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**THE 'EZEL PROJECT' INQUIRY: MESOTRANSFORMATIVE PRAXIS
TO DECENTER WHITENESS IN RACIALIZED ORGANIZATIONS
AND SCHOOLS**

Justin Gerald
CUNY Hunter College

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THE 'EZEL PROJECT' INQUIRY: MESOTRANSFORMATIVE PRAXIS TO
DECENTER WHITENESS IN RACIALIZED ORGANIZATIONS AND SCHOOLS

JPB Gerald

Mentor

Catherine Kramarczuk Voulgarides, PhD

Readers

Anthony Picciano, PhD
David Hernández-Saca, PhD

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Abstract

In this study, a Black scholar in the midst of understanding his neurodivergence and his identity as someone who has been dis/abled reacts to the prodding of white peers by creating a course on decentering whiteness. The scholar then interviews ten of the participants in said class to understand how they came to select such a course and what they might have accomplished in attempting to challenge the structure of whiteness in their institutions. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, Critical Whiteness Studies, Dis/Crit, and in particular the work of Victor Ray, this work seeks to examine the narratives that brought the author and his students together and where they might travel into the future.

CHAPTER ONE: PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Background

You will not find *mesotransformative* or *narrative intersection* in the extant literature, as they are neologisms I settled on during the course of my research. I define the former as *shifting power from oppressors to the oppressed within organizations, particularly from whiteness¹ to the racialized*, and the latter as a *methodological pursuit exploring how researcher and participant experiences combine to create one broader narrative about the contexts in which they exist*. Far too much of scholarship is siloed and unable (or unwilling) to challenge hardened power structures, particularly when it comes to race (Bonilla-Silva & Biaocchi, 2001), and my goal is to engage in inquiry and reportage that avoids these common pitfalls.

This study concerns a course I designed on the decentering of whiteness, my own journey to creating the course, and the narratives of some of the participants who completed it. There are others offering classes under the umbrella of anti-racism or white supremacy, and books on race and racism have been extremely popular since the events of 2020 (Andrew, 2020). Some of the past and current training on anti-racism has shown promise (Abramovitz & Blitz, 2015), and others have not; see Gorski (2019) for details on the impact of thwarted efforts. I value these efforts, and I am glad for people to engage, but I worry that for many, little will occur beyond internal reflection and performative social media posturing. I designed the course from which much of my below data are drawn so that those who complete its sessions had to, as a condition of the course, take concrete actions to make substantive changes to their organizations, and this study was an attempt to examine whether or not my approach proved resonant; I am not just interested in the *plans*, but

¹ Much more on this throughout the work, but this is the idea and ideology of a superior, unraced people.

the actions they took after the course was completed. Additionally, as will be detailed below, I have gradually gained a deeper understanding of the ways that ableism – or oppression based on disability status or perception – intertwines with racialization, and, through my own narrative and those of my participants, I hope to examine how their decentering of whiteness potentially disrupts ableism as well. Consequently, my aims are two-fold, both a qualitative exploration of my approach in designing a course around influencing organizations, and a critical analysis of the participants' stories leading up to the course and choices after the fact.

Though these can certainly be applied to other disciplines, in detailing these ideas throughout this work, I hope to demonstrate how and why they are particularly relevant to education studies, and how reportage based in narrative intersection can capture mesotransformation that has potentially occurred within educational institutions. As I will hopefully make clear throughout these introductory sections, I mention these terms here to indicate that, more than anything else, at some point early in my doctoral studies, it became apparent to me that, for reasons I hope to make clear, the only chance I had at success in doctoral studies was by attempting something that felt new to me, and something that pointed towards a substantive shift in power. My academic ambitions were shaped by my own positionality and further sharpened by the context in which I have been studying. I have been strongly influenced by Critical Race Theory, Critical Whiteness Studies, Disability Critical Race Studies (Dis/Crit), all of which will be explored in detail later; and, most importantly, by the birth of my son. But I had to travel quite a distance to reach my current position, the place from which I seek the answer to the research questions you will find below.

Doctoral Journey

I entered my doctoral studies with a desire to effect measurable change in attendance rates for adult English Language students in low-cost community programming, a goal that I expected to lead to a quantitative path. I cynically and erroneously assumed few would care about my research if it was qualitative, and I wanted to, as was expected of us, resolve a problem in a measurable way, which to me, in 2018, meant numbers. As I began to read literature related to language and oppression, I was struck by what Annamma et al. (2016) would term *color-evasiveness* (what Bonilla-Silva (2017) originally classified as *color-blind* racism), the desire for individuals, particularly white ones, to avoid discussion of race at all costs. Accordingly, in the summer of 2019, I turned my focus onto the intersections of language, racism, and whiteness, and in the break between semesters, started recording and releasing a podcast on the topic. On my show, [Unstandardized English](#), I discussed issues of oppression in and around the field of language teaching with guests who were predominantly early-career scholars, and I came to feel that I was gaining more through my public engagement than through my traditional studies, which is not really an indictment of my program – which is, as it is meant to, invested in training me and my classmates in empirical methodology – so much as an encouragement for scholars to seek public community. In January of 2020, my first peer-reviewed article was published (Gerald, 2020a), theorizing the concept of the *altruistic shield*, a phenomenon in which white members of supposedly prosocial professions² use their proximity to perceived virtue as a pre-emptive defense against being seen as complicit in the harm wrought by whiteness. I was relatively satisfied with my accomplishments for an early-career doctoral student.

² E.g., language teachers (and all educators), social workers, non-profit workers.

With some extra time before the spring semester of 2020, I began to write another article, which advocated for the decentering of whiteness in language teaching, and submitted it for review. I entered that semester planning, for a pilot study, to interview white English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals who had chosen to work against whiteness in their field, with the hope, down the line, to publish this and additional data for administrators to read and internalize for their ELT training programs. Even with the impact of the pandemic, I completed interviews with two such white ELT professionals, and was satisfied with my path towards valuable research.

At the tail end of May 2020, we entered what was unfortunately a brief yet still significant reckoning in support of *Black Lives Matter*. At the same time, the aforementioned article I had written before the spring semester was published (Gerald, 2020b), and several white friends and associates started peppering me with questions about “what to do,” as, for a brief moment, white Americans took note of the danger of whiteness, whether weaponized by the State itself or by bird watchers hoping to make use of the State’s power and control behavior and mechanisms (Reuters, 2020). At first, I answered their questions dutifully, but I quickly grew tired of being a helpful “Black friend,” as I felt more like what Kendi (2017) would call a *Black exhibit*, visible but silenced. I thought of my then-infant son, Ezel, and how, in the future, his becoming the person answering these questions, annoying though it is, might be the best case scenario compared to being a victim of some violent act of anti-Blackness. I decided that my former research topic, on attendance at low-cost language programs, did not go far enough. As Tuck and Yang (2014) wrote, academia “stockpiles examples of injustice yet will not make explicit a commitment to social justice” (p. 233), and I was not, and am not, satisfied with this. I decided I would still continue to speak to white educators and members of other helping professions about their connection to whiteness, and I would surely continue to record podcast episodes with other eager junior scholars,

soaking up as much extracurricular knowledge as possible from my public engagement and scholarship, a category now including mainstream publications, such as a *Washington Post* opinion piece (Gerald & Debs, 2020) and articles in *Language* magazine (Bryan & Gerald, 2020; Gerald et al., 2021). Additionally, by centering my own complex journey in all of my writing, including this work, I aim to demonstrate the ways in which a researcher's own evolving positionality and unfolding narrative can impact their scholarship. As such, a significant portion of this work is devoted to exploration of my own path leading up to the present, and the way my newfound identity is inextricably tied to the reportage contained herein.

The Ezel Project and Racialized Organizations

In July of 2020, I began teaching a series of six-session synchronous online courses, for which I charged my students an amount similar to that of a one-credit graduate level class. These courses were called “Decoding and Decentering Whiteness,” and they aimed to help the participants fully understand the different facets of whiteness and why it needs to be decentered, and how they could collectively (in small groups) plan to make substantive changes within organizations to which they are connected—e.g., their workplaces, schools, and/or communities—to counter racism and redistribute racial power. Though I admittedly stumbled into the course as it happened rather suddenly (see **Appendix A** for full story of the curriculum), in retrospect I can see how my course contrasts with the dominant literature from which many workplaces build their own “DEI” efforts. For example, in a white paper from scholars at Wharton, the authors note that, “Activities should connect clearly to business goals, including bringing in great talent, tapping underutilized talent, etc.” (Creary, Rothbard, & Scruggs, 2021, p. 37). Though it might be easier for me to ignore “business goals” as an independent consultant, aside from my own income, the

endgoal of my course diverges entirely from making organizations more money. Indeed, decentering whiteness and upending regular practices may instead be costly, and the racialization of organizations is tied to the fact that it is less costly to perpetuate the status quo. More on the racialization of organizations, particularly based upon the work of Victor Ray (2019) will be shared throughout the remainder of the work.

For my research, I planned to contact my course participants and interview those who respond about how the course has, or has not, helped them decenter whiteness in their organizations, and what changes have occurred as a result of their subsequent efforts, both with respect to their organizations and how they interact within whiteness. I wanted to understand how and why they feel that my course has or has not changed their own relationship with whiteness overall, how it may or may not have supported their efforts to challenge whiteness in their organizations, and to learn what may have led them to become the type of white person who would be interested in such an undertaking in the first place. The research on whiteness, as will be detailed in **Chapter Three** below, often centers on the emotionality that prevents white individuals from acting against whiteness (e.g., Matias, 2013; Kenyon, 2022). I wanted to explore what it looked like for those who have made the decision to act, and what those actions were, investigating the narratives of my participants (and myself) in relation to the course I developed.

Though I did not have a name for my approach when I began the courses last summer, as they were created out of a sense of urgency, I have come to call my pedagogy a *mesotransformative praxis*³, inspired by concepts described by Victor Ray in his article about racialized organizations (2019). Ray referred to organizations as the *meso* level⁴, and he wrote, “(1) racialized organizations

³ That is, practical application of (critical) theory

⁴ As opposed to *micro* (interpersonal) and *macro* (societal).

enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups; (2) racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distribution of resources; (3) whiteness is a credential; and (4) decoupling is racialized” (p. 2). Though it was not necessarily my original plan, the people who have taken my course thus far have predominantly been white, female, non-dis/abled, middle-class educators with small amounts of power within racialized organizations (and/or schools), and the course would ideally support them as they respond to this unequal distribution of agency, resources, and credentialing. The course would enhance their ability to seek a redistribution of (figurative and literal) racialized power, as will all of the other instances of public scholarship in which I engage. The work of John Diamond, for one, has taken a hard look at whiteness and the impact of white spaces on Black people in general and Black students in particular (e.g., Diamond et al., 2020; Diamond & Anderson, 2021), whereas Warren (2010) has also conducted relevant research on white anti-racist activism, a useful precursor to what I attempted. Several aspects of my approach are tied directly to my frameworks and the literature that have served as my epistemological, ontological and pedagogical foundation, which will be reviewed in detail in **Chapter Two** below.

