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A High School Mathematics Teacher Tacking Through The Middle Way: Toward A Critical Postmodern Autoethnography In Mathematics Education

John O. Wamsted

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The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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PUBLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

A HIGH SCHOOL MATHEMATICS TEACHER TACKLING THROUGH THE MIDDLE WAY: TOWARD A CRITICAL POSTMODERN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN MATHEMATICS EDUCATION

by
John Oliver Wamsted

The “urban” mathematics classroom has become an increasingly polarized site, one where many middle-class White teachers attempt to bridge the divide between themselves and their relatively economically disadvantaged, non-White students. With its mania for high-stakes testing, current education policy has intensified the importance of mathematics in the school curriculum—both drawing attention to and reifying an “achievement gap” between White (and Asian) and non-White students (Martin, 2009c, 2010). Keeping in mind the *Mathematics for all* rhetoric as it affects the academic and life success of students (Martin, 2003), this cultural polarization in the mathematics classroom provides a rich site for exploring pedagogical practices that might improve mathematics achievement and persistence for all students. As a middle-class White man, I am a teacher in such a divided situation; I have spent the past 7 years working with almost entirely Black 9th graders as a mathematics classroom teacher in an urban high school. In this study, I employ a critical postmodern theoretical perspective (Stinson, 2009; Stinson & Bullock, 2012) toward an autoethnography (e.g., Ellis & Bochner, 2000) of my experiences as a teacher in this particular educational environment. Using writing as a “method of inquiry” (Richardson, 2000), with an emphasis on two particular intersections of critical race theory (e.g., Tate, 1997) and poststructural theory (e.g., St. Pierre, 2011)—the role of storytelling and the concept of “race” as metanarrative—I examine, theorize, and (re)tell of my life and teaching experiences. My aim is to provide

assistance of sorts for a new teacher in a similar situation; the kind of educator—middle class and White—who, according to projections, will more times than not be filling the role of teacher in the urban mathematics classroom. The goal of this study is twofold: (a) to gain and share theoretical and practical insight into my teacher identity and pedagogical practices, and (b) to provide potential insight for and assistance to other mathematics teachers who may see themselves in the (re)telling of my stories.

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MIDDLE WAY: TOWARD A CRITICAL POSTMODERN
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN MATHEMATICS
EDUCATION

by
John Oliver Wamsted

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in
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in
Middle Secondary and Instructional Technology
in
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Nothing so all-consuming as a dissertation gets accomplished without the deliberate effort of a host of others. Their names may not appear on the title page, but I would like to take this brief space to acknowledge their efforts on my behalf. Teri Holbrook read countless rough-draft pages of key sections of this work, and was gracious enough to meet with me over the phone for hours at a time in order to save me trips downtown to her office. She also introduced me to the delights of Dorothy Sayers' mysteries, the personal reading of which has carried me through during this stretch run. Jodi Kaufmann taught me my first class on qualitative methodology, exciting me enough to take an ominous sounding class about poststructuralism simply because she was teaching it. It was in this class that I wrote the first draft of what would become my first published article; her encouragement of my original idea was a turning point in my writing. Danny Martin was kind enough to agree to read this work by some random student on the other side of the country, an act of generosity I still cannot wrap my head around. I can only hope that he finds my copious use of his own work acceptable, and in some sense thought-provoking.

David Stinson cannot be thanked enough. I can still remember how terrified I was the day I decided to propose "autoethnography" to him; without his eager willingness to walk this road with me I would never have known the joy of this writing. His guidance as a classroom teacher during the early stages of my research led me to make good reading choices and consequently good notes, and his bizarre ability to read multiple drafts of the completed dissertation was invaluable. It could almost go without saying that this dissertation would not exist without him, though I gladly say it. If my road leads me someday to being a professor, I hope to be the kind of mentor and advisor that David has been to me.

On the subject of things I lack the ability to properly say, I have come to my wife, Millie. Over the past five years we have had three amazing children together, and their care and development at these young ages has fallen disproportionately on her. In the past year she has consistently displayed the ability to deal with two toddlers all day long while being increasingly pregnant, only to be corralled into conversation at the end of the day by a husband desperate for her opinion on his writing. It is an unfair aspect of this whole process that I will receive the sole credit for this degree; the reality is that she and I did this together.

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PREFACE: A BRIEF PARABLE

Once I was in class, and the professor had us split up into groups of about four or five. It was a crowded room, filled with the maximum number of students allowed, and our desks were arranged in misshapen circles as we discussed our reading from the week in preparation for a larger group conversation to come. I was sitting next to a classmate, a Black man about my age, and it was close to the end of our allotted time. Suddenly—to my mind at least—he leapt out of his seat and pointed at me. “You!” he said angrily. “Outside!” He then spun and marched out the door to which we were conveniently close. I was shocked, stunned even, but, feeling certain I had no other option, scrambled out of my seat and followed him. I had no idea what he was so angry about; he had not spoken at all for some minutes.

In the hallway his words spilled out through raised voice, his arms gesticulating wildly. Apparently I had been tapping his shoe with my own throughout our group time, and though he had tried to give me the benefit of the doubt, to ignore it, he felt unable to do so any longer. He could not understand how I could so disrespect him as to invade his space in such an obvious, repeated manner, and he was furious. I was apologetic from the start: I had no idea I had been touching him in any way; I am constantly tapping my feet or my fingers in an entirely unconscious manner; I must have assumed I was tapping the leg of a desk. I was sorry, and he calmed down, and we went back into class. The noise of the room when we left had been such that I thought no one had noticed our absence save for our own group, to which we briefly explained what had happened. End scene.

The class in question was my first with Professor Kaufmann, an introductory course on qualitative research methodology, and, as it turns out, I was wrong in thinking

that no one had noticed our almost altercation. In fact, she had, and in a recent (re)telling she said that it had frightened her badly—to her it had looked like the prologue to a physical conflict. This event occurred nearly four years ago now, but Professor Kaufmann (re)told the tale to my dissertation committee during my recent defense of this document. She intended it as a sort of parable for an unacknowledged problem with my work, and we all readily agreed that she was correct, and that something needed to be done about it. In an effort to get at these problems, this brief preface is my attempt at a bit of preemptive narrative priming—I want to include my reader in on the failings of the words about to be read, and invite you into my head as I try to rectify these issues.

Privilege is a lot like my foot tapping against my classmate that day: what goes unnoticed to those of us in some sort of position of power can eat away at the minds and bodies of those in the obverse. I am White, male, middle-class, Christian, straight, and able-bodied; I also happen to be good at institutionalized schooling. In short, I have always found myself on the hegemonic side of any sort of power differential. When I tap my White foot against that of a Black man and am not even aware that I am doing so, that is a not-so-subtle example of the kind of privilege people like me enjoy every day of our lives, ever always at the expense of the other and his or her mind and body. What makes this parable all the more poignant—and powerful—is the fact that though this man exploded in anger at me, though the scene so frightened Professor Kaufmann that she held on to it for nearly four years, until she (re)told the story during my defense *I had absolutely no recollection of it*. What had so affected these two others had literally slipped my mind entirely. Being hegemonic brings with it not only the privilege to invade another's mind and body; it not only brings with it the privilege of being able to remain

entirely unaware of doing so; it also brings with it the privilege of forgetting on the rare occasion when one is in some way confronted with these ugly facts.

This dissertation—an autoethnographic look at race in the mathematics classroom—is going to feel for many of my readers just like a White man’s foot incessantly tapping against your mind. Like Poe’s Raven, or his Tell-Tale Heart, the drumbeat of my privilege-soaked words will get under your skin and possibly drive you to a sort of madness. This effect, I believe, is unavoidable. How am I to write about race without naming my privilege? How am I to truly name this privilege without pushing painfully into it? How could this troubling not simultaneously push back at my reader? I think I see my privilege with perfect clarity, I believe I understand enough of hegemony and oppression to be candid in my writing. What I have come to learn, however, is that no matter how much I think I have come to understand, no matter what insight I believe I have, my words have no way forward without exposing still more of my privilege, avenues and arenas of which I will be entirely unaware at the moment of writing. It is as if I have no choice but to exhume the jagged scar of one type of privilege even as I attempt to unearth another. This effect is the tap-tap-tapping of my foot that will drive you crazy if you let it.

I can only ask you as a reader to bear with me. When something I write seems entirely devoid of self-awareness—when in my writing about race I come off as just another clueless White man—I can only beg you to consider that it is a long journey from the privilege of hegemony to a full troubling of my complicity in the racial troubles of our day. I can only go so far at a time. I ask you to keep on reading, to find a place on the next page or the next where the words of an ever-so-slightly-aware White, middle-class,

straight, able-bodied, Christian male who also happens to be good at institutionalized schooling can be believed to be not entirely clueless. I ask you to give me the benefit of the doubt when you can, to push on with me as I trouble my White skin and try to do the difficult work of rewriting my internal discourses of racism. I want you to see this document as the best effort I can produce at this time, but also to understand that if I had not written it at all I would be even less self-aware than I am now—as impossible as that may seem to you as the Raven is tap-tap-tapping on your windowpane.

I hope the stories that follow in this dissertation can somehow demonstrate that it is possible to move along the axis of awareness, that movement from my place in Dr. Kaufmann’s classroom that day just might be possible. What follows is not intended to be intimidating or nettlesome, nor is it meant to be an expression of privilege. I have no doubt, though, that it cannot help but to be all three; if I am going to move past these ills I have to move through them first. I can only ask you as a reader to somehow trust that it is only by the dialectic pull of privilege asserted and resisted that any kind of growth can occur in those of us in the hegemony. My writing may tap-tap-tap at your brain, but I believe it is only in this kind of work that we as a world of polarized people can move somehow forward. I invite you to come with me as I attempt to do so.

INTRODUCTION: TOWARD AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

I have had two teaching careers in my 36 years of life. The second is the one I currently work within—seven years and counting in a large Southern city, teaching primarily 9th grade mathematics to a nearly 99% Black cohort¹ of students at Murphy High School.² The other career—my first, back in the year 2000—was also spent employed by Metro City Schools³ among the same demographic of students, although that time it was a middle school. Less than three months into that career I marched into my principal’s office—it was Halloween Day; I was exactly 24 and a half years old—and told him that I was simply unable to do it anymore; in that act of quitting I became just another statistic buried in the dismal dossier of the American city school system. At the time I blamed aspects of that particular school for my failure, but in looking back from my current place of employment and scholarship, I am no longer so sure that the middle school at which I taught was in any way qualitatively different from Murphy High—a place where I feel a self-professed sort of success. The next sentence feels rather clichéd as I consider writing it, but I think it is just that I have changed in the interim period between this ignominious past and my more ostensibly successful present. An attempt to get at the difference between my two disparate experiences is the subject of this work I have written.

¹ As of the year of this writing, the 2012–2013 school year, I am teaching 100% Black students. The 99% number represents our school at large as well as my typical classroom makeup over the years.

² A pseudonym. With a tip of my hat to Professor Stinson, I note that my paternal grandmother’s maiden name was Murphy.

³ Also a pseudonym.

Before I move on to that, however, a question might be asked: How on earth did I get to that middle school, obviously so unprepared and seemingly so uncommitted? A fair question, to be sure; I will attempt to briefly answer it. As my young life will come under quite a bit of scrutiny later in these pages, I will begin this particular story somewhat late in the game, during my first year out of college. I spent a year working at a soup kitchen in the downtown area of my large Southern city, where for the first time I realized that the travails of what I would now call the economic underclass were not something easily fixable, that the journey from gainfully employed to homeless was an evidence of a larger problem in the structural machine of America. This feeling of total system failure was what led me to want to become a teacher, as the one mismatch between my clients at the soup kitchen and the society from which they felt estranged, the common thread that I thought cried out for a delineated solution, was often a lack of education. This particular systemic failure was one I felt able, in some small way, to combat. So many of the men and women I met during the course of that year were high school dropouts, and I was a mathematics major with little to no career direction; a sort of solution seemed both logical and feasible. The work I was doing at the soup kitchen seemed to me so much like giving aspirin to cancer patients—putting out symptomatic fires with mere analgesics—and I wanted desperately to be a part of the team researching a cure for the actual disease. Not to take away from the necessarily important work that needs continuing among the currently homeless, but I felt I could perhaps help the next generation of homeless aid workers by keeping some of their future clients off the street. Over the course of the year, something in me crystallized into a sense of purpose; for the first time in my life I felt a calling to a career.

With these rather inauspicious motives—more apposite words might be naïve, idealistic, immature, or foolish—I sent resumes out to all the middle and high school principals in Metro City Schools and in short order underwent a couple of interviews. In retrospect, the entire process seems a blur. In July I accepted a job as a seventh grade math teacher; in August I started work having undergone absolutely zero training—neither by the district at large nor by my new school specifically; by September I felt eaten alive, as any experienced teacher would have certainly predicted; on October 31st I quit. I walked into my new job with a feeling of security in my solid foundation in mathematics coupled with a vague sense of knowing that I liked working with children, but mostly I was equipped with a typical White male sense that anyone could be a teacher, and that I would pick up whatever skills I might need along the way. As I said—naïve, and more than a little condescending.

I learned in short order that the kind of work I had done in volunteer and camp-style settings bore little to no relationship to the kind of work one must do inside the institution of the classroom, and the requisite skills were almost impossible to discern absent from a visible and active role model. I might liken this kind of learn-as-you-go style to the fantastical task of trying to build a space ship out of spare parts as you are drifting through space, while one’s only previous experience with either space or ships is remembering having been to museums as a child. Any experienced teacher reading these words will have no problem believing that my biggest problem—in some sense my “only” problem—was classroom management. I liked the kids and they seemed to like me; regardless, I just could not maintain any semblance of order in my room, which became more and more unhinged with every passing day. It wore both of us down—me

and my students: I gained ten pounds rather quickly, went home miserable every night, and rapidly felt myself more and more useless. They were continually kept from doing their schoolwork by a steady stream of interruptions and were disrespectful and disdainful of my authority (or, rather, utter lack thereof); in addition, my classroom was proving to be a staging site for a series of increasingly alarming physical conflicts. I left on a particularly awful Monday afternoon unable to escape the emotional oppression I felt at school, certain that I was doing nothing more than baby-sitting these children through their time with me—and that very poorly. I could not have felt further from my original aims in entering the school, and this led to a sort of depression—believing that the work I had held in such high regard was proving so pointless. I drove in that Tuesday morning with my stomach in knots, walked past my classroom straight to my principal’s office, and quit.

I am a White, middle-class, straight, able-bodied, Christian male who also happens to be good at institutionalized schooling; my life had always been pretty easy. This moment in my principal’s office instantiates the first real failure of my life, and it stung me in a rather harsh manner. I left that day believing not only that I would never set foot in a classroom again but also that this abrupt change of course would serve both me and any imaginary group of future students well. I blamed the principal, the school, the structure of public education; I convinced myself to believe that there was nothing I could have done differently and that I was in no way culpable for this failure. My friends and family commiserated, and I ensconced myself in a cocoon of plausible deniability born of perpetual privilege. In retrospect, it seems a kind of minor miracle that I made it out from under this haze of self-deception in order to enter the classroom again. Through a series

of fortuitous circumstances, however, I somehow managed to shake this cloud of nonsense and get myself back on track, so to speak.

It took four and a half years, but in the summer of 2005 I did what I should have done the first time—enrolled at Georgia State University in an actual effort to become a fully qualified teacher. Before being propelled to this step, though, I had to undergo another minor failure. I had been tutoring to pay the bills, and this daily routine gradually led me back again to the thought of being a teacher. Having no intention of repeating what I considered to be my one major mistake in life, however, I applied solely to private schools at which I had connections through my clients; my desire to in some way combat systemic economic failure had been completely buried by years of living rather easily as a highly-paid hourly contractor. I got really close to a job with one school, meeting with several people and even teaching a practice lesson for a class of 7th graders,⁴ but was eventually rejected in favor of a teacher about my age “with experience.” In a follow-up conversation with the administrator who made the ultimate decision, I was told the best thing I could do was either to seek a substitute teacher job or to go back to school and student teach—I was too big a risk with my only classroom experience having ended so inauspiciously. I decided to follow his advice and go back to school.

I had every intention of completing my year at Georgia State and immediately re-applying to the private school I had been turned down by; knowing the people I knew, I was fairly confident that they would accept me the second time around. Even taking a bit of scholarship money and committing to teach in a “high needs” city school for two years

⁴ Fraction, decimals and percents, to a class of about seven students. I remember being terrified, which I now find hilarious to consider. Just this week, I had 36 students in my room for a lesson on graphing quadratic functions. Now, that is kind of terrifying.

seemed just a bump in the road of what I considered to be my true calling: instructing mathematics to students who were being raised in a similar environment to the one I remember from my childhood—namely, one of class privilege and racial homogeneity. Something changed, however, when I actually started student teaching. I was placed at Murphy High School in the spring semester of 2006 and hired for the subsequent school year; I can admit now that I considered this job to be mere expiation of my debt to Georgia State University. As of the writing of this dissertation, however, I am in my 7th year of teaching at Murphy. My balance sheet was paid off five years ago; I long ago could have left. Why am I still there?

The short answer is that I like it at Murphy, and it feels somehow right. I suppose it could be said that my wonder at the long answer behind these blasé words is the impetus behind this work I am currently writing. Though I know I did things desperately, horribly wrong the first time, I am still not quite yet sure of what I might be doing right this time around. I know it is different; I just don't know how. I am doing something right, though—I am happy, my students both like me and also get mathematics accomplished on a daily basis, my test scores are some of the best in the building, my administrators tend to respect me. It is of course debatable as to whether these self-descriptors are an accurate accounting of what makes a “successful” teacher, but let me proceed for the moment as if they in fact do. What haunts me is the wonder of whether I could have experienced this sort of success the first time around—if there was something I could have read or some introspection I could have undertaken prior to my first career that might have been able to trigger the self-awareness I needed to do things differently. Could I have been successful the first time? Could things have gone another way?

I am hopeful that this dissertation might just be the work I wished I had read. I think it might just be the push a White, middle-class, straight, able-bodied, Christian male who also happens to be good at institutionalized schooling could have used to propel himself to some sort of space outside his norm—teaching mathematics to students who are being raised in environments entirely dissimilar to his own. This vision might sound vain—believing that my frenetic failure and redemptive return could hold some sort of lesson for others out there. However, I know that I needed something back then in the year 2000, and no one was there to offer it. I also know that though we read books similar to my work during my master’s program at Georgia State University, we didn’t read anything quite like what I think I have written—salient takeaways from this thorough training I received were almost entirely contained within classroom conversation and student teaching. Given my perception of this lack in the literature, I think what I have written might just matter. I will find out in a matter of time.

Two words about my title—*A High School Mathematics Teacher Tacking Through the Middle Way: Toward a Critical Postmodern Autoethnography in Mathematics Education*. First, I am purposefully alluding to Ladson-Billings and Tate’s seminal 1995 article “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education”—with all due apologies to them, as I in no way think what I am writing is as important as that piece. I do like the thought, however, of pushing *toward* something in my writing—not just rehashing extant literature but actually aiming at a goal, someplace possibly new; it is the belief that I am just might be doing something new that leads me to wish to allude to their piece. Also, I like the word “toward” because it frees me up in regards to making mistakes, getting around gaps, looking at lacunae. As will become evident rather shortly,

both my vision and my attempts at implementation of autoethnography have changed considerably throughout this project. The word “toward” gives me space to approach the possibly mythical limit point of absolute autoethnography via a somewhat twisted trail.

Secondly, I wish to unpack the expression “the middle way.” I tend to use these words quite often in order to call back to one of my favorite metaphors: Odysseus sailing through the channel between Scylla and Charybdis—monsters to his left and right who would dash his ship to pieces if he were to sail too close to either.⁵ I find this an apt metaphor when I consider the binaries that I am attempting to plot a course between: postmodernism and critical race theory, mathematical science and autoethnography, teacher and researcher, writer and author, among others. I am trying to allow myself access to all of these at times conflicting aspects of my life and practice; I am also trying to remember that if I push too far into any one my entire project may be inadvertently dashed by a monster. In this spirit I will borrow some sailing argot when I write of my constant need to *tack*—a nautical maneuver wherein a sailboat can move upwind by cutting alternating diagonals across the straight line direction of the wind. I must tack from Scylla to Charybdis and back again, changing direction whenever I approach too close to either, cutting back across and through the wind which blows directly at me in my course through the middle way. The research I am hoping to do is different; it is difficult; it is beset by dangers. I must tack through the middle way. This metaphor will guide me throughout this paper, and I follow cultural philosopher Neil Postman (1995) in being unrepentant about my saturation of poetical practice into a piece of research: “Yes,

⁵ In (re)reading my own words almost ad nauseam, I see that I am also slightly obsessed with Minotaur imagery: labyrinths, threads, clews. Probably somewhere in this work I will mix these metaphors together into some Frankenstein’s monster of an allusive mess.

poets use metaphors to help us see and feel. But so do biologists, physicists, historians, linguists, and everyone else who is trying to say something about the world. A metaphor is not an ornament. It is an organ of perception” (p. 173–174).

Now a note about structure. I have deliberately eschewed the traditional layout of the doctoral dissertation—problem statement and background, literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, data reporting and analysis, conclusion—in order to present an integrated work. I have written these six chapters, so to speak, though only the conclusion can be found in its proper place. As for the remainder of the chapters, I have deliberately cut them up, stitched them back together, and presented them in what I consider to be their more organic order. I understand that this may be jarring to a reader acclimated to academic strictures; however, I believe it to be best for my project. Here I am, still stuck in my introduction, already sailing upwind!

The first half of this work—chapters one through five—is a lightly edited version of the research prospectus I successfully defended on February 20th, 2012 to the same group which comprises my dissertation committee: Professors Teri Holbrook, Jodi Kaufmann, and Danny Bernard Martin, with Professor David Stinson serving as mentor and chair. Formerly having been a prospectus, it is in this first half of my dissertation that I have reintegrated most of the problem statement, literature, theory, and methodology. When a sizable theoretical inquiry which took place after my prospectus defense led to a novel bit of methodology, however, I chose to place the literature surrounding this material in the second half of my dissertation. I made this decision in a possibly crude effort to demonstrate for the reader the journey I have undergone in the course of my autoethnographic work; the best way to accomplish this feat seemed to me to leave the

writing from before my prospectus defense as isolated as possible from the material I wrote after the defense—what would more normally be called the data reporting and analysis. In other words, I tried to keep my ideas about autoethnography—where I thought I was headed before I actually started writing—separate from my autoethnographic investigations themselves.⁶

In keeping with the conceit I used in my written comprehensive exams and subsequently carried over to my prospectus, throughout the entire dissertation I will try to guide the reader through this unusually integrated work through the use of fictional conversations I imagine taking place between myself and a composite of family and friends who have asked me about my work over the last few years. I write them in the Arial font and they are intended to aid the reader in unpacking a bit of the abstruseness of what is being read. In the first half these conversations serve simply as section headers, but in the second half they will begin to intrude into the middle of sections, this break in tone similarly intended to help the reader through the methodological moves being made. Later it will become apparent that the conversations themselves have turned into a method all their own. A second holdover from my prospectus work—one that I again push further in the second half of the dissertation—is the use of quotations from my favorite childhood books: Lewis Carroll’s 1865 *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and its

⁶ The main exception to this rule will be the footnote. I mentioned that the first half of the dissertation will be “lightly edited,” meaning that I will try to leave most of the good in with the bad, only changing what is necessary for the sake of continuity and clarity. However, when a thought occurs to me that seems in some way important—as has already happened several times in this introduction—I will use the footnote space to record these wonderings. Some of the footnotes, though, are original to the defended prospectus itself. I will for the most part dispense with telling the reader which is which, trusting that if it is important it will be readily apparent which are *ex post facto* and which are *en medias res*.

1871 sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. These quotations serve as a thread through the more theoretical and philosophical sections of the first half, signaling to the reader that he or she is tacking through “deep water,” so to speak.

Sections that start with neither an *Alice* quote nor an *Arial* conversation in the first half could be called pieces of the problem statement or literature review; in second half they will serve as the autoethnographic writing itself. At first these will be the most concrete of the sections—statistics and mathematics and the gritty realities of the school building being their content; later on they will be rather different in their more inward focus.

I hope these narrative threads may serve as a sort of a clew to guide my reader through what I know is a potentially labyrinthine work.⁷ It is certainly not without some trepidation that I undertake this atypical writing; I do, however, feel it is important for me to do what I think makes best sense for this particular project. With all of this atypicality—and knowing, as I do, how much more is yet to come—I might here quote Barthes (1971/1977d): “What is given here is not a ‘result’ nor even a ‘method’ (which would be too ambitious...), but merely a ‘way of proceeding’” (p. 127). In other words, I am trying as best I can to get on with this project of autoethnography, and what follows is merely the way I proceeded. All of that said—personal history, nautical metaphors, structural guides—let me begin. I start my written journey, as I have started many a conversation these last five years with inquiring friends and family, with some sort of a definition.

⁷ I am going to resist the temptation to keep track, but this use right here is the first of the Minotaur imagery.

CHAPTER 1

PHILOSOPHY, PERSONALITY, AND POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Autoethnography: A Clarification of Terms

“So, I heard you’re finally working on your dissertation. Four years of classes and readings and now you get to do the actual hard work. That’s pretty cool, right?”

“It is cool. I’ve done a lot to get to this point—I’m looking forward to seeing what happens when I actually strike out on my own!”

“What exactly were you planning on writing about, again?”

“Um.... Well, the degree is going to be in Teaching and Learning with a concentration in Mathematics Education. But...the dissertation writing is mostly about race and identity, with a focus on what those things might mean to an urban math teacher.”

“Huh. So, are you doing a study, or what? Like how minority kids in urban schools do on math tests or something?”

“No.... It’s actually mostly going to be about White math teachers and how they interact with Black students, how they might do that well or badly, depending on different factors—what might make a White teacher successful in this certain kind of environment.”

“I get it. So you’re going to interview a bunch of White teachers in urban environments? Look for common themes and all that? They call that a ‘qualitative study,’ right?”

“They do, and my dissertation work is most definitely going to be a qualitative study. Actually, though, it’s going to be pretty different than even a typical piece of qualitative inquiry. I’m going to be writing an autoethnography.”

“Say what now?”

“Autoethnography. It’s a qualitative research methodology.”

“Okay.... So, obviously you’re going to have to do better than that. What exactly does that mean?”

“Well, the best way for me to explain might be to invite you to read just a little bit with me. It can get a little complicated.”

‘What is autoethnography?’ you might ask. My brief answer: research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot. Thus, autoethnography claims the conventions of literary writing. (Ellis, 2004, p. xix)

Rambo (2007a) writes that autoethnography “is a postmodern method of producing an account of personal experience; a particular style of accounting for

particular pasts” which “does not speak to ‘capital T’ truth but instead seeks to turn the gaze inward...and both deconstruct and reconstruct ‘small t,’ local truths” (p. 364). Lest this make autoethnographies sound rather solipsistic, like some sort of poststructural blog, de Souza Vasconcelos (2011) notes that autoethnography “turns the autobiography or memoir genre into a *method* for conducting and displaying research” (p. 417, emphasis in original text). Ellis and Bochner (2000), in their seminal piece on autoethnography from the now-canonical *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), write that as a piece of research autoethnography “rises or falls on its capacity to provoke readers to broaden their horizons [and] reflect critically on their own experience,” that the goal is to “actively engage [readers] in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered” (p. 748). What is autoethnography? Perhaps Ellis (2007) summarizes it best when she writes, “autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining...and observing and revealing” (p. 13). These four verbs—experiencing, examining, observing, revealing—are worth keeping in mind as I move forward, despite what Geertz (1973) tells me about the similar words “observes,” “records,” and “analyzes”: “distinguishing these three phases of knowledge-seeking may not, as a matter of fact, normally be possible; and, indeed, as autonomous ‘operations’ they may not in fact exist” (p. 10).⁸

Jenks (2002) writes, “it was the act of writing field notes in a context I both was and wasn’t a part of that allowed me to become an autoethnographer” (p. 184), and it is

⁸ I received a lot of flak during my prospectus defense for using this Ellis (2007) definition and ignoring its obvious postmodern problems. I am leaving the paragraph as is, however, because my departure from this feedback serves as the centerpiece of most of the second half of my dissertation.

sentiment like this that first piqued my interest in my own story: as a White teacher in an almost all-Black school, I feel both part of and apart from my daily context. Early on in my career at Murphy I started taking my autoethnographic cues primarily from Richardson (2001), who encourages me to examine myself through my writing: “I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it” (p. 35). She observes that this *method of inquiry* can serve as “a way of finding out about yourself and your topic...a way of ‘knowing’—a method of discovery and analysis” (2000, p. 923), later noting that this method “provides a research practice through which we can investigate how we construct the world, ourselves, and others” (p. 924). Elsewhere she tells me a little more about her personal feelings about writing: “I want writing to move me someplace new in terms of my knowledge about myself, the world, or how things hang together. To sit at a desk and to really be engaged in the process requires that I not know where the writing is taking me” (p. 319). Ely and colleagues (1997) tell me that the act of writing “involves us in a quest. Writing helps us attend to the odd intersections or unexpected corridors of meaning and to the unexamined echoes and resonances that lead to sense-making as we write our way through various versions of understanding” (p. 7). I love the thought of writing as *quest* and, though there are certainly other ways to do so which I will soon briefly cover, I have chosen to undertake my autoethnography through the traditional text of the writing project (see also, e.g., Barthes, 1971/1977c; Flemons & Green, 2002; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; de Freitas & Paton, 2009).

What might this traditional text actually look like? There are a multiplicity of ways to write an autoethnography; let me briefly describe a few of my favorites. Rambo

(2007b) interlaces typical academic script with flashes of remembrances from her life as a former art student, calling this *autoethnographic sketching*. Ellis and Bochner (2000; see also Bochner & Ellis, 2002) favor more stylized, conversational scenes of their lives—also again intercut with more traditional academic writing;⁹ Church (2002) follows an almost identical angle in her writing. A quote from Denzin (2002) gives me a glimpse into his rather eclectic style:

I seek a writing form that is part memoir, part essay, and part autoethnography, a form that uses the techniques of minimalist fiction: plot characterization, dialogue, more showing than telling. I write from the scenes of memory, rearranging, suppressing, even inventing scenes, forgoing claims to exact truth, or factual accuracy, searching instead for emotional truth. (p. 259)

Following Denzin's dictum—"more showing than telling"—Goodall (2008) mines his own life for his work in a similarly loose manner, approaching as he does the line between strict nonfiction and what Gerard (1996) calls *creative nonfiction*. Denzin (2002) ultimately paints what I find to be a beautiful picture of my ideal autoethnography: "I intend [my work] as a montage that moves back and forth between memories, events, history, and interpretations" (p. 259; see also Jones, 2002 for an excellent example of this type of work).

Before I close this section where I set borders around my own particular version of autoethnography, I wish to briefly point out two things. First, there are other ways I could have chosen to do this work. Bochner and Ellis's 2002 edited volume *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics* contains

⁹ A technique that I am borrowing, sort of. As my quasi-fictitious conversations continue throughout the dissertation, however, they get slightly stranger in a way I would not wish to attribute to Ellis and Bochner (2000). Their use of textual stylistic changes, however, directly informs my decision to use different fonts to code the reader that they are switching from text to "narrative" and vice versa.

examples not only of drama (Pelias, 2002) and poems (Picart, 2002), but also visual art (Scott-Hoy, 2002). The transcribed and subsequently polished conversation amongst experts is also a trope repeated throughout the book, as well as in a *Qualitative Inquiry* article written by the lions of the field: Ellis, Bochner, Denzin, Lincoln, Morse, Pelias, and Richardson (2008). Second, I do not necessarily enjoy all of these manifestations—traditional text or otherwise—finding some at times to be a bit self-involved. Picart’s piece (2002) is particularly grating to me—weaving from poem to drawing and back again without any seeming effort to make sense of this for me as the reader. Though I understand the irony of my self-interestedly wanting to be addressed in some way, I cannot help but wonder: To what end this writing?¹⁰ Seeming narcissism of this type is not limited to the lesser known; I found myself appalled in reading Ellis’s (2007) rationalization of why she published a piece on her mother’s dying—“I needed to talk about her body and bodily functions” (p. 18). It has occurred to me that if an open-minded reader such as me is sometimes taken aback in reading autoethnography, it is quite likely that a larger mass of readers would find objectionable even what I consider to be solid. Let me push into this thought a bit more by considering the scientificity of all of this research.

¹⁰ I want to tack away here slightly from autoethnography solely as *connection*, which I find to be tantamount to mere entertainment. I find this to be uncomfortably close to my impressions of Pelias’ (2002) dramas; similarly I sense more than a little nonsense in Lockford’s (2002) description of another autoethnographic drama: “As we encounter and momentarily live in her desire, and our own, we vicariously experience her well-rehearsed and habituated somatic resonances and newfound longings made rich in the moment of recollection” (p. 79). In my unfortunately necessary efforts to maintain scientific *bona fides*, I may find myself needing to create more distance in my work from writing of this type as I continue to move forward in my research.

Interlude: A Short Story

It was the second week of school, and I was at my interactive whiteboard, running a warm-up problem for my midday freshman Math Support class. It was a problem I have done several years in a row—in multiple classes, for probably a total of ten times—and I am rather proud of it: I pulled a map of the world from one resource database and a Cartesian coordinate plane from another, overlaid them, and asked the students to identify the continents and oceans from a mathematical perspective. This particular class, however, was having trouble with the question. Math Support is an elective for students who performed poorly on their 8th grade end of year state test; the intention is that they take a double dose of mathematics during their first year of high school in order to expedite the process of catching up to grade level. Knowing them as little as I did so early in the year, however, I had underestimated the difficulty my blending of academic disciplines might cause them. So I went to the board and pulled the map half off the screen, pushing the Americas aside in favor of the Eastern Hemisphere.

“Listen, y’all. This is all I’m looking for,” I said, writing the words “continents” and “oceans” on the board, slashing a line underneath. “Pick a continent, say...”

And here occurred one of the countless micro-decisions a teacher must make during any given day. In an instant I made the seemingly reflexive choice to highlight Africa because it was near the origin (unlike Australia) and had easily quantifiable borders (unlike Europe and Asia). At least, at some point I believed these were my intentions; writing about what happens next has led me to wonder, though. I wrote the word “Africa” on the board and began to count out a coordinate contained within it. I

didn't finish it, however, because almost immediately a voice called out from the back of the room.

“Racist!” he yelled—whoever he was. I didn't even know all of their names for sure yet, much less their voices. We froze in tableaux. I, a chastised White teacher postured before a class composed entirely of Black students. They, waiting to see what I would do in response to this deliberate provocation. And here was another micro-decision I had to make in less than a moment: What do I do? Ignore him? Overreact in a punitive or didactic way in some demonstration of my innocence? Or might there be some sort of middle way between these two monsters? It would be an untrue cliché to say that every second counts in a moment like this; the fact is, I had far less than a second to react before my class, like a rhizomatic hive mind, sensed the weakness inherent in any sort of pause. What happened next would be far more a function of instinct and reflex than a matter of calculation or decision, who I am as some sort of core person taking precedence over any ideology I might have about my role as an instructor. I break the fourth wall here to address you directly, reader: What would you have done in this moment?

Locations

“Who are *you*?” said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”

“What do you mean by that?” said the Caterpillar, sternly.
“Explain yourself!”

“I ca’n’t explain *myself*, I’m afraid, Sir,” said Alice, “because I’m not myself, you see.”

“I don’t see,” said the Caterpillar.

“I’m afraid I ca’n’t put it more clearly,” Alice replied...

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*
(Carroll, 1865/1992a, p. 35, emphasis in original text)

It is common to speak of theoretical perspectives, epistemologies, and methodologies as *lenses*—for example Charmaz’s (2003) chapter on grounded theory in the book *Inside Interviewing: New Lenses, New Concerns* or Jo Boaler’s (2007) article “Paying the Price for ‘Sugar and Spice’: Shifting the Analytical Lens in Equity Research”—but, as Professor Stinson has pointed out to me in classroom conversation, this metaphor stretches at the seams under any attempt at extension. If critical theory is merely some sort of sight aid for Boaler, the implication is that she could, if she so chose, take off this lens and view the girls under observation in her classrooms in some fundamentally different way. To a researcher who believes that mathematics is “value-free” (cited tongue in cheek by Bishop, 1988/2004), believing Boaler to be under the influence of a mere lens may allow the dismissal of the article’s potential importance for girls in the mathematics classroom; such a researcher could trivialize the lens of another as an inferior option, some sort of cheaper, knock-off product. No, thinking about a worldview as a lens renders it far too easy for a certain type of scientist to dismiss out of hand the sociopolitical positioning of such important mathematics education researchers as Gutiérrez (2013), Martin (2009a), and Stinson (2011). Indeed, a better metaphor is needed.

Kaufmann (2011b) likens the construction of meaning through habit and repetition to “repeatedly cutting the dough with the same cookie cutter...always making hearts and thinking hearts are the true form while disregarding the possibilities in the expanse of dough” (p. 148). Perhaps the cookie cutter is the metaphor I am looking for? In mathematics speak, let the dough equal the particular plane of reality we all exist within—what Deleuze and Guattari (1987a) would call the rhizome, but more on that

later—and let the cutter equal what heretofore has best been expressed as a theoretical perspective. We are the cookie—Kaufmann seems to prefer hearts?—and thus are both made up of the stuff of reality and simultaneously determined by the shape and dimensions of our cutter. This metaphor serves a rather distinct purpose for me here: it rids us of the “choice” of a theoretical perspective and frees us up for more equitable dialogue with those who were cut from a different mold. After all, I see the dough my way and you see it your way, depending on many factors both in and out of my control; but perhaps both ways contribute something to the overall picture of our rhizomatic cookie sheet of an existence. The parable of the blind beggars feeling different parts of the elephant comes to mind.

In the first half of this dissertation sections headed by quotes from the *Alice* books represent my best effort at explaining my particular cookie cutter. The instrument that makes me who I am is cobbled from bits and pieces of postmodern thought and poststructural philosophy, soldered together with some—but not all—tenets of critical race theory. Following Koro-Ljungberg (2004) I will admit up front that in writing a *mixed-theory project* such as this I must necessarily be “guided by notions of empirical inconsistencies and paradigmatic discrepancies” (p. 603); I am hoping to be “openly influenced by the theoretical confusion as well as by the ontological and epistemological discrepancies” (p. 604). I will begin this effort at being guided by inconsistency and discrepancy by first looking into postmodernism and poststructuralism. Following this survey I will continue on to critical race theory as a stand-alone perspective before detailing the tensions and intersections of the differing viewpoints. Stinson (2009) calls the overlap of these theories a *critical postmodern* perspective, and I follow him in my

final examination of what possibilities I believe are present in this combination of theories for my own particular research. First, however, I must return to my promised examination of an important question: What makes the work of autoethnography scientific enough to be called research?

An Objection: Is this Research?

“Okay, I think I see what you mean about autoethnography. That all sounds kind of interesting.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“Well, it’s just that...”

“It’s okay—you can say it.”

“I mean, this is research? It sounds an awful lot like book club memoirs to me—like Barnes and Noble kind of stuff. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad for you that you get to use your personal story in order to get a dissertation written. I’m just kind of surprised that you can get such an important degree writing only about yourself. It doesn’t seem very...scientific.”

“No, I understand what you’re saying. There’s actually a good debate about everything you’re saying, and the answer is kind of complicated, but...”

“Well, tell me about it, we’ve got nothing but time.”

“From an existential point of view, that’s really only true about you.”

“Come again?”

“Nothing. You sure you want to hear me hash through all of this?”

“Go for it. I guess what I don’t quite understand is how this thing you’re calling autoethnography could possibly be scientific enough to make a dissertation.”

Ellis (2004) gives me some advice on how to handle the weak points in one’s work: “Best thing to do is confront the issue head-on in your writing...and inoculate against this charge. You bring up and interpret the issue before anybody has a chance to use it against you” (p. 89). A good starting point for an inoculation against the accusation of a lack of scientificity might be to back up a bit in order to ask: What, exactly, makes something acceptably scientific? Geertz (1973) writes, “if you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners

of it do” (p. 2). Let me follow this thread and look a little into what, exactly, the practitioners of science do in their written work. Lather (2007) calls *scientificity* “a performance—for example, the textual display of the absence of the author and/or the veneer of scientificity accomplished by the use of mathematics” (p. 69). Foucault (1969/1984c), in reference to this absence of the author, calls it “the game of writing,” going on to say that the writer must “assume the role of the dead man” (p. 102); Lyotard (1979/1984) echoes this when he claims “language games as [his] general methodological approach” (p. 15). Davis and Hersh (1981) put it this way when writing tongue in cheek about their Platonic concept of the Ideal Mathematician: “His writing follows an unbreakable convention: to conceal any sign that the author or the intended reader is a human being” (p. 36). Mathematics, it might be noted, is prime ground for this confluence of language game and scientific camouflage: “Mathematics is seen, not as a science, but as a language for other sciences” (Davis and Hersh, 1981, p. 343). If “scientists” are supposed to hide themselves in their writing, how much more so the meta-scientists, the mathematicians?

Elsewhere, Lather (2009) creates her own amalgam definition out of other’s earlier works when she writes that the performance of scientificity leads to *scientism*—“not so much the actual practices of science as the infusion of the standard elements of scientific attitude into all aspects of the social world” (p. 17). Derrida (1967/1997) uses the word “objectivism” to describe this attitude, telling us that it is merely “another unperceived or unconfessed metaphysics” (p. 61). Ellis and Flemons (2002) write of the “logo-centric position [which believes] *real* science yields singular truths, singular interpretations” (p. 349, emphasis in original text); St. Pierre (2011) puts it rather

succinctly when she calls scientific analysis “the pathology of quantification” (p. 37).

What makes something scientific in today’s modern telling? According to these authors, in many cases the fingerprints of science are merely a willingness to play along, a refusal to keep ideological cards out on the table, an addiction to mathematization, countability, and “truth.”¹¹

Let me keep in mind, however, that Alcoff (2009) warns me—as one who might wish to take to task the performance of scientism—“not to suggest that all representations are fictions: they have very real material effects, as well as material origins, [though] they are always mediated in complex ways by discourse, power, and location” (p. 120). A “hard” scientist such as a microbiologist or quantum physicist would most likely not see him or herself at all in my preceding paragraphs, instead finding clarity enough in Dewey’s (1934/2005) definition of science: “A well-conducted scientific inquiry discovers as it tests, and proves as it explores; it does so in virtue of a method which combines both functions” (p. 176). Dewey’s lean definition and Alcoff’s (2009) words of caution might remind me that all of this talk of scientism and scientificity and unconfessed metaphysics is not to take away from all scientific representation—I, for one, have no desire to argue about the utility of gravity as a tool for tracing our world. Let me, however, proceed cautiously when I hear questions along the line of “is this

¹¹ I place this word in quotation marks as an example of what Derrida (1966/1978c) calls a “loaded word” (p. 278); I am also following Spivak (1976/1997) who included an apposite aside after placing quotation marks around the word “truth”: “if one can risk that word” (p. lxiv). I follow this convention throughout my dissertation whenever I want to code a word as loaded—the reader should infer that I find these words used in these particular places to be troubling, even if I do not take the time to trouble them. Note, for example, the second word of the abstract: “urban.” Though I am forced at times to use this word in keeping with conventional description of schools like mine, in some sense I consider my entire dissertation to be a sort of deconstruction of it (see Stinson, in press).

science?” Martin, Gholson, and Leonard (2010) tell me that questions such as these “represent political stances and are symbolic of larger power relations in the domain” (p. 21), and they go on to write, “mathematics education, as an enterprise, benefits from a variety of research perspectives and approaches” (p. 21). Just because my study might not prove anything in some classical sense does not take away its ability to explore, discover, and test; I am still undertaking something that Dewey (1934/2005) might call a “well-conducted scientific inquiry.”

Barthes (1971/1977e) might have this to say of scientific striving for “truth” through methodological rigor: “The invariable fact is that a piece of work which ceaselessly proclaims its determination for method is ultimately sterile” (p. 201). This accusation may seem harsh, but it does remind me of the Bard: the lady doth protest too much, methinks.¹² Let me flesh out Barthes’ quotation a bit more:

Some people talk avidly, demanding of method; what they want in work is method, which can never be too rigorous or too formal for their taste. Method becomes a Law, but since that Law is devoid of any effect outside itself (nobody can say what a ‘result’ is in ‘human sciences’) it is infinitely disappointed; posing as a pure meta-language, it partakes of the vanity of all meta-language.... No surer way to kill a piece of research and send it to join the great waste of abandoned projects than Method. (Barthes, 1971/1977e, p. 201)

When Barthes places “result”—along with “truth”—into Derrida’s (1966/1978c) store of loaded words, he brings me to an important question in all of this talk of science and its meta-processes. Earlier in his essay he asks: “What is a piece of ‘research’? To find out, we would need to have some idea of what a ‘result’ is. What is it that one finds? What is it that one wants to find? *What is missing?*” (p. 197, emphasis in original text). Excellent question. I am often asked: Is my research scientific? I might answer with another

¹² Or, as my high school gym teacher used to say, “a bit dog always barks.”

question: What exactly, in all this schooling I am going through, have I been hoping to find out? The answer to that question is, I believe, rather complicated.

Britzman (2000) writes disparagingly of “seamless narratives” (p. 31), later defining this negative phrase for me: works “that seem to position experience as seamless even while it was lived as disorderly, discontinuous, and chaotic” (p. 33). Rambo (2007b), writing about her technique of autoethnographic sketching, has this to say:

Autoethnography, and indeed all forms of ethnography, presents a unique challenge because the subject the writer attempts to represent is always in motion on various levels.... Even as lines are being laid down, erased, or added to—even as a serviceable representation seems to emerge from the manuscript—the person or process the writer is trying to describe shifts, perhaps subtly, because the subject, the autoethnographer, or both change position. (p. 540)

She goes on to say that autoethnographic sketching is “a conscious effort to stand with instability, to represent the ineffable” (p. 541). Atkinson and Rosiek (2009) reinforce this idea when they write, “narratives are a re-signification of lived experiences and do not capture episodes like the shutter of a camera.... Because of that quality, narrative is dynamic and changeable” (p. 178).

What am I trying to achieve in my research? I am trying to “capture” a picture of teaching, and, as I have written at length elsewhere (Wamsted, 2012b), teaching is tricky. To pretend that one can take some sort of snapshot of a seamless narrative—to lay down a single set of lines and believe it serves as signification—is, to me, naïve at best, insidious at worst. Let me return to Barthes (1971/1977e). What do I want to find out? I want to discover what it is that I, as a White teacher, do in my classroom of all Black students that gives me a foundation for potential success. Desiring as I do such a result, it seems that the scientificity of the autoethnography may be just what I need. My students

and I are constantly changing positions in a disorderly, discontinuous, and chaotic manner; the dynamic and changeable narrative may be the perfect piece of method to chronicle my hoped-for results. In fact, it may be that the scientificity of autoethnography would serve well in tracking the chaos of other classrooms as well. After all, as any current or former teacher could tell you, there is nothing seamless about the classroom experience; Boote and Beile (2005) write of “the messy, complicated nature of problems in education” (p. 3) and its subsequent difficulties for education research. Perhaps well-conducted autoethnography—“a conscious effort to...represent the ineffable” (Rambo, 2007b, p. 541)—is just what the education field at large needs: less seamless scientism and more dynamic narrative.

With that said, let me take a closer look at the theory that undergirds my writing, that might help me better understand what it means to produce a “well-conducted” autoethnography. I place the words in quotes because I am not especially going to trouble what exactly it might be that makes autoethnography well-conducted, as opposed to poorly conducted. If Dewey (1934/2005) gets to write about scientific inquiry being well-conducted without any real explanation of what that means, I think I can follow suit; after all, I do not want to drift too far down the rabbit hole of Foucault’s (1977/1984b) “politics of the scientific statement” (p. 54). Instead, I am going to trust that my reader can judge my conduct for him or herself as I move on to look at a little bit of theory.

Postmodernism & Poststructuralism

“In *that* direction,” the Cat said, waving its right paw round, “lives a Hatter: and in *that* direction,” waving the other paw, “lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they’re both mad.”

“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.

“Oh, you ca’n’t help that,” said the Cat: “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”

“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.
 “You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”
 —Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*
 (Carroll, 1865/1992a, p. 51, emphasis in original text)

...“reality” [is] one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes...

—Vladimir Nabokov, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”
 (Nabokov, 1956/1997, p. 312)

Let me begin with modernity. Lemert (2005) defines this rather slippery state of mind as “the culture that dreamt, or dreams, of a common, true, and universal humanity” (p. 99). Lyotard (1979/1984) provides the precedent for Lemert’s (2005) definition when he says “I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse [that is] making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative” (p. xxiii). With this in mind I will strike straight to Lyotard’s (1979/1984) famous definition of postmodernity: “I define *postmodernism* as incredulity toward metanarratives” (p. xxiv, emphasis in original text). We turn to Lemert (2005) again for some clarification of Lyotard’s (1979/1984) lean words:

Postmodernism is a culture that believes there is a better world than the modern one. In particular it disapproves¹³ of modernism’s uncritical assumption that European culture (including its diaspora versions in such places as South Africa, the United States, Australia, and Argentina) is an authentic, self-evident, and true universal culture in which all the world’s people ought to believe. (p. 22)

Let me look to one more writer to help define this word—one so often used as a straw man for attacks from the “true scientists,” who in reading postmodern texts selfishly see

¹³ I follow Lyotard’s anthropomorphism here throughout my dissertation. In other words, I continually refer to theoretical perspectives like postmodernism and CRT as if they were actors capable of human abilities: disapproving, wanting believing, et cetera. This technique is a common, if philosophically peculiar, affectation.

themselves as innocent Alice moving amongst the madness of an upside-down Wonderland. Richardson (2001) writes:

The core of postmodernism is the *doubt* that any method or theory, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty, has a universal and general claim as the ‘right’ or the privileged form of authoritative knowledge. Postmodernism *suspects* all truth claims of masking and serving particular interests in local, cultural and political struggles. It does not—as some seem to think—automatically reject conventional methods as false or archaic; it simply opens them to critique, as it does the new methods of knowing, as well. What postmodernism does is to recognize the situational limitations of the knower. It recognizes that you have partial, local, temporal knowledge—and that is enough. (p. 35, emphasis in original text)

Lemert’s (2005) definition cuts to the core of what I find most appealing about postmodern thought in his talk of “modernism’s uncritical assumption that European culture...is an authentic, self-evident, and true universal culture” (p. 22). In my own experience—looking out at the rhizomatic dough over the edges of my cookie cutter—I am most struck by modernity’s “uncritical assumptions” about European culture (what I will hereafter refer to as “White culture” or simply “Whiteness” [Dyer, 1997/2008]) and postmodernity’s ability to frame race as a metanarrative. Martin (2010), drawing on tenets of critical race theory, refers to the masternarrative that “has helped to support negative social constructions of [Black] children” (p. 64). I will return to this aspect of critical race theory in due time; for now, however, I need move on to some sort of definition for poststructuralism.

Lather (2007) tries to tease out the difference between the posts—the one seemingly sprung from the other fully formed, like Athena from the head of Zeus—when she notes that postmodernism generally refers to the “historical shifts of the global uprising of the marginalized...and the fissures of global multinational hyper-capitalism”

while poststructuralism “refers more narrowly to a sense of the limits of Enlightenment rationality” (p. 5). Remembering Foucault (1984d), who writes that we in the West “must try to proceed with the analysis of ourselves as beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment” (p. 43), I realize that poststructuralism does not seek to wipe away the scientific rationality engendered by the Enlightenment; rather, the poststructuralist seeks the edges of the Enlightenment’s cookie cutter, realizing that there is a whole sheet of dough out there, bits and pieces that may have been swept aside in the haste to get the cookies in the oven. Foucault might say that the Enlightenment made a good cookie—he would also encourage me to search around in order to discover what it may have missed. After all—to borrow an idea that Professor Kaufmann mentioned in conversation with me—what is left over after making a pie crust makes rather excellent cinnamon rolls.

I am most attracted by poststructuralism’s ability to trouble the text.¹⁴ Britzman (2000) writes, “poststructuralist theories disrupt any desire for a seamless narrative, a cohesive identity, or a mimetic representation” (p. 31–32), and I am delighted by this disruption, disturbed as I am by the authority arrogated by the modern writer. In keeping with Lather’s (2007) concept of scientificity, Richardson (2001) calls this modern authority “the omniscient voice of science or scholarship” (p. 34); eminent poststructuralist Barthes, however, (1968/1977a) disrupts this omniscience by assuring us that “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin” (p. 142). Foucault (1969/1984c) writes that in the modern text “the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing

¹⁴ Mulling over my attraction to the disruption of the text led me to observe, in conversation one day with a friend, that postmodernism was an *attitude* while poststructuralism was an *action*. I have no further wish to push this idea, but it seemed a rough enough rubric for mention.

more than the singularity of his absence” (p. 102)—more authority is granted the less an author shows at the seams, the more he or she feigns neutrality and scientificity by abnegating voice. An air of objectivity and the pretension of third-person, however, are no longer enough to automatically earn this authority. Alcoff (2009) tells me that under poststructuralism “the neutrality of the theorizer can no longer, can never again, be sustained, even for a moment” and that who “is speaking to whom turns out to be as important for meaning and truth as what is said” (p. 121). Modern science—social or otherwise—most often assumes anonymity for its authors; this serves the dual purpose of establishing Enlightenment *bona fides* while also reifying Enlightenment attitudes. Poststructuralism frees me from this foolishness. It allows me at one and the same time to see the author hiding behind the curtain of the text and also to jettison him or her as unnecessary for the understanding or enjoyment of reading. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987a) put it:

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subject. (p. 23)

Poststructuralism allows me to both be the author of the text I write—to speak of myself in the first person!—and to believe that the same writings must have a life of their own past the purview of my own intentions. The abrogation of the “tripartite division” of text, author, and reader is singularly attractive to me, turning, as it does, the reading and writing experience into a co-production—the assemblage of the book.¹⁵ Indeed, as

¹⁵ Dewey (1934/2005), writing squarely in the modern era, hints at this idea when he tries to draw a link from language to art as triadic relation: “There is the speaker, the thing

Barthes (1968/1977a) says, the “removal of the Author...utterly transforms the modern text” (p. 145). In my search to lay out the theoretical aspects of my cookie cutter, however, where exactly does this leave me? A quote from Derrida (1963/1978a) might bring me nicely into a conversation on critical race theory: “If writing is *inaugural* it is not so because it creates, but because of a certain absolute freedom of speech, because of the freedom to bring forth the already-there as a sign of the freedom to augur” (p. 12, emphasis in original text). I like the thought of writing as “inaugural,” of bringing forth the “already-there”—this as opposed to a more typically authorial claim of “creating,” seeming as it does to me such a vain, power-hungry thing—but I am pulled back to earth, so to speak, by the triple mention of “freedoms.” I am reminded, unfortunately, that this freedom is by no means a guarantee for all the citizens of our still too-modern world. It seems that I need turn to a different part of my cookie cutter. First, though, amidst all this talk of postmodern autoethnography and the scientificity therein, a little bit of background has become necessary.

said, and the one spoken to. The external object, the product of art, is the connecting link between artist and audience. Even when the artist works in solitude all three terms are present” (p. 110–111). Though not exactly important for my current work, I do so enjoy seeing these nascent bits of poststructural thought pop up in the writings of such an eminent philosopher of education.

CHAPTER 2

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN AND WHY WE ARE HERE

A Small History: The State of the Black School

Numbers is hardly real and they never have feelings
 But you push too hard, even numbers got limits.
 Why did one straw break the camel's back? Here's the secret:
 The million other straws underneath it—
 It's all mathematics.
 —Mos Def, "Mathematics"
 (Smith, 1999, track 16)

Before I can return to my promised look into how critical race theory might smooth out some rough parts of my poststructural cookie cutter, I need navigate first through the waters of some American educational history. I begin, painfully possibly, with slavery, taking Cornel West's (2004) words to heart: "*the enslavement of Africans and the imperial expansion over indigenous peoples and their lands were undeniable preconditions for the possibility of American democracy*" (p. 45, emphasis in original text). The great American experiment was built by White people through an incredible legacy of what Jensen (2005) calls *holocaust*, from the annihilation of the Native American peoples (Jensen, 2005) to the annexation and forced assimilation of vast sections of the Southwest United States (Valenzuela, 1999) to the brutal regime of legal apartheid that existed for Blacks from 1619 until 1964 (West, 1993). It would be nice if I could elide these events, mentioning them only as moments from a particular past—one owned by ancestors far removed from us—but Feagin (2000) agrees with West when he argues that "systemic racism is a central part of the foundation of U.S. society" (p. 269); Berlin (2006) concurs by noting that "American history cannot be understood without slavery [which] shaped America's economy, politics, culture, and fundamental principles"

(p. 2). These are not merely moments from some particular past—rather, as a White American, they are my events to wrestle with, my history of which to try to make sense. Feagin (2000) details the additional difficulty to me as an educator when he observes that from “the colonial era to the present, educational institutions have been critical to the transmission of the racist ideology across many generations” (p. 76). In this assertion he hints at the need for me to take a further look at the Black school.

What do I mean by *the Black school*? How could such a seemingly discriminatory statement slip from the fingers of an self-avowed postmodern scholar who should supposedly know better? After all, did not postmodernity usher in the era of the post-racial? What need is there to speak of color anymore? Unfortunately, I am writing of a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly more common, even in a country where Whites “view blatant racial discrimination as rare and see U.S. institutions as basically healthy and color-blind” (Feagin, 2000, p. 93). Bonilla-Silva (2006) nicely defines this trend as a “racial ideology that I label *color-blind racism*” (p. 2), and I use his term throughout my dissertation to describe this more insidious form of racism—what Feagin calls a “vener of liberality” (p. 93)—that flies in the face of the reality of the *apartheid school* (Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Kozol may be the most famous of the researchers clamoring to be heard about this subject, but he is not alone in his observing the current *de facto* re-segregation of our public schools (Mickelson, 2003; Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006). Some three-fourths of Black and Latino/a students are attending schools that are predominantly minority, with 2 million of these children attending our almost exclusively minority apartheid schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006). I happen to teach

in one of these schools: over 99% Black and 0% White. The “Black school” is a reality that, despite the best wishes of color-blind racists, must not be ignored as aberrational.

So let me return to Feagin (2000) and his assertion that the educational institution has historically played a role in the dissemination of racist ideology. What might this statement mean to me today? After all, the Black school is at this point admittedly *de facto*, not *de jure*. How is it that the aggregate product of individual free choices could be indicted as racist? West (1993) might reply, tongue firmly in cheek: “A provocative...question to this descendant of slaves sold at the auction block is, Can the market do any wrong?” (p. 86). Let me follow his thought back to its roots, remembering that Skovsmose (2005) writes that the “apartheid regime has come to an end, but the ghost of apartheid is still in operation, and new ways of establishing differences have been set in operation” (p. 21). The *de jure* aspect of slavery ended in 1865 with the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, although legal apartheid continued in large parts of the country for almost a century after that. Among other seemingly essential aspects of the American way—voting rights, property ownership, access to gainful employment—Blacks were also shut out of the increasing democratization of the public school that occurred throughout the early part of the 20th century (Anderson, 1988; Lemann, 1999). In keeping with Feagin (2000), Anderson notes: “this system of second-class education for blacks did not just happen. It was the logical outgrowth of a social ideology designed to adjust black southerners to racially qualified forms of political and economic subordination” (p. 3). From the start the school was used, in a manner of speaking, to “keep Blacks in their place.” A longer quote speaks to the historical legacy of such a move:

For blacks in the South, the struggle to attain public high schools for the majority of their high school age children would continue beyond the post-World War II era. While American youth in general were being pushed into public high schools, southern black youth, a sizable minority of black high school age children in America, were being locked out of the nation's public high schools. This oppression of black schoolchildren during the critical stage of the transformation of American secondary education seriously affected the long-term development of education in the black community and was one of the fundamental reasons that the educational progress of black Americans lagged far behind that of other Americans. (Anderson, 1988, p. 236)

In a speech where she asserts that a continued focus on the well-known Achievement Gap between Whites and Others will necessarily serve up only short-term solutions, Ladson-Billings (2006) calls this effect of Black students lagging behind other American students the *education debt*—“I am arguing that the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt” (p. 5). She argues for a look into these deeper causes of education (under)achievement—the education debt—in this, echoing Gutiérrez (2013) who rather eloquently notes that “‘gap gazing’ offers little more than...a ‘safe’ proxy for talking about students of color without naming them” (p. 54). What underlying causes might I offer that can get me past safe proxies—it is true, Blacks lag behind Whites in almost every academic measure (see, e.g., Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Rousseau & Tate, 2003)—and push me towards a solution? Chapman (2006) argues that the failures of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) to properly democratize education did irreparable harm to Black, urban parents and their hopes for what a public school could—and, more importantly, couldn’t—do; Rousseau (2006) spells out how white flight into suburban areas engendered these failures. This *de facto* resegregation of housing—a market based “free choice” of White people that leaves only those behind who cannot

afford to get out—is noted by Bonilla-Silva (2006) as being exactly the kind of thing a color-blind racist would deny being race-related at all. Housing patterns and their correlation to poverty are just one thing I could look to as an underlying cause of the education debt; they are very real remnants of Skovsmose’s (2005) “ghost of apartheid.” What else?

