

Rising Above Pain: An Autoethnographic Study on Teaching Social Justice as a Female Teacher of Color

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic study demonstrates my experiences of teaching social justice issues as a female teacher of color at a university in the Southwest. Based on Critical Race Feminism (CRF) and intersectionality, I explore the intricate layers of my social identities and positionality in relation to my teaching practices. The first finding highlights my sense of self-doubt and shame as an “Other” teacher. Next, I analyze whiteness and how it operated discursively and performatively in my classroom. I also discuss how I made sense of and dealt with whiteness particularly in the discussion of race. The third finding demonstrates resilience as a necessary process of becoming a CRF teacher. The conclusion addresses a few suggestions to translate the complex groundwork of CRF into classroom and community-based action as a way to disrupt oppressive norms. These suggestions include questioning the notion of safe classrooms, carefully examining the academic and pedagogical endeavors under the banner of diversity, and creating academic spaces for critical reflexivity on racial relations and theorization starting from the experiences of women of color.

Key Words: female teacher of color in higher education, social justice art education, meta-autoethnography, Critical Race Feminism, whiteness

With the increasing attention to social justice, there have been an abundance of studies discussing theories and practices of art education for diversity and social justice. According to the study conducted by Milbrandt, Miraglia, and Zimmerman (2018), social justice is the most frequent focus in the *Studies in Art Education* from 2014 to 2016 at 30%. In line with this growing effort, issues of justice, equity, representation, and empowerment are often explored along with social identities including, but not limited to, (dis)ability, age, class, ethnicity, gender, nationality, race, and sex. The foundation of social justice education is heavily shaped by the political, social, and cultural theories examining oppression and disparity reflecting the social conditions and experiences of marginalized social groups (Adams, 2010; Adams, Jones, & Tatum, 2007; Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2010). Thus, teaching social justice is emotionally and intellectually demanding since it requires the teacher and students

to examine their beliefs and experiences in relation to their social identities (Bell, Love, Washington, & Weinstein, 2007; Garber, 2004). Race, for instance, is one of the most difficult topics to discuss especially in a predominantly White classroom due to the dominant colorblind ideology (Bonilla-silva, 2006; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Most White students tend to express their emotional discomfort, such as defensiveness and guilt when learning racial issues (Case & Cole, 2013; Platt, 2013; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005; Tatum, 1994). Succinctly put, teaching for critical consciousness necessarily involves emotional discomfort, forms of tensions, and resistance. However, what if the teacher, who does not fit the White patriarchal norm of academia, tackles the issues of social (in)justice in a predominantly White classroom? If they find their experiences different and particularly challenging, what makes their experiences more difficult, and how do they cope with it? Most importantly, in what ways does their teaching become a way to resist the White middle-class patriarchal norm of the academic authority?

This article attempts to answer these questions through an autoethnographic study on my experiences of teaching for social justice at a university. As a female teacher of color, I explore the intricate layers of my social identities in relation to my teaching experiences based on Critical Race Feminism (CRF) and intersectionality (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). College classrooms are not neutral educational sites; rather they reflect the social relations of power interconnected with hierarchies and privileges shaped around race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other social identity markers (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998). In this light, I focus on how my racial and gender identity intersectionally informs my teaching experiences and vice versa in a predominantly White classroom.

The discussion includes my reflection on my anti-racist teaching practice that was in tension with whiteness that manifested in the classroom. Whiteness, which is a racial discourse based on the dominant white-centered racial perspective and worldview, is not automatically equal to White people, whose racial identities are built upon their skin color. As Frankenberg (1993) describes, whiteness is an unmarked cultural category in contrast to other identities marked by race, ethnicity, and class. Whiteness operates on multiple sociocultural levels throughout different ethnic groups as hegemonic images (Leonardo, 2002; Leonardo, 2009), which sometimes lead to homogenize diverse white ethnic groups into a single category. Whiteness is not only a standpoint from which Whites see themselves, others, and society, but also cultural practices that are usually unnamed (Frankenberg, 1993). In the context of racial dialogue, whiteness can be characterized by the denial of racism, unwillingness to participate in racial conversations, minimization of racist legacy,

and other similar evasions (Leonardo, 2002). Where whiteness functions as a normative power in everyday practices of teaching and learning, discussing racial issues is particularly challenging for teachers of color considering their racial power dynamics. From this perspective, this article discusses in what ways I, as a female teacher of color, interrupted and dealt with whiteness in the classroom to engage students in transformative conversations. This discussion is followed by pedagogical practices drawn from critical race feminism (CRF) as an act of resilience to further develop critical racial consciousness.

