

## White Warnings

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### ABSTRACT

How white scholars engage in anti-racist scholarship is a paramount concern for the field of art education. But there is a double bind facing white art education scholars engaged in qualitative research. Reflexivity is a hallmark of trustworthy qualitative research yet being reflexive necessarily entails white people discussing their own entanglements in racism. Ironically, this reflexivity re-centers whiteness and reinvests whiteness by showing that it is capable of seeing itself for what it is. In this paper, I use an example from my own research that illuminates this double bind. To work this double bind, I propose that white art education scholars with anti-racist commitments must run towards white warnings, or cues that their praxis might threaten their social and institutional standing, as well as whiteness itself.

Keywords: whiteness, white warnings, reflexivity, critical race theory, gentrification, creative city, creativity

### Introduction

In this paper, I reckon with my efforts to understand how, why, and whether I should tell the story of my complicitities in white racism as an art educator and researcher. Through auto-ethnographic research, I discovered how discourses of whiteness created the gentrifying conditions for me as a community-based art educator to become entangled in the displacement of one of my own students and her family from their home. Since this discovery, I have confronted the challenge of how and whether to tell this story without reasserting the power and profitability of whiteness through reflexivity. To break this circularity of white reflexivity, I argue that white art education scholars with anti-racist commitments must seek out scholarship that triggers *white warnings*, or psychosomatic signals that suggest that their unfolding line of inquiry might threaten white dominance and profitability.

How white scholars engage in anti-racist scholarship is a paramount concern for the field of art education. The call for this special issue has observed that 80 percent of the National Art Education Association (NAEA) membership identify as white. Most, if not all, white people in the field probably assume that they are one of the “good” whites—

meaning that they see themselves as those who are not racist like overt white supremacists (see Sullivan, 2014). But white people are always entangled in the structural power and profitability of whiteness. Nonetheless, white people are turning to engage with anti-racist work more than ever, largely because of the provocation of the Black Lives Matter movement. The timing of this special issue in the *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* reflects, I think, this shift in our field. It is late, but better than never.

While overt white supremacy has played a role in the stubborn absurdity of ongoing racial injustice, the harsher truth is that “good” white people tend to consent to and invest in structural and institutional racism—with and without conscious intention—because it is profitable for them to do so (Lipsitz, 2006). The irony is that white anti-racist work can recapitulate white racism. Indeed, critical race scholars have pointed out numerous problems that occur when “good” white people attempt to engage in anti-racist practices. There is a tendency for “good” white people to reassert their own feelings and interests without creating conditions that might contribute to the flourishing of black and brown life (see Sullivan, 2014). For example, when white people confess their complicities in racism, they are signaling that they should no longer be seen as a person who has been blinded by racist ideologies. But the social positioning of white people as enlightened on the question of race is not the aim of anti-racist work. The flourishing of black and brown life is.

The tendency of “good” white people to center whiteness and reassert its power through anti-racist work hinges upon particular ontological assumptions about whiteness itself. Critical race scholar Cheryl Harris (1993, p. 1714) established that whiteness has been constructed legally in the United States as “property” that white people can possess and pass on intergenerationally. George Yancy (2016) argues that white people make a vital mistake when they presume that this white property is possessed internally. When “good” white people search introspectively for this white self—in an effort to reckon with their own complicit racism—they will not find a white self *in there*. Instead, Yancy (2016) argues, their white self is located “at a great distance,” constituted through transactions with:

history, white power, white epistemic regimes,  
repetitions of white norms, implicit white  
alliances, white axiological frames of reference,  
white communities of intelligibility, white modes  
of being-in-the-world, and so on. (p. xxiii)

The political implication of this ontological orientation to whiteness is that white introspection is doomed to fail as an anti-racist strategy. The atomistic individualism of white introspection can often end

up doing “nonperformative” work (Ahmed, 2006, p. 105). This introspection—this search for the white self in there—can often end up with white people attempting to make white life less shameful and less painful for themselves—rather than changing the conditions that might contribute to the flourishing of black and brown life.

