwards' (2014) colleague expressed to her at a time when Edwards was confronting similar issues, "the whiteness is thick here (4)." The class that I am currently in is small, four students, myself included. So much of what I experience in this class epitomizes my overarching experience at UWT and in higher education in general. I hate taking this class so much because it serves as a weekly reminder of all the ways I will never measure up. Whiteness is the benchmark, and no matter how good I am at everything else, I can't ever be white. I get so angry and frustrated with the feedback and comments I receive--and it's not the criticism, I went to art school, I put criticism in my coffee. The problem is the way their feedback doubts, delegitimizes and questions the credibility and content of my research.

Every time I go to class, there is always something that feels off. It is not anything that anyone does intentionally or even knowingly, but Critical Race Theory reminds me that neither their intentions nor their ignorance negates the way their actions make me feel or the consequences of the racism they perpetuate. Whether it is being called defensive or having the validity of my lived knowledge challenged, the challenge of being in this class epitomizes my experiences as a Brown student in a white education system. Zora Neale Hurston has said, "I do not always feel colored. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" (as appears in Majeed 2015). This perfectly sums up my experiences as a student of color. It was not until I was surrounded by things and people so different from me as an undergraduate that I realized how much I did not belong. Suddenly, I had to accept that race where I lived in middle

America did not function the same way as it did where I previously lived in the Pacific Northwest. This realization forced me to think more critically about my existence as a woman of color in a white world.

With origins in legal studies, *Critical Race Theory* (CRT) has a specific application to education. Generally, it is concerned with understanding and criticizing the way race and racism operate, particularly in social systems, with an emphasis on social and restorative justice (Ladson-Billings 2013, 44; Hiraldo 2010, 57). CRT scholars are not only concerned with race, but rather they recognize the ways in which race and other social identities intersect and seek to understand what happens at these intersections. There is some conflict in the literature about which aspects of CRT are considered *the* hallmark tenets, but the ones I have identified are compiled in the table (Table I) below are ones I believe most theorists agree upon.

Table I: Critical Race Theory Tenets

Tenet	Main Idea	Examples
Permanence of racism or racism as norm	Racism is an ordinary occurrence (hegemonic) that happens every day	Individual, cultural, and institutional racisms that manifest via microaggressions, policies, laws, and practices--Harvard admissions process, crossing the street away from a POC, assuming a WOC with children uses public assistance
Race is a social construct	Race is not based in science, it's a categorization system created by people	Eugenics, skull measurement, race DNA tests are all bunk science as are IQ tests and other "standardized" grading measures that determine viability/intelligence
Interest convergence	Change happens when the dominant group stands to benefit	Universities showcasing diversity to attract more

	from it	students
Whiteness as property	Intangible rights afforded to whites solely because of their whiteness	Living in “nice” neighborhoods; campus police called on Black student napping public space; calling the police on POC when they’re barbecuing
Counter narrative or counter storytelling	Employing ways of knowing outside of dominant ideology	Testimony as evidence; Sister Circles; (more examples from Tuhiwai Smith); “talking back” in knowledge production
Anti-essentialism	Social experiences, while patterned, are not monolithic, and can be understood along many converging social dimensions (i.e. race, gender, culture, language, nation status, sexual orientation, etc.)	Gloria Anzaldua as Lesbian Latina scholar from the border of Texas and Mexico.

Compiled from Delgado & Stefancic (2001); Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings 2009; Hiraldo 2010

Racism as the Norm

Now that we have an idea of how hegemony, whiteness, and white supremacy all exist in our society, recognizing racism as an everyday reality, CRT’s first main tenet, may be easier to understand. This means that racism and white supremacy are not limited to occurring between individuals. White supremacy ain’t just tiki torches¹¹, white hoods, and bad people doing bad things to POC. It is also structural, enacted through culture, reproduced through limited and often negative representations of people of color (POC), or in the standards for learning promoted by schools (Inoue 2015), or the practices, laws, and procedures that make up a criminal justice system that over-incarcerates Black men and Latinos (Alexander 2012). It was easy for my undergraduate advisor to explain away the difficulties I had in math by attributing it to my

¹¹ This is in reference to the Unite the Right rally that took place in Charlottesville, VA in August 2017.

Blackness. It was easy for her to suggest that I try something in the humanities because “people like me” tend to do better in those subjects. And it was easy for me to believe her and follow through on her advice because that’s how pervasive racism is. Even when it was being committed against me, I accepted it as truth.

Interest Convergence

The third tenet of CRT, interest convergence, explains the insincere efforts to eradicate racism. I call them insincere because while they may be really good things like voting rights, affirmative action, or efforts to improve diversity as in the case of *Brown v Board*, progress only happens when there is a clear benefit to white people, or when their interest aligns with people of color (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 18-21), which makes these aims fleeting and less than altruistic. Whites must stand to benefit. An example from this in my own experience is the time when my professor called me abrasive. In a mediation meeting with the department chair, she expressed to me that she was retaliatory towards me in class because she felt threatened by my outspokenness. Her suggestion for resolving that was for me to use my energy to voice support for her ideas and be her “cheerleader.” According to my instructor, when I was not in support of and advocating for her, I was negative and dominating, but when used for “good” those same qualities had the potential to make me an enthusiastic leader. I just wanted to feel comfortable, welcome, and safe enough in the classroom to be my authentic self. It was only acceptable for me to be myself when my behavior served my professor in some way.

Whiteness as Property

Whiteness as property, the fourth tenet of CRT refers to the rights white people are afforded through their whiteness, which are the rights to possession, use and enjoyment, disposition, and exclusion (Hiraldo 2010, 55). Cheryl I. Harris (1993) discussed the ways that the

legal system has upheld whiteness as property, citing *Brown v. Board*, an extension of *Plessy v. Ferguson* as a cornerstone but dating as far back as the mechanisms within the law that permitted the systematic oppression (through conquest and chattel slavery) of Indigenous Americans and Black people (1715; Inoue 2018, 7). Through her discussion, Harris demonstrates that the white right to exclude is attainable by “even a poor, uneducated, or jobless white man” (Inoue, 2018, 8). Thus, systems like education, systems that rely on grading and standards, function in a way that prioritizes whiteness and proximity to it and perpetuates the white right of exclusion by maintaining an ideal predicated on whiteness. By extension, whites have the latitude to exclude everyone else from possession, use and enjoyment, and disposition, the other rights identified by Hiraldo (2010). White people exercise these rights in a number of ways in daily life. Well known, contemporary examples include the trend among white people where they call the police on. endanger, and harass people of color for doing things like speaking another language in the grocery store¹², barbecuing in the park¹³, or being in their own home¹⁴. In each of these examples, the perpetrators feel that their property--their whiteness, their right to enjoy a space, their right to use a space, and their right to exclude people from a space they have not deemed worthy--is threatened, so they call the police, make threats of violence, and in some cases act out that violence.

Counter Narratives

The fifth tenet, counter narrative and storytelling, refers to what is sometimes called back talk or talking back (Sue 2015,106). Essentially, POC and other underrepresented folks assert

¹² In 2018, two women speaking Spanish to one another in a grocery store were berated by a white woman.

¹³ In 2018, a white woman in Oakland called the police on a group of Black people barbecuing in a restricted area in a park.

¹⁴ In 2018, Botham Jean, a Black man, was in his own home by a police officer, a white woman, when the officer mistook Jean’s apartment for her own.

their voices in response to the existing discourse to correct and offer their truths to the discussion. Feminist scholars of color have a long tradition of speaking back to dominant voices and creating their own systems of knowledge production and validation, many of which intersect with this tenet (Hill Collins 1991; Tuhiwai Smith 2012; hooks 1984; Lorde 1983). In a lot of ways, this entire thesis is a counter narrative. In the final chapter I present counter stories, and throughout the thesis I tell truths that aren't often told from voices that aren't often heard. This is especially true in the case of my retelling of interactions in the classroom setting. The dominant narrative says I am abrasive, passive aggressive, and defensive. I say I am confident and unafraid. The mislabeling of my personality has more to do with the whiteness my body lacks than the things I actually say or do. If I were a white man or white woman, my self assuredness would be read differently.

Anti-Essentialism

Lastly, anti-essentialism asserts that everyone has a unique combination of identities and experiences, so in reality, there is no monolithic experience. Different combinations of identities affect the way people exist and move through the world. Intersectionality and anti-essentialism seek to honor that truth and the multiple ways of being and knowing. This tenet is tied very closely to the concept of intersectionality. While anti-essentialism and intersectionality are not the same, they are close. Some CRT scholars even describe the last tenet as intersectionality and anti-essentialism (Ladson-Billings 2013, 37). For the purpose of this thesis, I use intersectionality as a separate framework rooted in the tradition of feminists of color (hooks 1984; Lorde 1984; Hill Collins 2016). Because this tenet is so important to how anti-racist and anti-white supremacist work in the academic can be done, it warrants a separate discussion, so the following section talks more about the specificities of intersectionality.

As CRT states, racism and white supremacy are alive and well. Through the examples of each tenet I've provided, it is made clear that white supremacy is rampant in the education system. Education is a way of controlling people of color physically, mentally, financially, socially. Education is used to maintain the status quo, with whites as dominant in society and everyone else as subordinate. It happens in large and small ways. This can be advisors suggesting students of color do not belong in STEM majors, by extension keeping them out of STEM fields, cutting these students off from STEM money. This can be instructors policing a student disposition and personality unless the instructor can gain from it. This can be the system of grading as a whole, that, on one hand, is limited in its meaning but at the same time translates into projected student successes, abilities, and worth. Whether it's used to evaluate individual actions, institutional systems, or cultural practices, CRT serves as a tool to identify and analyze the sacrifices and penalties students of color endure in the pursuit of higher education.

Intersectionality as a Framework

At some point, I realized I was seeking higher education to validate my worth. Experiences in various classes made it clear that I was never going to be able to do enough or be good enough. One class I took was an oral history methods course. The professor is veteran faculty at UWT. He's well known as a labor historian who participated in the Civil Rights movement. He marched with Martin Luther King Jr. and has remained active in civil rights work since the 1960s. In this class, I was one of two women of color. My counterpart was a brilliant woman from Japan. The rest of our classmates were white women, about seven of them. The class was only once a week for four hours. I worked all day, drove an hour to school and then another hour home at night. Even though I was very pregnant, I only ever missed once. A few of

the assignments were optional but as the old adage goes, I had to work twice as hard to be considered half as good¹⁵, so I completed them all.