Du Bois (1903/1995) observed, over a century ago, that the “opposition to Negro education in the South was at first bitter, and showed itself in ashes, insult, and blood; for the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro” (p. 71). Indeed, the school building has long been a racist institution, from the immediate days of post-slavery, through Du Bois’ time, and on to *Brown* and into today’s apartheid schools. Lee (2005b) has this accusation to level:

When one considers the relative comparability of the developmental levels of Black children from early childhood on, and looks with dismay at the huge differences in achievement once the children enter school, one wonders about the broad impact of U.S. public schooling on African American children and adolescents. (p. 50)

Currently, we as Americans are living out the legacy of nearly 400 years of what Jensen (2005) calls White supremacy, and our nation’s Black children are paying that price (Dyson, 2008). Horatio Alger would have me to believe that we all have a fair shake in modern America, that the meritocracy works perfectly (Lemann, 1999), and color-blind racism with its veneer of liberality eagerly assents. Hip-hop artist Mos Def (1999) is right, however—the only way the straw can break the camel’s back is with the help of the million other straws underneath it. The final straw, possibly? The Achievement Gap. The million others underneath? The education debt. This is the state of the Black school today, and these scholars listed—among many others—believe that we must move past

the safe proxies of the Achievement Gap in order to make a way forward. The question, of course, is how?

Critical Race Theory

Alice looked round her in great surprise. “Why, I do believe we’ve been under this tree the whole time! Everything’s just as it was!”

“Of course it is,” said the Queen. “What would you have it?”

“Well, in *our* country,” said Alice, still panting a little, “you’d generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time as we’ve been doing.”

“A slow sort of country!” said the Queen. “now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*

(Carroll, 1871/1992b, p. 127, emphasis in original text)

Racism still alive, they just be concealin’ it.

—Kanye West, “Never Let Me Down”

(West, Carter, Richardson, Bolton, & Kulick, 2004, Track 8)

Critical race theory (CRT) is an offshoot from the vibrant field of critical legal studies, a philosophical attempt by its founders to rectify a racism they considered to be run rampant throughout society. One of these prime movers crafted a helpful metaphor for understanding the need for CRT:

Indeed, one can see our entire current system of civil rights laws and policies as a sort of homeostat, assuring that the system has exactly the right amount of racism. Not too much, for that would be destabilizing, nor too little, for that would require that whites forfeit important psychic and pecuniary advantages. (Delgado, 1995, p. 48)

Or, as succinctly noted by another founder of the critical legal studies movement, Derrick Bell (1992): “I’m convinced that racism is a permanent part of the American landscape” (p. 92). Delgado (1995) goes on to note that “society doesn’t see—can’t see—faults in the paradigm” (p. 103), thereby setting up a key tension of CRT: Blacks—who see the racism that grants “psychic and pecuniary advantages” to Whites—are drawn up opposite these

same Whites who cannot even see these “faults in the paradigm” (see also Feagin, 2000). This shift of sight may indeed be more than a little intentional, as Chubbuck (2004) argues: “Rather than ‘objective’ and nonracist, a colorblind perspective could more rightly be called ‘privilege-blind’ or ‘power-blind’ as it masks White privilege by denying the salience of race” (p. 306; see also Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2006). A belief in this intentional masking of White privilege is not necessary, however, to understand what Delgado’s homeostat might mean to the typical White person: a steady stream of just the right amount of *dysconscious* racism¹⁶ ensuring both stability and benefit. Hughey (2011) notes that, despite our best wishes, “racism is not dead, but has found new life behind closed doors” (p. 150). The racism of CRT, of Delgado’s homeostat, has gone underground—what Hughey calls “backstage.” With that invidious image, let me return to the institution an offshoot branch of CRT scholars have turned their eyes upon, believing it a key actant in the perpetuation of racism: the school system.

Dixson and Rousseau (2006a) write, “it is through [the] analysis of race and racism in schooling that we seek to meet the ultimate goal of CRT—social transformation” (p. 7). An analysis of “race and racism in schooling” necessarily starts with Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), who first began CRT’s move into the field of education. I here quote their three central propositions of a critical race theory of education:

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States.
2. U.S. society is based on property rights.
3. The

¹⁶ King (1991) defines this term of hers as “not the *absence* of consciousness...but an *impaired* consciousness” (p. 135, emphasis in original text). I like using the word because it refuses to absolve White people in the ways that the term “unconscious racism” would. According to my take on the dysconscious view, we have been conditioned to choose not to see racism—it is not something we are somehow unable to see.

intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity. (p. 48)

They later sum up these three tenets tightly into one sentence: “race [is] *the* central construct for understanding inequality” (p. 50, emphasis in original text).¹⁷ Another excellent definition can be found in Yosso’s writing (2006): “CRT is a framework that can be used to theorize, examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly affect social structures, practices and discourses” (p. 168). Let me pause here for a moment to note the power of a cookie cutter that can be used to theorize and examine the ultimate intersection of race and property: my White skin. As a White teacher in a 99% Black school, I am desperate to know what it is this skin brings with me every day, the intangible effects—both good and bad—I carry with me through the door in the morning. I find CRT to be a tantalizing tool, holding out hope for an analysis of the education debt that I do not see elsewhere. The ghost of apartheid lingers in the halls of my school building; CRT gives me some ability to face that phantom.

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) write that critical race theory “starts from the premise that race and racism are endemic, permanent” (p. 25), but DeCuir-Gunby (2006) notes that “racial categories are difficult to define, especially whiteness” (p. 93). If race and racism are endemic while whiteness is difficult to define, where am I in terms of Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) goal of understanding school inequality through race? How can I hope to utilize CRT if I have a difficult time pinning down my own

¹⁷ It is worth remembering other hegemonic binaries that might take umbrage against this sweeping statement: male/female, rich/poor, straight/gay, Christian/non-Christian, abled/disabled. It is also worth remembering—as I noted in my introduction—that I fall on the hegemonic side of each of these binaries, and everything I write must be interpreted with that in mind. I focus here on race because it is the most obvious binary I see in my day-to-day world. Remember my preface: I can only move away from privilege so far at a time.

Whiteness? DeCuir-Gunby goes on to say that society “has implied the meaning of whiteness...by determining who is not white” (p. 93), calling this Whiteness both an “enormous source of power” (p. 93) and a “property right” (p. 108; see also Dixson & Rousseau, 2006b). According to DeCuir-Gunby, I am White because society has looked upon me and decided that I am not, in fact, Black. Again I turn to hip-hop prophet Kanye West: “Everything I’m not, made me everything I am” (West, et al., 2007, track 10). Feagin and Vera (1995/2008) point out an additional aspect of Whiteness when they observe that being White “in this society almost by definition means rarely having to think about it. Whites must exert a special effort to become deeply aware of their own and other’s racism” (p. 154). It is this charge of CRT—the connection from the persistence of racism to the privileging of Whiteness—that brings me full circle back to my classroom: a solipsistic gaze at my White skin is all well and good, but an effort to become aware of my “own and other’s racism” seems a power that might prove liberatory to myself and my students (Ignatiev, 1994/1996; Tatum, 2007). CRT gives my cookie cutter the ability to push into my own racism (Jensen, 2005; Wildman & Davis, 1995/2008), to examine my own role in the education debt.

But how exactly? In 1998 Ladson-Billings noted that “CRT argues that racism requires sweeping changes, but liberalism has no mechanism for such change” (p. 12), and it is tempting to come away hopeless from such sentiment. However, a glimpse of a solution is sighted a few pages on when she writes that from a historical point of view “storytelling has been a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression” (p. 14). Far be it from me to pretend to be able to heal racism’s “wounds of pain”—I do, however, consider myself to be a bit of a storyteller. Does this connection

from critical race theory back to autoethnography hold promise for me? Perhaps so. I find another apparent piece of my cookie cutter in DeCuir and Dixson's (2004) definition of counter-storytelling:

Counter-storytelling is a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes. The use of counterstories allows for the challenging of privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority, therefore, serving as a means for giving voice to marginalized groups. (p. 27)

Is it possible that the stories I want to tell in my autoethnography—the stories I have, in fact, been telling and (re)telling, writing and (re)writing since the moment I began my teaching career at Murphy High, almost seven years ago now—might have some ability to challenge privileged discourses? To push against the type of system that leaves Black Americans, like the Red Queen, running as fast as they can for decades only to find themselves in the same economic, educational, and societal situation? That the words I both weave in my written work and speak in the space of my classroom might be an aid to “exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes?” Again, perhaps.¹⁸ Let me push into this potential by tacking back towards postmodernism and poststructuralism—into the realm of intersection, an examination of the space created by a cookie cutter crafted from these theories and critical race theory. Before I go there, however, let me linger a little longer for a further look at the White teacher.

¹⁸ On the other hand, Clark and colleagues (2009) note that “African American mathematics teachers, therefore, may serve as bearers of counter-messages that challenge the historical and contemporary narrative of African American students as being ‘less able’ than students in other racially defined groups in the United States” (p. 49). In my own attempt to challenge privileged discourses about racism and mathematics ability, it is paramount that I continually keep in mind that I am White, and thus without active effort might merely serve as an instantiation of the message that upholds historical and contemporary narratives.

A Question: Why a Focus on White Teachers?

As for the concern that looking at whiteness and white privilege will deflect our attention from racism, this could not be further from the truth. White privilege is the other side of racism. Unless we name it, we are in danger of wallowing in guilt or moral outrage with no idea of how to move beyond them. (Rothenberg, 2008, p. 1)

I believe White people, in the self-interest of supremacy and hegemony, created this racial mess of a society in which we currently exist—a mess most visible in a prison population overrepresented by Black men and women (Kitwana, 2003) and an academic (Rousseau & Tate, 2003) and economic (Nembhard, 2005) elite underrepresented by the same. I also believe any claim that White people can fix their mistakes without the tandem action of the historically oppressed is merely a thin veneer of progressivism over an entirely new type of colonialism. For non-White students¹⁹ struggling beneath the education debt to achieve success within our system of American public schools, it will take a massive infusion of effort within those groups; anything Whites attempt to do “for” these minorities will prove nothing but a new façade framed over a status quo that has proved ill from the moment Western Europeans “discovered” the “new world.”

Regarding the effort to re-direct the course of our nation’s urban schools, however, I do not believe that any historically oppressed minority group has the ability to peaceably cure the ills that afflict them inside of our White supremacist society without at the very

¹⁹ From this point on I switch from an exclusive conversation about Black students to a more general one about non-White students as a whole; presently, I will return to my focus on Black students. I do this because, though Black students are of prime importance to me personally—teaching where I do—nationally the conversation is more properly framed by including other minorities. In keeping with most educational writing, when I talk about “non-White” I do not typically mean Japanese, Chinese, or Indian students—these being non-Whites who often outperform Whites. I am writing more of Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Southeast Asians—those Stinson (2011) calls “historically marginalized students” (p. 63).

least the tacit complicity of the White establishment. Far better would be a deliberate, concurrent action. Du Bois (1903/1995) noted this need over a century ago in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “It is a great truth to say that the Negro must strive and strive mightily to help himself, it is equally true that unless his striving be not simply seconded, but rather aroused and encouraged, by the initiative of the richer and wiser environing group, he cannot hope for great success” (p. 94). Let us ignore the pandering present in calling Whites “richer and wiser” and focus instead on the sentiment inherent in the quote: Whites made this mess, and it will take some sort of concurrent action from Whites to help clean it up (Sleeter, 1995/1996; Wise, 2000/2008).

Greer, Mukhopadhyay, Nelson-Barber, & Powell (2009), in the introduction to their edited volume on culturally responsive mathematics, note that although Whites will not lose their majority status as a national demographic until 2042, they will be the minority of public school students as early as 2023. They couple this with the startling fact that 83% of teachers are White; Rousseau & Tate (2003) place this figure closer to 90%. Clearly, White teachers matter now and, given that Whites are graduating from college at nearly double the rate Blacks are (Nembhard, 2005), it seems that White teachers will continue to matter into the foreseeable future. A simple thought experiment set in California should suffice to show exactly how much these teachers matter. I have chosen California for this experiment because in its hyper-diversity and ballooning urban areas it—along with Texas—might potentially paint a picture of where our nation as a whole is headed.

During the 2010–2011 school year, under 27% of the public school students in California were White (California Department of Education, 2010); this low number

despite the fact that almost 71% of the teachers during the 2007–2008 school year were White (Edsource, 2009).²⁰ For the sake of my experiment, I assume that there are only 120 students in all of California; I also assume an average class size of 30.²¹ I thus have four classes in the entire state, made up of approximately 32 White children and 88 non-White. If equity reigned there would be four classrooms comprised evenly of eight White and 22 non-White students; however, as discussed previously, this utopia of racial mixing is not the case. Kozol (2005) reminds me that White students tend to be in schools with other White students while non-Whites are similarly grouped, and Oakes, Rogers, and Lipton (2006) note that this effect is true at the classroom level even at the rare racially mixed school—White students are tracked into classes with other Whites and not so much with non-Whites. Thus, my thought experiment instead points toward one all-White class of 30 students, one all-minority class of 30 students, and two classes with one or possibly two White students mixed in with 28 or 29 non-Whites. Given that nearly 3 out of every 4 public school classroom teachers in California is White, I have in some sense proved my point. Assume that a White teacher teaches the all-White class and a minority teacher teaches the non-White class: the two remaining classes—both all but completely minority—must be taught by my two remaining White teachers.

In all, it seems possible that every other teacher in the California public school system might be a White teacher of almost all non-White students. Even if more mixing

²⁰ This information comes from different years because these were the easiest for me to discover in casual internet research. Not pretending to be an ardent scholar of these arcane statistics, I am fine with the difference.

²¹ Class sizes vary widely both between and within districts, but this makes no difference to my thought experiment. I chose 30 to work with because it is a round number near the historic class size limit for my school. My average class size for this current year has been both above and below this number.

is taking place than I am assuming—and I do not know that I find this to be likely on the statewide level—that ratio could be cut in half and still remain startling: one out of four teachers would remain an alarming proportion. White teachers matter, and, given the fact that the classroom teacher may well be the largest determinant in student success from year to year (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin & Heilig, 2005; Tate, 2008), they matter very much to somewhere between 25% and 50% of our nation’s minority students. Take our current and impending teacher shortage—especially in so-called “hard to staff” urban schools (Painter, Haladyna & Hurwitz, 2007) which are heavily populated by non-White students—and couple this with Teach for America and its proclivity for putting young, well-meaning, White teachers into schools like these as a kind of stopgap (Martin 2007). White teachers matter, and though the nation’s classroom demographics are changing rapidly, the effect of the White teacher is likely to continue for some years yet. With this question—why a focus on the White teacher?—cursorily examined, let me turn my eyes toward another facet of the school building that might disproportionately matter to Black students: the subject of mathematics.

Another Question: Why a Focus on Mathematics?

It is my strong belief that unless African-American communities begin to think of mathematical literacy in civil rights terms...students will be left on their own to wade through an endless stream of mixed and contradictory messages about its importance. (Martin, 2000, p. 188)

Lytotard (1979/1984), speaking on the disciples of modernity in the university setting, writes, “they limit themselves to the transmission of what is judged to be established knowledge, and through didactics they guarantee the replication of teachers rather than the production of researchers” (p. 39), and this admonition seems an adequate indictment of the current state of our secondary school system as well. Under the screws

of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) for the past decade and at present turning to face the loom of its doppelganger replacement Race To The Top, the school has hunkered down in an attempt to guarantee the replication of “established knowledge”—part of what Gutstein (2009) has likened to a national education agenda intended for “global supremacy” (p. 138). In an environment seemingly unable or unwilling to undertake Lyotard’s (1979/1984) “production of researchers,” our current core of established knowledge—beholden as it is to both colonialism and modernism—consists almost entirely of mathematics and science (D’Ambrosio, 2004; Slouka, 2009). Other disciplines are still taught—though seemingly, to this teacher on the front lines, cursorily—but the expectations of scientific and mathematical acumen have been likened by Martin (2009c) to “missionary-like goals relative to African American, Latino, and Native American children” (p. 305). Elsewhere, Davis and Martin (2008) note that “NCLB has repositioned state and local policies and instruction and standardized testing efforts in public schools, specifically, in mathematics, to carry out the construction of [racial] hierarchies” (p. 118). Darling-Hammond (2007) points out that NCLB tries to achieve these goals more through punitive measures than through any attempt at systemic change—what she calls “carrots and sticks.” All together—given that mathematics is all but required for any future career in the sciences—a rather intimidating gaze falls disproportionately on the mathematics classroom containing non-White students, a gaze observing under the auspice of what Foucault (1977/1984a) might call a “microphysics of power” (p. 174).

Stinson (2013) points out that this disproportionate focus on the mathematics student of color—what he, in line with Gutiérrez (2013) equates with “gap-gazing”—

actually serves to reinforce the importance of mathematics even as it purports to criticize our performance in the discipline:

I believe that the continued overreliance on gap gazing within mathematics education research continues to reify the ‘White male math myth’ discourse. That is to say, by using the White, middle-class, male student as the point of reference in such comparison research, researchers—unintentionally on their part, I suppose²²—continue to position mathematics as a discipline that is first and foremost a White, middle-class, male domain. (p. 3)

After all, in our nation today—and this is unfortunate for many reasons—there is no higher compliment than for an academic discipline to be positioned as “first and foremost a White, middle-class, male domain.” Such a placement in our society governed by white supremacy (Feagin, 2000; Jensen, 2005) and male dominance (Burton, 2001; Boaler, 2007) is tantamount to pole position in a race, if not akin to the primacy of royalty in a monarchy. NCLB, by its blind commitment to gap-gazing at the mathematics scores of our children, is only serving to reify the seemingly desperate importance it has placed on the very subjects under its scrutiny. Mathematics is being sold to the non-White student as a subject both incredibly important and utterly unattainable. Gay (2009) places this cacophony of gap-talk back in the student’s frame of reference: “High percentages of students of color have been persuaded that they cannot succeed at math, so they do not” (p. 200). Lee (2005a) notes an even more alarming effect of the constant testing necessitated by NCLB when she cites data purporting to show that “the longer African American students stay in school, the less they learn as measured by standardized

²² Knowing Professor Stinson as I do, I cannot in any way believe that he thinks this prime positioning of White maleness is unintentional. At any rate, I certainly do not: it seems to me a classic case of purposeful hegemony reification.

assessments” (p. 75). Mathematics matters more than other subjects because we as a nation have turned our outsized gaze upon it.

An additional aspect of mathematics couples with this increasing national attention in a rather insidious way. Martin and McGee (2009) note that “a color-blind approach to mathematics teacher development prevails; one in which it is thought by many that good teaching is simply good teaching,” one where a “White teacher's content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge will trump any negative beliefs and dispositions” (p. 224) that exist between the White teacher and his or her non-White students.²³ Mathematics, more than other disciplines, is seen as a universal language—remember what Davis and Hersh (1981) write: “Mathematics is seen, not as a science, but as a language for other sciences” (p. 343). Skovsmose (2005) notes that mathematics is largely seen by the outside world as something that is fully pure, gentle, and clean, while Bishop (2004/1988) warns that mathematics is generally considered to be value-free (see also Lather, 2007). Martin (2010) writes, “mainstream mathematics education research and policy contexts in the U.S. represent instantiations of white institutional space” that assert “knowledge production as neutral and impartial” (p. 65). This quote immediately reminds me of Richardson’s (2001) “omniscient voice of science [and] scholarship” (p. 34), a voice which believes that it can rise above the partisanship that might exist in the more liberal arts—what it might, condescendingly, call “social” sciences. Greer and colleagues (2009), in their positioning towards a culturally responsive mathematical

²³ These quotes exactly sum up how I felt as a 24-year-old with a mathematics degree about to enter a classroom full of Black middle school students; I had been completely convinced by the metanarrative of mathematics that I was prepared for what I was about to do. For the first time, this faith in my privilege failed to carry the day. I could not have been more wrong in my naïve and racist belief.

education, give speech to this “omniscient voice of science” in what they call the “familiar argument” of the opposition: “isn’t mathematics, and more particularly the teaching of mathematics, culture-free?” (p. 1).

Mathematics is seen as something that can be taught by anyone with a thorough enough content knowledge, to any and every student. Looking back, however, to my thought experiment, to the one out of every four teachers in California who might be a White teacher of non-White students, is it easy to believe this “familiar argument” that mathematics is “culture-free?” Might the young, White, Teach-for-America²⁴ mathematics teacher be in over his or her head, bringing this rather colonialist attitude into the classroom? Might the incessant gaze of the national mathematics establishment exacerbate this effect? Perhaps. Let me look at this type of teacher in just a little more depth. However, before I examine this perfect storm of a teacher—inexperienced, White, mathematician—I must return to my promised examination of an intersection of theory.

Intersections: Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Critical Race Theory

“Please, would you tell me—” she began, looking timidly at the Red Queen.

“Speak when you’re spoken to!” the Queen sharply interrupted her.

“But if everybody obeyed that rule,” said Alice, who was always ready for a little argument, “and if you only spoke when you were spoken to, and the other person always waited for *you* to begin, you see nobody would ever say anything, so that—”

²⁴ I notice that I reference Teach for American (TFA) quite a bit, but mostly out of my own head—that is, not citing articles or studies but merely disparaging it. I leave this affectation intact in the editing process, and note two things. One, I have worked with dozens of TFA teachers over the years, and I have both liked and respected all of them. Two, however, all but one of these wonderful teachers left Murphy after their two-year commitment expired; the exception stayed for only three years. My feelings about TFA might be summed up thusly: I find the individual actors to be wonderful, but I find the macro-system to be problematic. As for a scholarly reference that equally informs my feelings, Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2005) would be a good starting point.

“Ridiculous!” cried the Queen. “Why, don’t you see, child—” here she broke off with a frown, and, after thinking for a minute, suddenly changed the subject of the conversation.

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*
(Carroll, 1871/1992b, p. 192, emphasis in original text)

Involved happened over a long period of time, pulling you in like quicksand...Involved is neither good nor bad. It is just a consequence of living, a consequence of occupation and immigration, of empires and expansion, of living in each other’s pockets...one becomes involved and it is a long trek back to being uninvolved.

—Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*
(Smith, 2000, p. 363, emphasis in original text)

As noted by Ernest (1997) and Walshaw (2004a), in reference to opposition to their atypical work, there are those who want to keep postmodernism out of mathematics. Similarly, one could also find researchers who wish to keep critical race theory out of mathematics, those who “address race as [no] more than a categorical variable in reference to differences in achievement” (Martin, 2010, p. 60; see also Greer, Mukhopadhyay, Nelson-Barber, & Powell, 2010); presumably it would be simple to find some who also wish to keep postmodernism out of critical race theory, and vice versa. Like the Red Queen, such researchers are interested in the status quo, in the way things have always been done, in what Lather (2006) calls “tidy binaries” (p. 36). Alice, in her rather childlike way, however, observes that if we always followed the rule of “speak when you are spoken to,” then no one would speak at all, waiting as they were for another to speak to them first. This logic flummoxes the Red Queen, and in a child’s story it may be enough to leave it alone. As adults, however, we understand that this rule in actuality only applies to children and to those whose voice is marginalized in similar manifestations of power dynamics. Elsewhere Lather (2009) spells out what it is she believes is possible in the troubling of these “tidy binaries”—the same possibility Alice

sees in challenging a child's rule—"a breaking of the hegemonies of meaning and presence that recuperate and appropriate the tragedies of others into consumption, a too-easy, too-familiar eating of the other" (p. 23). "Speak when you are spoken to" is a hegemonic rule; similarly so for the belief that CRT or postmodernism should be kept out of the mathematics classroom. Just as the characters in Zadie Smith's (2000) wonderful novel about empire and colonialism *White Teeth* have become involved by years of "living in each other's pockets," we as an education establishment are similarly woven together. To pretend otherwise merely provides maintenance on a system that chews each other up in a rather too-familiar way.²⁵

I have looked into postmodernism and poststructuralism, albeit briefly; I have also taken a similarly slim glance at critical race theory, and need return there to take a promised deeper look into storytelling. However, before I undertake this endeavor let me spell out several other points of intersection between my pastiche of posts- and CRT. It seems important here that I "prove" to those who are interested in such things that it is worthwhile to pursue Stinson's (2009) critical postmodern perspective, that it is a "valid" cookie cutter, that a tacking back and forth through the middle way between the disparate theories might be a fruitful enterprise. I start with the story itself.

I first want to remember Lyotard's (1979/1984) taut definition of postmodernity as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (p. xxiv). CRT has a word for "metanarrative"—the majoritarian story. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) tell me that "a

²⁵ This entire paragraph reminds me of a type of teacher Martin (2007) calls a *cannibal*. At one point in his work he writes that cannibalizing, in a certain context, "connotes an extreme form of color-blindness and a denial of student diversity, that is, teaching students without really 'seeing' them" (p. 19). The very word cannibal carries vivid connotations worth keeping in mind in any conversation about hegemony.

majoritarian story is one that privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference” (p. 28). They go on to spell out specifically their drawing from the well of Lyotard’s postmodernism: “Whether we refer to them as monovocals, master narratives, standard stories, or majoritarian stories, it is important to recognize the power of White privilege in constructing stories about race” (p. 28). Delgado (1995) also refers indirectly to Lyotard when he writes about the debt CRT owes to “slave narratives [used] to test and challenge reality... and to probe, mock, displace, jar, or reconstruct the dominant tale or narrative” (p. xviii). Postmodernism wants almost nothing more than for me to be incredulous towards the metanarrative; CRT similarly encourages me to test and challenge the dominant narrative or majoritarian story.²⁶ In this rather critical piece of each epistemology’s foundation, the overlap is intense enough to believe that that the one is merely a subset of the other—that postmodernism in its inception drew heavily from the experience of Black oppression even as CRT scholars would subsequently draw heavily from postmodernism.

Another significant intersection can be found in the word “deconstruction”—a rather frightening word that might imply the frenetic dismantling of a well-crafted product. There exists such a word however—destruction—and “deconstruction” should be separated from its similar sounding sibling—denoting, as it does, the un-doing of “construction.” Construction is an orderly architectural process; similarly so for any

²⁶ Autoethnographer Arthur Frank (2002) calls the majoritarian story “the ride,” which Goodall (2002) notes “alter[s] our consciousness in the direction of a nonreflexive state” (p. 385). Frank (2002) cites Disney World and McDonalds as examples of the ride of capitalism and, though this particular intersection of majoritarian stories—race and capitalism—would be well worth returning to at some point, it is enough for now to note the additional term.

reasonable attempt at deconstruction. St. Pierre (2011) tells me that the “first step in deconstructions, then, is to reverse the binary” (p. 22)—note that reversing is in no ways tantamount to destroying. It is merely a mixing up in an effort to see things differently.²⁷ CRT similarly is not interested in destroying race—as I have argued elsewhere (Wamsted, 2011), those striving towards a sort of post-racial society are in fact further perpetuating the colonizing hegemony of the current racial climate (see also Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2006; Feagin, 2000). Howard and Flenbaugh (2011) explicitly note: “We take exception to the term ‘post-racial’ and any suggestion that we are beyond race, and that race no longer matters in US life, law, policy, and life chances” (p. 106). No, CRT has no wish to move beyond race; it does, however have an intense interest in reversing its binaries, as Dyson (1997) writes:

The ideal of a color-blind society is a pale imitation of a greater, grander ideal: of living in a society where our color won't be denigrated, where our skin will be neither a badge for undue privilege nor a sign of social stigma. (p. 224)

This ideal of a society is rather closer to deconstruction than destruction; not so much an abolition of race but an abolition of the privilege the binary provides. Similarly, Spivak (1976/1997) tells me that I must utilize “the resources of the old language, the language we already possess, and which possesses us” because to “make a new word is to run the risk of forgetting the problem or believing it solved” (p. xv). The poststructuralists are not interested in the destruction of our language, merely the deconstruction; like Dyson (1997), Spivak is not seeking some sort of post-language society—merely a language that is troubled and twisted so as to expose privilege and bias. Here, along with

²⁷ I am not here trying to imply that deconstruction is simple, nor that it might not be potentially destructive. I am merely trying to point out that deconstruction is not necessarily the same thing as destruction.

our incredulity toward the majoritarian story, I find a second significant area of overlap between the posts- and CRT: the commitment to “deconstruction” rather than “destruction.”

I will first push through some problems before returning to the overlapping aspect of storytelling that I am most keenly interested in, because, it must be acknowledged, there are problems fitting these two perspectives together into a single cookie cutter—places where parts fit ill or not at all. I begin with a rather lengthy quote from Deleuze and Guattari (1987c):

European racism as the white man’s claim has never operated by exclusion, or by the designation of someone as Other.... Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face, which endeavors to integrate nonconforming traits into increasingly eccentric and backward waves.... From the viewpoint of racism, there is not exterior, there are no people on the outside. There are only people who should be like us and whose crime it is not to be.... Racism never detects the particles of the other; it propagates waves of sameness until those who resist identification have been wiped out. (p. 178)

Most serious scholars of race and racism would certainly be troubled by the claim that “racism has never operated by exclusion or by the designation of someone as Other.”

While West (1993) can write something similar when he observes that “blackness has no meaning outside of a system of race-conscious people and practices” (p. 39), he also speaks of “black youths isolated from the labor market, marginalized by decrepit urban schools, devalued by alienating ideals of Euro-American beauty, and targeted by an unprecedented drug invasion” (p. 85). I believe he would argue strongly that the isolation, marginalization, and devaluing experienced by Black youths is exactly the “exclusion” that Deleuze and Guattari (1987c) are claiming might not exist, that it is precisely what the dominant society does in order to achieve “the designation of someone as Other.”

There are problems here. Would a serious scholar of race read enough of Deleuze and Guattari to discover the beauty and utility of the philosophical poetry within? Or would he or she dismiss it as another example of the type of scholarship that Bishop (2005) calls out as “a meaningless relativism [that refuses] the need to recognize and address the ongoing effects of racism and colonialism in the wider society” (p. 128)? To wit, more seeming meaninglessness, again from an author that I respect and use in my own writing:

When Ahab abandons the quadrant, he abandons an already tenuous tie with the striated space of conventional life to pursue the smooth space of the nomadic subject to the limit point of the whale hunting multiplicity of which he is a part. (Lorraine, 2005, p. 168)

Yes, the quote is out of context, and yes, there is an extended metaphor that I have been dropped into the middle of. However, I am quite positive that most scholars know who Ahab is and what he might represent to those of us hunting our own metaphorical white whale. Possibly some one of these other scholars would make more of this quote than I can; possibly, again, he or she would dismiss it as, to put it gently, lacking in usable meaning.

This tendency towards meaninglessness is not my only problem. An additional issue that I find more insidious—and consequently more troubling—is one of misappropriation. I have covered the joint commitment of my cookie cutter perspectives to “deconstruction” and the fact that this is the un-doing of “construction,” not merely destroying. A potential problem lies in those who claim to be doing post-racial work in a postmodern spirit—those who believe that what we need is not the deconstruction of racial strictures, but the destruction. Teachers like those studied by Delpit (1995/2006) and Ferguson (2000) who would purport not to see color at all, merely children—

convinced that though on paper “race existed...beyond that the public consensus among adults was that distinctions of race were of no further significance” (p. 17)—blindly believing that this is best for our children. Pulitzer Prize-winning authors like Jared Diamond (2005) blithely describing the Rodney King riots—“the acquittal of policemen on trial for brutally beating a poor person provoked thousands of outraged people from poor neighborhoods to spread out to loot businesses and rich neighborhoods” (p. 273)—entirely eliding any effect race certainly played on the scene in a misguided effort at postmodern color-blindness.

I am not sure that Diamond (2005) means any harm in his words—and I am picking on Diamond as proxy here, as individual anecdote and the popular press could provide countless more examples, were space to provide. For example, in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*—a progressive, egalitarian periodical if ever there was one—Menand (2012) refers to Barack Obama as “the embodiment of twenty-first-century post-ethnic America” (p. 77); I find this sentiment to be rather disagreeable, however thrilled I might be at Obama’s ascendance to the Presidency in 2008. Similar to how I feel about Diamond (2005), though, I do not think Menand (2012) is making a conscious policy statement with his words. Rather, I believe that both of these writers, like countless more advocates of color-blindness across this great nation, have fallen prey to a dynamic that Dewey (1938/1997) noted over seven decades ago:

For in spite of itself any movement that thinks and acts in terms of an ‘ism becomes so involved in reaction against other ‘isms that it is unwittingly controlled by them. For it then forms its principles by reaction against them instead of by a comprehensive, constructive survey of actual needs, problems, and possibilities. (p. 6)

In other words, maybe the ‘ism of the postmodern might at times get caught up merely reacting to the ‘ism of race in such a way that the former is unwittingly controlled by the later. This effect—as evidenced by Diamond (2005) and Menand (2012)—seems to me a danger of the critical postmodern intersection of theory. Indeed, Tyler-McGraw (2006) tells a chilling story about a Confederate Heritage organization using the language of multiculturalism to frame their argument for keeping an objectionable, borderline racist mural of Robert E. Lee hanging in their hometown of Richmond, Virginia. This abuse of theory gives me pause.

There are dangers here, no doubt.²⁸ However, it seems to me that the reward might just be worth the risk. Let me steer clear of “meaningless relativism” as I proceed; let me similarly be extremely careful to draw the distinction between “deconstructing” and “destroying”—always remembering, as I do, that post-racism is not tantamount to post-racial. And thus, finally, let me move on back to my promise of a return to the storyteller. I have examined intersections and teased out tensions; let me look into some possibilities of this middle way. I begin with the hope of the critical postmodern autoethnography.

A Solution of Sorts: The Critical Postmodern Autoethnography

One has to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism (this is considered a positive term by some and used by others, on the contrary, as a reproach); or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality (which may be seen once again as good or bad). (Foucault, 1984d, p. 43)

²⁸ Stinson and Bullock (2012) observe that the “concept of change” is another tricky subject in the critical postmodern perspective. I am sure there are others of which I am not even aware.

Here Foucault is using the term “Enlightenment” much in the same way that Lyotard (1979/1984d) used the word “modernism” earlier in my dissertation: as a proxy for entrenched rationalism, quantifiability, mathematization—what Lather (2007) calls *scientism*. Foucault is warning against both the wholesale rejection as well as the blind continuation of these things—calling both of these courses “simplistic and authoritarian.” This is the place I find myself in as a mathematics teacher, researcher, and scholar: pulled between the scientific certainty of mathematics and the improvised slipperiness of the actual classroom.²⁹ The Enlightenment may be satisfied with merely mentioning the race of a teacher without discussing what exactly contributed to his or her practice; similarly, a post-Enlightenment attitude might be satisfied with an entire escape from both mathematics and the explicit observation of its instructors, believing that each case is unique enough to render generalizability impossible. Following Foucault (1984a), I want to figure out how to tack a way through yet another middle way.

Ladson-Billings (2001) notes, “there is a wide gulf between wanting to be a good teacher and actually becoming one [and this] gulf is particularly large for teachers who opt to teach in schools serving poor students and students of color” (p. 8). An Enlightenment attitude may be content to merely gap-gaze at the failures of the schools which serve our poor students and students of color—lost, like Narcissus staring at the brittle beauty of self-reifying data—while a post-Enlightenment bent may merely focus on the wanting-to-be and practices of a good teacher—refusing in repudiation to even

²⁹ And, incidentally, disappointed with current qualitative efforts to invoke mathematical authority—see, for example Strutchens & Westbrook’s (2009) talk of replicated protocols and triangulation of data sources in an otherwise excellent article on voice in the mathematics classroom. I find myself on the side of Koro-Ljungberg (2004), who writes of teachers “suspicious of the purposes of triangulation, and...hesitant to believe that any method, even when triangulated, will capture the Truth in its entirety” (p. 604).

look into the mirror. But again, is there not a middle way? I want so much to be a good teacher, and I am painfully aware week in and week out that there are endless aspects to my pedagogy that I could improve upon. Specifically, however, I want to be a better teacher—as a White man—to my students—who are Black. I want to improve my practice, and I want to do so deliberately—standing next to the gap and aware of its existence without losing myself in gaze upon it. Too often, it seems, our research tacks one way or the other—too close to the Scylla of statistics and science or the Charybdis of story and anecdote. I want to find a middle way.

I believe that middle way is the critical postmodern autoethnography. Stinson (2011) hints at the need for this type of research in discussion of his own work with mathematically successful Black students:

Any theoretical explanation or meta-narrative that attempts to explain the schooling experiences of Black students (or historically marginalized students in general), I believe, must first begin by deconstructing the hegemonic ideology of Whiteness that infects US public schools. That is to say, we must refuse the oversimplified act of focusing the spotlight (or blame) on the child rather than on the alienating hegemonic discourse of Whiteness—and maleness, middle-classness, Christianness, heterosexualness, and so on³⁰—that are (unjustly) the very foundation of the structure of US public schools. (p. 63)

Stinson wants to wend this middle way—to turn the gaze away from the historically marginalized student and towards the White teacher while simultaneously keeping the focus on the success of the student. This research is not the study of Whiteness for solipsistic or theoretical reasons; rather, it is turning inward in order to benefit those on the outside. It is critical in that it desires the leveling of the playing field for all children (Delgado 1995; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005); it is poststructural in that it acknowledges a

³⁰ I might add to Stinson's (2011) "and so on" one further norm that largely structures our public schools—that of being "abled" as opposed to "disabled."

need for the deconstruction of hegemonies and metanarratives (Lyotard, 1979/1984; St. Pierre, 2011); it hints at autoethnography in that Stinson himself is White and taught in an all-Black secondary environment for 5 years prior to his becoming a professor (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Rambo, 2007b). Might he believe that his own experience could have provided a guide for other White educators following in his footsteps (Flemons & Green, 2002)? Elsewhere Stinson (2013) asks “How might mathematics educators create learning environments that reduce (if not eliminate) the White hegemonic discourses of schools, providing for easier negotiation for Black students (and other historically marginalized students)?” (p. 93). I believe the critical postmodern autoethnography might be one possible answer to his question.

Remember my own history—my initial attempt at teaching, frustrated and quitting mid-year in an obfuscating haze of plausible deniability, thinking that what went wrong could be in no way my fault. Perhaps had I received some advice from the front lines, so to speak, I may have been better prepared for my assignment. Perhaps had I been forced to face the hegemony of my Whiteness before being thrown into a classroom of students who were far from the hazy picture I had of my own middle school education, I may have experienced more success. Perhaps had someone told me how a my job might be subtly different from the rosy picture I was painting, I may have been able to find the excitement in teaching inside this environment of difference—an excitement I now am able to experience week in and week out. Perhaps had I been introduced to the work of a teacher who “is always in motion on various levels” (Rambo, 2007b, p. 540) I might have been able to come out from behind the shield of content knowledge I now realize I was hiding behind. Due to the pressures on the urban school and specifically its mathematics

department—as I have noted previously—there are teachers just like that younger version of myself all over the country right now, struggling to square up to what is expected of them in the classroom. Perhaps they, too, could benefit from a critical postmodern autoethnography. Ellis (2004) writes:

I would argue that a story's generalizability is always being tested—not in the traditional way through random samples of respondents, but by readers as they determine if a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know. Readers provide theoretical validation by comparing their lives to ours, by thinking about how our lives are similar and different and the reasons why.... (p. 194–195)

Perhaps the critical postmodern autoethnography I wish to write would be able to tack through this middle way of story and science, genre and generalizability. The question, of course, is why I not only saw no such book as a first-time teacher, twelve years ago, but have seen nothing of the sort still. Where is this literature I would hope to read?

The Repertoire: What Else Is out There?

I would like to suggest that if one does not see color, then one does not really see children. (Delpit, 1995/2006, p. 177)

I have, in a manner of speaking, demonstrated that non-White students, White teachers, and mathematics all matter. I have taken a similar look at the importance of poststructuralism, critical race theory, and the overlap of the two. A question naturally arises: what work out there might be written at the intersection of all these things? Specifically, what can I say about the White mathematics teacher of non-White children from a critical postmodern point of view? According to published research, unfortunately, the answer is “not much.” I can parse these particulars out a bit better—White, non-White, mathematics—and search for more overlap than I have previously posited. The White mathematics teacher of non-White children, however, is a bit of a cipher—he or

she must be there, teaching away, but all too often this teacher goes unnamed and unresearched. For example, Greer and colleague's 2009 *Culturally Responsive Mathematics Education* offers nearly 400 pages of advice on how to teach the non-White student; assumed in this is the fact that, though the reader/teacher may not be White, he or she is most likely of dissimilar race/ethnicity from his or her students. As a mathematics teacher of dissimilar race/ethnicity from my students, I ate up the words, looking for specifics to apply to my situation. I was not disappointed, and I enjoyed the book, though I was surprised at the lack of forthrightness—I wanted something to speak directly to me as a White teacher, representing as I do some 85% of all teachers, and I felt rather talked around than talked to. I felt a similar kind of talking around in reading Tate's (1995) foundation-laying work on culturally relevant pedagogy in mathematics—no mention is made of the race of his exemplar teacher. Possibly this effect occurred because Whiteness is the assumed ground of any figure, because it is understood that a White person is—unfortunately—the most likely reader of these pieces. However, as one who aims to interrogate his own Whiteness, I was left dissatisfied.

I experienced this feeling most poignantly quite recently when I eagerly devoured a promisingly titled article—"Contrasting Pedagogical Styles and Their Impact on African American Students" (Berry & McClain, 2009)—contained within Martin's (2009b) edited volume *Mathematics Teaching, Learning, and Liberation in the Lives of Black Children*. It was during my sixth year of teaching, and I was somewhat desperate for someone to parse my pedagogical style; I read the piece hoping to see some sort of image of myself, something I could use to further my practice. I was not disappointed to discover that one of Berry and McClain's research subjects is noted as White, and I

eagerly expected to finally get a glimpse at what it is that makes a White teacher successful with Black students—how their Whiteness might be repositioned as an asset rather than a hurdle. I was rather surprised, consequently, when upon finishing the section I realized that not even a hint of the teacher’s Whiteness had been mentioned in a detail of her “pedagogical style.” How could this be, I wondered? How could a woman’s Whiteness not have an effect—either positive or negative—on the manner in which she teaches Black students? Or, if indeed her Whiteness somehow managed to have no effect on her Black students, how could this phenomenon not itself be worthy of note? This omission seemed to me all but insane.

And yet it occurred again when I read Malloy’s (2009) piece in the same book “Instructional Strategies and Dispositions of Teachers Who Help African-American Students Gain Conceptual Understanding.” Despite its similarly promising title, this section of the book pulls a parallel piece of prestidigitation: early on one of the subject teachers is identified as Black while another is identified as White, and neither of these facts are even implied as an effect on these teachers’ “instructional strategies and dispositions.” I have found this to be such a common facet of mathematics education research that I have ceased even to make note of it when I read. I am not saying that these articles were not helpful—they were, and Martin’s work continues to be paramount in the field of mathematics education as it pertains to race—but only that I feel an opportunity was wasted. Given my own anecdotal experience, it seems very likely that my Whiteness must contribute something qualifiable to my “pedagogical style” and my “instructional strategies and dispositions,” some perhaps subtle affect that could be set apart and

examined. Sadly, I have been unable to find studies of this nature, and I am limited to mere wondering.

In 1994 Gloria Ladson-Billings—perhaps feeling some of my frustration—wrote that “there is very little reliable literature on preparing teachers for diversity [and] almost nothing exists on teacher preparation specifically for African American students” (p. 7). This statement, happily, is not quite true anymore—due in no small part to her seminal study and those, like Martin, it most certainly inspired. I have read *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* three times now, and I find it to resonate in a different way on each occasion; it reminds me again of the need to tailor my instruction toward cultural relevance for my students, and at times I can hardly focus on the words at hand for thinking about my classroom waiting for me back outside the book. However, the work suffers—in my mind—from the same failing as Martin’s book chapters: though several teachers are identified as White, no mention is made of how this might make them somehow different from their Black colleagues. All are identified as excellent teachers—by their communities, their principals, and by Ladson-Billings herself—but it was not until the second time I read it that I wondered about their Whiteness and how it might affect, both positively and negatively, their excellence. In her “follow-up” study *Crossing over to Canaan: The Journey of New Teachers in Diverse Classrooms* (2001), she implies that she is writing for the White audience that increasingly comprises the university and the schoolhouse. Yet, most of the book slips by in a similar manner to *Dreamkeepers*: important, inspiring, exciting, but lacking in specificity to the White audience she is ostensibly writing for. One radical

counterexample, a paragraph I read twice because it reminded me so much of myself, tantalizes with possibilities of what the book might have meant to a teacher like me:

The average white teacher has no idea what it feels like to be a numerical or political minority in the classroom. The pervasiveness of whiteness makes the experience of most teachers an accepted norm. White teachers don't understand what it means to 'be ashy' or to be willing to fail a physical education class because of what swimming will do to your hair. Most white teachers have never heard of the 'Black National Anthem,' let alone know the words to the song.³¹ Most have never tasted sweet potato pie or watched the intricate process of hair braiding that many African American girls (and increasingly boys) go through. And although African American youth culture has become increasingly popular, and everyone can be heard to say 'You go, girl,' and believes she has the right to sing the blues, the amount of genuine contact these people have with African Americans and their culture is limited. (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 81ff)

Martin (2007) writes, "few researchers in mathematics education have given particular attention to the issue of what constitutes a highly qualified mathematics teacher in contexts predominated by African American learners" (p. 17), and he goes on to argue that "teachers with high levels of (mathematics) content knowledge, in the absence of concerns for equity or the social realities of students, are likely to struggle" (p. 18). Mathematics education has neglected students of color in general, and the mathematics teacher who enters, as I one time did, into this starved space believing that he or she can rely on content knowledge alone to lift the boats on the rising tide is likely to struggle. In fact, Martin argues that teachers such as my past self "who are unable, or unwilling to develop in [emancipatory and liberatory] ways are not qualified to teach African American students no matter how much mathematics they know" (p. 25). Later, Martin tantalizes us again by calling out these teachers as largely White—from the previous two quotes it could be inferred that he was writing about non-White teachers as well—when

³¹ When I began working at Murphy I had no idea there was such a thing as a Black National Anthem. I still don't know any of the words.

he calls them “cannibals” who possess “an extreme form of color-blindness and a denial of student diversity, that is, teaching students without really ‘seeing’ them” (p. 19).³²

Here again, however, I pause. In what ways would “seeing” my students be unique to me as a White man? I am on board: I believe that my content knowledge alone will not save me (see also Berry & McClain, 2009); I believe that the predominately non-White student context is necessarily different from the predominately White school context (see also Gay, 2009); I understand that concerns for equity, social reality, cultural responsiveness, and cultural relevance will be fundamental in my classroom career (see also Gutstein, 2006). But still I want to know: what does this look like for me as a White man, and especially how can I take advantage of my Whiteness to some sort of positive affect? I find the answers to these questions largely missing from the current research, though I might have found a thread to follow in a recent reading of Davis and Martin (2008):

Teachers must ask themselves difficult and uncomfortable questions about African American students and their conditions that include, but are not limited to: Do I believe African American students are intellectually inferior? Do I believe that issues of race and racism play a role in shaping the lives, schooling, and mathematics education of African American students? Do I harbor racist beliefs about African American students? (p. 24)

Keeping these questions in mind, and especially wondering as to how I might hope to answer them, let me turn now—finally, it might be thought—to an example of the kind of research I am hoping to write—in no small part because it is the kind of research I have always been hoping to read. I will table an explicit confrontation with my own privilege and racism until later, instead turning to a more subtle study. I will, simply, tell a story.

³² Obviously non-Whites can and do exhibit forms of blindness (color and otherwise). It seems unlikely to me that Martin is here referring to such; I take this to be a gauntlet tossed at the feet of the largely White mathematics establishment.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT I HOPE TO DO

The Story of Shawn Robinson: My Version

“Wait, wait wait. You can’t just jump right into a story³³ like that.”

“No? You’ve been so quiet for so long, I just assumed you were on board with everything that was going on.”

“I mean, I’ve been following you through all of this, I think. It’s slightly easier to keep up with all the talk about mathematics and schooling than it was to understand all that stuff about the French philosophers.”

“I thought it might be. Hey, you want to give us a little bit of a summary?”

“Sure. How little?”

“Just a bit. We don’t want to bore my readers, but it might be nice to catch up anyone who’s feeling a little lost.”

“Okay, here goes. Your dissertation work is going to be a critical postmodern autoethnography. As a White mathematics teacher of Black students, you are in a uniquely important, but under-theorized position. You think personal story can help cut through the cannibalizing, Enlightenment attitude society generally presents toward non-White students—the overarching effect of No Child Left Behind and subsequent education reform efforts.”

“Wow. That was beautiful—I wish I’d thought to say it myself.”

“Is that another joke?”

“Maybe. But let’s move on. What exactly is your problem with the story I’m about to tell? I thought you’d be thrilled that I’m finally moving on to some autoethnography.”

“Wait, didn’t you start this whole thing with autoethnography? Whatever happened to that story you told about the boy who yelled at you from the back of the class? The ‘Racist!’ incident? Did you forget about that?”

“No, I didn’t forget about it, although I am glad that you brought it back up—for my readers who may have. But anyways, that wasn’t really autoethnography, it was really just a framing device. That student will come back here in a bit.”

“But this story we’re about to read, this is actually autoethnography?”

“Well, I think so. We’ll have to see. Remember that this entire process is twisted in time, so my conception of what exactly makes something autoethnography is constantly changing. But, according to the conceit under which I’m writing this dissertation, I am calling what is about to happen autoethnography. We’ll see if that stands under further review.”

³³ At some point in all of this work, Professor Holbrook asked me to explain how exactly I was using the word “story.” In keeping with my established editing process, I will not do that here. Rather, I merely note that if my reader is similarly curious, I refer them to Appendix C, wherein I detail my decisions as to how I use important, open words like “story.”

“This is kind of a long conversation we’re having. Is this going to fly with your readers?”

“I think so. I’m hoping that they find your interruptions a kind of delightful diversion from my sometimes dry words.”

“So I can keep talking? I mean, I do want to know a bit about this story you’re about to (re)tell, some background about this first real example of autoethnography.”

“In reality, you’re kind of autoethnographical. I neglected to mention that. So, the story I’m about to tell is not really the first bit of autoethnography in my dissertation.”

“Okay, now I know you’re making a joke!”

“Sorry. I’ll answer your question. What kind of background are you looking for?”

“Well, what do I need to know? I mean, I assume in the story itself you’ll tell us all about this Shawn Robinson—which I also assume is a pseudonym?”

“Of course. And I’ll tell you as much about him as you need to know. I’m actually in a bit of a crisis about how much to talk about my students in my stories, but we’ll get to that later.”

“Oh, I can’t wait. Anything else I need to know?”

“Just a bit. What you’re about to read was a small part of a paper I did a while ago, one of my first halting steps towards autoethnography. Immediately after that, I’m going to show you a different version of the same story, one I wrote quite a bit later.”

“I get it. You’re going to compare and contrast how you’ve grown as a teacher and a White person and all that.”

“Yeah, well, sort of. I have to tell you first, though, it was tempting to just completely re-write the old piece, because I’m a little ashamed of it now. But it exists out there, it’s part of the ‘data’ that makes this autoethnography workable, so I’m letting you read it despite my slight embarrassment.”

“That’s kind of cool. You have the same story, but told some time apart. This is that writing as a method of inquiry thing you were talking about, right?”

“You got it. One more thing, though.”

“Go on.”

“I also added another layer. The second version is told from the student’s—Shawn’s—point of view. So, in that respect, it’s a piece of fiction—as opposed to my rather this-is-what-happened version.”

“What do mean, ‘a piece of fiction’? This story actually happened, right? I mean, that’s non-fiction. By definition!”

“Well, telling things from his point of view immediately makes it fiction. I mean, it’s really my story—I’ve got no way to know how he felt about it. I didn’t interview him or anything and I don’t want to pretend towards something like that. In that sense, only the Shawn Robinson in the first story is ‘real,’ because that’s the story where I describe what happened as best as I can remember. The Shawn Robinson in the second story is a fictional mash-up of all sorts of students I have known over the years. He’s actually a composite character.”

“A what now?”

“Let’s come back to it after I tell the stories.”

“Fair enough. Anything else you want to tell me before we move on?”

“Only that what started as a mere exercise in writing turned into much more, once the dust settled and I was able to look back at what I had written. I think I learned a lot about myself in my self-study of White privilege through this writing, things that I might not have been able to learn otherwise. But we can come back to specifics after the stories.”

“Sounds good. So, one story, two versions, written two years apart, from two different points of view, one ‘real’ and one fiction. Let’s hear them.”

One day, relatively early in my teaching career, a student I will call Shawn Robinson³⁴ was in a corner of my room working in a group with several other students. I had asked him several times to put up his mp3 player and focus on the mathematical task at hand, and eventually found myself feeling the need to take his player away from him. School policy is that we are supposed to confiscate electronic devices and turn them over to an administrator; all my students knew, though, that my policy was to give it back at the end of class. Shawn grudgingly handed over the device, clearly upset, but said—mostly to his friends, but certainly loud enough for me to hear—“You just don’t like Black people.”

³⁴ I choose pseudonyms by saying the name I am trying to mask over and over again while free associating names from my past and popular culture that feel similar. This tactic will become possibly important later when I create pseudonyms for some people who have rather distinctly “Black” names. My pseudonyms, consequently, end up racialized. In writing group one day, my friend and fellow doctoral student Erika indicated to me that she was slightly disturbed by the feel of these racialized names. I am choosing to keep my process intact, however, as I don’t want to pretend that the racial coding of names doesn’t exist. For anyone who disagrees with me, I would invite them into my classroom when I tell my students various names of my cousins and nieces: Mary Beth, Anne Perry, Audrey Kate, Annemarie, Katelyn. “White people love double names, huh Mr. Wamsted?” British sounding double names, I always reply. Their faces four years ago when I told them we were thinking about naming our daughter Margaret and calling her Maggie were priceless: they were entirely unable to disguise their bemusement. We ended up naming her Kira, which, though rapidly becoming a cross-racial name, always earns me a bit of respect at the beginning of the year when I tell my new classes.

I panicked. I had never been accused of this before—at least to my face—and I didn't know quite how to handle this rather public affront. Later I realized that I overreacted, but at the time all I could think to do to address the situation was to drag him downstairs to an administrator—an unfortunate act of escalation. This probably accomplished what I wished: Shawn never said anything of the sort again, and the rest of my class saw that I came down hard on the accusations of purported racism. However, as time went on I wondered what it was exactly that had caused me to immediately run the boy³⁵ downstairs, as my normal inclination to most manners of offense is to attempt to deal with it myself, either in the classroom or in the hallway, calling a parent if necessary—but next to never to take the student downstairs. I had let far larger slights pass by without involving any of my administrators; why had that been my immediate recourse to this one?

I have told the story of Shawn Robinson many times in the past few years. My teacher friends seem to enjoy it, and every time the subject of racism comes up I can get a laugh by repeating the comments of one of my administrators who helped me out of the obviously uncomfortable situation: “You think this man rides his bike 20 miles down here to work with all you Black boys, and he doesn't like Black people? Get out of here!” I used these words as a shield against my worry; I had made a deliberate choice to work down there³⁶ amidst and among Black people—how on earth could anyone think

³⁵ I cringe at the use of the word “boy” here, though I am leaving it in as part of the writing process. It is what I wrote in those first, clumsy, autoethnographic steps.

³⁶ It is almost the end of my dissertation process here, much later than the previous footnote, and I just now found myself troubled by this language. Am I echoing the quote of my administrator a few lines up? Even so, it is an interesting choice in that at the time of this writing apparently I saw my job at Murphy as being “down there”—connoting as

that I didn't like them? Still, though, why had I been so affected by the accusation? Why had I let the words of a fourteen year old boy cause me to quake and rouse me to react in such a knee-jerk fashion? With every re-telling of the tale, the scene reset in my mind and made me wonder anew—what could have struck such an unpleasant chord in me but a grain of truth?

Shawn Robinson: A Fictional Story

He had already asked me a couple times to put up my ipod, and I didn't mean any disrespect, but I was ignoring him. I mean, it's a stupid rule and he knows it, because half the time he doesn't say anything to us about it at all. So when he came by the first time I pretended to put it up and told Tiara to keep an eye on him for me. Anyways, I only had one earphone in because we were working. I mean, I work best when I can listen to my music. Usually Mr. Wamsted is cool about stuff like this, letting us do what we got to do, but some days he just be tripping. Too bad this was one of those days.

*I'll take that, Shawn.*³⁷

it does the lower and the less, the mud and the dirt. An interesting question: If I am merely trying to harmonize with the quote—an innocuous, artistic decision to be sure—is it possible that I misremembered whatever it was my administrator said the first time I put his words to text? I think it entirely likely that I may have. After all, I cannot pretend to some sort of photographic memory about what was said; any remembrance I have has been entirely filtered through my own thoughts and feelings first. This slip of language may serve as a sort of window into my past—words that trouble me now did not do so then. I find this thread of thought fascinating.

³⁷ Keep in mind that Shawn is a composite character. Though I have not formally defined this concept as of yet, I will be doing so shortly. The bottom line is that the character I am calling “Shawn Robinson” here should not in any way be construed as being connected to my remembrances of the “actual” Shawn Robinson. In similar fashion, none of this dialogue is real; I constructed it from thousands of interactions I have had with hundreds of students over the years. The only real “truth” in this story is the essence of the action.

He was holding out his hand, doing that thing he does that drives us all crazy, not even looking at me as he's waiting for me to just hand over my property. How you going to speak to a person without even looking their way? Instead, he's just watching the rest of the room, looking around like that's more important or whatever. I watched his fingers twitch at me like he was thinking about sending a text and all I knew was I just didn't feel like dealing with him today.

Aw, come on, Mr. Wamsted. It's not that serious.

At the last second I remembered that he hates talking to people with even one earphone in and I took it out.

Look! You can see we're getting everything done here. I'm not hurting you, I'm not hurting them, I'm not hurting anybody. Just let me listen to my music while we work.

Still looking away, he does that thing all adults do whenever they know you have a point about something. He blamed someone else.

Not my rule, Shawn, not my rule. You know that I'm supposed to take it away and give it to them downstairs in the office and they'll keep it for ten days.

Now he finally turns to look at me. He looks upset, for sure, but not as much as I thought by the way he was speaking. Mostly he looks kind of tired, like he'd been up too late last night or something.

I'm trying to do you a favor here, Shawn. I'll give it back to you after lunch.

I wonder if he thinks I'm supposed to be so grateful or something. Yeah, some favor, taking away from me the one thing that helps me keep it together and take care of my business.

Mr. Matthews lets us listen to whatever we want, so it can't be a school rule.

I've been wanting to say that to him for a while and I figure it can't hurt, even though I know he won't care. Why are some adults so cool and others so lame?

Well, Mr. Matthews is breaking the rule, and I'm not going to get in trouble for you if some principal walks in to check out what we're doing. Just hand over the ipod.

He looks away again and Tiara rolls her eyes at me. Why don't adults ever listen to you when you talk? Why won't they ever have a discussion with you about whatever it is they're tripping about?

I decided to give up and was about to hand over the ipod, but for whatever reason I just sounded off with what I said, not really thinking.

You just don't like Black people.

I thought it was quiet enough for only Tiara to hear, because she's always talkin' about how Mr. Wamsted is kind of weird, even for a White guy. I'd told her for sure he doesn't have any Black friends, because he's got no swag, no style. Anyways, I didn't mean for him to, but I guess he heard me.

For the first time he really locks his eyes on me, and I can tell right away that he is ticked off, because his brow is all furrowed up and he's clenching his jaw, getting red the way White people do when they're mad or whatever. That's no excuse for disrespect, though. He snaps his fingers at me like I'm a dog or something and he points to the door.

Let's go.

I was just fixing to say something about his snapping at me when I bit my tongue. Instead I got up and grinned at Tiara and them before heading out the door. I mean, my ipod was in my pocket, and it seemed like I was going to get away with just another hallway conversation. These were pretty harmless, because all Mr. Wamsted does is wave

his hands and get all red and talk talk talk, but eventually he lets you back into the room and you get to go back with your friends and get your work done. I was totally surprised when he passed me leaning against the wall and just marched off down the hall, waving his hand at me to come with him. It took me a while to figure out that I was following him downstairs to the office. Now I knew he was doing too much—all this about an ipod?

I won't lie, I got a little nervous then. I mean, I had been down to the office twice already that week, for stupid stuff also, but it doesn't matter how dumb the thing, they always take the teacher's side about it. I hurried up a little bit to catch him.

Mr. Wamsted, where we going? I mean, it's not that serious, you know? You want my ipod, take my ipod, give it back to me after lunch. You keeping me from my work right now! Let's go back to class.

I held it out to him and shrugged my shoulders.

I don't want your ipod anymore, Shawn.

He just kept walking and I knew this would be bad. I'd seen him mad before, I'd had him holler at me about all manner of stuff, but this was the worst he'd been, true.

Mr. Thomas³⁸ was on the desk right then, which wasn't good because he doesn't even turn your way until he's heard all the static the teacher has to say. Mr. Wamsted's story was crazy too—talking to him and the police officer all on and on about the ipod and me disrespecting him. I tried to cut in and defend myself, but Mr. Thomas just stared me down so I had no choice but to shut up. Then Mr. Wamsted got to the end of the story, the part that I figured had really bothered him, about me saying what I said about him not liking Black people. Mr. Thomas got hot at that. He turned around quick to face me, his

³⁸ Mr. Thomas is also a composite character, based on a mash-up of dozens of administrators I have worked for over the years.

whole body swinging almost off his chair. I had seen him act like this before, so I wasn't really scared, but I knew from the look on his face that he was really mad.