I hesitate to refer explicitly to a theory of change here, as I have found that much of the related literature is business-school jargon, but, with the ability to reflect back on the creation of the course, I do believe that my decision to focus on the middle level as a goal is what has the potential to set my work apart. If the participants, whom readers will meet later, succeed in changing their institutions, then that impact on others in their context will have been realized, whereas an interpersonal improvement is nice but has no impact on power differentials, and societal changes are often so gradual as to lack the urgency necessary to support those who are currently in great need. This is not to say that smaller- and larger-scale efforts are without merit,

but to point out that encouraging people to return to their institutions and cause trouble is a worthy and somewhat unique goal. I will return to this angle among the findings.

Accordingly, my goals are ambitious, but I think of my son at school with my own former classmates, any one of whom could have caused my destruction if they had so chosen—and who, nonetheless, perpetuated prolonged *spirit murder*⁵ (Williams, 1987)—and anything smaller, even if well-intended, is just not enough. I went to exclusive, expensive, “elite,” and, yes, extremely white schools for most of my life, and even now, nearing the end of what could be considered 22nd grade, I am almost always one of the only Black faces around, and can count the Black educators I have had on one hand. This was no less true as I began my career as an ELT professional, in a field founded firmly on colonialist ideals, espousing *linguistic imperialism* (Phillipson, 1992; Canagarajah, 1999)⁶, while claiming it seeks to better its students’ lives, despite all evidence to the contrary (e.g., Cushing, 2020; Jenkins & Leung, 2019). No matter which direction I have turned, whiteness has controlled my educational and professional experiences, and it is imperative I do whatever possible to make it so that that is not the case for my son.

Accordingly, I do not believe in simply attempting such a task for my own benefit. Even if I were to succeed at helping to change a considerable number of my students’ organizations, the reportage on the pedagogy and the praxis is just as important as the work itself. This research, whether I succeed or not, will hopefully serve as a narrative guide from inception, to initiation, through several iterations, and finally to the necessarily unfinished conclusion of my mesotransformative approach to the decentering of whiteness.

⁵ The psychological violence that results from a lack of care for others who depend upon us.

⁶ The imposition of a dominant (colonial) language upon others.

The purpose of this inquiry into the Ezel Project is to demonstrate whether or not a racialized and neurodivergent scholar can attempt to decenter whiteness through a mesotransformative approach, a two-pronged purpose, as you will see below. First, the fact that it is a person with my specific positionality and experiences who has designed and led these courses, an endeavor from which I hope that anyone who reads my findings and curriculum upon their publication can take valuable lessons about the importance of being guided by their own multiple identities and experiences. And second, this work represents an attempt to determine if, in the opinion of the students, courses such as mine can effectively support their attempts to decenter whiteness in their racialized and ableist organizations.

Accordingly, my research questions are as follows:

Research Questions

1. How have my multiple identities and my experiences as an educator and an academic within racialized and ableist organizations shaped the development of my mesotransformative decentering whiteness courses?
2. A. How do white educators describe the way that their experiences and prior relationship to whiteness influenced their decision to join a course on decentering whiteness?
B. How did that participation in this course shape their efforts at substantively decentering whiteness in their racialized and ableist organizations?

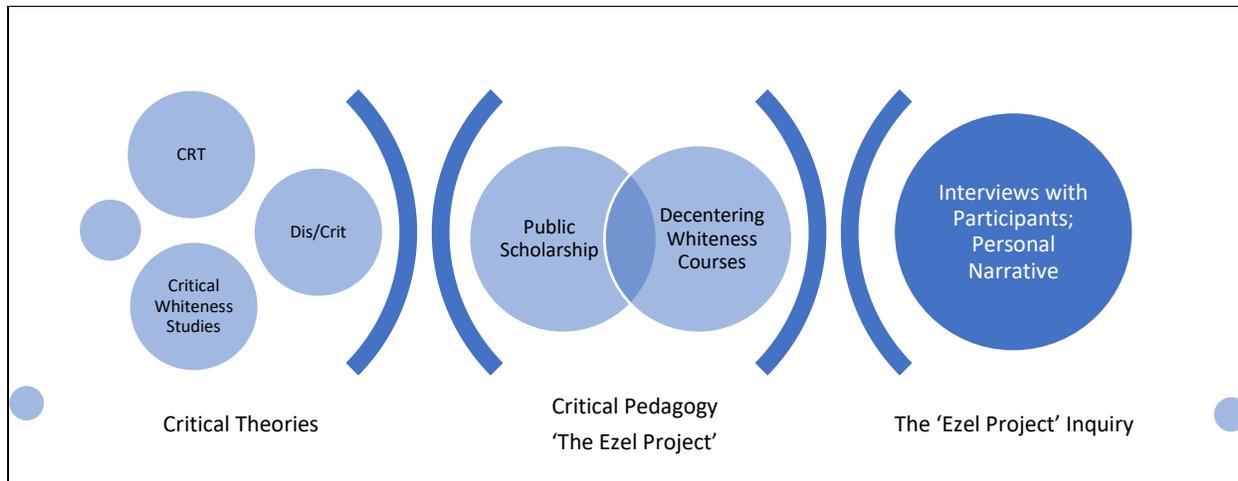
A brief note about the different ways that the answers to these questions unfold throughout this work. The second question was the frame around which I built my interview questions, which are listed in **Appendix B**. The first question, however, was never asked in an interview; it helped to

guide my decisions in reflecting on my course design and on the public scholarship I have produced as part of the Ezel Project, and is rooted in the practice of autoethnography, as defined by, among others, Ellis (2004), as will be detailed below. Additionally, the presence of the first question led me to a choice I was almost afraid to make, but which became necessary for Ezel, the Ezel Project, and this, the Ezel Project Inquiry; this choice is the subject of the first portion of **Chapter Four**.

Frameworks

During the process of planning out my study, I settled on what I think is a compelling relationship between different theoretical frameworks as well as a useful explanation for the relationship between the literature upon which I drew to create my Decentering Whiteness course, the interplay between my course and my public scholarship, and the analysis that this study will ultimately represent. In my view, the combination of my own narrative and those of the participants is what sets this work apart from others, and using a self-analysis as a central part of the scholarship also aligns with my chosen frameworks, both the critical theories that led to the Ezel Project and the Critical Pedagogy that the project represents. Both my public scholarship and my whiteness class are chiefly concerned with challenging power structures, and autoethnography can be a valuable tool in pursuing this goal. The vantage point from which a story is told is inherently connected to the potential for coercive hierarchies. For how this all fits together, see **Figure 1** below.

Figure 1



The intent with this image is to show the relationship between the frameworks in which my research is grounded, the actual teaching of the course and my other public scholarship, and then the emergence of the inquiry that became this dissertation. In other words, having learned from the below critical theories, I was able to develop of a body of public scholarship I have since named ‘The Ezel Project,’ which I am now investigating in this work, ‘The Ezel Project Inquiry.’

Critical Theories

Critical Race Theory

As my work centers on race and racism, I ground my mind and heartset firmly in several of the tenets of critical race theory (CRT), a framework derived from legal studies and analysis (e.g. Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1990) and expanded into many other fields, including education (Dixson, 2018), and now a flashpoint for right-wing politicians with the so-called ‘divisive concepts’ bills becoming state law across the nation, mostly in Southern and Midwestern states

(Ray & Gibbons, 2021). I am particularly compelled by the idea of *interest convergence* (Bell, 1980; Milner, 2008), which holds that racism will never abate unless and until it becomes in the actual interest of whiteness to change, which is, in a way, impossible within the construction of whiteness. As Kendi (2019) explains, racism is borne more of self-interest than of pure hatred, though the latter is surely a factor. Convincing individuals that oppression is immoral will not be effective as long as whiteness believes it is in its best interest to maintain racial oppression, and by definition and ideology, it cannot accept a challenge to this hierarchical structure. The structural aspect of the system of racism is central to CRT, and the racialized organizational credentials that I hope my students will prove to have challenged are tied directly to this part of my multifaceted framework. My goal is not to somehow convince whiteness to challenge racism, because whiteness requires racism to exist, so much as to help individual white educators pull themselves away from whiteness as an ideology.

Another important aspect of CRT is the use of storytelling, and particularly what is referred to as *counterstories* (Delgado, 1995). Compelling though numerical metrics may be to many, CRT believes in the power of stories that counter the dominant racial (and racist) narrative as a methodological tool against the status quo. Long before I created the courses on whiteness, I began taking notes on what I hoped to do with my scholarship, an ongoing document that morphed into planning for the Ezel Project and various other instances of public scholarship. The very first sentence in the document, written before Ezel himself was even born, says “counter stories of ELT professionals.” I had yet to decide upon frameworks, but in a way, it seems as though this framework had already decided on me.

One might ask, how can it be a counterstory if the participants are white? Well, as will be discussed in the literature cited below, a great deal of the empirical data on white educators

demonstrates how they have struggled with race and racism, and while that is useful to some extent, I hope to capture how, despite struggling with these same issues, my own participants have nonetheless taken steps to decenter whiteness in their racialized and ableist organizations. Additionally, by including my own narrative and my own somewhat unique relationship with whiteness, I believe I can convey a dimension of racism that has rarely been explored in the literature, meaning that the autoethnographic aspect is itself a counterstory⁷. We both stand apart from aspects of our identities, my participants in their conscious decisions to try and push against the whiteness inside of which they were raised, and myself in both my eventual rejection of my status as the supposedly “smart” and “safe” Black person who might expect to be welcomed into whiteness, in addition to placing me at a distance from most academics. As will be shown among the findings, all eleven of us – myself and the ten participants – had to make a conscious choice to twist away from the narratives that had been pushed upon us, and these decisions, from different origins but towards a convergent future, comprise the counterstory that I hope this work can represent. Accordingly, I hope to provide a story that counters the dominant narrative in two directions at once, and hopefully can have a stronger impact accordingly.

Another tenet of critical race theory is *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1990), or the important idea that no one aspect of a person’s identity can or should be fully demarcated from others, particularly with respect to ways in which they are being oppressed. Daniel G. Solorzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara J. Yosso (2000), rooted in the field of education, listed five central elements of CRT approaches and perspectives, and included intersectionality among them as follows:

1. The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism;

⁷ See **Chapter Three** for more detail on autoethnography.

2. The challenge to the dominant ideology;
3. The commitment to social justice;
4. The importance of experiential knowledge; and
5. The use of interdisciplinary perspectives. (p. 63)

As gradually became clear to me regarding my own identity, there are few people, if any, who can be classified as existing along only one axis of oppression. More detail will be given below, but although I entered my research with a plan to focus on whiteness as a purely racial hierarchization, an approach that does not explicitly consider additional angles will fall short of providing a full picture. I had to learn this “the hard way,” by experiencing what I only retroactively learned was ableism in my adolescence, and intersectionality insists that experiential knowledge not be dismissed as dominant ideologies are challenged.

Critical Whiteness Studies

Speaking of whiteness, my focus therein is aided by engagement with Critical Whiteness Studies, particularly the work of Painter (2011), Cabrera (2012), Matias⁸ (2015), Roediger (2018), and the earlier framing made by Harris (1993), though the latter appeared before the discipline was codified. My own articles are thus far chiefly centered on whiteness and white female and male educators, specifically because, even when race is discussed, the oppression seems to descend from a faceless, nameless origin, the way Flores and Rosa (2015) describe the harsh judgment of the *white perceiving subject*. The Ezel Project was designed to substantively diminish the power of whiteness, and as such whiteness itself is an important fulcrum of the pedagogy, as well as an

⁸ Who I am now working with on a chapter in an edited volume

important aspect of my second research question; the participants are not merely attempting to challenge racism in their organizations, from which they could more easily separate themselves, but whiteness specifically.

Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (Dis/Crit)

As I learned more about dis/ability, however, it became clear that to ignore this intersectional aspect of racial oppression would be causing damage. Dis/Crit (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013), a combination of Disability Studies in Education and Critical Race Theory, is a recent addition to the literature, so recent in fact that it is rather shocking scholars did not have an appropriate framework for effectively analyzing this intersection. As listed in the article cited above, the tenets of Dis/Crit are as follows:

1. Dis/Crit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate inter-dependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.
2. Dis/Crit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on.
3. Dis/Crit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.
4. Dis/Crit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.
5. Dis/Crit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.

6. Dis/Crit recognizes whiteness and ability as property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens.
7. Dis/Crit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.

Intersectionality is a central tenet of Disability Justice (Berne et al., 2018), and dis/ability cannot be divorced from the full understanding of whiteness that I hope to convey with my work, even though the two have not always been analyzed collectively. As shown above in **Figure 1**, my public scholarship is an important part of my work, and the influence of Dis/Crit is perhaps more prominent there than in the Decentering Whiteness courses. Accordingly, I started including captions on all of my public presentations, and, additionally, since my podcast remains a facet of my activism, I have begun transcribing each episode with the help of a program (though I edit them by hand), as I cannot consider my work fully accessible if it cannot be consumed by all of the public⁹. If I am going to teach about how whiteness constructs both racism and dis/ability, I cannot exclude people who are impacted negatively by both; additionally, if the students, the people who attend my talks, or the people who consume my podcast, are going to attempt to challenge whiteness in their organizations, they need to understand how it similarly pathologizes dis/ability, and allow this to inform their choices going forward. For better or worse, though, I planned the course curriculum before I gained a full understanding of this intersection, so the findings may not show as much of an explicit push against ableism as I would have hoped had I planned the course now. Nevertheless, my own experiences as a public scholar and the decision I

⁹ Which is also why I prefer to avoid jargon whenever possible.

made to medicalize myself (see **Chapter Four**) ensured that conceptualizations of ability resonated throughout the findings.

Critical Pedagogy and The Ezel Project

Ultimately, these interconnected critical theories have built towards my evolving scholarly ideology, both in terms of my classes and the rest of my public scholarship (as shown in **Figure 1** above). The Decentering Whiteness course rejected authoritarianism, and the sessions, aside from a brief introduction in the first class, were fully interactive and egalitarian. At no point did I give orders, and the homework assignments, while important, were designed as reflective bridges from one session to another (See **Appendix A** for more details). Surely, it was my course, and I provided intellectual labor for which I believe should have been compensated fairly, but the work the students completed belonged to them, and the action plans are of their choosing. Ultimately, the course is built so that they can find their own paths towards decentering whiteness in such a way that oppression is substantively lessened in their organization, and because of these aims, I believe my work falls under *Critical Pedagogy* (Freire, 1970).

It would be possible to create an informative course about racial oppression, about ableism, or even about whiteness, and convince myself that, having been harmed by racism and conceptualizations of normalcy and ability, it would only be fair for me to assume full control of the proceedings. In Freire's framing, though, the teacher should not place themselves above the learners, and although I did have certain scholarly expertise my participants may not have, one important theme of the course is that the learners knew far more about whiteness than they realize, and that the solution to its hegemony¹⁰ primarily requires them to gain a clearly articulated

¹⁰ i.e., dominance of one social group.

knowledge about themselves, their institutions, and the connections they already have to whiteness.

Critical Pedagogy also fits in neatly with the concept of racialized organizations, because, in a miniature sense, my course might be replicating the structures that I hope the students challenge if it had been constructed in an authoritarian manner. A pedagogy that is not critical of its own inherent power dynamics is necessarily authoritarian, and though the course needed to be constantly monitored for these imbalances, something I often reflected upon in my post-session notes, I believe that the Ezel Project could exemplify these ideals if it turns out I was successful.

Admittedly, some of my analysis of the Critical Pedagogy involved in my work is necessarily retrospective – I believe in Freire’s ideals, but, as I will write several more times in this work, I had a time crunch in planning the course, and I was focused more on topics and logistics than I was on the theories with which I am now working. Indeed, the Ezel Project was decidedly not developed as research, but rather as ideas I felt needed sharing, and only when I grew overwhelmed with the combination of work, school, *and* the Ezel Project courses and public talks that I began to wonder if it could become part of my scholarship. As such, I am retroactively applying a theoretical lens to pedagogy I developed to serve what I felt was an eminent need. I will return to this throughout the findings in the final chapters of this work.

By keeping the ideal of Critical Pedagogy in mind, ensuring that dis/ability is incorporated my own writing and speaking about pathologization (Annamma, 2018), focusing on the structural aspects of racism and ableism that lead to the unspoken prominence of whiteness and ability within organizations, my course and the reportage thereof bring all four of these frameworks together in The Ezel Project and all that I eventually write for the public as the work continues.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The specific set of tasks I have initiated does not exist in the literature in precisely this format, though aspects of it resemble other work. There is scholarship on anti-racist professional development in workplaces, including nursing (Bell, 2021) and nonprofits (Greene, 2007), and there is scholarship on anti-racist teacher education (e.g., Miller, 2020; Arnebeck & Jamte, 2021), but I have been unable to find one with the specific attributes contained herein, and particularly the addition of the autoethnography from a scholar with my positionality. The participants completed a course designed and led by an individual Black and neurodivergent scholar with the aim to have (non-Black) students commit to substantively changing the organizations with which they are affiliated. The Ezel Project also includes how my other public scholarship efforts – e.g., podcast, presentations, personal communication, and my upcoming book – influence my Critical Pedagogy and the supposedly long-term changes made by the participants, as well as its connection to the methodology discussed in **Chapter Three**. Any single article cited as a specific model would be an expositional stretch. Instead, I feel it would be more beneficial to, as Paris and Winn (2014) said, “take an academic walk” (p. 56) through the relevant literature I have consumed, internalized, and discussed in the time leading up to the initiation of this project, which will lead into an explanation of how my frameworks have been chosen.

Racism and Language

In early 2019, I was first introduced to Flores and Rosa’s (2015) concept of *raciolinguistic ideologies* in a course co-taught by Dr. Maria Teresa Sanchez. Flores and Rosa (2015) argue that it is not possible to discuss the language of a racialized person without considering how it is tied how their body is or is not valued. Like many of the articles I will critical review, this gave voice

to my experiences and feelings, and I began to include their work in many of my written assignments and publications. In particular, I was drawn to the aforementioned concept of the *white perceiving subject*, the oft-unmentioned audience for the language used by a racialized speaker and whose oppressive assessment helps reify linguistic and white supremacist hegemony (e.g., Macedo et al., 2015). This was one of the first times I encountered a succinct description of how whiteness retains its power even without being voiced.

Although much of academia is unfortunately disparate and siloed, I was determined not to allow this to be the case for my scholarship, and I began a useful practice that continues to this day, connecting directly with authors with relevant bodies of work. I came across the work of a young scholar named Vijay Ramjattan, whose publications (in particular, one from 2019) focus primarily on the ways “non-native” English teachers are oppressed based on their accents, their look, and many other ways they are coded as not meeting the “standard of whiteness.” Instead of just reading his articles, however, I contacted him and met him briefly at the 2019 American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference in Toronto¹¹, and have since built a close scholarly relationship with him, including a *Language Magazine* project we, along with another collaborator, recently developed, authored, and completed. This practice of critically thinking and building with fellow critical scholars has ensured that my public scholarship must pass through the scrutiny of those I admire and respect rather than merely being submitted in pursuit of school credit, and I believe it is one reason I have been able to build name recognition in my iconoclastic corner of the field despite not having finished my degree.

¹¹ I also met Dr. Flores in Toronto; I spoke to Dr. Rosa on the phone in January of 2021, and have communicated with Dr. Ray about his work for the better part of a year.

After connecting with Dr. Ramjattan, I was convinced by my wife to begin what became my podcast, a decidedly amateur production that has nonetheless garnered a small amount of attention among language and racism scholars. Each conversation is semi-structured¹² around a broad topic, and knowing that we will be heard publicly by a few hundred people has helped me ensure that my conceptualizations are resonant for other such thinkers and practitioners. Dr. Ramjattan has been a guest on the show thrice so far, in fact. And now, in 2022, the show has joined a larger podcast network and will hopefully be heard by many more people. We shall see.

Analyses of Racism and Whiteness

I began to look more deeply into whiteness and racism as scholarly subjects, while keeping one foot firmly in my background of language education. At this point, I consumed two of the most popular recent works on race, the article (and eventually the book) in which the term *white fragility* (DiAngelo, 2011) was popularized and *How to be an Antiracist* (Kendi, 2019). I was deeply taken with these works when I first read them, and cited both when I later presented my *altruistic shield* article at a conference; in fact, white fragility is listed as a central component of the concept of the *altruistic shield*. I have since traveled some distance away from this writing, not because I have decided they lack value, but because, perhaps by their own design, they are more useful as starting points on race scholarship than as endpoints¹³, and I have since deepened my understanding of the subjects. I understand why they remain popular, though. Truthfully, I have come to find Kendi's earlier book, *Stamped from the Beginning* (2017), more effective in its depth

¹² A word I am choosing deliberately

¹³ Something with which I am not sure the authors would disagree

and novel conceptualization, and have leaned more heavily on this work as my thinking and feeling has advanced.

With these as ballast, I dove into the many extant analyses of whiteness, building a scholarly lens and an eventual pedagogy brick-by-brick, through both conceptual arguments and empirical findings. Among the latter, I read, first, about the whiteness of teaching and how challenging it is to discuss this explicitly (Picower, 2009), with teachers falling back on any other portion of their identity they can find in order to distance themselves from being complicit in whiteness. For that article, Picower interviewed eight white, female pre-service teachers and also reviewed their written assignments from a multicultural education course, using a grounded theory method to analyze the data. As Picower (2009) found,

Participants often used not only religion but also their White ethnic backgrounds to create a hegemonic story about how people of color should be able to pick themselves up by their bootstraps... Such a view upholds the dominant ideology of people of color as lazy and victims of their circumstances and helps teachers such as Dawn to perpetuate the myth of American meritocracy (p. 201).

I learned of how popular culture creates and alternative certification programs reify an image of a heroic white educator “making a difference” in racialized communities (Cann, 2015). Cann (2015) selected a handful of what she calls *white teacher savior films* (e.g. *Dangerous Minds*, 1995) and compared the narratives in these productions to the materials promoted by Teach for America, performing both visual and textual analyses to determine how these combined materials, in her words, “created meaning rather than represented meaning” (p. 295). Cann (2015) elaborated to write,

The not-so-subtle message here is that urban youth do not need highly qualified and experienced teachers who look like them, but rather, they do better academically when given inexperienced and underqualified, White¹⁴ teachers. Against the educational research, these narratives mark their inexperience and Whiteness as the freshness that brings salvation to impoverished urban youth floundering under more experienced, but burnt-out, and bureaucratized educators (p. 306).