The grading throughout the course was arbitrary at best. At different points throughout the quarter, a white classmate and I questioned the professor about what the grades meant--there was not anything in the syllabus. I asked first. He told me that they were marks meant only as notes for him and that they would not impact our overall grade. A few weeks later, my classmate asked. He gave more or less the same answer, but he changed her "grade." That should have indicated to me something was up, but I didn't pay too much attention to this or the rest of my "marks" for the remainder of the course. Now, I don't want to brag, and generally grading systems are limited in the information they can provide generally meaningless, hegemonic measurements, but I do okay in school. I graduated with a 3.4 in undergraduate school and up to this point, I had a 4.0 in my current program. I do my work and I do it well. I'm an engaged student; I'm paying for this, so I take it seriously! It caught me off guard when I looked at my final grades and saw that I got a 3.8 in this class. I was especially surprised since other classmates who missed more than half of our meeting sessions and did not do all of the assignments (required and otherwise) received better grades than me-- 4.0s, even. I asked everyone I knew their grade, and they all had a 4.0 except one "incomplete" (she was given notes on what she needed to do, later finished and was marked at 4.0).

Of course, I called this to the attention of the professor. I did not ask for my grade to be changed. It's not about that, right? Rather, I asked for feedback, an explanation of why I had received that grade. In order to be better, I needed to know where I fell short. Instead of receiving an answer, I was given a 3.9. As if to say "Okay, quit complaining now, it's an A," but

¹⁵ Some call it the double tax

that was not what I wanted. I wanted to know what else I needed to do, or rather what I did not do. This was fairly early on in my program (my 3rd quarter, my 3rd or 4th class), and it is the only grade I have ever received less than 4.0 to date. From where I see it, the lack of explanation communicates that there isn't anything I did or did not do other than not be white or "acceptable" (exceptional) in this professor's eyes. But that's not tangible, so how could I ever be that?

The professor was used to his authority not being challenged. His position as a professor but also as a white male had afforded him the privilege of making the rules and not usually being questioned, especially by students, and probably not by women students, and almost definitely not by a woman of color student. When my classmate and I questioned him though, he made a choice, maybe unconsciously maybe not, but absolutely a choice informed by some implicit biases. My classmate got a different answer about her "grade" than I did, and even got her "grade" changed. Later on, this played a part in her getting a better grade overall. As far as the discussion between the two of us at the end of the term regarding my final grade, the teacher was unable to reconcile to himself that maybe there was something wrong with his grading practice and that maybe I had done the work, the labor, equivalent to a better grade. Recall, when I asked him to explain why my grade was a 3.8, he did not provide a response. Instead, in a patronizing way, he simply replied that he changed my grade by a tenth of a point. He made no mention of my labor or its quality, probably because he knew he did not have to. As the dominant person in this situation, the person with the power, the teacher, the male, the white person, he held all the cards. He was able to handle the situation however he wanted to. I was his opposite in every way, the subordinate, the powerless, the student, the woman, the non-white. And he knew it. He wasn't just pacifying me with a 3.9. He was telling me to know my place. Whether he knew this

or not, did it intentionally or not, this is what happened, because I left it alone after that. I got to a point of, ‘there’s not really anything else I can do.’ So, I took the grade and stayed in my place.

To be clear, this is not an indictment. I share this example to demonstrate policy and practice. There are unequal conditions and unequal outcomes. This is white supremacy at work. A professor whose career is rooted in progressing the rights of POCs, a person whom many may see as a model ally, even he can fall into the roles white supremacy make so easy to assume. No one is immune. Whether it is in class discussion, feedback on my papers, or grades I receive, there is always a question of if or how my race, color, and gender impact my success. This is especially true since my former art professor put the idea into my head. Prior to that it didn’t cross my mind, it’s like ‘Of course I’m excellent!’ Afterward, I worked so hard not to internalize what she had said to me, but I did. She got into my head, and this experience in graduate school validated her assertion.

An intersectional lens provides the clearest and most complete understanding of what it is like to move through academia as a woman of color. While intersectionality can have many different meanings, the one I relied on during this research and the one I think best applies to the understanding of the female student of color experience is thinking of the concept as an analytical tool (Hill Collins & Bilge 2016, 2). Hill Collins & Bilge (2016) define the term as “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences” and they assert that in the case of social inequality, there is not “a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but. . . many axes that work together and influence each other” (2). In the case of my experience above, the white supremacy remains as the underlying issue, but there are ways my gender, race, and even pregnancy culminated to create new intersections of experience and ways of being perceived. The class was all women, but only

two of us, my Japanese colleague and I, were of color. There was another woman of color in that class, but she was not pregnant. There were other mothers in the class, but they were white. So, there are unique intricacies to the identities of each woman in the class and they are directly tied to how we experienced the class as well as how we were perceived and subsequently treated/graded by the white, male professor. This is intersectionality, and this example displays many of the core ideas that comprise intersectionality. The six core ideas of intersectionality as a framework are: social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice (Hill Collins & Bilge 2016, 25-30). When applied to my research, these six concepts allow ways to interrogate the kinds of educational situations and subjectivities I examine in this thesis in order to make room for problematic layers of meaning, and perhaps solutions.

First, *social inequality* is the big and small ways in which the culture of higher education is not conducive to the success of female students of color (and it's not something that gets a lot of attention). The other part of that and the second core idea is *power*; whether it's at the undergraduate or administrative level or anywhere in between, the women in these situations often do not have enough power moving through them to make enough of a difference in the things that matter to them. Again, remember when I was a math major and I just didn't feel like I belonged? There were multiple instances I visited my advisor and I made several attempts to visit the chair of the math department in an effort to get what I needed out of the program. Mostly, I just wanted to be heard and helped. The classes I took in no way reflected the person I was or even the social experiences I was familiar with. My lecture class of nearly 100 people had ten women or less, and the ratio of people of color was the same. A lot, more than half of the students in my class were members of fraternities and sororities, and they came from money. Their parents golfed with and belonged to the same country clubs and neighborhood associations

as our professors. I was the only woman of color in all of the math classes I took, and I got more than halfway done with the required classes. Four out of the five instructors I had were white males. Somehow, I had one white female instructor. It was not until I left the major and was nearly graduated that I met anyone from that department that looked like me. My classmates came from and lived in the same world as my instructors, and not only did I not live there, I didn't even have the tools to build a ship to try and get there. So, I tried to live somewhere else. In this situation, the social inequality and imbalance of power put me in a situation where I had to choose between success and self-preservation or the completely unknown.

Relationality, the third core idea, is more than just relations, but it deals with relations between different groups. That is to say, relationality deals with the way race and gender are positioned in relation to one another. Their meanings are derived from their oppositional position to another category: what it means to be white is constructed in binary opposition to non-whiteness, same with female in binary opposition to male. There is a dominant/subordinate element to these binaries. These categories are codependent on one another for their meaning and have greater meaning when juxtaposed with one another and presented as binaries (Glenn, 2002). Generally, a lot of the experience in academia as a student of color revolves around this idea of relationality, especially at a PWI. Students of color are “underserved,” “underprivileged,” and “minoritized,” all in relation to white students.

In the case of women of color, the meaning of the position is compounded, because the status position as a woman of color is given meaning in multiple binaries simultaneously--WOC are compared to men of color, white women, and white males. What it means to be a WOC is constantly shifting depending upon the context. For me, it was difficult to be the only WOC in my math classes that were filled with and taught mainly by white males. Yet, as the only WOC

in my graduate program and in classes that are primarily filled with white women, I have to make different determinations on how I code-switch. The safest thing to do in the male dominated spaces as an undergraduate was to assert myself and show my power. I might be threatening, but I would at least be respected. In graduate school, surrounded most often by white women, that's the least safe thing to do. My best bet is to know my "place," to be strong and stoic, all wise, but not assertive because that might make them read me as aggressive. All of these ways my existence is perceived and given meaning is dependent upon who I am next to.

As an Afro-Latina with a multicultural upbringing, it is important to me to consider the experiences of all Brown women, not just the ones with whom I share a complexion or racial and ethnic backgrounds. While the *social context*, the fourth core idea, is very specific to my particular campus, it has greater implications for the UW system as well as for institutions of higher education as a whole. In some ways the experience women of color have on campus is not that different from what they experience elsewhere in society, but it is important to state that being a student is a unique experience in our society, especially when its compounded with being a woman of color at an institution of higher education.

There is a performance-based aspect to social contexts; we are constantly evaluated on our intellect and abilities, which ultimately equates to a measure of our personhood. For a long time, I thought...no, I didn't think, I KNEW I was an amazing student. I knew I was smart and capable. I described myself as good at learning. I always excelled in school. This all came tumbling down when my professor in college expressed to me that my previous instructors were afraid to grade me fairly because they worried, I would make it a Black thing. Before I could think critically about what she said and recognize that their problem with being able to fairly assess my learning was their problem and not mine, I seriously doubted whether or not I was as

good a student as I always thought. Even though now I know that whether or not what she said of other professors was true, and that it says more about them than it does about me, I can't shake the self-doubt when I get a grade or take a moment to appreciate my success. In other places in society, like participating in sports or driving, the measurements of success are not as susceptible¹⁶ to being contingent upon an evaluator's personal biases. Additionally, if I had attended a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) for my undergraduate degree, a professor probably would not have said something like that to me because it would not make sense in the context of my situation.

The study I report in the next chapter is not without *complexity*, the fifth core idea. Even on its face, the experiences of undergraduate women of color in higher education are nuanced with a lot of intricacies. Complexity within intersectionality is concerned with understanding the way new, unique perspectives emerge as a result of multiple, intersecting identities. At every intersection, there are new oppressions and opportunities. This concept posits that having multiple different identities is not necessarily layered oppression, or a plus and minus system of oppression. Instead, complexity says that, for example, it is difficult to be a woman of color at a PWI but depending on other identities and experiences this woman has like being queer, using a wheelchair, or wearing a hijab, there are also certain protections and social advantages. As a wheelchair user and hijab wearer, there are laws that protect her rights. Additionally, belonging to all three of these communities, especially the ones where her difference is visible, can provide support that may minimize racism or sexism. However, queer women, women in wheelchairs, and women in hijabs also have very specific ways they can be denigrated as well. Moreover, since identity--neither what's felt nor what's perceived--is not fixed, the way all of these

¹⁶ Though, what happened to Serena Williams at the 2018 US Open exemplifies that even sports are not totally safe.

identities are experienced is organic. This is all to say, there is no monolithic experience because of the infinite ways internal and external conditions impact identity and experience. The closest example I can think of in my own experience is a very odd, almost adolescent place within me. I often feel stuck as a second-generation college student and secondish generation American.

These realities affected my trajectory and path to success in school.

Of the relatives I'm closest to and who I spent time with during my upbringing, my father and uncle have college educations. The educated women in my family are either extended family or were inaccessible to me throughout my childhood. My father has a graduate degree. His path was paved for him though with the help of the US military. He also started college when I was four or five years old and finished when I was thirteen. My uncle and I actually went to college at the same time. He graduated my sophomore year. College was something I grew up talking about, but it was not an established norm in my family. It wasn't a system any of us were experts in navigating, and we still aren't. We also didn't have the generational capital, financially or socially, that many of my classmates had. We still don't. I recognize the ways in which I have advantages and privileges compared to first generation college students and first or zero generation Americans, I am in no way discounting the leg up I had and continue to have. While these realities and parts of my identity are not obvious and they present real barriers to my success, they're not recognized as part of underrepresented or underserved. So, the support I get, when I get any, is focused on my femaleness and my Brownness, not on my genuine inexperience in academia. While there is a gap in the understanding I have of "how to college," and I could still benefit from first generation supports, there are ways in which that is quantified, and I'm not far enough removed to count. Most of the time, identities like these are pushed into the background.