You think this man rides his bike 20 miles down here to work with all you Black boys, and he doesn't like Black people? Get out of here!

He slammed his fist down and waved his other hand at me, then turned away from me after one more of those looks you get right before your momma's about to drag you out the room by your ear. I sure knew better than to say nothing to that.

Then Mr. Wamsted left, and I looked at Mr. Thomas. He smiled kind of halfway at me, winked, and turned back to the police officer. They talked for a few minutes, long enough that I wondered if they had forgotten about me. When the bell rang I cleared my throat and shuffled through my bag. I could tell I wasn't in trouble anymore, but I couldn't figure out what was going on, and I thought I might should head on to my next class. Mr. Thomas turned back toward me, leaning back in his chair and kicking his feet up on the desk. All of a sudden he looked almost chill sitting there, like we were just hanging out or something.

Listen, Shawn, give Mr. Wamsted a break. Sometimes it's hard to figure out exactly what a White man wants when they're talking, where that line is. It's like, you ever see that old TV show, Seinfeld? I'm not getting half of what they find funny about it, but that's not the point. The point is that they find it funny, and you just got to go with it. You see what I'm saying? White people can get a little upset when someone brings up race and all, so just keep your head down, do your work, and get done what he asks you to get done. Got it?

He raised his eyebrow at me and I knew this was the part where I was supposed to nod my head. I'd heard this keep-your-head-down speech so many times from so many people—my brother talking about our momma, my momma talking about my principal, now my principal talking about White people like Mr. Wamsted. But hey, if having to hear this talk again is all that happened out of this whole mess, I can't complain. I got to miss class, got to keep my ipod, and in the end didn't get in trouble with Mr. Thomas. I wanted to skip out of there before anyone could change their mind about any of it. Keeping my head down isn't hard. I mean, I'm not stupid, I can do what I got to do, right? Sometimes I want to ask why it's always me that's got to keep his head down, though. Just once can't I get someone else to listen to a word I've got to say? Some other day, maybe. He tipped his head at me like I could go, and so I left.

CHAPTER 4

HOW I HOPE TO WORK WITH WHAT I HOPE TO DO

Confidentiality

“Hey, before you jump into talking about the story you just told, let me ask you a sort of question.”

“Hey, no problem. What’s your question?”

“Okay, so all science is suspect and you’re doing the best you can to get a picture of a rather disorganized situation, and you’re doing it through alternative writing practices—we just saw an example of that. That all makes sense to me, I think.”

“Good.”

“I want to be honest, though, and tell you that I still worry a bit about calling the story you just told me ‘research.’ I mean, it was good writing, and I’m sure it took a lot of time.... Don’t get me wrong, it was a nice break from all of the French philosophers and all, but...”

“...yes?”

“Well, I get that it was hard work, and in that sense you researched something. I guess I’m just not sold on quite why it matters. I hate to hurt your feelings, because I know that this is important to you. But, I mean, what good is it doing to tell this story?”

“No, that’s a fair question. I’m going to get more into that as we move on, because I really do believe that there is power in this story for all kinds of teachers. But let me just tell you real quick the good that it did me.”

“Aside from the fact that you’re getting a dissertation out of it.”

“Ouch. But, yes: aside from the fact that I’m getting professional traction out of the telling of these stories, I also experienced a series of small epiphanies in trying to write myself through the eyes of a student. To paraphrase a benefit that Ellis (2004) sees in personal stories of this nature: “[I] learned through doing autoethnography that [my] viewpoint is only one way of seeing, and [I] moved to taking the role of the other on a level that [I] hadn’t done before” (p. 287).”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“Meaning that I found myself critiquing my teaching practices in a way I think I never would have just by asking myself the question: “How do I appear to the students?” Meaning that through the process of this writing I believe I discovered something about myself that I was not expecting to discover, unusual revelations about how uptight and distracted I might appear to a teenager—behaviors that to me are the crux of my classroom management but to them might just seem totally out of touch.”

“You’re saying that in the writing you actually discovered these things about yourself, things you can’t imagine having discovered in any other, more traditional way?”

“I won’t go that far—not yet, anyway. I don’t want to claim that autoethnography has a power entirely lacking in other methodologies. But, as

part of an answer, I quote Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) and how they answered a similar question:

My point here is that these data might have escaped entirely if I had not *written*; they were collected only *in the writing*. I used writing as a method of data analysis by using writing to think; that is, I wrote my way into particular spaces I could not have occupied by sorting data with a computer....*I doubt I could have thought such a thought by thinking alone.* (p. 970, emphasis in original text)

Now, it is a given that in this case the effect of my having discovered these things through my autoethnographic writing may be pretty local. Meaning, they may only affect me and my practices in my own classroom.”

“But that’s still important, right? Insomuch as you teach some 150 students a year, and anything you can do to improve your practices is powerful to those students.”

“I totally agree. This story had a purpose that goes beyond the realm of merely earning me a degree. I really believe the writing of it made me a better teacher. But now I have a question for you.”

“Go ahead.”

“Do you really think that something so powerful to me and my 150 students has no practical value outside of my own classroom? I mean, what is the statistical probability that some other White teacher kind of like me somewhere out there might benefit from reading my story?”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way. So maybe this storytelling is doing a lot more good than I first thought.”

“Let’s say hopefully.”

“I think I might be starting to get on board with that sentiment. But I have another question before you go off and start talking about all the French philosophers again.”

“Oh, just you wait—the philosophy only gets better. In the last paper I wrote I used Deleuze and Guattari to—“

“—and we can get to all that later, okay?”

“Okay, but it’s your loss. Go ahead with your question.”

“I see what you’re doing—autoethnography—and I see how it’s as scientific as anything else out there. Or would you rather I put quotes around ‘scientific?’”

“Nice! You’re learning.”

“But isn’t this all kind of sticky from an ethical point of view? I mean, what if Shawn Robinson somehow happened to identify himself from that piece you just wrote? Or maybe worse, what if your administrator saw himself? Couldn’t that be bad for you or him or both?”

“I think it is the perfect time to address that issue. It was because of this worry that I needed to fictionalize Shawn in the second story, so that there is no ‘himself’ to be recognized. Shawn, in that second story, isn’t real. As for the administrator, he’s not real either. I stripped away most of his character’s details

from my initial writing of the piece, things that didn't add to the narrative but might have directly led to his being able to be identified. Then I added back in some affect based on my general interaction with administrators over the year. Mr. Thomas is no more a "real" character than Shawn."

"Could you go back to this 'detail-stripping' and maybe give me some examples?"

"Well, like the exact location of his office, for one. Or the exact year and semester, and other, unimportant things like that—I can't get into everything or it would ruin the effect. But, for instance, I could have made Mr. Thomas a woman instead of a man if I'd wanted. It wouldn't have changed anything about the story, but would have protected him. In fact, I may have done that here, and I certainly will do that elsewhere."

"I see what you're saying about ruining the effect. Telling your readers that you switched the gender of a character is as good as not switching it at all! Anything else?"

"Well, as you could tell, I have no way of knowing what happened after I left the room—that was all fictionalized to help me move in my thinking about how two Black people might view a White man entirely absent from the gaze of that White man. What's really interesting, however, is the technique I used to generate that little *Seinfeld* speech."

"I'd like to hear about that. This is all kind of complicated, though. Can you go into it a bit more officially?"

"Oh, sure. But for stylistic considerations, though, could you repeat your question in its entirety, please?"

"Sure. Well, Jay, what about the ethics of confidentiality in the writing process?"

Confidentiality is a tricky ethical issue. I first wondered over this problem upon reading an article Ellis (2007) wrote wherein she examined her retrospective feelings for those she had researched for her dissertation study. This study became quite famous, as it was turned into a book and all but solidified her career as a writer. However, it became famous enough that copies of the book made their way back to the community she researched; several read the work and spread the word of her at times unflattering portrayal of their people and practices. In revisiting the community years later, Ellis was surprised and upset to learn of her now semi-pariah status among those whom she had once counted as friends and near-family. Unable to properly disguise members of such a tight-knit community in writing about them, and feeling that any attempt to mask identity

sufficiently to maintain confidentiality would have entirely elided all characteristics worthy of the writing, she chose a loss of relationship over a more guarded kind of writing. Kiesinger (2002) puts it this way, anticipating fallout from her soon to be published work on her relationship with her father: “This is a complex dilemma for me. Although I feel that sharing this manuscript will help others understand and reframe their own abusive pasts, I fear that sharing it with my father will damage our current relationship in irreparable ways” (p. 107).

Long after her experience with the fisher folk, Ellis put it this way: “You have to assume everyone you write about *will* read what you write” (p. 150). I have tried to tell myself that I teach so many students—well over 1100 during the last seven years—that maintaining confidentiality for them in any story I tell is a relatively simple matter. A change of name and no mention of what year I taught them and I want to believe that I could describe a student in deep detail while virtually guaranteeing that neither they nor those who know them would see the student in my words. It has been pointed out to me, however, that without more strategies I may be stuck in the inverse situation: every student I ever taught might believe I am talking directly about them, might see themselves in places they never were. I am going to set this situation aside for the moment, however, to address the differently difficult task of maintaining confidentiality for fellow teachers or administrators—as there are so few of them and my relationship to each so specific, simple masking techniques will not do. Let me turn to an example.

I once had an article in submission for publication which was almost entirely predicated on the reader being delivered a rather detailed description of another teacher—the story rested on a single comment she had made to me, and I believed that

understanding our relationship was key to my parsing out of that comment. In an initial pass at the piece, however, I realized that any teacher or student who happened to work with or take classes from this teacher would instantly know her in my description; changing her name accomplished nothing. The experience of writing that article—which has long been resigned to the digital graveyard—prompted in me a need to explore fictional masking techniques.

I settled on an idea that I had previously thought unique to the Hollywood screenwriter tasked with the adaptation of a book or a play: composite characters. I got the idea from Fordham (2010) who, in a semi-autoethnographic work published in *Harvard Educational Review*, told stories of students in a sort of pastiche of truth. She was much more interested in establishing the essence of her characters than in maintaining veracity about who said what, and she freely combined identifying characteristics and quotations in order both to get them into her piece and to protect the privacy of any one student. Critical race theorists Solorzano and Yosso (2002) also “created composite characters who helped us tell a story” (p. 34) in their work with counter-storytelling. Ellis (2007) talks of “inventing composite characters to protect identities” (p. 16); elsewhere, Ellis and Bochner (2000) call this “collapsing characters” (p. 753). For my piece, I took the description I had already written of my colleague and changed key aspects, replacing them with those of other well-known teachers in the building, careful to try to retain the essence of how I saw her and how our interactions made me feel even as I changed the salient facts my reader might remember as takeaways. I thought it went rather well, and I

noted the technique for later—I even considered it a possible solution to my “every student sees themselves” problem.³⁹

A more difficult case presented itself around the same time that I was rewriting my composite colleague. An interaction occurred that I felt was important to write about because of how it prompted me to think about myself as a teacher, but the nature of the action would render any story (re)told about it entirely recognizable to the other players involved. Given that the happenings took place between me and some colleagues I wanted to keep separate from the writing, I wanted to explore options for how to (re)tell the story in such a manner as to keep even the colleagues involved from recognizing themselves. A tricky process, to be sure, and for a long while I thought the problem intractable.

In conversation about this situation with Professor Holbrook, however, she advised me to take the essence of the action and place it in a wholly different context, changing the entire structure around the characters and even the characters themselves so that no identification would be possible. She was advising me to find a space somewhere in between the creative nonfiction of Gerard (1996) and the methodology of Angrosino (1998) who, in his groundbreaking ethnographic work with adults with cognitive difficulties, notes that he is “using ‘creative fiction’ rather than ‘creative nonfiction’ to represent the ethnographic experience, in part because it helps overcome some ethical problems about disclosure” (p. 266). Defending this decision, he notes:

³⁹ I want to confess here that Goodall (2008), whom I admire very much as a writer, speaks disparagingly of composite characters. He writes that a “composite is by definition a fictional construction, even if everything that is used to build a composite character is true” (p. 53). The weight to me is on the other side of the argument, but I did want at least to mention the debate.

Ethnography is necessarily a depiction based on the ethnographer's own experience of the lives of the people as they have related it to him or her and as he or she has shared it. My main reason for using fictional literary techniques is to replace the stylistic appurtenances of 'objective,' scientific ethnographic discourse with a style that reinforces the shared subjectivity of the experience. (p. 265)

What happened between my colleagues and me is certainly subjective. Given this necessary subjectivity—if my writing is ever only able to show how I feel about the events in question—why maintain a slavish attention to the “truth” of detail at all, especially given that some careful fictionalization of these details could elude “ethical problems about disclosure?” Barthes (1966/1977b) reminds me that all the characters on the page—including the narrator!—are merely “paper beings” (p. 111), only “true” insofar as I adhere to the “scientific ethnographic discourse” that Angrosino (1998) is pushing against in his fictionalizations. Is there something for me here?

Though I have yet to attempt to write through this story, I did follow Professor Holbrook’s advice in Shawn’s version of the story above, and I must admit that it felt rather strange at first. In an editing session with her on the story, I found myself in kind of a corner in my efforts at writing up the brief soliloquy that an administrator might have given a student at the end of such an interaction. The trouble was, I had not been in the room at the time and as an obvious consequence do not know what exactly was said. I was confident that my colleague spoke, similarly so that I had at least a vague idea of what the stock speech to the student might look like—having given versions of that speech so many times before. My colleague, however, was Black, and I was similarly sure that his speech to a Black teenager would differ from mine in some discernible, if

slight, manner.⁴⁰ I wanted to capture this difference, if possible—wanted to make the behind-closed-doors invented speech feel as genuine as possible, and I was frustrated with my attempts.

It was during this conversation about my stilted starts that I happened to mention to Professor Holbrook some random thing a fellow teacher had said to me earlier in the year, a speech he had given his students in private that he later shared with me. I went on to tell her I was frustrated that I would never be able to use this comment because it was so identifying to the teacher in question, based on our professional relationship and the circumstances of the story. Dr. Holbrook advised me to take the one set of words of which I was certain and put them into the mouth of a composite character, spoken in a space where I was unsure what had been said. This act accomplished two goals: it kept the teacher who spoke the original words safe from identification, and it helped me think more about how I might be perceived by my students and peers. Though it was difficult for me to take incidents that had occurred years apart and merge them into one—fictionalizing in this case along the lines of Clarke and colleagues' (2005) *braided time* felt a little bit like lying⁴¹—because of the similar nature of the situations, the scene felt

⁴⁰ I feel this way through long observation of my Black colleagues at Murphy. For instance, one of the most respected, most effective teachers in our building often speaks sharply to the students, barking at the boys to “sit your monkey ass down!” The boys love him, and respond to him, and work for him; he is a powerful presence in the classroom. His efficacy notwithstanding, however, it is a tactic that I of course could never imitate. I mention it only as an example of how certain aspects of the way a Black person could work with a Black student are (and must remain) fundamentally different from the ways in which I could attempt to work.

⁴¹ But this assumes that only “science” is “real.” Clarke and colleagues' (2005) work with “braided time, [where] the beginning, the middle, and the end are wound around and circle back onto one another the way that braided hair does” (p. 924) could be as methodologically valid as my “real” remembrances. Though the collapsing of time is

strong to me and stronger still upon subsequent readings.⁴² I emerged pleased with the exercise, and—for the first time—felt hope that I one day might be able to work up the story about my colleagues that I so longed to write. Before I tackle the telling of any additional stories, however, let me push a bit further into the issue, this time from a slightly more theoretical angle.

Theoretical Tools: The Author & The Story

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’ ” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’ ”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock down argument,’ ” Alice objected.

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*

(Carroll, 1871/1992b, p. 161, emphasis in original text)

The ethics of telling “true” stories should never cause me to refuse to tell such tales, as I have already noted that my cookie cutter of postmodernism and poststructuralism has a certain ability to trouble the text and the author. For example, Barthes (1968/1977a) wrote about the death of the author just a year before Foucault (1969/1984c) asked what an author actually was. Foucault’s answer:

most typically seen as a tool of the straight fiction writer (see Bell, 1997 for examples), every footnote I read or write is an example of an accepted social science practice of this method.

⁴² See Angrosino (2002) for an example of how he took “a conversation I had with someone else on another occasion altogether” and put it in the mouth of another person in his autoethnography, justifying that “a single representative figure is much easier to deal with” (p. 330).

It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance. (p. 112)

The author is a “function”—Derrida (1967/1997) says that “the questions of origin carry with them a metaphysics of presence” (p. 74)—and I am encouraged by Deleuze and Guattari (1987a) to “write, form a rhizome, increase your territory by deterritorialization, extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency” (p. 11). Barthes (1968/1977a), convinced as he is that the author is dead, tells me that “there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not as was hitherto said, the author” (p. 112). A more gentle way to express it would be to call the writer and the reader “coproducers of meaning” (Tillman-Healy, 2002, p. 340). Alcoff (2009) writes that the “the concept of the author is an ideological construction many abstractions removed from the way in which ideas emerge and become material forces” (p. 132). Poststructuralism would remind me that none of what I read is supposed to be “true” in any colloquial sense. It is not who wrote the words or who the story is based on that matter so much to the poststructuralist; it is the words themselves, the coproduction of the reading, the text. What CRT calls the story.

Dixson and Rousseau (2006a) write of the “centrality of storytelling in CRT” (p. 7), and I have already introduced the majoritarian story and its use in CRT as a way to write about the dominant narrative—another name for Lyotard’s “metanarrative.” I have defined the counter-story as an oppositional tale to this majoritarian story, and here my terms muddle just a bit. The majoritarian story is not a story at all—rather it is a metaphor for discourse or narrative, as when Delgado (1995) writes, “White folks tell stories, too [but] they don’t seem like stories at all, but the truth” (p. 194). The counterstory can also

be used in this metaphorical manner; however, it is also a more literal leaning of the word “story.” In other words, some of the counterstories used in CRT are, in fact, actually stories. An excellent example is Dixson and Rousseau’s (2006b) chapter “The First Day of School: A CRT Story” contained within their 2006 edited volume which compiled key scholarship on CRT, both old and new. In this chapter they tell an extended story about an imagined first day of school in a racially segregated district, a first day that found the Black students receiving the lion’s share of the district’s resources while the White students languished in second-rate buildings and leftover teachers—a fictional following of St. Pierre’s (2011) advice to reverse the binary. Here I see a possibly powerful connection from CRT’s story to poststructuralism’s author: for a tale to have the power to subvert, to affect the dominant discourse, it need not be either true or carry with it the weight of the named author. The story need only to resonate as text, to interact with the reader in some meaningful manner, to spur some sort of coproduction that might trouble Lather’s (2006) “tidy binaries.” The fiction I somewhat fear to tread may not be turn out to be so scary after all.

A word, however, about truth. Dixson and Rousseau (2006b) tell me that a story need not be “true” in order to affect—and let me always remember Spivak’s (1976/1997) aside upon using the word “truth”: “if one can risk that word” (p. lxiv)—but the question presents itself: what about “true” stories? After all, my story with Shawn did, in fact, “happen.” Following Humpty Dumpty’s affirmation that a word can mean whatever he wishes it to mean, let me decree that “true” means something along the lines of “containing reference to an event that all involved would agree occurred in some form or

fashion.”⁴³ Are stories such as these acceptable? A brief survey of true stories in the critical postmodern library: Marjorie Wolf’s (1992) work *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism & Ethnographic Responsibility*, an academic interrogation of an almost forgotten autobiographical text; Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1994) personal stories laced throughout *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*; Derrick Bell’s (1992) clear folding of his own experiences into the seminal CRT tome *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*; Richard Delgado’s (1995) similarly styled and heavily indebted *The Rodrigo Chronicles: Conversations about America and Race*; Victor Villanueva’s (1993) *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, a seamless weaving of personal story and deep academic text; and Carol Rambo’s (2007b) article “Sketching as Autoethnographic Practice,” intercut with scenes from her former life as a young art student; last, but not least, possibly the first ever critical autoethnography: W. E. B. Du Bois’ (1903/1995) classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*.

So true stories—the building blocks of the autoethnography I am trying to write (Richardson, 2000; Leggo, 2007)—are as integral to the traditions of postmodernism and poststructuralism as they are to those of CRT. Both fields of play also attest to the importance of the minimization of the author: postmodernism and poststructuralism for largely theoretical reasons—Gergen and Gergen (2002) put it this way: “we are invited into dialogue with [the author’s] point of view from the perspective of our own” (p. 18)—and CRT for largely practical purposes—“the problematics of *writing* [are] intimately connected to the realisation that research texts might carry undetected, unwelcome traces

⁴³ This is not a definition nor a quotation. Rather, I made it up.

of colonialism, racism and gendered privilege in their very structure and poetics” (MacLure, 2009, p. 99, emphasis in original text). My critical postmodern perspective has provided some fertile ground here in the intersection of the author and the story, a fertility I hope to exploit by writing “true” counterstories in my autoethnography. Before I close, however—in advance of moving on to the project of the autoethnography proper⁴⁴—let me briefly examine one more ethical dilemma.

Consumption & Appropriation

“Okay, that sounds reasonable. Not that you’ve got confidentiality all figured out, by any means, but that you’re at least on track. What do you want to call all that—fictional masking?”

“That seems as good a term as any for now. Thanks for the suggestion.”

“But I have another ethical question, if that’s all right with you?”

“Absolutely. I think this is the perfect place for just such a question.”

“Okay, a while back—during the non-French philosopher part of this whole conversation—you laid out a decent argument about the state of the Black school and how White people are going to be needed for some time in the future to address this thing you’re calling the...”

“Education debt.”

“Got it. And you even convinced me that math teachers might just matter more than other types of teachers. That was a nice piece of work, by the way.”

“Thanks. I am trying to convince the powers-that-be of the fact that math teachers might just benefit from this autoethnographic type of work as much as the traditionally liberal arts teachers. Part of that argument rests upon the fact that despite the seeming universal nature of the subject matter, math teachers are in an increasingly unusual place as professionals, given the national attention on test scores and the shifting demographics of the public school classroom.”

“It makes sense, to be sure. But I still have some questions about how this autoethnography you’re writing actually works. About the ethics of the writing process itself.”

“So what’s your question?”

“All this talk about colonialism got me thinking about you telling other people’s stories. I mean, I know that they’re your stories, but by virtue of other people being in them, they’re also their stories too, you know? It reminded me of something Du Bois (1903/1995) said, how the Black man’s world “yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (p. 45). By being the teller of these tales, are you possibly

⁴⁴ Although by this time I am hoping that you, dear reader, have already discerned that the autoethnography actually began long ago, long before the first “story” was told.

contributing to the Black man needing the White man to see himself—robbing him of his self-consciousness?”

“Hey, look at you: quoting literature! But you have to also remember what Du Bois said about needing the tandem action of White people to fix the problem of the color line. I think what he meant by that is that some White people are going to have to step down even while Black people rise up. We’ll have to become what some people call a ‘race traitor’ (Segrest, 1994; Ignatiev, 1996/1993). This work might be my small step towards such a thing, even if I have to appropriate a story or two.”

“Okay, okay—I don’t want to argue Du Bois with you. But you see my point?”

“I do. Something about Black self-consciousness?”

“Let me put it this way: have you thought about the ethics of all of this appropriation? Is it possible that you are doing a disservice to your students by consuming their actions into your stories?”

“Ah! That’s a good question. Let’s look at that.”

The ultimate aim of educational ethnographic and qualitative research and, for that matter, education research in general, is to generate knowledge that contributes to the well-being of human beings and is otherwise beneficial to scholarship, policy, practice, or the people who participate in the research (Hostetler, 2005). Good educational ethnographers and qualitative researchers not only strive to make beneficial contributions but also are ethical in their relations with research participants. They may, and often do, confront thorny ethical dilemmas during the course of their fieldwork, which, it is hoped, they resolve in a fashion that does not hurt participants or do serious damage to the research. (Hemmings, 2006, p. 12)

I like this quote by Hemmings (2006) for several reasons. First, I am attracted—naïve as this may seem—to the idea that the work I do is ultimately for the “well-being” of both those I work with and the place in which I work—that is, the students, teachers, and system in general of both my particular school and the body of our nation’s schools writ large. I believe that I might just have some “beneficial contributions” to make to these various people and institutions. Ellis and Bochner (2000) write that the “goal [of autoethnography] is to write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference” (p. 742); in a published conversation on criteria for the evaluation of ethnography, Laurel Richardson says, “[should] modern

ethnography...inspire people to do good? ...inspire people to higher works? I would want to say that. I definitely would want my writing to do that” (Richardson & Lockridge, 1998, p. 335). In this, however, I also see myself pushed into “thorny ethical dilemmas” that I must decide how to manage. I have previously covered the issue of confidentiality; Ellis’ (2007) article about her dissertation study also brought to light for me the problem of appropriation and its attendant metaphor of consumption. She writes of an epiphany she had soon after suffering through the aforementioned loss of relationship with her research subjects:

While I cared for the *Fisher Folk* [the name she gave the community and subsequent title of her book], my loyalties were not to them. I was trying to find my place in academia, build my career, and contribute to sociological knowledge, goals no doubt nurtured by my graduate education. (p. 10)

Alarm bells rang in my head when I read these words, sitting as I was in my school on a break from my teaching duties. The question immediately presented itself: where were my loyalties? To the students I was being paid to teach? Or to my nascent career as a writer and researcher?

Marker (2009) assures me that “there *is* no disinterested academic” (p. 39, emphasis in original text), and by this I think he means “disinterested in the outcome of what they are studying.” Everyone has something on the line, some scratch in the game, so to speak. I certainly want every day when I stand in front of my class to get some mathematics taught; increasingly, however, I am also looking for good stories pertaining to race and my interactions with the same students learning mathematics from me. I am, in a sense, looking to *consume* them (Lather, 2009). Hole (2007) encourages me that this might be okay when she raises some “ethical questions” pertaining to the poststructural

destabilization work she was doing: “Is this analysis useful? Can a poststructural analysis add to the political debates and extend the discussion without undermining the political importance of the [work?]” (p. 276). Do I believe my poststructural analysis of race in my classroom is useful, that my consumption may be in some sense helpful for all involved? This sentiment may sound incredulous, but I actually do believe that my self-research can “extend the discussion” and “add to the political debates” orbiting around Black students in mathematics classrooms. Cannot my loyalties, my interests, be to both the mathematics standards of my 9th grade curriculum and my race-related stories? Could my consumption bring about some good? It is a fact that it will advance me as an academic; in order to continue in good conscience, though, I have to believe that it may be able to provide a similar benefit to others.

Marker (2009) may have another word for me. As he is writing from the space of a more traditional ethnographer, he uses the term “Indigenous people” twice in this quote. This label makes little sense for me in my work, though, and thus I have replaced it with “those they work with.” Marker asks:

Are researchers...willing to let go of their expectations and allow themselves to be overwhelmed by the unsettling sensation of flux and uncertainty about truth? Will they let [those they work with] tell them what is important to study and learn about? Or, will they continue to insist on defining [those they work with] in ways that suit their academic disciplines, their careers, and their political agendas? (p. 35)

I believe I have here a charge for myself. I like the thought of allowing myself to be “overwhelmed” by an “unsettling sensation of flux and uncertainty” about the ideas and beliefs I bring with me to my work every day; it reminds me of Rambo’s (2007b) standing with instability. It seems, according to Marker, that if I can let myself live in this uncertainty, if I can let my students and colleagues define for me what it is that is

important in our work at school, if I can try to minimize my expectations as to how good data geared toward my own academic career might manifest itself, then possibly I can do ethical work both teaching mathematics and writing about those whom I teach. Possibly my consumption of their stories might serve some greater good. At least, I hope that this is possible; I shall see.

Let me look back again at the example of Shawn's story. In conversation with Professor Holbrook about the writing, I commented that what I had done was in following with Lather's (2009) advice to use multivoicedness as a "[contemporary practice] of representation designed to move ethnography away from scientism and the appropriation of others" (p. 20). I thought I had avoided consuming Shawn by giving him a voice. Professor Holbrook pointed out to me that I had done no such thing—despite my belief that I had painted my student on the morally higher ground in this story, I had still appropriated him, fictionalized him into a composite character in order to tell the story I wanted. I was the only one to gain from this story being told, and I was still the only one who got to tell it. Despite my best efforts, I had entirely consumed Shawn and his story. When I expressed some small dismay at Professor Holbrook's correction, she asked me a simple question: Does the fact that I appropriated Shawn take away from the power of what I had written? I agreed that it had not; in the spirit of writing as a method of inquiry, I learned about myself by trying to write "me" through a student's eyes. After all, as Richardson (2001) reminds me, poststructuralism "frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said at once.... The life can be told over and over again, differently nuanced" (p. 36). Perhaps a poststructural analysis permits this type of consumption—especially if I am up front about it.

Professor Holbrook’s correction of my thoughts on multivoicedness was well taken, however. It is worth remembering when I attempt to undertake the voice of a young, Black student—a reality I only know about from the outside, and even that rather tangentially—what MacLure (2009) tells me: “The emergence of voice into qualitative research is intimately connected to the realisation that research texts might carry undetected, unwelcome traces of colonialism, racism and gendered privilege in their very structure and poetics” (p. 97). It may have benefitted me and my work to tell the story twice, from two different points of view; this type of writing, however, is not Lather’s (2009) ideal of multivoicedness—a text where I would actually have included my student in the writing. MacLure’s (2009) potential for colonialism and racism coupled with the reality of consumption need temper my attempts to affect the voice of another. They do not, however, force me to abnegate the strategy altogether.

There is danger in all this talk, though; here be dragons. I have borrowed the consumption metaphor from Lather (2009), who writes about it disparagingly: “consumption, a too-easy, too-familiar eating of the other” (p. 23). Merely stating that I have no story to tell without the necessary appropriation of the others in my life does not guard me against this “too-easy, too-familiar” consumption. Again I feel cautioned to avoid becoming one of Martin’s (2007) cannibals—although this is not quite how he uses the term. Perhaps I can close amidst this tension with a quote from Ladson-Billings (2005), from her foreword to the edited volume *Black Education: A Transformative Research and Action Agenda for the New Century*. Ladson-Billings writes:

We refer to students who are ‘low-income,’ ‘culturally diverse,’ and the ‘achievement gap’ and ‘dropouts,’ but we really mean Black children. We speak of ‘welfare moms,’ ‘criminal element,’ and ‘violent individuals,’ when we mean Black people. We say ‘housing projects,’ ‘ghetto,’ and

‘poor neighborhoods’ as proxies for Black communities. There is no language of excellence, hope, and promise aimed at Black people and their circumstances. (p. xv)

The typical language purporting to be “speaking about” (Alcoff, 2009) Black students in America is dismally lacking in hope. There are dangers in consuming the stories of others, to be sure, but given that my autoethnography must necessarily appropriate the stories of Black people—else I could not write about my school at all—the least I can do is to remember Ladson-Billings’ words here. I can try, as best I can, to use a “language of excellence, hope, and promise.” This effort may not solve my problems of appropriation and consumption; it is, I hope, at least a piece of a part of a start of a solution. Let me attempt to make such an effort as I (finally) finish the story with which I began this first half of my dissertation work.

CHAPTER 5

AN ENDING OF SORTS

“Racist!” Resolved

So, what did I do when the student hollered “Racist!” at me? Fortunately, as I have already shown, this was not the first time something like this had happened. In retrospect, I believe I lost a lot of respect that day from Shawn Robinson’s class—a class in which I never managed to feel comfortable, always wondering if I had somehow backed myself into an unfortunate corner. I’m not even sure exactly what a commensurate overreaction would have been during this second incident—I knew who the student was the first time; I had no clue during the Africa activity. Thankfully, I am a rather different teacher and person than I was that first time, and so I didn’t have to get all huffed and puffed to prove my point.

“Oh, I get it,” I said slowly, walking to the back of the room to turn off the air conditioner so I could lower my voice to a deliberate volume intended to transmit how not-upset I was. “Because I’m White, and you’re Black. I get it.” Nervous laughter rattled around the room as I kept my voice even, almost playful, like we were all in on the same joke.

I was back to the front of the room again. “I guess you’d have rather I said ‘Europe?’” More laughter, less nervous now. I erased “Africa” and wrote “Europe” in its place. “How about we do Europe? You know, since that’s where my people came from?” The laughter was getting more assured, and in watching the class I was even able to guess who it was that spoke in the first place, as he looked a little less than jolly about the whole scene.

“You know, you try to do a good thing,” I said, almost as if to myself as I counted out coordinates. “The White man always gets to go first, and I try to cut the Black man a break, and you guys think I’m a racist. Oh well, I tried, I guess.” I finished writing the coordinate for Europe, and the class is positively roaring now. I turned around dramatically and swept my eyes across the class, certain now that I knew which student was my culprit.

“Okay, now can I do Africa? Now that we’ve established that I’m not racist? Or would you rather we do Asia?” I go ahead and do Africa, put my pen in my pocket.

“Okay, y’all—it’s your turn now. Finish.”

And they did.

Coda

I am convinced that I would have played this part differently, badly differently, just two or three years ago. Even after the incident with Shawn Robinson, I am convinced that it is only my work writing and reading and thinking on my Whiteness and my students’ Blackness and the intersections and opportunities therein that enabled me to hold in my instinctive White fear of being construed as racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) long enough to make something good of the moment, as Tatum (2007) would have us do with these racially charged exchanges. I am convinced that it was in following Richardson’s (2000) admonition to use my writing as a method of inquiry that I was equipped for this moment. She notes, “I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it” (p. 924), and I have as solid a proof as I require that this is excellent practice. After all, it was mere weeks before the “Racist!” incident took place that I had written up the Shawn story. Working closely with Professor

Holbrook on the tone and technique of telling a story from another’s point of view, we came out of the process with the skeleton of an article intact; little did I know, though, that the real result of the paper would not surface until the middle of Math Support a few weeks later, when I was able to react to a similar situation with considerably more grace and—one would hope—more efficacy. I believe quite literally that it was my foray into the critical postmodern autoethnography that summer that laid the smooth stones of a foundation for that next school year. Is it too much to hope that it could do the same for a pre-service teacher?

One last thing. I still teach the student who I knew almost without a doubt had called out the word that day, some year and a half later now, though I have never broached the subject of the “Racist!” day with him. I want to bring him into a tighter, more personal focus here, so I am going to call him Eddie. A few months after my story took place, I was glancing over Eddie’s journal. He was standing next to me, kind of grinning, bouncing in that way a teenage boy can do after noon on a Friday, and I happened to glance over the words “And I was kind of rude to Mr. Wamsted at the beginning of the year.” I looked up at him and smiled.

“Yeah, what was with that at the beginning of the year?” I didn’t mention any particulars, and he kind of shrugged his shoulders.

“Yeah, I don’t know,” he said, kind of half looking away while somehow managing to keep his eyes locked on me.

I smiled at him and turned to my computer. “Okay, let’s see what that does for your grade,” I said, and he hunched down over my shoulder for us to check out his

assignments. I couldn't help but wonder how differently our year might be going had I not been prepared for him that day the second week of school.⁴⁵

Directions

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
 “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the
 Cat.
 “I don't much care where—” said Alice.
 “Then it doesn't matter which way you go,” said the Cat.
 “—so long as I get *somewhere*,” Alice added as an explanation.
 “Oh, you're sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long
 enough.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
 (Carroll, 1865/1992a, p. 51, emphasis in original text)

Richardson (2000) says that the power of the kinds of autoethnographical vignettes I have been telling depends on their “rhetorical staging as ‘true stories,’ stories about events that really happened to the writers” (p. 931). I think now, for the first time, I might understand what she is getting at. What happened between my students and me during our brief encounter may not quite be the “meaningful, productive dialogue to raise consciousness and lead to effective action and social change” (p. 193) that Tatum (1997) calls for, but I think it just might be a start.

I have misled my readers slightly here. Prior to this point all of my *Alice* quotes have been connected to theory and the trickier stuff of the dissertation. This section, however, is pretty personal. It just so happens that the conversation Alice has with the Cat is one of my favorite in the entire book, and it rather appropriately leads me into my last little comment here. I like this quote because it reminds me that walking will always get you somewhere; it is only in choosing a direction ahead of time that one is able to reach a

⁴⁵ Eddie went on to do well in my class last year, and I would call him a key contributor to my positive classroom climate today. The critical postmodern autoethnography has continued to pay dividends.

purposeful somewhere. The Cheshire Cat reminds me that if I write purposelessly I may end up with a dissertation, but not one that matters to me or my students. The Cheshire Cat keeps me focused on my goal.

What is that goal? In conversation with my writing group about early drafts of this section, Erika noted that my reaction to the second “Racist!” incident was certainly better than the first, but that I had not sufficiently troubled possible deficiencies inherent in it. Specifically, she noted the sarcasm that I was clearly hiding behind as a possible problem in my relationships with my students. I want to make clear here that I do find my reaction to be still problematic, to be still reeking of power and privilege, to be still far from ideal. I want to remember the Cheshire Cat—to set a direction for my research so that I end up somewhere I want to be, as opposed to merely any old somewhere. In the spirit of directions, I hope that the next time something like this happens to me—as I am sure it one day will—I can respond with dialogue, with sarcasm-less questions, with a humor hoping for a response other than merely laughter. My second response was certainly better than my first. I hope that my third will be better still.

One Final Conversation

“Hey, we did it!”

“Did what?”

“Got to the end of the first part. You finished. You wrote it all up!”

“I know, right? And to think that when I first started this whole process I was so scared about the prospectus stage. Now, in the editing stage of the dissertation process, I see that the prospectus is way less than half of what I will write overall. How could I have been so frightened of this first part?”

“You were scared, weren’t you? Scared enough that you had to start talking to yourself, huh?”

“Hey! Now you’re making the existential jokes!”

“Well, I’m a quick study. But seriously, and please don’t take this the wrong way, why exactly are we still talking? I mean, as fun as this has been and all...”

“Oh, that. Well, I was thinking that you might give us one more super quick conclusion.”

“Me? You want me to be the bridge between the halves of your dissertation?”

“Yeah. You were so impressive with all of the ‘double-consciousness’ stuff. I thought you could handle it.”

“So what do I say? I mean, do we really need another conclusion?”

“I think so. They call it an elevator speech. If you ran into someone who randomly asks you what I’m doing for my dissertation, and you only had 15 seconds to talk it through, what would you say?”

“I’d tell them it took me until page 90 to get through it, and they better get themselves to doing some heavy reading.”

“Har har. Seriously, are you going to do this for me or not?”

“Yeah, I got it. Here we go, an elevator speech about your dissertation: You’re writing an autoethnography, which is like a super academic, self-analytical memoir. Primarily, you will be examining and presenting your data through the method of writing as inquiry, and you have an example of that in your stories about being called a racist. If you read a whole lot of fancy French philosophers you’ll learn that this type of research is just as valid as anything else out there. You use your example to look at some serious ethical questions of appropriation, consumption, and confidentiality, but you’re struggling toward solutions to these problems as best you can. And you’re super excited about learning how all this will work as you go.”

“Wait, you just made that up right now!”

“Well, aren’t you? Excited, I mean.”

“Yeah, I suppose I am. I guess I forgot to say that, huh? You’ve probably hit on a better way to end this first part than any I had in the hopper, so let’s go your way.”

“You’re going to end with my comment?”

“You bet. I’m super excited about learning how all this will work as I go. After all, I expect that the writing process itself will provide me with a rich opportunity to really figure this all out.”

“There’s probably some reference from Laurel Richardson that you’re going to add right there, huh?”

“Nah. I’ll trust the reader to figure it out for themselves.”

CHAPTER 6

A SECOND INTRODUCTION⁴⁶

“And ever since that,” the Hatter went on in a mournful tone, “he wo’n’t do a thing I ask! It’s always six o’clock now.”

A bright idea came into Alice’s head. “Is that the reason so many tea-things are put out here?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s it,” said the Hatter with a sigh: “it’s always tea-time, and we’ve no time to wash the things between whiles.”

“Then you keep moving round, I suppose?” said Alice.

“Exactly so,” said the Hatter: “as the things get used up.”

“But what happens when you come to the beginning again?” Alice ventured to ask.

“Suppose we change the subject,” the March Hare interrupted, yawning. “I’m getting tired of this. I vote the young lady tells us a story.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*
(Carroll, 1865/1992a, p. 58)

Having a rather active imagination, I am going to invite my reader into a recurring daydream of mine. A couple of times a year, after my children settle down to sleep, I leave my wife at home and head out on my bicycle for a kind of mini-adventure. I ride somewhere for dinner, which I eat alone while reading bits and pieces of several books, and I then make my way to the movie theater near my house. In a previous life—sometime after college but before marriage—I would typically go by myself to see one or two movies a week; it remains one of my all-time guilty pleasures. It is entirely possible that the audiovisual and narrative stimulation I experience from the movie itself is primarily responsible for my recurring fantasy—soon to arrest my imagination on the ride home—but I can certainly isolate some other factors. Riding the empty roads back from the movie close to midnight is a stark contrast to my daily commute (also by bicycle), and

⁴⁶ Much of this chapter has been adapted from a previous publication (Wamsted, 2012a). Many thanks to the editors at *Qualitative Research in Education* and the publishers at Hipatia Press for allowing me to (re)use my ideas about the barriers to autoethnography.

the sidewalks splashed with silent lamplight probably evoke a certain amount of nostalgia in me for a time long past, when as a boy I used to race home in an effort to make curfew. I still sip soda and consume candy during these late-night films, as if I were a much younger man, and the now atypically large amount of sugar might interact ill with the adrenaline of the ride; probably this effect adds to my mind racing wildly. Whatever the exact causes, these mental and physical contributions culminate in the same waking dream, every time, at the same point of my ride: the old covered bridge.

I am alone, racing across a converted bike and foot path used to traverse the massive interstate perimeter of my hometown, so high above the occasional cars below that I feel not only alone on my bike, but also in the world. It is here that my brain always skips a beat, and all the science-fiction and fantasy movie and novels I have consumed in my life assault me in a moment, and I find my mind wandering, wondering: “Probably this is where I will travel back in time. Probably I will emerge on the other side of this bridge at some point in my distant past. Probably I will not be able to go home tonight. Probably I will have to solve this puzzle instead and figure out a way to return to my own time. Probably my life will turn suddenly into the plot of a fantastic book.” Ridiculous as this sounds, rest assured that it all makes perfect sense in the slipstream calm of the moment.

I always imagine myself in the same time—fifteen years ago, 1997—though I have no idea why. I usually picture myself riding my bicycle in the middle of the night 90 miles to where I was in college at the time, accosting my 20 year old self and his friends, pleading for help in finding a way back to my present life. I picture the conversations I would have with these boys: what I would or would not share, what advice I would give,

on which matters I must remain silent. I envision myself sitting in all our old haunts with them, marveling at the situation at hand, them trying to get me to tell them everything and me demurring in the interest of the pseudo-canonical rules of time travel. I think this through every time I cross this bridge, wonder anew at what I would do were such a thing to occur, how I would convince them to help me escape the trap of the past. Oftentimes the spell continues for the remainder of the ride home, breaking only after I creep quietly into my children's rooms to tuck them under covers they are still asleep beneath and slip silently next to my wife who still shares our bed. It is a powerful fantasy, one which has an unexplainable hold on me. At risk of offending the Freudians, I am not going to attempt to explain it; rather I merely move on to state what I think all of this has to do with autoethnography.

Meeting the Other

The March Hare is bored. Alice is attempting to suss out the rules that govern the seeming chaos of the Mad Tea Party, and the Hatter is eager to explain. The Hare, however, is tired of such philosophizing. Much like my reader, I might imagine. The good news is that by and large the theoretical sections of my dissertation have been handled already; it is time, finally, to move on to some stories. There remains, though, one not insignificant piece of philosophy for me to push into before I can feel completely confident in the authority of my autoethnographic voice. Fortunately, for both my reader and the March Hare alike, this high bit of theory also begins with a story—although not one of my own. I have previously used a piece of work by Argentine mystery writer Jorge Luis Borges in my writing (Wamsted, 2011), and at the risk of typecasting myself I am

going to return here to his rich vein of fantastical fiction in an effort to introduce this theory that undergirds the second half of my dissertation.

In the short story “The Other” (1975/1998), Borges tells an ostensibly autobiographical tale that I believe resonates with Gannon’s (2006) *paradox of poststructural autoethnography*: “Although autoethnographic research seems to presume that the subjects can speak (for) themselves, poststructural theories disrupt this presumption and stress the (im)possibilities of writing the self from a fractured and fragmented subject position” (p. 475). In an effort to push into this paradox—a problem that has already accosted me in the prospectus work which turned into the first half of this dissertation—I first briefly summarize Borges’ (1975/1998) story before noting what I believe is an interesting aspect that sets it apart from other, similar work. I then tease out three thoughts—difficulties, in fact—that might prove useful for me to consider in my own efforts at autobiographical writing. In the end I allow Borges the opportunity to suggest a way out of these potential problems. In this act I believe that I bolster the authority of my autoethnographic voice.

The story is a rather simple one, almost slight in plot and action. A 73-year-old Borges is claiming to be writing of an event he experienced three years previous, but that he has chosen to suppress on account of its unbelievable qualities. In his telling of that time, he sits down on a park bench in Cambridge, Massachusetts for a moment of contemplation only to have his attention drawn to a person who takes the seat right next to him, whistling. Hearing this man suddenly sing the words to the Argentinian tune engenders the realization that this is in fact no stranger—rather, it is a 19-year-old version of Borges himself who has filled this empty seat. The older man is at first horrified at this

revelation, but then seems to recover by immersing himself in the academic task of trying to convince the younger that they are, in fact, both Borges. The matter is complicated by the fact that the younger man claims to be sitting on a bench in Geneva, Switzerland; it seems that space as well as time has in some way been bent. They converse for a short while, the younger man comes to realize that what should be impossible appears to be true, the older tells the younger some future facts from their shared life, and they part ways after agreeing to meet again the next day at the same time on the same bench. Despite the incredible fantasy of the premise, nothing remarkable happens; the entire story takes up less than seven pages in my Borges anthology.

I want to begin my analysis of this story by noting that there is nothing unusual—from a narrative point of view—about the younger Borges failing to recognize his older self. Rather, it is to be expected that upon first being confronted by this unbelievable circumstance, the younger would say something like, “It *is* odd that we look so much alike, but you are much older than I, and you have gray hair” (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 412, emphasis in original text). This failure of recognition is in keeping with a long line of time-travel tropes. These “rules” could be the subject of a dissertation of their own, but I mention briefly the movie *Back to the Future, Part II* (Canton, Gale, & Zemeckis, 1989) because, though a far cry from Borges in artistic sensibility, it is in my opinion one of the genre’s seminal films. At some point in the action a character travels from 2015 to 1955 in order to give his much younger self some information intended to make them both rich; they have a rather long conversation during which the younger never gets beyond a glimmer of a realization that he is talking to his future self. This sentiment might be more poetically expressed in the lyrics of a song by singer Bill Mallonee (1999): “Desperate

times, you know everybody's part / It's your own lines you'd like to forget / Till what you were meets what you've now become / And grins and says 'Hey, haven't we met?'" (Track 3). No, I am not surprised to find the younger Borges needing significant convincing of the fact that he is speaking to his much older self. What I find unusual, though—and more applicable to my task as autoethnographer—is the more subtle inability the older Borges seems to have in recognizing the younger. It is this seemingly paradoxical piece of misunderstanding that I would like to briefly push into over the next few paragraphs.

Three Barriers to Autoethnography

When the younger man first sits down on the bench, he is described by the older only as “someone” and “the other man” (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 411). Even after the older man experiences the unpleasant shock of finding the younger man's voice familiar—“I recognized it with horror” (p. 412)—he proceeds to ask the younger man several questions, seemingly attempting to convince himself that this bizarre situation is actually occurring. What is important from my point of view as an autoethnographer is that there appears to be some sort of veil between the two versions of Borges; it is the uniqueness of this veil in the time-travel canon that makes this story so interesting to me. This difficulty of initial recognition continues to show itself in three distinct ways throughout the story—I call these subtle problems of recognition *barriers*—and I contend that these barriers are important to me not only as a reader of Borges but also as an autoethnographer. These problems are: (a) the barrier of memory and knowledge, (b) the barrier of understanding and interpretation, and (c) the barrier of communication. I briefly discuss each in turn.

The barrier of memory and knowledge appears in two separate places in the story. First, when the older Borges is attempting to convince the younger that they are in fact both Borges, he goes through a litany of facts about their shared experience intended to demonstrate the fact of their overlapping identities; however, toward the end of this rather long speech he makes a small mistake about a street name, a mistake which the younger man quickly corrects. In the second instance, the conversation moves on and the older Borges begins to make small talk with his younger self. The older asks the younger what he is reading, the younger replies Dostoyevsky, and the older inquires, "It's a bit hazy to me now. Is it any good?" (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 414). This question in and of itself is not surprising; I am sure all of my readers can relate to a certain haziness in attempting to remember details of a book read some years past. What is important to note, however, in regards to my work at autoethnography, is that this barrier of memory and knowledge between who we are and who we were exists in far more important aspects than just the books we once read or the streets we used to walk. As an autoethnographer, I am in a near-constant battle with my memory, and to trust it fully—as heretofore on my academic journey I rather blindly have—is a mistake which, though certainly common, could only serve to undermine the work I hope to do.

The barrier of understanding and interpretation is brought to light only after the younger Borges is able to come to terms with their situation. A conversation ensues, described by the older Borges:

A half century does not pass without leaving its mark. Beneath our conversation, the conversation of two men of miscellaneous readings and diverse tastes, I realized that we would not find common ground. We were too different, yet too alike. We could not deceive one another, and that makes conversation hard. Each of us was almost a caricature of the other. (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 416)

They fully know each other here—this problem is not one of knowledge or memory. Rather, what I see here is the language of drift: Borges' tastes have changed, the years have left their inevitable mark, the older Borges cannot quite find common ground with this man he used to be. It is worth noting, also, that it seems the older is surprised by all of these things. This paragraph is haunting to my work as an autoethnographer, in that it appears that even if I remember something correctly, even if I know the facts of the past with something approaching full veracity, my interpretation of that event will necessarily change over the years. Perhaps how I see a scene could even change so drastically that my much younger self, the self who in fact underwent the event, would fail to find common ground with me in simple discussion of it. Perhaps also I would find myself surprised at this drift, in some sort of denial that it has, in fact, happened to me.⁴⁷

The final barrier I see in this story—that of communication—is similar to the barrier of understanding and interpretation, but in a rather insidious way subtly different. This difficulty in communication is demonstrated in a passage toward the end of the story which takes place immediately after the older Borges suggests the two men's meeting again the following day: "He immediately agreed, then said, without looking at his watch, that it was getting late, he had to be going. Both of us were lying, and each of us knew that the other one was lying (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 417). This quick exchange goes

⁴⁷ I am reminded here of an apocryphal definition of insanity bouncing around my brain: Insanity is the whole-hearted belief that you alone are the only sane person you know. It seems to me that most of us, though doubting the memory ability of those around us, secretly trust our own memory almost entirely, in a manner we would call crazy if seen in someone else. This train of thought in turn takes me to something Davis and Hersh (1981) wrote about mathematical philosophy: "The typical working mathematician is a Platonist on weekdays and a formalist on Sundays" (p. 321). In other words, the majority of our work is spent acting in ways that merely feel right, though if called to task by some higher power we quickly know how to get our philosophical ducks in a row.

beyond a mere problem of understanding or interpretation; the two men in fact seem to understand each other quite well: they understand that they are both liars. I find this deliberate obfuscation to be especially poignant in the case of the older Borges—it seems unsurprising to me that a younger self would out of ignorance or bravado speak untruths to the older, but for an older man to lie to his younger self smacks more of sadness and regret than hope and expectation. Meaning, I make promises all the time in regards to what I am going to do in order to make the future different than the present; this is natural, and equally natural that some of these promises I make to my future self will go unfilled, even as I know at the time that I might be overreaching my ability to make good on what I say I want. It is somewhat pitiful, though, to consider that in looking back upon my life—in undertaking the examination of the past that is autoethnography—I may speak untruths into that very past, that in some vain effort to protect my ego I might purposefully lie to myself about who I once was or what I once did. It is one thing to consider the barriers of knowledge, memory, interpretation, communication; I find the fact that I need to consider these obstacles to my autoethnography manageable. I find it chilling, however, to consider that I might have to deal with more than just these natural veils that shield my sight from the past, that I might be capable of this sort of deliberate misdirection.

A Step Forward

Let me recap this dissertation work as it exists so far, for myself as much as for my reader. I have for the most part frozen in time my thoughts about what I believed a critical postmodern autoethnography might be like at the time of my prospectus defense, in the process hinting at methods and tactics that led me to my first successful publication

of autoethnographic writing. My publication victory (Wamsted, 2011) was short lived, however, as it was less than halfway through my prospectus defense when my professors began pushing me to grapple with the nature of self-knowledge, Gannon's (2006) "paradox of poststructural autoethnography" (p. 474–475).⁴⁸ Before moving on to the second half of my dissertation—the struggle to qualify the problem of self-knowledge—I first have tried to demonstrate Gannon's paradox by teasing out three barriers to self-knowledge which I believe show themselves in a short story by Borges (1975/1998): the barrier of memory and knowledge, the barrier of understanding and interpretation, and the barrier of communication. Meaning, I cannot trust myself to remember things as they might have occurred, I cannot believe that I interpret things the same way now as I might have then, and I cannot even trust myself to tell the truth about what I actually do remember and understand. I ended the last section in a rather low place, having backed myself into a kind of corner from which my entire autoethnographic project appears somewhat suspect. It is time to attempt to climb out of this low place—a nadir of an intermission where the barriers to my work may intimidate me to the point that I decide not to write at all—and look forward to some sort of a solution. After all, no less a skeptic of self-knowledge than Butler (1999) tells me that "I do not believe that poststructuralism entails the death of autobiographical writing" (p. xxv).

Borges (1975/1998) led me into this mess; let me see if he provides a thread that might be able to guide me out. I find my first clue in a comment the older man makes to

⁴⁸ Nothing in my brief academic life made me feel more accomplished than this diversion during my prospectus defense when my professors began constructively criticizing an article I had published two months prior. Before that moment I always felt as if they were unidirectionally shaping my thoughts with their criticism of my classroom papers; from that point on I felt like a part of an actual conversation.

the younger during his initial attempts to convince that young man of the stark reality of their situation, however fantastical: “Perhaps our dream will end, perhaps it won’t. Meanwhile, our clear obligation is to accept the dream, as we have accepted the universe and our having been brought into it and the fact that we see with our eyes and that we breathe” (p. 413). Butler (1993) reminds me that “none of [what she writes] is meant to suggest that identity is to be denied, overcome, erased” (p. 117), and I take this charge to mean that I must not let the barriers to self-knowledge that I have exposed cause me to despair—that, in fact, my “clear obligation is to accept the dream, as [I] have accepted the universe” (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 413). To despair at autoethnography might lead me to give up on self-representation and existence altogether, but if as eminent a poststructuralist as Barthes (1975/2010) can be tempted to write about himself, I must not allow this defeat to occur. The dream might be existentially fantastic; I still need embrace it.

Later in the story the older Borges (1975/1998) adds a bit of clarification in a comment directed to the younger man, words leading perhaps from vague philosophic encouragement to a more concrete advice: “Individuals exist—if, in fact, anyone does. *Yesterday’s man is not today’s*, as some Greek said. We two, here on this bench in Geneva or in Cambridge, are perhaps proof of that” (p. 414, emphasis in original text). Here, I believe, is my second clue toward some sort of action: so long as I can keep constantly in mind the fact that “yesterday’s man is not today’s” I may have a hope at getting to know that man I used to be. I misunderstand and misinterpret him because he is in fact a different man, and this thought that I am not he is “perhaps proof” of some sort of path. In other words, I need to let go of this wrong-headed notion that when I

undertake autoethnographic work I am in some way describing myself; in fact, I am describing an entirely different person. If I can somehow accept that claim, perhaps I can then begin to describe that person with a sort of authenticity.

“Yesterday’s man is not today’s” (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 414, emphasis in original text). A critical reader is most likely rolling his or her eyes at this point—what do I do with this sort of vague philosophy? How might such a cliché in any way aid an earnest effort at actual autoethnography? I have experienced this eye-rolling feeling many a time in reading various academic texts, finding myself left with hazy admonition as my only takeaway. I have no wish to leave my reader similarly dismayed, however, and I would now like to add a glaze of my own to this story. Meaning, I would like to answer the assumed question in the mind of my reader: How, exactly, would you advise me to try to get to know this entirely different man I used to be, this man of yesterday who is no longer today? It is all well and good to accept that he is wholly different than me; how, though, do I push through these barriers of memory, knowledge, understanding, interpretation, and communication in order to speak to him at all? What action step might I be able to attempt to take at this project of autoethnography?

An attempt at an answer to this most excellent question represents the second half of my dissertation. However, before I rush headlong in to look a little more into this unattributed Greco-philosophical idea—yesterday’s man is not today’s—I want to take a breath and a pause. It seems to me that if I continue this straight ahead dive into still more philosophy and theory, I might lose my reader, much as Alice and the Hatter bored the March Hare with a little too much curiosity. As such, I am going to use this breath of a pause to (re)tell a story, to generate a piece of autoethnography which I believe directly

applies to the mathematics community—specifically as it operates inside the apartheid school. In other words, I am going to (re)tell a story that I think might have mattered to my younger, 24-year-old self; I am going to (re)tell the kind of story I think might have served me well before I began my first, failed teaching career.

Here I have a bit of a template for the second half of this dissertation. There remains, unfortunately for the March Hare, a bit of theoretical and methodological work to be done. I will write this work—hoping that this necessary philosophical side of autoethnography must excite a certain kind of reader, the Hatters among us—while interposing leaner, more practical pieces of autoethnography in between the philosophy. With apologies to Rainer Maria Rilke, I call these autoethnographic stories “Letters to a Young Math Teacher,” believing as I do that they might serve a certain sort of pre-service educator well. Given the nature of these letters, three things need be noted before I can move on. First, I write large portions in 2nd person voice—a bit unconventional, to be sure, but I believe applicable to the task at hand: I want to directly address this young math teacher for whom I am writing. Second, I attempt, with every fiber of my being, to avoid references in these letters. There is scholarship aplenty in this piece of work for those who choose to seek it out. I have read Boaler (2007) and Bishop (1988/2004); Gutiérrez (2013) and Gutstein (2006); Leonard (2009), Martin (2000), Tate (1995) and Walshaw (2004b). Let me, for once, refrain from an attempt to impress. After all, as Professor Stinson told me, paraphrasing something St. Pierre told him, “We only ever always speak through the words of those who came before us.”⁴⁹ Let me give up overt

⁴⁹ This is a terrible paraphrase. I have no idea what exactly she said to him nor what he said to me. But I like the quote, so it can stay.

philosophizing for a series of moments, trusting in the implicit nature of my writing to reinforce what has come before. Let me attempt, merely, to (re)tell my stories.

Last, in these letters I am going to refer to Angrosino (1998) and his ethnography of adults with cognitive difficulties: “[I use] ‘creative fiction’ rather than ‘creative nonfiction’ to represent the ethnographic experience, in part because it helps overcome some ethical problems about disclosure” (p. 266). Like Angrosino, I am going to attempt to create bits and pieces of “fictional worlds,” spaces which reflect reality only inasmuch as “things *like these* happened to people *like these*—not in the sense of this being a documentary with a few literary touches around the edges” (p. 101, emphasis in original text). Because of the tensions often circulating in conversations around race and education, I am going to protect both myself and my colleagues by using a healthy dose of the *fictional masking* techniques of which I wrote in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. I have, of course, been using these techniques all along, even if I have not explicitly indicated every single change. Some of the stories in my letters, however, are so vastly altered from the “reality” as I remember it that they warrant a bit more introduction.

Angrosino (1998) draws a bright line between himself and writers like Gerard (1996), who defines *creative nonfiction* as “the stories you find out, captured with a clear eye and an alert imagination, filtered through a mind passionate to know and tell, told accurately and with compelling grace” (p. 12). In my case, however, some of the stories that I want to tell, given their context of race and racism, might be hurtful to me or others if told with Gerard’s accuracy. Nevertheless, because of the feelings they elicited and theorizing they prompted, I believe the stories important. Therefore, I appeal, instead, to another writer of creative nonfiction. Goodall (2008) writes that when we “engage in

writing or telling a story, we create alternative pathways to meaning that are imaginative *and* analytical; that are guided by a narrative (rather than propositional) rationality” (p. 14, emphasis in original text). Creative fiction allows me to create one of Goodall’s “alternative pathways to meaning”: an attempted distillation of what I believe to be the essence of the story I want to tell, a pulling out of some sort of “larger Truth” (Gerard, 1996, p. 208) and simultaneous shifting of some or all of the details surrounding it. Using Goodall as a bridge, I do not see quite the same bright line between Gerard (1996) and Angrosino (1998) that they might see between themselves.

For my first letter, I began the process of crafting an alternative pathway to meaning by writing the story down as best as I could remember it, warts and all. I then re-read my work several times, asking myself as I did so, “What is the one-word main idea I want to pull away from this writing? What matters to the math teacher here?” After arriving at an answer—discourse and its dissemination, the idea that our reality is in large part structured by the words we speak to each other—I went through a brief brainstorming session wherein I attempted to move the action of my story to some other arena while still keeping the theme of discourse-as-creation. I settled on a newspaper staff meeting because I found more than a few parallels between education and print media, two systems born of modernity and attempting to find their way in the information age. With that decision made, I proceeded to re-write my story. None of the quotes are identical to the original—and thus are not intended to be “true”—but I believe all of the words will seem “right” to the mathematics educator. It is my hope that this story conveys a bit of how it sometimes feels to be a math teacher; that feeling—one I could only safely capture through this alternative pathway—is the primary carryover from the original

version. Though this type of letter might seem, at first blush, to be a bit far afield, I hope that you—my young, math-teacher reader—are willing to push into this bit of creative (non)fiction.