Theoretical Lens: Critical Race Feminism

I employ CRF as a theoretical lens to explore my teaching experience as a female teacher of color. CRF draws on the legal scholarship that sheds light on the concerns of a certain group of people who are women, disproportionately poor, and the members of racial minorities.¹ Delgado (1995), who first introduced the concept, consciously coined the term “Critical Race Feminism” to accentuate its significant focus on women of color and the fundamental connection to critical legal studies (Wing, 2003; Wing & Willis, 1999). Consequently, many central tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and CRF are interconnected.² CRF’s race intervention is rooted in the feminist discourse; therefore, it necessarily embraces feminism’s emphasis on gender oppression within patriarchy (Wing, 2003). Even though there is no single definition of CRF, many CRF scholars employ storytelling as their analytic tool and research methodology in order to bring voices of underrepresented women of color to the surface (Delgado, 1995). CRF is also centered around critical praxis; the main purpose of CRF scholarship is the practical application in an effort to dismantle injustice (Wing & Willis, 1999).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is not only a key tenet of CRF and CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), but also the significant analytic contribution that CRF

1 This does not mean that the experiences of women of color can be categorized and analyzed as a single group. However, defining the different standpoints of groups of women, such as queer women, women of color, poor women, and women with disabilities, reveals that the viewpoints previously considered “neutral” are inflected by the upper-middle-class White male perspective (Hurtado & Stewart, 2004).

2 The foundation of Critical Race Theory (CRT) lies on critical legal scholarship and radical feminism emerged in 1970s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT scholars consider that racism is ordinary and deeply pervasive in the sociocultural fabric of the U.S.; therefore, race is a central categorical axis to analyze the social inequity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

makes (Wing, 2003). Dill and Zambrana (2009) explained the concept of intersections as a way to explain experiences of women of color and to critique the exclusion of women of color's perspectives and needs from "both White, Eurocentric, middle-class conceptualizations of feminism and male dominated models of ethnic studies" (p. 3). CRF scholars consciously consider the intersection of race, class, and gender by locating women of color at the center of analysis (Wing & Willis, 1999). The term intersectionality was originally coined by Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (1989) to criticize a single-axis framework that considers race and gender as mutually exclusive analytic categories. In the dominant legal discourses based on the single-axis framework, discrimination and inequity were only recognized in instances of gender and race discrimination, but not a combination of both (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Subsequently, the discriminatory conditions that women of color face were ignored by both feminist and antiracist discourses. Furthermore, the single categorical analysis misleadingly implies that oppression functions along a single categorical axis (Crenshaw, 1989). This argument is connected to Collin's (2000) argument about intersectionality as anti-essentialism. Through "the matrix of domination," Collin's (2000) analysis unveils in what ways intersecting oppressions are structurally, interpersonally, and ideologically organized and how these intersections regenerate different forms of oppression (p. 18). As Collins (2000) reminds us, there is no independently reducible type of oppression; oppressions always work together in producing injustice.

CRF and Women of Color in Higher Education

Race and gender together complicate power dynamics in the classroom, particularly when the majority of the students are members of the dominant social groups. For instance, Chesler and Young's (2007) study demonstrates that faculty members' social identities affect the faculty members' everyday institutional experiences and their teacher authority. With this in mind, there are several studies exploring experiences and perspectives of female scholars/teachers of color in higher education (see Adams et al., 2007; Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012; Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Ng, 1993; Rodriguez & Boahene, 2012; Vargas, 1999). These studies place women of color in the center of their reflection and theorization to investigate how different sociocultural and political forces shape women of color's experiences in school (Berry, 2006). For instance, Vargas's (1999) study demonstrates particular challenges that female teachers of color experience in predominantly White classrooms. Similarly, Rodriguez's (2009) autoethnographic study of her experiences as a Latina professor reveals the construction of the "Other" teacher and how this normative practice constantly questions her authority and capacity as a scholar in the university classroom. There are studies discussing

the experiences of female graduate students of color and their journey in and outside of academia. Lee's (2006) study demonstrates the on-going negotiation of her scholar identity in her own native community and academia.

In relation to my positionality, it is important to point out the significant amount of discussions on Asian and Asian American women's experiences in higher education (Hune, 2011; Li, Beckett, & Lim, 2005; Mayuzumi, 2008; Ng, 1993). This scholarship illuminates the gender and racial disparities experienced by Asian and Asian American female faculty on both the interpersonal and institutional levels. Asian and Asian American women's experiences are distinctively shaped through the interlocking multiple hierarchies of gender, race, immigrant/citizen status, nationality, and language (Hune, 2011). In the university classroom, Asian and Asian American professors are not only differently racialized but also deemed foreign (Hune, 2011; Mayuzumi, 2008). Moreover, Asian women scholars also experience the unique dilemma and challenges in regard to their transnational experiences and positionalities (He, 2006; Mayuzumi, 2008, 2015). All in all, these works put together the narratives of Asian and Asian American female faculty's experiences and collectively examine the ways to dismantle the White, middle class, and male-dominant academic culture.

Methodology

In order to conduct this autoethnographic study, I revisited the data originally collected for my dissertation study completed in 2017.³ I examined not only original data including the researcher's journal and audio-narratives, but also the presentation and analysis of data I published in my dissertation. This reflective process of revisiting the data in the past and re-writing autoethnography is based on what Ellis (2009) calls, meta-autoethnography. I address my methodological approach and rationale for employing autoethnography in this section.