Lastly, the *social justice* aspect of intersectionality is, potentially, one of the “most contentious” core ideas because it frames intersectionality as more than a way of thinking and analysis but also as a tool that when used to its maximum potential can drive social change and deliver justice. Hill Collins & Bilge (2016) make it clear that “working for social justice is not a requirement of intersectionality” but they also say that people who use intersectionality as an analytic tool are often the very ones unwilling to accept social injustice (30). When I consider what the purpose of my inquiry is, a quote from Angela Davis comes to mind: “I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept” (DuVernay 2016). I reject the normalcy of the experiences I have had and know my peers, colleagues, and professors to have had at every level of education, but especially in higher education. I recognize that nothing can change what has happened to us, but I also cannot allow myself to continue in this field as if I condone the culture I’ve been expected to learn in and plan to contribute to. I can’t stand by, say nothing, and merrily continue with my other research interests without first addressing the reality of the educational experience of female students of color in a way that feels significant.

Chapter 3. In the Thick of It: Undergraduate Women of Color at the University of Washington Tacoma

To gather the data for this study, I spent a little over thirty hours in the field using a participant observation model. The site for my research was the University of Washington Tacoma campus, an urban, commuter campus situated very near downtown. I spent time in a variety of learning and social spaces, primarily the library and one of the computer labs. In addition, I conducted numerous (approximately seven to ten) informal interviews and four formal interviews. My main objective was to observe the way undergraduate women of color utilized and interacted with places and people on campus.

The interview questions fell into four categories geared towards helping me understand why students chose to pursue an undergraduate degree; how the reality of their experience compares to and differs from their expectations about what college would be like; what makes it possible for them to stay on campus-- that is, what are the footholds they can grab onto to make it through -- and lastly whether or not they feel that they're negotiating away aspects of themselves in order to endure, and if so, what those aspects are and what it feels like to do that.

Participants: Four Perspectives on a Common Place

I interviewed four women in their early twenties, Nicki, Selena, Lucy, and Karina. All four of them were students at the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) during the 2018 summer. In order to protect their privacy and identity, I allowed them to choose pseudonyms. Karina had trouble coming up with her own, so I gave her the name I used for her in my field notes. I am not including transcripts or making the interview recordings available because some of the content while unrelated to the study is identifying and has potentially negative

ramifications. While I did my best to anonymize my participants, I used the real name of the school and nearby locations in hope that this research effects change in the right hands.

Nicki introduced herself to me during my fieldwork. There were times I had my child in the field with me. They are an adorable people magnet, and Nicki approached me to say so. I had seen her a few times that day as she walked back and forth between buildings for her on campus job, but at this point I was packing up my kid and their toys to leave for the day. Nicki caught me off guard. We talked for a bit, and I asked Nicki if she was an undergraduate student at UWT and invited her to participate in an interview with me. Nicki is the youngest of six siblings. She was born and raised in Tacoma, and she grew up not far from the university. Both of her parents, one of whom she lives with, are from Uganda, and have advanced degrees. She also has a neurological condition that affects her physical abilities and experiences as a student. Her disability was something she discussed openly, and it seemed to be an important aspect of her identity to her because of how it impacts her experiences on campus.

Table II: Participants

Name (Pseudonyms)	Age and year in school	Major	<i>Reported Race, Ethnicity, or Nationality</i>	In-State Student?	First-Generation College Student?
Nicki	20, sophomore	Business	Ugandan, African, African-American	Yes	No
Selena	21, junior	Biomedical Sciences	Mexican	No, from California	Yes
Lucy	22, senior	Ethnic, Gender, & Labor Studies	Cambodian	Yes	Yes
Karina	20, sophomore	Ethnic,	Mexican	Yes	Yes

		Gender, & Labor Studies			
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My mentor suggested Selena when we were discussing the plan for my study, and she introduced us via email. Selena is a self-described nerd who enjoys watching YouTube videos and baking. She brought a completely different point of view than the other interviewees as a result of her status as an out of state student who lives on campus, which was not a perspective I expected to find considering that UWT is primarily a commuter campus. Selena is a first-generation college student and also a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. My initial correspondence with her gave the impressions that she's pretty soft spoken and seems to be no-nonsense, but throughout the interview process Selena admitted that she jokes a lot and tries not to take things too seriously.

My last two interviews, with Lucy and Karina, occurred after the initial study concluded; I had already completed thirty hours of fieldwork, two interviews, and a preliminary analysis as required for a class. Lucy and Karina were my classmates in the class in which I finalized the design for and completed this study. In order to keep from making them feel pressured to participate and also to protect their identities and information, I opted to wait until the class was over before I invited them and one other student via email to participate in the study. I chose email as opposed to in person because I wanted to avoid potentially coming off as confrontational or opportunistic--the only other context in which I would see them would be for the final--as well as to ensure I could document the interaction if necessary.

I interviewed Lucy first. She seemed eager to participate and to share her experiences as she was the first to get back to me. She even brought it up in person at our next class. The class we took together was the last class she needed to graduate. Lucy is a Tacoma native. She grew

up on the Eastside of Tacoma in a traditionally Cambodian community. She is the youngest sibling of several brothers and one of two of her siblings to complete college. Lucy transferred to UWT from a local community college, and prior to that she attended a different university in western Washington. Although Lucy appears on paper much like any recent college graduate, she has unique, deeply personal experiences that shaped the way she experienced campus including her transfer, marital, and graduation statuses.

My other classmate, Karina, was also happy to participate in my study. Karina is originally from California; she and her family moved to Tacoma when she was an infant. For the first part of her life, she lived with eleven other family members. Her mom worked a lot, Karina was primarily raised by her father and grandmother. She's the youngest of her cousins, who are like siblings to her, and they are all first-generation college students. Right away Karina, made it clear that in her family the expectation was for her to attend college, "a matter of status." She described its importance as being related to class as well as something she called "hyper documentation," where "undocumented folx compensate for not having citizenship [with] diplomas." Between her familial obligations and journey to the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT), Karina brought a perspective to the study familiar to me in more ways than one.

All but one of my interviewees, Nicki, was a perfect stranger. I met Selena through a mutual connection, and I expressed in an email that her participation would not affect her relationship with the professor that introduced us. For my classmates, I waited until the class was over both to protect their anonymity in the class since we shared our results and workshopped our studies. Also, I did not want to put pressure on them to participate to help me with my grade or to put them in a position that could make them think their relationship with me in class or the professor would be impacted.

Recruitment

I conducted this study during the summer 2018 session at UWT, and like most campuses student traffic in the summer is vastly different than the rest of the year. As a result, I had to utilize connections available to me and act swiftly when opportunities to recruit interviewees presented themselves. Three out of four of my interviewees were recruited based off of relationships. For one of them, Selena, we have a faculty mentor in common, and for two others, Lucy and Karina, we took a class together, which familiarized them with me and my research to facilitate their participation in this study.

Methods and Theoretical Framing

In my quest for answers, I used a combination of participant observation and ethnographic interviews. For the observations, I spent thirty hours in the field—the entirety of UWT’s campus—usually for two to three hours at a time. Generally, I tried to visit one or two locations during each session, but in some instances, there was not enough activity and I spent my time walking through campus in search of my population. After each session I typed up field notes within forty-eight hours of the observation. I frequently revisited the notes and added things I remembered or questions that later came up. The notes were anonymized to the best of my ability. However, I did keep the names of buildings, streets, and businesses the same so that the findings can be useful in improving the experience of women on my campus. In total, there were sixty pages of field notes (not including memos or interview notes).

For the interviews, I identified participants through fieldwork and mutual connections. I used ethnographic interviews because of the importance Black Feminist theory places on lived experience. Black Feminist scholars rely on lived experience, their own and that of other women, in order to create knowledge. The use of “experience as criterion of meaning” dates

back to slavery, and is used to identify symbols, hidden meaning and greater wisdoms (Hill Collins 1991, 258). Additionally, Black Feminist scholars use conversation to validate knowledge (Hill Collins 1991, 260). This method is also a cornerstone in African-American history, vernacular, and the community; variations include call-and-response and storytelling (Hill Collins 1991, 261). The goal is not consensus, rather it is to create a fuller picture by including input from multiple voices.

Moreover, Black Feminism addresses the binary present in the struggle between “whether being [of color] is more important than being a woman” by accepting, making space for, and empowering multiple oppressed identities (hooks 1984, 29). Patricia Hill Collins, one of the field’s pioneer scholars, has explained over the course of her career that the basic premise of Black Feminism is intersectionality (1991). She asserts that in order for Black women to free themselves, they must “[attend] to oppressions of race *and* class *and* gender” (Hill Collins (2016) 65). However, I posit that because of this, Black Feminism is for *everybody*. This method of inquiry is especially suited for my research because of the analysis of women of color in white, male dominated spaces as well as my outlook on women of color as a whole.

I used an intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Hill Collins 1991) frameworks in the design and analysis of this study because it gave me the latitude to use my and others’ lived experiences to identify symbols, hidden meaning and greater wisdoms to validate the knowledge I produce (Hill Collins 1991, 257-258, 260). Using ethnography as a tool and participant observation with interviews is among the strongest methods for creating a full picture of experiences (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). I used a grounded method of analysis for the interviews, modeled after Hesse-Biber (2011). Additionally, CRT played a critical role in the design and analysis of this study (Solórzano & Yosso 2016; Parker & Lynn 2016). While all

tents are inherently present, aspects of BFT and intersectionality bring whiteness as property, counternarrative, and anti-essentialism to the forefront of my research.

Procedures

I submitted this project to the IRB following human subjects procedures. The IRB waived my submission. Still I provided informed consent documents to my interview participants and secured verbal consent. I recorded the interviews on an audio recorder and immediately uploaded them to my computer. At this point I deleted them from the device. I also recorded the interviews on my phone as a precaution. During the transcription process, interviews were only stored on my password protected phone and computer. They were also anonymized in the transcription process. Once the interviews were transcribed, I deleted them from my phone. They remain stored in my transcription software on my computer for future use. Interview and field notes were kept in the same notebook. When this notebook was not on my person it was stored in a secure filing box in my home. Now that that study is concluded, these notes will remain stored for future use.

As previously stated, each interviewee used a pseudonym and I did my best to anonymize their personal stories. Their interview recordings and transcripts are unavailable to protect their identity and the sensitive nature of the information shared. I do not anonymize the UWT campus in hopes that the research provided can influence future change.