“Okay, you have to hold on a moment again.”

“Got it. What’s up?”

“Well, I think I’m following you through all of this creative (non)fiction talk. I mean, I understand that the story you told about Shawn Robinson was in some sense ‘true’ and in another sense ‘fictional,’ and that one of the reasons for that fictionalization was to keep him and your administrator protected from identification.”

“Absolutely true. The other benefit, one we’ve already spoken about, is that by looking at myself through the eyes of a fictional student I was able to see my teaching and management style through an entirely different lens. I learned a lot about myself by trying to picture the way Shawn might have seen me.”

“I remember you finding that interesting. Let me redirect here, however. I see the benefits of fictionalization, but before we go on I’d like for you to give me a quick summary right here of the techniques you’re using to accomplish this thing you’re calling fictional masking. I just want to make sure I’m with you completely.”

“I think that is an excellent idea. It’s been a few pages since I told Shawn’s story and we teased out some of the techniques—and now I’m ratcheting the whole thing up a notch by more directly fictionalizing things.”

“I know, right? I just want to get a kind of list of things you’ve done to protect all of the players in your stories.”

“Absolutely. Given the nature of the masking, I will not note at every turn that I am, in fact, making these moves. So this little survey of yours will serve as a kind of blanket caveat for our reader: what is to come has been fictionalized!”

“So, no pressure then?”

“Don’t sweat it. How about you start. What do you remember from Shawn?”

“Well, the simplest thing seems to be composite characters—taking a whole mash of traits you have known from a variety of people and jamming them into one composite student, going for an authentic ‘feel’ to a character rather than an authentic ‘truth.’ We also talked about how you removed situational details from the stories—like the exact site of your administrator’s office. I assume that means you might could have placed the office in an entirely fictional place in the building if you had wanted to?”

“Sure. Any detail that is not key to the story is subject to omission or altering without explicit notice.”

“You talked about the fact that you could have changed the gender of your administrator, and I’ve noticed that you also have a tendency to sometimes keep people gender-neutral in a similar masking vein. And, sometimes you are very specific about time and sometimes deliberately vague—keeping the reader

guessing about when a story might have occurred keeps them from knowing exactly who might have been at Murphy at the time, I guess?”

“Absolutely. And don’t forget about Professor Holbrook’s trick of taking real words but putting them into the mouth of a composite or fictional character. That was the key to getting that second Shawn story written.”

“Of course. That was an interesting twist to that story. Now, what else is going to come?”

“Well, let me again repeat that all of these simpler techniques will be repeated not only in the letters, but also throughout the rest of the dissertation.”

“Noted. Go on.”

“Okay. Well, I’ve already explained the first letter. The story was too potentially hurtful to too many people to be told in anything close to its ‘true’ form. So I kept the gist of the story—how I felt as I was living it out—and changed absolutely everything else about it. None of the quotes are real, none of the characters are even composites—they are simply fictional, as are the setting and actions.”

“Okay.... I suppose that might make more sense after I read it?”

“Well, I’m hoping so.”

“Next, then, please.”

“For the second letter I used a couple of key quotations to anchor the story. I broke down all of the action and rebuilt the circumstances and setting in which the comments were said. The quotes are the important thing, and they are as accurate as I can remember them.”

“Got it. That makes sense, I think. And you did that again to protect the characters?”

“Yes. In addition, I use composite characters—much as I did to Shawn Robinson. I indicate this change in the text, though, don’t worry.”

“And the third letter?”

“This one is kind of a combination of the first two. I had a feeling that needed to be conveyed, but housed in a story that I couldn’t get any traction on without betraying too many confidences. So, I centered the story around a couple of quotations, again, and broke it down to build it back up. For this one, I invented an entirely fictional setting—a training session on graphing calculators.”

“So in the first letter the feeling is true, in the second the quotes are true, and in the third the quotes and the feelings are true?”

“Not all of the quotes in the third, but the big ones, yeah. And of course you have to remember that truth is in the eye of the teller.”

“Well, obviously. We’ve talked enough French poststructuralism at this point for me to know that.”

“We’ve got more coming up—get excited. And then there are two more letters which go back to the small-change kind of fictional masking techniques, the kind that don’t really get mentioned up front.”

“The kind I already summarized for you—composites, masking of time, specific locations, gender—that kind of thing?”

“You got it.”

“I have to say, I am looking forward to reading this—it’ll be a healthy break from all the philosophy, at least. You sure you know exactly what you’re doing?”

“Honestly? Not at all. But I’ve read some good stuff (Angrosino, 1998; de Freitas, 2007; de Freitas, 2008) and I’m hoping it will inspire me to do a decent job.”

“Maybe one more quote here would be appropriate?”

“Good idea. Here’s de Freitas (2007), talking about the power of fiction in education research:

Fiction fronts its craftedness or writtenness, announcing itself as textual, stylistic, strategic. Fiction hails the reader in a different way, claiming a resonant truth, power and impact, without grounding such claims in a correspondence theory of truth. The resonant truth I discover in a story is no less meaningful or valid than that demonstrated through reportedly accurate or factual descriptions of events. But the fiction reader takes up the fictional text differently, recognizing its distinct claim to a different kind of truth, and recognizing themselves as positioned differently in relation to that truth. The reader engages fiction as an active inquirer, sensitive to the duplicity of its meaning. (p. 341)

“I like that! I get to engage with fiction as an active inquirer, rather than a passive reader. You’ve been writing in some way about that engagement with the text all along, right?”

“I think so. I also really like her use of the term *resonant truth*. That’s what I’m hoping these stories will do—resonate truth to my math teacher readers, a truth that will hopefully be ‘no less meaningful or valid than that demonstrated through reportedly accurate or factual descriptions of events’ (p. 341). We’ll see how it goes.”

Well, I’m sure it will be interesting nonetheless. Shall we soldier on?”

“Let’s go. Without further ado, here comes my first letter to a young math teacher.”

Letter to a Young Math Teacher: The Destructive Power of Discourse

The newspaper staff meeting was hot, as it always was, and more than a little stultifying, as it could only truly be on a Friday afternoon when most of its attendees’ minds were entirely elsewhere. The editor had called everyone in with a brusque nod of his head, pushing his way into the overstuffed little room that served as their command post when a story was breaking. Simon had worked at the newspaper for only a few months since graduating from college—long enough to have a keen sense for the tensions inherent in this business which, everyone agreed, was rapidly changing beneath their feet. There were still readers, though, and thus

there would still be papers. He trailed into the meeting and took his customary seat at the far table.

There were four of these small tables in the room, situated oddly to create a kind of upside-down letter “A” made out of child’s blocks. His editor stood in the gap created by the legs of the “A,” flanked by old-school paper flipcharts and dry-erase boards—this while an expensive piece of presentation hardware loomed behind him, unused and at this point all-but unnoticed. An assistant wandered around the room, distributing a thick paper handout to the fifteen or so people crammed around the tables. Simon wondered, not for the first time, why no one ever posted these handouts to the internet-dropbox they all used to write and edit their stories. He resisted the urge to pull something out of his bag on which to work, and instead tried to focus his attention forward.

“I assume you all watched the President’s speech last night?” Walter, the editor-in-chief of this formerly formidable city newspaper, made sweeping eye contact with his staff—that is, those of his staff who weren’t surreptitiously looking at their cell phones. Amidst the small flurry of side conversations any mention of Barack Obama brought to a room as politically diverse as this crowded meeting-place, most people nodded.

“He repeated that thing again, about wanting to hire 50,000 new math teachers, or whatever the number was.” Walter made a move as if he were about to look the figure up on his own cell phone, then seemed to rethink the motion. He went on, “Now, we all know how pitiful the public schools are around here. We know that when Obama and Secretary...Secretary...”

“Duncan,” someone interjected, not looking up from their phone.

“Secretary Duncan,” Walter picked up, snapping his fingers in salute at the editor of the politics page. “When Obama and Secretary Duncan talk about all of these plans they have to fix our nation’s schools, No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top and all of that, we know that they’re talking about us—the schools our kids go to here in Metro City.”

Simon flipped through the handouts as Walter went on with his little speech about the state of education in the city. It was more than a little daunting, the handout—page after page of test scores, identified only by arcane acronyms, statistics and percentages piled on top of raw numbers, means and medians and pass rates and differentials. Simon was no scientist—he had majored in journalism, after all—but he was also an intelligent, recent college graduate who had minored in economics in hopes of someday making a national name for himself as a policy reporter. Even so, he could make neither head nor tail of this report Walter had passed out to them.

“Just look at these numbers!” Walter’s booming voice interrupted his own thoughts, and probably half of the people around the room dutifully picked up the handout and began flipping through it at random.

“Let’s pick a school no one’s kids here go to...how about...Gotham High School?”

Simon briefly wondered why he had never heard of Gotham—that is, until he found the requisite page and noticed that the school was 99% African American. He was not originally from Metro City, though he had a fair number of friends who were. All of these friends, however—persons who attended high schools with names he might recognize—were Caucasian. Of course, it made perfect sense that he had never heard of Gotham.

“Now,” Walter said, after the rustle of rolling paper receded away, “what do you notice?” He paused for a moment, letting the room go silent for just a bit longer than was comfortable. Simon began to wonder what he would say if called upon. Even with his attention focused on a single school, he was struggling to come up with something meaningful to note from the mass of information spread out before him.

Eventually one of the other young reporters spoke up. “Well, the math scores are far and away the lowest in the building.”

“Exactly!” Walter rejoined. “Of course Obama wants to hire a whole new crop of math teachers—these guys must not know what they’re doing!”

“It says here that Gotham missed the list of high performing Metro City schools last year,” a research assistant added, looking up from her cell phone without missing so much as a beat of her staccatoed thumbing.

“How could they be on that list, with math scores like that?”

Walter turned to the flipchart next to him and began jotting random notes from his speech and their conversation: math, Obama, 50,000 teachers, Gotham, high performing schools. Someone at the front of the room must have mentioned something about the Chicago Teacher’s Strike, because Walter added that to the list as well. Amidst the squeaking of the permanent marker Simon overheard the research assistant turn to her neighbor and laugh, saying something like: “I never had any head for math!” He was shocked—this young woman was one of the smartest people he knew.

“But wait,” Simon said, finally believing he had seen something noteworthy, and troubled enough by the scene unfolding before him to speak up in this room of far more experienced reporters. “Look at these scores. The math scores are actually closer to the state and district averages than the science scores. Even if they are the absolute lowest in the building, from a relative point of view Gotham has just as much trouble with their science department as they do their math department.”

“That just proves Walter’s point,” the politics editor spoke up. “The state average for math is also super low—that’s the problem. Being close to a low average doesn’t make those math scores any better.” A murmur of assent orbited the room.

“Yeah, but...” Simon began, about to step up to the dry erase board and draw some bar graphs, try to show that though of course all of the

scores were bad, the math and science scores were of a relatively equal badness. Trying to equate Gotham to Obama's call for more math teachers through these numbers alone was more than a little tenuous. Walter, however, cut him off.

"That is precisely the problem," Walter said, snap-saluting his politics editor again while putting his hand on Simon's shoulder, effectively keeping him in his seat. "And we are going to investigate this particular problem of these sorry math scores. I've done some digging around the document you're holding, and it seems that these super low math scores are true in almost every single Metro City School. Now, what we are going to do is to..."

Assignments were doled out, and in short order the meeting broke up. Simon's job for the next week was to get in contact with as many Metro City high school principals as he could in order to interview them about their low math scores—if he could pull a quote from each of them about their plans to address their dismal situation so much the better. He soon found himself back at his desk, making a list of City schools and any second-hand contacts he might have in the building. He turned to the man in the cubby across the aisle, an older reporter who had trained Simon in his first few weeks at the paper.

"Alan," he asked, "don't your kids go to Camelot?" Camelot was one of the Metro City schools with a name Simon recognized, a school one of his good friends had graduated from some years back.

Alan sighed. "Yeah, and they've always done pretty well at math. I had no idea the situation in Metro City Schools was as bad as that data shows. I mean, it seems like there isn't a decent math teacher in the district. I don't know what I'm going to tell my wife about this new story of ours. She is going to freak out. I mean, math is just so important nowadays."

Simon started to re-explain his science score discovery, but bit his tongue—the thrill of leaving on a Friday afternoon too tempting even to take the time to assuage Alan's worries. "Yeah, I know. Listen, what's the principal's name over there?"

It was close to seven o'clock before Simon made it to the bar where he always met his friends on Friday evenings. Before long he had a drink in his hand and was crowded around a table explaining his newest assignment to a rather large group—some of them Metro City Schools graduates themselves.

His friend who graduated from Camelot turned to a young woman he didn't know. "Beth," he asked, "you teach in a Metro City school, right?" Simon soon found himself in conversation with the woman, an elementary school teacher at a school that fed directly into the high school around the corner from Gotham. She was explaining the test-score

situation at her school and how it was not really all that bad from a national point of view.

“Well, then,” Simon laughed, “these high school math teachers in Metro City must be doing a heck of a bad job, to take kids who do fine in elementary school and turn them into high school students with such pathetic scores.”

The conversation continued for several more minutes until Beth and her friends began gathering their things to go. One of them turned to Simon on the way out. “You know,” she said, “my husband teaches math at Gotham. He’ll be bothered to know that you guys are running such a big story about him and his colleagues. He works so hard, and really is such a good teacher.”

Simon back-pedaled just a bit. “Oh, no doubt that there must be good math people in every building. I would just wonder about his colleagues, you know?” The woman smiled, and the quick side-conversation ended amicably, Simon even getting the husband’s phone number as a potential contact.

Once Beth and her friends left it wasn’t long before Simon and the rest of his group moved out to dinner. It was only at the restaurant that he realized he had left the Gotham teacher’s phone number back at the bar, scribbled on the back of the napkin that he had used to wrap around his second drink.

Oh well, he thought as he settled down to his hard-won Friday evening meal. I suppose I could track that number down again if I wanted to. But, I don’t really want to talk to the teachers—they’re not really in a change-making position the way the principals are. Really, what difference does it make what the teacher has to say?

I quote Angrosino (1998) again: “[I am] using explicitly literary techniques to create stories that get at the truth of a situation without being explicitly ‘factual’” (p. 40). Nothing like these newsroom and bar-table scenes ever actually happened; that does not prohibit them, however, from getting at “the truth of a situation.” Specifically, I believe I have shown in microcosm how it is that discourse is created and disseminated through a concatenation of fairly innocuous events. Every actor in my story was only doing their job, looking out for their families, taking care to guard their personal life. However, picture the scene of Simon at the bar multiplied out in the actions of every character in the narrative. If each of these individuals tells just a small handful of people about the

newspaper's new project—the story of the “sorry math scores at Metro City Schools”—then in no short order a very real discourse is created out of the series of innocent events depicted. Alan goes home and tells his wife and children, Beth goes to her elementary school and tells her colleagues, Beth's friend goes home and further demoralizes her already harried husband, and on and on it could go, multiplied exponentially out as the hearer becomes the teller *ad infinitum*. Like a game of telephone gone horribly wrong, what was once a debatable parcel of data being openly discussed in a meeting becomes “truth” by virtue of mere transmission.

I hope this story had the smack of reality to my math educator readers; it certainly feels true to me and my current school year. As a math teacher in an apartheid school, you will ever always be approached by a whole host of others who have been unconsciously convinced that they “know” you are doing a poor job, that you could be working harder and better, that you are almost certainly replaceable. You will sit in on a meeting like the one in the story, have a conversation with a friend at a bar or interact with a stranger for just a moment in similar manner. Even the well-meaning of these people, repeating their sound-bites from the evening news, will most likely be entirely unaware of the damage their questions and comments might do to you. The destructive effects of this powerful discourse are just part of your job. I would advise you to get ready for them.

CHAPTER 7

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

“You!” said the Caterpillar contemptuously. “Who are *you*?”

Which brought them back again to the beginning of the conversation. Alice felt a little irritated at the Caterpillar’s making such *very* short remarks, and she drew herself up and said, very gravely, “I think you ought to tell me who *you* are, first.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*
(Carroll, 1865/1992, p. 36, emphasis in original text)

I am faces. I walk the lines of their assemblages, existing in multiple bodies at once. I fold my bodies within a singular face. (Kaufmann, 2011a, p. 916)

All this must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel—or rather by several characters. (Barthes, 1975/2010, p. 119)

I think it is past time to come back to that pesky Caterpillar’s oh-so-central question. In Chapter 1 of this dissertation—in the section entitled “Locations”—I used part of this famous Alice passage to introduce my attempt at describing who I am from a theoretical point of view. Some hundred or so pages later, I would like to return to the question—almost as if to the scene of the crime, so to speak; this time, however, I am going to try to attack it from a different angle. In a manner of speaking, I think I am going to flip the question back on its heels—much as Alice defensively reverses it right back to the Caterpillar—and attempt to tease out who the writer has shown himself to be in the writing, as opposed to a writer merely writing about who he thinks he is. The difference is diaphanous, to be sure. However, I believe it will prove its importance in what is to come, this concept of examining the writing for what it says about the writer rather than for merely what the writer was trying to say. In short, I am going to try to bypass deliberate self-presentation in order to augur an inadvertent, and thus hopefully more insightful,

self-revelation. I am going to begin to attempt an end-around Borge's (1975/1998) barriers to autoethnography.

McAdams (1996) writes: "Although the question of 'Who am I?' may seem silly or obvious to a young child, modern men and women are likely to see such a question as potentially problematic, challenging, [and] ego-involving" (p. 306); the fact that Alice grapples much as I do with this existential dilemma is part of the reason I find her story so interesting.⁵⁰ Deleuze and Guattari (1987c) tell me that "the face has a real future, but only if it is destroyed, dismantled" (p. 171), and I think this advice might provide me a path through this problematic piece of self-identification. Like Kaufmann (2011a) and Barthes (1975/2010), I am increasingly defining myself as "faces" and "characters"—a plural presence—and nowhere have I seen that effect more keenly than in my work to date on this dissertation. Presently, I am going to attempt to follow Deleuze and Guattari (1987c) by if not destroying—I am not sure I am quite ready for that verb—at the very least dismantling the face that I have put forward in this work so far. In the rhizomatic spirit of their *Body Without Organs*—"opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987b, p. 158)—I am going to list out the organs that make up the organism that is Jay Wamsted, the writer who, ultimately, will be responsible for this production he is working on so tirelessly. I have decided, however, to let all of these anatomical analogies pass as this point; instead, I wish to pursue a slightly more literary metaphor: the cast list, the *dramatis personae*. So,

⁵⁰ As a contrast, my four-year-old daughter believes that she knows exactly who she is. Often when I call her by her longstanding nickname (Goosebear) she will say to me, "No! I am **not** Goosebear. I am Kira Jane Wamsted!" If pressed to accept my verbal affections, she will grudgingly acquiesce: "I am Kira Jane Goosebear Wamsted!" Her solid sense of self is rather calming to me in the midst of all this existential turmoil I am intentionally undertaking.

without further ado, let me push on into this project of tearing myself apart. In no particular order, let me list and annotate the characters that I have observed in my many (re)readings of the first half of this dissertation work, the characters that make up what I colloquially call “me.”

John O. Wamsted

My parents named me John Oliver Wamsted, but no one has ever called me either of those first two names for longer than a day or so. I have gone by “Jay” since the time I was born; though my son is also named John, only family and close friends are even aware of the fact that we share a legal first name. It was fitting, I suppose, that I would have this dichotomy already present when I began my writing career, as the rare times I have seen my name in print remind me of what Foucault (1969/1984c) has to say about the lead actor in my dissertation:

Everyone knows that, in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first-person pronouns nor the present indicative refers exactly either to the writer or to the moment in which he writes, but rather to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in the course of the work. It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker. (p.112)

Jay Wamsted is writing this dissertation—right now, this very moment, sitting in room 2309 of Murphy High School. However, John O. Wamsted is the author, the alter ego, the fictitious speaker, the name I use when I want to connote the gravity that goes with being a capital-W “Writer.” His is the name under the title of the few publications I have managed to eke out; each “I” and every “me” in this dissertation refer not back to Jay Wamsted—father, husband, teacher, haggard graduate student, ardent cyclist—but rather

sideways⁵¹ to John Oliver Wamsted, the character I have created to be my lead voice. “I write: that is the first degree of language. Then, I write that *I write*: that is language to the second degree” (Barthes, 1975/2010, p. 66, emphasis in original text). Jay Wamsted writes—he is a writer to the first degree; John O. Wamsted writes that he writes—he is a writer to the second degree, an author, the author of these words. Derrida (1967/1997) tells me that “writing is dangerous from the moment that representation there claims to be presence and the sign of the thing itself” (p. 145). I want to be up front here and try to dodge this danger: as confusing as this all may sound, the “I” that speaks these words is not the “me” that is writing, reading, and editing them. “I” am John O. Wamsted. Jay Wamsted just does my work for me.

Proxy Me

The sideline conversations in Arial Font slowly changed from a lark of a conceit I used to get through my comprehensive process to a rather important part of my prospectus; they are going to become increasingly more integral in what is to come. Though didactic conversations of this type go back at least as far as Plato (trans. 1993), and I have a certain debt as an autoethnographer to the similar structure in Ellis and Bochner’s (2000) landmark piece on the methodology in the second *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), I believe I chose this method of pseudo-

⁵¹ In case my reader is curious, I am making a purposeful allusion to the television series *Lost* (Abrams, Lieber, & Lindelhof, 2004), specifically the flash sideways conceit of the final season. At times I feel almost as if Jay Wamsted and John O. Wamsted are living fundamentally different, but integrally connected, existences. I have heard somewhere that quantum physicists now believe that the sub-atomic particle called the quark can exist simultaneously in two different places. They also tell me that at some level I am made up of these quarks (quirks?). *Ipsa facto*, maybe *Lost* was right in the end? Perhaps Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987c) dismantling of the face is no more crazy than the Large Hadron Collider.

Socratic dialogue due primarily to the influence of two works from the field of critical legal studies: Bell's (1992) *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* and Delgado's (1995) *The Rodrigo Chronicles: Conversations about America and Race*.⁵² It was not a conscious allusion in either respect; I just figured I could work well with the process, easily allowing me to smooth over some of the rough spots in my methodology paper during my comprehensives. At the time I intended the one (knowledgeable) voice to represent me while the other (inquisitive) voice would represent an amalgamation of those over the years who have asked me, with varying levels of credulity, about the nature of my work. This intention, however, soon slipped, and I found myself in unplanned—though, thankfully, not uncharted—waters.

It didn't take long before I was putting references into the speech of the inquisitive voice—and this secret knowledge he seemed to have is what finally clued me in that I was taking cues from Bell's (1992) Geneva and Delgado's (1995) Rodrigo—and in what is to come he will further transform from a mere questioner into a full blown partner in the autoethnographic process. It was sometime during this writing that I started referring to this voice as "Proxy Me;"⁵³ this both in acknowledgement that his character is as much "me" as any other part of my dissertation as well as in recognizing that I had granted him a kind of power to ask certain questions I needed asking, that I had given him a proper role to act on my behalf as the writer. I may be unable to resist the temptation to

⁵² It need be noted that Ellis stages a ten page internal dialogue towards the end of her 2009 book *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work*. Framed as a conversation between her "Ego" and her "Alter Ego," this conversation reads similarly to those of mine. All I can say is that great minds must think alike, because I had written the bulk of my dissertation before I read this particular book.

⁵³ I switch back and forth between calling this character "Proxy Me" and "Proxy Jay," as required in the context of the sentence—similarly so for the two characters to follow.

make corny jokes at his expense about existence and eternity, but I have come to a place where I need this character as much as any other in order to accomplish what I am trying to do—I now find him to be indispensable in these efforts of mine attempting a stab at self-knowledge.

“You missed something.”

“I did?”

“Sure. I didn’t notice until the read through, but I think you forgot to tell them about how much you need the shift in tone that I give you.”

“Oh, yeah! I was so busy thinking about it from an academic point of view, the origin and methodological benefit, I didn’t remember how it worked for me from a simple narrative point of view.”

“Well, tell them about it right now.”

“Sure. This won’t really become super apparent for another section or two, but I think the informality of the conversational voices helps me to say some things that are important not just for my reader, but also for me. Proxy Jay—that’s you, of course—lets me write in my dissertation more like the way I talk. Which is also a little more like how I sometimes think.”

“For example, you get to write lazy, completely non-academic stuff like ‘super apparent.’”

“And I get to use words like ‘stuff.’ Yeah, the need to perform in the dissertation itself sometimes feels kind of paralyzing, like I don’t quite know how to say some of the simple things I want to say using the more arcane language I feel pressure to use.”

“Instantiation? Hegemony? Ossified? Abrogate? Obverse?”

“Among others, sure. Anyways, the conversations I get to have with Proxy Me—“

“Actual Me?”

“Actual You. Anyways, these conversations really loosen me up as a writer. I think they enable me to say some important things in a straightforward manner, things I might otherwise have to pump up in an unnecessary manner in order to make sound somehow more scholarly.”

“Yeah, and the last thing you need is to make anything more scholarly. I think I can speak for all of your readers when I say: give us a break.”

“Well, that’s what you’re here for.”

“At your service, thank you very much. Time to move on?”

“Moving on.”

Footnote Me

This character is a little complicated. Probably about half of the time, the footnotes are written in the same voice as the dissertation—that is, they are written by

John O. Wamsted, the “author function” (Foucault, 1969/1984c, p. 112). Often, though, a crack appears in the veneer of voice, and a bit of tonal creep occurs. This tone-shift manifests itself in two ways, one autoethnographically important and the other merely interesting. First the merely interesting: I at times find myself unable to resist a humorous aside—and I mean this in the strict dramaturgical sense, as something spoken straight to the reader, almost behind John O. Wamsted’s back—and the footnote is my way to slip these comments into my work. When, in footnote 13, far above, I make a joke about my high school gym teacher, that is Footnote Jay writing—mostly for his own enjoyment and with a bit of disregard for the academic process. I can trace this predilection of mine straight to two books I read in my pre-doctoral student days: Dave Eggers’ (2000) stunning memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and David Foster Wallace’s (1997) pseudo-ethnographic writings in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. Eggers (2000) does not actually write with footnotes, but his entire introductory section is rife with the kind of self-serving humor I believe I am emulating; Wallace (1997) transfers this somewhat solipsistic concept—albeit with considerably more gravity—to the footnote. I add a footnote of this Eggers/Wallace type almost exclusively *ex post facto*—during the editing process when something strikes me as interesting or funny, though not quite relevant or important enough to add it to the body of the dissertation proper. Another perfect example would be the footnote a few pages back about the television series *Lost* (Abrams, Lieber, & Lindelhof, 2004): though this brief mention of particle physics seems related to my work in some small way, I only sort of know about quarks and the Large Hadron Collider from my relaxation reading in the popular press. As I am not trying to make a major academic point here, and have no

references with which to back up such a hypothetical point, the footnote seems the place to talk about topics of this type. Footnote Jay loves talking about things like the Large Hadron Collider.

A slightly different manifestation of Footnote Jay is when, upon (re)reading, I realize that something has shifted since I last wrote, that I might now feel somehow different than I did in the moment of the writing; it is in trying to honor the words that John O. Wamsted wrote in the dissertation's past that I am forced to let Footnote Jay speak in some sort of approximation of the present. This type of writing is almost a puncturing of the fluidity of the reading process: what might have been mere pages for a reader could be days, weeks, months, or even years for the writer, and this effect typically goes entirely unmentioned. Barthes (1966/1977b) describes this twisting of time as a clash between "*logical time* which has very little connection with real time" (p. 119, emphasis in original text); I also find Clarke and colleagues' (2005) *braided time* to be an appropriate metaphor. I think what Footnote Jay might be trying to do is to undermine the modern "game of writing" (Foucault, 1969/1984c, p. 102), the lie that what we write is not edited almost to death, that who I am at the initial draft is who I remain at the final edit, that a unified presence has been adequately represented and subsequently interpreted in the reading process. The logical time of the dissertation, though—the drift and flow of the reading—has no connection to the real time going on in the life of the writer—the fits and starts of the writing process. In a sense, Footnote Jay helps to bridge that gap between John O. Wamsted—the tightly controlled author function—and the reader, in that these types of meta-footnotes are a somewhat more spontaneous reaction to the (re)reading

process. In John O. Wamsted’s vision, all readers of his work would have similar reactions to his wonderful words; only Footnote Jay gets to add to the text, however.⁵⁴

24-year-old Me

Toward the end of my senior year of high school I, like hundreds of thousands of other students around the country, took a battery of Advanced Placement tests in an attempt to earn college credit on the cheap. In the week leading up to the English Literature test, several of my friends and I went through 20 years of previous free-response essay questions—the bugbear of the test wherein we were expected to hold forth on any random topic, calling to mind from memory plot points and characters from the canon of our high school literature. Other (more industrious) students might have drawn up outlines and discussed how they would have answered each question individually; we were interested in a far more utilitarian task, however. We wanted to prove that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* could be incorporated into any question they could possibly throw at us. More specifically, we wanted to prove that the cinematic version of *Hamlet* we all had in our heads would suffice to slip us through our examination; to my later-in-life regret, I had stopped reading for school sometime during fall semester and was only able to discuss things we had sufficiently covered in classroom conversations or movie

⁵⁴ For instance, Footnote Jay might point out that half of this paragraph, from “Barthes” all the way to “fits and starts of the writing process” was, until very recently—from a real time point of view—located within a footnote a few pages back. It worked well there, but better here. A reader would have no occasion to know such a thing unless someone were to expose the engine under the hood.

viewings. Given this self-imposed insufficiency of knowledge, my prospects for the test looked rather grim.⁵⁵

In my memory, we felt more than confident in our assertion that *Hamlet* was filled with enough universal themes to get us through whatever question we were to receive and, in fact, the test did not disappoint us.⁵⁶ Completely vindicating my awful decision to shirk on my reading, the question was along the following lines: Examine the effects of literary works wherein plots hinge on characters which are absent or at most minimally present. Jackpot! The ghost of Hamlet's father served my purposes perfectly, and I scored high enough on the test to place out of English 101 my freshman year of college. At the time I obviously declined to push into the idea of a more general "Hamlet's Father" effect, as I was simply pleased to have skated my way through my senior year of high school. The question posed by the AP board was a good one, however, and *Hamlet* was indeed a good starting place to answer it—this proper point of origin despite my suspect intentions in choosing the tragedy. I have been thinking about a kind of "Hamlet's Father" effect a lot lately in reading through my dissertation work as regards the effects of

⁵⁵ This period in my life was, thankfully, rather short-lived: I began reading in earnest again during the first week of my first semester of college. I don't know if my temporary holiday from required reading says more about me in specific or teenagers in general; either way, there seems a lesson of sorts here.

⁵⁶ I just realized that I have all-but completely personified "the test" in my speech and writing. This misappropriation comes, I suppose, from seven years spent preparing my students for a high stakes end of course examination. I cannot count the number of times I have said things to my students along the lines of "the test wants you to..." or "the test is going to..." or "the test doesn't care if you..." The test is a living, breathing thing to me and my students—a bit of a monster, I suppose. I don't know why I am surprised to see this kind of talk bleed over into my ostensibly more academic writing, but for some reason I am. This present footnote, by the way, is another classic example of Footnote Jay intruding on the academic process.

the 24-year-old me: In what way does the plot of my work hinge on this minimally present character of my former self?

The 24-year-old me has no speaking parts, so far has directly appeared only briefly in the introduction some hundred pages ago, and seems at first blush far beyond any reach of my mortal pen. Like Hamlet's mostly absent father, however, it is becoming increasingly clear to me that he haunts every word I write. He does this not merely by being the genesis of my guiding question—what things are going mostly all right now that went so vastly wrong then?—but also by forcing me to feel that I need to justify his failures, make right his irresponsibility, squeeze some good out of what went so obviously bad. The 24-year-old me may not get a speaking role in this drama, but he is the driver behind it all. Even now I can recall the tightness in my chest during my first full year of teaching at Murphy when, on Halloween Day, I successfully went to work and home again, from that point on officially passing my former teaching career in longevity. This annual remembrance continued for several years, gradually decreasing in intensity, and though I did not feel the fear this past year I still seemed to have no choice but to mark the memory of the day in my mind—I wondered over it off and on all day.

In what is to come in this second section of my dissertation, I am going to attempt to examine this 24-year-old man as best as I can, despite our separation in time of now over 12 years. I think in this act that I am hoping finally to expiate my past, believing that if I can just dissect him enough, discover a bit more about him, find out exactly and precisely what went wrong—if I can figure it all out then I can finally put him to rest. I suppose in that respect I am trying to call forth this specter and once and for all exorcise his haunting from my work. Until that time—hopefully soon, but I know it would be

foolish to expect too much of any one thing—I will most certainly continue to feel his phantasmal face looking over my shoulder as I write, whispering in my ear along the same lines as the ghost of Hamlet’s murdered father spoke to his grieving son:

I am thy father’s spirit,
 Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
 And for the day confined to fast in fires
 Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
 Are burnt and purged away. (Shakespeare, 1623/1997, 1.5.9–13)

The Ideal Mathematician

Similar to the ghost of Hamlet’s father, another looming presence—unique to my little mathematical corner of the education field; one I have only recently become aware of—permeates the pages of all that has come before in this dissertation: the Ideal Mathematician. I am borrowing the concept of this character from Davis and Hersh (1981, p. 34–44), who sketch a painfully true lampoon of not “the perfect mathematician, the mathematician without defect or limitation. Rather [they] mean to describe the most mathematician-like mathematician...an impossibly pure specimen, in order to exhibit the paradoxical and problematical aspects of the mathematician’s role” (p. 34). The chapter introducing the Ideal Mathematician is a funny one, highlighted by a series of conversations wherein a mathematics professor attempts to explain his work to first a public relations staffer, followed by a student, a positivist philosopher, and finally a skeptical classicist. The portrait painted of this Platonic ideal⁵⁷ of a mathematician feels almost entirely indicting, specifically when Davis and Hersh tell me that “the

⁵⁷ In talking philosophy with the positivist, the Ideal Mathematician says: “As far as being a Platonist, that’s just a handy figure of speech. I never thought hypersquares existed. When I say they do, all I mean is that the axioms for a hypersquare possess a model” (p. 41). If you fail to find this quote funny, take solace in the fact that you are not, in fact, an Ideal Mathematician. If you get the joke, however, Q.E.D.

mathematician usually assumes that his own view of himself is the only one that need be considered” and that mathematicians “know that they are studying an objective reality” (p. 43). *My own view of myself is the only one that need be considered.* I believe that the Ideal Mathematician rattling around in my mind may have led me astray in this autoethnographic process: perhaps I am not able to describe myself with quite as much veracity as I think I can; perhaps the assumptive mathematical façade of an objective reality has lured me into a bit too much positivism. I tackle this theme of overreaching immediately after I finish the detail of my *dramatis personae*, as I believe it is the most glaring problem with the first part of my dissertation.

I have a fear, however, that I will be unable to corral completely the idiosyncrasies of the Ideal Mathematician. Far too much training in conjecture and proof, counterexample and contradiction undergirds the words I write—far too many years spent hunched over a series of symbols I had been taught to believe was a universal language, one that would leave me “prepared, if the occasion should arise, to meet an extragalactic intelligence” (Davis & Hersh, 1981, p. 41).⁵⁸ Specifically, though this may seem an entirely insane thing for a postmodernist to say, I feel unable to dodge the following volley: “[The Ideal Mathematician] rests his faith on rigorous proof; he believes that the difference between a correct proof and an incorrect one is an unmistakable and decisive difference” (p. 34). I have realized of late that, due to the effect of the Ideal

⁵⁸ See previous footnote. Please know that this is exactly what real mathematicians think of their work. We actually believe that if faced with an alien intelligence, our “first effort to communicate [should] be to write down (or otherwise transmit) the first few hundred digits in the binary expansion of pi” (Davis & Hersh, 1981, p. 41–42). Speaking of which—from memory, the first 40 or so digits of pi: 3.141592653589793238462643383 2795028841971. I’m not sure if knowing the first 40 digits of pi necessarily makes me a bit of an Ideal Mathematician, but it certainly cannot be considered exonerating evidence against the allegation.

Mathematician, all of my previous writing has fallen prey to this feeling of decisiveness.

In a manner of speaking, I think that I have been attempting to produce some sort of

“rigorous” postmodern “proof.” A hypothetical example:

1. If (Barthes, 1975/2010), then A; if (Derrida, 1967/1997), then B
2. If (Foucault, 1969/1984), then C; if (Lather, 2007), then D
3. $A + B \Rightarrow (AB)'$
4. $C + D \Rightarrow (CD)'$
5. $(AB)' + (CD)' \Rightarrow Z$, where Z equals some bit of postmodern reporting tool, Q.E.D.

Even a single (re)reading of this simulacrum of a proof belies its ridiculous nature. My math readers, though, will find the structure—if not the content—rather intimately familiar.

Worse even than just the attempt to write proofs of the preceding type, crafted out of quotes from various authors who would most likely be shocked at their inclusion in such a process, I think I actually believe that I have been able to produce a postmodern proof or two. Meaning—and this becomes clear quite soon—I have literally found myself startled at the “facts” I have discovered in the various line 5s I have been writing; shocked, but certain that their “truth” is secure, that I have done due diligence in “proving” these postmodern (re)tellings. This kind of certainty is probably quite difficult for someone unfamiliar with the Ideal Mathematician to grasp; the fact that this is so pushes me all the more to admit his inclusion on the cast-list of the drama I am writing. The Ideal Mathematician is a part of me, jockeying for position with John O. Wamsted, Proxy Me, Footnote Me, and 24-year-old Me—the tone of his voice is as apparent in my (re)readings as any of the rest of them. To deny him this due of recognition is to continue to pretend that I can shed my mathematical training by sheer willpower alone.

Some “Minor” Characters

I have deliberately skipped over all of the actual flesh and blood people who play such an important role in this writing: my wife and first-pass reader, Millie; my major advisor, David Stinson; my committee: Teri Holbrook, Jodi Kaufmann, and Danny Martin; my writing group, Erika and Jackie; Shawn and Eddie and all the other real life people yet to come who played parts both large and small in some story I (re)tell. I choose not to go into further detail about these people in my life because, though my wife and professors certainly get a rather keen editorial say in what eventually makes it down on paper, they are not strictly part of the dismantling of my face that Deleuze and Guattari (1987c) advise me to do. Meaning, these minor characters are actually a physical part of the process of writing; they are reduced to characters in the work, sure, but they are far more than characters in my life. They are not, so to speak, abstract parts of the face I as a writer am putting forward here; they are instead the actual forces behind the face. I started writing them into this section and had to stop myself, because I realized that it was reading much like the “Acknowledgments” section of a book—all I could find myself doing was thanking them and saying how important they were. I hope to write such a section someday, and they will all receive due mention therein. *Dramatis personae*, however—being, as it is, primarily about Barthes’ (1966/1977b) “paper beings” (p. 111) rather than real flesh and blood—need move on without them.

All of Us at the Table

In a published conversation with his wife Laurel Richardson, Ernest Lockridge (Richardson & Lockridge, 1998) summarizes a theory of fiction he tries to abide by:

Everyone in a novel is equally alive, even though, of necessity, they're not all equally created. So that when you invite anyone into your fiction,

whether it's simply to carry the suitcase for the main character, you should believe that person to be totally alive, carrying with them the entire baggage of their own lives. (p. 332)

Though what I am writing is not, strictly speaking, “fiction,”⁵⁹ Lockridge’s point is appealing to my imagination. In picturing some fully fleshed out scene, I see John O. Wamsted sitting down to dinner with Footnote Jay, slightly flustered at being called out for some authorial illusion by the merry prankster of the dissertation process; Proxy Me pulling up a chair next to 24-year-old Me, quipping in his slightly bolder font with that slightly younger man who would be more than bewildered at his inclusion in this strange scene of far-future matters; the Ideal Mathematician jockeying for talking time, attempting to bring the rest of us back to brass tacks; all of us more than able to impress with the *Alice* quotes I for some reason favor.⁶⁰

Of course, none of these characters could ever matter so much as Jay Wamsted the writer—the teacher, the father, the husband, and so on—but in line with Lockridge (Richardson & Lockridge, 1998) I think that they are all equally alive, if not equally created. They are all contributing to this dissertation work, in various ways and to varying

⁵⁹ Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) “contend that there is still one major difference that separates fiction writing from science writing. [It] is not whether the text really is fiction or nonfiction; rather, the difference is the claim that the author makes for the text” (p. 961). I suppose I am here making the claim that, despite an infusion of fictional practices, I ultimately still consider myself a science writer. Ronai (1999) writes, “ethnography exists as a kind of hymen between fiction and truth” (p. 127). Perhaps that is why I am so drawn to autoethnography as methodology—I seem so much to enjoy travelling in this borderland between “science” and “fiction.”

⁶⁰ My wife and I are currently reading through all of Dorothy Sayers’ Lord Peter Wimsey mystery novels. Sayers is a huge fan of high-brow allusion—classical Greek literature, Shakespearean drama, Romantic poetry—but also seems to have a weak spot for *Alice*. Often I will chuckle at something Lord Peter says and read it out loud to my wife, only to have her respond, rolling her eyes, “I never even would have known that was an *Alice* reference.” It makes me wonder what else might be in there that I am missing.

degrees, and it feels right to have listed them all out here. I am reminded in the end, though, of something Foucault (1969/1984c) wrote: “Behind all these [thoughts], we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking?” (p. 120). Perhaps my reader feels similarly—again, bored as is the March Hare by all of this deconstructing. Foucault duly noted and my reader considered, however, I would end by recalling Barthes (1975/2010) and his admonition I used as epigraph to this section: it might not matter exactly who is speaking, but it is nice to notice that there is more than one voice going on in the writing. Keeping that effect in mind will serve us—and by this particular “us” I mean both writer and reader—well, especially as I move on now to take a look at the slippery natures of identity, experience, and the autonomous “I.” First, however, another letter—this one piggybacking off all the talk of plurality by looking a bit deeper into my nature as a White teacher of mathematics.

Letter to a Young Math Teacher: “That Man Is White. He Could Never Understand Him”

Some years ago now, I was stopped in the hallways of Murphy by a former student, a young man I will call Deangelo. He was frustrated about something that was going on in his current mathematics classroom, and I could tell that he needed to let off a little steam to a friendly ear. I waited patiently for a few minutes as he complained about whatever was going on with his teacher and his grade, and on my part attempted some sort of advice and encouragement. We parted ways, and almost as an afterthought Deangelo called after me: “Mr. Wamsted, you the only teacher up in here who ever understood me, who ever knew how to teach me. You understood that I’m not stupid—I’m smart, just lazy!”

As a mathematics teacher, I hear this kind of comment from students rather often. Let me be clear before I continue: though someone I am calling Deangelo did in fact say those words to me at some point, *Deangelo* as a character from this point on is more a composite than a single student. I have a whole host of others from which to draw my sketch, as mathematics is a discipline wherein you as an instructor will be able to spot radically bright students in class left and right—young men and women who are able to follow a disjointed whole-group discussion with almost alarming alacrity, potential mathematicians who sometimes startle you with the keen edge of their thought processes. Some of these same students, though, will all but madden you as they proceed to fail test after test, seemingly unable to get their act together enough to do the work and practice required to succeed at these quantitative measures of mathematics acumen. Probably their natural intelligence has carried them so effortlessly through their elementary and middle school years that they are shocked to discover high school mathematical success requires more than they can achieve by merely watching and thinking. This shock will freeze some of these bright students into almost complete inaction. I have half a dozen Deangelos every year—overly intelligent young men and women who for whatever reason seem unable to adjust to the rigor of high school mathematics. They breeze by all of their other classes through prodigious memory and raw intelligence, but their mathematics suffers alarmingly. If you can manage to be a good teacher of mathematics to students such as this, you may make an impression upon them, an impression that might not soon fade away.

After my meeting with Deangelo, I went to a faculty meeting and found myself in conversation with the teacher with whom I had co-taught Deangelo the year before. I

repeated the story and comment to him, and we shared a little chuckle about what a handful Deangelo had been for us from a management point of view, reflecting also that he had performed admirably on the end of year state test. As our principal took the podium at the front of the room we quieted down and faced front, and it was in this brief moment of murmuring calm that I overheard a colleague behind me whisper to a friend: “That man is **White!** He could never understand him!” I tensed immediately, completely embarrassed both by being overheard bragging about my relationship with a former student and also by being called out as a White man thinking he knows more than he possibly could. Wondering who else had overheard the exchange, I barely moved the rest of the meeting, eyes locked on the front, sneaking out a back door as soon as I possibly could.

I never have been able to let go of this story. The version included here has undergone several drafts and (re)tellings in order to distill what I think is important about it—my colleague’s comment and its impact on my thinking about teaching. In using the techniques of fictional masking, I have changed the story so that only the quoted comments are accurate; the setting, characters, and situation, however, have all been changed considerably. As my intent is to explore some of the emotional terrain of being a White teacher in an apartheid school, I felt the quotations were the key elements—the specifics surrounding them receded in importance with each subsequent draft. In other words, a student did say something like what I have quoted him saying, and my colleague did say something along the lines of “That man is **White!** He could never understand him.” It just did not happen like I am telling it. The changes are, I believe, important and

necessary: streamlining my narrative makes for a better story while also keeping my characters confidential.

The bare bones of the story are enough for me, the quotations requisitely solid to speak for themselves: I think I understand some part of students like Deangelo—based on my reading of them as incredibly bright, distracted students—while my colleague expressed that such a thing is unlikely to impossible. It is this epistemological dissonance between me and a colleague I respect that hurt me so much that day—that, and the dull ache of wondering which other teachers in the building might feel similarly. I never spoke with my colleague about this incident, nor have I attempted to engage too many others in conversation about it; instead, I have let myself be haunted by this moment, content but not satisfied by my attenuated attempts at wondering over the comment in my writings. Here, I hope, I might finally have something more to say.

I was in conversation with a parent recently, and the ghost of this story spooked me so badly that I found myself once again trying to think through the implications—for me, as a math teacher—of the “that man is white” comment. The details of the conversation are not germane; what matters is that a parent wanted to talk with me about the way I had handled a situation with a student, one who reminded me very much of students like Deangelo—very bright but sometimes distracted to the point that it negatively affected their grades. The conversation intensified as I tried to grasp the depth of the parent’s concern, and I began to feel frustrated. Suddenly, haunted by the words spoken about me in that meeting long ago, words that I had written about so often in attempts to trouble, explain, and move past, I said something like this:

“I know you might be looking at me and thinking, that is just some White man, and he couldn’t possibly understand my son or anything about him. But I am here to tell you that despite all the difference between us, I think I do understand something about your son, that there is something about him which reminds me of myself, something which has nothing to do with the fact that he is Black and I am White. See, I used to be the bright kid in the back of the class who could never stay still, the student who got it all without really having to try too hard and consequently was always getting in trouble with my teachers for talking to my friends, the student who was always being put out of class. I understand these things about your son, I get that he’s not trying to be disrespectful of me in any way when he acts out, I get that in some sense he’s just filling his time because he’s a little bored. I understand this about him because I have been there myself. But I’ve also seen the other end of that kind of behavior and it’s that downside that I’m trying to steer him away from when I push him academically. I think I understand this part of your son because I have seen the underside of being bright and intelligent many times both in my own life and also in the lives of my students. It is because I think I understand something about your son all too well that I have pushed him in an effort both to own up to his problems and also to choose to leave them behind. I think that because I understand your son I might be able to help him do just that.”

My throat nearly choked when I called myself “just some White man.” I am positive that my voice quavered; it would surprise me to learn that the parent had not noticed. I walked away from our encounter, slightly dazed and a little overwhelmed, the conversation having ended reasonably amicably as the parent and I traded phone numbers and purposed to keep the student’s best interests at heart for the remainder of the

semester. I sat down, flush with worry that I had spoken too sparingly, that I may have offended the parent by bringing race into a conversation which seemingly had no place for it. I knew, though, that race did in fact play a not insignificant part in this story, if only for me and my ability to be a teacher at Murphy. For several years I had been carrying the shadow of my colleague's comments around with me, wondering in every interaction whether the comment was in fact unequivocally correct, whether my Whiteness presented an insurmountable barrier to my efforts to teach my Black students. I also wondered which of my colleagues felt similarly and silently judged me unfit for service. I think that, despite all my academic efforts, I had failed at exorcising this ghost—the thought that in fact I never would be able to understand a thing about students like Deangelo.

There are many axes of understanding, however. I have known this fact over the years since the comment was first made, carried it with me as I tried to write about the words in an effort to assuage my worried mind. What I should have said back then, I believe, needed to be more along the lines of what I said to the parent that day in our brief conversation. I feel this intense connection to my students because of all the things we share in common—me as a former bright, distracted student with all of the potential in the world and all of these students who remind me of Deangelo and our similar history. However, I also understand only too well the things that separate me from Deangelo, the fact that my White privilege protected me from all manner of adolescent mistakes in a way that his Blackness will be unable to do. It is this horrible realization about the systemically racist society we all live in, and the privilege that I have been unfairly granted, that drives me to want to continue to seek out students like Deangelo, to be the

best teacher I can be to these young men (and women) who remind me so much of myself. I am White, and Deangelo is Black, and there are things we might never be able to understand about each other. There are, however, things that we can understand only too well.

I became a better teacher that day by finally saying to that parent something along the lines of what I wish I had said to my colleague in the faculty meeting. I faced the specter of race that constantly threatens to divide me at the apartheid school, and in a manner of speaking cut it off at the pass. I said what I can see myself saying in a range of similar situations: *I am White, but do not see me as only that, as unable to be a good teacher here; give me a chance and you might just be surprised at what I am able to understand.* I thought ahead to my next period class and yet another young man who I had pushed hard over the past two years, another bright, distracted student whose mother I had called pleadingly on more than one occasion. I may never be able to fully understand this student, but, suddenly, I felt better able to be his teacher.

CHAPTER 8

WHO ARE YOU? A FURTHER LOOK AT IDENTITY & EXPERIENCE

Alice took up the fan and gloves, and, as the hall was very hot, she kept fanning herself all the time she went on talking. “Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I’ve changed in the night? Let me think: *was* I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is ‘Who in the world am I?’ Ah, *that’s* the great puzzle!” And she began thinking over all the children she knew that were of the same age as herself, to see if she could have been changed for any of them.

“I’m sure I’m not Ada,” she said, “for her hair goes in such long ringlets, and mine doesn’t go in ringlets at all; and I’m sure I ca’n’t be Mabel, for I know all sorts of things, and she, oh, she knows such a very little! Besides, *she’s* she, and *I’m* I, and—oh dear, how puzzling it all is!”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

(Carroll, 1865/1992a, p. 14–15, emphasis in original text)

The Argo

Roland Barthes (1975/2010) writes about his vision of the ship *Argo*, the vessel on which Jason’s mighty men set sail to retrieve the Golden Fleece. He considers the maintenance of the ship during its travels, wondering at “each piece of which the Argonauts gradually replace, so that they ended with an entirely new ship, without having to alter either its name or its form” (p. 46). This picture, taken to its logical conclusion, leads us to imagine a ship returning to its original port in appearance identical to what it was when it left, and in name the same, but being in fact *an entirely different ship*. I am reminded here of something that my mother used to tell me when as a child I would insist that I did not like such and such a food: she would say that your taste buds completely change every seven years, and that what you enjoy eating now could be different than what you used to like. Delighted as I am to now taste the tang of tomato on my sandwich—something a younger me steadfastly refused—it occurs to me to be disturbed

perhaps by the thought of my tongue somehow being entirely different than it was seven years ago. Like the *Argo*, it may look the same, and I may still call it by its same name, but if my mother is right then a piece of a part of my mouth that helped form the words asking my wife to marry me nearly a decade ago *no longer exists*. This troubling fact haunts my efforts at autoethnography as I, like Alice, wonder at the question: Is the “I” who now writes still the “I” who plays the part of me in the stories I (re)tell, or have I too perchance changed for someone else in the night? If so—if I am no longer the Jay Wamsted I remember but now Ada or Mabel or some other such person—what does this mean to me as autoethnographer?

I need appeal neither to the myth of the Argonauts nor to the vagaries of biochemistry to further drive this point home. In fact, I must merely remember the awe I felt as a young man talking proto-philosophy with my friends upon first hearing the old adage: “You can never step in the same river twice.” It is true, I remember thinking in awe: the river I see before me will never be the exact same again; all of the water I see at this moment will soon find its way to the ocean, to be replaced by seemingly identical but nonetheless entirely different molecules of water. The point of this talk was immediately grasped by my younger self—I will never be in these exact circumstances again and must make the most of every opportunity before me. Probably I used this as an excuse to cease studying and instead drum up an ultimate frisbee game; I don’t remember, though, whether the existential implications of this river talk troubled me then as they do today. It’s not just the river that is changing—I, too, am different every day—and now I cannot help but think of Borges (1975/1998) and his advice that yesterday’s man is not today’s. It seems I might be, like the ship *Argo*, nothing more than “an eminently structural object,

created...by two modest actions...: *substitution* (one part replaces another, as in a paradigm) and *nomination* (the name is in no way linked to the stability of the parts)” (Barthes, 1975/2010, p. 46, emphasis in original text). I might just be, in fact, “an object...with no other identity than its form” (p. 46). Little wonder I don’t remember thinking about this as a younger man—it is rather disturbing.

It was in this considering of myself to be an “eminently structural object” (Barthes, 1975/2010, p. 46) that I ran into trouble during my prospectus defense with Ellis’ (2007) definition of autoethnography, a definition I gladly quoted before for its practicality and pithiness: “autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining...and observing and revealing” (p. 13).⁶¹ These words seem to sum up autoethnography rather succinctly, but in wondering over Borges (1975/1998) and the *Argo* I need ask: Who is experiencing? Who examining? Who observing and revealing? If time is considered linearly, and the accumulated wisdom of Borges, Barthes (1975/2010), Alice, and my mother is fairly weighed, the Jay Wamsted who experiences cannot be the Jay Wamsted who later examines; the self who observes is no longer the self who reveals. Or, to put it differently, the river I step in when I undergo some series of events is necessarily not the river I am in when I later craft those events into what I am calling a story. I have changed—consequently, so has the story, as it does anew with every (re)telling—and to pretend otherwise is to bury my head in the sand in an attempt to ignore Gannon’s (2006) previously mentioned *paradox of poststructural autoethnography*: “Although autoethnographic research seems to presume that the subjects can speak (for) themselves, poststructural theories disrupt this presumption and

⁶¹ See page 2 for my use of this definition that got me into trouble that day.

stress the (im)possibilities of writing the self from a fractured and fragmented subject position” (p. 475).

Naming this paradox—questioning the typically taken as self-evident assertion that subjects can speak for themselves—brings me to the point of needing to trouble the very nature of “experience.” After all, if experience is a word that could be left without the tattoo of quotation marks—if it is not, in fact, one of Derrida’s (1966/1978c) loaded words—then Gannon’s (2006) paradox comes undone and I am free to speak for myself, rivers and ships and taste buds notwithstanding. If, however, “experience” need be included in this ever-increasing pantheon of words which “mean nothing without quotes” (Nabokov, 1956/1977, p. 312), then there is work before me in terms of reconciling the experiences I use as foundation for my stories with the shifting structural nature of identity brought to my attention by Alice and the *Argo*. First, however, Scott (1991) has a warning for me in this troubling of the nature of experience: “[It is not] to deprive subjects of agency. It is to refuse a separation between ‘experience’ and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse. Subjects are constituted discursively” (p. 730). It is worth noting for those who might be inclined to tune me out in this troubling of experience that Scott and I are not playing existential games here; we are not trying to take away from the reality that a “true” story typically means that something happened at some point in time. Rather, we are reminding ourselves that it is only in the (re)telling of the story that the experience continues to exist along the linear construct of time—further, that this discursive construction of past experience is part and parcel with the discursive constitution of the autonomous “I” as subject.

Dewey (1938/1997), though writing squarely in the modern era, hints at this rather postmodern idea: “Just as no man lives or dies to himself, so no experience lives and dies to itself. Wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experiences” (p. 27). Scott (1991) takes this idea one step further—the experience of the *happening* lives on in the further experience of the *telling*. Jay Wamsted the biological man certainly exists, I have no wish to attempt to take away from that. Jay Wamsted the individual personality, however, might just exist solely through the stories I choose to tell. Psychologist McAdams (1996, 2001) calls this idea the *life story model of identity*:

[Modern adults] provide the Me with an identity—by constructing more or less coherent, followable, and vivifying stories that integrate the person into society in a productive and generative way and provide the person with a purposeful self-history that explains how the Me of yesterday became the Me of today and will become the anticipated Me of tomorrow. [The deepest level] in personality, therefore, is the level of identity as a life story. (1996, p. 306)

McAdams is writing primarily about a larger, overarching life story, to be sure—what he later calls “*the life story*” (1996, p. 309, emphasis added)—but he also notes that “no single story may encompass all of the many narratives that any given person can use to make sense of his or her life” (2001, p. 117). Building on this idea, Bamberg (2011) writes about *small stories*: narratives that “surface in everyday conversation... as the locus where identities are continuously practiced and tested out” (p. 15). These ideas are strange, certainly; let me press a little further into this mash-up of poststructural and psychological thought.

“You’ll Get Over It”: Three Things about Experience

To begin with, that I am constituted through the discourse of my experience, and that this concept of experience is a slippery one, seems a simple enough idea to push into.

An example, one that I believe should harmonize with most readers: I have an old friend named Jason⁶² whom I still see regularly. We attended the same elementary school some 25 years ago and have been friends since; our children now play together. Jason happened to be the first person I ever told about a burgeoning crush on my now-wife, Millie—this in the spring of 2000—and this moment has always served as an important touchstone in the story of my marriage. Jason’s and my separate memories of this event, however, differ widely. Not only can we not agree on what was said—I think he dismissively told me, “You’ll get over it,” while he counterclaims to have been more supportive—we also have competing ideas about where this conversation took place and what we were doing both prior to and immediately after my disclosure. During our most recent argumentative iteration Jason accused me not just of disagreeing with his remembrance of location, but also of changing my own position on this point over time: he claims that I have always maintained we were at a coffeehouse and that I had only recently switched to saying that we were at my apartment—this contra to his supposedly steady opinion that we were at a bagel shop. I disagreed with him at the moment, insisting that I have always maintained that the conversation took place at my apartment; now, however, I am having a hard time deciding which I believe to be true. Do I remember the conversation occurring at the coffeehouse where we spent much of our single life studying, as he says I used to claim? Or do I actually think it took place in my apartment, as I most recently argued? If he is right about my flip-flop, how did I come to switch positions on this point? More importantly, if my memory of this detail is so slippery, how can I truly trust my

⁶² Not a pseudonym. I would normally not include such a mention as this about the name of a friend, but an early reader of this section thought I was being clever regarding Jason and the Argonauts and the *Argo*. I wish it were that I could be so witty. However, I just happen to have a best friend named Jason.

supposedly lucid remembrance of his now infamous quote? And what, to bring this back to Alice and the *Argo*, does this mean about who “I” actually am?

I take three things away from this anecdote pertinent to my thinking about identity. First, to return to Scott (1991) and Dewey (1938/1997), it is only in discourse that an experience such as this could be said to have been created. This slip of a story about Jason and Millie has grown disproportionately important over the past decade as Jason and I continue to rehash the entire scene, jockeying for position in regards to who was right and who was wrong. As a matter of fact, it has occurred to me that I might now have more memory of the arguments we have had about what happened than I do about what actually occurred. It is in these arguments that we continue to remember and reify the scene; it is this ongoing discourse that has managed to morph this moment from something that merely happened into something that I would now call “an experience.” Scott (1991) phrases this idea rather succinctly when she notes that it is “through discourse [that we] position subjects and produce their experiences” (p. 779), going on to say that experience is “not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced” (p. 780). Just because something must have happened does not make it an experience; it is only in the talking or telling that I can create such.

It occurs to me that by teasing out the difference between happenings and experiences I may have alienated some readers, and as a rather grudging Ideal Mathematician this loss of universality somewhat unsettles me. I use another work by Dewey (1934/2005) to try to provide a bit more common ground for all of us to hopefully

rest upon—the writer, the reader, and the writer whose only authority rests in turn upon his own reading. In his book *Art as Experience*, Dewey tries to split hairs on the difference between these things I am calling *happenings* and this other thing I want to call *experience*:

Things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience.... We have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. (p. 36–37, emphasis in original text)

Earlier in the book he puts it this way: “Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication” (p. 22). I am not contesting the fact that happenings at some point were experienced (in the colloquial sense of that word); rather, I am aligning myself with Dewey and Scott (1991) in saying that there is a difference between these types of non-events and what we are calling *an* experience. That difference, it seems, takes place in what Scott is calling “discourse” and what Dewey (1934/2005) is calling the “interaction of organism and environment.” I am choosing to call it “the story.”