³ For this course, I taught theories and issues of social (in)justice, including but not limited to ableism, ageism, racism, sexism, transgender oppression, through the lens of systematic oppression (Young, 1990). It was a predominantly White classroom with 10 White students out of 15 students. I had 11 female students and 4 male students. The purpose of providing the demographic information is to contextualize my autoethnographic narratives. Although none of the data presented and analyzed in the study were not collected from my students, the researcher's journal, audio narratives, and reflections unavoidably included the interactions with the students and what happened in the classroom. I should note that the incidents and interactions I describe in this study are not meant to represent the students' perspectives. Rather, I attempt to illuminate my reflection on how I interacted with the students and what I learned from it.

Why Autoethnography?

Autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273). As its term implies, it is a hybrid form of writing that amalgamates autobiography with ethnography for various purposes that not only studies oneself, but also provides reflexive and critical insights as social research (Hughes & Pennington, 2018). Autoethnography, for me, was a necessitous choice since the goal of this study was to explore the reflective process of my teaching and negotiating with the oppressive ideology embedded in and outside of the classroom. It was inevitable to position myself, the researcher, as the subject voice in the narration (Chaplin, 2011) in order to demonstrate the intricate layers of my teaching experiences as a woman of color in higher education. However, this does not mean that I employed autoethnography for the purpose of self-absorbed or self-confessing writing. In an autoethnographic study, the researcher’s experiences are analyzed in relation to the sociocultural context. For instance, writing about selected epiphanies should be able to highlight how those experiences stem from a particular sociocultural identity and contexts (Ellis et al., 2011). Thus, the purpose of this work is not to accurately represent my experiences nor to merely make sense of them. Instead, it aims at opening up social possibilities of what my narratives can do and where they can lead to on a societal level (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Furthermore, I chose autoethnography since it considers critical reflexivity (Hughes & Pennington, 2018). My teacher identity and pedagogical practices are shaped through ongoing reflections on past and present experiences as a teacher, memories of schooling, and interactions with other people. Thus, the autoethnographic study can demonstrate how my identity and teaching practices are constantly negotiated within the specific contexts. As Warren (2011) argues, autoethnographic works enable classrooms to be sites for critical reflexivity. Through autoethnographic writing, I attempt to reflect on how power relations, privilege, and oppression in relation to my social identities have shaped my practice and my teacher self (Warren, 2011).

Lastly, this autoethnographic study is written to carefully unpack the interlocking systems of oppression (Collins, 2000) in relation to my teacher identity and practices with an intention to possibly provide a counternarrative. Many educators/scholars of color examine their justice-oriented teaching experiences through various forms of personal narrative writing (See Berry, 2006; Cleveland, 2005; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Ng, 1993; Rodriguez, 2009). Likewise, autoethnography, in the context of teaching for social

justice, can not only provide pedagogical insights, but also serve as a counternarrative to challenge the hegemonic ideologies of coloniality and whiteness in education (see Camangian, 2010; DeLeon, 2010; Mayuzumi, 2009). Although many autoethnographic studies challenge the hegemonic norms and discuss how the systems of oppression function in the authors' lives, it is crucial to remember that "effective autoethnographies are not victim tales; on the contrary, writing autoethnography well produces survivor tales for the writer and for those who read them" (Ellis, 2009, p. 19). From this perspective, the purpose of autoethnographic writing as a counternarrative is to open up a dialogue on possible ways to subvert the oppressive systems, not to proclaim the right way of being and living (Ellis, 2009).

Meta-Autoethnography: The Process of Reflecting, Revisioning, and Rewriting

There is no single unified form of autoethnography; accordingly, there are various types of approaches to collect and analyze data for an autoethnographic study based on the purposes and styles (Hughes & Pennington, 2018). For this study, I employed the approach of meta-autoethnography proposed by Ellis (2009). Meta-autoethnography is a process of critically reflecting and synthesizing one's own previous autoethnographic work in order to add "layers of new interpretations, reflections, and vignettes" (Hughes & Pennington, 2018, p. 20). Ellis (2009) describes it as an act of connecting the meaning-making process from the past to our current life. Meta-autoethnography provides me a unique opportunity to revisit the interpretation of my teaching experience in the past and ask questions I didn't ask then (Ellis, 2009). Since I completed my dissertation study, I had many conversations about my autoethnographic findings formally and informally with my advisors, other educators/scholars I met at conferences, and my friends who were doing similar work. More importantly, I had an opportunity to present the autoethnographic study with the students who participated in the study at a conference. This informal member-checking process with the students offered me new insights and interpretations that I did not previously have. This array of experiences altered some of the original meaning I found and added more nuanced layers of interpretation. As Ellis (2009) argues, the purpose of writing autoethnography is not a simple storytelling, but "a complex interrogation of the meanings that are created" (p. 13). From this angle, I reflected on the meanings that I originally found and reconstructed an autoethnographic narrative with newly developed insights to expand the meanings of my teaching experience.