Limitations

To reiterate, the data was collected during the summer which problematizes my data for a few reasons, the main one being that there's a severe decrease in student population, ultimately affecting the level of activity on campus and utilization of spaces I observed. It helped create my picture, but it should be understood that it did so in a limited way--what I have is a rough sketch

of the campus and student perspective of its issues, unlike if study was conducted any other time of the year, I likely would have had a larger pool to choose from, more interviews, more interactions to observe, and, potentially, the ability to have focus groups and conduct surveys. Additionally, it made the selection slim. I had to rely on students either working and or taking classes during the summer. Then there's my perspective. On one hand, I'm a graduate student, a parent with a partner, living apart from my parents, and using the campus at vastly different times of day and for much more limited reason. I also had a very different undergraduate experience that I have had to time to reflect on, so my understanding and reading on campus occurrences and issues are very different. It was easy for me to look the part of an undergraduate student, but it was not an experience I was able to embody.

Study Findings and Discussion

I present my findings in terms of themes. Between my experience in the field and what interviewees shared. I determined three common motifs of the way the five of us experienced being a woman of color on campus: (1) the importance of community, (2) issues with student services and support, and (3) problems with the institutional implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Although aspects of the themes have points of success, my analysis suggests that there is still a lot of work to do.

Sense of Belonging

When I asked Karina what I should take away from her interview in order to understand her experience as a student, she told me "Going alone you'll go fast but going together you'll go far." It took her a few more words to get there, and she tried not to sound cliché, but she put to words a feeling that the three other women interviewed for this study and I can identify with on social and academic levels.

Social Belonging

During my time observing and interacting on campus, a sense of belonging (Strayhorn 2012) was something I struggled to establish myself. This theme became apparent in my study's participants as well. Here, sense of social belonging refers to messages students get that communicate whether they matter to, are important to, and are cared about by the university on a personal level. One Thursday evening I observed particularly stands out as an example of what the norm on campus was for me. Here is an example from my field notes:

I never realized what a lonely place the campus is until I began observing. There's something about really looking and not just being here that I feel isolates me. Even though most of the time I'm still doing other work, the intentional people watching feels really foreign to me. Most of the time when I'm on campus, I at least have my son with me. On the rare occasion he is somewhere else, it's typically because I came to school to escape. That's not the case this time. I am here in a capacity in which I have never been here before. Of course, my purpose here is research and observation, but really, I want to find my people here. So often when I am on campus I rush to class and back home, to a meeting and back home—typically with a stroller. I'm relishing the opportunity to be here as an undergraduate student, even if I'm a poser. I love the giddy feeling, the butterflies in my stomach as I search for the spaces that students like me inhabit. It's summer, so I know there may be less of us around, but I figure like me, there's got to be a decent number of students trying to catch up on some credits. But there aren't. Nobody's here.

Even though to any passerby I appeared to be a student just doing my homework, and not also observing and taking notes, I felt a lot like an intruder. I constantly asked myself if I was bothering people, whether or not I was too noticeable. Later I discovered this feeling was not unique to me. The excerpt from my field notes below details the desolateness of student spaces:

I went to the Student Center at the Y, a place I regularly shut down throughout the school year with other women of color, and they're closed. I can't even enter the space because the door is locked. I go to the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) in the library, a place I know many students use to study thanks to the quiet workspace and tutors available. It's empty. I walk through its expanse and feel like the heroine of a young adult dystopian novel. The Dawg Den is more of the same. It almost seems like a waste of money the space is so underused—the cushions on the booths still fill the air with their vinyl smell and the stainless-steel microwaves have that fresh out the box glisten.

Communal spaces were generally pushed to the edges of campus, making them inconvenient to notice or access. This was further complicated by summer because there are fewer students on campus. Experiencing these various spaces left me with more questions than answers, like why is there not summer programming for students? How can the campus keep students engaged all year long, even if they're not taking classes? In the excerpt from my field notes below, I describe the sensory experience of this isolation:

Most of the places that students tend to frequent had modified schedules in the summer, closing at typical business hours Monday through Thursday, between three and five in the afternoon on Fridays, and with the exception of the library and one of the computer labs, totally closed on the weekends. The computer lab and library had limited hours Saturday and are closed on Sunday. As a result, I spent a lot of time in the library. There was a spot on the first floor of the Snoqualmie (SNO) library that allows me to observe the second floor, three entrances to the main floor of the library, the help desk, and all the way back to the south wall on both levels. Although I can't see the quiet study space behind me, no one can get there without crossing my line of sight. Like most libraries, it's pretty quiet. On one hand, you hear nothing but at the same time, that nothing is *so* loud. Occasionally it's broken up by clacks on a keyboard, pages turning, a cell phone buzz, or a cough. I can hear the chatty librarians whispering but it sounds more like white noise than it does conversation.

In my fieldwork I noticed that nearly every time (all of the times except six, with the exception of recurrences like library and computer lab clerks) that I observe women of color on campus, they are alone. Of the six times I saw women together, only one of these instances appeared to be unrelated to school or work. While I cannot know the nature of the interaction between those two women, in both formal and informal interviews every woman I speak to tells me that she comes to campus for class or work (if she works on campus). This resonates with my experiences in the field as well:

On my way to the Dawg Den I see nine women. They all whizzed past me with such speed I could hear it. I do my best to catch a glimpse of at least one identifying thing about each of them, whether it's sparkly shoes, their makeup, their hairstyle or how they're dressed. It happened so fast though, like a movie scene meant to depict isolation or time passing, where the character stays still but everyone around them moves so quickly that all they are is a blur. Three of the women go by so quickly I barely catch

their skin complexion. Even as I try to remember it in my mind's eye from a few moments ago, all I can picture is a swatch. The only thing I can say for all of these women is that they are alone as they pass me.

As the excerpt from my fieldnotes exemplifies, when I sought out places where women of color spend time together, with or without structure, even though I find them, I still end up feeling more alone than connected. This concept of connection and its importance is a common motif in my field notes as well as the interviews. I notice that at UWT, community—or the lack of one—plays a major part in how undergraduate women of color experience and interact with the campus and one another.

Throughout the observation and interview process, a common experience described was the feeling of “Am I okay here? Am I bothering anyone?” Even as an older graduate student, I have anxiety around whether or not I was welcome in various places on campus before, during, and after this research. Aside from a lack of greeting or invitation, the spaces were not necessarily unwelcoming, but there were also no indications that one was “allowed” to take up space either. The fact that permission is something we all sought points towards the possessive nature of whiteness. We feel that socially, there is an unspoken authority over our bodies, that they belong to someone else.

This sentiment was so prevalent I dubbed it the “first year formula.” Students I spoke with expressed apprehension around finding places on campus where they feel they are allowed to be, whether that's to study or just exist. The majority of them said that in their first year, they came to campus for classes and work, and then would leave right away. For those that were unable to leave, either because of their transportation situation or living on campus, they were sort of forced to spend more time on campus and became more comfortable sooner. While most students reported growing out of this after their first year at UWT, whether it was their first year

in college or their first year on that campus, Selena, a junior who lives on campus, expressed that she still goes out of her way to make herself physically small in order to avoid inconveniencing others:

I mean, when I'm in public spaces, I kind of just [try] to take up as little space as possible [made body small as she said this]. I don't want to be taking up more than I need to be. I don't know, I'm not sure. I guess such as how I like, I don't want to inconvenience anyone else. I don't know why I don't want to do something else. Maybe I'd like to think it's just a polite thing to do.¹⁷

It's been months since this interview, and now I want to ask Selena, does anyone do this for you? What would that be like? This example of what Selena does illustrates the degree to which she wants to belong. She wants to be accepted so badly that the strategy she deploys is one in which she attempts to merge with the existing culture (Venzant Chambers 2011) in order to be affirmed and validated instead of choosing to be herself. Although Selena is not white, she invokes the white racial *habitus* academia has trained her to use. According to this way of being, her body -- female, brown -- is worthy of less space than those around her. I interpret that whether she is aware of it or not, by shrinking down, Selena assumes the role white supremacy laid out for her (as a person worthy of being excluded). Women I spoke with shared very similar experiences about trying to find places to study as well as just safely and comfortably exist on campus during their first year. Generally, though, they either found those places on their own during their second year as they became more comfortable and confident or established friend groups in which they created those spaces together. My understanding of this is that it either took time for the women to feel confident enough to challenge the existing culture of white supremacy on their own or it took the safety of a group to challenge the norms.

¹⁷ All interview excerpts have been edited for clarity. In some cases, verbal tics and utterances and repeats were removed.

Belonging to the Academic Community

The importance of belonging also impacted the academic experiences of the women I interviewed. Academic belonging is different from social belonging because of how it affected classroom performance. Here belonging to the academic community refers to feeling capable of handling the intellectual aspects of school and being able to perform in the classroom. Though these two ideas are inextricably tied together, I separated them to showcase the different repercussions when students do not feel as though they belong. When Lucy first started at UWT she was a computer science major. Her experiences in computer science classes made her feel isolated:

I was like, 'Okay, this is how I should think, and how [I] should process my mind,' and so.... I am like, my mind is more creative. I can't just do like, XYZ goes blah blah blah, you know. I'm not a computer. And so, (pause) yeah, I just felt like I, every day I went to [those] classes, I just felt like, I had to be a certain person to get a good grade and to learn what I needed to learn.

She explained that the computer science program is male dominated and that once she was "one out of three girls" in a class. The fast paced and competitive environment was not conducive to her success. In Lucy's case, the professor's teaching approach and the individualistic nature of the program made her feel unseen, unheard, and unimportant.

Lucy already felt like an outsider because she was one of few people of color, and that experience was exacerbated because of her gender. Lucy's intersecting identities, female and Brown, made it difficult to relate to the professors and her classmates, who were generally male and white. From her descriptions of her experiences it seemed that her inability to connect also made learning a lot more difficult. Although Lucy expressed satisfaction with the major she moved to, Ethnic, Gender, and Labor Studies, the isolation she experienced in the computer

sciences program led her to eventually convince herself that she did not belong there because she could not be successful, not because she lacked skill or ability in computer science.

Similarly, Selena has struggled with her place in the biomedical science major and at one point doubted whether she could be successful in science at all. She described to me one of the moments when she had this realization:

I was walking into um one of my science classes, and I just kind of sat down and I was looking around the class and I just kind of noticed, like, there was a lot of blonde and blue-eyed people and like, not very many people of color, and the professor was also white. And I just kind of felt kind of alone. Like I didn't belong in there for a second. It felt very weird. I don't know and it just kind of messed with me a little bit in that class cause I was like, 'I don't really feel like there's anyone here that can really relate to' so I felt very lonely in that class for that quarter. [I thought] 'Oh, I don't really see anyone. I don't really belong.' That class really messed with me [and made me feel] just like 'am I really a science person?' But I just felt weird. I think [the problem was that] I didn't have other people that I was like, connecting with in that class I was going through everything by myself. And I was really struggling with the material. And it led me to think, 'can I really do science in my life, [independent of] other people?'