A clarifying example, for continuity’s sake still in this vein of my relationship with my wife. I have absolutely no memory of telling either of my parents that I was bringing Millie home to meet them for the first time, that I was in a relationship I considered to be quite important and they were about to be introduced to that person. I am positive that this moment on the phone must have “happened” inasmuch as I am sure that I did not just show up for a weekend visit with a woman they had never met in tow as a sort of surprise. It seems to me that the reason I don’t remember this moment on the

phone is because my parents and I have had no occasion to discourse about it in the ensuing decade, no opportunity to reify the event through story in the way Jason and I constantly do. Thus, this moment of mine—though properly called some sort of happening—would not best be described as an experience. Without discourse and story, happenings slip away, subject to the amnesiac quality of time; with discourse and story, experiences are created out of these same ephemeral happenings.⁶³

But wait!—the Ideal Mathematician cries—this story demonstrates precisely why memory data is so utterly useless. Without video or audio recordings, interviews and transcriptions, written samples, surveys, triangulation, member checking—without these firewalls constructed against corruption we are stuck working with data which has either partially slipped away or at best undergone subtle shifts in veracity. This slippage and shifting is why we need hard data; after all, “if we don’t record observations, conversations, events, and impressions in our field notes, then it is difficult to document that these actually occurred” (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p. 162). I am sensitive to these worries and have previously attempted to assuage the Ideal Mathematician in the section “An Objection: Is This Research?” As such, I will not give him too much thought here, though I would ask him why he places so much value in the written and recorded, why he believes that these tangible takeaways are for some reason not also stories—equally

⁶³ It is worth my acknowledging that I am deliberately not taking up the subject of traumatic experiences that are unconsciously repressed as a coping mechanism by some sort of unwilling subject. This line of thought seems outside the scope of my work, and it is enough to note that experiences of this type do not seem to me to fit cleanly into the framework I am trying to create. It might be possible to align these sorts of happenings with what Dewey (1938/1997) calls mis-educative experiences—ones which have “the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (p. 25)—though I feel in no way qualified to follow this idea any further. I did want to note, however, that I am fully aware of the existence of such experiences.

filtered and processed stories at that. Furthermore, an immediate observer of the kind he desires must still write some particular version of a happening, an instantly ossified version which will be read quite differently as time goes on, changing in interpretation much as Jason's and my stories change in the (re)telling. Even ignoring this problem, Denzin and Lincoln (2004) tell me that "representation, of course, is always self-presentation.... The Other who is presented in the text is always a version of the researcher's self" (p.452). How is a piece of self-presentation written by an observer not a sort of story? And if the Ideal Mathematician counters—as I know he will—with some talk about the infallibility of the impartial, mechanically recorded observation of a teacher in practice, I would be more than happy to go on at length about the absurd theatricality all of my colleagues undertake when any kind of extra body is in our room watching us teach. It is all story—memory, written data, recorded data—and there is no escaping this fact, only obfuscating it. I hope the Ideal Mathematician might at least see my point enough to continue reading.

Let me return to my and Jason's competing stories and the second thing I notice in considering the nature of experience—that under my definitions it might best be understood as what Hook (2005) calls "*a complex of events*, a poised moment of various intersections of force rather than a self-sustained, autonomous entity" (p. 13, emphasis in original text). There is no self-sustained, autonomous experience out there for Jason and me to discover; there exists no magical, "authoritative evidence" (Scott, 1991, p. 780) which might finally settle the argument we have gone round and round on over the last 10

years.⁶⁴ We both experienced the moment quite differently, and trying to reconcile our stories into a single text has only proven more futile as years have gone on. Of such efforts Butler (1993) rather dismissively writes, “the notion of the ‘moment’ may well be nothing other than a retrospective fantasy of mathematical mastery imposed upon the interrupted durations of the past” (p. 245). Rather than trying to draw “experience” as isomorphic to “event,” however, I might be better served in adopting Hook’s (2005) notion of the complex of events—his re-termining of the Foucauldian concept of *eventualization*. Hook defines this concept for me: “the idea of eventualization means to effect a multiplication or pluralization of causes such that the object of analysis (an object now understood as *event*) is analyzed according to the multiple and complex processes that constitute it” (p. 13). It is best, perhaps, to look at Jason’s and my continued argument about what happened that day in the coffee-shop/bagel-store/apartment as a practical example of eventualization. Rather than seeking a common ground sort of solution, we should accept that our joint experience need be multiple.

Pushing this idea a bit further leads me into interesting experiential waters. Again, let me return to the example of my wife, as it is possible that one or both of my parents remembers quite well the moment I called home to tell them about Millie. My mother, in specific, seems likely to have some recollection of the conversation that would lead to her meeting someone she immediately suspected as a future daughter-in-law; it is equally possible she would have had opportunity through discourse to eventualize this happening

⁶⁴ It might be argued that if, as in some science fiction novel, a time machine could be procured we could both go back to the moment of the revelation and settle once and for all what actually happened. Even were such a thing possible it is more than likely that we would still, upon returning from our magical ride, manage to disagree about what we saw. After all, we are both different people, and it is possible that no two people could view the same scene in the exact same way.

into, according to my definition, some sort of experience.⁶⁵ In this a startling fact needs be noted: my mother might have in her past some experience that rather directly involves me, though *I have no reciprocal experience*. A complex of events can lead to not only wildly different experiences being remembered among the actors, but also entirely mismatched experiences—some event that exists for one actor may not exist at all for another. This possibly disturbing fact is worth remembering when I consider those who play a part in my stories, those who have been eventualized by my discourse into a part of my experience: they may not reciprocate.

The last thing that needs noting from my story is a connection from this redefinition of the concept of experience back to my starting point on the ship *Argo*. The discourse that Jason and I have undergone over the past ten years has not only created an experience for me out of what I am now calling a complex of events—it also through this process has undertaken the formation of my identity. After all, as Brown, Jones, and Bibby (2004) tell me, “identity is a form of argument” (p. 167). In fact, these scholars—working in the realm of *mathematics identity*—might have a word I could generalize to assuage Barthes’ (1975/2010) worries about the *Argo*: “Identity should not be seen as a stable entity—something that people *have*—but as something that they *use*, to justify, explain and make sense of themselves in relation to other people, and to the contexts in which they operate” (Brown, Jones, & Bibby, 2004, p. 167, emphasis in original text). Meaning, Jason and I through our diachronic discussion are using our self-asserted

⁶⁵ My wife was 18 years old and just starting college when we began dating; I was 24 and several years graduated. My mother would not have been overly shocked at hearing this information over the phone, but she almost certainly would have found it noteworthy, *experiential*. In that sense, it would have made perfect sense for her to discuss with her friends this first phone conversation and the surprise she felt when I told her I was bringing home a very serious girlfriend who was quite a bit younger than me.

identities to make sense of ourselves in relation to other people. Specifically, it might be noted that I think of myself as the kind of person who would push through a negative reaction from a friend in order to do what I think is right or best, while Jason sees himself as the kind of person who would never react negatively to his friend presenting a tenuous thought that turned out to be true. According to my understanding of all this philosophy, Jason and I are not discoursing about our decade-old conversation *because* these teased out traits are parts of our present concept of our identities; that is putting the cart before the horse. Rather, these traits could be said to be parts of our identities only because Jason and I continue to discourse about it—it is in the argument that we continue to form our ideas of exactly who we are. It is possible that were we to cease conversation about this complex of events for some years, these traits would someday no longer be a part of our self-avowed identities. I would still look like me, as he would still look like him, but some part of our personalities that seems so important to us today would, in some fundamental way, *no longer exist*.

What Jason (and the Argo) Tells Me about Identity

This thought of a future where Jason and I cease our arguing and eventually forget the story and the complex of events and the experience altogether brings me back to the ship *Argo*. One day we might find ourselves as entirely different men “with an entirely new ship, without having [had] to alter either its name or its form” (Barthes, 1975/2010, p. 46). Barthes, though he might be right about this one aspect of identity, might be wrong about another, however: we might not be merely objects “with no other identity than our form” (p. 46). It may be that we are objects whose identity is housed in the form-altering acts of discourse which create the substitution that so bothered both Barthes and

my taste-bud-haunted former self. Put another way, Deleuze and Guattari (1987a) might say that the happenings which bring about a complex of events are a rhizome, while the memories and experience I take away from such a situation are a tracing. In viewing things this way, it seems appropriate to me to attempt to see identity itself as nothing more than a type of tracing—active enough in its effects but illusory in its seeming solidity.

The *Argo* exemplifies this concept perfectly: it gives off the appearance of Platonic continuity, but in actuality its identity is held together in a continued trace of the vessel it only appears to be. I think much the same could be said about the autonomous “I” that I consider to be “me.” Bamberg (2011) notes, “the narrating subject [is] not locked into stability nor drifting through constant change, but rather [is] something that is multiple, contradictory, and distributed over time and place, but contextually and locally held together” (p. 9). If this is true, if my identity is neither locked in nor drifting through constant change but is in some sense distributed over the diachronic tracing of my discourse, I am able to discover an incredible weight to these stories I am (re)telling in my autoethnography—a weight that might remain absent were these stories to be accepted as merely some things that “happened” and were subsequently written about. Derrida (1964/1978d) asks, “Has not the concept of experience always been determined by the metaphysics of presence? Is not experience always an encountering of an irreducible presence, the perception of a phenomenality?” (p. 152). In an attempt to make sense of my perception of the phenomenality of experience, my stories might just be the modular units—moveable, malleable, replaceable—that make up the ship I call *Myself*. There is power in autoethnography.

Troubling as all of these words are—experience, event, identity, the autonomous “I”—it appears from my brief survey that they are not so easily done away with. After all, it is important to Alice that she can be certain she is still Alice—not Ada or Mabel or any other such person. Who are we as a school of philosophers to deny her this comfort, and who among us does not take secret solace in similar self-knowledge? Even Butler (1993) would allow Alice the dignity of her name and the history attendant to it, noting that “none of the above is meant to suggest that identity is to be denied, overcome, erased. None of us can fully answer to the demand to ‘get over yourself!’” (p. 117). Scott (1991) seconds this when she writes, “*experience* is not a word we can do without, although, given its usage to essentialize identity and reify the subject, it is tempting to abandon it altogether....It serves [however] as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity” (p. 797). Tempting as it may be to abandon experience and identity altogether, the near-farcical impracticality of such a stance leads me and my scholars away from this precipice. Without my admittedly loaded words—experience, event, identity, the autonomous “I”—how would I ever hope to communicate? I need a way of “talking about what happened” with those I live and work with; I need a purchase to find for me and the other actors in my life so we can position ourselves to discuss our differences and similarities. Something happened that day in the coffee shop or bagel store with Jason, and for some largely unknown reason it seems important to both of us to keep talking about it. This need to talk about the past traces the tap through the power of autobiography, toward the science of autoethnography, and into the very vein of the concept of self. I have no choice but to follow.

Let me close with another word from Butler (1999), this in an effort to sum up my original purpose in all of this—to examine what the troubled concept of identity means to me as an autoethnographer:

I do not believe that poststructuralism entails the death of autobiographical writing, but it does draw attention to the difficulty of the ‘I’ to express itself through the language that is available to it. For this ‘I’ that you read is in part a consequence of the grammar that governs the availability of persons in language. I am not outside the language that structures me, but neither am I determined by the language that makes this ‘I’ possible. This is the bind of self-expression, as I understand it. What it means is that you never receive me apart from the grammar that establishes my availability to you. (p. xxv)

For the time being I believe it is enough for me in my work to follow Butler—to continue to do autobiographical writing while deliberately drawing my attention to the difficulty of expressing myself through the language available to me. I take this tack despite the fact that Barthes (1975/2010) disagrees with Butler (1999)—he believes that poststructuralism does indeed in some way entail the death of autobiographical writing. He begins his own autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*—which I have been exclusively citing from in this chapter—with the epigraph: “*It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.*” (Barthes, 1975/2010, p. 1), later tripping deeper down this rather evasive rabbit hole: “the substance of this book, ultimately, is therefore totally fictive” (p. 120). This thread scares me, I must be honest, worried as I am about losing myself in the labyrinth into which it leads. Perhaps I have followed this line of poststructural flight far enough.

I am not simply worried about losing my mathematics education readers by following Barthes’ (1975/2010) clew too far—though this is certainly a fear—but I also have to abashedly admit that I enjoy my sense of an autonomous “I.” Like Alice, I want

to continue to be Jay Wamsted, grounded in some sort of continuous reality. However, I am simultaneously afraid that without intentionality my writing will fall to prey to Gannon's (2006) warning about the majority of "autoethnographic work [which] leaves the speaking self relatively untroubled in the text" (p. 477). I hope in this chapter to have made a case for a kind of middle ground which both encourages me to trouble my speaking self while also allowing me some sense of an autonomous "I"—yet another middle way for me to tack through. Returning to Ellis' (2007) definition, hopefully I can continue to observe and examine, experience and reveal—if I can keep in mind the slippery nature of the concepts behind these seemingly simple words, a nature which could do violence to my work if I choose to remain unaware. After all, when following a thread through a labyrinth, it is wise to keep one's eyes peeled for a Minotaur.

Letter to a Young Math Teacher: The Danger of Being Misunderstood

During the defense of this dissertation it was pointed out to me that I seemed to have hit upon a bit of an unacknowledged theme. Professor Martin, in wondering over my multiple stories wherein hints and accusations of racism are brought against me, asked me if I was aware of and could speak to my seeming need to "circle the wagons" around this motif. I stumbled through an answer to his question at the time, and have been thinking it over in some depth since. I believe I have a more polished rationale to my need to "circle the wagons" than I was able to articulate at my defense, but in order to get at it I have yet another story to (re)tell in connection with this theme. I have tried to warn the young math teacher that you might be called a racist by students and that you might be thought a bit of a carpetbagger by colleagues, but I have yet to mention that, also, you might just find yourself in some deeper water with some more important people. This story is about

one of my accidental forays into that deep water. As in my letter “The Destructive Power of Discourse,” I have changed this story considerably from its original version by distilling it down to a one-sentence sort of takeaway and rebuilding it from there. Unlike that letter, however, I have kept myself as a character and the school system as the setting; the theme is too personal for me to remove myself altogether. The actions and the setting are fictionalized and the characters are all composite proxies, though the words largely adhere to my memory of actual words spoken by actual people. I appeal again to Angrosino (1998): though I have never actually been to a calculator training, something much like this happened to me once; this creative (non)fiction is my attempt to (re)tell you about it while maintaining confidentiality.

I was at a training, one of those all-day affairs you will attend several times a year, district-wide events wherein teachers from different schools are placed in content and grade-level appropriate workshops run by central-office staff or corporate liaisons. It was closing in on lunch of our first day, and I had been in a spacious conference room all morning with about 30 other 9th grade mathematics teachers, running through a variety of activities focusing on the use of technology in the classroom. For the past hour my table—made up of me and four of my colleagues from Murphy—had been exploring the capabilities of a fairly complicated graphing calculator. Though for a while we had a good time teasing out the tricks we could do with this powerful little machine, before the official hour ended we had grown tired of our explorations. A conversation had spilled over from another table about the practicality of these devices in our actual classrooms, all of us agreeing that though a fascinating diversion there was limited utility for our kids

back at school. This conversation was not radical, nor even novel; it was just a way of passing the time.

The trainer wandered over to our table and sat down, a man from some contracted company who was running this show with two others, each of them managing different aspects of the day. He asked us how our exploration had gone, and a colleague of mine who is always particularly game for such conversations stepped up to the plate and showed him some of the shortcuts we thought we had discovered. After a few minutes of this, the man appeared ready to go and made as if to stand up. He paused, however, hands on the table, and instead asked, “So, how do you see yourselves actually using this calculator in the classroom? How are we going to use this technology to catch our kids up to where they need to be?”

Silence reigned. Mere moments before we had been discussing just how useless we thought these machines would be in our actual classrooms—fine for playing around in a rare down moment, but most certainly distracting to our core business of trying to teach mathematics in an apartheid school. It got a bit uncomfortable as he waited for one of us to respond, and it was clear that he was confused by our reluctance to do so. After all, we had just recently been holding forth on all of the fun we had experienced in our exploratory activity, and now we were obviously unwilling to respond to his perfectly understandable question. As is often the case in moments like these, I found myself feeling as if I should say something. Had someone else spoken up before I did, this happening would have turned into a non-experience and thus I would not be (re)telling this story today. As it were, when the silence went on long enough I found myself saying something along the following lines:

“Well, I don’t really think we see ourselves using these calculators in our classrooms. They are just so complicated that it would take an incredibly long amount of time to get the kids up to speed on any kind of activity. Then, probably, we’d have to do so much of that explanation over again the next day and the next. It would just waste too much time—and really for the kids who need it the most, because those who are the furthest behind would need the most time to re-learn the calculators every day. It would be fine for the advanced kids, they’d be good, but it would be just another weight on the remedial learner. Also, because the calculators are so expensive, we’d probably only have 60 or so in the entire building, which would mean that we wouldn’t be able to use them for too many days in a row before someone else needed to work with them—and then who knows when we’d get our chance again and how much the kids would forget? And then there’s the fact that the kids can’t use these types of calculators on their high-stakes tests—we’d have to completely re-train them on an entirely different calculator in the weeks leading up to the test, wasting more time. Don’t get me wrong, we would certainly use them and design some activities around them—it would be super useful for the advanced kids and fun for all the others—but as far as them being a daily aid to our lessons, we just don’t think we see it.”

My colleagues nodded along with me, and even chimed in at the end when the trainer asked a few questions about my comments. I thought I had made good sense, and thus I entirely forget about the conversation in the hour we had for lunch; none of us breathed another word about calculators as we went about the wonderful business of being able to go out for a meal on a workday. We took our time eating and lazily returned to the session, and it was then that I discovered an email from a former administrator of

mine, requesting me to come see her in a different training session. When I stood up and told my colleagues where I was going and who I was going to see, they all gave me kind words to pass along. In a literal meaning of the word “ironic,” the conversation about the calculators could not have been further from my mind.

I found Ms. Andrews a few rooms over. We had greeted each other earlier in the day, so without much formality she cut right to the point. “Jay,” she said, “Mr. Wilson came over here to see me....” She trailed off, I think to give me a moment during which to step in and head her story off, get my own two cents in before she told me her version. However, I was unable at the moment to remember who exactly Mr. Wilson was, and thus could have betrayed no knowledge of the story on my quizzical face. “Mr. Wilson, the trainer from your technology session,” her voice went up at the end of the sentence as if it were a question. I nodded, and she again paused.

“Oh, sure!” I bluffed. I could not in a million years have told her the name of this man if asked ahead of time. “You know him, I guess?”

“He went to college with my husband. We still see him from time to time. He came over here during lunch, and repeated something rather disturbing.” Ms. Andrews stopped again, but she must have realized by this point that I was unable to head her story off at the pass, so she kept on. “Mr. Wilson seems to be under the impression that you, and I quote here, ‘don’t believe that Black children can learn.’”

It was like getting punched in the gut—a brief instant of being unable to breathe, followed by ragged, disoriented thought about what had just happened. I truly cannot remember what exactly I said to Ms. Andrews in the moment, so frightened was I at the prospect of defending myself to this powerful Black woman I had always respected so

much. I must have stammered badly through some sort of attempt at conversation, because, mercifully, she did cut me off rather quickly. In short order she sketched through Mr. Wilson’s version of my little speech about the calculators, enabling me to catch my breath enough to reconstruct my own memory of the moment.

“Be careful what you say, Jay,” she said at the end of this debriefing. “It was that talk about ‘remedial learners’ that bothered him—he probably didn’t really hear anything else you said. In his mind, you said that your Black kids aren’t smart enough to be able to learn how to use these calculators, that they’re so far behind they can’t benefit from high quality instruction.”

It was then that I was finally able to wonder: had I said that? I knew that I had not *meant* that, but had I somehow *said* it? I believed very much in the oppressive power of systemic racism (Feagin, 2000; Wildman & Davis, 1995/2008; much more on this later), was spending all my time writing a dissertation pushing into my own racism resulted from this system; had some troubled habit of mind slipped from my mouth without my even being aware of it? Was Mr. Wilson, in fact, correct? Did I in some way not believe that Black children could learn? I went over and over with Ms. Andrews what I had actually said as well as what I actually meant, skipping for the moment the wonder and worry of these disturbing thoughts. Leaving her and quickly making my way back to my session, I felt okay as far as our relationship went—if still a bit embarrassed. I was, though, downright terrified to spend the next two days in session with Mr. Wilson, feeling that I needed in some way to acknowledge our misunderstanding but entirely hamstrung as to how to go about that act.

I got through the next two days dodgedly, avoiding Mr. Wilson almost entirely. Though at the time I was bothered enough to believe that all was well that ended well, I now see what a wasted opportunity the whole situation was. I did see the racist slant to what I had said; I did believe that any White person, no matter how well-meaning, can and will say stupid things at times. I should have told him about these thoughts of mine. I should have had the guts to apologize. As it were, I let my embarrassment and, I must admit, anger get in the way of what could have been a mutually beneficial dialogue. I was upset at being called out for a racism I was willing to accept, but only on my own terms. Unable to move out of that sense of humiliation, I lost the moment.

There are several takeaways here for my young, math-teacher reader. It is interesting to note from this brief (re)telling of the incident that what started as a merely mathematical conversation—how best to remediate our students who are multiple grade-levels behind—flipped so quickly into a conversation about race. As a White teacher in an all-but all-Black school, race is such a consistent conversational default; I have now shown this in the classroom and in the hallways with both colleagues and superiors. Even being aware of this effect, it is frightening to be accused of racism when one thinks one is merely discussing mathematics. It is also worth wondering whether we as White people can ever truly “merely” discuss mathematics. In retrospect I think that maybe Mr. Wilson might have been more than a little correct that day in his accusation; in this acceptance of my own culpability as a systemically racist White man I can even see sense in him going to Ms. Andrews. After all, if he really did think I was an active, intentional racist, what good would it have done to have addressed me personally?

I suppose I am “circling the wagons” around this theme of accused-racism for each of the above reasons: I both believe it is an almost inevitability in my job as well as worry myself as to just how true it might actually be. I know that the specifics of these stories—Mr. Wilson and Ms. Andrews, Shawn Robinson and Eddie, Deangelo and the faculty meeting—cannot be entirely generalizable to the other young, White teachers of mathematics to whom I am ostensibly writing, but I do know that the general through line is one worth repeating: mathematics education is in a nervous state in our nation, and the math teacher at an apartheid school is in a particularly tense spot. Race is probably going to get mixed up with your job, whether you try to keep it separate or not; I think we have no ability but to find ourselves in these strange positions of pushing against each other. How you handle them—both in the moment with the other actors and in your own mind as you trouble your true intentions—will make the measure of your ability to continue teaching. This aspect of your work as a teacher might be uncomfortable—questioning the manners and thoughts of your inner mind almost always is. I have certainly found myself uncomfortable at times; it is this feeling that continues to tempt me to circle the wagons. Pushing through this discomfort—pulling apart the wagons, so to speak—might just be the best thing we as a teaching community can do for our students, and ourselves. I should have talked to Mr. Wilson that day. Maybe next time something like this happens I will have the humility to do so.

CHAPTER 9

RACIAL IDENTITY & NARRATIVE MINING

“—then you don’t like *all* insects?” the Gnat went on, as quietly as if nothing had happened.

“I like them when they can talk,” Alice said. “None of them ever talk, where I come from.”

“What sort of insects do you rejoice in, where *you* come from?” the Gnat inquired.

“I don’t *rejoice* in insects at all,” Alice explained, “because I’m rather afraid of them—at least the large kinds. But I can tell you the names of some of them.”

“Of course they answer to their names?” the Gnat remarked carelessly.

“I never knew them to do it.”

“What’s the use of their having names,” the Gnat said, “if they wo’n’t answer to them?”

“No use to *them*,” said Alice; “but it’s useful to the people that name them, I suppose. If not, why do things have names at all?”

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*

(Carroll, 1871/1992b, p. 132, emphasis in original text)

What is Narrative Mining?

I have performed a piece of evasive magic in the first half of this dissertation work, pulled a bit of rug over my readers’ eyes despite my best intentions at full disclosure. In a blind rush to get my personal (and painful) story down on paper—the introductory tale of my initial failure as a classroom teacher—it is now clear to me that I failed to properly interrogate the 24-year-old man I once was. I call my former self naïve and foolish, this in an effort to make sure the reader knows that it is okay for us to wince together at his past actions, but whatever exploration my writing attempts only highlights the lacks in my knowledge at the time: what it was I didn’t know how to do, what it was I didn’t know how to think about. True, I was laughably unprepared to face that classroom of 7th graders on the first day of school, missing so many things I now believe would be

necessary for even a chance at success. However, I only feel this way in retrospect; no mention is made in my introduction of how I felt at the time. What exactly was I thinking that first day, or in any of the long days of expectation leading up to it? What were my beliefs about Black people or schooling or the obvious intersection I was trying to live within? During my prospectus defense Professor Martin asked me a hard question: How does a White person come to the point where they can love and care for Black people? The answer to this question is, in many respects, the ground to the figure of my entire dissertation project—it is the driver of the research on my own journey I am still in the act of writing. Professor Martin was not looking for a perfunctory answer that day, nor will I insult either him or my reader by offering such now. In an attempt to respond to him, however, I start by pushing back to that moment in my introduction that I evaded before, and I ask a question: What might have I been feeling, as a 24-year-old White man raised in a nation both obsessed with race (West, 1993; Barrett & Roedier, 1996/2008) and in denial about this fact (hooks, 1992/1995b, Bonilla-Silva, 2006), when all of those Black 12 and 13 year olds trooped into my classroom that August day back in the year 2000?

Race is a tricky thing. Like the names under discussion between Alice and the Gnat in my epigraph, it seems of utility only inasmuch as it helps to define another; one tends not to think about one's own race much as one tends not to speak one's own name. It seems possible to me that if I somehow can tease out how I felt about race in those first failed months of teaching I might also be able to draw some parallels—and hopefully some perpendiculars—to how I feel today. In that, I might just be able to begin to answer an attenuation of Professor Martin's question: How did I get from there to here? Tatum

(2007) observes, “most teachers in the United States are White teachers who were raised and educated in predominantly White communities [and whose] knowledge of communities of color and their cultures is typically quite limited” (p. 71), and both of these identifications are certainly true of me. Though a necessary starting point, however, it seems no longer sufficient for me to continue to hide behind the statement “I am just like other White people.” In an effort to truly attempt an examination of my own racial identity—specifically as it pertains to Black people—I follow Tatum’s advice to interrogate my early memories of race and what they might say about what I might think (Tatum, 1997, p. 31–32). In this experiential examination I am in keeping with my previously defined concept of identity—that facet of the autonomous “I” which we cultivate through our experience-creating discourse. In other words, my early stories⁶⁶ about Black people say a lot about what it is that I think about Black people—otherwise *I would not continue to tell them*. My current and former racial identity has been and still is formed by the discourse I surround myself with, by the stories I am continuing to (re)tell. In what I call *narrative mining* I am going to examine these stories in an effort to uncover what their continued discourse might be able to reveal about the ever-unspooling thread of my racial identity.

“Okay, wait—I think I have a question.”

“Sure. I was really convinced this time that you had left us for good—greener pastures and all that.”

“Well, I wanted to give you a chance to kick off this second half of your dissertation with some sort of propriety. And, for what felt like the first time, really, you were making sense for long stretches. For instance, I was really interested in all that Jorge Luis Borges talk that started all this off.”

⁶⁶ Tatum (1997) writes about *memories*; given the slant I have applied to experience and identity, I write about my *stories*. The words might seem largely replaceable in the context of my work, but I think it important to reinforce the thought that everything we claim as part of our autonomous “I” is story-based.

“Well, we really liked that book of his short stories.”

“Obviously. And then your *Dramatis Personae* was just so eloquent, especially when you finally were able to admit how important I am to this whole process.”

“With a little interruption from you to spur me on, of course.”

“Of course! But then you finally decided to get it through your head to tell some real honest stories. I think I can speak for all of your readers when I say thank you, and about time.”

“You are more than welcome. All of you.”

“I really liked how the “That Man Is White” story finally came full circle. It’s so different from the those early drafts. It’s hard to believe you were working on that first article almost three years ago now.”

“Yeah—and now it finally feels good. I mean, it almost seems like I could send it off again, written as it is.”

“Why don’t you try to finish this here project before you get too far ahead of yourself?”

“Fair enough.”

“And then, and I almost hate to admit it because I don’t want it to go to your head, but when you jumped back into theory and French poststructuralists, I actually found myself lulled into understanding what you were talking about in all that identity and experience talk.”

“Hey, thanks! Professor Holbrook and I worked real hard to get it to make sense. It’s complicated stuff, you know?”

“Oh, don’t worry: I get that loud and clear. But now that you’re switching from theory to method, I think I want a bit of a recap. Especially since you’ve decided to start making up terms again.”

“Well, I may have made up the term *narrative mining*, but it’s definitely not all that novel of a conceit.”

“I’m glad you brought that up! I didn’t want to say it, but it sounds like some kind of therapy term, right? Like you’re about to lay down on a couch and start talking, strike out into your past and discover gold or something?”

“Something like that. As far as the accusation of therapy goes, I’m definitely taking big cues from the psychologist McAdams (1996, 2001) who coined this whole thought of the life story model of identity. But to call it ‘therapy’ is a little off base.”

“Okay, then, convince me otherwise. I mean, the whole concept doesn’t sound all that complicated, but I just want to get what it is you’re doing exactly, so I can follow through the process.”

“Got it. Okay, well, why don’t we start with you describing what you think is about to happen, and I’ll chime in if it needs correcting? I think your summaries have proved an excellent source of sanity for all of us involved in this whole process.”⁶⁷

⁶⁷ I really cannot express how much I enjoy writing this at times rather thick philosophy from Proxy Me’s point of view. Something about the act of putting myself in the shoes of someone who hasn’t read any of the primary source material, nor even really thought two

“I couldn’t agree more—how could I not be important? But, to get back to the identity and experience section, I think what I hear you saying is that our shifting identities are directly tied to our shifting sense of our experiences, which in turn are reinforced and remembered by our discourse.”

“Actually, I tried to follow Scott (1991) in making a case that experience is actually created by discourse, but in a more colloquial sense the words ‘reinforced’ and ‘remembered’ might be a bit more comfortable for most of my readers.”

“Thanks. I seem to have a gift for making this postmodern stuff a bit more comfortable for all of us.”

“That’s design, not chance, by the way.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that. At any rate, what you’re about to do now is go back to your early stories about race—your experiences over time with and around race that have been...created...by the discourse of your telling of stories over the years.”

“I think I prefer the term ‘(re)telling’, but go on.”

“In tapping these experiences—what you’re calling ‘narrative mining’—you’re hoping to open a sort of window into the man you were at 24, the day you started your failed attempt at teaching middle school. You think that in examining what you remember today, you might be able to get a clear shot at your identity that day in the past. You’re hoping that the stories you tell and have told about your interactions with Black people will serve as markers for your identity, and in that you might be able to show yourself at 24 in a better way than a rote recitation of ‘what you remember’ from that day could do.”

“Oh, I like that last part. I wish I’d said that earlier.”

“Yeah? I did good?”

“For sure. Because if I tried to answer Professor Martin’s question by merely writing about ‘what I thought that day’ as compared to ‘what I think now’ then that description of the past would have no choice but to be indelibly tainted by everything that has happened to me since then—that moment irrevocably lost amidst the swirl and snarl of all that has come since. But in pushing back to stories that took place before the day in question I might be able to dodge my natural tendency to revision.”

“Thereby possibly bypassing the barriers to autoethnography you talked about from that Borges (1975/1998) story?”

“You were paying attention! I am so touched.”

“Well, it seemed like the least I could do. I feel like I’m on this journey with you, you know?”

“Well, it’s a nice connection you’ve made. Can you remind my readers what I named those barriers?”

thinks about it until “right now,” is somehow quite conducive to my whole train of thought. In that sense, then, Proxy Me’s summaries certainly have been “an excellent source of sanity for all of us involved in this whole process.” I don’t think I would be enjoying this dissertation quite so much without him.

“Memory and knowledge, understanding and interpretation, and communication?”

“Perfect. Specifically right now I think we’re talking about a way to bypass the barrier of communication.”

“Meaning that by reaching back to these deep stories you might be avoiding your present-day predilection to paint a rosy picture of ‘what you thought’ or ‘what you felt’ at 24 years old.”

“Exactly. In the mining process, I might even be able to discover something entirely unexpected, something I would have some reason to lie to myself about in the present—much like Borges the elder baldly lies to his younger self.”

“I thought that was so interesting. It makes total sense to me that in talking about the past—trying to tell these stories that you call autoethnography—you would have a real problem with self-deception. I enjoyed seeing you pulling that out of the Borges (1975/1998) story, and I’m glad to see you’re trying to get around that problem.”

“Thanks! But really, you’ve done an amazing thing tying narrative mining back to Borges (1975/1998) and his story—I’m not really sure I had quite made that connection so explicitly. I’m really excited now and I’m ready to get started, because I think we’ve pretty much nailed it down. For the sake of the academics out there who might be a little suspect of all of this, though, I’d like to provide a quote from McAdams (2001).”

“Go on. This is a dissertation, after all. Nobody could possibly begrudge you these unnecessarily lengthy quotations.”

“To the contrary, my audience loves them! McAdams (2001) writes:

People carry with them and bring into conversation a wide range of self-stories, and these stories are nested in larger and overlapping stories, creating ultimately a kind of anthology of the self. Although no single story may encompass all of the many narratives that any given person can use to make sense of his or her life, some stories are larger and more integrative than others and come closer, therefore, to functioning as identity formats for a given person. (p. 117)

“Anthology of the self? I kind of like that!”

“I thought you might.”

“So this quote maybe gives you the freedom to push through a whole host of stories, looking at how they overlap and intertwine, all in an effort to get at your racial identity. There isn’t just one story of ‘who Jay Wamsted is,’ but rather a wide range of different kinds of self-stories.”

“I think so. Where I’m kind of making up my own gloss is in the claim that these stories that took place before I was 24 years old might give me a more unbiased look into what I was like at that age than any other type of recollection I could attempt. I’m not sure McAdams (1996, 2001) would necessarily agree with that.”

“Well, you’ve got to have license to do your own thing in your dissertation, right?”

“We’ll see. At any rate, you ready to get going?”

“By all means. Let the narrative mining begin!”

Kevin

Let me start with the earliest story I can. Some might be shocked to know that my oldest memory involving a Black person—and this includes any talk about race to anyone at all—takes place when I was nine years old, during my 4th grade year. Others, understanding the direction racial discourse has taken in recent decades—and hearing that neither I nor my parents were born in the South—would be unsurprised at my near total lack of racial contact and context. I tacked between the two extremes. After all, I grew up in almost all-White environments: the elementary school I attended in Augusta, Georgia had only two Black children in my grade; moreover, only one of these boys lived in what we considered the neighborhood proper—an almost entirely White middle-class haven of brick ranch houses, back yards, parks, creeks, and even a community pool. Prior to moving to this house in the summer before my 2nd grade year we lived on various Army bases, which at first blush should seem to have been fruitful for some sort of cross-racial interaction. My father, however, was a member of three clubs that in the late 1970s would each still have been the domain of almost exclusively Whites: he was an officer, a West Point graduate, and a lawyer. It seems likely that we might have lived in different parts of the bases than did the Black men and women who over-represent the enlisted class (Fletcher, 2010), the ones my mother—herself an enlisted man’s daughter—remembers living with as a child on Army bases in the 1950s and 1960s.

Where we lived exactly is conjecture, however, and entirely unimportant to the work I am doing. I have not asked my parents for clarification on the color of our quarters

during the first six years of my life—were there Black people near us? did I play with any of the children?—because revelations of this sort would add nothing to what my stories say about what I considered at that point in the past to be worth (re)telling. I have no recollection of Black people or even the concept of race until my 4th grade year because I wasn't (re)telling stories about any Black people, and whether I actually played with Black children or not as a preschooler is largely incidental to this brute fact. McAdams (1996) writes, “what may be most important in a nuclear episode⁶⁸ is not so much what actually happened in the past but what the memory of the key event symbolizes today in the context of the overall life narrative” (p. 309), and I feel this to be true as regards to my racial identity. Here I find a possible answer to Borges (1975/1998) and his story's exposure of the barrier of memory to autoethnography: my inability to get at some sort of absolute truth of what happened in my past is largely unimportant; what matters is housed in the much more local truths of the stories I (re)tell. McAdams (2001) again:

Autobiographical memory and the life story are not exactly the same phenomena. Autobiographical memory encompasses a vast range of personal information and experience, whereas the life story consists of a more delimited set of temporally and thematically organized scenes and scripts that together constitute identity. Life stories provide a view of human personality that cannot be accessed through dispositional traits or characteristic adaptations. (p. 117)

In other words, I can write about what I was like as a child all day, calling my mother to obtain details I cannot quite remember, searching through scrapbooks and old

⁶⁸ More from McAdams (1996), immediately before this quote and intending to give context to the term “nuclear episode”: “A person may give high priority to a particular event from the past that encapsulates in a narrative nutshell an essential and enduring ‘truth’ about the Me [and becomes] symbolic ‘proof’ from my past that ‘I am what I am.’” (p. 308ff). I really enjoyed discovering McAdams in the psychology literature and reading into his theory, though I understand that it is a bit far afield at times. Thus, the footnote.

photographs for information and ephemera. As far as my identity goes, however, that might just be mere whistling in the dark. It seems that my stories are a better access point into the thing I call “Me.”

All that aside, however, the apparent erasure of race from the first 9 years of my life might be rather shocking to a reader, and I too have found myself at times amazed by it. I have managed to develop a theory as to how this can be true, of course, though it largely rests in more conjecture about my parents. My mother and father were alive but not quite school aged when *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) became law, teenagers about to start high school when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 finally passed, and just beginning college when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Landmark moments of modern American racial history were the driving drum of their public educations. My parents are both well-read, politically active college graduates, having come of age in an entirely different world than their own parents; the sea had changed, and they were probably eager to change with it. They and countless other White middle-class parents like them were a living laboratory for the creation and transmission of color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006)—raising their children not to mention the race of a friend at school or a stranger on the street, almost as if the speaking of such a thing made it somehow shameful. I do not blame my parents for this; I merely think that they were doing what they thought best in an intentional backlash against the conscious and active racists who though increasingly outnumbered made up for their diminished ranks with the escalating volume of their rhetoric. I am thinking specifically of David Duke, who attempted to run for president during both my middle and high school years—it seems reasonable to assume that any mention of Duke on the news would have given my parents

fits, and that a seemingly sensible recourse would have been to make sure that their sons expunged themselves of any and all racial conversation, throwing out both the good and healing with the bad and divisive.

Again, more conjecture—in reality I have no memory of anything like what I am describing; I have no memory of any racial talk at all. But if I was discouraged as a boy from speaking the race of someone at school, is it any wonder that my memory failed to form around the entire concept of race at all? If verbal discourse is the first cause of the complex of events that make up experience, then my lack of talk as a boy in some key way might have caused me to have a similar lack of any sort of racial history or memory. That is, until I was nine years old and something happened—something that forms a story I still tell to this day. It is in this story that I pick up the first clue as to what I might have been thinking about all of those Black middle-schoolers that day when I was 24 years old.

I remember that our recess football games during my 4th grade year were largely the same: 4th grade versus 5th grade. Though this might seem unfair, our team was captained by a boy who went on to be the quarterback for our high school team as well as a college baseball prospect, and during a 15-minute recess game having the best athlete on the field can make all the difference. One day something heated happened at some point during the game, though I have no recollection what that might be. The start of this story from my point of view picks up with a 5th grade boy sitting on top of me, knees pinning my shoulders to the ground, repeatedly punching me. Now, this was not my first schoolyard fight, but this was the first and only time I got into a fight with someone who was not what I would call a friend. All of those other fights I now look back on fondly as part of the process of growing up; they usually seemed funny immediately afterwards and

almost always brought my combatant and me closer together. This football fight, however, was an actual altercation between unfriendly antagonists. Though I do not remember exactly what I was feeling in the moment, I do have a distinct recollection of it being a rather tense scene—this effect due most likely to the fact that the boy beating me was both older and bigger than me

Even now my reader might be holding his or her breath, worried that my first experience with a Black person was one of unwarranted violence. I am pleased to say that my story turns sharply away from this precipice, as the boy hitting me was not Black. Rather, the classmate who unselfishly saved me from this situation was: Kevin,⁶⁹ one of the two Black children I remember from my 4th grade class, the one who didn't live in the neighborhood. In my telling of the tale—one I have told multiple times throughout my life, as childhood fights come up rather often in normalized alpha-male talk—Kevin streaked across the field, pushed through the crowd of people watching the event unfold, and tackled the 5th grade boy full throttle, knocking him off me as they both tumbled to the ground. He then rather gracefully rolled to his feet and kept the older boy glued to the ground with only a glare as I scrambled up and away. The situation dissolves in my mind here—we either got back to the game or went back inside for the rest of the school day—but what is of primary importance is what I am unable to remember: I have absolutely no recollection of speaking to Kevin about what had just happened. Furthermore, and I am embarrassed to admit this, I have no recollection of any conversation with Kevin at any point in time, ever, either before or after this pivotal moment. For all intents and purposes, my entire experience with Kevin is wrapped up in this one silent, saving

⁶⁹ Kevin is a pseudonym.

moment: he appears from nowhere and disappears immediately thereafter, never to be heard from again.⁷⁰

Let me be clear: I find it impossible to believe that I did not thank Kevin, that we as a ragtag bunch of 4th graders did not spend the rest of this glorious day reliving the moment where he administered sweet justice to an older bully, that we did not talk about this altercation ad nauseam at football for weeks. These conjectural conversations, however, are belied by the definitions I laid out in the previous section and the thought that if I cannot remember a happening then for all practical purposes that happening was not a part of what I would call my experience as a nine year old 4th grader.⁷¹ The bald fact might just be that the self-perceived important parts of my identity at nine years old did not involve talking to Black people. Not that I never did it—again, I would find such rudeness incomprehensible—but that I considered it to be an insignificant enough portion of my daily interactions that I had no grid for remembering even what I said to a Black classmate who had saved me from a potentially humiliating situation. In this—my earliest memory about Black people, a story that somehow keeps getting (re)told—I think I have

⁷⁰ Reading this sentence in the editing process makes me wonder if I have ever played a similar sort of brief heroic role in the life of some childhood acquaintance. I also wonder, in line with Tom Stoppard's (1967) famous play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, not only what Kevin's life was like at the time but also what it went on to be.

⁷¹ I have never read Freud, though I have read Derrida (1966/1978b) and his essay "Freud and the Scene of Writing." Reading this sentence of mine and thinking about the Mystic Writing Pad and its connection to the trace of identity makes me want to push further into what I can or cannot claim about my past experience and the unremembered residue of what might once have been written on my mind. Freud puts it this way: "It is easy to discover that the permanent trace of what was written is retained upon the wax slab itself and is legible in suitable lights" (as quoted in Derrida 1966/1978b, p. 224). As it is, though, I might have to leave this rabbit hole marked but unexplored; tripping down another labyrinth seems too distracting right now.

laid bare the paucity of my racial interaction in a way that the rote demographics of my neighborhood and school could never do. My neighborhood and school contained some Black people; the fact that I do not remember speaking to Kevin on this day indicates that my experience had no such room. Or, at least, I kept that room shut so that its stories stayed stuck in some sort of separation.

It is worth briefly noting what this story does reveal about my impressions of Black people, what parts of this story could be said to be positive⁷² pieces of my racial identity. After all, a proper mining of this memory is an essential clue in my quest to discover what I was like at 24 years old. For any sensitive reader it would be hard to help but notice that the stereotypes laced through Kevin's story are thick: Black boys are fast, Black boys are strong, Black boys are intimidating. Have I always emphasized these aspects of the story in my (re)tellings because even at 9 years old I was already primed to be susceptible to such generalizations by a stereotyping media? Or, possibly worse, have I unconsciously added these flourishes over time as I have been exposed continually to such reifying images in television and film? Either way, the fact that these stereotypes exist in my earliest racial story says quite a bit about the baggage I was carrying with me that first day of my teaching career: the experiential discourse of my stories exposes a man who trafficked in physical stereotypes about Black people. Let me leave Kevin behind and push on from this story to the next in an effort to uncover more of the man I might have been that day.

⁷² I am using the word "positive" here not as a synonym for "good"; in fact, what I am about to posit about my racial identity is decidedly not good. However, the previous paragraph dealt only with absence in my racial identity, and here I am going to attempt to tease out some presence. In this I suppose I am intending a more mathematical connotation of the word, which somehow feels right even if a bit misleading.

The Rhizomatic Middle

I usually say that I did not have a Black friend until I was 19 years old, and this statement is both true and false. It is true inasmuch as it was not until the summer after my freshman year of college that I had intimate, recurring conversations with a Black person. It is false inasmuch as I had Black classmates throughout middle and high school whom I would have called my friends at the time—people with whom I shared the ups and downs of a typical adolescent experience. In retrospect, given that this experience was almost entirely prescribed within the confines of the school building, I would no longer use the word “friend” to describe these persons, believing as I now do that friendship needs more than circumstance to warrant the naming. However, I do not want to gloss over these “friendships” in my writing, for two reasons. First, I am not entirely sure that the 24-year-old me—the Jay Wamsted I am trying to get at in this act of narrative mining—would completely concur with my current redefinition of past friendships. I think in order to avoid doing injustice to my tracing of his thoughts, in order to circumvent the autoethnographical barrier of understanding and interpretation I observed in Borges (1975/1998), I might need to examine these relationships. Additionally, it feels somehow evasive to skip from my first racial memory at nine years old (Kevin) straight to my first Black friendship at 19, and I have no wish to be accused of circumlocution. Consequently, I will push through my middle and high school age memories despite what I think is a lack of true story.⁷³ In this I mean that, unlike Kevin,

⁷³ I’m going to ruin the suspense here: it turns out that there are some rather important somethings to be found in the seemingly rambling stories I am about to tell. Yet another reason to push into the *quest* of writing (Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul, 1997), as I am about to discover some parts of myself that I, upon the original writing of this paragraph, had no idea existed.

there will be no arc, no plot to the tale I am about to tell. Rather, I will be writing in a somewhat meandering, circuitous manner, moving from memory to memory and back again as the process guides me. In this experiment, I will be following Deleuze and Guattari's (1987b) advice to "write, form a rhizome, increase your territory by deterritorialization, extend the line of flight" (p. 11). I can only hope that my reader will bear with me.

Terrell⁷⁴ was a Black classmate who went to some of middle and all of high school with me; he also was the only Black person whom my friends and I occasionally saw outside the halls of our school. As far as I can remember, Terrell was also the only Black student enrolled in the gifted program I was a part of from 2nd to 6th grade, and the sad thing is that I don't actually remember him from this time at all. Through 5th grade there were no Black students in our cohort of probably 12 or so "gifted students"—Terrell having gone to a different elementary school—but in 6th grade our almost all-White elementary school merged with two other schools to make a more racially mixed middle school, subsequently expanding our gifted class. In my mind this middle school I attended for one year was probably 60% White and 40% Black, but as is typical in gifted and honors programs around the country (Ladson-Billings, 2006) we only had one Black student who attended our weekly all day pull-out workshops: Terrell. I, however, have absolutely no memory of Terrell from that 6th grade year. Rather, after moving to New York for 7th and 8th grade and later coming back for 9th grade and high school, I was re-introduced to Terrell by an old friend in class one day with the explanation: "He was in

⁷⁴ A pseudonym.

gifted with us.” So, though I know it is true that Terrell was in gifted with me from the testimony of my friends, the experience of my memory gives me no such assurance.

Here I hit upon another line in the sketchy trace of what I might have been thinking that day when I was 24 years old: not only had I been brought up watching Black children denied equal representation in my gifted classes, but I even went so far as to fail to remember the one who made it. If memory is experience is identity, as I have tried to show might be true, for all intents and purposes it seems in this erasure that I was the kind of man who believed that Black people are not gifted. I pause writing these words because it seems so scary to think that I might have thought that. However, if I want to consider my narrative mining useful I believe I have to follow the process wherever it might lead—frightening or not. Could I possibly have forgotten about Terrell altogether because my identity housed disconcerting stereotypes about Black people and intelligence, stereotypes that were both formed and reified by my being educated in White honors classrooms inside a racially mixed school—an effect which Nasir, McLaughlin, and Jones (2009) call the *two schools phenomenon* (p. 84)? Could I have been actively holding these sinister stereotypes that first day of teaching, if not consciously then at least in the back of my mind? These are troubling thoughts.

A brief aside, a tangent diverging from the thought of Black underrepresentation in gifted programs, along with an acknowledgment of the fact that the rhizomatic nature of memory might make the writing of it rather slippery. During the two years I was away from Georgia I attended a middle school on the campus of the United States Military Academy at West Point—a rather exclusive school made up of fast-tracked officers’ kids.

I tested into the gifted class again,⁷⁵ though this time it was ratcheted up a notch in that the 25 of us were together all day every day. There were two Black girls in my class that I remember quite well in that again I would have said that we were friends—though by this I think I meant that they were friends of girls I was friends with. These girls are the first Black people I remember actually interacting with—this at 12 or 13 after five years living in the deep South!—and I suppose it might be said that it was at this point that I began to develop some sort of racial awareness, insomuch as the experiences that make up my identity contain specific remembrances about the Black people I spent time with. For example, I can still picture one of these girls quite well, see the way she smiled, hear how contagious her laugh was to her friends—in this sense, my experience of her is deeper than my experience of Kevin in that it is far more personal. Possibly this shift is indicative of my evolving a more personal sense of racial awareness; I was finally starting to “see” Black people.

A few thoughts about my burgeoning sense of racial self. First, I continued to look around me and see an overwhelming amount of White people in my gifted class—this fact cannot be ignored even as it might become tiresome to repeat, and it will be repeated again in both high school and college. Second, despite the fact that we socialized both inside and outside of school, I still remember not a single scrap of specific conversation I

⁷⁵ A related something I have always found interesting. Absent my mother’s intervention, not only were the school officials going to refuse to even allow me to be tested for the gifted program, but they also had strong inclinations to have me repeat my 6th grade year—this solely on account of their experience with students coming from Southern public schools and their lack of academic preparedness. It has recently occurred to me that my mother’s action on my behalf seems a classic manifestation of White privilege. I have often wondered how different my life might have turned out had she not been able to fight that battle for me.

ever had with either of these two girls. Getting better, I suppose, but still alarming as per my earlier reasoning pertaining to Kevin. Third, not only am I unable to claim having had a boyhood crush on either of these girls, but also I cannot remember anyone having a crush on them nor hearing about them having feelings for any of us—“anyone” and “us” being my clique of White male friends. One of these aspects of our adolescent emotions would not be unusual; all three together are suspicious given the amount of energy I remember all of us expending in the newly confusing space of young relationships and the fact that, in typical teenage fashion, who liked whom was in a seemingly perpetual state of flux. It seems that even at 13 I might have assimilated the thought that Black girls were not for dating.⁷⁶ This thought rather startles me, and I return to Terrell briefly only in order to push further into this notion of cross-racial attraction.

Terrell was one of the few Black students in my high school honors-tracked classes, this again in a school I remember being about 40% Black. In fact, he is the only Black person whom I remember being in honors throughout my freshman and sophomore years. By junior and senior year, however, he had been joined by a couple of other boys—all of whom, again, I would have called friends at the time. What I find curious to consider as I write is that I cannot make my mind remember whether there were any Black girls in any of my high school honors classes, ever. I can clearly picture the boys: I can recall their first and last names, envision their faces, compare and contrast their personalities and senses of humor. Yet, I cannot even decide if there was a single Black girl in any of these classes. I find it nearly impossible to believe that there were in fact

⁷⁶ I hate this sentence, as it just feels grimy. It plays an important role in what is to come, however, so I am forced to leave it be. At this point in the original writing process, I am not sure that I believed that I had assimilated any such fact—rather, I think I was just reaching for something to write about. The tables turn here in a moment or two.

none, and so through effort I can almost convince myself that I can picture this one specific girl—a cheerleader, a popular student I call Briana—in both my 11th grade AP English and my 12th grade honors physics class. However, as soon as I do so I just as quickly talk myself out of it: No, Briana was in my 12th grade gym class, I remember that for a fact, and I am just mixing the memories of the classes I so much enjoyed during my senior year, a not atypical halcyon conflation of time.

My immediate inclination is to email a friend in order to sort out the answer to this question, but again, to hearken back to my decision not to interrogate my mother about my childhood racial encounters, I think this act would in large part be missing the forest for the trees. The mere fact that I cannot decide if this girl took honors classes with me is enough for the present writing, it makes decided for me what I only hypothesized in regards to my middle school self. For me—a young man who, like many teenage boys I knew, had an Achilles’ heel of a penchant for falling for popular girls, particularly those of the cheerleading variety—not to have formed any experience with this seemingly well-suited young woman who may have been in class with me says loud and clear what I hinted at earlier in my thoughts about middle school: as far as identity goes, at the time I had absolutely no grid for dating or being attracted to a Black girl. If I had, I can say with almost complete confidence that my teenage self would have formed some sort of memorable experience with this particular one, probably the most likely candidate I knew during my high school days. This bias against dating⁷⁷ a Black girl I find in my former

⁷⁷ In writing group Erika observed that this statement may be a bit strong: it seems that my bias might have been against noticing or “seeing” Briana, not against dating her. I acknowledge her point, and I think that it supports my argument elegantly: I believe that if I had thought dating Briana was even a possibility, I would have “seen” her much more than I did.

self is a common form of racism, I suppose, but I am surprised nonetheless to see it so glaringly through this act of narrative mining. I could almost have dodged the charge in my memories of middle school; it seems rather unavoidable now. Let me continue to follow this line of flight, as I have piqued my interest in wondering about how often I might have seen this girl.

Briana

I can remember not a single interracial couple from my school experience, this going from elementary school all the way through college. Of course I watched interracial couples on television—both real and fictional—but I never personally had a White friend who dated a Black person, and none of my limited number of Black friends dated a White person. Is this shocking? Maybe not for Augusta, Georgia in the early 1990s or Clemson University in the middle 1990s or The University of Georgia in the late 1990s; it is entirely possible that there were very few interracial couples in any of these locales.⁷⁸ However, I again find it impossible to believe that there were none. A brief mention of Brandon,⁷⁹ my first “true” Black friendship which I will detail more later: he attended an almost all-White private high school where he was both popular and the star of their highly competitive soccer team,⁸⁰ and I find it hard to believe that he did not date at all

⁷⁸ The first non-White person I was ever close to was a girl of Japanese descent at Clemson who dated a White student a few years ahead of us. As already discussed, my friend—the only child of architecture professors—seems not to meet the criteria of Stinson’s (2011) “historically marginalized students” (p. 63), and thus I find this anecdotal fact largely irrelevant. For honesty’s sake, however, I wanted to mention it.

⁷⁹ Not a pseudonym. I would be overjoyed to have Brandon read about himself here.

⁸⁰ I am fully aware that this sentence itself needs interrogating: “almost all-White private school” and “star of their highly competitive soccer team.” I will get to this troubling in

during high school. However, in not explicitly remembering dating of this cross-racial type from the time, the same question arises here in regards to my own possibility of cross-racial attraction that I found myself faced with in considering Kevin and athletic stereotypes: Did I not have a grid for being attracted to a Black girl because I saw nothing of the sort around me? Or, do I not remember anything of the sort around me because I had no grid for being attracted to a Black girl? I obviously do not know the answer to this question, but I will say that I think I was 23 years old before I had a friendship with a Black female wherein I remember the internal question of dating arising in any form or fashion. We didn't even come close, and soon lost touch; consequently, I have little to say about this except to note that this was merely a year before I started teaching middle school. All of these stories being noted, it might be fair to accuse that 24-year-old man of believing deep in his heart that miscegenation is, if not wrong, at least not natural. This accusation seems fair insomuch as attraction to Black girls did not appear to come naturally to him.

My fingers tremble writing these last couple sentences, and immediately I want to make two qualifications clear. First, that is the man I was, not the man I am. I will not insult my reader by listing reasons that I believe indicate the changes in me since then, but I will say that I have been actively troubling my racial self for seven years now, and the number of Black women and interracial couples I have known in the past decade dwarfs my exposure as a younger man. This exposure has changed me, I think, and I will trust my reader to let me leave it alone, given that this line of justification is outside the

its proper place; I just wanted my reader to know that I know how exploitative this sentence feels.

parameters of my current endeavor of narrative mining.⁸¹ I do want to plead with the reader, though, to give grace to me about all of this: digging through experience and identity apparently can churn up some rather difficult stuff. I am embarrassed by much of this work, and it is all I can do just to make myself keep writing, to stop myself from going back in some *ex post facto* fashion in an effort to edit or soften.

My second qualification is more of a clarification. I want to make sure my reader knows that never, ever would I have said that I believed in the impropriety of miscegenation—not as a 24-year-old teacher, not as a college undergraduate, not as a high school or middle school student. I think what I have now realized firsthand, however, is the insidious power of what I have read so much about these past five years: that though this type of direct racism has, for the most part, gone backstage (Hughey, 2011), by and large this relegation of overt racism has rendered the more subtle kind—the color-blind racism discussed by Bonilla-Silva (2006)—to be unknown even to its hosts. In other words, I as an educated upper-middle class White teenager would never have said out loud or even thought out loud any of these ideas I now believe I had inculcated about Black people, despite the fact that I had, seemingly, absorbed them rather well. To the contrary, I would have been shocked had someone I known well espoused them vocally—all of my good friends were pretty much just like me in regards to this

⁸¹ Not only outside the realm of narrative mining, but also largely unfalsifiable. In writing group Erika asked me if, “God forbid, something were to happen to your wife, would you date a Black woman? Especially thinking about your White children?” An affirmative answer to this question is an entirely hollow claim, as I am not in such a situation. It would be like asking how I would react if I were to win a million dollars in the lottery: I can say that I would give half of it away, but until such a thing were to occur this high opinion of myself is just that—opinion.

backstage racism and consequently race-talk played no part of our conversations.⁸² I may be clarifying unnecessarily here, but I am terrified to have my reader misunderstand, to have some image of a 17-year-old Jay Wamsted shooting off at the mouth about how it wouldn't be natural to date a Black girl. To be repetitively clear: this type of overtly racist talk was entirely foreign to me, in actuality only known through television and the radio. Probably if asked I would have said something along these lines: "I think dating a Black girl would be perfectly okay. I just don't happen to know any Black girls I am attracted to." The sad thing, I suppose, is that this logically racist statement would have gone entirely uninterrogated by my family and peer group. Rather, these words probably would have been affirmed as politically correct.

"I have to take a breath here."

"No problem. Wait, hold up—did you just interrupt your own dissertation? Are you allowed to do that? Usually that's my job!"

"Yeah, well, I'm getting a little freaked out by all this, and I think that warrants a rule change."

"You know, I'd noticed you were getting a little touchy there. 'My fingers tremble,' 'embarrassed,' 'terrified,' 'to be repetitively clear.' Your words were really starting to get a little sensitive."

"Well, I'm going to be honest here and say that I had no idea I'd dig up this stuff about miscegenation and me at some point in the past not believing that it was natural. I hated writing that sentence because it feels so unbelievably racist. I mean, it's one thing to look back and see that I had absorbed stereotypes about Black people from the media pertaining to athletics or whatever. It's a completely different thing, though, to all of a sudden see so clearly that I really believed, or at least acted like I believed, such an awful thing as the unnaturalness of cross-racial relationships."

"But this isn't the first tough thing you've written about in this whole autoethnographic process. What made you feel like you needed to take a break this time?"

"I'm not really entirely sure. It just felt so different all of a sudden. I was riding my bike the other day after starting this part about Briana, desperately

⁸² I remember Feagin and Vera's (1995/2008) previously quoted comment that being White "in this society almost by definition means rarely having to think about it. Whites must exert a special effort to become deeply aware of their own and other's racism" (p. 154). My friends and I were exerting no such effort.

trying to make myself remember whether she was actually in Physics with me or not, and I just couldn't quite convince myself one way or the other. So, I decided that as soon as I finished this section I was going to email that friend and find out, because it is killing me to realize just how hazy my memories of Briana are."

"Do you think that will help, emailing your friend?"

"Honestly, no.⁸³ Either way, what screams at me so loudly is the fact that I can't remember which classes I had with this girl I would have called a friend at the time. I just felt so awful about it on my bike that day, thinking about how ignorant it was of me to have formed this horrible belief, that Black girls are not for dating. At the point that I decided to email a friend about her I also decided we needed some sort of break to talk about all of it."

"Let me ask you this: you really didn't think you'd find anything that hard? I mean, you thought this narrative mining would turn up all easy memories, stuff you could just breeze through writing about? You thought that everything would feel kind of like Kevin? Tame stereotypes that weren't entirely your fault?"

"I guess so. I mean, before I even began writing this section I had worked up the whole outline in my head and at that point it didn't include Briana at all—my stories went straight from Terrell to Brandon. It was only in talking about the Black girls I was sort of friends with in middle school, remembering them and realizing that they were entirely excluded from all of our adolescent relationship talk—that was what forced me to face Briana's memory. When I made the jump to talking about high school honors classes, the completely accidental juxtaposition brought her to mind."

"Or, not to mind, as the case may be."

"Thanks for that. Your cleverness is an incredible help in this difficult time."

"I'm not trying to be hard on you. I am remembering, though, a quote from a book you always said made no sense to you when you read it in college."

"William Faulkner?"

"No, I'm pretty sure those books will never make any sort of sense to either of us. I'm talking about Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952/1995). Listen: 'I am invisible, understand, simply because people sometime refuse to see me.... That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact.' (p. 3)."

"Huh. I should reread that book. That seems to be exactly what is going on in my memory so far as Briana goes. Nice quote."