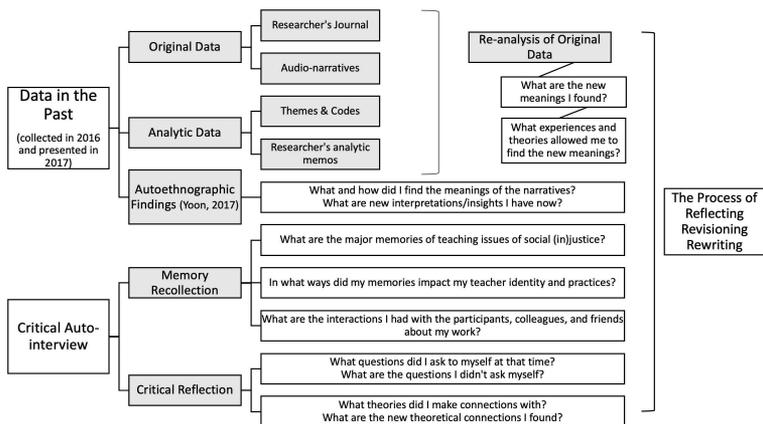


Figure 1. The Process of Data Analysis for Meta-Autoethnography

Figure 1 describes the semi-structured process of analyzing data and writing meta-autoethnography for this study. “Data in the past” represents the original data which was collected in fall semester of 2016 as well as the autoethnographic writing I published in my dissertation (Yoon, 2017). The researcher’s journal included my observation notes and reflections on a general overview of what happened in class, interactions with students, thoughts on the course materials, surprising moments, relevant memories, new ideas and insights about teaching diversity and justice. I also reanalyzed 14 audio narratives where I recorded my reflection on teaching after the class period. In addition, I revisited my autoethnographic findings I wrote in 2017. I reflected on the findings with the questions in mind: What meanings I found previously? How did I construct these meanings? What are new interpretations/insights I have now? What led me to have new insights?

Moreover, I conducted a critical auto-interview to recollect the memories surrounding the autoethnographic study I conducted and critically reflect on them. Critical auto-interview, which originates from the oral history tradition, is a method of reflexivity and critical awareness (Boufoy-Bastick, 2004). The goal is not only to learn about oneself, but also to examine social norms and values which are embedded in the process of knowing oneself (Boufoy-Bastick, 2004). In this light, I asked myself a set of questions to reveal hidden norms and values that I was unknowingly complicit with and I was resisting against. In terms of recollecting my memories, I asked myself the significant memories I had about teaching social justice, the reasons I

found them significant, the interactions with other people about the autoethnographic findings, and how the interactions affected my new understandings. To further reflect on this process, I also asked myself what questions or theoretical connections I was dealing with at that time and what I have now. By pondering on the fragmentation and gap between now and then, I tried to illuminate how new meanings are constantly created through revisiting and revisioning the autoethnographic narratives.

Positionality

As Hall (1990) asserts, “there’s no enunciation without positionality” (p. 18). Reflecting on positionality, which indicates where one stands in relation to others, is a significant part of the qualitative research since the research focus, process and product are mediated through the researcher’s positionality (Bourke, 2014). Especially in the autoethnographic study where the researcher primarily examines their own experiences and perspectives, positionality plays a key role in not only providing a backdrop of the study, but also situating the study in relation to the relevant discourses. I briefly share my social identities and position vis-a-vis the system of oppression (Collins, 2000) in a narrative form.

Asian. I became an Asian when I moved from Korea to the U.S. I did not have to claim my Korean nor Asian identity in my home country, where I was ethnically privileged. I am now an immigrant in the U.S. I am not sure when, or if I will identify myself as Asian “American.” Claiming one’s national and cultural identities are not clear-cut.

Asian Woman. As a cis-gender woman, I am socialized to perform certain aspects of femininity. I am working on deconstructing my own beliefs on gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity. I also frequently think about how my Asian body gets exoticized through the male gaze and through the predominant media depiction. I used to prepare myself for insensitive comments on my appearance and accent before I walked outside of my home. I became inured to the “you are not from here” gaze.

Bilingual Asian Woman. I spent several years of wondering about the hegemony and global power structures upholding English ideology in Korean society. I became more passionate about deconstructing standard English ideology (see Delpit, 2006; Delpit & Dowdy, 2013), which perpetuates linguistic stereotypes and discrimination against bilinguals, Ebonics, global English, and other regional dialects.

Bilingual Asian Woman in Academia. My advanced degree allowed me to navigate both my home country and the U.S. with a certain degree of social advantages. Education and financial stability were never

easy for my parents or their parents. My family wanted me to become a public-school teacher because they believed a teaching job would be perfect for a smart girl from the low socioeconomic class. I pushed far beyond their hopes. I crossed the border (national, cultural, linguistic and psychological) that I did not even dare to imagine. Moving back and forth between these distinctly different two worlds is not easy. I switch my language (not only Korean and English language, but the style, vocabulary, accent, etc.) when I talk to my family. I still feel like a stranger in academia. I also feel that I am drifting away from my community and family.