For white art education researchers, the nonperformative nature of reflexivity, what Sara Ahmed has called “stealth narcissism,” poses a problem. Reflexivity through self-exposure and self-awareness is considered a hallmark of trustworthy qualitative research (Davies, 1998). The problem for white art education researchers with anti-racist commitments is how to be reflexive in their research without reinvesting in the white self as property they possess or as an affect that needs to be rendered more tolerable. Indeed, white art education researchers who employ qualitative methods face a double bind (although the stakes of this double bind should not be overstated). If they choose to reveal and analyse their position in the text, then they center whiteness and its affective needs. If they choose not to do so, they forego the opportunity to analyse white entanglements, including their own, in systems of white power. Working with this double bind requires seeing the white self as a discursively constituted political subject. With this ontological assumption, white people can direct their anti-racist efforts towards changing the conditions and repetitions that might “call/hail a different kind of subject” (Yancy, 2016, p. xxiv). By “un-suturing” themselves from the white self that they presume to possess “in there,” they can then turn to try to contribute to a world in which black and brown life can flourish without the white threat of symbolic and material theft and violence. The aim of this paper is to provide a conceptual tool emerging out of my own research experience so that “good” white people might be able to discern the difference between “stealth narcissism” and “un-suturing” whiteness.

Given the double bind outlined above, I am ambivalent about using my own story in this analysis. I risk recapitulating what I am suggesting is an ineffectual, if not counter-productive, narrative trope that re-centers whiteness. And yet, to not tell my story risks passing over an experience that I think provides an illuminating example of how and why white art education researchers can and should shift their ontological assumptions towards whiteness in their research and activism. There is no easy way forward here. For better and for worse, I turn “inwards” and “outwards” to critically analyse my lived experience of whiteness as an art educator and researcher.

## **The racial politics and aesthetics of the Creative Capital**

Returning “home” to conduct ethnographic art education research after years away provided me an unexpected opportunity to find

my white self “at a great distance” (Yancy, 2016, p. xxiv). My home was New Urban Arts, a storefront studio in Providence, Rhode Island. New Urban Arts provides free arts and humanities education programs to high school students during the after-school hours and the summertime. I founded New Urban Arts in 1997 when I was a senior in college at Brown University through a public service fellowship. I led the organisation for a decade before going to graduate school in 2007. During that time, and since I have left, the majority of young people who have participated in New Urban Arts are young people of color from low-income and working-class backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> In 2012, I returned to New Urban Arts through a post-doctoral fellowship at Brown University’s Center for Public Humanities to study how and why young people theorised the significance of the studio in their lives. Using an ethnographic research design, I participated alongside these young people and interviewed current and former youth participants. I became interested in several themes, including how and why young people thought of New Urban Arts as a “home away from home,” a “safe space,” and a “second family.” These terms resonated with what Michelle Fine and her colleagues discovered in their research of youth arts and humanities programmes that operate “beyond the borders of schooling” (see Fine, Weis, Centrie, & Roberts, 2000).

I interviewed former youth participants whom I knew when I was the director of New Urban Arts to investigate these themes further. I interviewed Mariana, who was then in her mid-twenties. Mariana is brown-skinned and identifies as Latinx. When she was a high school participant, she sat by the storefront window near my office, looking outside towards her school while I worked at my desk. She recalled how she remembered Yo La Tengo’s *And Then Nothing Turned Itself Inside-Out* often playing from my computer speakers. She sometimes sat there with a close friend, chatting with her quietly enough so that I could not hear the topic of their discussion. Sometimes they laughed and other times they cried. These were tender moments near my office, and I remember never wanting to interrupt them. These moments seemed to me to be an example of what students meant by

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1 In 2012, nearly 380 students enrolled to participate in New Urban Arts, with an average of 44 students participating in the studio each afternoon. Nearly 60% of youth participants in 2013 identified as female. Using racial categories provided by the local school district, 41% of students identified as Hispanic, 26% multi-racial, 14% African/African-American, 14% White, 4% Asian, and 1% Native American. More than one-quarter of these youth participants identified as LGBTQ+, and more than seven out of ten qualified for free or reduced-price lunch at school. The majority of students (76%) lived in neighbourhoods where the poverty rate for families with children was twice the national rate (33%). This demographic profile is representative of New Urban Arts’ student body throughout its now twenty-year history.