The issue with assumed altruism, as mentioned above, has recurred in my work¹⁵, and it is one of the topics that I am always concerned will be left out of any such courses on whiteness, allowing educators “off the hook,” so to speak, because of their supposed good intentions¹⁶.

I also read of how self-described liberals exhibit a particularly insidious form of racism mixed with intense denial thereof (Zamudio & Rios, 2006), which resonated strongly from my own experience in a series of nominally progressive schools. The Zamudio and Rios study is by far the largest among these main empirical foci, collecting its data from the journal entries of sixty undergraduate students, and analyzing it through grounded theory research methods. From this trove of data, they were able to establish their theorization of said polite, color-evasive, liberal racism and how it differs from what one might call “traditional” or “overt” racism. Ultimately, I had to ensure that my courses directly addressed these possible issues with white educators in some fashion.

¹⁴ “White” is capitalized only where it appears as such in quoted articles.

¹⁵ Including said Matias-edited chapter that will be published later this year.

¹⁶ This sort of issue is the problem I have always had with any training related to implicit bias, as it, by definition, lets people off the hook. I also believe achieving a “better racism score” is besides the point when this is a systemic issue. Most importantly, getting a better score does not seem to actually blunt the effects of an organization’s racism (Forscher, et al., 2019).

Education, Racism, and Whiteness

Finally, though, I came across what eventually pointed towards some possible paths forward for my own courses. I encountered the idea of assigning white learners a racial autobiography (Ullucci, 2012), as many have never explicitly considered their own whiteness and its impact on their context. Ullucci performed a textual analysis of the assignments her education graduate students had completed over several years in her class, using Critical Race Theory as a framework to situate her own, and her students', positionality. Similar to Picower's (2009) findings above, Ullucci wrote:

Culture was the more salient component for many students; unraveling how being white functioned was more of a hurdle. More than a few students mentioned that they didn't have racial backgrounds – that other components of their identity were more important. While this may feel true to a particular individual, it also exposes a gap in this assignment. Being white matters (p. 97).

In other words, being white means having the option to distance oneself from one's racial identity, when others lack this choice. When I looked for a way to build a course curriculum, this seemed a natural place to begin.

Also helpful to me was learning of the fact that challenging whiteness can be classified as *transgressive white racial knowledge* (Crowley, 2016). Crowley's study was multi-faceted, involving initial field notes, recording of his own teaching, written assignments, and semi-structured interviews, all of which he coded through a constant comparative process. From this trove of data, what emerged was a feeling of tension among his white participants. As he explained:

This tension creates hesitant, unsure feelings about race as desires to take action are always implicated with desires to remain in the good graces of the white community. While members of the urban cohort were often able to grasp critical racial knowledge intellectually, they displayed ambivalence when they discussed putting it into practice, as shown by their desire for safe spaces to talk about race (p. 11).

Ambivalence, a lack of confidence, but an ability to understand racism and whiteness on a purely intellectual level—there was something to work with here.

Once again, I contacted two of these authors—Ullucci and Crowley—to discuss their work and their findings, and incorporated some of their guidance into my own course. Taken together, the findings above led me to take note of a few themes that had emerged from this subsection of the literature, namely what I saw as:

1. A strong desire to distance from whiteness and racism;
2. A tendency to position oneself as a savior;
3. The need for white educators to come to a fuller understanding of how whiteness has shaped their lives and careers; and
4. The need for a supported space where they could build towards concrete action instead of remaining understandably uncertain of a way forward.

In the **Course Design** section (see **Appendix A**), I will make clear how I incorporated all of these themes as central aspects of my curriculum.

I consumed other scholarship on the intersection of teaching, racism, and whiteness (e.g., Cabrera, 2012; Daniels & Varghese, 2019; Seltzer & de los Rios, 2018), all of which built the incontrovertible argument that all educators, myself included, must have a strong grounding in all of these topics, regardless of the subjects they teach. Although my whiteness course is not,

technically, a language class per se, many of the topics are based around the way our language protects whiteness, and all of this scholarship has informed the construction of the pedagogy. Additionally, as I built towards my second publication, I included more analysis of the economic systems at play, including the influence of neoliberalism and its claims toward a value-neutral free-market ideology (Harvey, 2007) in maintaining the violent but silenced hegemony of whiteness.

Though there are myriad metaphors for whiteness in the literature (Leonardo, 2016), the one I continued to return to in my scholarly evolution is that put forth by Harris (1993), where whiteness is positioned as property to be defended at all costs and by any means necessary. Harris's work is central to the evolution of one of my primary frameworks (CRT), and this article in particular has helped serve as a path to my own understanding of the means through which whiteness endeavors to exclude. Within this framework, individuals seek to protect their investment in the ideology, and, as one might see on signs in many suburban or rural areas, *trespassers will be shot*, sometimes quite literally. Additionally, one can become a trespasser through more than just the wrong skin tone, which helps support the contention of Dis/Crit scholars, as cited above, that both whiteness and ability are forms of property.

If I return to our previous discussion of Ray (2019), one prominent aspect of the property of whiteness is organizations themselves, or perhaps the conceptualization of certain types of work is a better way to frame it. If whiteness is indeed a credential, then for the racialized to move past their own deserved place is to trespass on this property. There are surely exceptions, but for a racialized organization (or school) to truly become an organization that supports the racialized, whiteness and its defense of its property cannot remain in its place at the center. Accordingly, decentering whiteness becomes key to transforming said organizations.

When I think of a mindset that is deeply committed to its property, I struggle with something like Helms's theory of white racial identity development (1990), with its skillfully examined stages and processes. I reflect upon race theorization, and particularly the aforementioned idea of *interest convergence* (Bell, 1980; Milner, 2008), and although I think Helms has captured the internal process of a white individual learning to divest from whiteness, I remain concerned that a group of morally-improved people is not automatically guaranteed to change policies and practices. That is, I believe we need to take direct action on structural practices, and the course is designed to lead directly to such changes – this is what I came to classify as my goal of *mesotransformation*. To be clear, though my course is designed for individual participants, these individuals are meant to learn together to challenge structural inequity, oppression along many different axes that intersect in powerful ways. This was, however, not the endpoint of the academic journey that preceded the Ezel Project, as my knowledge base was expanded in an unexpected way.

Dis/Ability, Education, and Racism

In the spring of 2020, I was informed of a request for proposals in an edited volume about dis/ability¹⁷. Never having studied “special education” before that semester, I nonetheless submitted a chapter proposal about my own personal experience, which was accepted (Gerald, 2022). Before recent years, I had been in deep denial about my own clear neurodivergence (i.e., my brain processes stimuli in ways that are outside of the supposed “norm,” in both good and bad

¹⁷ I write “dis/ability” with a slash to denote that people categorized as such have been disabled by the society that created the idea thereof while refusing to accommodate their needs. There is plenty of debate around this choice and I may yet change my mind, but Subini Annamma, among others, uses this construction, and I respect this work.

ways), but the literature I was introduced to¹⁸ helped me understand the deep, and painful, connection between the social and emotional construction of dis/ability and racism, and how a form of ableism had compounded the educational trauma I had experienced. In particular, the historical way that Black students have long been considered both sub-and superhuman (e.g., Artiles, 1998; Nielsen, 2012) has never left our educational system, filtering all the way down to the way that dis/abilities are affixed to supposed “troublemakers” in the classroom (Shalaby, 2017). I gained a full understanding of how dis/abled and racialized learners are forced to grapple with what Yoon (2019) calls *haunted trauma*, punished and removed from class instead of receiving the support and care they deserve. Even when students receive an appropriate identification, districts will often do just enough to avoid being punished (Voulgarides, 2018), and whether a student is Black, dis/abled, or especially if they are both, they are pathologized by a system built for their very destruction (Annamma, 2018). At least that is how the assembled texts painted the situation to me, and in learning this about the intersection of racism and dis/ability—or the intersection of whiteness and ability supremacy—while coming to terms with my own neurodivergence and becoming a father to a boy who may well later prove to process stimuli and information the same way that I do, it was further inspiration not to have a merely descriptive research topic: I needed to take direct and specific action against whiteness and other forms of oppression. It is too late for the child I once was, but it is not too late to protect Ezel. The consumption of this scholarship alongside the ongoing production of my increasingly activism-centric podcast coincided with the publication of my article on decentering whiteness and the global racial reckoning that led me to designing my course and to my decision that any other

¹⁸ Along with unlocking conclusions in talk therapy.

research I might attempt would necessarily be less compelling and less significant than an inquiry into the Ezel Project has the potential to be.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The Power of Autoethnography

I have two primary research questions. As a reminder, they are:

1. How have my multiple identities and my experiences as an educator and an academic within racialized and ableist organizations shaped the development of my mesotransformative decentering whiteness and ability supremacy courses?
2. A. How do white educators describe the way that their experiences and prior relationship to whiteness influenced their decision to join a course on decentering whiteness?
B. How did that participation in this course shape their efforts at substantively decentering whiteness in their racialized and ableist organizations?

One is about my own experience, and the other is about the steps my white students have taken to decenter whiteness in their racialized organizations after taking my class. What I believe makes the most sense is to combine and build upon two traditional methodologies to form something that can bring the entire story together. Regarding my own story, my experiences as an educator and novice scholar and my developing positionality lend themselves to the use of autoethnography, which is more than autobiography or a mere personal story in that it is an explicit connection between the self and the culture (Ellis, 2004). I have written above – and am in the process of threading throughout my book – about how each aspect of my chosen topics (whiteness, ability, language teaching) are tied to my own identity and experience, and as such autoethnography would seem to fit. Writing in the book that shares its name with the methodology itself, Adams et al. (2015) defined autoethnography as follows:

A qualitative research method that: 1) uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique beliefs, practices, and experiences; 2) acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others; 3) uses deep and careful self-reflection--typically referred to as "reflexivity"--to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political; 4) shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles; 5) balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity; and 6) strive for social justice and to make life better. (p.2)

Another reason I favor autoethnography is the fact that telling my own story will necessarily defy the narrative placed upon me and people like me. Bonilla-Silva (2018) has written that members of racialized groups have their own emotionality, and as such, there is inherent value in making the decision to shape our own public perceptions through autoethnography, as well as in my reluctance – or is it inability? – to diverge from my preferred, emotionally open writing style. For racialized scholars, autoethnography can be a powerful tool of building autonomy over one's own story (e.g., Hughes, 2019; Kim, 2019; Ohito, 2016), and particularly with my own experience of gradually coming to terms with my own neurodivergence, an opportunity to tell a much more accurate story about myself is almost a necessity. A pertinent example of this particular intersection can be found in the work of Hernández-Saca and Cannon (2019), who demonstrated the ability of autoethnography to aid them in regaining power over their own narratives as racialized and neurodivergent scholars, and who, in a follow-up (2021), referred to the method as possessing the "gift of disruption," a shield from "epistemological and educational violence" (p. 21). As Hughes, Pennington, and Makris (2012) noted, autoethnography has not always been respected as empirical, yet my experience as a racialized author, as well as the frameworks I call

upon, leads me to believe that its potential impact for oppressed groups, this “gift of disruption,” is inextricable from that enduring academic skepticism.