Here, Selena puts to words what I interpret Lucy was feeling but didn't completely express.

Selena recognized that in order to be confident and to thrive in her science classes, she needed to see other people like her, be that through similar gender or race. For Selena, that realization caused her to briefly doubt her potential. She internalized something that had nothing to do with her abilities. Both Selena and Lucy's experiences are compounded by *stereotype threat*¹⁸. They were confronted, however implicitly, with the stereotypes about women and students of color not having as much success in STEM fields. In their case, they fall into both categories as women of color. In Lucy's case, she did what Steele's (1995; 1997; Rydell et al. 2010) research shows students in these situations often do; she disidentified with her major in an act of self-preservation. Lucy felt the best choice she could make for herself was to be successful in a program where she sees professors and students that are more like her. Selena on the other hand

¹⁸ Stereotype threat is a concept from Claude Steele. It refers to the risk of confirming or being judged or treated negatively because of negative stereotypes about one's group.

continued in her biomedical science program and persisted through that particular class. Still, she relies heavily on professors of color outside of her program and classmates and friends of color for support. Although the connections Selena has outside of her major are valuable, part of belonging to an academic community is having positive representation present in that community. When students see and experience the success of others like them in the roles of peers and professors in their community it fosters a greater sense of belonging.

Karina also experienced doubt about whether or not she belongs in the classroom. In her interview she identified the feeling as an imposter syndrome.¹⁹ I tend to agree with her evaluation:

Karina: I've had some classes that were kind of hard to be in because I have like, imposter syndrome, which I felt like I didn't really belong there. In spring, I took public policy and pollution. And it's for environmental studies. And so, a lot of the people didn't look like me. And so, it was mostly white men. And so being in that class, I felt really overshadowed and I felt like I couldn't really talk. Not because they didn't give me a platform, but I just felt like whatever I said wasn't right. So, then I found myself not getting such a good grade in that class. I mean, I still passed but, I just felt like it might.... like I could have done a lot better.

TeyAnjulee: When you say, “imposter syndrome”, what do you mean?

Karina: It's just when, like, when you don't feel like you belong there...

TeyAnjulee: Oh, I guess I know what it means. I mean what do you mean for you?

Karina: Well, just I think it just means what it can be either one or two things for me, it can mean where I stick out like a sore thumb. And people are constantly looking at me, or where just like, [I'm] completely drowned out and not even marginalized almost...So in that [introductory] Environmental Studies class, I felt totally drowned out and I felt like I was getting lost in the sauce. I just felt like [I really] couldn't get ahold of it, because there's a whole bunch of jargon that I just didn't understand and like, ‘Am I supposed to know this?’ Yeah, it was kind of just like that. But there's other times where, going back to my experience in high school, when we talk about something like immigration, people would constantly turn to me and... there's this time in social studies where [we read an

¹⁹ Imposter syndrome is when a person feels of incompetent or inadequate and as though they do not belong in a given environment because of their inadequacy even if they have evidenced success or credentials. The person experiencing it may feel like a fraud. A short article that provides a good foundation is “Making it by Faking It” by Robert Granfield.

immigration story as a class] and the teacher was like, “Oh, Karina, do you mind sharing your story [of] immigration.” And I was like, “Well I was born in California. So, I don't really know.” And people were kind of just looking at me like “Ooohh.” And again, with people being like, “Oh, you're the spokesperson for all Brown people, right?” And it's been like that sometimes.... it'll be like a spokesperson for people of color or like, women or, you know, like, x y and z.... So, imposter syndrome goes both ways for me so like sticking out or being marginalized.

My interpretation of what Karina is telling in this example is that UWT's spaces, classrooms, and majors are not built with WOC in mind. She does not feel explicitly invited and welcomed into majors and physical spaces on campus. As a result, the de facto white supremacy of our society, schools, and disciplines creates barriers for WOC to even be in school, or a major, or a space purportedly built for their use. Its intended purpose is to simultaneously elevate whiteness and reduce anything that's not that. This is what Karina is talking about. Although Lucy, Selena, and Karina used different language to describe their experiences, it is clear that the lack of a sense of belonging socially and academically played a critical role in their experiences in the classroom and their sense of imposter syndrome. It is apparent that scaffolding and other types of intentional support that help foster community inside and out of the classroom would have a significant impact. The campus may have more students of color demographically, but it imitates the predominantly white culture prevalent at predominantly white institutions.

Issues with Institutional Support Services

“[Counseling was] where I really opened up about my feelings and just being open with people and um, just be true to myself...[counseling] changed me a lot. But it changed [me] for the better.” -- Lucy

Different support and student services played a significant role in the experiences of all of the women I interviewed. They generally felt very supported on campus and had positive interactions with utilizing different services, including counseling, disability resources, tutoring,

and diversity, equity and inclusion. Nonetheless, there are areas in which the institution can improve student supports at the institutional and classroom level.

Support services on campus received mixed reviews from the women interviewed. All four of the women seemed aware of at least one example of help available, and if they hadn't utilized one themselves, they knew someone who had. The counseling and psychology services available at UWT was brought up by two students. For these two interviewees in particular, access to counseling influenced their decision to stay in school. Lucy got to a point in her junior year, her first year at UWT, at which she considering dropping out of school altogether. The counseling and psychology services available helped her make it through that difficult time:

I was going through my divorce and we were trying to make it work out. And like, he's like, "Well, the only option to make it work is if you move to Alaska," which was where he was stationed and so I really considered it and I was like, looking into like um, schools in Alaska. But, I...at that time, I didn't realize how toxic that relationship was, but looking back, I'm like, really glad like I had these counselors to talk to and like the friends not only here but also like my best friend who's who I've known since 6th grade. They kind of just talked me through what I was going through and, I realized my family lives here. And my support system was here. And like, I did try going [to Alaska] for like, a couple weeks during my break just to see how I would work out in that atmosphere. And like, it just was really toxic. And yeah, it just, I wasn't getting anything that I needed, and I felt like I was more free here, as opposed to there. And so, I'm really glad I didn't drop out of this place to go pursue that other life, cause I don't know where I'd be. So, yeah. I'm just really glad that uh, the counselor was here to talk to me through that. Cause that was a really vulnerable time in my life.

Lucy referenced the support she received from the counselors on campus numerous times throughout her interview, saying that she would go every week. Even though there were counselors at the two other colleges she attended, Lucy felt supported and encouraged by the culture of UWT to prioritize her mental health:

I had a mental breakdown like right before class because of stuff and he's [her professor] like "No, it's okay you can go to the counselors," and like, "you need to take care of yourself first." That's what he said, and I was like 'oh my gosh.'

Her professor validating her experiences outside of the classroom and recognizing the ways in

which they affect her learning and overall experience as a student made Lucy feel like she mattered. Providing the counseling free of charge also eliminated other potential barriers as well.

Another service that had a significant impact on student persistence was the office for disability resources (DR). Nicki has a really good relationship with the DR and works with them to ensure she gets the accommodations she needs to be successful in class. Although this experience was unique to one person in the group of women interviewed, it's important to showcase the ways in which this office empowered Nicki to stand up for and validate herself, even when the campus is not always as accepting and welcoming of her:

[In] sociology class, I—I had a—I work a lot with the disability services here to help me get through classes. That's also an added support for me. Um I have accommodations, so like I can take tests in—in [the Disability Resource] room or have like extra time or I can turn in assignments late and I won't get knocked down cause I need the extra time or like, whatever I need, basically. As long as I can do it. And that sociology class, I—I don't know. I just felt like it was too much. So, I was talking to the professor and then she was like, 'oh okay, that's—that's fine.' But she gave me some kind of attitude, like "why do I have to do this, for you?" "I have other students to worry about" kind of thing. That's the vibe I got. And when I dropped that class, she emailed me, she's like "you had such great potential." And I'm just like (*Nicki makes a confused face, squints her eyes and looks from side to side*) "Huh? Okay, what do you mean by that? I'm confused. What—like you said that you weren't gonna help me, and then you're telling me that I was doing good." [waving her hands in the "no thanks" way] Okay. Cool. I was like, 'Whatever.'

Even though the professor in this case did not respond the way Nicki had expected, she still felt armed with the support of the DR to make the best choice for her education and could take solace in the fact that even if she did drop the class, her full-time status would not be affected. She was also able to recognize that the professor's perceived attitude and problem with Nicki was just that, her problem. This scenario could have played out in a way that made Nicki feel like she or her disability were the problem yet having the support of the institution behind her gave her the confidence to not only make the best choice for her and her education and also keep the issue in

perspective. Her professor's handling of the situation is more about her professor, and less about Nicki.

Nicki told me that she has felt discriminated against on campus another time, and in this situation, the support of the DR was not enough. She was denied a campus job because of her enrollment load²⁰, she was denied a job multiple times and then told that it was "university policy." I could tell this really affected Nicki because she applied and interviewed for the job twice. She felt confident she would get it the second time, but was disappointed and angry when she did not, especially since she had a different campus job. Interestingly, the job she applied for multiple times and was unable to secure is a more public facing position. In that position, Nicki would have been responsible for giving tours to potential students and working in a customer service role. The job she has now is much more behind the scenes and she is employed by the university. The confusion for Nicki, and the confusion for me, is how her enrollment status impacts hiring decisions for one campus job, but not the other, and how she can apply and interview for the same job twice, with the same accommodations in place, and be denied twice, after an interview. It looks like the university is saying you're good enough to set up the tables, but not to sell admission at the door. Being invited to interview meant Nicki looked perfect on paper but for what could reasonably be her disability--and all the quirks associated with it like her speech pattern or the pauses she takes to think--she was no longer a viable candidate.

The incidents of discrimination aside, Nicki seemed to take comfort and have confidence in the knowledge that at any point if she needed help there are resources available on campus, not just the support available to her through the disability resource office. In our interview Nicki explained how she engages with support resources on campus:

²⁰ In general, full time enrollment is 15 or more credits. Per Nicki's accommodation, full time enrollment for her is 10 credits.

“If I need help with like, academic wise, I go to the TLC. I spend my time there all the time. If I have like a paper to do—like to, that I need help with. I recently started going there for like microeconomics stuff, so I’m thinking I’m gonna need them for accounting too, but like we’ll see. But I usually am there for writing purposes so like paper wise like if I—or like discussion posts whatever. Yeah, I just make sure that I have everything ready also, like if I’m doing research, I get help from the front desk.... And then if I need like emotional support, I go talk to the counselors. They help me all the time. We have a lot of resources on campus, you just have to know that they are there and not—don’t be afraid to ask honestly.