"Again, thanks. You've kept that book all these years despite admittedly not understanding most of it at the time you read it. But that first, famous paragraph just resonated so much with what you're writing it seemed worth

⁸³ It is now nearly a year later and I did not email my friend. At the time of this writing—the main text, that is—I also had a plan to look through my senior year high school yearbook for picture of these Black classmates of mine, in some sort of effort to spur more memories of Briana. I still ostensibly plan on doing these things, but given that I knew it wouldn't make me feel any better about my pseudo-racist past, these actions seemed more likely to pollute this narrative mining process than aid it. At any rate, I felt like it couldn't hurt to delay, and so I did.

pointing out. As far as your epic perseverating about your past racisms, though, I think you're being more than a little naïve."

"Again with the hurtful words? What kind of Proxy Me are you?"

"No, seriously, cut the jokes and think about it. Or, rather, read about it. I found something you wrote in June of 2011 for a class, right about two years ago. I think it might be relevant to what we're talking about right now."

"Weird. I guess it makes sense that you have access to my old writings, but I'm still a little surprised by this textual turn."

"Whatever. Do you want me to show this to you?"

"I'm not quite sure. I wasn't planning on going to extended unpublished quotes in this piece. But probably you're right—it seems that this is the right time. Go ahead and show me what I wrote back then."

"Here you go:

The answer now seems obvious to me: because I am a racist.... I do not make this statement to attempt aggression, nor do I intend to invoke images of hooded heads, noosed necks, or offending flags with my choice of words. Rather, I am merely stating what I now believe to be a matter of simple fact: I am a racist. What do I mean by this, then, if not an emotional reading of the word? Wildman and Davis (1995/2008) urge us to look at a non-traditional sense of "racism" when they write:

Some readers may be shocked to see a white person contritely acknowledge that she is racist. I do not say this with pride. I simply believe that no matter how hard I work at not being racist, I still am. Because part of racism is systemic, I benefit from the privilege that I am struggling to see. (p. 114)

Systemic racism—this was what was missing from my toolkit back in the fall of 2009 when I struggled to understand my reaction to Shawn Robinson's casual accusation..... (unpublished classroom paper)

"Wow. I think I see why you wanted me to read this. I remember writing this last summer when I was trying to push into the thought of why I was so bothered by Shawn Robinson, that first student who ever accused me of racism to my face. It felt cathartic at the time, to get to say that bald statement: I am a racist. And then I got to do a pretty turn talking about the hooded heads and offending flags."

"Pretty from a writing point of view, I guess—all that alliteration. It's actually very ugly talk."

"That's what I meant—the alliteration is nicely done. But I guess that's my point—it's ugly talk that is relatively well written, allowing me both a confession as well as a simultaneous dodge. I mean, I talk about me being a racist and then

immediately qualify it, bracket it off solely in terms of systemic racism. I may be bad, but at least I'm not this type of racist."

"Can we define that, by the way—systemic racism? You mentioned it briefly back in your section "The State of the Black School," but I really didn't quite know what you meant."

"Sure. Feagin (2000) defines systemic racism as "a diverse assortment of racist practices; the unjustly gained economic and political power of whites; the continuing resource inequalities; and the white-racist ideologies, attitudes, and institutions created to preserve white advantages and power" (p. 16). I like to add a twist to this definition, one Villanueva (1993) gives when he pushes into the idea of systemic racism as a constraint, calling it "the limitation of liberalism, the ideology that has at its base the belief that change is an individual concern, a matter of pulling one's self up by the bootstraps" (p. 120ff). It's a nice visual—the bootstraps. In that way systemic racism is a kind of bootstrap cutter."

"That reminds me of what President Obama said in his acceptance speech after securing the Democratic Party's Nomination back in 2008."

"I was just going to quote him, talking about the theory of Reagan's trickle-down economics and the tacit message it sends to the poor: 'Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, even if you don't have boots. You are on your own' (The New York Times Website, 2008, paragraph 44)."

"Beautiful turn of phrase. Would it be fair of me then to try to link systemic racism back to Hughey's already mentioned metaphor of 'backstage?' Meaning, out of sight but still very much a part of the action?"

"You got it. Except you have to say 'Hughey (2011)'."

"Actually, I really don't. That's more your problem."

"True enough. But anyways, it's not that I was wrong in what I wrote about systemic racism that summer: it is such an important concept and something that I was entirely unaware of until about four years ago or so. It was a powerful revelation for me to have in looking back upon Shawn and that whole incident."

"But then you immediately opt out of any personal responsibility when you call it a non-traditional view of racism."

"Exactly. When I put it like that—when I write the way I did then—I get to admit to being a racist because of the system I live in. I get to be a good White guy, because I can see racism, but I also get to totally shrug off the thought of it in any way being my fault. What I wrote is true, for sure, but definitely half-hearted. I guess what I wasn't prepared for in this current writing was the fact that acknowledging my non-traditional racism half-heartedly is entirely different than suddenly realizing that as a younger man I had some rather traditionally racist views."

"Namely, the fact that White boys dating Black girls was in some way unnatural."

"I hate you even putting it that way, but I guess you're just repeating me from earlier. Sure. It's one thing to fess up to being a non-traditional, systemic racist. It is a much more difficult thing to realize that I was actually a racist much closer to the hooded heads and offending flags variety than I could ever have imagined."

“Magnet (2006), in her article ‘Protesting Privilege: An Autoethnographic Look at Whiteness,’ writes that her goal in writing is for her article ‘to stimulate people to speak out, not only to point the finger at the racism of others but also to speak to our own internalized (and subsequently externalized) racism’ (p. 746).”

“Nice quote, and excellent use of APA. Maybe that’s what I was picturing at the outset of all of this: to get to point the finger at the racism of others or at worst at the systemic racism I was raised in. Realizing that this internalized attitude has externalized in such a bigoted, hateful manner, however, is rough.”

“I hate to bring this up...”

“Go on. I obviously know exactly what you’re about to say.”

“Well, isn’t what’s really hard about this the thought that, even though you’ve shed this ‘Black girls are not for dating’ nonsense, even though you’ve pushed through one piece of traditional racism.... Isn’t your big worry that you, at 36, writing these words even as we speak them—isn’t your worry that there are still traditionally racist thoughts living inside your head? Something just as offensive, the thought of which you are entirely unaware?”

“Yes.⁸⁴”

“...”

“...”

“So, what do you want to do now? Remember, you have a dissertation to write.”

“Well, I have a bit of a plan as to how I want to handle this next step.”

“Oh? Do tell. I love a good plan.”

“First let me say that I’ve been a little conflicted about what to do here. See, I have a good bit more narrative mining to do about race—after all, I haven’t even got out of high school yet.”

“But you’re worried that this is all just a little much.”

“Exactly! I mean, I believe in the power of this method I am in the act of creating, and what we’re about to do with the rest of my high school experience, specifically Terrell—is going to produce some surprises for me. But...”

“You think it’s a little solipsistic and it’s time to move on.”

“Yes. Here’s the deal. I think I’ve shown that this method ‘works’ in that I have discovered something about my past self through narrative mining, something that I would not have said to be true if directly asked a year ago. If my reader finds this method and result interesting, I am pretty sure they would enjoy what comes next. If, though, they are thinking ‘enough, already!’ then they are going to feel that way through to the end—there is little reason for that kind of reader to continue on my journey.”

“So let’s do this. Take the 20 pages or so that follows this point and move it to an appendix.”

“You think I can get away with that?”

“I have no idea. This is your dissertation and you’re the one who has to deal with the powers-that-be. But I think there’s a sort of prettiness to you turning

⁸⁴ This may be entirely too postmodernly meta for a dissertation, but I literally teared up when I wrote this word. I am having a really hard time with this section.

the last half of your dissertation into a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure kind of book.”

“Nice reference! So let’s put it that way to my reader, let them choose their own adventure. That way I get to keep mining, but I’m not forcing any of my imagined readers into following me down that road. You want to officially explain the options?”

“Sure. Dear reader: it is time for you to choose your own adventure. If you feel like there is something for you in this process of narrative mining your racial identity, flip to the end of the dissertation right now and read Appendix A. Then, return to this point and move on. If, however, you think you have heard enough about narrative mining, keep reading right here. Another Letter to a Young Math Teacher is coming right up.”

“Thanks so much. And without further delay...”

Letter to a Young Math Teacher: “Otis” and Overlap and the Problem of Problem Solving

Hip-hop artists Kanye West and Jay-Z recently put out an album together, and I believe a single released from the record in the summer of 2011 epitomizes an important piece of the puzzle of being a White teacher at an apartheid school. It is also, not incidentally, an amazing song. The track begins with an extended excerpt of Otis Redding, ever so slightly slowed down, singing the tail end of “Try a Little Tenderness”—a sample so curiously long that a student in my room once asked, hearing the song over my classroom speakers and looking quizzically up from his work, “Wait, is this the real Otis song? Or the Kanye?” At about the 30-second mark, though, the drums are raised up in the mix, and Jay-Z drops in over the top of Otis’ singing to ask the listener, “Sound so soulful, don’t you agree?” His voice, arguably the most famous living voice in hip-hop, is electrifying. Suddenly, Otis begins to loop—something like “Got to, try a, na-na-na”—and Jay-Z and Kanye proceed to trade verses: fifteen or twenty seconds apiece, overlapping here and there, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in dissonance. One time Kanye manages to end one of his verses with the word “mañana,” perfectly

drawn out to harmonize with the ghost of Otis repeating “na-na-na.” Every so often a sort of chorus is formed by allowing Otis to get past his refrain, letting him belt out “Squeeze her, don’t tease her, never leave her,” though he is immediately returned to his “na-na-na” loop. This cyclical effect continues until the end when he repeats his “squeeze her” line several times underneath some sort of primal Otis wail and Jay-Z and Kanye taking the track home. To this relatively untrained ear, it seems as if the only production taking place at all is in the manipulation of the Otis track, coupled with an overdub of his wail from somewhere else; I can almost picture this song being performed live by an actual disc jockey scratching an actual record. It is a beautiful, amazing, inspiring song. I have been listening to it on repeat while writing this paragraph, and I have found myself at times almost a little too hyped up for the Starbucks in which I am currently sitting.

The song is called, simply, “Otis” (West et al., 2011, track 4), and my students love it. As a rule, I generally listen to instrumental music in class when I am expecting students to get anything accomplished; I intentionally break this self-imposed rule, however, every five weeks or so for my regularly scheduled partner quizzes. On partner quiz day I rearrange the room into pairs of desks, spread out around the room—this as opposed to the usual front-of-the-room centered setup of a typical class—further breaking the routine by handing them an assignment immediately upon entrance, instead of asking for some sort of warm-up problem first. They have a set amount of time to do their quiz with a friend, and they are allowed to ask me certain questions about how to do what I am expecting of them; if they finish early I will do one free check for them and allow them to do corrections. It is an easy way both to see what they know as well as to surreptitiously introduce a new concept or two into the mix, all while breaking up the monotony of a

typical school day just a bit. I find myself looking forward to partner quiz days—the excitement of walking around the whole time, bouncing from group to group, answering a mountain of tiny questions—and one day it just seemed good sense to me to put on some rap music, replacing the jazz that I tend to favor and that my students tend to find somewhat annoying. The fact that I have rap music on my computer never fails to impress my students; the mix of songs they know and some older material they are less familiar with also interests them, I think. At any rate, it works for my room both from a classical definition of pedagogy—the switch to music they enjoy tends to motivate them into getting mathematics done—and a more non-traditional definition—meaning that if my students like or trust me a little bit more because of some action I make, that cannot help but be a good thing for my teaching and their learning.

The first day I listened to “Otis” with my students I was so excited about the song that I played it for my wife upon returning home. I was doing dishes, dancing around the kitchen, eager to have her hear this rap reinvention of a song that we just that summer had watched her father perform at a family function, to rave, if biased, reviews. Before I played it for her, I had tried to explain to her the scene from my room that afternoon: how my students knew every word, every rhythm change, every sonic break; how it all looked just like a television version of a mathematics class for the 2 minutes and 58 seconds of the song; how truly wonderful it all was. Afterwards I looked at her, eager to share in the heady, almost adolescent excitement of having “discovered” a new piece of music, only to have her burst my bubble. “There’s too much going on,” she said. “I couldn’t focus on what Jay-Z or Kanye were saying because I found myself just trying to listen to Otis sing.”

I laughed at this. Her comment was appropriate, of course—even in this relatively stripped down song there is quite a bit going on: three voices, one of them on multiple differently-timed loops, two of them purposefully playing off each other in a very scripted sort of verbal dance. I shrugged off this musical difference between my wife and me, even as I went on to listen to “Otis” dozens of times in my room after that, never failing to marvel at just how beautiful a song I find it to be. I thought little about my wife’s comment, that is, until I was sitting in a meeting some months later, watching one in a series of district-distributed videos on effective teachers. We had been told ahead of time that the starring teacher—a science teacher from some other school whom I call Mr. Mixon—ran an incredibly tight ship from a management point of view; that he had at some point been MCS’s teacher-of-the-year was the reason we were studying him. Even being told how disciplined his classroom would be, however, I was still surprised at just how firm a hand of control he actually kept over his students. No one stood up, nor even asked to do so, no one spoke out of turn without either raising their hand or being called upon, no one even said so much more than a breath worth of words to a friend, this malfeasance even done without turning the head to one side or the other. It was quiet, efficient, and from all appearances eminently educational. Even allowing for the tempering effect of a camera in the classroom, it was clear that his students were incredibly conditioned to this classroom environment of peace and quiet.

I was shocked. The difference between this classroom and my own could not have been more stark. I do not allow students to get up from their seats at will, of course, but while I am talking they will be constantly catching my eye and miming questions seeking permission to move: Can I sharpen a pencil? Give this to her? Get that from him? Borrow

a calculator? Put my jacket over here? Move to this seat? If I talk at the front of my room for more than two minutes I will surreptitiously grant permission to move about the room to at least one student, who will go about his or her business and get back to their seat in a decidedly non-disruptive manner. This management of motion between our rooms was seemingly the most noteworthy difference, but to my discerning eye it paled in comparison to the entirely different classroom conversations we ran. When I ask a question in my room, I would estimate that well less than a quarter of the time do I call on a student directly. The overwhelming majority of my questions are asked to the group at large—“What do y’all think?”—and I receive answers in a commensurate manner. Meaning, I get a chorus of “answers” both consonant and dissonant from the group at large. Voices shout out, overlap, interrupt each other, finish each other’s sentences, at times argue and at other times affirm. It is, admittedly, rather raucous. My friend’s classroom was the polar opposite—a kind of Platonic ideal of teacher-directed turn-taking.

Several concerns might have entered my reader’s mind, and I wish to address these potential objections briefly before moving on. First, a certain school of thought would say that when I don’t call on a schedule of students with some sort of deliberate regularity—when I fail to teach like Mr. Mixon—then I am allowing any one student the option to remain completely quiet in my room. To which I would reply, so what? If a particular student chooses never to participate in my polyphonic classroom conversations, it is almost certainly because they don’t have the mathematical acumen necessary to contribute to the conversation; what exactly might be served by embarrassing this student by forcing him or her into a center stage solo? I choose not to do such a thing, and instead

seek out these mathematically timid students in a more private moment later on during class time. In this confidence-building act, hopefully, I am preparing them to better answer the next time.

Second, a reader might argue that in asking questions to the classroom at large, privilege would be given to the loud, the confident, the mathematically keen, that these voices would be the only ones I would be able to hear and consequently reify. This line of thought believes that raising hands and taking turns is about equitability. Admittedly, at the beginning of the school year, this sort of feedback effect does play a problem, and it is only through intentional manipulation of the classroom voices that I can eventually encourage the quiet, the timid, the mathematically suspect to join the conversation. They will, however, join our conversation, if questions are asked and orchestrated with a certain skill by a discerning teacher. I cannot count the number of times a student who would almost certainly never raise a hand has said something incredibly smart; they are confident in speaking out loud in a chorus of others in a way they never would be alone. I consider it my job to catch these less confident student's comments out of the undertow of voices, so to speak, and pull them out from the deep into the light of day for the class to discuss. When I am doing this well, hearing all of the layers in the conversation, I can get all levels of students participating in a manner I believe just might be impossible with turn-taking and hand-raising.

Managing a multi-layered type of conversation is not simple, of course, nor is it really something that I can offer much more advice about here in these pages. In an effort to encourage a potential reader to give this type of questioning a chance, though, I will say that I have been observed on multiple occasions by superiors who subsequently

mention me in department meetings. Creative principals and instructional coaches are always imploring us as mathematics teachers to break out of a typical math class routine of lecture-problem-solution-homework, and sometimes my classes get brought up in this context: “A productive classroom is at times chaotic. If you don’t feel comfortable with this, go observe Mr. Wamsted’s room. He is really good at managing the chaos, and keeping everyone involved and working.” My job, of course, is not to impress these bodies above me in the bureaucratic hierarchy of the public school, and I don’t run my room in a manner intended to solicit their praise. I only mention the accolades in order to reinforce what I already believe to be true: a multi-layered conversation might just be educationally efficacious. How to run these types of conversations is more a question of method than theory, however, and though I believe there would be benefit in an attempt to move this idea past instinct and vague admonition, I want to get back to the more general philosophical thoughts I had that day while watching the video of Mr. Mixon.

Managing the chaos. That is the difference between my room and Mr. Mixon’s: he seemed to be suppressing even the slightest tilt towards anything resembling disorder, while I am actively encouraging an all-speeds-ahead race into it. Sitting there and thinking over the contrasts between our rooms, however, I wondered if this very real difference between our ostensibly productive classroom cultures might not merely be a matter of personality, but also a natural result of our respective subject matter. Meaning, it occurred to me that mathematics might better be done in a room like mine, whereas science might better be done in a room like his. If such a conjecture is true—and I have only my own observations to justify such a thought—then I believe it might stem from the fundamental difference between science *questions* and mathematical *problems*. In

other words, mathematics is more than just a series of questions about information and observations; it is, fundamentally, a synthesis of information and observations towards the goal of solving a problem. When I ask my students what they think we should do next, even in the most simple of high school mathematical tasks, I am asking them not merely to answer a question but also to stitch information together toward the solution of a larger problem—what mathematics educators might call *sense making* (Schoenfeld, 1992). And sense making, unlike information reporting, is such a thing that can be done in many different ways.

For example, if Mr. Mixon were to ask his entire class a question in a multi-layered conversational style, he would hear twenty different answers, but they would almost entirely all be binary—either right or wrong. Little would be served by students hearing each other’s voices; to the contrary, broadly asked questions might only serve to drown out the correct answer to any particular query. In other words, because there is little to no overlap in the binary relationship between correct and incorrect in the science classroom, nothing is served by having the student’s voices overlap in conversation. In the mathematics classroom, however, there always exists more than one way to solve a problem, more than one tack to take, and in each of these different directions toward a solution there are multiple manners in which to understand or phrase each individual step. In the mathematics classroom, there is always overlap in the answer to the question at hand—problem solving is decidedly not binary—and it helps profoundly for students to hear each other’s answers as they are simultaneously working through their own thinking. Mathematicians don’t just need facts explained to them, as in most other high school classrooms; they need problem-solving processes modeled for them. Could it not be that

they can best do this for each other in a classroom discussion managed in a multi-layered conversational style?

I believe that an effective mathematics classroom might need to look a little bit like “Otis”—a chaotic, polyvocal, explosion of sound, seemingly random but in fact intentionally skating the line between script and improvisation. In this analogy, you as the teacher are the tightly scripted, controlled background loop of Otis Redding’s vocals; the students are the free-flowing, overlapping, creative flow of lyrics spilling out from Jay-Z and Kanye. You provide the background fuel for their overlapping mathematical thought processes. When this effect is properly produced, it can seem as if lightning is flashing in the classroom, and you as a teacher might find yourself marveling at the disorganized beauty of such a thing. I can certainly respect my wife’s words after I first played “Otis” for her—“there’s too much going on; I couldn’t focus”—and I can also see how a mathematics teacher might be frightened at the thought of experiencing something similar in his or her classroom, worried about the responsibility of managing the chaos. I would encourage this teacher in the same manner I did my wife, however: just because something might seem vaguely dissonant on first experience does not take away from the potential power of such a thing. A science teacher may be able to get away with only listening to straightforward rock or soul; a mathematics teacher might have to find a bit of their inner hip-hop.

There is, of course, an entirely different reason for a teacher in an apartheid school to consider teaching in a hip-hop fashion, and it has everything to do with race. It is common understanding that jazz and its style of overlapping solos flowed from the historical conversational style of the Black Americans who pioneered the genre; as far as

musical history goes, hip-hop and rap followed suit. At this point it might be argued that multiple generations of Black students, raised on this hip-hop and rap in a sort of feedback loop, have been musically conditioned to believe conversation most valuable when it consists of overlapping polyphony. This effect, present in music, the streets, and the halls, might need to be better incorporated into the classroom itself if we as educators are to have any hope at gaining the attention and energies of our students. In 1981, Kochman wrote the following:

The white classroom rule is to raise your hand, be recognized by the instructor, and take a turn in the order in which you are recognized.... The black rule, on the other hand, is to come in when you can.... [Also], because of the competitive nature of black turn-taking, occasionally two or more people are talking at the same time.... Listeners must decide whom to attend to. Sometimes several speakers are attended to at once. (p. 25–26)

Black students implicitly understand this non-traditional—that is, from a White point of view—turn-taking dynamic; it has been argued that they might better experience success inside this milieu than they do inside that of an imposed, more classically White structure. It is inarguable that on the whole Black students are being failed daily by our White, middle-class oriented schools. Is it possible that a hip-hop style of mathematical questioning could be a valuable affirmation of the Black student’s intrinsic value and potential?⁸⁵

⁸⁵ No doubt there exists generalization and stereotype in this paragraph. As I have written about elsewhere, however (Wamsted 2011), to pretend that White and Black is all the same, that race doesn’t play itself out in the fields and folds of our actual lives, that music somehow “doesn’t see color,” is more than naïve—it is also possibly insidious. Of course White people like jazz and hip-hop; I certainly do. Of course Black people like rock and country; my students constantly impress me with the music they have heard and enjoyed. But I refuse to pretend that there are not broad sweeps of difference that can be discussed and exploited for pedagogical gain.

Perhaps. This line of thought, however, is an entirely new line of flight in this dissertation I am in the process of trying to wind down. When I began the writing of these autoethnographic sketches I enacted a self-imposed rule in an effort to keep the narrative structure flowing: no references. I have broken that rule with my quotation from Kochman (1981), of course, and though I do not regret this more academic turn to my story, I am going to back off from it. Let me return to Mr. Mixon and the video I watched of his teaching, wondering at the structure and order he was maintaining behind his closed door. It was working for him, I saw that immediately, and for an instant I was tempted—by the video’s alluring advertisement of his through-the-roof test scores, high student regard, and administration approval—to think about attempting a similar structure in my own room. I even tried to picture myself in his place, speaking in his cadence and affect, asking specific questions to specific students, taking their answers and turning them into a takeaway of information to jot down as notes. A moment or two of self-doubt turned to something like self-resolve, and then I remembered a recent lesson. It was in considering my own unique mathematics curriculum that I realized his pedagogical style would fail in this particular type of activity.

I had taught my students how to find one missing side of a right triangle using trigonometric ratios, and by day two of the topic they were reasonably accomplished at such a skill. The next level—seemingly simple to me as a teacher, though I knew it would throw them for a loop—was to find both missing sides of a similarly positioned triangle. I intended them to merely repeat the trigonometric process, substituting cosine for tangent or whatever, but was not surprised to discover that some of my students were using trig to find the first side and the Pythagorean Theorem to find the second. I was pleased with this

turn, of course, and from that moment on when asked by a student how to solve these double-side triangles, I would say something like, “You use trig on one of the sides just like you did on those other problems. Then you can either repeat this process with the other side, and a different trig function, or you can use the Pythagorean Theorem.”

Inevitably the student would ask, “But which way is the right way? What do you want us to do?”

I would smile, pat them on the shoulder, and walk away, calling back over my shoulder, “Do whatever you want, whatever makes you feel more comfortable. There is no right way.”

I watched the video of Mr. Mixon’s room, remembering this activity, and my mind wandered further. I pictured myself roaming the room during my largest class, answering questions and putting out fires as I did so. I am going to use actual student names here for a moment to add authenticity to my composite scene; these are some of my favorite students from one particular class period this year. I saw David and Jermiah towards the front of the room, imagined them arguing over the answer to some triangle or another, one of them shouting a question across the room at me and gloating to the other when I answered, Warren or Kiera overhearing what I said to David or Jermiah and adding to the conversation. I pictured Rico, who never stayed in his seat for long but whom I never worried about because wherever he happened to be standing at whatever moment I could count on him to help a student he was near. He, too, would talk to me across the room—a question that would gain the weight of additional voices as we spoke back and forth about its answer; soon, there might be five or ten of us tripping over each other’s heels to talk about it. I saw Ravyn, whose questions I never directly answered,

rather only replying with another question while walking away; sometimes she would shout after me and her friends would get involved. Soon we would all be arguing with each other across the desks until finally Ravyn would say, “Fine! I get it! Go away!” I always knew I had done my job well when a student told me to go away. I pictured the middle of the room, where William and Amari and Santeanna and Janay and Diamond all sat, close enough together to check each other’s answers and argue ferociously about who had done what correctly—a block of students I often approached with questions intended to push them to higher level thinking, a group consisting of students determinedly unwilling to let any one of their peers have the floor for too long without interrupting in an attempt to mathematically one-up them.

Sitting there and watching the video of Mr. Mixon’s room I tried to picture what my imagined classroom scene might look like from the outside, the chaos it would seem, and I smiled, knowing that I had actively engendered this kind of creative flow through the hip-hop style of questioning I used when I took center stage at the board. I remembered that my role as a teacher was to stay off this center-stage as much as possible, to get my students working and thinking and solving problems, to refuse them easy answers or simple processes. Then I thought again about “Otis” and decided that the work it might take to tease out all the layers of the song was well worth it. It may be difficult to hear Jay-Z and Kanye and Otis all at the same time, but that might just be the best way to learn to teach mathematics in an apartheid school.

CHAPTER 10

MATH(EMATICS) IDENTITY & NARRATIVE MINING

“Have you guessed the riddle yet?” the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.

“No, I give it up,” Alice replied. “What’s the answer?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” said the Hatter.

“Nor I,” said the March Hare.

Alice sighed wearily. “I think you might do something better with the time,” she said, “than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*
(Carroll, 1865/1992, p. 56)

If you do mathematics every day, it seems the most natural thing in the world. If you stop to think about what you are doing and what it means, it seems one of the most mysterious. How are we able to tell about things no one has ever seen, and understand them better than the solid objects of daily life? (Davis & Hersh, 1981, p. 318)

What Is so Special about Mathematics?

Davis and Hersh (1981) write about the “three standard dogmas [of mathematics]: Platonism, formalism, and constructivism” (p. 318). They dismiss the strict theoretical constructivists out of hand as “a rare breed...that of tolerated heretics surrounded by orthodox members of an established church” (p. 322); Ernest (1998) undoes this dismissal, however, in his work on the social construction of mathematics—“mathematics is dialectical...reflecting the basis of the social: language games in process, embedded in human forms of life” (p. 168). I find this philosophical space to be interesting, though a rather separate abstraction from my wonderings about my own mathematics identity. The tension I feel within my mind between Platonism and formalism, however, is all too immanent.

Brown, Jones, and Bibby (2004) provide me with a succinct summation of formalism—we mathematicians must invent our discipline because “after all,

mathematics, as such, does not exist in any tangible sense” (p. 168)—while Davis and Hersh (1981) sarcastically delineate the contrary position of Platonism: “A mathematician is an empirical scientist like a geologist; he cannot invent anything, because it is all there already. All he can do is discover” (p. 318). It is this tension between mathematics as created and mathematics as discovered that I would like to push into further, specifically as it pertains to me personally. After all, the fact of whether Alice’s riddle has an answer or not is primarily determined by knowing exactly which parlor game she is playing—discovering the answer to a preexisting riddle is an entirely different process than creating an improvised answer to a random question. Mathematics may be one, or the other, or some combination of the both; the question is, however, how do I see it? Platonism and formalism, of course, are not the sum total of my thoughts and feelings surrounding mathematics—this is not, after all, a philosophical treatise. These concepts merely serve, I believe, as a good starting point for a conversation about mathematics identity.

Presently I am going to apply my notion of narrative mining to my mathematics history. Along the same lines as I did for my experiences relating to race, I am going to (re)tell some stories I have held onto over the years, tales told about my time both as a student and an educator of mathematics. As before, I hope in this act to discover aspects of my mathematics identity that pertain to both my past and, hopefully, my present. Before I proceed, however, I would like to provide a touch of context from Martin (2000):

Mathematics identity refers to the participants' beliefs about (a) their ability to perform in mathematical contexts, (b) the instrumental importance of mathematical knowledge, (c) constraints and opportunities in mathematical contexts, and (d) the resulting motivations and strategies used to obtain mathematics knowledge. (p. 17)

Martin goes on to note that “what is called mathematics identity among [his] participants is intimately linked to several other identities that constitute their larger sense-of-self” (p. 20), and I want to note that my mathematics identity should not be isolated too long from my “larger sense-of-self.” As a teacher of mathematics, however, a deep look into my beliefs specific to the subject could prove beneficial to both my practice and my students, specifically as they pertain to Martin’s four key components of identity: ability to perform, importance of knowledge, constraints and opportunities, and motivations and strategies. Gutiérrez (2013) advises me that “learners, practitioners, and researchers are constantly creating themselves—writing themselves into the space of education and society as well as drawing upon and reacting to those constructions” (p. 46), and I want to follow this line of flight in an effort to find out just who I might have created myself to be over the years in the (re)telling of mathematical stories. I note again Brown, Jones, and Bibby’s (2004) words about identity and how it “should not be seen as a stable entity—something that people *have*—but as something that they *use*, to justify, explain and make sense of themselves in relation to other people, and to the contexts in which they operate” (p. 167, emphasis in original text). There are certain mathematical stories I have been (re)telling over the years that I believe serve this function of justifying, explaining, and making sense of myself. Let me learn a bit more about my own Ideal Mathematician in the act of narrative mining.

Negative Integers

As I did previously in the matter of race, I begin this process with my earliest mathematics memory—a story I have (re)told to many students over the years, both as a professional tutor and as a classroom teacher. My mother and I were at the kitchen table

sometime during either my seventh or eighth grade year, though the subject matter and my recollection of course order suggests that it was probably seventh grade, when I was 12 years old; this story is a watershed of sorts in that it was the last time either of my parents helped me with my math homework. My class was in the beginning stages of learning how to operate with negative numbers, and I was experiencing some sort of massive mental block relating to the concept of adding and subtracting these integers. In my (re)telling of this moment, I was working through a problem set with my mother and battling her over every problem; not that I could not provide the correct answer—I could, quite handily—but that I did not grasp exactly why I was doing what I was doing. My issue, it seems, was not so much one of isolated misunderstanding as it was of holistic incomprehension. At some point in this process, my mother said something to me along the following lines: “But you’ve got to see that adding a negative number is just like subtracting a regular number. It gives you the exact same answer.” Something about this statement immediately assuaged me. I sat back suddenly in an obvious ease of tension and said, entirely calm, “Oh. They should have taught us that when we were little.” This rather flip comment ended the fight, the homework session, and consequently my story.

I am not entirely sure what this story might have to say about my philosophical beliefs in either Platonism or formalism.⁸⁶ The tale, though, seems to me sown with the seeds of my beliefs as an educator. Remembering that narrative mining is unconcerned with the so-called factual accuracy of the events described in the story per se—for

⁸⁶ In other words, did I in that moment “discover” a fact about subtraction and negative numbers, a fact that would exist as solid fact whether or not my mother or I or anyone else ever chanced to think about it? Or did I in the moment “create” a bit of mathematics—albeit a piece of mathematics long ago created by thinkers time out of mind? Or, to get really crazy, did I in fact do a little bit of both? Is there some thought here connecting me back to the rhizome and the tracing? Perhaps.

instance, I now find it debatable as to whether I was able to answer every question perfectly and was merely upset about the big picture; this reeks of heroic revision—I am, however, able to peel back the experience as related through story and connect it to the identity of the boy I was at the time. Apparently, I already believed that persistence paid off, that mathematics was as much about hard work and pushing through incomprehension as it was about some sort of natural ability to “just get it;” it is also interesting to note that my mother’s attributed words might indicate a proto-belief that good teaching is primarily about patience and the ability to say the incisive right thing at the precise right time. At 12 years old, I might see the future teacher in me, (re)telling this story over time as inspiration to both myself and my future students: I have struggled in the past, and math is sometimes about struggle, but I was able to succeed because I persevered and pushed on through; so too must you. These are powerful words to underperforming students; little is more discouraging to a class of uncomprehending teenagers than a teacher who believes that they should somehow understand through natural ability alone. Connecting this story back to Martin’s (2000) definition of mathematics identity, it might be thought that I held little stock in “the instrumental importance of mathematical knowledge” (p. 17), but rather believed that a student’s “ability to perform in mathematical contexts” (p. 17) was in large part a result of sweat and thought, followed by a good teacher making a key comment at an opportune time. All of these possibilities pulled from my narrative mining would be pretty inspiring, if this story were in fact my own. As it is, however, I have no actual recollection of any of these events. The story I am telling as my earliest math memory is actually my mother’s.

“A-ha!”

“A-ha?”

“I knew there was a problem with this whole narrative mining thing, but I hadn’t quite been able to put my finger on it. Now I see!”

“Well, aren’t you just so smart. What is it exactly that you think you see about this method I’m trying to squeeze into a dissertation?”

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot, trying to figure out just why your idea of narrative mining has rubbed me the wrong way sometimes. It all just clicked there in one triumphant moment! To show you what I’m talking about, I’ll use that first story you tried to mine, the one about Kevin and him saving you from the beating on the playground, if that’s all right.”

“Of course. I think that’s an excellent story for us to go back to at this point. We didn’t really discover anything incendiary in it, but I think it demonstrates the method of narrative mining pretty well—both the capabilities and the limitations. It’s prototypical, in a way.”

“Well, you sort of nodded to this problem at the end of Kevin’s section, when you wondered whether the racist stereotypes of his being athletic and intimidating were present in the earliest versions of your story, or whether you added them at a later date due to media images and et cetera. I have every confidence that those words must sound familiar to you.”

“I remember. I still think there’s no real way to know, but that the thoughts I teased out of the story are important either way—given that we are mostly trying to access who I was fifteen years later at 24 years old, when that anecdote was already largely set—from a narrative point of view, at least.”

“Right, I mostly agree. Either way, wherever the story gets placed, it almost certainly tells you something about yourself at 24 years old. But this is still an assumption, and you’re seriously glossing over the ‘almost certainly’ part of the sentence. You’re leaving a major thought untroubled.”

“Untroubled? Since when did you start talking that way?”

“We’ve been doing this a long time—I’ve picked up a little bit of the way you philosophical doctors are supposed to talk. Anyways, what you’re taking for granted is that you have been telling this story all these years, and that as a consequence it actually connects you back to that 9-year-old kid. But what if you’re wrong? What if you just started telling this story in the last few years? What if it has only been changing in these most recent (re)tellings? If either of those things is true, then you could be dead wrong: it might not have been a part of your 24-year-old identity at all. It really undermines the applicability of the entire project.”

“Look at you—calling me out on science. The word you’re looking for in this admonitory diatribe is ‘validity.’”

“Whatever—you get what I’m saying.”

“I sure do, and I want to try to address your concern because, I have to admit, I’ve had the same worries myself.”

“Well, obviously, right?”

“Right. Instead of answering you directly, though, I’m going to quote something I wrote recently about this very story of Kevin and the schoolyard. I think it might help me out of this bind, and even connect us back to the problem of my mother’s story and its misplacement in time.”

“Good thing I chose Kevin’s story to use as an example, huh? Okay, go ahead. I’m curious to see how you’re going to handle this problem.”

“Well, here’s what I wrote for a recent article I managed to get published:”

... I can assent that this is an imperfection to the method. At some point in my past this story took on its current form; at this unknown point I am claiming to have discovered buried racisms through my process of narrative mining. I may be in error in placing it at the origin of the story itself, but given that I need place it somewhere I find this to be an acceptable error to make. Perhaps in the further mining of other narratives I will find reason to place this story elsewhere; perhaps I will never know for sure. It remains, however, that the discovery is there in fact, even if I cannot locate it precisely in time. (Wamsted, 2012a, p. 197)

“Okay. I think I see where you’re going, but I might want you to be the one to expand on it, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure. First of all, we have to keep in mind that narrative mining isn’t claiming that this story with Kevin changed something about me, and consequently that’s why I remember it. That’s a much more straight-psychology reading of an event. Rather, what I am claiming is that this story with Kevin only exists at all because it touched on some extant piece of my identity, thus calcifying into a story in which we are able to see glimpses of this self, this autonomous ‘I.’”

“I’m with you on that, go on.”

“So, yeah: I might not have told this story for years and years after it happened. Heck, that might even be likely, given how embarrassed I must have been. But something happened, and it must have touched some part of my identity or else I would have been unable to recall the event at all.”

“Keep going. I’m starting to feel at least a little better.”

Well, I think I see the tenuous conclusions I’m drawing from the Kevin story—from all of the stories in all of these sections—as part of the entire scientific process—the method my students learn about in their 9th grade biology class: hypothesis, experiment, conclusion, new hypothesis. Kind of a dialectic, if you will.”

“Oh, I will. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis.”

“Nice. You’re absolutely right, I might be dead wrong about these racist aspects of my identity we discovered—they might not be at the source of the story itself and they might not even be at this magic age of 24 I’m so desperate to discover more about. But, I am as certain as I can be that they were there at some point in the past—that most of them are not part of me anymore—and I have to start somewhere, right? So by and large I’m going back to the source as the safest place to begin.”

“And you’re leaving opening the possibility that in further narrative mining you might be able to more properly locate those stories. I see—that is rather scientific, I suppose. But how does this settle the issue of your mother’s story?”

“Well, there’s no way my reader could know this, but I wrote a slightly different draft of the “Negative Integers” section last night, and in that first version I didn’t acknowledge my mother’s primary production of this story. In fact, I was at that point blissfully unaware of her playing any more of a role in that story than in any other story I tell.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that a happening becomes a story when you tell someone, and I thought she was just someone I had talked to about that happening over the years. I hadn’t yet realized that it was in fact she who was telling me the story. So at the end of yesterday I was riding home, thinking about what I was going to work on next, and I was troubled by the thought that all of my soon-to-come memories were a complete turn away from this notion of effort and keen teaching. They were all ability narratives.”

“What?”

“We’ll get to it. The point is, that the stories to come didn’t seem to set well with that first story at all. Then, about two minutes from home, I realized that this homework story isn’t mine at all—it’s my mother’s. I don’t remember it happening, all I can remember is my mother telling me about it over the years. The scene I set back there is entirely based on her words.”

“Probably she started telling you this story at some point after college when you started tutoring. Like, ‘Remember when I used to work with you on your homework and now here you are doing the same thing.’ Or maybe it was after you started teaching that first time, but somewhere around then, right?”

“Probably. That better places this story in the 23 to 25-year-old range.”

“But, the connection you see to the scientific method is that, despite the initial mistake, in further mining of other narratives you were able to correct it.”

“Exactly.”

“Let me see if I can sum all this up with the proper language. According to your terminology from before, this incident with your mother at the kitchen table was always some sort of happening, but because it did not resonate with your identity at the time—in line with Barthes’ (1975/2010) *Argo* and McAdams’ (1996) life-story model—you did not form an experience (Scott, 1991) out of this happening. It was only much later, perhaps up to 12 years after the fact, that you and your mother began to hash out an experience out of this complex of events (Hook, 2005).”

“That was amazing. Truly. It is absolutely thrilling to know that at least one person is with me on all of this. The only thing I would add to your summary is that I am actually glad to have discovered this misplaced story. I realize it is going to make certain types of people even more uncomfortable with a process they weren’t exactly thrilled about to begin with, but to me it just adds power to the whole method. I misplaced a piece of my identity, but I kept on mining and the confusion resolved itself. It’s kind of exciting, really.”

“I assume you have a name for what happened? I know how you feel about making up argot.”

“Oh, sure. Right now I’m calling the misplaced story a *shifted fossil*.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’m picturing your typical archeological fossil discovered at some dig, but somehow accidentally attributed to the wrong time period. Presumably there would be some academic dissonance as a fallout, but that would work itself out in the long run as paleontologists attempt to quell that upheaval. None of this scurry, though, takes away from the fact that there is valuable information to be read in the fossil itself, even if it was for a time temporally misplaced.”

“I don’t know whether to roll my eyes or be a little impressed with your ability to squeeze metaphorical meaning out of the most tenuous of connections.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. How about we get back to the narrative mining?”

“Sounds good. Where do we pick back up?”

“Well, we’re going to do a bit of Choose Your Own Adventure again. If my reader is interested in seeing more of my early stories about mathematics—my actual stories, not my mother’s—then I would advise him or her to skip to Appendix B and read the first two sections of it. For the rest of us, though, I’m going to recap by saying that every story I’m skipping here is an ability narrative. Meaning that my stories are all about being naturally good or talented at mathematics, never about working hard or struggling.”

“Which makes you wonder, via this process of narrative mining, if as a 24-year-old you believed that mathematics was an innate ability, not a learnable skill.”

“Right. Which would make me necessarily a poor teacher of mathematics to children in an apartheid school—children whose learning styles and intelligences might look different than the ones I know from my own childhood.”

“Interesting. So you just might have discovered another aspect of your past self that made you a poor teacher to your students. But we’re not going to go into that now?”

“Nope. Choose Your Own Adventure. If you want to read it, skip to the appendix. If that summary is enough for you, let’s move on together.”

“What’s coming next, then?”

“A story that I think really speaks to the concept of the Ideal Mathematician, or at least the version of him that lives on in my head, causing me to believe possibly crazy things about what is testable and provable. It shows, I believe, just how positivistic mathematics can be, and just how strange a road I am trying to tack as a postmodern teacher of such a subject.”

“Sounds interesting. Or, at least, more interesting than you bragging about how good you used to be at mathematics.”

“Thanks for that. I’d like to say something about how truth-telling in narrative mining is of the upmost importance, but I think I’ll just move on to the story.”

“Moving on!”

An Infinite Amount of Primes

I want to (re)tell a story about my belief in about the beauty of mathematics.⁸⁷ It was my first mathematics class at the University of Georgia, some kind of introductory upper-level class solely for mathematics majors on the nature and structure of proof. Prior to this class I had taken general mathematics classes almost exclusively with engineers; this class was the first where we were all either mathematics or mathematics education majors. After covering some introductory material—notation, number systems, logical truth tables, proof by induction, et cetera—we were introduced to what I later realized was a seminal educational moment for me: the proof by contradiction. This method of proof begins with an elegant twist: assume that what you want to prove is, in fact, not true; then, merely follow the mathematical thread until you find some sort of contradiction with the original assumed (false) statement. If you can do this, then—ergo, ipso facto, Q.E.D.—you have proved the thing you originally wanted to prove.

I am going to leave the methodological description at that, as my desire is neither to trouble nor to defend the mathematical mainstay that is proof by contradiction.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Had I not thought of this soon-to-be-told story on a recent bike ride home, this entire chapter might not exist. I was so excited about mining this particular narrative that even in anticipation I gushed to my wife when I got home about how powerfully revelatory this whole process was. It was in thinking through the tale I am about to (re)tell that I found the key to my being able to write this section on mathematics identity.

⁸⁸ If the reader is interested, however: proof by contradiction works by using the logical concept that the contrapositive of a given conditional statement must always be as true as the original statement. For example, given the true sentence, “If I go swimming, then I will get wet,” it is easy to see the truth value of this statement’s contrapositive: “If I did not get wet, then I did not go swimming.” In other words, if you want to know whether someone went swimming but for some reason are unable to ask them that question directly, you can ask them whether or not they got wet in order to learn what you want. If they did not get wet, you can be sure that they did not go swimming. Proof by contradiction simply strings together a series of these logical games. As my students point

Rather, what I want to tell is the story of the first time I really understood what I was doing when using the method, the time I felt I had been initiated into some sort of secret fraternity of logically scientific insiders. I am not entirely sure whether I did this problem alone, in the isolation of my bedroom study space, or whether I took it down as dictation during one of our classroom lectures, though in the end it makes little difference to the story. The professor posed a simple problem: prove that there are an infinite amount of prime numbers. This question naturally leads itself to proof by contradiction, as it is simple enough to assume that there are, in hypothetical fact, a finite number of prime numbers. I am actually going to follow the mathematical thread here in an attempt to force a logical contradiction, though for the sake of my readers I will write a bit more colloquially and consequently a bit less mathematically. I (re)produce this proof here because it still gives me a bit of a shiver of delight to do so, and I believe this weird fact must say something about my mathematics identity. The proof:

Assume that there are a finite amount of prime numbers.⁸⁹ If this is the case, then there must be a largest prime number; we call that number q_n . Let us take every prime number ($q_1=2, q_2=3, q_3=5$, etc.) and multiply them all together to obtain a new number $Q = q_1 \times q_2 \times q_3 \times \dots \times q_{(n-1)} \times q_n$. Now consider the number $Q + 1$. This number is unable to be evenly divided by any of the prime numbers $q_1, q_2, q_3, \dots, q_{(n-1)}, q_n$, as all of these

out every year, however, just because someone got wet does not necessarily mean that they went swimming; this logical problem is the limitation on proof by contradiction.

⁸⁹ A prime number is a positive integer greater than 1 whose only factors are 1 and itself. Meaning, the number cannot be split up by division into smaller numbers except by the trivial case of dividing it by itself. For example, 12 is not a prime number because $12 = 6 \times 2$, but 7 is a prime number because it cannot be similarly split up. The first fifteen prime numbers are 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43, and 47. They do, in theory, go on for infinity.

numbers evenly divide into Q but cannot evenly divide into 1. Thus, $Q + 1$ has no prime factors; in other words, it can only be divided by 1 and itself. So $Q + 1$ is by definition a prime number necessarily larger than q_n , and therefore q_n is not the largest prime number. So by contradiction we have proven that there are, in fact, an infinite amount of prime numbers.

Words fail me to describe how powerful I find this elegant little proof. It is so short as to be quickly manageable, so simple as to be easily understandable, and so large in scope as to be eminently powerful. In ten lines I just proved that there are literally an infinite amount of prime numbers, that no matter how large a prime is someday discovered there must always be another. Even now there are computer programs running all over the globe attempting to discover incredibly large prime numbers,⁹⁰ but I have managed to show that they will always fail to find the largest—that their job will never be complete. I was blown away by this proof when I was 20 years old; I have continued to be impressed by its elegance as the years have gone by. Recently I was standing in my front yard late at night, taking my dog outside one last time before bed, and I (re)constructed this proof from memory. Standing there in the cool night air, listening to the crickets drone, staring up at the apparently also infinite stars, I was almost overcome with joy at the thought of the vast expanse of numerical territory I was able to cover in a few simple moments of proving by contradiction. I am a religious and spiritual man in a very traditional sense, but this moment felt spiritual in an entirely different manner. I hope this description hits home for all of my readers—if not as pertains to mathematics, at least to some larger thing similarly outside of yourself.

⁹⁰ Wikipedia just told me that a prime number was discovered in August of 2008 that contained nearly 13,000,000 digits. If this boggles your mind, get in line.

Let me put aside for a moment what Lyotard (1979/1984) says about this most deceptive of loaded words, “proof”: “What I say is true because I prove that it is—but what proof is there that my proof is true?” (p. 24). I am not blind to the fact that I am here playing by “the rules of the narrative game” (p. 28), rules adjusted slightly according to the tenets of scientific hegemony.⁹¹ Laying all that macro-postmodern tension aside momentarily, however, I ask instead a micro-question: What does it say about my mathematics identity that I am so overcome by the ability to prove this simple little fact? True or not, what might my wholesale acceptance of this proof of the infinity of prime numbers tell me about myself? I have been (re)telling this little story about my first real proof over the years, boring friends and family with it in conversation whenever someone asks me what a pure mathematician does for a living. What can I mine from this narrative regarding my mathematics identity?

To begin with, it seems that I am far more of a Platonist than I ever would have imagined. Not only did it fail to occur to me during the time of my original proof to question the construction of these fantastically large, almost mythical numbers, it even at this moment seems a lark to consider them as in any way constructed. Prime numbers—even those of size so large we need to note them by merely the letter “Q”—seem to me

⁹¹ Barthes (1975/2010) tells me to “always remember Nietzsche: we are scientific out of a lack of subtlety” (p. 161). I like this thought a lot, as it reminds me of just how much intellectual posturing I put forward in my mathematical talk. I did try so hard to make that proof back there accessible to the general reader, but even a glance at my footnotes shows how much joy I get in being mathematical, being smart, being the liaison who gets the privilege of explaining this science that is much more important than any other discipline, that acts “not as a science, but as a language for other sciences” (Davis & Hersh, 1981, p. 343). If I really wanted to cast aspersions at John O. Wamsted, the author function, I would say that he sees himself as some sort of modern-day Moses, come down from the mountain with the oh-so-essential texts that he will graciously help his readers translate and implement. Barthes (1975/2010) might hopefully keep him a bit more honest: perhaps he is so scientific out of a fear of openness and uncertainty.

completely real, tangible and solid, existent and eternal; these large prime numbers are, in my mind, out there whether I (re)produce this proof or not. The act of the proof seems in my (re)telling of this story to be an act of discovery. Ernest (1998) writes, “the certainty of mathematics cannot be established without making assumptions: this thereby fails to result in absolute certainty” (p. 25), and though as an aspiring poststructuralist I heartily aver this statement, as a practicing mathematician I seem eager to readily refute it. My joy and delight at the nature of this proof belies my poststructuralist beliefs—specifically, I am more than willing to overlook the assumptions we as a community of mathematicians make about the eternal solidity of the methodology that is the proof by contradiction. It takes a bit of a mathematical Platonist to believe in these magnificently large numbers solely on account of some simple assumptions.⁹²

A second connected thing to take away from the (re)telling of this story about infinite primes is a consequence of my seeming belief in the certainty of Lyotard’s (1979/1984) dirty word, “proof.” I have no doubt that most of my readers would grant me a certain amount of leeway in using the word to describe these mathematical endeavors. Some might roll their eyes, exasperated at the hegemony of mathematical chicanery in scientific discourse, but I would think that these might ultimately shrug their shoulders and say something like, “Well, we’ll give him that—who really cares if there are an infinite amount of prime numbers?” Well and good. However, I wonder if these readers were troubled some pages back when my Platonic sense of mathematical proof surfaced

⁹² This footnote is almost exclusively for my mathematician readers. Proof by induction seems to be a particularly suspect method in light of Ernest’s words. I understand how it works, of course, and it has always seemed to me a particularly clever way of proving things. Sitting on this side of the scientific divide, however, I now see just how built on *assumption* the method is.

in my narrative mining of race stories. I quote a section of this current dissertation work here, in reminder:

All of these stories being noted, it might be fair to accuse that 24-year-old man of believing deep in his heart that miscegenation is, if not wrong, at least not natural. This accusation seems fair insomuch as attraction to Black girls did not appear to come naturally to him. My fingers tremble writing these last couple sentences.... (p. 180)

I really did waver when I wrote those sentences, I really was frightened at what I believed I had discovered—at what I believed I had proved. I felt—and still feel—that given my assumptions about experience and identity as laid out in this dissertation work, my assumptions about the efficacy of narrative mining, and the stories that I had told about and around Black girls from my childhood, I had proved to myself beyond a shadow of a doubt that I at one point in my life had believed “that miscegenation [was], if not wrong, at least not natural.” I was horrified by this, to be sure. My Platonic belief in the ability to discover previously unknown facts coupled with my single-minded devotion to the nature of “proof,” however, both served as evidence enough for me to believe that this horrific fact had been true.

I am airing some incredibly dirty laundry here. I appeal again to Koro-Ljungberg (2004) and her words about the influence and guidance for *mixed-theory projects* such as mine: “empirical inconsistencies and paradigmatic discrepancies” (p. 603); “theoretical confusion [as well as] ontological and epistemological discrepancies” (p. 604). I am riddled with these inconsistencies and discrepancies. On the one hand I am wholly with Lyotard’s (1979/1984) logical problems with proof, St. Pierre’s (2011) naming of “the pathology of quantification” (p. 37), Spivak’s (1976/1997) placing of quotation marks around the word “truth” to serve to show it as a loaded word. On the other hand, I am,

apparently, also more than a little of an Ideal Mathematician. I like proof, I like statistics, I like truth; I do think there is something solid and beautiful behind all of the mischief of mathematical discourse. I am fully aware that I am walking an almost invisible line here when I try to place a foot in both of these camps, and I quote Walshaw (2004b) writing about the identities of the mathematics teachers she was studying: “teacher identity, then, is best thought of as complex and multiple, developed in response to other identities that are sometimes held in opposition. Teaching experience...is, above all, a source of (micro)political engagement” (p. 80). I would only add that as a mathematics teacher who is a concurrent researcher, the complex and multiple nature of my identity seems to me at times overwhelming.

“Choose Your Own Adventure!”

“Again? What now?”

“Well, I have another story that follows this one—a couple of stories, actually, centering around a favorite professor of mine from college. But I’m going to skip them here. As with last time, they are all ability narratives.”

“So if your reader is really interested in this concept of narrative mining, how you discovered this weird fact about yourself by writing through your early stories of mathematics, how you kind of think you’ve proven that you might think mathematics is an innate ability and not a learnable skill...”

“They can check out the last section of Appendix B, yes. As it is, we are going to wrap up here.”

“Finally—we wrap up at a point where I feel like I mostly understand what is going on.”

“Yeah? You followed that story about prime numbers?”

“Sure. Your feelings about prime numbers and what you’re kind of calling the backdoor ways to prove their infinity seems to say something fundamental about your identity that applies to all aspects of this dissertation.”

“Nice! Like it or not, I am an Ideal Mathematician—I never would have made it in college without putting on that disguise. But play a character long enough, and I guess it just becomes a part of you. Trying to be an Ideal Mathematician and a poststructuralist at the same time, though.... Well, it’s a little confusing, to say the least.”

“Obviously. It’s why we get existentialist jokes and mathematical philosophy flying fast and furious—probably putting off both camps a little bit while properly pleasing no one.”

“That might just need to be the slogan on the back of the t-shirt I’m going to print up when this dissertation is through. ‘Tacking Through the Middle Way: Probably Putting Off Both Camps While Properly Pleasing No One.’ Thanks!”

“Hey, I call it like I see it.”

“Anyways.... It’s funny, because it never occurred to me to have a problem with the thought that I had somehow 100% proved that 12th grade me didn’t believe that it was natural to date a Black girl. Both Millie and Professor Holbrook, though, were somewhat more critical about my ability to literally prove something like that. My feelings at 20 years old proving the infinite nature of prime numbers gives both me and my readers a bit more context, I think.”

“I see that. Can I ask, though, what was with all of the ability narrative stuff?”

“Well, I was so pumped up about this whole concept of narrative mining after finishing my section on race that I was completely convinced something else would turn up if I started mining my mathematics identity—that it wouldn’t end up simply being about proving prime numbers. And I was right: though I had no idea at the start, it seemed apparent right away that I had all the time been walking around with all of these stories that contained a common thread, a phenomenon McAdams (2001) calls *analogous events*.”

“That’s the psychologist who came up with the life story model of identity, right? Can I get a definition of ‘analogous events,’ please?”

“Sure. His papers are chock full of references to other psychologists, and it seems from his referencing that he has drawn the concept of analogous events from someone else. I didn’t read the primary source, though, as I don’t want to get too deep into psychology journals or I think I might never get out.”

“It sounds like you’re justifying yourself for using a secondary source, but you forget that I don’t care about any of that. Just give me the definition.”

“Right. McAdams (2001) writes:

Among the personal event memories that seem to be most instrumental in self-definition are...analogous events, or episodes that are readily compared with similar other events to suggest a pattern or theme that runs through the person’s life story (Pillemer, 1998). (p. 109ff)

“So you think that all of these stories about your innate mathematical ability are analogous events along these lines? I suppose that makes sense.”

“And what I find really exciting as an autoethnographer is that I don’t think there is any way I would have seen this ‘pattern or theme’ in my own self-definition of my life without doing this work of narrative mining.”

“Hold on: I have the quote you’re looking for right here. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) say, ‘[The] point here is that these data might have escaped entirely if I had not *written*; they were collected only *in the writing*....*I doubt I could have thought such a thought by thinking alone*’ (p. 970).”

“Don’t forget to say ‘(emphasis in original text)’, but otherwise: exactly! This particular thread from my life—this seemingly solid belief in my innate mathematical ability—“

“—what you’re calling *the discourse of ability*, right? Emphasis in this text, of course.”

“Right. My seemingly solid belief in the discourse of ability ‘might have escaped entirely if I had not *written*’ (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 970, emphasis in original text).”

“Man, that is unwieldy, right? Didn’t you just quote them?”

“It’s the rules of APA, unfortunately. Switch paragraphs and you have to do the whole reference again. It is unwieldy, but it’s the way things are done.”

“I suppose Foucault (1977/1984a) was right: power literally does produce knowledge.”

“Wait, is that a poststructuralist joke?”

“Maybe. Was it any good?”

“I think so. The proof is in the pudding, though. We’ll have to see if our readers find it keen or droll. It’s hard to believe that when we started you didn’t even know what autoethnography was, and now you’re gathering quotes for me and making jokes at APA’s expense using maxims from Foucault.”

“Well, we’ve all grown a lot over the last year or so.”

“Of course. But, back to your original, amazingly apposite quotation from Richardson and St. Pierre (2005)—yes, I do feel that I could never have thought all of this by thinking alone. It is only in the writing, the methodology of autoethnography and specifically the method of narrative mining, that I have been able to think these thoughts about my wholesale acceptance of the discourse of ability.”

“Were you worried when you had to move most of these stories about the discourse of ability to an appendix?”

“At first, yes. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. If a reader finds this concept of narrative mining interesting—believes me that I am discovering things about myself I would not have discovered without writing—then they can go and read the stories for themselves. If a reader is only marginally interested in narrative mining, however, they will probably be okay just reading our description of the results. In that sense, it makes a perfect appendix.”

“Okay, I see all that. Can you bring all of this back to teaching, maybe?”

“One step ahead of you, my friend. I was doing some background reading for this section recently and I stumbled upon an article by Picker and Berry (2000) called ‘Investigating Pupils’ Images of Mathematicians.’ I underlined an interesting quote toward the end because it reminded me of my teaching, and I think it might help to clear up what I’m talking about. They write:

At the present time it is very rare to be in a mathematics class and hear the word mathematician used during a lesson. And while we have heard teachers refer to and address their pupils as scientists in a science class; poets, novelists, or writers in an English class, yet it is very unusual to hear pupils addressed in a mathematics

class as mathematicians. There appears to be no other subject studied in school where pupils are placed at such a distance from the discipline than occurs with mathematics. (p. 90)

“And that reminded you of your teaching style?”

“Oh, yeah. I would never call my students ‘mathematicians’—not in an insulting way, not that I couldn’t imagine some of them one day having a major or a career that drew heavily on mathematics. It just would never occur to me to make that leap to calling them ‘mathematicians.’ And yet, I can totally see my colleagues in Science or Language Arts calling these same students ‘scientists’ or ‘poets’ or ‘writers.’ I underlined the passage because I immediately wondered to myself: Why? What’s the difference?”

“And you think the difference was uncovered in your narrative mining?”

“I do. I think we’ve established that I think mathematics is an ability you have, not a skill you can learn, that I have accepted the discourse of ability. But this quote from Picker and Berry (2000) makes me realize that I don’t feel the same way about science or writing, that I think those are disciplines that are more skills to be learned as opposed to innate abilities. In these other disciplines I have rejected the discourse of ability.”

“Let me ask you a not unrelated question. There was a time in your life when you wrote a lot of what you now insist on calling ‘really bad poetry.’ Would you at that time have called yourself a poet?”

“Maybe not, but I definitely believed that in practicing the craft of poetry I was getting better at it with every line I wrote. Same with the songwriting I did a few years later: the more songs I wrote, the better I began to feel about what it was I was producing.”

“The point is that you see poetry as a skill which is able to be learned, as opposed to how you view mathematics—an affinity for which you either have or for which you don’t.”

“I don’t want to take away from the gifts of the great poets or great writers, because I do believe that some people will be better poets than others no matter how much the lesser practices. But, in short, yeah. I’ll go all in with the Picker and Berry (2000) quote and say that it seem from my actions that I believe all other academic disciplines are learnable skills, save for mathematics.”

“And you would definitely say, along with Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), that this is another thought you would not have been able to think by thinking alone, right?”

“Absolutely. So now you see why this matters so much, right?”

“Of course I do. You are a teacher of mathematics who might not really believe that mathematics is a teachable subject. You even think that you’ve proved this fact about yourself, in a manner of speaking. That’s got to be one of the craziest things you’ve written so far, right?”

“I think so. It’s why I was doubly disappointed by this story about my mother teaching me how to operate with negative integers.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, remember that her story is a shifted fossil—it doesn’t originate from the time it is set as regards my identity. Rather it originates later, at some point in the more recent past when she started telling me that story.”

“Right. We decided that it probably dates from when you became a tutor or a teacher. That would make it chronologically the latest story you (re)told, right?”

“Yeah, I never tutored until I graduated from college. The first student I ever had was probably three or four months later.”