New Urban Arts being a safe space beyond the borders of schooling. When I asked her to explain these tender moments years later, Mariana said that she needed time in the studio to cope with racial and class-based traumas that she experienced in and outside school. The most significant event, she said, was being displaced from her home a few weeks before her high school graduation in 2008. Her family's rented apartment, which was located less than a mile from the studio, was razed to make way for a parking lot for a luxury loft conversion of a large red-brick industrial building next door. It was the first time that I had heard of this traumatic event in her life. Her story of displacement challenged me to think more deeply about how New Urban Arts, and indeed my white leadership, was entangled in the cultural political economy of Providence.

Mariana's displacement from her home is an example of the human toll caused by what bell hooks (2000) called "state-orchestrated racialized class warfare" (p. 137)—this time, in the name of white creativity. When Mariana graduated from high school in 2008, several neighborhoods in Providence were gentrifying, including the West End, where her family lived and New Urban Arts is based (see Strongin, 2017). The discourse of creativity was a driving force in reconfiguring the city for the benefit of more affluent and white people (Denmead, 2019b).<sup>2</sup>

When I arrived in Providence in the 1990s as an undergraduate at Brown University, the city was often characterized to me in racially coded terms. The city was "seedy," "dangerous," "rough," and "unsafe." The message to me was clear. As a white person, I should avoid crossing particular borders in the city to protect my own life from people of color who were constructed as predatory threats to my white existence (see Haymes, 1995). To protect my white self, I was expected to stay on College Hill where Brown University and

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2 Following the Second World War, Providence endured decades of industrial disinvestment. Capital moved factories south and then offshore in search of cheaper labor. The city was vulnerable to offshoring because its manufacturing industries were relatively low-skilled. People of color migrated to the city and were segregated within it through racist real estate practices such as redlining. And white people isolated themselves in particular Providence neighborhoods and fled to the surrounding suburbs. In 1950, the city was more than 95% white. Today, Latinx communities comprise more than forty percent of the overall population (180,000 in the 2010 census), as well as the majority of the public school population. These residents are often first and second-generation immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Bolivia, and Colombia. In the 2010 census, these ethnic communities were more concentrated in the West End and Elmwood neighborhoods, as well as Upper and Lower South Providence. The African-American population, which comprised 16% of the city's population in the 2010 census, has tended to concentrate in the Mount Hope and South Providence neighborhoods.

the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) were located. Moreover, through the symbolic construction of urban space as “seedy” and “dangerous,” the discourse of whiteness actively diminished the economic value of land through the semantic chain it constructed for urban space. Constructing this semantic chain of “brown and black neighborhoods” equals “dangerous and disordered space” equals “cheap and /or vacant land” has been key to what Shannon Sullivan (2014, p. 126) calls “white ontological expansiveness.” This system of meaning legitimizes white occupation of communities of color in the name of progress and development. This white ontological expansiveness is a key aspect of racial capitalism, which assigns value to things, including land, that can be exchanged for wealth through the prism of whiteness.

In the 1990s, the city’s mayor started to transform the image of Providence. The mayor, Vincent “Buddy” Cianci, who was white, rebranded Providence “The Renaissance City.” He created an arts and entertainment district in the downtown area where art could be bought and sold tax-free. Cianci was following the example of other waterfront urban development projects (e.g., Baltimore, Maryland). In addition to this rebranding, he uncovered rivers in the downtown area and built a park that allowed people to stroll up and down the riverfront from new office buildings to a downtown shopping mall. This new park, WaterPlace Park, featured gondolas taxiing couples up and down the river for romantic evenings, as well as outdoor art events that attracted white people who historically would not have congregated in the downtown area at night because it was “seedy.”