It was encouraging to hear from Lucy and Nicki about the supports that they take advantage of and the ways in which those supports positively impacted their experiences. I was unable to observe a lot of the services they described in action, both because of privacy concerns and as a result of the timing of the study. Mostly, my observations around support available focused on supports I noticed were missing and or not very obvious to students. My field notes reflect this:

[~7:00 pm] I have lost track of time observing and haven’t eaten in for almost seven hours. In my search for food, I’m reminded of something I haven’t had the misfortune of remembering in several months: the food options on campus are awful and limited. There isn’t anything healthy and affordable or affordable and healthy. I’m cheap and broke though, so maybe it’s just me. I spend \$9 on a small salad, a single piece of cheese and a small coffee. How are students supposed to eat? I notice a WOC watching something on a laptop. She had a camo shirt, armpit length, dark wavy hair with a deep side part. I sat down a table away from her. As I start to eat, I recognize the director of the Office of Equity and Inclusion (CEI). She has her child with her. We speak at length about my study and interviews--the challenges, what I’m learning, and how she can help. She volunteered that one of the arguments the university makes for the lack of programming geared towards minorities is that there isn’t a population. She told me about new Assistant Chancellor for Equity and Inclusion and suggest that I email him. I write down his name and she and her child go back towards her office. [~10 minutes before 8 pm] the woman watching her laptop leaves. I left shortly after her.

Impressions: It was nice to be validated by the CEI director. I will take her up on offers to help me secure interviews. I appreciate her perspective on the situation too. It’s interesting to hear what the general excuses are for why campus is used/not used the way it is. Also, the food really bothered me. The cost of food on Pacific Avenue has tourist trap prices and the cost of food on campus is off the chain²¹. How are students supposed to make healthful choices if the affordable options are for crap food?

²¹ “Off the chain” has lots of applications. Here it is used as a way of saying something is ridiculous or offensive. Here I am saying that the prices students are expected to pay for food are inconsiderate of student financial positions to the point of being prohibitive. In other words, students go hungry.

This excerpt is from the field notes from my last observation session. I was in West Coast Grocery, a building on campus that houses the Center for Equity and Inclusion and West Coast Grocery Store, a convenience store. The store is one of the only places on campus that offers food beyond vending machine options. To start with the food, in more ways than one, there is a disconnect between what UWT claims to be proud of about its campus, students, and community and what it shows its proud of. True pride would be a recognition of the food insecurity many students experience.²² True pride would honor the variety of cultures students come from and offer food on campus and nearby that honor those cultures or respond to them. Instead, the food inside of the WCG Store and in the restaurants nearby are very limited and grossly overpriced. To illustrate, there are four pizza places within walking distance, two sub sandwich joints, four restaurants offering Asian and Pacific Island cuisine, and three pub-brewery style eateries. The restaurant serving style also is not conducive to student lifestyle. They need to be able to order and receive their food quickly, and often take it away. Again, UWT administrators fortunately are aware of the food issue, and are discussing ways to offer university dining. That doesn't do anything for students struggling to secure healthy and affordable food now though.

Although food may seem to be a race neutral topic, the context of the campus matters. UWT is a campus that serves students from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds who come from a variety of socioeconomic circumstances. Race and income are linked (I feel like I need a citation?). Neglecting to provide health conscious food offerings that fit a wide range of budgets sends a few different messages and has a multitude of consequences. On one hand, it sends the message that the university values the health and satisfaction of students with access to a certain

²² There are food and hygiene resources available to students at UWT through The Pantry, a free resource sponsored by the Center for Equity and Inclusion. I was aware of this resource during the research. What was and remains unclear to me is how that resource is supposed to be used. That is, are the resources available for students with a specific level of needs? Are students able to get lunch there if they cannot afford to eat on or near campus?

level of financial resources more than students who do not. In other words, if you are a student who struggles with food insecurity or cannot afford the price for a healthy meal on Pacific Avenue, then your opinion appears to matter less. The message starts to become, students with certain resources matter, and the other ones do not. Even though we are talking about “resources,” this is still very much about race. Within white supremacy, the idea of what is neutral is connected to those who have something, to those who are not lacking. They are white. This indicates that those who are deficient, who are wanting are diametrically opposed to whiteness. They are of color. The message very quickly turns into ‘some students belong here, and others do not.’ It is veiled as a discussion of resources or an oversight about what’s affordable for students, but in actuality it is about who the university prioritizes. This is about who matters to, is important to, and who is cared about by the university. In this sense, access to healthy, affordable food is tied directly to student sense of belonging and also undergirded by a poisonous foundation of white supremacy.

The other interesting part of the notes from my last session was the explanation for the lack of diverse student programming. The CEI director told me that the reason she was given was that there isn’t a population for the programming. As earlier stated in this thesis, UWT has about 51% student of color population, and considering that other institutions with far less student of color populations have diversity and inclusion programming, that’s a tired, sad, lazy, excuse. The undergraduate students know and pick up on this too, which is why fidelity to and follow through with the implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion is the third and final theme in my research.

Problems with the Implementation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

“[UWT Recruiters] always [said] “diversity” when they were visiting my high school, but when you get here it’s more like, “Okay you have to [find] it

for yourself.” -- Nicki

Throughout my analysis, I have worked to prioritize the voices of the women interviewed and their perspective of UWT. However, I would be remiss to exclude the issue of diversity. Of the women I interviewed, only Nicki used the word “diversity” as the label for the problem. Karina used “equity and inclusion” and spoke about specific departments and programs. Selena and Lucy on the other hand were more general with their language and spoke instead about things like culture, interpersonal connections, and having similar backgrounds, experiences, or upbringing. All of them though, in their own way identified representation that they felt was missing from their experience.

The Center for Equity and Inclusion (CEI) came up a couple of times, but not exactly as a place that students leaned heavily on for support. In some ways this surprised me because of what I know offices like this have the potential to offer students (Patton 2006). My observations of the CEI were more or less in line with what Karina describes below:

“I think being in the Center for Equity and Inclusion is like the most comfortable not because I believe in equity--the whole like Equity and Inclusion thing from the university because honestly, I think it's a load of baloney. I just don't really think it's, it's [authentic]. I think, again, it kind of just [tries to shows], ‘Look [at us] we’re so diverse and we care about people,’ but in reality, they're just, they're just talking, but not really putting the words into action.”

I think a large part of this disconnect comes from the space being patchworked across West Coast Grocery (WCG). There is not enough dedicated, protected space for students to congregate or relax in their own space. Fortunately, the administration is aware of this need and an expansion and relocation of the CEI is in progress, it can’t happen soon enough. The current office space is spread over three rooms, two of which house offices for equity and inclusion staff. The third is also set up like an office, it has several computers, tables, and a couch. While the presence of a couch and other student resources may present as attempts to make the CEI a

lounge space for respite and fellowship. This attachment to literal office space is what keeps it from feeling student owned. The lack of separation makes it nearly impossible to refrain from imposing office behavior expectations and etiquette on what could be a place of refuge where students (like Selena) can spread out and be themselves instead of feeling confined and having to still behave the same way they do in class and elsewhere. While Karina expressed that it is a comfortable space for her, it's not because she buys into what the space signifies. She can find people she gets along with there, but she believes the space itself and messaging about diversity and inclusion are for show and lack follow through. Her belief is magnified by her experiences with a group that she called First Gen. The group refers to first generation college students. At the time of our interview, the group transformed into a program, now called First Gen Scholars, but as Karina describes, it started out as a club:

[It's] a program now and they'll do cohorts...but we were there while it was a club so it felt, it had more of like a homey vibe but now it feels very like corporate (pause) like "Oh how many people can we get on [the club roster]" and like "Oh let's try to make [First Gen Scholars] look good for x, y and z." Rather than benefiting the individuals, it's more of 'How does [First Gen Scholars] look? How does it make the college look?' And so, it's been... I mean, people still go to it. And I guess some people find it helpful, but not anymore for myself. So, I just go to the CEI.

From Karina's perspective, as the group transformed, it became less about the students it was created to serve and more about providing the institution with an opportunity to pat themselves on the back. I interpret that this interest convergence between what makes the university look good and what is best for first generation students is at the root of Karina's distaste for the program. In my observations, I noticed that in every building, on every level, there is a poster that displays the university's commitment to diversity (Appendix A):

"The policies and practices of UW Tacoma are grounded in the principles of diversity. Through an acknowledgement of the diverse backgrounds and goals of citizens of our community, UW Tacoma believes all its constituents can be better served."

It is frequently accompanied by a “Hate Has No Home Here” poster that repeats this sentence in a few different languages (Appendix B). What do the posters mean though? Do they mean anything at all? If since the start of the school year roughly two months ago there have been at least three instances of hate speech that I am aware of and limited institutional action, what does that tell us? These posters are scattered throughout the school, but who does it serve to display them?

Efforts like the creation of First Gen Scholars and hanging up thoughtfully worded posters and diversity statements don’t go unnoticed or unappreciated. Things like this, big and small, have the potential to make a world of difference in the experiences of women of color and to the campus climate when they come with action. The issue arises when the action is limited or lacking in transparency. On their own, First Gen Scholars, the UWT Diversity Statement, and the “Hate Has No Home Here” posters all appear to serve the purpose of making the university appear to be anti-racist, diverse, equitable, and inclusive. As detailed in previous sections of this chapter, the follow through needs to visibly match the intensity and integrity of the effort, otherwise it feels like empty words and a return to previously scheduled white supremacy.

Conclusion

For UWT and for higher education as a whole, I have more questions than I have answers. I think my instincts were right as far as why students stay, what footholds they can grab onto, and the personal cost. I think I could guess as much because I have lived it more than once, in different places, and across time. There is a lot that I still don’t know and am unsure of though. Namely, what are institutions doing about it? What can they do? Who can and should be responsible for helping WOC succeed and feel welcome? Do students and families need to better prepare for “the way it is” in higher education or is it time that academia intentionally spends

time and money to make past due improvements? Both? Maybe....I don't know. What I know is this: white supremacy is implicated in all of this, at every step of the way. Even if students don't call it that, even if they don't have the language, that's what it is. And I know that until we start calling the problem what it is, naming it out loud in the daylight for all to see and hear, not in hushed conversations in offices and safe spaces, we will never be able to move forward. By not naming the problem, we're fixing everything except the issue. Like stopping a flood in the house without first turning off the water source. Buckets and towels will only get you so far. Learning institutions, like UWT need to make use of the conceptual tools provided by CRT and utilize them to identify students' Racial Opportunity Costs, the white supremacy and its normalized structures and norms as part of academia. Doing so will allow them to make lasting changes to the experiences of women of color in higher education.