My unnoticed identities. I have been constantly and conscientiously reflecting on the privileged sides of my identity, which pass unnoticed. My immigration status, nationality, cis-gender body, ableness, and my current heterosexual relationship allow numerous advantages in my life. I need to keep questioning at whose expense am I privileged. This should not be a passive self-reflection that makes me feel good. I should make myself vulnerable to take actions toward social justice.

Findings & Discussions

As I explicated in the methodology section, the analytic process of this study was not linear nor strictly structured; rather, the process felt chaotic as I continuously found new meanings and interconnected insights even in the process of writing. Nonetheless, the process of reflective analysis brought my attention to several themes. This section is structured according to the themes I found. The first part discusses my sense of self-doubt as a foreign-born female teacher of color. The second part sheds a light on the process of deconstructing whiteness I was complicit with, as well as whiteness that manifested in the classroom. This part is built upon my new insights that I did not heavily discuss in the previous autoethnographic finding (Yoon, 2017). This part examines challenges I experienced to facilitate critical racial dialogues and how I tried to deconstruct and negotiate with whiteness in the classroom. The last finding highlights the resilience and growth I gained through teaching social justice in relation to my teacher positionality.

Self-doubt, Anxiety, and Shame as the “Other” Teacher

Two weeks after arriving to the United States for the first time, I walked into a university classroom with about 50 undergraduate students as a brand-new Graduate Teaching Assistance (GTA).⁴

⁴ I taught this general education course for the first time in university about children’s art where I had many freshmen. As an instructor of record, I had the full responsibilities of the course design, teaching, and assessments with the support from a mentor faculty member. The majority of my students did not know that I was a GTA until I revealed it. I usually introduced myself as a doctoral student the first day of class.

This transition from an elementary teacher in my home country of South Korea to a university teacher in the U.S. was as demanding as anyone could imagine. Despite my anxiety and uncertainty about my responsibilities and teacher authority, I hid my insecurity and expressed confidence to survive my first year in a GTA position. In spite of my constant attempt to auto-suggest my confidence and capabilities, I could not get away from a deep sense of self-doubt. I was well aware that my racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences did not fit the persona of a “normal” teacher in U.S. academia (Rodriguez, 2009). In my first two semesters, I had several students with various racial backgrounds who explicitly expressed their doubts about my competence and challenged my authority in the classroom.⁵ With continuous experiences of hostility and resistance, I felt deep shame about myself: the way I presented myself, the way I spoke English, and the way I interacted with my students. The fear that my differences would be presumed incompetent started growing (Baker & Copp, 1997; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012).

With the sense of self-doubt and shame as an “Other” teacher, teaching about race and gender felt more emotionally overwhelming to me. The emotional burden sometimes paralyzed my thinking and my body. I often thought, “What if my students question my authority and the legitimacy of my teaching about race because I am not from here?” I knew this was not an uncommon line of questioning by the authority faculty of color, especially those who are foreign-born. Linguistic identity, such as an English as a Second Language (ESL) also adds another layer to the hierarchical differential in power (Delpit & Dowdy, 2013). I was afraid that my bilingual identity, in addition to my national origin and racial identity, signified the incompetency of teaching critical social issues. The process of coming to the realization of my self-doubt was perplexing and agonizing. As I tapped into my own oppressive thoughts through CRT and CRF, I began making sense of my inner struggles. I learned that self-doubt is one of the consequences of internalized oppression, and it accompanies emotional distress including helplessness, frustration, and mistrust to name a few (Harro, 2010). Under the influence of the dominant stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners (Chang, 1993; Mayuzumi, 2008), I internalized oppressive thoughts about Asianness.⁶

5 I sensed subtle hostility from the students from the first day of my class. However, some students expressed their doubt more explicitly by saying “I cannot understand what you are saying because of your accent” or “I want to talk about my grade to your professor, not you.” There are many studies examining the unique challenges that Asian female faculty members experience including the students’ resistance to their authority and academic competence (see Hune, 2011; Lee & Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Li, Beckett, & Lim, 2005; Mayuzumi, 2015).

6 In the Orientalist discourse, Asianness is regarded as an exotic way of being that is at a great distance from Western and European ways of being (He, 2006; Hune,

This internalized oppression reinforced self-fulfilling negative stereotypes (Padilla, 2001). Even when people gave me a “compliment” about the fact that they could hardly catch my “Asian accent,” this message signified Asianness as something to be erased. This experience resonates with Mayuzumi’s (2008) study discussing the racialization of Asian accents. Mayuzumi (2008) points out that the notion of accent draws a line between “white and non-white, citizens and immigrants, competency and non-competency, and mainstream and periphery” (p. 175). In the hierarchy of accent, the accent of faculty of color is considered less legitimate and desirable than that of European faculty (Creese & Kambere, 2003; Mayuzumi, 2008).