My entire scholarship is ultimately about challenging the premise of the very epistemology upon which we rely, and my own story is one of gradual disillusionment with the narrative I have been sold throughout my life and academic career, leading to the way I have thus designed courses to decode, decenter, and demolish the system I was told to value. As such, a significant portion of my findings will be an autoethnographic examination of the Ezel Project and the person who created it. Additionally, autoethnography will help me disentangle the aspects of my public scholarship that do and do not align with my chosen frameworks, and, in particular, how my efforts do and do not align with Critical Pedagogy and the principles thereof.

Narrative Inquiry and Participants’ Stories

My own story is only half of the project, however, as I also have a primary question about the students in my class and the choices they have made to further our shared goals of decentering whiteness. I asked these students to share with me their own accounts of their racial understanding, their motivation for joining my course, and their possible success at challenging whiteness in their organizations after the fact, and then I used this textual data to perform a deeper data analysis. The interviews were similar in a lot of respects, as all of the participants described learning more about whiteness as adults after having emerged from consistently color-evasive childhoods, with only one exception. Where the stories differed was in how they chose to approach their goals after completing the course, and the true inquiry, as well as the analysis, eventually centered on what ways in which they are hoping to challenge whiteness into the future.

Ultimately, I hope this work conveys the story of how my experiences led me to create and deliver the class, as well as the stories of how these students came to be the type of white individuals who would take such a class, how their experience in the class affected their choices in decentering whiteness, and what they have attempted to do after taking the class, particularly with respect to decentering whiteness in their racialized organization.

In considering my own methodology, I think back to the previously-cited study by Ullucci (2012), where she had her students write racial autobiographies, and I think of what Syed (2016) refers to as *master narratives*, a rejection of the tidy life stages and hierarchies to which we might all be accustomed, and a more authentic way to examine our own stories in relation to the world around us. As she wrote, “Master narratives are the “stuff” of society. They provide a template for understanding acceptable behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes within a given society” (p. 318). By asking my participants to share with me their own development in relation to whiteness and the decisions they have made in opposition to it, I believe I can help demonstrate an as-yet-untold master counternarrative, which will serve as an example for those who want to take these steps but have yet to find resonance in other approaches they may have encountered.

As I was quite explicitly in search of my participants’ stories, the most appropriate traditional methodology appeared to be narrative inquiry. As described by Bhattacharya (2017), “narrative inquiry offers a lens, a framework to the study of storied lives” (p. 93). For my students, I hope to share my understanding of how the stories of their lives brought them to my class, and how these stories have developed in the time afterwards. I might add that I had no guarantee that my class had had any significant impact on their stories, and if those are among the findings, it would be valuable to share this all the same.

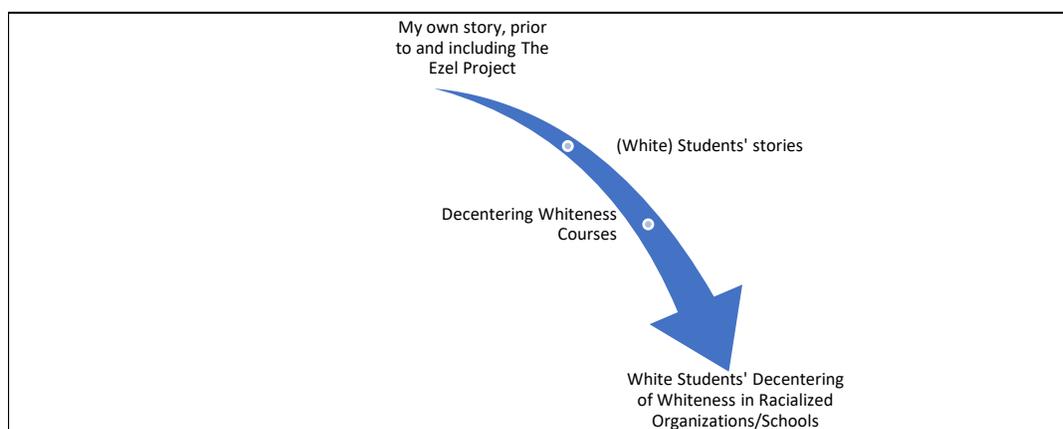
In searching for examples of how this method might fit my goals, I looked initially for mere examples of narrative inquiry that were compelling, but, as it turns out, I came across two examples of the type of study reportage I might hope to produce, created by fellow graduate students.¹⁹ Paula Booker-Baker (2005) focuses, nominally, on five Black women who have received doctoral degrees and the resilience contained in their stories, but the way she tells the story, although framed as narrative inquiry, is similar to the way I have always written. Consider this brief selection, part of the preamble to the description of her methodology: “My narrative is speckled with adversity, and resiliency is a constant in my life. As I began this project in storytelling and questioning, I continually reflected on my story” (p. 87). Again, it is not described as autoethnography per se, but the parallels between her style and mine are clear. As for her actual study design, she contacted a total of eleven women, then narrowed the selection down to the five she found the most compelling, which is an interesting way to phrase it, but ultimately, for narratives, an honest and real consideration (though in my case, I already knew my students). She ultimately interviewed each participant for a total for four to eight hours, after which she called them to clarify points contained in the data as she reviewed it. As one might expect, she then coded the transcripts of her recorded interviews and pulled out what she found to be the most resonant version of the stories.

Arany Sivasubramaniam (2020) chose a more traditional structure and writing style, but she also made clear how CRT and narrative inquiry can work in tandem. As she wrote, “Narrative inquiry complements CRT in storytelling because it is a source to uncover the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences are constituted” (p. 45). For her

¹⁹ And yes, I am the type of obsessive who read both of them in their entirety.

study, she had a goal that was broadly similar to my own, in that she was hoping to transform a particular context by capturing five salient counterstories, which in her case was an examination of what we would call long-term care facilities and the racism contained within them. For her methods, she chose to adopt a “life story method” of narrative inquiry to capture her participants’ transition to long-term care and the racialization involved therein, using semi-structured, conversational interviews that were designed to allow for fluidity. Her narrative analysis centered on finding “plots” in these life stories, like a novel any one of us might read.

Returning to Bhattacharya (2017), she actually classifies autoethnography as a subtype of narrative inquiry, though these categorizations feel somewhat arbitrary in my estimation, and, as the author herself wrote, “The list is a flexible one” (p. 94). The point here is that my interest was not precisely in what has happened after the class but how the students *feel* that their own stories have changed with respect to whiteness. As Hammack (2011) noted, “The meaning individuals make through narrative is not simply personal or idiosyncratic but rather *political* in nature, for it always possesses implications for a particular configuration of social categories and, hence, social competition” (p. 312). What my white participants expressed, and what I was able to find among the stories they shared with me, was not just their stories, but an explicitly political meaning, and as such I hope that my findings represent some valuable interpretations from what they share that will prove compelling to any educators hoping to find a way to decenter whiteness themselves. What makes my research necessary, I feel, is the connection between my own journey and theirs, how our narratives might prove to have intersected in a way that will lead to the decentering of whiteness. For a visual representation of what I am trying to do with this research, see **Figure 2** below.

Figure 2

(See **Appendix C** for full list of semi-structured interview questions.)

Ultimately, I hoped to capture their own understanding of their, as mentioned, master narratives, and then, through my analysis, will determine how their stories have intersected with mine in the class, as reflected in the above image.

In retrospect, though I am referring to the sections about my experience as autoethnography and the findings from the students as narrative inquiry, I truly believe that the full story requires both portions, and I am not sure saying that the work is “partially autoethnography and partially narrative inquiry” quite captures what I am attempting, even before considering that the former might be classified as a subset of the latter. Ultimately, I think this research is best classified, as I wrote back at the beginning of **Chapter One**, as *narrative intersection*, because the purpose is the exploration of how I was led to this place, how my students met me there, what happened once we collided, and the (counter)story that represents the entire journey.

Participant Recruitment and Procedure

My study participants were recruited from among the 33 people who have taken my classes. I chose these participants purposefully because my second research question focuses on white educators who have taken a course that is explicit in its focus on whiteness, and otherwise I would need to search for other courses similar to mine and verify their curricula; though this will be explored again among the **Limitations in Chapter Seven**, I do not believe I would have been able to answer my research questions with any other participants. In order to verify that other individuals had chosen to complete a course similar to mine, I would have had to gain access to the curricula of offered courses, speak to the instructors, and solicit participation from among these students. This is not impossible, but it would have taken me a bit farther away from the story of the project I am hoping to convey.

The students have come from many different sources, with a wide variety of identities, locations, and positionalities. There have been 33 students across eight sessions thus far. Most²⁰ have identified as white, but not all. Most²¹ have identified as female, but not all. Most²² have been educators, but not all. Some²³ have been sent by their employers, some have found me through my Twitter account, and some have contacted me after seeing one of my presentations or consuming my podcast. There has been no particular pattern to the acquisition of students, aside from the fact that word of mouth has driven much of the progress.

When my eventual book publisher approached me in the fall of 2020, I was working on a seemingly unrelated project about whiteness and dis/ability, and when I spoke to her via Zoom,

²⁰ 23/33

²¹ 24/33

²² 24/33

²³ One cohort of six

we talked extensively about ideas I had, as she had seen a summary of one of my presentations²⁴. They are a language education publisher²⁵ – small but legitimate enough to publish a volume edited by Dr. Flores – and anything I wrote for them was going to have to tie into my original field of language education. I considered proposing a simple expansion of my published article on whiteness and language teaching, but then I knew I did not want my work that fall to go to waste, and I had some other ideas percolating, so I did what I always do and put every single one of my ideas together²⁶.

Accordingly, the book, in short, is about how whiteness uses language teaching as an instrument of pathologization while it is, in fact, whiteness that is pathological if you compare it to the criteria listed for antisocial personality disorder in the DSM. I chose to use the criteria for antisocial personality disorder as an analytic tool because I learned that a popular television host (Tucker Carlson) referred to Black protestors as “antisocial,” thereby reifying the centuries-old connection between identities outside of whiteness and the conceptualization of disorder. In other words, if anything is *antisocial*, it is whiteness, and English Language Teaching will remain a callous, corrupt, and cruel industry so long as whiteness remains at its center. The book will be called *Antisocial Language Teaching: English and the Pervasive Pathology of Whiteness*, and will be released in the fall.

The argument ties together settler colonialism, capitalism, anti-Blackness, ableism, and other related concepts, and is broken into three sections, **Disorder**, **Symptoms**, and **Treatment**²⁷.

²⁴ Yes, a summary rather than the presentation itself

²⁵ A subsidiary of Informa, which also owns Taylor and Francis; there are only a few corporations in the world!

²⁶ I will always have more ideas to spare, do not worry

²⁷ Lest one worry about this terminology, the goal is to *challenge* this medicalized language.

The final section of the book will include some of my observations from the Ezel Project, as well as the curriculum. This is a very long way of saying that, to fit the themes of the book, I have interviewed the students who are white *language* teachers (or academics) about what actions they have taken (or not taken) since they completed my course²⁸. The particular questions I asked of them included more details about the connection between language teaching and whiteness, but ultimately, this is not included in what I proposed to the IRB; I offer this explanation only so that the book's relationship to, and delineation from, my dissertation work is contextualized. Indeed, the book is a part of the public scholarship strand of the Ezel Project.