Chapter 4. Changing the Background: Implications for Action and Further Study

College can be a really lonely place for lots of different reasons. I, like Selena, was an out of state student during my undergraduate education. A lot like Lucy, I came from a high school and grew up in neighborhoods that were relatively culturally diverse (our high schools are only five miles apart). Similar to Nicki, I was at a point in my development where I was struggling to reconcile my multiple identities. And like Karina, I had what felt like unique familial responsibilities to juggle alongside classes. In addition to all of this, I, just like all four of these women, suffered from imposter syndrome. I sought support from my university's mental health services. I thought a lot about quitting. Ultimately things worked out. I don't know that I can say things got better, but I made it through. What made a difference was the interpersonal connections. I made friends and found mentors through my department, at work, and at my campus' cultural center. This was my village, and with their support I was able to survive. My multicultural village taught me how to play the game, to value myself above the worth that the institution assigned me and gave me strategies to preserve myself when academia was unkind. I am successful in academia despite the system, not because of it or even with its help.

The fact is that sometimes, for some people, my best will never be good enough in this system. Why? Because as long as the underlying problem remains unaddressed, I am not the standard. From a young age I think I knew, even though I didn't know the words, that my school problems were because of white supremacy. I was kind of sweetly ignorant for a long time and held on to the idea that education was the great equalizer. It wasn't until very recently, towards the end of my graduate program that I understood that until white supremacy is eradicated, I will continue to have to work twice as hard in order to just be half as good in the eyes of those who hold power. This was the point where I begrudgingly and with great apprehension gave into

myself and allowed my experiences as an Afro-Latina, multicultural woman of color in higher education be the catalyst for my research.

We are here. We are staying, and we know we are worthy of being here, but academia makes it so fucking hard. We lack infrastructure for community, we need more diligent allies, and we need common language to talk about the problems. Two different women of color I spoke to that work for UWT expressed their perception of the barriers to developing a campus community among women of color. One of them, a professor, talked about the physical set up of the campus:

Look at the communal spaces. Think about how the campus is set up. The [Dawg House]²³ is pushed to the margins of campus and located in a building no one goes to unless they need to visit a different office there. It's inconvenient and it's intentional.

The director of the Center for Equity and Inclusion agreed that developing community is an issue and told me that one of the excuses given for a lack of programming geared towards minorities is that “there is not a population.” Outside of socializing, we are also often isolated from people who are like us, in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender--especially in STEM fields (Ong et al. 2018). A student at UWT described her experience in science classes as “pale and male.”

Even though we have consistently grown in presence on campus, the culture continues to be a “boys’ club” at every level, despite diversity initiatives and inclusion efforts. There are plenty of studies on what helps students be successful, but they’re not from the student perspective. They are primarily pedagogical, either for professors or student affairs professionals. The information we have isn’t providing a complete picture of what we go through as students from our perspective, what helps those of us who do stay to persevere, and what those of us who

²³ A student lounge area with a variety of gaming consoles and game tables (billiards, ping pong, etc.) available for student use as well as ample sitting and study space. Described as “one of the focal points of student life at UW Tacoma” on the university website.

are considering quitting or who have quit, needed in order for us to continue to be here. At UWT in particular, as my study in chapter three suggests, there are promises of diversity, community, and support at this school. While UWT proves to have support available, in the experience of some undergraduate women of color, there is a consistent lack of intentional community building through physical and people centered spaces, as well as a need for follow through on the part of the university in implementing diversity and inclusion efforts with fidelity.

My preliminary research consisted of conversations with women of color involved in academia in different capacities including classmates, mentors, and professors. I talked with them at length about our experiences in higher education. These conversations suggested that while there are a number of footholds that made getting through undergrad possible, despite the arduous journey it often is, there are few common themes. One was resistance--for some female students of color, the difficulty and their being unwelcome motivates them to stay. A professor I spoke with identified it as “stubbornness,” and I could relate to that. Another motif was relationships. Whether students make friends or find a professor to mentor them, it seems the accountability to and for one another fosters a necessary sense of community, no matter how small. Last, and most familiar to me, there is a sense of hope. Whether the students stay because they are optimistic their situation will improve or because they are determined to create a better space for those who come after them, they stay because similar to the “stubborn” ones, they’re not ready to concede.

I relate to a lot of what the students in my preliminary research said and recognize similar themes in my own experiences. Sometimes I wish I had stayed in the math department because I met other women of color as I continued in undergrad, but I’m glad I moved to the art department because of the relationships I developed with women of color there. I plan to pursue

a PhD in part because of the instances throughout my own and my mother's education where we did not feel supported or represented by our teachers. And frankly, I'm often pissed off that I look around a class and I don't see more people who are like me. So, I choose to stay, in defiance to the hegemonic system and to stubbornly prove that I and those who will come after me are worthy of occupying this space and feeling welcome and comfortable when they do so.

Recommendations

UWT calls itself urban-serving; it has "Commitment to Diversity" and "Hate Has No Home Here" posters smattered throughout the campus (Appendix A and B). After being a student here, intentionally and mindfully observing student life here, and speaking with four students here, I wonder what UWT *actively* does that makes them different. Suggestions for moving forward at UWT and beyond focus around one main question: if institutions center the needs of female students of color, how can that improve their experience? How can it make the university better and improve student support?

There needs to be curriculum-centered anti-racism. By the time students get to university racism and whiteness is already learned. It's already internalized. If this university plan to live up to their mission statements as well as their commitments to diversity, equity and, inclusion, then curriculum has to be at the center of the action.

The next part of that is hiring. The university can make a rule that there has to be anti-white supremacy in curriculum. I experienced that on a different campus, and what it looked like was a select handful of majors really focused on doing that good work and then there was the required diversity class (yup, count it, one) that every student had to take regardless of major. What passed as diversity was not necessarily inclusion centered. That is to say students outside of sociology, women and gender, and ethnic studies majors and minors did not get the kind of

anti-racist education they needed because the only requirement was one class. Instead, keep the class requirement, and put people in positions to spread anti-racist education to other classrooms. Explicitly, that means hire more POC at every level, and especially in the faculty capacity. This kind of curriculum cannot be implemented without people who know how to teach it and the life experience to influence their epistemological approach. That's not to say white folks can't also do this work. There are plenty who can and do. Keep doing it! For those who are unwilling or unable, for the positions that are opening as other faculty retire or move on, fill those positions with all the people, especially the POC ready to do this work. Faculty are the ones with control over curriculum and diverse representation in a wider variety of fields allows students to see themselves there, which helps with cultural capital as well as creating community in places where it hasn't always been. I don't want to hear that there aren't enough qualified candidates of color. That is a farce. It's an old, tired, lazy farce.

Hiring more POC alleviates the current POC already there taking on all this extra labor (Fryberg and Martinez 2014, 21-22). It is not their job to do extra diversity education work for white and Brown students or to be the designated safe people for SOC, especially if the university is unwilling to recognize this extra work and value it with compensation or consideration around promotions and tenure (Fryberg and Martinez 2014, 7-9, 19-21). This becomes their job thought when there is nowhere else to go. They get burnt out and it hurts everyone, so bringing in more folks who can do this work inside and outside of the classroom (and recognizing and compensating them for it appropriately) makes it so everybody wins.

At the administrative level, they need to be about it, specifically in regard to improving campus culture and climate as well as in hiring practices. It's not enough for all the diversity to be in Student Affairs or the Center for Equity and Inclusion. There needs to be a genuine

commitment to the community. While this is UWT specific, it still has broad applications. You can't say you're urban serving and proud to be in Tacoma if you're not taking care of everyone that attends school here. If schools perpetuating a predominantly white culture, even when the demographics don't match, then they're lying. What does it look like if UWT reinvisions the way they involve the CEI? How can the university change itself? One way is making better use of the student and staff talent that comes through the CEI. This office can be used to review and create policy with the university. Consideration should be given to the CEI the same way it is given to other departments when university wide decisions are made, not just when "issues of diversity" crop up. By coordinating with the CEI this way, the university ensure equity and inclusion is taken into account in everything they do including hiring, construction and reorganization of buildings and campus space, and even choices around food.

One way the university can address this is by creating a (multi)cultural center and dedicated real space to the CEI. The current orientation of the CEI appears to be unintentional-- it is a few scattered offices tucked into the corner of a building, and students deserve better than that. There needs to be devoted student space that is separated from classroom and office space. This will help with providing students space to decompress and be their full selves. Since the conclusion of my research and the completion of this thesis, I have become privy to plans to relocate and expand the CEI. While that is a good first step, I don't know that it will be enough. I look forward to following this development and seeing how the university works to ensure it is a student owned space that provides them with the community and sense of belonging that they need.

Another important step involves programming and student organizations. There needs to be better support for and communication between student groups. As far as programming,

students shouldn't have to "go find" diversity or community once they arrive on campus. I recognize that a lot of the present programming (especially orientation) is geared towards getting students what they need and getting them out from an efficiency standpoint. Still, providing opportunities for students to get what they need where a sense of belonging is concerned would also be useful. I did not go on a first-year tour because I came in as a graduate student. Either way, if given the opportunity to learn about the study spaces available or to have pancakes on the quad or at least have opportunities outside of class to make connections, I would have taken them, and I know that for at least one of the women interviewed, and maybe all of them, they would have too.

This study did not answer the questions I had in the beginning the way that I expected it to. I have more questions than answers leaving this research, but the course of my research created its own community for me. It brought me into circles of women and people and into physical and proverbial spaces that I otherwise would have never ventured. My research probably made me, the "problems" I brought up, and questions I raised a nuisance. At least now I know for sure someone is telling *our* stories and asking about us with our best interest at heart. I think the difficulty is in two parts. One, I ask current undergraduates what helped them remain in college, however that's kind of a reflective question, and they have not been able to reflect on their undergraduate experience yet. Similarly, I ask questions about identity that not every student has the language for or understanding of themselves yet. If I continue this research in the future, I think it would be useful to work with recent graduates (within one to two years since graduation) and graduate students. This research is important to the field because there isn't a lot of retention research, and even from what exists, it's not enough because women of color exist

on campus—even ones like ours—in isolation and not plugged into community where they are more likely to thrive.

Future Work

If this research continues, I think there are a lot of ways information I've already gathered can be improved and expanded. Most immediately, increasing the number of students involved in the research would provide a lot more information and represent a greater part of the whole picture. In addition to interviews, surveys and focus groups could provide different kinds of information.

New questions that I have come from questions I was unable to answer because of the limitations and also from the findings. Primarily I want to test how the things I learned in this study conducted over the summer with four women aligns with a study conducted in the fall or throughout an entire school year with 25, 50, or 100 women. Students named imposter syndrome and alluded to cultural capital in this study, and on a larger scale, how do those things show up? How are they impacted by the white supremacy we know exists on campus? Lastly, the university is in the process of taking steps to address many of the issues identified in this study. Throughout that process, how does the experience of female students of color change? How are they involved in directing university wide changes?

There is a saying, "if you build it, they will come." Nearly thirty years ago, UWT opened its doors. The school was opened for a different kind of student than what's up the freeway, and now that student is here. I am one of them, and we're not going anywhere. If UWT will give students what they need to be (more) successful here, then they will use it.