The stereotypes and dominant discourses do not merely operate on the ideological level. The intersection of sexism and racism is routinized and shapes the “normal” ways of thinking and treating groups of people unequally (Ng, 1993). I found that my struggle with establishing the teacher authority and dealing with hostility was not merely caused by my personality nor a few “rude” students, but intertwined with race, gender, and power relations. When women of color thwart gender and racial expectations, we can face microaggressions that attempt to punish our unexpected behaviors (Harris & González, 2012). I slowly picked up my own strategies to deal with microaggressions in the classroom by dressing up very professionally every single day, emphasizing my qualifications the first day of my class, and overpreparing for my classes. I came up with a few strategies to talk with people when they were insensitively asking my ethnicity or commenting on my Asian female body. I learned how to shift the conversation to lead the person to rethink about the offensiveness of their questions or comments. It became critical for me to excise the strategies to subvert the racial and gender expectations in and outside of the classroom (Harris & González, 2012; Niemann, 2012; Rodriguez, 2009).

(Un)Learning and Deconstructing Whiteness in a Classroom

If you have so many problems with racism in the U.S., why don't you go back to your country?

2011; Mayuzumi, 2015). Despite the long history of Asian immigration to the United States, Asian Americans are still considered perpetual foreigners in U.S. society due to nativist racism (Chang, 1993). The dominant discourse surrounding Asian and Asian Americans reinforces a sense of foreignness and the model minority myth, which makes the oppression of Asian Americans invisible (Chang, 1993; S. Lee, Park, & Wong, 2016). Moreover, Asian women are frequently depicted overly feminine and exotic in pop culture and media (Nemoto, 2006). In addition to the model minority myth stereotyping Asians passive and docile, Asian women are hyper sexualized and often considered obedient and servile (Cho, 2003; Mayuzumi, 2008; Nemoto, 2006).

In our current globalized context after the long history of European colonization, there is no place that one can escape from racism (Du Bois, 1989). Globalized whiteness transcends national boundaries, and it has developed into a formidable hegemonic force (Boucher, Carey, & Ellinghaus, 2009; Leonardo, 2002; Moreton-Robinson, Casey, & Nicoll, 2008). This is why I cannot naively claim that I was unaware of racial relations simply because I was raised in my home country where my racial/ethnic affiliation was dominant. Nor could I assume other countries, especially non-Western countries, would be far from upholding the globalized racial hierarchy. Especially under the current influence of multinational media production and circulation, it is almost impossible to be unaffected by the Western racial hegemony. When growing up, I consumed many Hollywood movies and understood the U.S. as a middle-class White country. In my English classes, my pronunciation was laboriously corrected until I spoke with a “proper” American accent. As a young woman, I held up the standard of white beauty and was constantly discontented with my Asian body like my other friends. These few examples demonstrate the pervasive nature of globalized racism as a perspective and cultural practice, which operates flexibly depending on the geopolitical and historical contexts.⁷

It became clearer that I could not just walk away from the racial dialogue as I moved to the U.S. The first few years, I naively claimed my innocence of not knowing the racial discourse by positioning myself as an outsider. I did not see myself performing and upholding whiteness in order to effectively survive and climb up the ladder of transnational social status. I intentionally and unintentionally avoided any racial talk with the idea that talking about race would put me in a dangerous position. I wanted to be under the radar to survive graduate school; at the same time, I wanted to be recognized as a “good” student and teacher. The desire to be a good teacher, particularly, hindered any discussions around uncomfortable topics.

Nevertheless, I had to confront the fact that I was unknowingly socialized to perform certain aspects of whiteness and opt into the system of white dominance. Especially in the classroom where I wanted to engage the students in conversations about racial injustice, I had to first deconstruct whiteness with them. The invisibility of whiteness made it difficult for me to start the conversation. As Frankenberg (1993) puts it, the normativity of white dominance conceals its effect and presence in the racial discourse and how it

⁷ For more theoretical explanations about the flexibility of whiteness, see Boucher, Carey, and Ellinghaus (2009), Leonardo (2002) and Takaki (1993). Leonardo (2002) and Takaki (1993) lay out the historical context of Irish immigration and the embracement of whiteness in the context of the U.S. Leonardo (2002) also touches upon how the model minority myth of Asian immigrants has been co-opted into the discourse of whiteness.

is intrinsically linked to racism. By naming whiteness, everyone is placed in the racial relations, not just people of color (Frankenberg, 1993; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998; Leonardo, 2002). When I first spoke the word, whiteness, I immediately sensed the defensiveness on the students' faces. In the racial dialogue, whiteness functions to position Whites as racially innocent (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014). This often leads for the students to deny racial legacies and racism (Leonardo, 2002) and consequently, they dissociate any systemic racism with their personal lives.

When whiteness is pervasive in the classroom, talking about race symptomatically, not just superficially, increases emotional tensions (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). I, as an emerging social justice educator, also had a hard time tackling the systematic aspect of racism. As many anti-racist scholars discuss, the majority of White students and students of color have significantly different perspectives on racial matters (Bonilla-silva, 2006; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Tatum, 1992, 1994). Most White students understand racism as prejudice whereas students of color consider racism systemic (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). In order to encourage the students to look into how racism works not only on a personal level, but institutionally and systematically, I had to provide many factual data and counternarratives. This approach brought tension and sometimes caused heated debates between the students. I was often concerned about the consequences of causing discomfort, which might lead to the negative evaluation on my teaching.