Through re-imagining the city as a “Renaissance City,” Providence was becoming racially recoded as white by way of being ethnically re-coded as Italian. Moreover, through constructing a new identity for the city based on the arts, Cianci was privileging the image and identity of students and alumni from RISD, one of the world’s premier art schools. This school is one of the most expensive higher education institutions in the United States because it offers so little financial aid, and historically, the overwhelming majority of graduates from RISD have been white. Through branding the city as the Renaissance City, Cianci started to establish the discursive conditions to suggest that Providence was deemed available for the legitimate inhabitation of white people. Here, we see how one of the early iterations of creative city politics was designed to “lactify” the city. Frantz Fanon (2008) used the term “lactification” to describe the ways in which black people lighten their skin and /or internalise a white colonial consciousness. I am using the term to describe the “whitening” of a city through attracting white people and upholding white cultural norms and practices in the city as superior. “The Renaissance City” died as a viable urban image for Providence when Cianci was forced to resign in 2002.

He was convicted on one count of racketeering conspiracy (his second felony) before he then served a five-year prison term (2002-2007). His vision for Providence, however, as an arts-friendly and lactified city did not die. The next elected mayor of Providence, David Cicilline, who was also white, rebranded Providence from “The Renaissance City” to “The Creative Capital.” Here, Cicilline was “xeroxing” an urban renewal policy discourse that had been adopted in cities throughout the world (Pratt, 2009, p. 7). This “conventional creative city script,” as Gordon Waitt and Chris Gibson (2009, p. 1230) put it, is associated with urban theorist and consultant, Richard Florida. Florida (2003) proposed that entrepreneurial mayors should attract creatives to their cities based on the promise that their cities will provide them access to like-minded talent, a diverse population, and technology-based industries.

The key protagonist in Florida’s script for urban renewal is “the creative.” While the race of “the creative” is almost always unmarked and invisible, it is clear that “the creative” is presumed to be white. After all, operating in an American context, Florida’s thesis appeared to presume that cities lacked creativity at the precise moment that “urban” became interchangeable with “black” and “brown” (and in spite of obvious evidence, such as hip-hop). Florida never proposed that cities embrace the creativity of the communities of color that already inhabited these cities. As a result, Arlene Dávila (2012) has argued that urban progress within the conventional creative city script was always articulated to the very presence of “the highly educated, white, liberal, Brooklynite independent writer” (p. 73). That discursive subject is common in Providence because they are attracted to Brown University, where I went to school, and RISD. Indeed, one of the key aims of creative city politics in Providence was to keep these undergraduates from leaving the city once they graduated based on the expectation that they might kickstart the economic and cultural life of the city.

Indeed, in retrospect, my success as the founder of New Urban Arts depended upon this image being available to me due to my position as someone who was identifiable as white, and who graduated from an elite university known for attracting and producing such white “creatives.” In other words, this urban policy discourse of creativity was summoning people such as myself to be “creative” because our very presence signalled urban progress, thus attracting capital investment. The “white creativity” of Providence was not a characteristic that I naturally possessed; it was a characteristic that was bestowed upon me and made my career as an art educator possible. It also provided an epistemic horizon which established what I thought was possible for my white self (including starting a youth arts and humanities program). Curiously, creativity has become part of this “possessive investment of whiteness” (Lipsitz, 2006). That

is to say, creativity has helped increase the cash value of whiteness by increasing the property values of urban space that white people are more likely to own, and actively investing in the subjectification of white creativity is a strategy for securing those and other profitable returns, whether those returns come in the form of social, cultural, economic, or political capital.