Coda. Gazing Back: Counter Stories to White Supremacy in Higher Education

I want to end this thesis with alternate narratives. In the following vignettes I offer ways of being and existing that differ from the experiences detailed throughout the earlier chapters of this thesis. As you read, consider the following questions:

- How does this make you feel? Why do you think you feel this way?
 - Which of these worlds is the one you think you may feel safest in? What about this world gives that security?
 - Imagine the world you want to live in. What will it take to make that world a reality at the individual, institutional, and cultural level?
 - What action are you willing to take to ensure all people can feel comfortable?
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The Hair Problem

Imagine you are in college. You are a white male in your junior year. You are taking a class for your law major. You have a 4.0, you've gone to countless regional conferences, and after three years of applying you've finally been accepted into an elite student scholar community. In your cohort you are one of three males. Most of your professors are women. That doesn't necessarily bother you, but you do notice that it's been more difficult for you to forge mentoring relationships than your female peers. Ultimately, you chalk this up to a difference in interests. Aside from your major, your classmates have interests in common with your professors that you do not. Recently, you joined a small study group with one of the other boys and four women from your business law class. The group is preparing a presentation that will be shared with important connections. Representatives from major law schools and firms will be present. At the end of the last group meeting before the presentation, you're having a side conversation with one of the women about what you plan to wear. This student is a few years older, and it's

her third time presenting at this conference. Throughout this school year she has become a sort of unofficial peer mentor to you as well as a friend who wants you to be successful. You agree on where to meet before the presentation so that you can do one last rehearsal. As you head for the door she says, “Have you thought about what you’re going to wear?”

“Yeah, sort of. What do you think about a jacket or a vest? I don’t want to overdo it, you know. I was thinking a bow tie, maybe.... What about you?”

“Oh, a bow tie will be good personal flair. I plan to wear a jacket. You could wear a vest and a jacket, but not a vest alone. That might be too casual, you know?”

“True, true. I’ll do that. Well, I’m getting out of here, see you at rehearsal!”

“Wait, one more thing.”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Do you know what you’re planning to do with your hair---You know I like it and support your choice to wear it however you feel.”

“Uh...what do you mean?”

“It’s just that...well, if I can be honest, if you want to be taken seriously and get ahead in this career, then you need to wear it in a way that is more thoughtful. Something that is professional and says you care about your appearance. In other fields or for a kid it’s fine, but it’s a little too ‘boat shoes and tiki torch,’ you know what I mean. I know it’s fashionable in your culture, but maybe try something less severe. Soften your look so you can appear more gentle and approachable. We have a week, so I’m sure that’s enough time to figure something else out. Your usual look is fine for class and studying, but it’s unbecoming to a professional.”

“Oh...I hadn’t thought about that...thanks for the head’s up.”

“Of course! See I knew you’d understand and that you wouldn’t make a big deal out of this. The rest of us just don’t want you to embarrass yourself. Because you’re so talented, you know? We would hate for one of the panel members to judge your skills based on how you look.”

Trying not to let your face express how you really feel, you offer an understanding and appreciative smile and walk out.

What message is your peer’s suggestion sending you about your *habitus*? Why is the trajectory of your success in this system based in part on judgements about your appearance? How does it feel for your white masculinity to be the problem in this context and not black femininity as a non-negotiable default?

The Question of Comfort

Imagine you are a white male at a small college. Up until fifteen years ago it was a women's' school and the campus' population is still primarily women. It is your second year in school, and you are taking a required humanities credit. The only class that fit with your schedule is a course that focuses on prominent women throughout history. The course is taught by a Chicana feminist scholar. There is one other guy in your class, and he is from Panama. Everyone else in your class is a woman or outside of the gender binary. All but two of them are people of color.

You are used to feeling outnumbered in class and on campus or automatically counting the number of men in a room. After a year of being at this school it feels a little less awkward. For the most part the people in your classes are kind: they raise their hands to talk in class, they

don't crowd the hallways, and they neatly place their things around them. (or do I want the opposite of this?) This class is very different though.

The people in this class have no deference for classroom norms. The women set their multiple bags all around them, without a care. You have tripped over the bags several times throughout the term. Sometimes the women set their bags in chairs near them, forcing you to take a less desirable seat and physically walling you off from them. Now you habitually sit in the last row of the class, a bit removed from everyone else, but near a back door. When your classmates walk past you make sure to sit up as straight as you can in your desk and kick your bag under the desk. You try to take up as little space as possible; you don't want to be a manspreader.

The professor did not establish any discussion rules, so the class is often an overwhelming raucous that you have a hard time following. There is no apparent order, yet somehow everyone else has unspoken agreements about how to exist in the classroom. Your classmates don't necessarily talk over each other, but they don't raise their hands either. They take turns talking, never letting silence sit long enough before someone continues the conversation. Class discussions seem to go off track to you, but everyone else can follow along. Your grade isn't as good as you would like, and it's because you almost never get participation points. You don't know how to participate though. When you raise your hand, the professor doesn't seem to acknowledge it, and neither do your classmates. When you do get called on, people reiterate what you say and then get credit for rephrasing your idea. Even if it's just validation from a classmate or a nod from the professor, this really bothers you.

In the library, you overheard one of your classmates talking about you to a friend. She called you "the boy who never talks." Another time, around mid-term, you waved at a classmate

when you walked past them on campus, and they seemed like they'd never seen you before. As the quarter continues, you have become less comfortable in this class. Sometimes you don't go at all. When you come back from missing a class, none of your classmates ask why you weren't there or offer you notes. It's like they don't notice. On the other hand, when someone else is absent, at least three people offer notes or to meet up outside of class to discuss what was missed.

On one of the last days of class, you watch a scene from *Hidden Figures* (Melfi 2017). In this scene, the main character, Katherine, has to explain to her supervisor why she takes so long to go to the bathroom. The instructor stops it there. Initially the class talks about how symbolic that is and how it relates to contemporary bathroom issues. Seemingly out of nowhere though, the conversation turned to menstruation and speculation about the lengths Katherine must have had to go to when she was menstruating. The other male in class sat silently and listened but didn't seem bothered. He didn't even make eye contact with you. Disgusted and humiliated, you walk out of class in a huff. You feel like you should report the discussion for its inappropriateness, but all of the administrators on campus are women. You talk to your male roommate and a trusted male mentor. Your roommate says you are overreacting, and that you should be flattered they are so comfortable to speak openly in front of you. Your mentor listens to your discomfort and tries to empathize, but he ultimately tells you that this is how things are and to get ahead in the world you'll have to stop complaining, be mature, and get over it. You feel isolated, alone, and unheard.

How is your white racial *habitus* affected in this class? How does the racial and gender makeup of the class affect your sense of belonging socially and academically? How does your and your male classmate's intersectionality affect your views on this scenario? Why did he seem less bothered than you?

The Way Folks Write

Imagine you are a Pakistani immigrant. You came to the United States as a young girl, the summer before eleventh grade. During this time, you turned to reading to help you learn English more quickly. As a child in Pakistan, you were an avid reader and writer. You “published” your own newspaper each weekend with your siblings. Your parents always made a big deal about it, sending copies to relatives and even distributing it to some neighbors. Because of this, your command of Urdu was always very strong. However, after you moved to the United States, your teachers believed you struggled with writing because your transition from Urdu to English was not very smooth. You kept practicing but discontinued your newspapers in either language because of the intense shame you felt about your English skills. Writing was no longer fun. Your grades in school were still good enough to get into college though, and you’re glad for that.

In your first year of college, you take the first-year writing class. You are the only woman of color, and you’re pretty sure the only person of color. Throughout this course you have struggled because of your anxiety around writing in English. From the first assignment, your peer feedback has included comments that highlight your challenges with English like syntax, sentence structure, and verb tense. These comments are hard for you to read, but you feel that since it is so similar to what your high school teachers said, and it’s coming from native speakers, it must be true. While your instructor, an older white male, has access to your peer feedback, he grades based on completion and effort, so you are unsure about his position on your writing or if he has seen what your peers have said. One day, your instructor hands back one of your papers with a note that says ‘I’d like to use this as an example. Can you visit after class?’ The sentence he underlined reads:

When for the third time it happens again Dana hugs Kevin tightly and they both time travel and unfold many things.

It also has notes from peer reviewers telling you that the words are in the wrong order. Once the classroom clears out, he says: “Do you mind if we talk about the sentence I highlighted?”

“Of course, I appreciate any feedback you have so I can fix it. I will feel embarrassed if you use my mistake as an example though, so I’d rather you didn’t.”

Looking puzzled, the professor asks, “Mistake? How do you mean?”

“Well, I don’t really know what the mistakes are, that’s why I keep making them. I know that the way I write is wrong though, and I don’t want that announced in front of the class. Most of my classmates know my writing from the peer reviews so they will be able to tell it’s me.”

“I see. I was unclear. I want to use your writing as an example of sense making. This particular sentence is a good example of being descriptive.”

“Even though it doesn’t make sense and the words are in the wrong order?” You ask.

“I want to use this example to show that although this is not written in a way that we are used to, there is nothing wrong with how you’ve done it.”

Both surprised and encouraged, you consider agreeing to let your instructor use your work as an example. Not completely satisfied, before you go, you ask, “If there’s nothing wrong with how I write, then why did it take you so long to say something to me and to the rest of the class?”

“I could have stepped in sooner to address it. I also could have been more intentional about what’s “good” writing and what’s “bad” writing. If you’ll allow me, I can anonymize your work and the peer feedback to show this class and other ones I teach that there’s no “right” way to write or talk, and that it’s more about your ability to communicate meaning. I will share

several examples, and I want to include yours. Take time to consider it and let me know what you think.”

How often have your professors used your or other students with similar English language skills as you used examples of your work in a positive way? How does the instructor respond to the non-dominant *habitus* within your writing? One of the way white supremacy reproduces itself in schools is through standards and grades. How might your instructor’s completion and effort grading system instead of standards determined he determined worked against white supremacist language standards in your experience here?

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Appendices

Appendix A: Statement of Commitment to Diversity (poster)



STATEMENT OF
**COMMITMENT TO
DIVERSITY**

To hold constant a nurturing learning and work environment in the midst of change, each member of our UW Tacoma community has the responsibility to build and sustain respectful and supportive relationships, through which intolerance, discrimination and social injustice are confronted and resolved through non-violent behavior.

The University of Washington Tacoma's commitment to diversity is central to maintaining an atmosphere wherein students, staff, faculty and South Sound residents find abundant opportunities for intellectual, personal and professional growth.

Mark A. Pagano
Mark A. Pagano
Chancellor

Sharon Parker
Sharon Parker
Assistant Chancellor
for Equity & Diversity

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TACOMA

Equity and Inclusion. (2018). Retrieved 2018, from <http://www.tacoma.uw.edu/node/42085>

Appendix B: Hate Has No Home Here poster (image)



Equity and Inclusion. (2018). Retrieved 2018, from <http://www.tacoma.uw.edu/node/42085>