Another difficulty I faced was the students' silence. I first thought the students who were quiet in class were either shy or participating in their own ways. When a few students expressed their anger about the class topics of whiteness and racism through their writing assignments, I realized that their silence could be an indication of resistance. Ladson-Billings (1996) discusses this type of silence as resistance, which often manifests in education courses on race, gender, and class. In a predominantly White classroom, students tend to respond to the course content making them feel uncomfortable by withdrawing from the discussion or remaining silent (Ladson-Billings, 1996). This does not mean that silence always means active resistance. I was also aware that some of my students decided to remain silent because they were afraid of saying something offensive or being misunderstood by their classmates (Lewis, 1990). Under the ideology of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), talking about race is considered a taboo; one who sees race becomes a racist. For fear of being called a racist, the racial dialogue is particularly difficult for the majority of White students. Moreover, the ideology of individualism and meritocracy hinders them to examine their own socialization into whiteness (DiAngelo, 2018).

Through my experience of teaching racial issues, I found the students' silence, when it is an indication of disengagement, destructive to further develop communal and critical learning. Understandably, the students had more things to share when the issue was associated with their disadvantaged sides of their social identities. The female students were more eager to talk about gender issues than male students. Although several White students were willing to talk about their privilege as a heterosexual person who was temporarily able-bodied, the same group was resistant and silent in the conversations about race. Consequently, the students of color ended up with added responsibilities to continue the conversations on race.

One way to navigate and deconstruct whiteness in my classroom was to utilize emotional responses as a learning moment. I addressed possible feelings of resistance and discomfort to learn about racism in advance. I shared several stories of my experiences regarding having conversations about race before I started the group discussion. The stories included my honest reflection on the process of developing racial consciousness and navigating the racial dialogues as well as the emotional responses accompanied to the process. I explained to my students what possibly causes those emotional responses and what other scholars have been discussing. Tatum (1992) suggests that this kind of disclosure minimizes students' negative emotional responses and allows both the teacher and students to utilize them for learning. I found that admitting possible discomfort accompanied with raising critical racial consciousness was helpful to ease the tension to a certain degree. Furthermore, I was able to help the students to contextualize their learning by asking the reasons behind their emotional responses and what aspect of their identities/experiences are related to their emotional response (Case & Cole, 2013).

Resilience and Growth as a CRF teacher-scholar

Reflecting on my teaching experience as a female teacher of color created inner tensions and emotional struggles to a great degree. Nonetheless, it also allowed me to positively rethink my own position and roles as a critical educator. It prompted me to think about what it meant to be a teacher and scholar at odds with whiteness. Although surviving the U.S. academia as a bilingual female teacher of color is challenging, I learned that our very presence in academia opens up a possibility to disrupt pervasive whiteness and unequal racial and gender power structures in higher education (Rodriguez, 2009; Vargas, 1999).

My positionality and personal experiences became a pedagogical tool for both myself and students for empowerment and growth. I shared my own process of reflections with the students as a way to encourage and model critical reflexivity (Warren, 2011). I also

learned from CRF educators to bring in our own strong voices and experiences into the classroom. bell hooks (1994) writes about mutual vulnerability, which means that professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions. When I was teaching the course on diversity and social justice, I shared my stories in relation to the class topics before I asked my students to link their lives to the theories. In so doing, I was taking “the first risk” to link my narratives to academic discussions and to be vulnerable in the classroom for our mutual growth (hooks, 1994). Sharing my own stories seemed to help my students contextualize the theories they were learning. More importantly, it allowed myself and the students to collectively reflect on our experiences and grow through the process. This became a key part of my pedagogical practices, which emphasized engagement through the contextualization of personal experiences (Berry, 2010). Taking off my armor, opening up myself with the students, and taking the risk of being vulnerable in the classroom where I was already vulnerable was not easy. It will be never easy. In spite of my fear and hesitation, I learned that the practice of collective reflexivity can connect stories of different struggles and pains. I was able to reflect on my stories through different vantage points that the students offered and so did the students. Collective reflexivity helped us witness the various spaces and times that we were processing our experiences.

The reflection on my positionality also reminded me that the students’ social identities and personal experiences were a crucial part of their learning process. Thus, knowing our students—specifically their perspectives and possible psychological barriers of processing certain ideas—is substantial to develop meaningful conversations, particularly regarding the topics of social (in)justice (Case & Cole, 2013; Lal, 2000). The discourse of whiteness helped me contextualize the students’ emotional responses to the racial dialogue. Through reanalysis of the data, I found that the danger of reductionism also affects White students as it puts them in the situation of double bind where they had to choose to be either allies or enemies (Ellsworth, 1997). Similarly, I was able to reconsider White students’ negative emotional responses as a process of gaining racial consciousness. Instead of naming particular White student negative responses to the critical race discourse as resistance, guilt, or fragility, Flynn (2015) uses the term “White fatigue” (p. 115). This White fatigue describes the dynamic of the learning process for those who understand the moral imperative of antiracism but who are not yet “situated to fully understand the complexity of racism and how it functions as an institutional and systemic phenomenon” (p. 115). With this frame, I reconceptualized the students’ struggles and emotional fatigue in the process of anti-racism and racial identity development.