For my study, then, I contacted everyone who has taken my class as a cohort of participants not intended for the book and just for the dissertation²⁹. The recruitment form (see **Appendix B**) explained that the study was focused on the narratives of white educators and though I know, from our discussions in the class, who has told me that they would classify themselves as such, the participants were allowed to choose whether or not they considered themselves eligible, and whether or not they were interested in joining. Of the 33 people who have taken my class, 23 identified as white educators (including academics and doctoral students), and, after excluding the three people interviewed for my book, my recruitment goal was thus 20 people to interview. As it turned out, I had 50% participation from among this group, and completed 10 semi-structured interviews (see **Data Sources**). The interview questions were based around my research questions, and the interviews were conducted over Zoom and recorded, though only the transcripts were

²⁸ These interviews will not be directly quoted as they will occur before the conclusion of the IRB process; I have an aggressive contracted deadline for my manuscript.

²⁹ I cannot exclude the people I speak to for the book and they are welcome to participate in the study as well.

preserved³⁰. Data were stored on my password-protected external drive and backed up within a password-protected folder on my, again, password-protected laptop. Once the interviews were complete, I reviewed the transcripts a few times, taking occasional memos, and then conducted the data analysis mentioned below (see **Data Analysis**).

My goal, with both the informal book interviews and with the interviews conducted for the study, was to find a cross-section of white educators, which I hope will prove resonant to different readers, be they the public (for the book) or the committee members. I have taught, for example, white educators whose first language is not English, some who live in Asia, some who work at universities, and some who are also students like me. I hope to be able to help white readers see something of their own lives in the narratives I capture so that they might find motivation to attempt the same sort of changes in their own organizations. On the other hand, I hope that racialized readers can find resonance in my own story as it is weaved through the work.

I should offer a final note on the participants. Since half of this project involves my own exploration of my growing understanding of the power of whiteness, the narratives of white educators who have chosen to place their trust in me as an educator is an apt way for me to grapple with the distrust I have developed in the racialized and ableist organizations and schools in which I have spent my entire life. In a way, this work is something of a final attempt to find hope through these participants and their willingness to challenge a system that my son will soon be forced to endure. To some extent, that is really what the Ezel Project represents, my wish to believe he will be psychologically safe in the spaces I was told to trust, as manifested through these participants' potentially transgressive actions.

³⁰ I deleted the audio after listening a few times to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts.

Data Sources

As mentioned, for the autoethnographic aspects of the work, I will be using my ever-expanding portfolio of notes on my teachings, presentations, and podcast episodes, as well as my evolving document where I keep a journal of my scholarly evolution, all to inform a narrative wherein I analyze my own place with respect to whiteness and dis/ability in 2022, which will then be tied to the interview responses of the participants throughout the subsequent chapters of this work. As seen in **Figure 1**, the public scholarship is an equally valuable part of the Ezel Project, and my decisions in crafting a stance are tied to my identity and my experiences.

For the narrative inquiry, I conducted and recorded interviews with all 10 participants, during which I asked participants to share the narratives of their journey from the moment they understood that they were white, through their interest in and decision to enroll in the Decentering Whiteness course, up to whatever projects they have undertaken to challenge whiteness in their organization or school, and in their lives outside of their workplaces.

The sample included the following individuals:

- Of the 10 participants, nine are academics in some capacity, and one is a K-12 district employee and former classroom teacher. Among the academics, seven are professors of varying ranks, one is a doctoral candidate, and one is a provost.
- The sample featured eight women and two men, all of whom are cis het, with the exception of one cis queer woman.
- The participants range in age from their early 30s to their late 60s, though truthfully the range is more accurately described as early 30s to late 40s with one outlier.
- All participants are American – with a home language of English – by birth, though two live and work in Japan.

- Among those who live in the United States, one is in Maine, one is in Georgia, and six are in the Midwest.
- Four of the Midwest participants are colleagues at the same university, all of whom took the class together, and two of whom are husband and wife.

The following table (**Table 1**) summarizes the background information about each of the participants.

Table 1	
Participant # (Pseudonym)	Descriptors
One (Sally)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cishet woman in her early 40s</i> • <i>Education professor in Missouri</i> • <i>Wife of Mitchell, and colleague of Laurel and Christa</i>
Two (Gillian)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cishet woman in her 60s</i> • <i>Language professor in Japan</i>
Three (Laurel)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cis queer woman in her early 30s</i> • <i>Education professor in Missouri</i> • <i>Colleague of Sally, Mitchell, and Christa</i>
Four (Mike)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cishet man in his late 40s</i> • <i>Provost in Wisconsin</i>
Five (Mitchell)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cishet man in his mid 40s</i> • <i>Education professor in Missouri</i> • <i>Husband of Sally, and colleague of Laurel and Christa</i>

Table 1 (continued)	
Six (Kim)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cishet woman in her mid 30s</i> • <i>Classics professor in Maine</i> <p>Kim was also a classmate of mine in college, though we barely knew each other; a mutual friend (also from college) invited her to my course.</p>
Seven (Shirley)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cishet woman in her mid-40s</i> • <i>K-12 district employee in Iowa</i> <p>Sole participant who is not involved in academia.</p>
Eight (Jasmine)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cishet woman in her early 40s</i> • <i>Language professor in Japan</i>
Nine (Eileen)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cishet woman in her mid-30s</i> • <i>Language doctoral student in Georgia</i>
Ten (Christa)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cishet woman in her mid-30s</i> • <i>Education professor in Missouri</i> • <i>Colleague of Sally, Laurel, and Mitchell</i>

There are a few other descriptors that might be worth sharing – how many were married, how many had children, etc. – but I felt it best to focus on how these aspects of their identity shaped their individual narratives. The themes that I eventually uncovered brought to light the ways in which their superficially similar lives did in fact have important differences – albeit with plenty of commonalities – and indeed the analysis process proved its value, for I would not have noticed much difference without having developed questions to which I was tying the data.

Speaking of which, the information about the participants' backgrounds is tied directly to Research Question 2A, and the post-course efforts are tied directly to Research Question 2B,

whereas the autoethnographic work responds to Research Question 1, and is also contrasted with the participants' narratives throughout the reportage to ensure that the questions are not unnecessarily bifurcated from one another. These sources comprise the data for The Ezel Project Inquiry, and all of these stories will be woven together into a collective counternarrative in the chapters that follow this one.

Data Analysis

As Glaser (1965) wrote in originally defining the constant comparative approach, “the constant comparative method is concerned with generating and plausibly suggesting (not provisionally testing) many properties and hypotheses about a general phenomenon” (p. 438). As I have little desire to suggest that my course was a “test” or an experiment and sought only to explore the shape of the participants' stories, this method of analysis seemed appropriate for my goals.

Something Corbin and Strauss (1990) wrote aligns with the goals of my study: “Actors are seen as having, though not always utilizing, the means of controlling their destinies by their responses to conditions. They are able to make choices according to their perceptions, which are often accurate, about the options they encounter” (p. 5). My study is about these participants making the choice to take control over their “destinies” with respect to the whiteness under which they have always lived, and within which they continue to work.

My research questions were ultimately fairly straightforward questions about my participants' narratives. I believed that, so long as I was able to keep focused on my primary questions, the research would be strong, and the reportage worthwhile for my future attempts at publishing. It would be easy to become “distracted” by all of the ideas I am trying to tie together,

and it was important that I remain focused during my analysis. But ultimately, what readers are seeing here, with all of its offshoots and seemingly disparate threads, is the most effective way for me to think, operate, and write; more importantly, though, the story of whiteness, its many tendrils, and how it shapes all of us is far too messy to be approached within traditional boundaries, and I believe what I have outlined thus far was in fact the most effective way for me to tell these (counter)stories.

Consequently, I analyzed the transcripts as follows: With the help of the data organization system Dedoose, I performed inductive coding on the text of the transcripts and created a group of nine broad themes (and fourteen sub-themes) based upon my initial review (though their names changed upon further review). I then returned to each transcript to look for sub-themes (or child codes), and used the program to help me determine which themes (and sub-themes) overlapped with one another, and which recurred across the transcripts. As a novice data analyst, taking note of which themes co-occurred and when was definitely the most fascinating aspect of this process for me, and indeed shaped the final conclusions I attempt to draw later in this work.

On my first attempt to complete this work, I started by writing out an entire chapter that arranged the interview data in chronological order – i.e., Summary of Interview One, Summary of Interview Two – but that was lacking in robust analysis, so I went back to the transcripts to look for more connective ideas I had yet to uncover. I then re-ordered the information according to the themes in a way that I felt was more impactful and more closely tied to both the questions I was asking and the themes I uncovered in my initial rounds of analysis, then related these themes back to the theories that shaped the project. Consequently, after the end of this section, there are several chapters, each structured around a different aspect of my findings.

Examples of the broader themes I developed were as follows, as seen below in **Table 2**:

Table 2	
Themes	Description
Academic/Scholarly Development	<p>A significant portion of the participants' answers concerned the way their work and identities as scholars has changed and continues to, especially after their time in the course.</p> <p>Sub-themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publications • Committee Work
Anxiety in Challenging Hegemony	<p>This theme was identified when it appeared more than one participant expressed fear in taking action against whiteness.</p>
Backstory	<p>Catch-all theme for the portion of participants' narratives concerning the time before their participation in the course</p> <p>Sub-themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childhood and adolescence • Early Adulthood, which I separated only because a few participants were older and had a much longer narrative to share
Evolving Understanding of Whiteness	<p>Anything relating to how their understanding of whiteness emerged, developed, and continues to change</p> <p>Sub-themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memories of "overt" racism • On the boat • In the water <p>These final two sub-themes will be explained fully in future chapters dedicated to them, as they are central to what I believe I have uncovered.</p>
Existential Questions?	<p>When participants spoke more generally about their conceptualization of society</p>

Table 2 (continued)	
Themes	Description
Ezel Project Experiences	Participants' reactions to the actual Decentering Whiteness course they took, and which aspects resonated with them the most. The sub-themes were the topics discussed in my course that re-occurred. Sub-themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black Literature • Sundown Towns • White Saviorism
Personal Relationships	Created to separate narratives of these relationships from any professional relationships or work Sub-themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educator Parents • Parenting • Racialized Peers • Religious Community
Post-Class Narrative	What the participants have attempted after having completed the course
Unjust World	More than one participant expressed an understanding of what I called a fundamentally unjust world, and I wondered if this might have been a prominent theme in their backstories.