In addition to this performative function of “white creativity” within the particular context of urban renewal, a new aesthetic was being fashioned in Providence to hail these white creatives and profit from their associations. For example, there are numerous red-brick industrial buildings scattered throughout Providence, which are remnants of the city’s industrial past. These buildings are now associated with young white artists who rebel against their own racial and class standing by moving into historically segregated and disinvested urban neighbourhoods—a pattern that was established in New York City in the 1980s (see Deutsche & Ryan, 1984). Through moving into these live-work spaces, these young artists position themselves as adventurers, settlers, and pioneers in “urban jungles” and “urban wastelands.” People of color who lived in the neighborhoods before their arrival provide a backdrop of exotic otherness and titillating danger until these inhabitants are economically and culturally displaced by waves of affluent and/or white people who follow the trend established by those artists. As such, white ontological expansiveness and the racist pattern of non-white commodification are most clearly expressed through the contemporary phenomenon of culture-led urban gentrification (Sullivan, 2014, p. 126).

In Providence, state and city policy capitalized on this historic and racist trend. It pooled together industrial buildings scattered across the city into the first thematic historic district of its kind in the country (see chapter five in Denmead, 2019b). Then, city and state policy made subsidies available to developers, as well as tax credits to wealthy residents. This welfare for the wealthy and the white contributed to the rapid transformation of industrial buildings, some occupied and some vacant, into luxury lofts. The building next to Mariana’s house, which housed factories where her family had once worked, was included in this thematic district.

During our interview, Mariana and I had not yet realized that New Urban Arts, under my leadership and through her cultural labor, was implicated in constructing this new affluent and white urban aesthetic in the name of creativity. But I started to reconstruct a timeline soon after the interview—a timeline that shook me. It became clear to me that both of us were caught up in revitalizing the neighborhood at her expense and at the expense of the residents who lived in the West End.

This timeline begins when Mariana joined New Urban Arts in 2003. That year, she participated in making a mural outside our studio.



Figure 1: Mural by New Urban Arts. Photograph by Tyler Denmead.

The mural was located less than a mile from her family's apartment, and it was intended to counter negative and stereotypic representations of people of color who lived in her neighbourhood. Youth participants, including Mariana, walked the streets of the West End, interviewing residents, before representing a selection of them and their interests on the street mural. In 2005, a reporter for *The New York Times*, Bonnie Tsui, wrote an article, titled "In Providence, Faded Area Finds Fresh Appeal," which was published in the paper's travel section (2005). The article featured a photograph of the mural. Two young Latinas were walking in front of the mural, smiling. These two young women could have easily been New Urban Arts' participants walking home after leaving the studio. The article then proceeded to celebrate the transformation of the West End into a hip, creative enclave. It reported that artists were "flocking" to the neighbourhood, "looking for the last affordable loft spaces" (Tsui, 2005). These artists, Tsui (2005) wrote, were "helping to fuel a community-led revitalization effort that has resulted in brilliantly restored buildings and a crop of hip restaurants, cafes, and boutique shops appealing to new young residents."

Whiteness is unmarked and invisible in this representation of the West End. Understanding the racial dimensions of this representation requires decoding rhetoric such as "artists" and "community." Community operates here as a euphemism for the people of color who lived in the West End before the artists arrived and transformed their "faded area." "Faded area" suggests that the "community's" neighborhood was, in effect, placeless before the artists arrived.

Indeed, the term “artists” provides a rhetorical short-cut for the highly educated, white, liberal, Brooklynite independent writers such as me who were being celebrated and summoned through this urban policy discourse of creativity. After all, the “artists” are looking for the last loft spaces *affordable to them*. The “fadedness” legitimizes their white ontological expansion into the community’s neighborhood in their search for cool loft spaces. Words with positive connotations—“revitalization,” “brilliant restored,” “appealing,” “flocking”—signal that this white ontological expansion should be read as positive, as progress.