“Well, that’s great, right? That means your identity had shifted in some way by that point, transformed in such a manner that you were able to form an experience out of this story about effort instead of ability. I bet that’s a load off of your mind, huh?”

“Maybe.”

“Why so glum? It appears that we have proved that at some point around the age of 23 or so you were able to shed the discourse of ability in order to put on the discourse of practice and work, right?”

“I thought so at first, but then after sitting with it for a while that line of thought started to feel wrong somehow. I’m now beginning to wonder if this story of my mother’s became part of my story not so much because it reacted with my identity in some way, but rather because I wanted it to so badly. That’s the double disappointment.”

“I get it. You were a tutor and a teacher, and still believed in the discourse of ability, but wanted something to hold on to in order to feel like you could effect change.”

“And most certainly I (re)told this story primarily to the students I worked with, all right about the age I was in the tale—adolescent students who were struggling and needed a pick me up. I might not have believed in it in any way other than as a pedagogical tool. More like a bit or a stock speech than any sort of personal testimony.”

“And you don’t have any more stories about mathematics? Any more mining we could do to help clear this up? Some more digging around, so to speak?”

“That’s the problem: my whole life turned to stories about mathematics right around this same time. I think you need two things to mine narratives centered around a particular theme: some amount of requisite distance, and some maximum threshold of stories pertaining to your subject. And the more stories you have, the more distance you need. I guess when so much of my time is spent on mathematics, the background noise gets so loud that I don’t glom onto new stories.”

“Glom?”

“Sorry. It was the word that popped to mind.”

“I do see what you’re saying. It would be like asking you to mine your narratives about babies and toddlers from the last four years.⁹³ So much of your

⁹³ At the time of this writing, my daughter Kira has recently turned four years old, my son John just turned two, and my son Simon is right around five months old. To be perfectly clear: I have a lot of stories about babies and toddlers.

time is spent dealing with babies and toddlers and you (re)tell so many stories one or two or three times that it's hard to know which stories are a side-effect of your identity and which are merely a result of your being a natural raconteur. When you are so close to something so huge, it's hard to tell exactly what it is, and et cetera."

"Right. Years from now I might be able to mine through my mathematical narratives from the first decade or so of my teaching career. But right now, I'm just too mixed up in the minutiae of the moments."

"So does this end your mining of mathematical narratives? It's kind of a downer, I've got to tell you."

"I know. I'm hoping that I will have some big epiphany soon and get to add some sort of coda, get to claim that this story of my mother is in fact now true and that I can claim to be over the discourse of ability."⁹⁴

"Sure. It seems to me that you've got to let that go at some point."

"That's what's so crazy. I mean, if you would have asked me a month ago point blank if I believed in the discourse of ability, I would have answered in the firm negative. But again here the Ideal Mathematician rears his head and bums me out, in that I believe I have proved the fact that I do actually believe in this discourse. Narrative mining seems to have helped me circumvent one of Borges' (1975/1998) barriers to autoethnography—that of communication. I know what I as a teacher am supposed to say about ability and effort, but I don't in any way think that this 'right thing' is what either I or the 24-year-old me actually believe."

"He, at least, might have spoken what he thinks to be the truth. It's your revision as a teacher that is interesting. This is why I find that story about the prime numbers so important. It informs your bizarre belief that you can 'prove' aspects of you personality."

"Absolutely. It's confusing, because on the one hand I am thrilled about the power of my narrative mining, but on the other hand I am a bit depressed about what I'm finding. I mean, here I am: a White teacher of Black students at an apartheid school who as recently as 12 years ago didn't think it was natural for White men to date Black women and—oh yeah—also might still think that mathematics is an inherent ability, not a learnable skill."

"Can I say something?"

"Please."

"You are a mess. Let's move on to something else and maybe come back to this at some point."

"That's probably a good idea. Because I've been thinking that if I tack too far away from this discourse of ability I'm going to end up espousing some sort of discourse of effort—a Horatio Alger kind of mathematical knowledge I believe in even less."

"More on that please, but only briefly."

⁹⁴ This situation did not, in fact, play out. Meaning, I had no such revelation and am stuck here at the end of my dissertation project with these strange feelings about ability and effort.

“Well, Martin troubles the national rhetoric of *Mathematics for All* in the following quote, and it seems a pretty good proxy for my discourse of effort. Meaning, it’s a well-intentioned idea that has the potential to end, if not handled with kid gloves, very badly.

Because of a lack of attention to *process*, the well-meaning *goals* of *Mathematics for All* may actually contribute to the inequities faced by underrepresented students. There is a danger that when many of these students do not achieve up to their potential, there will be a tendency to either (a) locate the problem within the student (Boaler, 2002) or (b) assume that contextual forces are so deterministic that students are incapable of invoking agency to resist these forces. (Martin, 2003, p. 14, emphasis in original text)

“His point is that effort can only get you so far in today’s troubled world, right? But that our tendency is to blame the student or his environment when their effort doesn’t work out?”

“Exactly. And if I tack away from ability only to end up at effort, I may end up doing equal disservice to my students.”

“Again, you are a mess.”

“Don’t I know it. Fortunately, I can leave this alone for now, as it is only a tangential point and not a main focus of my narrative mining. I don’t seem to actually believe in this discourse of effort—it’s only a thought.”

“Good thing.”

“So much for uplift in looking at my mathematics identity, huh? It kind of ended up to be a bummer.”

“Not everything in life can be uplift. I’m sure your readers wouldn’t buy it if this whole project was all rainbows and smiles. It’s not what you expected from the start, and it’s probably not what they expected either.”

“True enough. Time for the last letter, please!”

Letter to a Young Math Teacher: In Front of the Classroom

I have said that the mathematics teacher is under pressure, and I have attempted to back up this statement both through current literature as well as personal story. I have also written at some length about the achievement gap and the state of the Black school, again from the point of view of current academic literature. I want to paint a slightly smaller picture here, for a moment, of what the mathematics classroom not only looks like but also what it feels like. The power structures of our current education system—as fictionalized in “The Destructive Power of Discourse”—have created a current of

conversation wherein the mathematics classroom in the apartheid school is labeled and understood as a place of failure. I want to show you why. I want, in other words, to give you a glimpse at a picture of what goes on inside my room. I start with fractions.

Fractions are one of those things a student learns for the first time as early as two years old—my son understands at a deeply fundamental level what it means to split something “in half” with his older sister—which also weaves through the entire K-12 curriculum like a thread, or a noose, depending on one’s grasp of its workings. First a student learns how to represent fractions, usually as parts to whole of a partially eaten pizza or pie, and in rapid order as they move through their institutionalized schooling they are introduced to one thing after another related to this seemingly simple notion of putting some sort of numerator over some other sort of denominator: improper fractions, mixed numbers, reducing, reciprocals, common denominators, conversions to and from ratios and decimals and percents, setting up and solving proportions by cross-multiplying, rationalizing square roots and imaginary numbers, using the conjugate to divide square roots and imaginary numbers, negative exponents, solving and graphing rational equations, differentiating and the quotient rule, integrating and u-substitution—to name just a smattering of concepts spanning from about 5th grade to about 12th.

As a pre-service mathematics teacher, of course, you might not be intimidated by any of these ideas; rather, you are probably excited by the thought of getting to pass on the tricks of the trade you think you have picked up along your own mathematical journey. What you find out in short order, however, is that a major disconnect has occurred at some point along the way in the lives of your students in the apartheid school. What you might consider to be the normal route to learning—defining the idea of a

fraction in 3rd grade, adding layer upon layer to this concept in subsequent grades, culminating in your job as a 9th grade teacher to push into the idea of, say, solving rational equations—has been for the most part almost entirely short-circuited. Meaning, more than half of your 9th grade students—and I mean this quite seriously—will be all but unable to perform any of the necessary lower-level tasks surrounding fractions. They will, for instance, be unable to reduce correctly or consistently or even at all; or, if they are good at reducing basic fractions, they will be entirely flummoxed by being faced with an improper fraction or a mixed number or a ratio and being asked to perform an identical task. The background knowledge is sketchy or entirely lacking, and the ability to generalize one thing to the other is all but absent. You will see similar problems in this half of your students with every task pertaining to fractions, from converting to adding to multiplying to cross-multiplying, and you will notice that even those who are good at the routine tasks tend to freak out when any sort of variable is introduced into the question. I walk a fine line here, at risk of essentializing my students—reifying their deficiency merely by continuing to print words about it. I pause, but after a breath or two I continue. This paragraph is my experience at Murphy, and the literature tells me that I am not alone. I do not want to paint the apartheid school with too broad a brush; neither, however, do I want to pretend that my experience is other than it has been. I want, as best I can, to speak the truth—the truth as I know it, small and local but maybe applicable to you as a young math teacher. I continue, warily.

You have come face to face with possibly the first pedagogical crisis of your young career: how do I teach a student to solve a rational expression if they are almost entirely unable to add or multiply or reduce far simpler fractions, if the mere presence of

variables tends to freeze their pencils cold? If you ask someone above you—your department head or an instructional coach, for example—you will most likely be told one or both of the following things: (1) The students did not receive an adequate education in the lower grades, and you will have to remediate this material; or, (2) You need to make the material more relevant to their everyday lives, and in that act inspire them to struggle on their own to catch up with their grade-level peers. That the students did not receive an adequate education in the lower grades is already explicitly obvious to you as their classroom teacher, though a little digging into their test records might make even you blanch at the severity of the problem. At least, it did me this year when I took upon myself the task up of digging up all of my student’s previous state test scores in math, just to see what exactly it is I am up against. I teach 10th graders right now, and I knew before I began my research that only about 40% of them had passed their 9th grade exit exam—meaning that well over half of my students would not be considered on statewide grade level for mathematics. Probing into their middle school scores, however, shocked me. Of the half who had failed their 9th grade test, probably half of these again had also failed their 8th grade exam; in other words, almost a third of my 10th graders didn’t actually properly pass 8th grade mathematics. Probably half again of these students had failed their 7th grade test also, with a student here or there actually having failed all three of their middle school tests.

Your job, according to the “experts,” is to remediate each and every one of these students while also pushing forward into the mathematics that actually comprises your 10th grade curriculum. At the end of the year, the expectation is that nearly all of your students will close the learning gap; you are expected of course to get the 40% of grade-

level students to pass the high stakes exam, this in addition to some not insignificant amount of those behind grade-level. Anything less, as already discussed, is considered a failure by you as a mathematics teacher, and you will almost certainly be blamed for not reaching these lofty goals.

Mathematics, however, is fundamentally unlike other academic disciplines in that what a student missed in middle school needs to be learned wholesale before he or she can truly move on. Meaning, a student absolutely cannot solve a rational equation if he or she doesn't know how to find a common denominator. The student can pick up tricks, can learn to fake it, can get really good at bulling a way through by observing the behaviors and patterns of teachers and classmates. However, fundamental understanding of the one will almost certainly never arrive without fundamental understanding of the other. This effect is entirely different from, say, the social studies classroom, where a lack of knowledge of middle school Georgia history in no ways hinders an ability to learn high school civics or geography. If a student takes a pass at middle school earth science—checking out of a class due to a disliked teacher or a rough year at home—that same student can still wake up when they hit high school and be entirely successful in biology. The remediation that might need to take place in high school social studies or science classrooms is of a fairly contained sort, limited and seemingly manageable if the students are willing and eager to play along. In mathematics, however, you as a teacher can be working with an entirely desiring corps of students who missed so much material from elementary and middle school that remediation can almost instantly swallow your plans at teaching the actual curriculum. I have had this happen many, many times—watched my plan to teach rational equations get entirely drowned in middle school remediations on

cross-multiplying and common denominators and other such sundries. Your administrators might tell you that your job is to remediate while also moving forward, but they will generally offer little to no advice about how to perform this piece of prestidigitation. What you really need is more time—like two years' worth instead of one—and time is precisely the thing you cannot get more of. This is no mad tea party, forever frozen in an advantageous moment; time is, quite literally, running out on you and your students and the work you long to do together.

If you as a teacher are given any advice at all, you will probably be told to make the material more relevant to the students. You will be told that today's classroom is an entirely different place than it was when you were in high school, that most of your children in the apartheid school are kinesthetic learners and you will need to engage their hands and feet first before you can engage their minds, that today is the digital age and students need to be approached through technology or they will have no ability to pay attention. You will be told not to stand at the front of the class and do what you might consider to be "teaching;" instead you will be instructed to make everything discovery based and group oriented, informed that activities with a partner are more relevant to the student's lives than notes or problems. You will be given trainings on how to use things like iMovie and the Internet, candy coated confections intended to tempt students into engagement as you approach them in their own milieu. You will be told, over and over again, that all you have to do is to make your lesson relevant to their world and point of view, and then success will follow. If you have carefully read this paragraph, you will understand that this advice is in actuality not all that helpful.

So how does a teacher make rational expressions relevant, except through the most arbitrary of measures? It is simple enough to find some video on YouTube, some sort of animation that sets the steps to music; I have shown these videos before, of course, and my students always love them. They are, for the most part, however, only useful as classroom diversion. A group laugh is shared, a snippet of a song might be stuck in our heads—especially if I am not booed off the stage when I try to instigate a class singalong—but very little actual learning ever takes place through these attempts at “relevance.” On a more traditional learning track, I have been remediating material for years and have become quite adept at concocting situations where I can almost trick students into learning some basic math by asking a series of seemingly unrelated questions. In other words, I can review fractions and ratios fairly well by having the students gather data on number of males to females in the room, in the hallway, in the class next door, taking these numbers and doing some representative mathematical thought. The introduction of variable expressions, however, instantly forces these situations into such arbitrariness as to be almost useless.

For example, a projection of males in the building. Sure, if I know that there are 12 boys in our room of 30 students and about 1600 students in the building overall, I can get them to use a proportion to estimate the number of boys and girls at Murphy High School. I can show this example, and though my students have very little grid for why they would care about something like this, they can buy in. With this minimal investment, I can usually train them to recognize and set up proportions in all manner of situations. How, though, do I make this have anything to do with variable expressions, the actual high school standard I need to teach? How crazy does this sound: if I know that there are

$(x + 3)$ boys in the room and $(4x - 6)$ total students, how many boys are there at Murphy High if we have a total of $(151x + 241)$? Same question, of course, but this one makes no sense—why on earth is my information given to me in such a bizarre manner? Where are the numbers? And, if there are no numbers, how on earth could this possibly matter? Unfortunately, much of the mathematics we have to learn in our high school curriculum has similar relevance to the everyday lives of 21st century Americans. That is, near to none. I have tried teaching rational expressions in this manner, moving from concrete relevance to abstract arbitrariness, and it has never gone well.

The difficulty of relevance, of course, is compounded in the apartheid school by the typical difference in race between the teacher and the student. Being twenty years older than the students you teach is divide enough in any kind of conversation of pop culture, the vulgate of your students; so much the more so when you grew up listening to classic rock and watching Nick-at-Nite—two things your students have next-to-no grid for.

This effect can be played for laughs, sometimes. A side note of an example: a recent fad at school is for my kids to wear faux vintage t-shirts, imitations of old concert shirts of classic White bands: The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, Lynard Skynard. Recently I stopped my lesson mid-sentence and approached a student wearing a Lynard Skynard shirt. “Can you name a single song by that band?” I asked, curiously and kindly. I will often interrupt a difficult mathematical lesson in this deliberate manner, trying to keep my students on their toes and a little bit entertained at the same time. I believe it endears them to me in some small way. At least, I hope so.

“Mr. Wamsted, I didn’t even know how to pronounce it until someone told me,” he laughed.

“Okay!” I shouted. “Time out!” I immediately went to the computer and found a recording of “Free Bird,” played the beginning of the song and explained its place in the canon of Western rock music. When classwork time came around—setting up trigonometric functions in a simple right triangle—I played the song all the way through, walking around the room singing and playing air guitar. My kids rolled their eyes and made appropriate fun of me, especially when I began waxing mock-poetic about an old girlfriend the song reminded me of (a mostly true story). They all worked, at the very least, if only to keep me from making eye contact with them and singing in their faces. At one point I went into the hallway to check the time and ran into one of the other eight White teachers in the building. “Hey, check this out,” I said, pulling him into my room. All eyes turned to Coach Gainer, a 6’5” giant of a man, a football coach and one of the best-liked teachers in the building.

“Lynard Skynard!” he said, grinning, much to my students’ delight. He sang a little bit, too, asking kids absurd questions about the band. When he left my students began suggesting various other White teachers in the building for me to go find, to bring into our room to share our experience. I laughed at the thought, and played “Sweet Home Alabama” for them instead. We got a surprising amount of work done that day. Cultural dissonance doesn’t always have to be bad.

It is, however, problematic when I find myself trying to craft “real-life” mathematical examples. Not impossible, of course, but just difficult, at least not without a finely tuned ear as to what might work and what might not. Or, at least, the ability to

learn from my mistakes at trying to craft these examples. For instance, one time I had what I considered to be an airtight “real-life” problem when, after going out to Texas for a cousin’s wedding I came up with a fake story about my experience renting a car. It went something like this: I am flying to Austin and renting a car and have two options, Company A which will charge me \$40 plus five cents a mile and Company B which will charge me only \$20 up front but then fifteen cents a mile; with which company should I rent my car? My students had learned how to solve systems of equations at this point in the semester, but had little experience applying them to word problems. I thought my “real-life” problem from my weekend would be a great place to engage them, planning on them first solving the question by guess and check before we talked about the practical realities and the algebraic solutions.

My scheme went fine for guess and check, as the students I expected would be able to answer the question were indeed able to figure out the fact that 200 miles was the marker at which I should switch from one company to the other. The breakdown occurred, however, when that answer went public while I was trying to lead the class in discussion about why Company A would be good for low mileage while Company B would be good for higher mileage. My students had absolutely no grid for driving 200 miles in a weekend, and the conversation got entirely derailed in a spiraling discussion about how such a thing could ever occur. Add this to the fact that my students also had no grid for renting a car instead of taking public transportation, and it quickly became clear to me that any “real-life” experience I might have been hoping to bring into the concept of systems of equations had been lost entirely in the translation. By the time I got to the algebra of the whole thing, I might as well have been working on an entirely arbitrary

example about dwarves and elves in Middle Earth. Or, possibly worse still, a classic book-example about lemons and sugar for a child's lemonade stand; my kids might find Middle Earth more real than the thought of selling lemonade on the side of their streets.

Later on that semester I created a similar situational example of a system of equations centering around the fact that my wife and I were trying to decide which cable company to use based on two companies' pricing structures (again invented). The problem here happened when I started the problem with the words "My wife and I don't have cable. We are thinking about getting it, and have done some research...." We as a class never made it past the first sentence. "Is that true, Mr. Wamsted? You don't have cable?" That part of the example was true—the "real-life" in the problem—and I obligingly told the student so. The class erupted in laughter and conversation: What do you mean you don't have cable? How could you not have cable? Everyone has cable! It never occurred to me that not having cable would seem a tangible sign of a floor of poverty far beneath most of my students—around 80% of whom are on free-and-reduced lunch, education-speak for "poor." My admission of a lack of cable is less an example of "real-life" for them than an intrusion of the absurd. To middle-class friends of mine, not having cable is a sign of progressive parenting and keen budgeting; to my students it smacked of being completely made up. We never solved the cable-company problem either.

Stubborn as the day is long, I again found myself tripped up against this issue of relevance and poverty in my attempts to use my daily bicycle ride as a mathematical example. I ride 11.4 miles to work and back nearly every day, but in the mornings I can do the ride over five minutes faster on average than in the afternoons—40 or less minutes

versus 45 or more. All of these figures seemed prime to me for some sort of dissection, and I recently went through a phase where I would draw complicated time versus distance graphs of my rides in order to ask a series of analytical questions pertaining to functions and their properties. This tack worked better than my cable-company and car-rental attempts at systems work, thankfully, but it brought a similar amount of cultural dissonance to the top of class every time I tried to work the activity. A typical class would start with a “do-now” problem on the board—one of those classroom management tricks they teach you in graduate school which really does work—immediately followed by the introduction of some brief concept leap-frogged straight from the do-now problem. I would then switch screens on my interactive whiteboard to my made-up graph adjoined by a series of questions pertaining to it. Classwork time would go just fine as I scrambled around the room answering questions and clarifying concepts to small cadres of twos and threes. The end-of-class whole group discussion, however, always got a bit off topic, usually along the following lines:

“You really rode your bike this far, Mr. Wamsted? This a true story?” I have been asked this question well north of a hundred times over the years.

“Of course it’s true!” some student always answers for me. “You see his bike in the corner of the classroom! You know he ride that bike as far as he can.”

“You rode that bike here to school, Mr. Wamsted?” some other student interrupts, incredulous.

“You crazy?” the defender wheels on the new doubter. “You think that man just carry his bike up here for fun?”

“You ain’t got not car, Mr. Wamsted?” This question might be asked by yet a different student, and at this point I am starting to lose control of my mathematical discussion, if not exactly the classroom. Meaning, for the first time all day I might have every single person’s attention focused entirely on me—although not strictly for mathematical reasons.

“Well, my wife and I have a car. We share it, but usually I ride my bike when I want to get somewhere.”

The room erupts at this point. “You mean,” some student howls above the rest, “that you have to ask your wife for permission to use the car? Your wife makes you ride a bike!” The first dozen or so times this scene replayed itself, I tried to explain that we used to own two cars, that when I got into bicycling in earnest we found ourselves leaving one of them parked for weeks at a time, that during the summers and vacations we would almost never use two cars at the same time, that the tires on the second car literally dry-rotted, that we sold it as a trial before we sold the other and bought a slightly bigger car for our whole family. Again, to middle-class friends of mine this story is immediately understood and affirmed; I have never explained our car situation to a White man about my age and not had him react with something like a little bit of jealousy. To a middle-class, college-educated White guy, believing as most of us do in exercise and global warming, owning one car per family is an admirable thing. To my students, however, it is yet another of those invisible signs of poverty that they are eager to eschew. I have told this story elsewhere (Wamsted, 2011), but it might bear repeating. I quote:

Once I was eating cake with some teacher friends in the work room and an older Black woman made a somewhat discomfoting comment about White people “always riding they bicycles.” A friend of mine attempted to come to my rescue, pointing out that she sees a Black man on a bicycle

every morning around the corner from school. The first woman looked at her angrily, almost spitting out her sentence: “He ain’t got no car!” Nobody responded and she shook her head, muttering under her breath, “White people.” I was incredibly embarrassed, standing there in my bike helmet quietly chewing cake. (p. 975–976)

My colleague would have found it equally absurd if I had told her that I didn’t have a car either. I could afford a car if I wanted to have one; the Black man my friend saw every day had no such choice. This effect is what my students are seeing in their mind when they find out I literally don’t own a car. It is, understandably, confusing.

The fact that I have continued to use my rides as a mathematical source of real-life problems must mean that I have figured out how to navigate these strange cultural waters. The trick, I finally realized, was to learn how to bend the conversation, much in the same way I channeled the Lynard Skynard t-shirt to some sort of positive gain. It is absolutely okay for the class to erupt in laughter and confusion because you don’t have cable or a car, it is okay for them to find these to be signs of poverty, or White privilege, or whatever. What matters, of course, is whether you as an instructor can direct this laughter and chaos back to the task at hand. It may not be the relevance you had hoped for—my 11.4 mile bike ride might be as alien as lemonade stands or Middle Earth—but it is relevant nonetheless if you can use it to let them know you just a little bit better. Another thing they tell you in graduate school which is absolutely true: finding a way to engender a relationship of trust with your students is equally or possibly even more important than your mathematical content knowledge.⁹⁵ This effect is amplified in the apartheid school;

⁹⁵ I want to be clear: I find mathematical content knowledge to be a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for success as a classroom teacher of mathematics. Meaning, without content knowledge I believe the secondary mathematics teacher will struggle, and struggle mightily. In keeping with aforementioned quotations from Martin (2007) and

you are most certainly one of handful of White people your students interact with on a regular basis, and their previous cross-racial experience might not have left them prone to trust you. Meaning, White people have been failing them in some form or fashion their whole lives. If you can bend their laughter at you back to some sort of respect or trust, you will have accomplished a powerful thing, however mathematically alien your real-life problem might be.

Once I was walking down a nearby hall at Murphy and saw a colleague of mine—one of the three White mathematics teachers in the building; an incredibly young, Teach-for-America hire—standing in the doorway, greeting students. The teacher was wearing a puffy vest, goggles, thick gloves, holding ski poles. I glanced inside the room and saw notes set up already on the board; the class was learning slope for the first time that year and skiers on mountains were drawn everywhere. I smiled awkwardly and walked on by, startled at my colleague’s cultural blindness. I never followed up on this moment—I have no idea how the lesson played out—but I have thought about it often over the years as I continue to meet the new crop of Teach-for-America hires every other year or so, as I watch the 2nd year teachers walk away to their graduate schools and business careers. It goes without saying that my students have absolutely no grid for snow skiing, and my colleague very well may have been displaying an entirely tone-deaf sense of culture in this moment. Probably, the lesson went badly. Maybe, though—and this is an understanding I have recently come to—not any worse than my car-rental or cable-company or bike-riding lessons. Cultural dissonance will occur, of course. The mark of a good teacher is in how he or she handles it when it does.

Martin and McGee (2009), however, I also believe that content knowledge alone will prove to be inadequate in an apartheid school.

A CONCLUSION OF SORTS: WHY ALL THIS?

It is past time to wind this work down. Unfortunately for my readers, you are certainly able to tell just how many pages are left on your way; you know that I am obfuscating when I call this a conclusion. In an effort to temper this misdirection, let me punt to the postmodernists here and claim that in some manner I just am not sure I believe so much in “conclusions.” Instead, here at the end of my ten official chapters, let me ask another question: How do I summarize this new launching point at which I have found myself? I started out what seems like a hundred years ago wanting to write a critical postmodern autoethnography. I believe I have succeeded, in a manner of speaking. I have told stories, I have troubled identity—racial, mathematical, experiential—I have told myself that the words I weave may be able to affect change in a system I find frighteningly close to broken, a breath away from abandoning the Black students I have come to love and care for over these past seven years. Certainly at times I tacked too far in one direction or another, too close to postmodern navel gazing, too near to racialization and the fields it which it worries, too far from story and then suddenly way too close, entirely absent from mathematics alternating with times of too much intensity. I think, though, that even if at times I slipped into some gray area where I may have lost or bored some of my readers, I for the most part managed to right the ship, find the wind, set straight my course. I think I showed the poststructuralists that I could write their words into an actual classroom, and I think I showed the mathematics educators that there is more to our craft than hard data or the mathematization of qualitative analyses. I believe I did manage to write my critical postmodern autoethnography; I think a pre-service mathematics teacher could find some good to glean herein.

This summary leads immediately to another question: What good, though? In the end, does it really matter that I was called a racist by more than one student on more than one occasion? Does it really matter how I handled the moments of these two stories? Does it really matter that a teacher once dismissed me as unable to understand the young men and women I teach? Does it really matter that I finally took that comment to some sort of positive good some years later? Who cares if the mathematical classroom is fraught with the detritus of decades of discourse about failure? Who cares if the mathematics teacher is under pressure? What good comes from hearing about the missteps of one teacher's nascent understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy? What good comes from hearing about the ostensible successes of the hip-hop questioner?

There are two answers to these questions, and I will, against type, answer them rather concisely. First, it matters to me. I have learned so much about myself in the writing of this dissertation—without the power of my narrative mining I believe I never would have discovered my latent racisms and corrupted mathematical identities—but it is so much more than that. I learned about my classroom and my pedagogical practices in the writing of them, I discovered ideas contained within my beliefs about teaching and education I would not have thought to think had I not been in the habit of writing them down for this dissertation. I am a better teacher than I was a year ago, and I lay credit for that fact to the words of this work. In that respect, this dissertation and, specifically, narrative mining has proved powerful.

Second, I have to believe that somewhere in here these words might just matter to someone else. I will get my degree, sure, and my career will go forward if I so choose. But here, in these now over 300 pages of text, I have to think that there is the seed of

something that might save some younger teacher from my former fate as a fraud and a failure. I am not naïve enough to believe that anyone will ever read this work absent from some sort of requirement; nor do I think there is a book here without some major effort, a job I may be unable to perform. I do think, though, that these stories might matter to some math teacher out there, some White middle-class kid who is about to be or maybe even already is in way over his or her head. I needed the poststructural wanderings, the critical race theory explorations, the mathematical rabbit trails to get to the stories that I think might matter to this young teacher. I don't know how or if any of these words will make it past the date of my defense, but I do know I will try to make it so. I believe I owe it to that teacher.

The student I have named Eddie called me a racist over a year and a half ago now. Somehow, despite all of the things standing in the way, the tricks and traps that might keep me from being a decent teacher to him, I have managed to make my classroom a place where both of us feel comfortable in our own skin—meaning, through my autoethnographic work I have dodged the bullet that was his shout from the back of the room that day. “Racist!” he yelled, and I took it calmly. How might things have gone had I taken it badly? Would he still have been in my room this very morning, working at classwork and asking me insightful questions? Or would our loggerheads of that day have set a tone that could have someday swallowed the both of us whole? I owe Eddie a lot, because I believe the answer to that last question is a highly probable yes. Meaning, without this autoethnography I think I might not only have lost this young man from my mathematics classroom—I might even by now have lost the strength to fight the good fight altogether.

I would be fine, I suppose, even with another teaching failure under my belt; that is the power of my privilege I have tried so to trouble. It is not only myself that I need to be thinking about, however; I do not believe that I am the only one who has benefitted from this sprawling work. Two years ago Eddie found himself sitting in the classroom of a better, more thoughtful teacher because of the power of the critical postmodern autoethnography—I cannot but believe that this must have made some sort of difference in his life. Might there not be another Eddie, a dozen Eddies, countless Eddies out there, students who could benefit from a self-reflective autoethnographer as their teacher? I wish someone had told me, all those years ago, that kids were going to try me by calling out “Racist!” at me; I wish someone had told me that it would terrify me so because it was in some manner true. I think things might have turned out differently back then if I had foreseen the situation and been equipped with the ability to trouble my own thoughts in regards to race and mathematics. Of course I hope the words of this dissertation, someday, make it out of here in order to tell all those other young math teachers the things I wish I had known then. It is not just for these other young teachers that I wrote this dissertation, however, nor is it merely for me. At this point, I owe it to Eddie.

AFTERWORD: *FREEDOM WRITERS*, THE WHITE SAVIOR, AND ME

A Dinner Party Problem

Recently my wife and I attended a going-away party for a friend of hers. We were sitting at a small table, probably six or so people, all but one of which I knew. Amidst the overlapping swirls of conversation, the young woman with whom I was unacquainted at some point turned to me and asked, “So, where do you teach?”

It was one of those moments where for no apparent reason it takes your brain just a millisecond longer than usual to receive pertinent information from your ear. At first, I heard her say something along the lines of “So, wh— do you teach?” but in the instant during which I sorted through whether she said “what” or “where” I glimpsed a bit of a conversational exit strategy. After the beat in which I decided for certain that she had said “where,” I chose to deliberately misunderstand her. “Tenth grade mathematics,” I answered.

My gambit might have worked had the table been either larger or more raucous. As it were, everyone heard her question as well as my reply; my wife later told me that she wondered in the moment why I had answered so oddly.

“Oh,” my wife’s friend’s friend said, and paused for a moment. “But, where do you teach?”

I answered her at this point, and what followed was a short, painless conversation about Murphy High School and my job there. I promptly forgot all about the entire incident until a week or so later, when my writing group—Erika and Jackie—was going over an initial draft of this afterword. It was in trying to get at the heart of what my dissertation is about with them that this story came to mind, my deliberate circumlocution

with this stranger seeming to belie my noble claims at truth and honesty that have threaded through this work as theme. Jackie was stunned at my admission. “I just cannot picture you backing away from the chance to talk about your work. That doesn’t seem at all like you.” She was right, of course: it does not seem in any way like me to shirk away from an apparently open conversation about race and class and mathematics. Or, rather, it doesn’t seem at all like John O. Wamsted, the author-character I have created out of thin air to write my dissertation. As a full confession, however, it is something that Jay Wamsted—the writer and person—does over and over again in maneuvers both obvious and subtle. In other words, I am exactly the sort of person who would deliberately misunderstand a question from a stranger in order to avoid a conversation I do not want to enter. The question that need be asked, here at the nearing end of this journey into autoethnography, is why.

The answer to this question involves a bit of backtracking into my first full year at Murphy, during which it felt like whenever I found myself in conversation with someone I had not seen in a while I would experience a variation of a dialogue along the following lines:

Someone I Had Not Seen In A While: So, how is your first year of teaching going?

Me: Pretty good.

Someone: Now, where do you teach again?

Me: Murphy High School.

Someone: [?]⁹⁶

Me: Metro City Schools.

Someone: Where is Murphy located, exactly?

⁹⁶ Almost never will a White person have heard of Murphy High School. There are only a handful of Metro City Schools attended by White students, and outside of this small number a White person would most likely be unable to name any other schools in the system.

Me: [description of the part of town]

Someone: Have you see *Freedom Writers* (DeVito, Shamberg, Sher, & LaGravenese, 2007) yet?⁹⁷

I had seen *Freedom Writers*, actually—a motion picture released during the winter holidays of my first year of teaching at Murphy—and as a cinematic piece of emotional uplift I had mostly enjoyed it. As social commentary, however, I both was and still am deeply troubled by the message it conveyed. An extremely brief plot summary of this movie, a so-called “true life story”: a White Language Arts teacher of non-White lower-track students at a Los Angeles high school helps a host of students who would otherwise have dropped out both graduate and move on to college. The film was a moderate commercial and critical success, but its ability to come up in conversation during that second semester far outstripped those more modest measures of importance. In fact, due to the nature of movies to remain in the cultural zeitgeist, I would often have the experience of talking about *Freedom Writers* multiple times with the same person. We would have a conversation about the movie before they had seen it, and then again sometime later after they had finally gotten around to watching the film. A refrain repeated endlessly that spring: “It just reminded me so much of you!”

My problems with this film and the conversations engendered by it are manifold, and they strike right back to the heart of why I, in a manner of speaking, lied to my wife’s

⁹⁷ As is true in most big cities, I imagine, usually a resident of my city will immediately be able to discern from my placing Murphy on the map that it is almost entirely attended by Black or Hispanic students. Thus their not unreasonable ability to jump straight from a physical locating of my school to an attempted conversation about *Freedom Writers*. Another favorite topic of conversation was the *The Ron Clark Story* (Cox, T., McNeil, Ord, Randall, & Haines, 2006), a made-for-television movie released about five months before *Freedom Writers*. I have never seen *The Ron Clark Story*, so I will be excluding it from my analysis; I did want to mention the unfortunate coincidence of its being released the night before I began my second teaching career, however.

friend's friend. In considering this rather odd story, it occurs to me that an analysis of these problems might just provide another piece to the puzzle of my autoethnography. Elsewhere I have described movies like *Freedom Writers* as belonging to a sort of subgenre of pseudo-fictional work:

A long tradition of film and television—from *Blackboard Jungle* (Berman and Brooks 1955) to *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer, Simpson, and Smith 1995)—depicting a White teacher who enters an “other” environment and, usually through sheer force of will, effects change in the lives of his or her students. (Wamsted, 2012b, p. 176)

I am unable to watch or discuss any of these movies without thinking about Chubbuck (2004) and her article “Whiteness Enacted, Whiteness Disrupted: The Complexity of Personal Congruence.” Though ostensibly a study of White teachers who were successful in non-White environments, one of her interview subjects seemed to be acting out the role of the so-called White savior: “The position she adopted was that of one who comes from a privileged space to save the Other, not one who lives in the heart of the struggle and works alongside for the practical well-being of the individuals being injured by the system” (p. 327). Martin (2007) defines a similar label in opposition to a “long tradition of ‘white missionary paternalism’ in African American education” (p. 13). Similar to the White savior, “the term *missionary* suggests a conceptualization of teachers who must save African American children from themselves and their culture” (p. 13); Martin further defines his concept as a type of “teaching that can remedy [student’s] blackness as a threat to the rest of society” (p. 19).

I want to be clear here: I am not accusing Erin Gruwell—the real life protagonist of *Freedom Writers*—of seeing herself as either a missionary or a White savior; I have done absolutely no research into her as an individual and thus entirely lack the ability to

make such a claim. However, it is not the individual teacher in any of these movies that tends to rankle me in conversations about the films, and as such I will spend no more time writing about Erin Gruwell. Instead, I am going to attempt to explain what bothers me about *Freedom Writers* and movies like it by focusing on my much more general single-sentence description of the film. Specifically, I want to look into the stereotypes strung through the summary I wrote: a White Language Arts teacher of non-White lower-track students at a Los Angeles high school helps a host of students who would otherwise have dropped out both graduate and move on to college.⁹⁸

The lower-track students picked up by their bootstraps in these movies are always non-White. There are certainly struggling White students out there in the real world who need good teachers—Teach for America, a program Martin (2007) directly connects to his concept of the missionary teacher, places teachers in both urban (almost always non-White) and rural (most certainly possibly-White) schools. These types of movies, however, always depict the struggling students as largely non-White. The struggles are always much more than merely academic: the student's lives outside the school walls are full of drugs, violence, broken families, poverty. This whirlwind of trouble has forced

⁹⁸ A reader inclined to be critical might notice that I have set up a straw man here—making my own umbrella summary of the *Freedom Writers* subgenre of film a subject of analysis, building it up only to knock it down. Further, it could also be pointed out that my only authority for the existence of this subgenre is my own previously printed work. I would respond by quoting something Ellis (2004) writes about the generalizability of the story: “Readers provide theoretical validation by comparing their lives to ours, by thinking about how our lives are similar and different and the reasons why” (p. 195). In other words, I would encourage my envisioned critical reader to ask themselves this question: Doesn't my one sentence summary of the story of *Freedom Writers* just feel like stories you have seen in multiple movies (and television shows) throughout your life? If so, the straw man accusation goes out the window. If a reader can honestly say this summary seems like nothing else they have seen—that it doesn't feel in any way familiar—I can only respond by noting that I am rather surprised such a reader made it this far into my dissertation at all.

these struggling students into a situation where current teachers and administration believe that there is no hope of success—both high school graduation and college admittance are deemed to be beyond the reach of whatever cohort of students is being followed. Into this maelstrom, though, comes the missionary, the White savior, the White knight: the White teacher. Though at first the teacher stumbles, an inevitable march toward complete life-change is gradually effected in the lives of the very students who at first were unwilling to accept the teacher. Often this is enabled by the teacher’s brilliant willingness to bring non-White culture into the classroom, a la the Tupac Shakur/poetry-lesson scene in *Freedom Writers*. The implication in a scene such as this is that no other teacher before this White savior ever had the bright idea to bring rap music into the classroom. This gifted teacher always shows a genuine care and concern for the students that they are pointedly missing everywhere else, and in the end the students always manage to pull themselves up—not so much by their bootstraps but by grasping onto the lone White hand stretched out to free them from the muck and mire of their daily lives.⁹⁹

I hope that in a short expansion of the plot summary of *Freedom Writers* the racist stereotypes are immediately obvious. In isolation, any one film along these lines would not be all that damaging; in fact, I enjoyed *Freedom Writers* in the moment of watching by being caught up in the inspiration of its narrative arc. Kennedy (2002), however, summarized an important point pertaining to a stereotyping media in his small book on

⁹⁹ This overall arc of this summary, especially the reference to the “lone White hand,” feels so much like the recent movie *The Blind Side* (Bourne, Smith, & Stoff, 2009) that I just had to mention it, despite the fact that the lone White hand in that film was the parent of a classmate and not an educator. I both read the book (Lewis, 2006) and saw the film, however, and the feel was identical: White people can “save African American children from themselves and their culture” (Martin, 2007, p. 13).

the historical and current discourse surrounding the word *nigger*—it is a fact that all most White people know about non-White people they know from their media diet.¹⁰⁰ If this assertion is true, what would a typical White person take away about non-Whites from a viewing of *Freedom Writers* and other movies of its ilk? Lower-track classes are exclusively filled with Black students, except for the one White student who is there on accident and in that regard is played for laughs. Non-White students' lives are filled with a turmoil largely of their own making, and thus of their own ability to avoid: drugs, violence, teenage pregnancies. The system has given up on non-White students, but *the only solution that is needed* is a caring, hard-working White person. If these poor, self-destructive, academically challenged non-White students were only to have the right White teacher, all would be well. This false sense of a solution to the almost intractable problem of public education might just be the only thing a typical White viewer knows about non-White students. I find this thought horrifying.

It is entirely likely that a thoughtful White person could come away from a movie like *Freedom Writers* and wonder at the effects that poverty plays on the lives of an increasingly larger slice of America. An exceptionally insightful White person might just grasp that economic privilege is an issue “not inseparable from the issue of race” (Manglitz, Johnson-Bailey, & Cervero, 2005, p. 1255); quite possibly such a White person might even be able to wonder at the damage we as a racist nation are doing to our children. This chain of events is possible, I suppose, though I rather doubt it. Even if such

¹⁰⁰ In 1995, hooks wrote: “Many white folks who never have intimate contact with black folks now feel that they know what we are like because television has brought us into their homes” (1995a, p. 112). I am pretty sure that things cannot be appreciably different at this point in time. See also Feagin (2000) and Bonilla-Silva (2006), whose works on the indelibility of racism in America echo this idea of races primarily interacting through their consumption of media.

a thing were likely, and somehow heralded by the production company as some ancillary benefit to the movie, Sleeter (1995/1996) throws cold water on this fantasy of an idea:

[White people] semantically evade our own role in perpetuating white racism by constructing sentences that allow us to talk about racism while removing ourselves from discussion. One such semantic evasion is to personify racism, making it (rather than ourselves) the subject of sentences. This allows us to say, for example, ‘Racism causes poor education in inner-city schools.’ *Who* is responsible for the quality of education in inner-city schools? The sentence does not suggest that anyone holds responsibility. (p. 260, emphasis in original text)

I find it impossible to think that anyone exiting a movie such as *Freedom Writers* would think to trouble the all-too common literary sleight of hand evident in the personification of “racism.”¹⁰¹ What is far more likely is that this viewer would think to themselves: Poverty and racism have caused these children to have a bad life, and *some White person must rescue them from this*. I find these movies to be so problematic because they are—paradoxically, it might be thought by some—the exact opposite of a counter-story as defined by DeCuir and Dixson (2004): “A means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes. The use of counterstories allows for the challenging of privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority, therefore, serving as a means for giving voice to marginalized groups” (p. 27). These movies only serve to normalize current racist discourse; they only give voice to that thread of thought that needs no further access to the bully pulpit.

¹⁰¹ Giroux (1996) writes tongue in cheek about the broad-reaching effects of movies like *Freedom Writers*: “The only salvation gained in portraying such inner-city hopelessness is that it be noticed so that it can be stopped from spreading like a disease into the adjoining suburbs and business zones that form a colonizing ring around Black ghettos” (p. 96). More cold water on the idea of a production company supposedly bent on beneficent social change.

I think it is, in a grand-narrative sort of sense, my belief that movies like *Freedom Writers* serve as cultural normalizers of racism that led me to mislead my wife's friend's friend that night at the party. In my limited experience, when a typical White person finds out where I teach and subsequently what I have written about in my dissertation work, I find that they tend to believe that they have a pretty good idea of what my job is like—this feeling of familiarity from having watched movies and television shows dramatizing certain slices of my particular piece of public education. As the years have gone on, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with this supposed assumption. I see myself as a committed public school teacher of non-White students, a White man working in whatever way he can toward anti-racist practice and pedagogy. In contrast, I see the characters in these movies as missionaries and White saviors. I believe myself reflective, purposeful, revolutionary. They are reifying. In conversation with people who I assume in turn are making their own assumptions about me, I have begun to choose the more cowardly of the two options in front of me: I avoid conversation altogether rather than risk being misunderstood. In this act I let both Jackie and myself down. Though my intentions are good—I want to minimize the transmission of normalized racist discourse normally attendant to conversations about movies like *Freedom Writers*—I of course also miss out on prime opportunities to stand up to this discourse. This failure to fight is the problem I am trying to get at here in this afterword; better late than never.

All of this duly noted—my distaste for movies about missionaries and White saviors, my beliefs about their power to spread racist stereotypes, my blaming them for my own conversational impotence of late—I am going to add one additional layer to my reluctance to enter into conversations about my work and my writing. I have a troubling

fact to face here at the end of my dissertation: in a section blaming movies like *Freedom Writers* for normalizing racist discourse, I confess that I (re)tell stories that sound like *Freedom Writers* too. Not every event of my day lends itself toward academia, as have the stories (re)told so far. In fact, I have experienced many moments in the classroom that felt like something which could have been pulled straight from the script of one of these missionary movies; as these instants are often the best part of my day, they might be one of the few things I report out to my wife at the end of our night. What am I to do with these *Freedom Writers* moments? What am I to make of my predilection to hold on to and (re)tell them in my stories?

A better question: Why am I in some way ashamed to (re)tell them? Unlike the overwhelming majority of my teacher friends, I teach students who are hovering beneath the poverty line, who have friends and family members fall prey to marked violence, who are in and out of jail, who are mixed up in drugs and crime, who are expectant or current mothers and fathers, who will disappear for days or weeks or even months at a time, who move suddenly in the middle of the semester on account of strained finances. It is of course true that I have many students who would fail to qualify for any of these descriptions, but it is also true that those students are much easier to teach and thus far less gratifying to watch do well. I tend to (re)tell fewer stories about these students. Like my colleagues at Murphy I tend to respect the most, I took a job in this urban environment because I wanted to do the hard thing, to effect change in those who seem most unlikely to be so touched, to make a difference. I often put it this way: the easier a teaching environment is, the more an individual teacher probably does not really matter to

his or her students—they will do well no matter who their teacher is. I want to teach somewhere where I matter. Is this wrong?¹⁰²

I do not know the answer to that question, but I think my worry about these stories contributes to my reluctance to discuss my work with others. Maybe I am more than a little worried that I am nothing more than a missionary or a White savior, terrified that I have not grown at all since my failed experiment as at 24-year-old middle school teacher. Maybe it is my sense of self-incrimination that leads me to find movies like *Freedom Writers* so distasteful, my fear of being found out that leads me to avoid conversations with others who I assume are unable to understand. As evidence of past as a some sort of self-perceived White savior, I submit a poem I wrote about two months into my student teaching at Murphy High—a piece of work I had entirely forgotten about until a recent perusal of my journal from the time:

who is to blame for this misconception?
 [systems existent solely for destruction]
 structured on safety of feigned equality
 deemed fair or right in this country's duality
 students controlled, coerced, contained
 so the status quo is able to be maintained.
 what is my part as I toil through here
 wondering wildly why no answer appears
 to my mind, my eye, my heart;
 solutions strained in fits or starts.
 is there a hope for this trouble and toil?
 it seems to be fated; their mortal coil. (unpublished personal journal)

It is not a bad poem, as far as rhythm and rhyme go, and I think it does manage to capture the hopelessness I felt during my first brief exposure to what would soon become

¹⁰² Trying to edit through this section I wonder at what a fine line it is between “the hard thing” and the White savior. I am sure that I am failing to draw a distinction in my work here, but I have to be honest about how I feel. If I didn't in some sense want to do the hard thing, why would I work in a hard place? All the good teachers I know at Murphy, White or Black or whatever, feel similarly.

my full time job. It seems clear in (re)reading this poem, though, that it is the work of a man who believed that it was his job to fix the situation he found himself in—that there was some sort of solution out there in his wider (White) experience which could have cut the Gordian knot of (Black) hopelessness he believed to be tied around his students. This poem is about a White man condescending to solve the riddle of Black education—the “trouble and toil” of these children’s “fated mortal coil.” I have long been aware that I saw myself as a White savior at 24 years old when I taught middle school; it seems from this poem that I began my work at Murphy under similarly inauspicious circumstances. Consequently it is possible, perhaps, that I still see myself as a bit of this kind of *Freedom Writers* teacher. I am both troubled and fascinated by this possibility. Troubled for all of the same reasons I dislike all of these movies; fascinated because it appears that I may, at the extreme end of this autoethnographic writing project, have stumbled upon yet another aspect of myself accessible for growth and change. As an afterword, this new charge for my future writing and growth could not be more welcome. I am a privileged White man swimming in systemic racism and missionary-thinking; let me, as I move forward, push myself to come up and out for air.

Eddie, Again

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
 And sorry I could not travel both
 And be one traveler, long I stood
 And looked down one as far as I could
 To where it bent in the undergrowth;
 —Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”
 (Frost, 1915/1969, lines 1–5)

Freedom Writers moments happen all the time. At the dinner party that night I could easily have (re)told any number of stories, moments in my teaching life that I hold

on to as continued encouragement, scenes that when stitched together could make a movie about an uplifting public school teacher. However, I also could have held forth on my many mistakes, my anti-*Freedom Writers* moments, the many instances that would never make the true-life story that becomes a movie. The times I have made a student cry, pushing them too hard in a hallway conversation about their behavior or academic standing, going way over the top in my effort to make them see whatever it was I thought so important for them to see. The times I have pseudo-deliberately provoked an obnoxious student into getting vocally angry with me, giving me justification for removing them from my room. The times I have given a packet of make-up work to a student and watched them walk out of the room, knowing they could never complete it on their own and being too tired to care. The times I let a favored student get away with some minor classroom infraction that I subsequently, mere moments later, punished a less liked student for, knowing full well that everybody in the room knew full well what had just happened. The mere fact that I have ever actually thought to myself: “I don’t like that student.” Here, too, with these moments that would never make the movie, I could very easily go on.

I think it is the existence of these stories that might be able to lead me away from the worry that I am nothing more than a missionary or a White savior. Rather, it is not the existence, but the regret of their existence that paradoxically makes me feel better about my teaching. As Erika said to me the day we were editing this piece, after I confessed to my fears about all of this *Freedom Writer* rhetoric: “Give yourself a break.” Taking comfort in the good stories, using the positive moments with the difficult students as nourishment when I am having a bad day, doesn’t make me a missionary—it merely

means I am human. I have bad days, I make mistakes all of the time, I am a White teacher of mathematics at a troubled “urban” school. It is okay to enjoy the successes, to (re)tell them to my friends and family and even party acquaintances. The attempted honesty of my stories—of this larger autoethnographic tale I am currently in the process of trying to close down—might just be the antidote I am hoping can play some part at healing the effect of the normalizing racial discourse of movies like *Freedom Writers*. Not to be too dramatic, but if a teacher as equipped as I am to (re)tell these stories while also pushing against the rhetoric fails to rise to the challenge, who will? If I persist in my abnegation, only the normalizing discourse remains. As the final word of my dissertation project, this realization is probably appropriate.

Any honesty about these *Freedom Writers* moments, though—any effort I make to break forward in conversation with others—is as contingent as the instant described by the narrator in the first stanza of Robert Frost’s (1915/1969) famous poem, only able to look down his possible path “as far as I could / to where it bent in the undergrowth” (lines 4–5). *Freedom Writers* moments are snapshots, fossils caught in the amber of time, feelings of hope and expectation about what brighter days might be ahead. There are, however, multiple paths forward from any given victory in the classroom, despite the fact that the films always freeze viewers before they have to see any backsliding by the newly invigorated young people. I worry: might my *Freedom Writers* stories lose all power if I were to (re)tell the rest? About the students with whom I make breakthroughs who get locked up, expelled, or otherwise disappeared? About the ones who fail my class as well as others despite our positive moments together? About the seemingly college-bound who choose to skate by with 70s and the barest of minimums? Perhaps they would; my dinner-

party stories might certainly be better poised in the possibly false hope of an attenuated ending. In trying to divine the future of a student like Eddie—he of the “Racist!” comment—I am much like Frost’s narrator: I can see a just a little bit down the path, right up until the bend in the bramble; from that point on, all is shrouded in mist and uncertainty. Here all is well and good, but who knows what lies down the path. Do my veneer of hope about Eddie and the critical postmodern autobiography come too quickly? Might there be a reason that *Freedom Writers* freezes its story in midstream?

I have wondered about all of this more than a little, and in the end I don’t think any of this lack of foresight takes away from the stories I find myself reluctant to tell. The movies make it look easy, and they make it look lasting, and sadly neither of these things is necessarily true. That doesn’t mean, though, that the moments are not in some way real, that I am not in some manner effecting positive change in the lives of my students. Shouldn’t I be able to feel good about that, too? Shouldn’t I want to take the stories of my dissertation to the streets? I have to believe that enjoying what I do—seeking out the positive moments mixed in with the hard work of the urban school—cannot in and of itself determine me a White savior, or a missionary, or some other sort of carpetbagging colonialist. In the end, wondering over the dissonance I feel between my (re)tellings of moments and my memories of movies, I think I can only throw up my hands and say something rather ridiculous. I think *Freedom Writers* and movies like it are about White saviors and missionaries and carpetbagging colonialists, and I dislike them immensely for the image they perpetuate of schools like Murphy, believing that they spread negative and misleading myths about urban schools and non-White students. I believe, though, that my self-admittedly similar stores that fill this dissertation are something entirely different.

Perhaps it is a matter of the size of the audience, perhaps it is a matter of voice—I cannot quite lay logical hold of why I believe the one to be invidious and the other to be invaluable. My statement may not be exactly fair, but it is how I feel. And, consequently, if my *Freedom Writers* stories are not really as bad as *Freedom Writers* movies, I owe it to Shawn and Eddie and Deangelo and all of my students to start answering people honestly when they ask me where I teach.

“So, where do you teach?”

“Murphy High School.”

“Where is that?”

“On the west side of town. It’s a Metro City School.”

“Oh. Have you seen *Freedom Writers*?”

“You know, I’m glad you asked. I tend not to like movies like that from an educator’s point of view, because of some simplifying things they have to do to tell their story. But they get some things right.”

“Like what?”

“Well, let me tell you about Eddie, this student I just wrote about all throughout my dissertation...”

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

RACIAL IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE MINING, CONT.

Terrell, Take Two

Terrell was the first Black person I knew who engendered in me any kind of thinking about the fact of being Black. Not that I have any recollection of ever talking about it, either to him or to anyone else, but I do remember thinking about his racial identity—his Blackness—and how that fact might have played itself out in his life.¹⁰³ I remember thinking that he seemed sometimes uncomfortable at our lunch table, him being one of the very few Black students in the cafeteria who sat at a non-Black table. I now wonder—thinking about my experience with Terrell from a narrative mining point of view—if it wasn't me who was uncomfortable with the fact of him at my lunch table, not the other way around. There is no way for me to know for sure; why, though, would I “remember” something I never spoke with him or anyone else about? To be sure, it is quite possible that he was at times ill at ease with us. In all fairness, however, it is equally possible that the converse was true and I was not quite as comfortable having a Black friend as I would have espoused. Again, this is a disturbing thought to me, though fortunately I do not feel as certain of this as I do of the troubling thoughts I discovered surrounding Briana. It is merely a possibility.

I remember wondering at Terrell's lack of Black friends, how it was that he stuck with my little cadre so closely even through our elective classes which were largely

¹⁰³ Unsurprisingly, this wondering about Terrell's Blackness spurred no such thought in me about my own Whiteness. It would be many years before I was able to come to such a place.

racially mixed. I have some vague sense that my White friends interacted with the other Black kids in gym class more than he did, and I remember this striking me as a little odd. I always thought he stayed with us in gym because he was not very athletic, and of course in retrospect I see the stereotyping here and I have to wonder: do I remember this “fact” about Terrell only because at 17 years old I had already decided that a Black kid could be either smart or athletic, but probably not both? Was that gross generalization a part of my racial identity? I remember being somewhat stunned to find out that he lived in an apartment—naively so, but he was the only friend I ever had who did not live in a house.¹⁰⁴ I remember also that someone always had to go pick him up—him being the only friend I had who never seemed to have access to a car. It was no trouble for me to do so—his apartment complex was maybe two miles from my house, though to get there I did have to cross one of those invisible neighborhood markers that make everything somehow entirely different. His apartment was right next to the middle school we had all attended, and I vividly remember that during our high school years they built a high wall between his complex and the school campus. We always heard it said and gladly repeated the story that they built this wall because someone had one day fired a gun from the apartments toward the school, although Terrell told us that this was not true. I thought about this racist story every time I went to pick him up.

Prior to writing my chapter on “Who Are You?: A Further Look at Identity and Experience” I would have called these remembrances of Terrell “facts,” but now I am sitting here wondering not only whether these so-called facts might be false but also

¹⁰⁴ I had a very good friend who lived in a townhouse, but it was the kind of development with a well-kept private pool and a nice clubhouse that we were able to reserve for parties and such. I’m not counting this as apartment living.

whether I ever even thought them at all. I now wonder if they might be reverse imprints, selectively altered memories I am forcing backwards upon Terrell, artificial thoughts culled from my later experience with Black people—both the real life interactions and the more imaginary mediations I underwent via television, movies, and magazines. Again, I have never spoken with anyone about these things—I lost track of Terrell shortly after high school ended—and according to Scott (1991) my experience of these events should only have been formed discursively. But what if it was some sort of discourse in my own mind that reified these remembrances of Terrell over the years? If this is possible, then I am led to wonder if this perhaps had been done falsely. Maybe I read Tatum’s (1997) *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”: And Other Conversations about Race* and then formed a false experience of an uncomfortable Terrell sitting at my lunch table during those three years we ate together.¹⁰⁵ Maybe I read Majors and Billson (1992) *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* and only believe I have an experience of an honors Black student going through some sort of existential dilemma during gym class on account of an acute inability to interact with other Black kids. Maybe Terrell had more access to a car than I remember, and perhaps I am taking all of the Black students I have seen in the past seven years of teaching who do not drive to school—around 80% of my school is on free-and-reduced lunch, the education-speak standard of poverty—and pushing those thoughts backwards to Terrell. Maybe he just never had his own car, maybe I picked him up one time when his mom needed their car, maybe he drove a lot. Certainly, his apartment was not as scary as I

¹⁰⁵ Due to the vagaries of our lunch schedules alternating yearly, Terrell was the only friend I ate lunch with all three of sophomore, junior, and senior years. It is interesting to consider the incredible amount of time we spent together in the school building, and how little I actually knew him.

remember it. As it is, Terrell's teenage home is less than a mile from where my father currently lives and I pass it quite frequently during my visits.¹⁰⁶ It is a rather standard apartment complex; I see far drearier on my ride to work every day. There remains, however, a large wall still standing between it and my former middle school. Possibly it is this inarguable fact that makes all of the other memories somehow feel so locked in place.

My method of narrative mining allows for all of these possibilities, to be sure. It does, however, render them largely inconsequential. If I remember Terrell as being uncomfortable with the White kids, lacking in Black relationships, poorer than me and my middle-class friends—these experiences are what count in terms of trying to paint a picture of me at 24 years old, face-to-face with an all-Black class of middle school students. It may seem cruel to say that what Terrell was “actually” like does not matter; in fact, I find it rather liberating for him, as I am no longer painting this picture of him in which he comes off as some sort of alien fish desperately out of his own water. Rather, I am being somewhat cruel to myself in considering the thought that I might have discovered more of the unspoken, pseudo-racist feelings of a 17-year-old Jay Wamsted: he seemed to believe that poor Black kids just could not fit in with an academically centered cohort of middle class White kids, that non-athletic Black kids might not fit in anywhere. It is entirely possible that the 24-year-old teacher I used to be still felt that exact same way looking out on the young, poor, and Black faces turned to him for their mathematics education that day over a decade ago. In fact, I might go so far as to say it

¹⁰⁶ Now that his children have moved away and he has received several promotions over the years, I would definitely call my father upper class. He lives in a very modestly sized home, to be sure, but I mention this to show the disconnect between an upper class home being so close to a supposedly scary apartment complex.

seems likely that he still thought that way, as there was precious little in his life from Terrell onward to that moment which might have managed to teach him otherwise. With this turn I will finally leave high school behind and move on to what comes next: Brandon and my first real Black friendship.

Brandon

Brandon was the first Black person with whom I ever had an intimately personal conversation of any type, the first Black person with whom I ever shared a meal outside of a school cafeteria, the first Black person whose house I ever entered, the first Black person I went out of my way to stay connected with even after the circumstances of our lives moved us around the country; this at 19 years old. I was home from college for the summer working at an athletic-goods store devoted entirely to soccer, and Brandon was recently graduated from the private high school he had attended—a school that through unimportant details was cursorily connected to my store. We had friends in common and in fact I had known him when I was in high school, but it was not until he started coming into the store—he was heading to Brown University on a soccer scholarship in the fall—that we actually got to know each other in any meaningful way. We spent an incredible amount of time together that summer, much of it at a Waffle House that many of us frequented almost nightly from about 10 P.M. until 2 A.M. as a kind of teenage watering hole. Seating and conversational dynamics would shift here quite frequently throughout the night as people came and left, but it quickly became not uncommon for Brandon and me to be alone for hours at a stretch, talking about whatever it is that teenage boys supremely convinced of their own intelligence talk about over Cherry Coke and cheese grits. Probably philosophy and girls, possibly disproportionately slanted towards girls.