Having performed this analysis, I sat with the data and my research questions to help build narratives according to the themes I had uncovered. Before my studies, being handed these interview transcripts, I might have simply looked for what appeared often, and indeed that still factored in in some respects. As I hope will be clear in the following chapters, what emerged was the difficulty of capturing how individuals might approach what would be a series of institutional changes, and not just changes to institutions, but changes to the very construction of said institutions. Whether it is the scholars of CRT or Dis/Crit, or Ray's work on racialized organizations, the recurring concept is that, though maintained by individuals, these structures were built, and persist, beyond the beneficence or malevolence of a handful of actors. Though the

findings are written in a sort of before-and-after sense because they were easier to organize that way, the heavy question, one that I still am not sure there is a clear answer to, is if their legitimate efforts will actually succeed at the aforementioned mesotransformation, or if they have simply become morally improved people. As such, when tying the themes back to the theory referenced above and throughout, the perhaps insurmountable gap between individual endeavors and entrenched systems is what made itself known. To return to the autoethnographic aspect, then, a somewhat dispiriting question that must be asked is, even with all of this effort, between the public scholarship, the course I designed and taught, and this inquiry into all of it, will the Ezel Project have achieved its ultimate purpose of making Ezel safer, or am I ultimately just making myself feel better about my own existence within whiteness and ableism? Or, is he relative safe for a Black child because of our class position, regardless of my efforts? I will return to these issues throughout the chapters documenting my findings and hopefully reach a resonant conclusion.

In considering these potential pitfalls of my data, I was reminded of a scholar's public example that I happened to witness, and one that directly informs the public talks I have given, the essays I have written, and the curriculum for the Decentering Whiteness course. At that same 2019 conference in Toronto that I mentioned back in **Chapter One**, where I met both Vijay Ramjattan and Nelson Flores, I saw an interaction that shaped what I have done in the time since. Cheryl Matias, whose work on whiteness has been cited here a few times by now, gave a short presentation on her book, *Feeling White* (2016), on a panel with several other speakers. During the question-and-answer period at the end of the talk, a (white) audience member posed a question to her that essentially can be summarized as, "So what should I do?" I know that this is but a single anecdote, but I also know that Dr. Matias's response is important to the story of my public scholarship,

because she refused to give her a simple answer and told her to go and do the reading³¹. Until this point, I did not know that a racialized scholar could afford to refuse to engage with superficial responses to their scholarship, and of course Dr. Matias did have enough institutional power – an Associate Professor at the time, a Full Professor now – not to have to worry about certain aspects of how she might be perceived. Yet this integrity struck me as essential to the work I had yet to begin but was beginning to feel called towards. Ultimately, the lesson I took from this interaction, aside from (correctly) anticipating such response from the audiences I eventually had, was that it was important for me to resist the easy, straightforward answer. I am sure it frustrates some of the reviewers and readers who consume my writing, but the most authentic answers I can give to many of the issues of racism and oppression are conditional and complex.

As I moved closer to conducting my own research, I encountered more models and frameworks for concepts like racial literacy that left me cold and called to mind the audience member in Toronto and her understandable desire to know what steps she could take to resolve racism. There was no apparent malice within her, nor is there among anyone who attends my talks and chooses to listen to me patiently, but there shall be no absolution built on one-size-fits-all approaches. As you can see by reading the full Decentering Whiteness curriculum in **Appendix A**, the course provides very few definitive answers, and asks the participants to consider themselves and their contexts in a way no external facilitator truly can do *for* them. Part of this is pragmatic – I have no way of actually knowing what it is like to work in their institutions – and part of this is an ideological commitment to serving as a critical educator who does not believe he is the source of unquestionable truth. When I consider the aforementioned lessons I have learned

³¹ She remembered this story when I told it to her during the course of her editing my chapter.

from the writings of Freire, particularly the fallacy of the students-as-empty-vessels mindset, I can draw a circuitous line from my own experiences, through this confirmation of my no-simple-answers ideology as exemplified by Matias's admirable obstinance, through all of my public work and the course the participants completed. It is thus no wonder that what has emerged from the data and my analysis thereof is a set of recurring themes that I do feel have importance, but no step-by-step process for white educators who want to challenge whiteness. If the "master narrative" of the Ezel Project can be said to include all that I brought to my work, then the sharp turn I took from what our program's director would call a "nascent scholar" who was intent on creating a simple answer for non-profit adult education attendance to someone with much bigger, yet deliberately messier aims is important for this narrative intersection.

There is one other item I did want to highlight here, though, because, with a few minor exceptions, none of the participants explicitly focused on aspects of dis/ability in sharing their narratives about challenging whiteness. As will become clear below, they were very clear about the oppressive structures within which they work, but that is not where their stories traveled. Does that mean there is no place for my including it in the remainder of this work? No, because not only will it be centered in my own narrative, its presence – or invisibility – as an aspect of whiteness will be central to the way I attempt to draw a larger conclusion to the entire work. Indeed, the relationship between whiteness, dis/ability, and power is how the next chapter will begin, as I will first turn to my own story of self-medicalization and how it relates to the creation of the Ezel Project.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE INSTITUTION

Medicalizing Myself

We emerging scholars are supposed to remember that our purpose and our research questions are meant guide our work. As a reminder, my first question, which concerns this part of the findings, is as follows:

- How have my multiple identities and my experiences as an educator and an academic within racialized and ableist organizations shaped the development of my mesotransformative decentering whiteness courses?

The following narrative is an initial attempt to answer this question.

In early September of 2021, my colleagues and I were suddenly told we would soon be returning to our workplaces full-time after having been out of the office for 18 months due to the pandemic. I initially explored seeking some sort of accommodation, but without a documented autoimmune issue or something similar, this was unlikely to be approved, so I steeled myself for the return. Once we were told, later, that it would only be two days a week, I accepted the news, and resigned myself to a new routine on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but I could not ignore how destabilizing it had been to initially receive the news, and I felt it was worth exploring, and possibly seeking an accommodation later.

There was the obvious issue of COVID risk, but on the other hand, I knew that if I protected myself on both the commute and at my desk, I would most likely be fine with masks both mandated and enforced by supervisors and security guards³². It appeared that my spike in anxiety was not really about COVID. I thought it might be the fact that I was going to have to return home much

³² At the time, I worked in one of the buildings of the World Trade Center.

later than I would prefer, but my then-supervisor had a much longer commute than I did and seemed uninterested in over-policing our time, so I was able to construct a schedule that worked for both Ezel's needs and my own. Eventually, I came to understand that my anxiety was simply about the office itself and how uncomfortable I have always been there, and in similar contexts. This discomfort, I believe, was mostly due to the particulars of my neurodivergence.

Pre-pandemic, I happened to have a desk near the main entrance to our floor in an awful, low-wall cubicle format. What this meant was, if anyone's ID card failed or had been forgotten at their desk, I was the closest to the door, and I usually ended up opening the door eight or nine times a day. As you can imagine, this would be distracting for anyone, let alone someone with focus issues. Additionally, with people crossing in front of my workspace constantly, it was exceedingly difficult to stay focused on the mostly-repetitive obligations of my job, and this had led to serious issues with what my supervisors referred to as productivity in the past. I have been successful at times, and less so at others, and this has been the pattern for my entire academic and professional life – I do well when placed in a supportive position and poorly at other times. Most of these anxieties, then, seemed to be tied to focus and distraction, and an evaluation for what I thought might be Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) seemed like it might make sense. I reiterate that am skeptical of the value of medicalization, ascribing as I do to the social model of dis/ability, which “distinguishes between the impairment (biological and functional limitation) and the disability (the social oppression that results from the category)” (Hernández-Saca, et al., 2018, p. 289). So, although I did not – and do not – think that I needed a doctor's approval to continue to build my neurodivergent identity, it nonetheless felt like it was time to confirm once and for all if I did, in fact, have ADHD as I have long suspected.

In the time since my former therapist and I initially landed on this possibility a few years ago, I have explored this in my writing and on my podcast, including several chapters in edited volumes that will be published in the near future, and in the ongoing “scholarship journal” I mentioned above. Because of my lack of formal diagnosis, I have been more comfortable referring to myself as “neurodivergent” than “dis/abled,” even though, as I have mentioned when explaining why I write the word with a slash, I believe the way I was stigmatized for my behavior growing up is the true act of dis/abling more so than any neurological impairments I have. I did, however, feel sheepish about accepting the label, always quietly adding “undiagnosed” when mentioning the possibility of ADHD, and feeling a bit like a fraud. The harm in this is that when we tie our worth to the power of diagnosis, in a system that uses these labels as a cudgel with which it can and does choose to oppress (Artiles et al., 2016), it is not exactly exciting to embrace the official medicalization.

The truth of the matter is, I do not particularly want to ask for very much from any workplace other than a bit of patience and support. I asked to move my desk at work because the old one had too much foot traffic, and I bought some earplugs that help me reduce background noise. People who need me – and this is rare when I am not scheduled for a meeting or a class – have access to our entire team’s instant messaging service, and although this means I participate in less office small talk, that was always a practice that left me scrambling for ways to connect because, truthfully, I am not very good at surface conversations, and my colleagues are not people I can fully trust on the issues about which I care (and about which I write). Only two of my colleagues knew of my potential dis/ability, and only those same two have any clue I have written an entire book manuscript. This is tied to, if I did in fact have ADHD, Rejection Sensitivity (Dodson, 2021), a symptom which means that, even if I do not particularly care for people in my

presence, I am far too concerned about their approval of me if I can hear or see them talking. In the pre-pandemic office, all day long I could hear and see conversations that got my mind wound up to the point of losing focus, and with the earplugs, headphones, various podcast subscriptions, and instant messaging, I had found makeshift solutions to many of my office issues. The lessons I have learned about myself, my needs, and my boundaries have little to do with whatever diagnosis I would possibly receive, but I want to be able to write about dis/ability with my full chest, and I felt it would be more helpful than not to submit myself to the medicalization process.

That medicalization process, at least as an adult, is a mess, and ties into issues of power and self-determination. At least in my case, I was not specifically looking for an accommodation at the moment³³, and certainly not one that would allow me for extra testing time, as I sure hope, after the comprehensive examination prior to this dissertation process, that I am done taking tests for good. Indeed, part of the reason my school had never even considered this possibility during my adolescence is that, when motivated, I do everything – including tests – extremely quickly, what the doctors call *hyperfocus* (Flippin, 2021). In fact, the only way I am ever successful is to put considerable effort into corralling said hyperfocus and steering the unstoppable bullet train in my brain in the right direction. My point is, though, that unless you are looking for test accommodations or something similar, it is nearly impossible to get ADHD evaluation covered by insurance. I had a large employer and my plan was fairly comprehensive³⁴, yet after contacting my own primary care doctor to seek a referral, reaching out to various providers through my insurer's website, and eventually cold-contacting organizations that specialize in these sorts of evaluations, it was clear I was going to be paying out of pocket. The cost was higher than I could have expected,

³³ Though I did eventually seek one to retain some work from home privileges.

³⁴ There is no space here for a long analysis of the American insurance system.

and based on what eventually occurred during the evaluation, it was clearly due to the various companies the evaluation centers are forced to pay to use their standardized examinations. Everything that unsettles me about quantitative research was rearing its ugly head – how can an identity be quantified? – but the sadder realization I had was that, unless you are a student (or a parent of one), if you have issues with focus, emotional regulation, short-term memory, or any of the other possible symptoms of my sort of neurodivergence (Dovis et al., 2013), it is going to cost you considerable money to receive any answers at all. The evaluator told me that the vast majority of the people whom she eventually diagnoses struggle with mood disorders and anger management, neither of which are unfamiliar to me, but if no professional has told you that you might have ADHD or something similar, particularly for other racialized people who might have many fewer resources than I do, then instead of being a financially stable doctoral candidate seeking answers to gain clarity and peace, you might just be someone who has trouble holding a job and has no explanation for why.