At the same time, the “community” is represented as if they are welcoming, if not, leading this transformation of the neighbourhood. The photograph of the mural, and the young, smiling Latinas walking in front of it, are employed in this representation to show that the “community” is indeed welcoming this transformation, if not leading it. The costs of this transformation to them—including displacement—are thus obscured. In the process, the mural reduces this “community” to a flat “spectacle of ethnicity” (Hall, 2017, p. 93), whereby the waves of white people being beckoned to the neighborhood can position themselves as well-meaning and tolerant of racial difference by locating themselves against the backdrop of New Urban Arts’ mural. The mural certainly did not cause Mariana’s displacement from her home a few years after this article appeared. But it helped mobilize a left-leaning white fantasy of “multicultural love” (Sullivan, 2014, p. 153), where interracial co-existence in urban space provides a means for white people to experience “racial redemption and freedom from self-hatred” (p. 158). This narrative nurtures a positive white affect and perpetuates habits of white ownership and ontological expansion without contributing to action that might redress the racist construction of urban geographies. So, the mural was caught up in a possessive investment in white urban creativity, and therefore, so was my leadership and my research as a white art educator.

### **“Discovering” state-sanctioned racialized class warfare**

I have wrestled with this story over the past several years from various vantage points (see, for example, Denmead, 2019a). I have become interested in the racial politics of representation that complicate its telling and my position. When I first reconstructed this timeline—mural, *New York Times* article, displacement—I was excited by its analytical power as much as I was distraught by its implications for white urban art educators in this era of creative capitalism. Perhaps, I thought, I could make up for my naivety about public murals by using this story to illuminate how the cultural labor of youth arts and humanities programs can be co-opted for the purposes of white ontological expansion through creative-

infused gentrification. In the tradition of praxis, my contribution to consciousness-raising would lead to more informed social action among urban art educators, both white and non-white. With this aim and assumptions, I returned to the field to ask several participants in my research about their views on this story. I expected these participants to be outraged by my discovery and, in turn, motivated to action. Yet, several interactions suggested to me that these assumptions were problematic.

For example, I interviewed Gabriela another former youth participant who cared deeply about gentrification. Gabriela identifies as Afro-Caribbean. She replied to my telling of this critical incident in underwhelming terms.

Her response amounted to, “Duh.”

Gabriela had not known the specifics of this story. But she understood its general contours: Young people of color do something positive for their neighborhood, and their labor is stolen by white people in power who reconfigure the city for their own benefit. That storyline was already familiar to her. So, rather than being impressed or surprised by my “discovery,” and rather than being called to action herself, Gabriela suggested that, in so many words, I go back to the library and read some black scholars who have already written about gentrification. In addition, Gabriela wanted to know why I felt compelled to tell this story now.

“Do you feel guilty?” she asked.

This questioning challenged me to reflect on my desire to tell this story, to position my white self as a person who possesses the discovery of this story.

Through this process of white self-criticality, I became more aware of the ways in which owning and telling this story recapitulates self-serving white tropes. For example, my sense that I had “discovered” this story of displacement was ultimately a form of white self-congratulation. I did my homework, as Gabriela asked me to do, by reading some analyses of gentrification by black scholars. For example, James Baldwin critiqued the discourse of urban renewal in 1960s San Francisco by saying, “urban renewal is just another word for negro removal” (Graham, 1963). And bell hooks (2000) wrote about gentrification as “state-orchestrated racialized class warfare” (p. 137). Both analyses point to the ways in which state power is mobilized to reconfigure urban space for the benefit of whiteness. My shock at my “discovery” (and Gabriela’s proverbial shrug) illustrate how late I was in understanding a phenomenon already well-understood and well-expressed by public intellectuals of color.

Yancy (2016) has referred to this self-congratulatory white performance of discovery as a form of “suturing” (p. xv). Here whites “install forms of closure, forms of protection” from epistemic events that destabilize and disrupt the normative expectations of whiteness (Yancy, 2016, p. xv). Through this sense of discovery, I attempted to keep my own whiteness intact, or “sutured,” by showing that my whiteness is now free from being infected by white ignorance (see Mills, 2007). This example from my research illustrates a risk for white art education scholars. Considering whiteness, per suggested by the call for this special issue, could lead to white people congratulating themselves for their “discoveries” rather than recognizing legacies of scholarship and activism that have been actively ignored to protect and invest in whiteness.