Revisiting narratives that I wrote enabled me to realize my personal and professional growth through struggles as a teacher who taught

the course solely dedicated to social justice for the first time. I was able to grow through taking the risk of being fully present with my body and mind in the classroom. As one of my students described, it was being in the classroom without an academic façade. Ironically, this practice of vulnerability (hooks, 1994) allowed me to be resilient with my struggles, both internalized oppressive thoughts and external pushbacks.

Concluding Thoughts: Creating a Transformative Space

This reflective study shares my teaching experience to provide narratives as tools for other educators to examine their experiences as the “Other” teachers in the U.S. education system (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). The analysis of my experiences brings up necessary questions about the next step. In what ways can this act of writing in the space of academia lead to classroom and community-based action to disrupt the oppressive norm? As Hughes and Giles (2010) point out, what might be the possible creative and metaphorical tools that translate the complex groupwork of CRF into social justice action? I would like to share a few thoughts that have evolved around the concept of space as a partial answer to these questions. I intentionally use the metaphorical term of space here to open up the numerous possibilities of creating space within/through the specific context and location.

The first concept we can tackle in our teaching is the notion of a safe classroom. For whom do we want to make our classrooms safe? Rodriguez (2009) insists that educators should let go of the myth of the safe classroom since “teaching social justice issues will always take place in an uncomfortable space” (p. 492). Leonardo and Porter (2010) also problematize the myth of the safe classroom by pointing out that individuals of marginalized groups tend to get more offended and agitated when engaging in so-called “safe” conversations about race. The concept of safety in teaching race is usually employed to protect White students’ feelings; as a result, “a space of oppressive colorblindness” is established (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 147). From this perspective, it is necessary to redefine what we mean by feeling safe in raising critical consciousness. We should rather work to create a space where students are willing to be challenged to unlearn their colorblind racism despite its potential discomfort. In critical teaching and learning, the safe classroom has to be a space where students and the teacher take a risk and cope with the conflicts together (hooks, 2010).

In an institutional space, we need to extensively examine the realities of racism if we believe in teaching for diversity (Hughes & Giles, 2010). It is important to remind ourselves that even a well-intended effort to promote diversity can be co-opted by a white dominance.

Bell's (1980) theoretical insight on interest convergence, for instance, effectively demonstrates how the institutional efforts for diversity are conflated with the interests of the dominant group.⁸ As Hughes and Giles (2010) point out, the diversity work frequently fails to receive institutional approval and support, when that work does not directly benefit all students, which are more often than not, White students in predominantly White institutions. Matias (2016) similarly addresses the issue when promoting diversity in higher education usually focuses on what diverse faculty, staff, and students can contribute to the campus while it overlooks the campus climate that is unwelcoming to diverse faculty, staff, and students. Based on these critical insights, we, as art educators and teacher educators, should take our praxis and its impacts into account beyond our classrooms. One potentially transformative action that can take place at an institutional-level is a concerted effort to shift colorblind culture in our teacher education programs to have more diverse bodies of faculty and art teacher candidates (Desai, 2010).

In the context of writing as a commitment to challenge the status quo, it is important to create a space where identities that are previously considered neutral are challenged by voices and stories that are systematically ignored. As an academic working in the U.S., one convenient example is space like the *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, which calls for the critical and sensitive reflection of our academic and pedagogical endeavors for racial justice. This call for voices attempting to rupture Whiteness, allows myself as a woman of color to have the courage to speak up. This space might also provide tools to carefully observe and reflect on one's identity, which passes unnoticed due to normativity and privilege. In this space of conflict, we are invited to ask at what and whose expense one's identity left unmarked and privileged. This critical self-analysis can provide a ground for the collective reflection and action. Many art educators have been sharing critical and reflective works examining racial issues (see Acuff, 2018; Knight, 2006; Kraehe & Acuff, 2013; Kraehe, Gaztambide-Fernández, & Carpenter, 2018; Travis, Kraehe, Hood, & Lewis, 2018). This commitment has laid the groundwork for other art educators to teach, research, and act for transformation. In line with this critical reflexivity, constructing the theoretical journeys from the location of our struggles as the members of marginalized groups should be recognized and encouraged (hooks, 1994; Hughes & Giles, 2010; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015). For me, like many other female teachers of color, these have been instrumental in informing resilience

⁸ Derrick Bell (1980) argues for the notion of interest convergence through the analysis of legal cases during and after the Civil Rights Movement. Interest convergence means that White elites promote racial equity and diversity only if it benefits their individual or group interests (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). It became one of the central tenets of CRT and has been widely employed as an analytic and conceptual tool to highlight the racial injustice in the U.S society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

and ensuring survival in academia. I believe this transformative space, where we encounter narratives from multiple localities and collectively reflect and grow through our experiences, is crucial to theorize and learn from our pains.

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