He was the best soccer player any of us knew, a fact which repeatedly arose during our summertime pick-up games—this among a field that regularly included other college players. He was also incredibly smart and terribly personable: funny, engaging, interesting to talk to for hours on end; we were so close during this time that I spent my sophomore year spring break sleeping on the floor of his dorm room in Providence, Rhode Island—this after something like 20 hours of driving to get there. It was during our hours-on-end late night conversations that I first talked to another person about what being Black actually felt like, how it seemed different from being White, how it made him think and feel in a way I never would have imagined. As mentioned previously, he was one of a tiny handful of Black students who attended a nearly all-White private high school; in retrospect I imagine that race very rarely left his thoughts in high school and that Brown University did not much ease this situation for him. I have no recollection of how our conversations eventually tacked toward this taboo subject of race; probably it was a mere function of intimate time spent together. Our racial dialogue was groundbreaking to me; remember that I literally had never discussed race at all to this point in my life. Thinking back upon our conversations, however, I believe it was all rather mild—nothing too critical or structural even if it was entirely revelatory to me. Still, one conversation in particular has always stayed with me, slipping over the years into the canon of tales I tell about the important moments of my life. According to my method of narrative mining this experience is probably important in some way; let me push into the story of that memory.

It was a brief moment for him, a little aside about his stepping into an elevator occupied by only a single White woman and watching her look at him sideways as she

shifted her purse to her hand furthest from him. I was duly shocked by this and told him so, probably thinking myself both liberal and post-racial; in looking back it seems this surprise of mine amused him some little bit, as he proceeded to regale me with story after story, situation after situation where something similar to that day's event had occurred. In my own story of this moment, it was in listening to his chain of events that I achieved my first sort of awareness of modern-day racism: "Oh," I thought, "We are in fact treated differently, you and I, and though we are great friends and so similar in so many ways we shall always be seen by others as different and consequently treated so." It has always been a watershed kind of moment for me—the day I realized that the effects of preferential racial treatment were still around, alive and well, though it would be years before I had the language of "White privilege" to give name to this revelation—and I have told it as such several times over the years as a seminal part of my journey.

I pause here for a moment to note that a reader may have observed a subtle shift in language in my writing about Brandon. I have gone from primarily "thinking" and "remembering" about the people from my past to just stating things about Brandon and our time together. This shift is deliberate, I suppose, inasmuch as I actually knew Brandon—or, at least, the part of himself that he allowed to be known—and it feels much more solid to write about him and what he was "really" like than it felt to tell about Terrell or Briana or Kevin. These three were at best supporting actors on the stage of my life, while Brandon for a season or two was a genuine co-star. I think, however, that this intimacy lulls me into the at least partly false belief that what I am writing about him is somehow more true, more real than all of the rest, that an effort at mining memories of him through the lens of identity and experience will prove somehow less fruitful. The

Ideal Mathematician immediately draws a graph: the more I actually knew somebody the more reliable my memories are, intimacy and familiarity plotted on the horizontal axis and veracity of remembrance plotted on the vertical—Briana a coordinate located near the origin, Brandon tacking away along the line $y = x$. This direct variation is probably true, to a point; certainly the mathematics of it calms me. However, it must be true that my memories of Brandon—fond as they might be—are somehow precisely plotted with the same pen, pushed through the lens of my identity at the time to form an experience that is still only discourse, still simply subjective, still able to be analyzed through my method of narrative mining.

In particular, I call into question the sepia-toned memory of the day my conversation with Brandon brought me into a belated awareness of the continued existence of racism. In retrospect this rendering seems rather ridiculous. While it is certainly true that I feel my entire experience with Brandon directly engendered this realization in me—that the year or so we were great friends was directly responsible for my so-called racial awakening—what I question is the lionization of this one particular story, this one particular conversation. If, in fact, we discussed race on more than one occasion then why do I remember only this one particular conversation with any clarity? It is certainly possible that I (re)told this story several times over the years and thus, in keeping with Scott's (1991) production value of discourse, reified it to its current place as an identity-forming experience. I wonder, though, if another more unfortunate possibility might possibly be true. What if I merely remembered this moment with Brandon intermittently over the years—more of a sort of internal discourse akin to the kind that I hypothesized kept stories of Terrell alive—calling it to mind every time I rolled up the

windows of my car when stuck in traffic in a Black neighborhood, every time I wondered where exactly my wallet was stowed away in my bike gear as a Black man approached me waiting at a stoplight, every time I switched my backpack from one strap to two while walking amidst a majority Black crowd through downtown streets, every time I saw a group of Black teenagers on the side of the road and instantly swerved my bike out into the center of the street to give me just a little more space to pass. What if every time something like this occurs—and here I must reluctantly confess that with all of my ostensible enlightenment over the last decade feelings like these still catch me by surprise at times—I remember Brandon and feel just a little bit guilty, as if I am betraying my memory of our friendship? What if the reason I remember this conversation with him so well is because his casual observation of racism in this White woman on the elevator harmonizes so keenly with what I know to be true of my own feelings in similar situations?¹⁰⁷

I think I finally may have stumbled upon some sort of present racism here—the expected bombshell that Proxy Jay cornered me into admitting possible back in the main body of this dissertation—but I am not entirely sure what to do with the discovery of these vestigial fears. I am embarrassed to admit this fact, that at certain times in certain

¹⁰⁷ Just yesterday a Black teenager jumped out from a crowd of children on the sidewalk—a deliberate attempt to make me flinch as I was racing downhill on my bicycle past his middle school. I think this provocation is more a function of being a teenager than being Black, though in writing group Erika wondered if it is more of an evolved, deliberately racialized act. Either way, I have little chance to break the stereotypes engendered during these moments, as I very rarely pass large groups of White teenagers on my bicycle.

situations I still double-clutch at the sight of an entirely innocuous Black man;¹⁰⁸ I am not nearly as shocked to find this racism, though, as I was when I wrote about Briana and my discoveries surrounding her story. It seems obvious to me—and hopefully should also be so to the reader—that I knew something like this was coming in this rather difficult writing, even if I wasn't sure exactly what it was. Truth be told, it is more cathartic than alarming to have written this still extant racism down, and in the braided time (Clarke, Febraro, Hatzipantelis, & Nelson, 2005) of the dissertation I am not nearly so devastated as I imagined myself being during the split dialogue conversation wherein I first realized that this sort of thing might surface.¹⁰⁹ Rothenberg (2008) tells me that “the first step toward dismantling the system of privilege that operates in this society is to name it and the second is for those of us who can to use our privileges to speak out against the system of privilege as a whole” (p. 5); maybe a mere naming of my racisms here can serve as that important first step—doubly important in that it can equip me for the second. It is the hope of this possibility that leads me to take the news about the racism swimming within my identity with somewhat more composure than I did previously.

¹⁰⁸ It occurs to me that I do not think that I feel similarly about Black women in these situations. I don't know if this is a good or a bad thing. Does this make me less racist or more sexist?

¹⁰⁹ You (the reader) are stuck in Barthes' (1966/1977b) logical time, but I (the writer) am under no such stricture: though only eight pages or so for you, it has in fact been nearly three weeks for me. This bending of time is part of the problem of writing autoethnography: I have had quite a bit of time to mull over the expectation that some extant racism might surface, long enough to prepare myself for it. The raw emotion of the previous revelation is thus kept from surfacing; this lack might jar the reader, though it makes perfect sense to me as a writer outside the frame of the story.

In any event, given that I have discovered this ugly piece of my identity still lurking within the hold of my metaphorical *Argo*, it seems all but certain that I have stumbled upon a part of 24-year old Jay Wamsted's racial identity. If I can catch these ugly stereotypes wreaking havoc on my mind even now, years of reading and writing and working hence, I am positive that the man I was would have wrestled with them even more urgently, probably almost entirely unawares. The Ideal Mathematician in me is kind of excited; he feels that we have again proved something.¹¹⁰ To wit, let me take as a given two facts: (1) I did not expect to find this racism at the start of the writing, and (2) this racism was discovered in the discourse of a story about Brandon I have told continuously for close to 15 years; ergo, that racism must have been hiding there that day a decade ago, housed in the same story I was still in the process of (re)telling. This feeling of proof fascinates not only the Ideal Mathematician, but also John O. Wamsted the author and Jay Wamsted the writer; in a sense it justifies all of our difficult work.

What else can I say about the former me, looking a little deeper into Brandon's story, past the things he might have purposefully taught me and into things I might have picked up accidentally? I believe I have shown that having one good Black friend in no way was able to insulate me from stereotyping other Black people; what else? Perhaps Brandon's story reinforced for me the age-old lie that Black people would be most successful in typically White environments, that they could all blossom into Ivy League

¹¹⁰ As I explained in the chapter "*Dramatis Personae*," the Ideal Mathematician almost always takes these tenuous discoveries of mine and turns them into "things we have proven to be true." In addition to this Brandon related discovery, he also feels very strongly that we have proved my former feelings about the unnaturalness of interracial dating. I want to deal with these positivistic feelings of his in their own section, though, because I think there is a strong crossover here with my mathematics identity. As such, I say no more now.

college students if only given the right kind of opportunity. Perhaps I learned, though, that this opportunity involved the Black person shedding his or her Black relationships; I cannot remember Brandon introducing me to a single Black friend of his. Perhaps I also decided that no matter how bright or personable a Black person is, they can only be truly valuable if they are athletic—after all, though Brown admitted Brandon based on his academic record, he freely admitted that his soccer skills were what set him apart from the mass of other students vying to go to school there.

The final thing I might have learned from Brandon comes from the end of our relationship, and I am not pleased to write it down. I will continue, of course, but I am admitting up front that I am disappointed with myself in regards to this brief story. Sometime around my senior year of college Brandon kind of fell off the map; he came home for vacations more seldom and for less time, no longer returned phone calls, stopped answering emails. At one point no one we knew had seen or heard from him in over a year, and somehow someone—it may have been me, but I truly cannot remember—took his complete radio silence to be some kind of repudiation of all of us. The rumor went around, ridiculously so, that he had joined the Nation of Islam and thus was forbidden from communicating with us; I have no idea how this story started. Let me be clear: I do not find the thought that Brandon might have joined the Nation of Islam to be ridiculous—at least not now; I'm not exactly sure how that made me feel then—rather what I cringe at in this current telling is the fact that we as a group of White people immediately joked that Black Nationalism was responsible for our friend's lack of contact. Had a White friend similarly cut ties we would never have invoked so arbitrary an explanation; however, with Brandon we kept the joke running to such a degree that

one night we even made a list of possible Muslim names for which Brandon might have exchanged his own.¹¹¹ This type of talk went on for a year or so, up until the last time I ever saw Brandon: we listened to some music I had recently recorded and talked about what we had been up to of late. He did not mention the Nation of Islam, nor did I bring it up; it seemed just too silly and entirely beside the point. It still felt the same talking to him, as it always does with those I am truly close to, but I never saw him again after that night. I literally have no idea where he is today.

I wonder now if I told this story of Brandon's leaving us because I somehow doubted the veracity of our friendship, if I somewhere believed that Brandon would be happier surrounded by Black people than he was surrounded by us.¹¹² Why else would we have blamed this specter of Black Nationalism for taking away our friend? There were certainly many other benign possibilities: the distance to New England, Ivy League culture, the simple shifts in personality we all underwent during college. The Nation of Islam thing was always a bit, of course; I now see, however, how racist of a joke it was, filled with fear about Black solidarity and what it might do to my possibly self-congratulatory cross-racial relationships. Perhaps this is a little more of what I was like

¹¹¹ I know exactly where this list is, as it is in my friend Jason's journal from the time. I am not sure if it would add to this work or not for me to look at it. As it is, and in keeping with my feelings about Briana and my old high school yearbook, I am refraining from looking at old source material such as this list until I do so more purposefully; I don't want to accidentally muddle the identity-and-experience waters.

¹¹² Tatum (1997) tells me that at a certain time in Brandon's racial identity development, he may in fact have needed to surround himself almost entirely with Black people. She references her college years as such a time for her, noting that this is not necessarily about anger but rather about self-discovery: "I [did not spend] a lot of time being angry with the White men and women I encountered.... The truth is I wasn't paying much attention to them. My focus was almost exclusively on exploring my own cultural connections" (p. 76). I had no grid for such a concept as racial identity development at the time of Brandon's story, however.

that day at 24 years old: I may have believed Whites and Blacks might not actually be able to be great friends—that we would either be stunted but protracted, like Terrell, or powerful but short, like Brandon. Perhaps all of this is a stretch—a hope that my narrative mining can discover gold again—and the most I can say is that I availed myself of a tame kind of racist joke for a time in my early twenties.¹¹³ In any event, it is rather a low note on which to end Brandon’s story. Sometimes, I suppose, that is just the way things must end. Though I would love to stay here longer and tell some good stories about Brandon—the chess matches on his back porch, the time I briefly left him alone at the soccer store and he sold a pair of shoes for me, the day we made brownies without an egg and tried to add it *ex post facto*—I think it is in fact time to move on.

...Through The Rest

I have almost reached the end of my journey, this effort to examine my racial memories prior to age 24 in a hope that I can paint a picture of what that man might have been feeling his first day of teaching an all-Black class of middle school students. I worked through a playground fight, a rather rhizomatic take on middle and high school, and my first real Black friendship; the tailing end of this friendship takes me to about 22 years old, just months away from graduating from college and taking that job at the soup kitchen that spurred me on towards a career in education.

A possibly amazing word about college: I do not remember interacting with a single Black person throughout my five aggregate years at Clemson University and the

¹¹³ Coming back to this piece some months later in the editing process, I do think this entire thought is kind of a stretch. I leave it in for continuity’s sake, however. In addition, it seems nice to have an example of narrative mining attempting to find but failing to discover anything all that revelatory.

University of Georgia until late in my second senior year.¹¹⁴ Even then, I only remember the young man because he was literally the only Black person I saw with whom I ever spoke. I have since forgotten his name, though, as he was really just a friend of a friend of a friend; I saw him socially only a handful of times. I have no real explanation for this other than the probably dismal demographic situation in these large state schools at the time. Looking at the University of Georgia website for undergraduate admissions in a search for recent data, I found that 27% of the 2011 freshman class was identified as “non-Caucasian” (University of Georgia, 2011). However, only 480 of these students were labeled “African-American.” Given the 5500 students reported to enroll for this school year (Atlanta Business Chronicle, 2011), only 8.7% of freshmen would have been Black—only about a third of the “non-Caucasians” touted by the school website. This demographic profile contrasts to a state which is 31% Black (United States Census Bureau, 2013), although this disproportional representation is an issue for another time. I can only assume that these race numbers—abysmal in 2011—were worse in 1996.

If I couple these demographics with the even more alarming underrepresentation at the time of Black people in mathematics majors—6.6% in the graduating class of 1993 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995)—then suddenly it becomes entirely believable that I could have moved through my postsecondary education completely separate from any meaningful interaction with a Black person. Certainly, this kind of separation could only have calcified whatever stories I was carrying from my childhood

¹¹⁴ Not all of my classes transferred from Clemson to UGA, and I was stuck with 9 hours of requirements to complete after my four years of undergraduate university training. I stayed in Athens and took these classes while also working part-time. I have always called these two years my first senior year and my second senior year, for obvious reasons.

and teenage days: I can almost see myself as a living fossil, telling the same tired stories about my limited interactions with Black people, having no opportunity to form new experiences. This lack of interaction and ossified feel that accompanies it gives me more faith in my narrative mining process, as the stories I told at 22 about Black people would have been such a small part of my larger life that they almost must have been identity-specific stories based upon the mere fact that I kept (re)telling them.

It came as a tremendous shock to me, then, when after graduating from the University of Georgia with a degree in pure mathematics I started my job working at the soup kitchen; all at once, in complete contrast to my previous life experience, I was surrounded by Black people.¹¹⁵ Any negative images frozen in my stories would only have been bolstered by the onslaught of stereotyping that my mind would have had to fight through day after day that year, feeding and assisting hundreds of Black men, so many Black men that the occasional woman or White person always came as a sort of shock to see. I interacted with Black people who were not homeless, to be sure, but only my social worker employers and fellow interns—though this certainly must have acted as a firewall of sorts against the temptation of mass stereotyping I was faced with. At any rate, I remember no one I worked with that year in any detail; apparently those are stories I for some reason chose not to (re)tell. I did become especially close to one other intern, though, the girl mentioned previously in reference to the only Black girl it ever occurred to me to even think about dating. Though we never approached anything like this level of intimacy, we were more than just work friends and saw each other socially a good bit

¹¹⁵ For more information about this phase of my life, refer back to the introduction.

over the year we worked together. I think I would have said we were genuine friends at the time; we lost touch, however, immediately after our internship program ended.

Sitting here writing, I can think of many things about her, but I cannot think of a single story I still tell in which she plays a part. The most I can say is that I believe that, given more time, she may have ended up playing a greater role in my road to some sort of positive racial awareness. As it is, I am not sure our friendship during that brief ten months was enough both to buffer the insidious effects of working with so many destitute Black men and to reverse the fossilized experiences from my high school days I was still carrying around in my stories about race. In short, I think that who I was at the end of the “Brandon” section is who I was at the end of my internship at the soup kitchen, and consequently who I was that day mere months later when I started teaching at 24 years old. Let me briefly summarize that man, and then finally be done with this process of narrative mining my racial identity.

What I Might Have Been Like

In early August back in the year 2000, a 24-year-old version of me began a teaching career in front of 20 or so 12 and 13 year old 7th graders. He didn’t last long—only about 3 months—and this failure to thrive has always haunted me. What went so wrong for that man then that somehow went right for me just 6 years later when I began teaching at Murphy? Though for a long time he blamed the school and specifically the administration, several years ago I began operating under a working hypothesis that placed most of the responsibility on the both of us—who he is being in fact who I was. I have been trying for the last 30 pages or so to crack open a window in order to see what it is I might have been like that day, specifically in regards to my attitudes about race. I

have tried to do this through my largely improvised method of narrative mining: the thought that the stories I tell around and about Black people might contain small pieces of my racial identity—else they would not have survived my ever-changing discourse over the years—and that these subtly hidden insights into my identity might hold more genuine information about my past than a rote recitation of “what I thought” or “what I believed” at the time about race could ever hope to have. I have covered in large or small strokes literally every interaction with a Black person I ever had prior to the age of 24 that managed to reify itself through story into a part of my experience and consequently my identity. Let me gather these pieces together into a sort of portrait.

I may have believed that Black people were largely poor, athletic, and slightly uncomfortable navigating through the White world in which I lived. I might have thought that Black people were underrepresented in gifted programs, honors classes, large state colleges, and science majors through some fault of their own, and I almost certainly believed that those who made it in places like these were forced in some manner into a compromising abnegation of their racial identities in order to do so. This self-denial of theirs would not work out, in my telling, as either they would be forced to be perpetually uncomfortable living in the White world or they would one day have to reverse course to recover their Blackness; either way their relationships with Whites would be stunted. I feel that I have in some sense “proved” two certainties about my former self: I believed that dating Black girls was in some way unnatural and I found Black people threatening in situations where I almost certainly would not have felt similarly about Whites—two very stereotypical types of racism that pain me to uncover. In short, and I hate to write this, I think that at the time I did not believe Blacks and Whites to be on equal footing. I

have to go one step further: I think I must have believed that the White world was not just different, but also somehow better than the Black world. This vision of inequality worked itself out in the multiple ways I viewed Black people as not-this or not-that—this or that being me and my view of what life should be like.

I would never have said anything like these statements out loud. To the contrary, I would have found them abhorrent and would have been able to speak eloquently as to why I believed in the pluralistic, absolute equality of all races. This disconnect between what I would have said and what it appears I actually believed proves the power of my method of narrative mining in that I have prevented myself from retrospectively hiding behind a veneer of political correctness. I have dodged Borges' (1975/1998) barriers to autoethnography—specifically in this case the barrier of (mis)understanding and (re)interpretation. hooks (1992/1995) writes of “the eagerness with which contemporary society does away with racism, replacing this recognition with evocations of pluralism and diversity that further mask reality...providing a cover, a hiding place” (p. 47), and in her words I find an indictment of that man I was. I have even found an indictment of the man I still am, having discovered present racisms about threat and danger lurking in the corners of my mind still today. Narrative mining has enabled me to shine a light into these dark spaces, exposing the ugly things I thought and the ugly things I still might think. Is it any wonder that I failed that first day of teaching, flailing desperately in front of all those middle school faces? How could I possibly hope to teach a class full of children I didn't actually respect, my stump speech about equality to the contrary?

Respect was some years away, sadly. I was a racist then—systemic and otherwise. Remembering Wildman and Davis (1995/2008), I say that I am a racist still:

Some readers may be shocked to see a white person contritely acknowledge that she is racist. I do not say this with pride. I simply believe that no matter how hard I work at not being racist, I still am. Because part of racism is systemic, I benefit from the privilege that I am struggling to see. (p. 114)

I will go one step further than they did, though. I will say that I might believe benefitting from systemic racism has polluting, corrupting effects even on those of us who work the hardest at overcoming our own individual, internal racisms. The system bleeds into my personal life. This pollution despite the fact that I work every day at a job I enjoy, surrounded by Black people of all ages, trying desperately to erase the vestiges of a past raised in a society which insidiously steers White to view “blatant racial discrimination as rare and see U.S. institutions as basically healthy and color-blind...[consequently providing] a veneer of liberality, which covers up continuing racist thought and practice that is often less overt and more disguised” (Feagin, 2000, p. 93). I was a racist; I am a racist; I want to cease being a racist.¹¹⁶ I can only hope that my naked act of narrative mining—churning up as it has such difficult things—will be read under the aegis of the man I am today: not the racist man, but the more enlightened man I am in the process of hoping to become.

“That’s a pretty ending you’ve worked up there.”

“Thanks. I’m struggling with how to conclude all of this. I don’t think I’ve ever written anything so long and complicated before.”

“I’m not sure the conclusion is the most important part. Davis and Martin (2008) write that mathematics teachers of Black students ‘must ask themselves difficult and uncomfortable questions about African American students and their conditions’ (p. 24). They list several important questions for self-reflection, the last of which is pertinent here: ‘Do I harbor racist beliefs about African American students?’ (p. 24). You’re trying to stumble toward an answer to that question as

¹¹⁶ Erika asked me if I think it is actually possible to cease being a racist. I’m not so sure that the wholesale rejection of any kind of internalized racism would be possible for any White person raised in this messed-up world, but the desire for such a thing seems important to me nonetheless.

best you can. Don't worry so much about trying to tie it up all neat in a conclusion."

"Again, thanks. I started this whole thing with a question from Professor Martin—it seems only appropriate to end with one.

"You didn't answer his question, though."

"Sorry?"

"Professor Martin's original question. You didn't answer it."

"I know. I was kind of hoping that all of that rhizomatic, elliptical writing would sort of slide back into it, and then all of a sudden I realized that I was answering an entirely different question. Then it was too late, so I just moved on. Slack, huh?"

"You want to talk about it right now?"

"Tell me the question again, just so I can be sure we're on the same page."

"He asked you: 'How does a White person come to the point where they can love and care for Black people?' After all of this narrative mining, do you have an answer for him?"

"I'm not sure. I can with certainty say that at this point in my life I believe that I both love and care for Black people, and that I would have been unable to say such a thing truthfully in the past. But as to how some other White person could get to the same place, I just don't know. I think that in my case it was a whole lot of reading and thinking and writing and a whole lot of time."

"Time?"

"Just...being with Black people. Not just my students but also my colleagues, my cohort at Georgia State: people who over time have come to be more than just people I work with. Now they're people I actually know."

"I thought you were about to say something cheesy like: 'Now they're my friends.'"

"I could have said that, because I think some of them are my friends, but I don't know if that's exactly the point. I think that at 24 years old I had only known one Black person, truly known him, and I think that this is probably the case for the majority of White people around the country—if they have even one Black friend at all! For me to come from that place to a point where I can feel good saying that I 'love and care for Black people' just took a whole lot of time being around Black people and finally getting to know them, both as 'just people' and as 'Black people'."

"That's it? Just time to finally get to know Black people and the problem is solved?"

"Well, I obviously think it's more complicated than that. I think a certain amount of intentionality would be necessary to get to know Black people on their own terms, not just on yours. I think that's the thing most people hide behind: their one Black friend at their all-White workplace excuses a whole host of ills."

"Kind of like Brandon did for you?"

"Good point. Yeah, kind of like Brandon did for me. I hid behind him and our relationship to avoid having to dig any further—especially during that year at the soup kitchen. For me, that digging also needed deliberate reading and

writing. I'm not convinced that everyone would need that to move out of their own head, but I'm sure it couldn't hurt."

"So that's how you'd answer Professor Martin? You got from this 24-year-old pseudo racist to where you are today, loving and caring for Black people, just through time, intentionality, reading, and writing?"

"That might be my answer. I'll get back to you later."

"Okay. I guess that will have to be good enough for now."

"It will, because it's time for us to move on."

"We have a lot more ground to cover, I suppose?"

"Oh yes. But we're going to leave race behind for a bit and focus solely on mathematics. I've realized in this writing process that I want to do a similar narrative mining on my mathematics identity, a kind of parallel digging into what that 24-year-old man might have been like from a mathematical point of view."

"Mathematics identity? I'm not sure I knew such a thing existed."

"Well, if your racial identity is your thoughts and feelings centered around the concept of race—both your own and others'—then your mathematics identity would be your thoughts and feelings centered around the concept of mathematics. Both how and what you think about it, and how you view others' thoughts and capabilities."

"I don't want to alarm you in any way, but I have to tell you that this sounds just amazingly boring."

"Oh, you're going to love it. Let's get started."

APPENDIX B

MATH(EMATICS) IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE MINING, CONT.

Inherent Ability

I do not think it would surprise most people to read that, my mother's shifted fossil of a story aside, I have absolutely no memories of mathematics until I was 13 years old. After all, I am not a prodigy; I never once did mathematical work beyond my grade level peers. Why would a normal kid have memories of mathematics earlier than middle school? The oldest story I, as a normal kid, would think to tell took place sometime during Algebra class my eighth grade year, when I memorized pi¹¹⁷ to thirty-something decimal places. This ability has already been demonstrated in these pages, but I have (re)told the story of how it came to pass often throughout the years, as for some reason my friends and family are fond of asking me at random times to spit the number out for their amusement. "Why do you know that?" I am usually asked by some innocent bystander, to which I always reply with this brief mathematical tale, my oldest story on the subject: I memorized it in Algebra class during 8th grade because I was bored, and my friend Rob and I had a competition every day after class to see who knew more digits. In and of itself, this story is rather harmless, but it is interesting to note that right there at the beginning of my mathematical tale-telling is this thinly disguised statement: I am good at math, so good that I am able to kill time in math class by doing even more math, and I am

¹¹⁷ I hate to do this to my non-mathematically-inclined readers, but I feel a need to define pi, or π , as the irrational number obtained by dividing the circumference of any circle by its diameter. This number might lie close to the heart of the Platonism versus formalism debate, at least in the layman's terms in which I understand it: a true Platonist would believe that we discovered this beautiful number which exists independently from us and could be discovered by any intelligent being in the universe, while a formalist would say that the concept is one that we invented because we had a need to talk in detail about the ratios involved in circles. It is a rather boring debate, to be sure.

so smart that all these years later I can still remember this math. My brief narrative is all about ability, and nothing about effort.

I pause at a memory before I move along to another story, keeping in mind the thought that what I (re)tell as story is more important to my current purposes of trying to mine through my mathematics identity than is a memory that exists only as anecdotal fact about my life. In other words, stories are more important than memories because they better highlight my self-perception of my identity over time. However, there are many anecdotal facts about my life that I have forgotten throughout the years, so the fact that I remember a mathematical one from this time period might somehow matter. From the moment memorizing pi with my friend Rob until a time two years later in my high school Algebra II class, I can remember only one thing about my mathematical life¹¹⁸: the fact that I scored a perfect 100 on my 8th grade New York State Algebra Regent's Exam, and that this was a rather rare feat. I obviously don't regale people with this fact very often—for instance, I'm not sure my wife would even know this aspect of my academic dossier—but it is telling that I don't remember any of my other Regent's Exams' scores from that year. Again arising to the surface: I am good at math, so good that I get perfect scores on tests that aren't supposed to be aced.

I might be writing this section along the lines of Rambo's (2007b) autoethnographic sketching; I quote again one of my favorite lines in all of autoethnographic literature: "I point with words, knowing I am a prisoner of them.

¹¹⁸ This is a bit of a lie, in that I remember my high school Geometry teacher mispronouncing the word "rhombus" by calling it "rumpus" and this is something I tell all of my students every year when we cover quadrilaterals. I have to believe that this isn't really all that important, however. After all, some things must not matter, right? Sometimes, as they say, a cigar is just a cigar.

Autoethnographic sketching is a conscious effort to stand with instability, to represent the ineffable” (p. 541). I do not believe it will suffice to just state what it is I think I believe about mathematics—I have to show it through story. My next tale took place a few days before Christmas break during my 10th grade year; I was 15 years old. The year before I had been in a general track Geometry class, full of all levels of students—some honors 9th graders, some regular track 10th graders, and some 11th graders repeating the class for the second time. It was an unfamiliar situation to me—keeping in mind that in my 8th grade year I had been in a very secluded honors program—and I kept mainly to myself. For Algebra II, however, the school decided to track all the highest achieving 10th graders into a single class and call it Honors Algebra II. I was thrilled about this decision; not because I cared one whit about learning advanced mathematics, however, but only because this tracking had placed many of my closest friends into a high school classroom together for the first time.

In retrospect, I did not handle this situation with the requisite amount of maturity; according to eyewitnesses I was somewhat of a terror from a classroom management point of view.¹¹⁹ The climax of this misbehavior occurred in the week before we were to get out for Christmas Break—back then we took exams immediately upon returning from the holidays, so this week was functioning as an intense review of the semester’s

¹¹⁹ I think about this sometimes when I am dealing with a bright student who is disrupting my room in a chronic manner. Two possible positions: 1) My past has uniquely prepared me to deal with just such a student, and I should take advantage of that experience; 2) I am getting exactly what I deserve. I vacillate back and forth between these two ideas. Another thought is brought to mind in reading hooks (2004): “The curiosity that may be deemed a sign of genius in a white male child is viewed as trouble making when expressed by black boys” (p 36). Given that my particular quality of curiosity lent itself to trouble making, I wonder how all of this would have ended up had I been a Black student? It seems I have located another aspect of my seemingly limitless White privilege: the ability to get into trouble in school and still be accepted as a top student.

material. At some point early in the week I was creating one of my apparently habitual disturbances when my teacher—who shall remain nameless—told me to get out. I grinned and headed for the door, not entirely unfamiliar with such a turn of events. As I was walking out the door she called after me, “And don’t come back until next semester. We need a break from each other.” I was surprised by this, of course, but I obliged—though I have no recollection of what I did the rest of the week instead of reporting to Algebra II. The gist of this story, though, is about the bare facts already presented: I was kicked out of my Honors Algebra II class, during exam review, for a stretch of multiple days; yet I still handily earned an “A” in the class. We (re)told this story all throughout high school in conversation about that rather crazy class of ours, reifying the piece of my identity it held: a seeming belief that “the instrumental importance of mathematical knowledge” (Martin, 2000, p. 17) was some sort of inherent ability, and that I happened to have this ability.

I only have three more stories from high school mathematics,¹²⁰ all of which took place in my senior-year AP Calculus class. The first was the fact that I never did my homework at home; I always did it in the classes leading up to Calculus, and if I ran out of time I just didn’t turn it in. This bit is more of a memory than a story, but it shows again the nonchalant attitude I took towards diligent work or persistent practice when it

¹²⁰ Might the fact that I have only five stories about mathematics from my childhood—only four of which are authentically mine—be some sort of interesting facet of my narrative mining in and of itself? Certainly it is noteworthy that a later love of mathematics—both my college major of pure mathematics and my career as high school teacher—was not necessarily evident in my earlier school activity. What this might say about my identity at the time, though, I have no idea.

came to mathematics.¹²¹ The second story is an unpacking of this one-sentence tale I (re)told to my friends all throughout college when we reminisced about our high school days: “I think I caused M— to fail Calculus senior year.” The larger narrative involves me and a friend continually causing daily disruptions in class to the point that our teacher found herself moving one of us in the middle of every lesson, only to find us sitting together again the next day; eventually she issued a permanent injunction separating us across the classroom. It was only later that I found out he was living on a razor’s edge from an academic point of view—apparently he got lost at some point and was never able to catch up. I am not actually sure whether he failed or not, but that is the story I always tell. Another nod to inherent ability: I am able to earn an A in the class and pass the AP exam all while entertaining myself and others in conversation; this kind of mathematical luxury is not available to everyone, only the select few.

My third story from Calculus is extremely embarrassing for me to (re)tell, as will become apparent quite soon. I am going to ignore my reluctance to share, however, in an effort to further push the point that all of my pre-college mathematics stories are about my inherent mathematical talent. It seems to me somehow important that a current teacher at one point believed so wholeheartedly in innate ability, important enough for me to swallow my pride and (re)tell this tale. For the last few months of my junior year and almost my entire senior year I was dating a girl who was two years younger than I was; though she was in Algebra II at the time, her teacher happened to be the same instructor

¹²¹ Actually, I think at this point that I have discovered nonchalance running like a thread throughout many of these stories from my early academic life. It seems pretty safe to say that neither my parents nor any of my former teachers would be shocked by this revelation of mine. It does surprise me, though, and stands in stark contrast to my current educational and professional pursuits.

who taught me Calculus. This young woman and I had what I believe was a rather typical teenage romance, meaning that we broke up and got back together some three or four times over the course of the year we were together. During one of those breakups—the first, I believe, though it hardly matters—I took to my personal journal immediately after the phone conversation that temporarily ended our relationship in an effort to describe what I was thinking; it appears that as a young man I was rather unusually connected to my feelings. Hidden amidst the teenage ramblings of a heartsick boy—“I feel so alone. Why did I break it off [?] It had to be done, I guess”—is this extraordinary statement: “[Our shared math teacher] told her, ‘Your boyfriend is so smart.’ Why does that make me cry?”

I am mortified by this sentence, pencil-scrawled on November 16th, 1993 into the second-to-last page of the journal I wrote in for most of high school, the earliest journal I still have.¹²² My bizarre handwriting is almost eerily identical to the way it appears in my most current journal; I would be unable to deny culpability for this ridiculous sentence even if I wanted to—my wife could immediately pick my distinctive scribble out of a lineup. I wrote a shade over 15 lines about this breakup with a girl who obviously meant a good bit to me, and I devoted two of those lines to this nonsense. Even at the time I suppose I was a little shocked—“Why does that make me cry?” could just as well read “Why did I write that?”—but now, nearly twenty years later, I am stunned by the solipsism. As pertains to my current project, however, I am fascinated. Now, it would be

¹²² Mortified does not even begin to cover how truly gut-churning it is for me to copy this adolescent drivel into something as important as my doctoral dissertation. “Nauseated” might be a better word. If I didn’t think it was so important, I would delete this entire section in an instant.

unfair to call this bit of my journal a “story,” as I have never in my life made mention of this piece of my history, for obvious reasons.¹²³ By writing it down, however, I believe I have served to cause this journal entry to operate in a similar way to the story: it encases in amber a tiny bit of my identity at the time, insomuch as this was a kind of story I told myself in the moment. The undertones of that story are what interest me, the words behind the words: I am good at math, so good at math that in a class I don’t even try in my teacher will seek out my girlfriend to gush about my skill.¹²⁴

With that story having come to a close, I finish the sum total of my mathematical experience prior to majoring in the subject in college. Unlike many narratives I hear and read from teachers of mathematics, there is no time of falling in love with the subject, no moment of struggle with some abstruse concept that upon epiphany engendered a newfound interest and respect, no growing sense of the supreme academic importance of the discipline. Instead I just see a bright kid who seemed to believe that he was good at mathematics for the same reason that his friend M— was so good at baseball: it was just the way the biological cards had fallen. This revelation is interesting, another feather in the cap of my narrative mining process, insomuch as I would never have said this about myself if for some reason last week I had been directly asked to rank mathematics along the continuum of inherent ability to learnable skill. I am certain that I would have said “learnable skill;” it appears that what I thought (and still think?) is inherent ability.

¹²³ My wife is going to laugh and laugh at her first reading of this. The thought of her glee is almost enough for me to withhold this section from her editorial pen.

¹²⁴ I am, for painfully obvious reasons, avoiding what this journal entry has to say about my relationship/romantic identity at the time. Clearly I had some issues centering around the thought of what might make me worthwhile as a boyfriend. Keep in mind that I was 17 years old, and let’s move on.

What does this hidden identity of inherent ability mean to me as a teacher, especially in light of the fond feeling of kinship I claim to find in this definition by Neyland (2004): “The teacher is not the sort of artist that turns lumps of clay into pottery, or a blank canvas into a painting. He or she is an improvisational artist who...both participates with the students, and skillfully aids the process of mathematical emergence” (p. 11). Lumps of clay and blank canvases imply creation *ex nihilo*; this kind of teacher either has material (understanding students) to work with or not, and these unalterable inputs serve as determinants of classroom culture. I do not see myself as this type of teacher; rather, I believe myself an improvisational artist who can and will work with anybody, no matter how skilled. In a related comment, Murrell (2007) notes, “the accomplished urban teacher encourages improvisational agency in children and youth” (p. 148). Am I able to be this kind of teacher—one who attempts to reach all of my students, whatever my perception of their mathematical background—or has my ability identity undercut in some way my efficacy at teaching students who I, perhaps unconsciously, classify as “not getting it?” I wonder.

Getting Past the Early Stories

“I was an engineering major at first, but I attended some kind of preview weekend at Clemson when I was still in high school, and it seemed that all engineering majors did was work with robots and computers. I thought that was boring, so I switched to mathematics.” With that two sentence story—one I have oft (re)told in inevitable cocktail party conversations about why I became a teacher—the rest of my life comes swiftly set. I remember very little about my math classes at Clemson—Calculus and Differential Equations and Linear Algebra, none of which I love very much even today—though I did

win some sort of award from the department as the outstanding freshman at the end of my first year. I did not think this was a big deal at the time—I didn't tell my parents until after the fact, and I remember reading something for my Literature class all through the ceremony—though I was stunned that there was a cash award accompanying the certificate I received. Again, this is not a story—just an anecdotal memory—but it dovetails nicely with getting a perfect score on my 8th grade Regent's Exam: I am so good at this stuff, and I don't even try.¹²⁵

At this point I would imagine that my reader is more than a little sick of this refrain. I hope it helps to know that I, too, am a little disgusted by all of this “innate ability” nonsense, and if not for the fact that I really believe in the power of narrative mining I would have skipped over most to all of it. It seems important to me, however, to wonder at the pedagogy of a current teacher who comes from such a background: what space do I have in my mind for a student to struggles, one who tries to achieve understanding through work or persistence? Do I still believe all of this ability-narrative nonsense? It is troubling me to consider that I might summarily organize my students according to my perception of their ability, that I might believe that mathematics is something you just get or you don't. Again, there is revelatory power in this narrative mining.

¹²⁵ I couldn't decide whether or not it would seem glaring to omit my SAT score. I got a 770 on the math portion the second time I took the test. I chose not to include this fact in the body of the dissertation because it feels somehow different to me than the others—probably I have for whatever reason held on to the memory of this fact without in any way attaching it to the larger narrative. This thought makes sense if I consider the fact that many people do this well or better on the SATs; a lack of superlative in my score might lend it to being buried in my experience. After all, why would I choose to (re)tell a story where I came off as somewhat “normal?”

My Last Math Class

I earned an A in each of my college mathematics classes, save for two. The first B I got was during my first senior year in a class called Multi-Dimensional Calculus of Imaginary Numbers.¹²⁶ It was my first Calculus class in almost two years, and even at the time I would have freely admitted that I was over the entire concept of Calculus; I had become completely embroiled in the more esoteric aspects of mathematical thought, logic and theory and proof. It was in following these academic leanings that I was directly led to my other mathematical B, when I took an obscure upper-level class during my second senior year as my final mathematics requirement. I cannot remember what this class was called nor even what it was ostensibly about; I enrolled in it solely based on the respect I had for the professor, an instructor I had absolutely adored in a previous required class on sequences and series. He was an older man—a former head of the department—who embodied most of the stereotypes of the absent-minded genius, although I often suspected that his pauses and circumlocutions were all part of an elaborate act.

For example, once a student asked a question about a rambling, board-hopping proof he had been performing for us while ambling around the room for the better part of a quarter hour. In typical fashion, he began answering the question before he turned to look at the board—it probably even took him a moment to find the correct board—but in

¹²⁶ The concept of imaginary numbers would be ripe for a discussion of Platonism as compared to formalism. Defined as the square root of a negative number, the debate is right there in the name: *imaginary* numbers. The larger aspects of such a conversation would be way over my head, but as far as brass tacks go I have always described imaginary numbers to my students along the following lines: “There is no such thing as the square root of a negative number, so we as a mathematical community had to invent one. These are the imaginary numbers.” Look closely at my oft repeated words: a formalist action (creating a solution that in fact does not exist in order to answer a problem that does) prefaced by a Platonic caveat (there is *no such thing*). I wonder if all mathematicians are as conflicted as I am by our chosen field.

mid-sentence he stopped directly in front of one of the earliest parts of the proof, evidently having seen some sort of problem. He looked up suddenly and said, “Did you just hear the bell? I think I heard the bell. Well, that’s the end of class. See you next time!” He put his chalk down, smiled, and walked out of the room a good three minutes before class was scheduled to end—this act in a class that had never once ended early. It was a move I never forgot, an act I have emulated in some form or fashion many times throughout my teaching career. He had a son in the doctoral program who looked and acted exactly like him; somehow this endeared me to him all the more.

A brief rabbit trail, back in the vein of Platonism and formalism. I have always told a story about the moment I realized that I was not, unfortunately, a mathematical genius; this story took place one day during this particular class. Our professor was in a conversation about dimensions of the 5th order and higher—the assumption being that of course we all could easily visualize the 4th dimension, time—and had us all shut our eyes for a thought experiment. He asked us to visualize a vast sheet of clay and instructed us to fold it into a kind of infinitely large torus. Then he told us to twist that ring-shape and fold it again to create a sort of double donut kind of structure. At this point I was completely lost and opened my eyes to look around. Everyone else’s eyes were shut tight, the professor swaying back and forth like Ray Charles on the piano, classmates nodding thoughtfully, and one particular classmate who I knew to be particularly intelligent¹²⁷ actually making motions with his hands as if he were conducting the beautiful orchestra of his own mathematical thoughts. I now wonder how much of my (re)telling of this story

¹²⁷ This guy was maybe 17 years old, a high school student in a senior level class for mathematics majors. Often he would get into conversations with our professor that others of us would, in conversation after class, confess that we were largely unable to follow. He was a mathematical genius.

is based in my apparently Platonic sense of mathematics—that what we cannot discover is not worth creating. Not to take away from the brilliance of this man and his formalist thought experiment, however; had I been brighter I certainly could have better followed the thread. I may have more than my fair share of mathematical ability, as I have been going on about for pages now, but from this point on I certainly knew I had my limits.

The day of graduation I attended a reception in the mathematics building honoring all of the majors from our department. It was a small gathering, as there were few math majors at UGA in general and even less who graduated with me in the fall semester. Given the small crowd, I got plenty of face time with my now former instructors, and I had the privilege of ending up in conversation with this much-loved professor of mine. We spoke for a moment or two about nothing in particular—what are you doing next year and et cetera—before he turned to me quite seriously and said something along the following lines: “I want you to know that I gave you a B for the class. I thought a long time about it, because I gave an A to K— and you did just as good work as he did. I finally decided that I think that was the best work he could do, though, and I think that you underperformed—I’ve seen your potential and that wasn’t it. So, anyways, I gave you a B to motivate you. I hope you go on to do mathematical things in your life—you should go to grad school.”

I don’t know if this logic sounds shocking or not. My wife, for one, has always been startled by this story, and every time takes up a refrain my reader may be feeling: “That’s unfair.” I was strangely sanguine about the whole thing, however, which is surprising in retrospect, given my decidedly ungracious reaction to every other B I

received in college.¹²⁸ I was immediately in agreement with my professor, and knew that he had spoken completely correctly: I had underperformed, I was capable of more, I was better at math than that other guy. I have told this story multiple times throughout the years in conversations about quirky professors or classes one should have done better in, and reactions tend to lean more toward my wife's than to mine. In all that time, however, I have yet to feel persuasively convinced that my professor made the wrong call, and in mining these narratives of my mathematics identity I think I am finally able to understand why. As someone who so firmly believes in an innate, pre-loaded ability in mathematics, it does not trouble me at all to think that my professor had, in this semester long dialogue heavy class containing less than a dozen people, somehow seen through both me and this other guy—that he had managed to discern exactly what our inherent capabilities were and that he had graded us according to this knowledge. It seems completely reasonable to me to think that he knew with something approaching full accuracy the ratio of output to ability that each of us had demonstrated throughout the semester; it seems similarly fair that he gave one student an A for a 90% ratio and me a B for 80%, even if my mathematical output was technically higher.

¹²⁸ My first college B came in a sophomore level English Literature class at Clemson. I was one of only 3 males in the general survey class, in which we read only works by Black authors or White women; the professor was a Black woman. Not officially a class about race or gender, we ended up talking about these topics almost exclusively, and though I remember enjoying the reading very much—it was here that I first read Alice Walker and Toni Morrison—I never quite felt comfortable in class discussions. For years I would blame the professor for my B, arrogantly claiming that she must not have liked me. It is clear to me now, of course, that at that point in my life I would have had no ability to come off well in a class devoted to such sensitive subjects. Meaning, I am sure that what little I contributed in class was probably pretty hegemonic. I am now positive that I duly deserved at best that B.

I can certainly understand why this train of thought bothers other people. My story takes this belief in a hypothetical innate mathematical ability and pushes it to another level of faith: not only do I seem to have confidence that such a thing exists, but I apparently have no problem believing that an outsider can properly divine precisely how much ability I have. Even for someone who accepts the first part of that proposition, it is entirely reasonable to reject the second. Meaning, even if we have some sort of pre-loaded skill set of mathematical acumen, who is that professor to decide how much of it I have? How is he to know the difference between me and the other guy except by the work I presented him? By what measure is he believing that he was able to see past my work and, so to speak, into my soul? These are all excellent reactions to my story. However, it is a sign of just how committed I seem to be to this discourse of ability that I have no problem whatsoever accepting my professor's judgment. After all, I completely agreed with him as to my underperforming; perhaps I saw my grade as a sort of penance.

"Okay, this has gone on long enough. I am calling shenanigans on this entire line of thought. It's high time to make our way out of these stories."

"Shenanigans, huh? Harsh words."

"Well, I've been quiet for some time, listening to you go on and on about just how smart you are. Blah blah blah: you memorized pi, you aced this test, you all but aced that test, you were a Calculus genius, you had a nerd girlfriend who for some reason was into really smart kids—"

"—Wait! If you get to call 'shenanigans' then I get to call lockbox. I'm burying all further mention of high school girlfriends. I was really embarrassed to share that, and quite frankly I think it's rather dirty of you to throw it back in my face like this."

"Yeah yeah yeah. Fair enough, though. I don't think either of us want to get too much into the discourse surrounding former girlfriends."

"That would benefit us both equally, to be sure. I'm glad you see my point. Continue with any legitimate problems you might have from a mathematical or writing point of view, though."

"Well, it feels like a million years ago, but you started off your chapter with all that really dry stuff about Platonism and formalism, remember? I stuck with you though, because, really, what choice do I have?"

"Nice. Did you end up feeling better about any of it? I really struggled with

the level of depth I wanted to go into regarding mathematical philosophy. I mean, I truly find it extremely interesting, but there is just so much to all of it, and it's not strictly necessary to my current project."

"I did end up enjoying it—I think I might actually have learned something as you kept coming back to it throughout the chapter and now the appendix. So, I get it: you think that the doing of mathematics is an ability, not a skill. Every story you tell, except for the shifted fossil of your mother with the negative integers, reinforces this theme. You are naturally good at math. I hope you don't take this badly, but can we move on?"

"Getting tired of all the tales, huh?"

"To put it mildly. No disrespect, and as per our earlier conversation, I understand how this is relevant to you as a teacher, your belief in the discourse of ability. But I think we've gone on quite enough, at this point."

"Well, there is a reason I moved so much of it to the appendix, right? I knew that this mining might prove too much for my reader. As important as it was to me, of course."

"Of course. You think that without the full writing you never would have arrived at any of the small takeaways."

"That's right! You really do listen to me when I talk!"

"Again, I have little choice, do I? So we can move back to the main part of the dissertation? Choose our own adventure out of this mathematical-identity space we've found ourselves in?"

"Lucky for you, yes. As I explained already, I am out of mineable narratives about mathematics from this point on in my life anyways. So, back to the body?"

"By all means, back to the body. And let's leave the shenanigans and the lockbox behind."

"Deal."

APPENDIX C

A GLOSSARY OF SORTS

At some point during my drafting process, Professor Holbrook tagged a sentence from this dissertation and added a comment to the side: “Are you going to explain how you use the word story?” It was a fair question, given the importance I am placing upon “my stories,” and I think the time has come to answer it. In doing so, I am going to try as best as I can to avoid the already alluded-to error of Humpty Dumpty—“When *I* use a word...it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less” (Carroll, 1871/1992b, p. 161, emphasis in original text)—but I confess up front that I will not work too hard to stay entirely within comfort or convention. Derrida (1963/1978a) writes, “meaning is neither before nor after the act” (p. 11), and in him I find more than a little bit of Humpty Dumpty and his anarchic spirit. I have read a good bit of Derrida in the past year or so, but given the slight confusion I must confess to always feeling when I do so I am going to defer—pun absolutely intended—to Ronai (1998) to sum up one of Derrida’s biggest ideas in a thumbnail quote: “[the] non-concept of *différance* alludes to the idea that meaning exists in reference to other meanings” (p. 411). In other words, I can make a word mean what I want it to mean if I can reference back to others’ use of the word; at least, that is what I take away from this Twitter-sized encapsulation of the French poststructuralist. To wit, what follows is not only an answer to Professor Holbrook’s question about my use of the word “story,” but also some brief justification for my use of other words that have grown to be of outsized importance as I have continued to write—all with the understanding that Derrida has in some sense justified me to own a bit of Humpty Dumpty’s bombast.

Story

Merriam-Webster (2013) defines the word *story* as “an account of incidents or events; a statement regarding the facts pertinent to a situation in question” and this is a perfectly adequate definition insomuch as it is along the lines of how most people would denote the word when separated from its more obvious definition of being “a fictional narrative shorter than a novel.” Although I am certainly not writing a “fictional narrative,” when I say that I “tell stories” I do find this first definition lacking, however; I intend a great deal more subtlety in connotation than it is able to provide. From my limited knowledge of music theory I have become aware of these things called overtones: the batch of barely audible harmonized sounds which provide a given note with its rich fullness; I want to push into the overtones I hear when I use the word “story.”

Angrosino (1998) writes that the story is “in many ways the lifeblood of culture; [a] vibrant record of a people's dialogue with itself. The very essence of community is the telling of stories” (p. 30). Ellis (2004) echoes this comment: “Stories are the way humans make sense of their worlds. Stories are essential to human understanding... Stories are the focus of Homeric literature, oral traditions, narrative analysis, and fairy tales” (p. 32). Ely and colleagues (1997) state simply, “meaning is constructed through story” (p. 63).

Goodall (2008) expands this idea:

When we engage in writing or telling a story, we create alternative pathways to meaning that are imaginative *and* analytical; that are guided by a narrative (rather than propositional) rationality; and that are relational—in the production of meaning, they connect the teller of the tale to the listener or reader of the story. The very act of writing a story, or telling a tale in public or just to a friend, changes not so much how or what we know (although telling a good story well can certainly do that), *it alters the way we think about* what we know and how we know it. (p. 14, emphasis in original text)

Adding import to this idea that our stories can alter the way we think, Ellis (2004) writes that through the process of writing “you become your stories to your readers, and to yourself” (p. 34). With all due respect to Merriam and Webster, I believe the stories I am in the process of (re)telling are much more than a mere “account of events” or “statement of facts.” Rather, I believe that stories—possibly most especially the ones which are ostensibly “true”—are cultural, dialogic, sense-making, meaning-constructing, imaginative, analytical, rational, relational, and thought-altering. To be sure, a good story would most certainly contain an account of the remembered facts of a particular event. In practice, however, it is so much more.

Race

It is standard in the literature I have been referencing to cite the opening salvo of the American Anthropological Association’s (AAA) Statement on “Race” (1998):

In the United States both scholars and the general public have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences. With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century, however, it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. (¶ 1)

The end of the brief statement provides some clarity as to what exactly it is that the AAA believes has “conditioned” the general public: “We conclude that present-day inequalities between so-called ‘racial’ groups are not consequences of their biological inheritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances” (¶ 11). DeCuir-Gunby (2006) sums this view up by calling it “the dynamic social construction of race [which] accentuates its malleability” (p. 92). Lipsitz (2006/2008) warns me, though—eager as I might be to embrace this biological dismissal of the concept of race—that I must not be allowed to disregard it altogether, noting that

“race is a cultural construct, but one with sinister structural causes and consequences” (p. 68). The AAA states the same. It is these sinister consequences that drive me to continue to deem necessary both the concept of race as a whole as well as the specific classifications we continue to use today. As I have argued elsewhere (Wamsted, 2011), the reality of race may be a biological lie; a tack away from this falsehood toward an imagined truth of color-blindness would be similarly insidious, however. When I use the word “race” in my work, I am talking about both this physiological lie laid bare by the American Anthropological Association as well as its obverse, both the non-truth of biological racial classification as well as the engendered truth we as a world have created by long living with this lie.¹²⁹ “Race” is, to be sure, one of Derrida’s (1966/1978c) loaded words.

Black

In my work I almost exclusively refer to Americans of African heritage (however distant) as *Black*; I try to avoid the use of the more politically correct term *AfricanAmerican*. I made this conscious decision years ago when I observed that everyone I work with at Murphy—students, teachers, parents, administrators, and whoever else—uses the word *Black* as both self- and other-descriptor. A story I have told elsewhere (Wamsted, 2011) bears repeating, as it neatly encapsulates my personal experience working in the environment of Murphy High.¹³⁰ Once in class I happened to

¹²⁹ I call this engendered truth the *t/racing*, a concept more fully teased out in my other writing (Wamsted, 2011).

¹³⁰ I am fairly certain my experience would be similar all over the South, where White and Black have been the dominant colors of record for some 400 years now. As far as other parts of the country are concerned, it would not surprise me to learn of similarity or difference: I am no expert on this matter.

be a perfect distance from two female students so that they both knew I could hear them but also felt enough separation from me to speak freely. One girl said to the other something about a Black friend or a Black family member or a Black acquaintance—I would not pretend to claim to remember which, and it matters not for this story—when she suddenly stopped mid-sentence. She turned and said to me, slightly embarrassed “Oh! Sorry, Mr. Wamsted. African American.” She then faced her friend again and finished her story. I immediately wondered if maybe this matters more to us—White people, Caucasians, European-Americans, whatever we are calling ourselves these days—than it does to my colleagues and students. With that thought as unconscious driver it was relatively easy to follow the speech of everyone else and erase the term “African American” from my vocabulary.

It was not too long before I learned that my wondering was not exactly true. I took a class once with a Black woman once who not only insisted on using “African American” to describe herself, but also took the additional step of calling me “European-American.” In conversation with her, I came to understand that it mattered very much to her to get away from the obviously false descriptors of color—false because most White people’s skin is no more white than a Black person’s skin is black—and that she believed the entrenched linguistic overtones of black as evil and white as good were damaging to all people of African descent.¹³¹ Her point was well taken, and caused me to question my

¹³¹ Blackguard, black heart, white wedding dress, white as snow, black-hatted bad guy cowboys, white-hatted good guy cowboys, a black suited Darth Vader, a white-robed Princess Leia, the safety of the light of day, the danger in the dark of night, clean white clothes, white knights, a dark day, darkened my door, brighten my day, et cetera. I recently read an account of an African language where “in contrast to the concept of ‘blackness’ in the English language, the meanings associated with ‘black’ ...are extremely

decision. Ultimately, however, I decided that an attempt to honor the speech of my students and colleagues seemed a better fit for me at this current time, given the intensely personal and local nature of the work I am doing. Anecdotally, a search of the word “Black” in my note-taking computer program yields 118 results, while a search of the word “African” shows only 76. Though slightly tilted toward the decision I reached, this decidedly non-scientific research shows that writing conventions lean both ways. Perhaps at some point in the future I will follow Stinson (2013) and his decision—“the terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably throughout this article to describe an individual of African descent who claims the cultural identity of the United States” (p. 69, emphasis in original text)—as this seems a natural way to respect both my students and the feelings of my former classmate. For the time being, however, I keep my current course.

White

Attendant to this decision to exclusively use the word “Black” to describe those of African heritage is my choice to use the word “White” to describe someone like myself who would claim European heritage. This choice is far from controversial; as the hegemonic group, White people have less concern for labels than do the less empowered portions of our country. It is worth pointing out, however, why I personally feel rather false calling myself “European-American” or “Caucasian.” First, Europe means next to nothing to me from a cultural point of view: only three of my eight great-grandparents were born there, none of whom I ever met; rather than this distant European connection, both sides of my family claim New Jersey as our cultural roots—Bruce Springsteen, the

and consistently positive” (Maiga, 2005, p. 174). For instance, potable water is known as “black water.” This linguistic difference is unsurprising, I suppose, but still fascinating.

boardwalk, the shore in summer. Were I to attempt to label myself for another, I might as well call myself a “New Jersey-American.” I find the term “Caucasian” to be even more nonsensical. I would be hard pressed to locate the Caucasus on a map in less than five tries,¹³² and I have literally no idea how I could even discover when the last time a family member of mine would have claimed the area as birth or cultural origin. Calling myself “Caucasian” seems no more true than calling myself “Middle Eastern;” after all, if I go back far enough in my family tree I could eventually find family from the Fertile Crescent as well. That there is far less caché in doing so, of course, is the whole problem—after all, anthropologists tell me that we were all African at one time.

Calling myself “White,” however, seems fair. I believe that the labels “European-American” and “Caucasian” serve as nothing more than underhanded attempts to dodge the undoubted legacy of White supremacy in this country, part of the social order hooks (1992/1995b) is describing when she writes of “evocations of pluralism and diversity [which] act to obscure differences arbitrarily imposed and maintained by white racist domination” (p. 33). When I self-identify as “White” I believe I am in some small way owning up to this unfortunate cultural inheritance. West (2004) writes:

The most painful truth in the making of America—a truth that shatters all pretensions to innocence and undercuts all efforts of denial—is that *the enslavement of Africans and the imperial expansion over indigenous peoples and their lands were undeniable preconditions for the possibility of American democracy*. There could be no such thing as an experiment in American democracy without these racist and imperial foundations. (p. 45, emphasis in original text)

¹³² I just looked it up on the internet, and I would not have precisely identified the mountains in 20 tries. I thought they were much further north, in the part of Russia which bleeds into Northern Europe. I guess I thought this because the whitest White people live in Northern Europe. Incidentally, the name “Wamsted” goes back to this part of the world; my paternal grandfather’s people were once Norwegian “Hvamstads.”

This statement might perhaps be a difficult one for a typical White American to take; similarly so when West later refers to “the white supremacist hurricane that nearly wiped [this] democratic experiment off the map” (p. 49), or when Jensen (2005) writes that the connection that links “people of indigenous, African, Latino, and Asian descent in the United States [is] their common experience of being targeted, abused, and victimized...by a white-supremacist society” (p. 2). This difficulty seems to me instantiated in labels such as “European-American” and “Caucasian” which subtly attempt to avoid these charges; “White” appeals to me as the possible start of some sort of acceptance and ownership. As Rothenberg (2008) writes: “The first step toward dismantling the system of privilege that operates in this society is to name it” (p. 5).

(Re)telling

The abstract for the first article I attempted to publish was largely written by my mentor and major advisor, Professor Stinson. I gave him first pass at the paragraph because of my fear that editors and hoped-for reviewers might give, in their hurry, undue weight to its contents; it was not until much later in my writing “career” that I began to be confident in my own attempts at abstract writing. In the process of conjuring from thin air a suitable summary for my work, Professor Stinson also changed what at the time seemed to me a rather inconsequential word in the first few pages of my article: “telling” became “(re)telling.” I thought little of this substitution in the moment, merrily adopting his advice for the most part wholesale, but as time has slipped by I have found myself almost exclusively using this language in my writing. In fact, I could say with high confidence that any use in this dissertation of the word “telling” in relation to some sort of story is probably an accident. When I say that I am “(re)telling” a story, I am purposefully trying

to invoke in my reader what Gannon (2006) writes about Barthes (1975/2010) and his autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*:

Memory is enfolded in the body but, as Barthes points out, the lived body is a discursive and multiple but very present space where we do not go looking for any ‘sacred originary’ but for traces and unreliable fragments. Memory writing is not a veridical act that reproduces the original experience as it was lived but is necessarily always constituted from a particular time and place and discursive frame. (Gannon, 2006, p. 483)

In other words, in the act of “telling” a story for the first time, I am already (re)telling it inasmuch as I am constituting and creating from a particular place and frame a story that could only be doomed to fail at reproducing some sort of sacred originary of an experience. I am able ever only to (re)tell, because every telling is necessarily different from the one before it. Ronai (1999) puts it this way: “Lived experience, as it unfolds in consciousness, is a constant process of correction...in the sense of adjusting the picture based on the perceived change in the relationships between the performers in a setting” (p. 115). Though I fully recognize that Professor Stinson may not see his own intentions in my definition, it is this effect of layering and tracing and correction I wish to invoke when I write that I “(re)tell stories.” Lyotard (1979/1984) tells me that “the narrator must be a metasubject” (p. 34), and I hope to submit myself to the start of this sort of analysis when I abnegate authority in my stories: “telling” a story pretends at some sort of absolutism; “(re)telling” nods to the slippery nature of first-person experience.