Gabriela also wanted to know if I was compelled to tell this story because I felt guilty. When Audre Lorde, the Black poet, feminist, and civil rights activist, wrote about dealing with white people’s hurt feelings, she said that she could not hide her anger towards racism to spare white people from being hurt, from making them feel guilty (2007, p. 130). Her analysis shows how people of color, often women of color, are taxed by white people who demand that their feelings be centered and managed. This tendency hinges upon the fact that white people have little emotional capacity for dealing with themselves as a white problem (see DiAngelo, 2011). Moreover, white guilt bestows moral authority on people of colour and then demands that they are responsible for “white redemption and deliverance from racism” (Sullivan, 2014, p. 129). White fragility and desire for redemption thus reproduces racist resource extraction by expecting people of color to manage and heal white people’s emotions. Here again, whiteness “sutures” itself by directing white people’s attention to resolving their hurt feelings so that they can position themselves above, beyond, or outside the racial fray (Yancy, 2016). White art educators must be wary of how their consideration of white identities in anti-racist research can recapitulate racist resource extraction and recognize how emotions themselves are resources.

This white self-criticality also opened up new areas of inquiry that had not been suggested to me by research participants. For example, I became skeptical of how telling this story reproduces problematic forms of white spectatorship. I wondered whether this story of displacement represented people of color as passive objects of history, as bearers of pain and suffering.<sup>3</sup> Holding Mariana and her pain at the center of the story becomes a form of white voyeurism, giving white people permission to stare at the suffering of people of color (when white people too often only see people of color as bearers of

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<sup>3</sup> I am borrowing from Susan Sontag’s analysis of voyeurism in photography. See Sontag (1977).

pain and suffering). White voyeurs can feel sympathy through this spectatorship, while, at the same time, letting themselves off the hook by convincing themselves that they personally had nothing to do with the particular event on display. Moreover, those with an inherited private safety net can feel perversely better about their own social position precisely because they do not have to deal with the trauma of displacement. In this sense, the spectatorial relation in this story serves as a “distancing strategy” for white people who see themselves as un-implicated in perpetuating white racism (Applebaum, 2012, p. 10), or even superior for being able to see themselves as un-victimized, un-tainted, and pure. This recognition has produced an ambivalence about centering or de-centering whiteness that should characterize any effort by white art education scholars who engage in anti-racist scholarship.

Telling this story of displacement also risked positioning young people of color and their families as cogs in the Creative Capital machine (in the classical Marxist tradition). This approach would presume that young people in the story suffered from false consciousness and they needed my enlightened viewpoint, my capacity to reconstruct the timeline, to see their oppressive conditions more clearly. Here, I would be representing myself as the absolute and universal subject of the Enlightenment, a subject position which is articulated to whiteness. But, as Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) commented, it is not empowering to presume that young people of color are politically blind and disempowered. Indeed, my research illustrated that I was late in my understanding of white ontological expansion, and I needed assistance from young people, such as Gabriela, to see these circumstances more clearly, more ordinary. White art education researchers must give credit where credit is due and resist the assumption that their (white) discovery *is* discovery.

Curiously, this process of white self-criticality, even now, remains circular. It is easy to see how the racial awareness that I have put forward in the preceding paragraphs are also self-serving. I can still be criticized (quite rightly) for continuing to elevate my racial standing by performing a whiteness that is enlightened. This discursive move keeps whiteness intact by suggesting that whiteness is indeed capable of having an “oracle voice,” a voice that is distanced from its ongoing legacy of violence and self-reward (Evans, 2008 quoted in Yancy, 2016, p. xvi). The insidious thing about whiteness is that it can shore up its power and profitability even as it admonishes itself for its undeserving power and profitability. In this sense, whiteness is “non-performative,” as Sara Ahmed (2004) has argued, because it does not do what it says and therefore must *never* be trusted.

Whiteness is pathetic because it only emerges through acts of symbolic and material theft and violence, and its efforts to legitimate

or overcome that theft and violence have the strong historical tendency to perpetuate more of the same. This recognition that whiteness is incapable of doing what it says, that it is pathetic and must never be trusted, does not necessarily lead to despair. Indeed, I would suggest that white art educators need to understand whiteness as pathetic and untrustworthy to work towards a more productive and critical approach to anti-racist scholarship, even if that orientation risks being enervating.<sup>4</sup>

## **“Un-suturing” white creativity**

George Yancy (2016) argues that a white person who has presumed or performed their “arrival” as race-conscious limits epistemic introspection of the “constituted white racist self” (p. xiv). Yancy (2016) argues that white people should instead “un-suture” whiteness by finding this “white racist self” at a “great distance” (p. xxii). Here, Yancy draws on Judith Butler and her book *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) to argue that whiteness is a “site of dispossession” (2016, p. xxii), a subjectivity that white people do not and cannot objectively possess as property. As a white person, Yancy argues, “I owe myself to things that are not me (yet paradoxically me), things that make me who I am as a problem...” (2016, p. xxiv). This understanding of whiteness as a site of dispossession means that white people cannot disavow themselves of their white racist selves by overcoming an epistemology of “white ignorance” (Mills, 2007, p. 13). Moreover, white people cannot simply un-identify as white; white people are white as long as there are racial disparities in education, wages, health care, housing, welfare, and the right to live. As long as these disparities persist, white people are the inheritors of this white racist self, a self that both exceeds white people and yet always locates white people.

What white art educators must do then is recognize the “need to change the conditions, and the repetitions that call/hail a different kind of subject—a different me,” a “me” not overly determined by that “white racist self” (Yancy, 2016, p. xxiv). This commitment to change the conditions that call/hail a different kind of subject, a different “me,” requires white people to be “addressed from elsewhere, from a place of alterity.”

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4 This viewpoint differs from that of Shannon Sullivan (2014) who argues that anti-racism must stem from “white self-love” rather than white self-loathing (p. 153). She argues that white people must dissent with whiteness out of love, to “seek the ongoing and improved life of that which it criticizes, not its death.” Trying to rescue whiteness from death through white self-love seems to me to be, however, yet another mark of white privilege given the fact that whiteness itself was born out of the social death of black people (Patterson, 1982).

This place of alterity exceeds the conditions that claim and locate whiteness as a profitable resource in racial capitalism. However, those who identify and are identified as white should be very sceptical of the possibility of being “addressed from elsewhere.” Whiteness is always reasserting itself in new ways, “ambushing” its own efforts to disinvest itself of its power and profitability (Yancy, 2016, p. xiii). Indeed, too much is at stake for whiteness to let go so easily. Given the circularity of white reflexivity, being “addressed from elsewhere” can quickly slip into being “addressed from an elsewhere” that reinvests in white power and profitability.

While the pathway forward (rather than around) is not straightforward, there are several lessons for white art educators that spring from this analysis. First, white art educators need to put themselves in a near-constant state of “crisis,” as Yancy (2016, p. xiv) has put it. White art educators must interrogate over and over the complex psychic and socio-ontological ways in which they are embedded in the double binds and perverse circularities of whiteness (rather than seeking “arrival” or “closure”).

Second, white art educators must redirect their scholarship towards more critical interventions into whiteness itself. Yet, how will white art educators know if and when they are addressing themselves from elsewhere as they pursue these lines of critical inquiry? After all, white art educators should be wary of claiming to know when they are being addressed from elsewhere, as that claim simply reproduces the absolutist and universal proclamation of whiteness. However, white art educators can become more attuned to clues that signal when a different kind of subject is being summoned from otherwise conditions. Indeed, white art education researchers should run *towards* ideas that trigger what I now recognize as *white warnings*. White warnings suggest that the pursuance of those ideas might threaten their social and institutional standing as white people, as well as whiteness itself. These warnings provide clues. They signal this “un-suturing” of whiteness, that white people may be beginning to inhabit otherwise possibilities, which may be late and may be provisional, but at least are not never.

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