It was expensive, but we could afford it, and it made me wonder, since diagnosis is so inaccessible yet nonetheless the only way to receive the type of support that many people need, how on earth we can continue to justify our dismissal of the neurodivergent and others who have been dis/abled by a world with little use for them. The difficulty and the expense of seeking out one's own label calls to mind how closely concepts of ability are tied to notions of “productivity” or suitability for work (Russell, 2019), and reminds me how many times I was seen or referred to as “lazy” because, as it turns out, I was not able to focus on certain tasks effectively. Once again, though, I was classified as “smart,” allowed inside of the property of smartness (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011) because of my performance on certain types of tests, and then diminished because of struggles with other tasks. How many people are, indeed, not succeeding at their

workplaces because of these unexamined issues? How many organizations and supervisors would even know how to support their workers effectively?

I mention all of this to return to the central article around which much of this work is built, namely Ray's (2019) concept of racialized organizations. To bring Ray, Leonardo, and Broderick together, in almost every workplace, whiteness is a credential, but so is the idea of smartness, which is tied directly to how ability is conceptualized. I myself have benefited and suffered because of these intertwined issues. Unless and until my scholarship succeeds at shaking things up, I will probably continue to be exalted for my standardized smartness, my Princeton degree, and eventually my doctorate. Hopefully this will not be true at future jobs where I can be explicit about my identity, but for much of my life, any miscues have always been classified as a lack of effort, and positioned in contrast to their unstated opinion of my innate intelligence. In addition, being not just "smart" but an exception to the standard assessment of Blackness and Black intelligence and ability has always left me in a strange, liminal position, my praise often coming with the implicit reminder that I am, essentially, an exceptional Negro, *not like the other Black people*, so when I lose things or struggle in any way, I am also viewed as a disappointment for not representing my race effectively, or, really, rising above its supposed deficiencies. This a phenomenon that occurs regardless of dis/ability, and the pressure to be a certain exemplar of Blackness is documented in the literature (e.g., Thornhill, 2018), but I am arguing that it is even more difficult to navigate with a brain I was never able to understand until recently.

The scholarship on Dis/Crit helps elucidate what was once a confusing experience. Though for most of life I knew I was being treated a certain way based on my racialization, I only learned recently that I was having the experience of being *multiply marginalized* (Cyrus, 2017), with my undiagnosed neurodivergence compounding the racism under which I existed. Though much of

the extant scholarship focuses on racialized students diagnosed with dis/abilities (Artiles, 2011), I would argue that my treatment, even if my classmates and school were supposedly unaware of my issues, qualifies as ableist oppression, and that the analyses made by scholars of Dis/Crit nonetheless apply. As Hernández-Saca et al. (2018) noted, “schools cannot ignore the social and emotional processes that also take place within educational contexts. For example, schools can be crucial environments for establishing a student’s sense of self and community” (p. 290), though in my case, it was a sense of isolation and a *lack* of community that were in fact established, even without the school singling out the neurodivergence they remained unable (or unwilling?) to see. Erevelles and Minear (2010) recalled an experience relevant to my own: “we have known privileged white students with similar behavioral problems whose parents were able to corral the school’s best resources, were able to access professional help outside the school” (p. 141). As mentioned, I have authored an entire separate chapter on this (Gerald, 2022), but where the intersectionality of my experience comes into play is that there were classmates of mine who “acted out” in the ways that I did, and who were not stigmatized; only because I was both “talking out of turn” *and Black* was I rendered as isolated as I was.

I wrote in the previous chapter that all of my scholarship is for Ezel. I said I wanted him to be proud of my efforts on his behalf, and I do indeed hope to be able to ensure his education is loving and comprehensive, however, another reason I chose to medicalize myself was because, if it turned out to be true that I had ADHD, I needed to know, and continue to learn more about myself, because it would not be unlikely that he processes the world the way that I do (Silver, 2020). I can be ambivalent about the label for myself all I want, but like any health issue, I needed to know this in case it is true of him as well. When I sat down to begin the evaluation, as uncomfortable as I was sure it would be, I tried to think of him and how happy I would be if he

could spend his whole adolescence never having to think that he is odd or, as many people told me, annoying. Whatever my concerns, this made the process worthwhile, and so I paid the money, sat for the evaluation, and turned my experiences into a series of numbers that determined whether or not I was officially “disabled,” regardless of the reality in which I had certainly been dis/abled.

The evaluation itself was rather unremarkable in format. She asked me a series of questions about my experiences at home, at work, in school, and took notes. I then completed a few short forms and she told me the results. Before starting, I had been worried I might somehow “fail” and turn out not to have ADHD, and I am not sure what I would have done at that point, but it became clear, as she continued asking me questions, that I have spent so much of my life trying to stay ahead of a brain I had been taught to despise that I was definitely going to be told that I did indeed have ADHD. And I do.

We took a break in between exams, and I admit I had to go into my bathroom to sit quietly for a short while. She had asked me so many questions about my past, as I expected, but hearing myself share what was not even a significant percentage of what I had spent my life doing to try and take care of myself was almost too much to bear, especially all at once. The tricky aspect of autoethnographic work is that making the researcher the subject and, in a sense, the participant means there is no review board to ask me how I will feel in responding to a series of questions I had chosen to have asked of me. During the evaluation, I was transported back to fourth grade, hiding in the bathroom at school instead of going to math class because I had been told I was an arithmetic whiz and could not admit I did not grasp the more abstract material, and then getting in trouble for talking too much when I attempted to cover my lack of understanding by acting out. The dis/abling process required no medical codification to become real, but it was a relief to attain it nonetheless. Accordingly, I believe I can effectively answer Research Question 1 now.

Though I did eventually, at the end of the evaluation, learn that I not only had ADHD but had certain aspects of it quite severely (and others less so), in responding to the prompts, all of my worries about being seen as a fraud melted away, at least for the time being. I knew what it felt like to be trapped in a brain I did not understand, and I now know what it feels like to be in command of the power I possess when I can grab hold of that bullet train. The contrast between my experience as an adolescent and the way I have been able to re-construct my identity as an academic is the space in which The Ezel Project exists. This is part of what I referred to above as the narrative intersection.

There is ultimately hurt at the heart of the work, but also an unshakeable belief that certain educators, even those raised to be invested in whiteness, can reject harmful epistemologies and show a version of younger me the love that my institutions mostly denied me, and that, thankfully, I have been more successful at locating in my doctoral studies, where Hunter has learned that the best way to support me is often to just get out of the way of the bullet train so as not to get run over. My quest, with my whiteness classes and the inquiry into them, is to find examples of those teachers who would have seen the fear and confusion under all of my antics and extended support when it was needed. Who are these teachers? What sets them apart? And, if given additional knowledge and insight through the work we do together, what choices do they make after the fact? I was worried at some point that the two sections of my findings would be disjointed, but I have come to see that there is no Ezel Project, and no Ezel Project Inquiry, without the experience of racism and ableism hanging over me in my past and present. As much as I would prefer to have been able to shrug it all off, I still need to, as I mentioned, build protections into my workday in order to present myself as successful, so it is hardly going away any time soon. It would be

dishonest to pretend that the mis-construction of my identity and the journey to its re-construction were not instrumental in the evolution of my pedagogy and my research.

When the tests ended, and she told me my diagnosis, she mentioned that, especially in terms of emotional regulation, I had developed very effective “compensation mechanisms,” as she called them, and as documented in research on people who had yet to be diagnosed with ADHD (Canela et al., 2017). For example, I do everything as soon as possible to avoid the creeping anxiety of deadlines, I set several electronic reminders for all of my obligations (including meals), and I always try to ride my energy spikes. Essentially, I had learned how to work within what I was given, and, due to either particular skills or economic and other forms of privilege, I have managed not to trip too far over my own feet, to the point that I am going to finish this degree soon enough and publish a book soon after. The evaluator’s comment was both heartening and disheartening, because the process of being dis/abled is what requires that sort of ingenuity in the first place. Indeed, I sometimes imagine what I might have accomplished if I had not had to expend so much effort on contorting my behavior into the assumptions of those around me. As I said at the end of the previous chapter, I remain uncertain if I have shifted any institutions through my work, but I do know he is safer with a father who understands himself and his brain in ways that many are never given a chance to, so if the only tangible result of the Ezel Project is the medicalization I undertook to realize it, I suppose that is better than nothing.

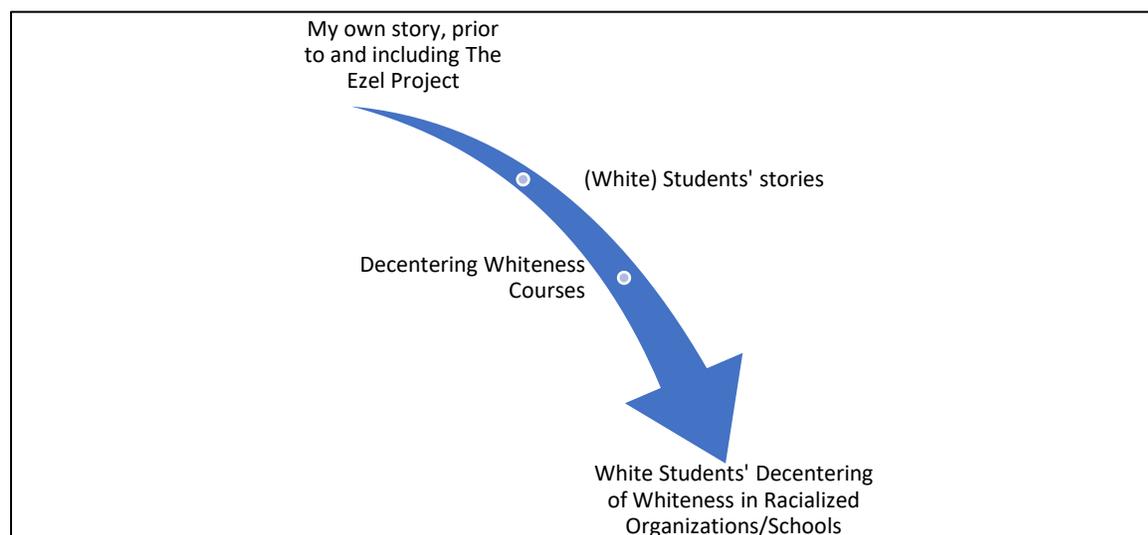
Going forward, I intend to be successful *because* of the unique skills I have been granted, but everything before the past few years has been *in spite* of the limitations that have been placed in front of me. I started kindergarten as an unusual little boy who rattled off subway facts and even dressed as the R train for Halloween, and by the end of high school, my head was spinning so fast that I could hardly see myself anymore. It is imperative that Ezel be given the space that I was not

given by my institutions and my peers, and that I am ensuring that I claim for myself from now on. All this is to say, I needed to know what sort of educator would see Ezel and cherish him and what they would do with a bit of extra guidance, and that is why I designed my courses, why I give my talks, and, ultimately, why I conducted the interviews that I did.

As it turns out, Ezel already loves trains just as much as I once did. I do not want him to lose that joy.

Helms, Ray, and Gerald

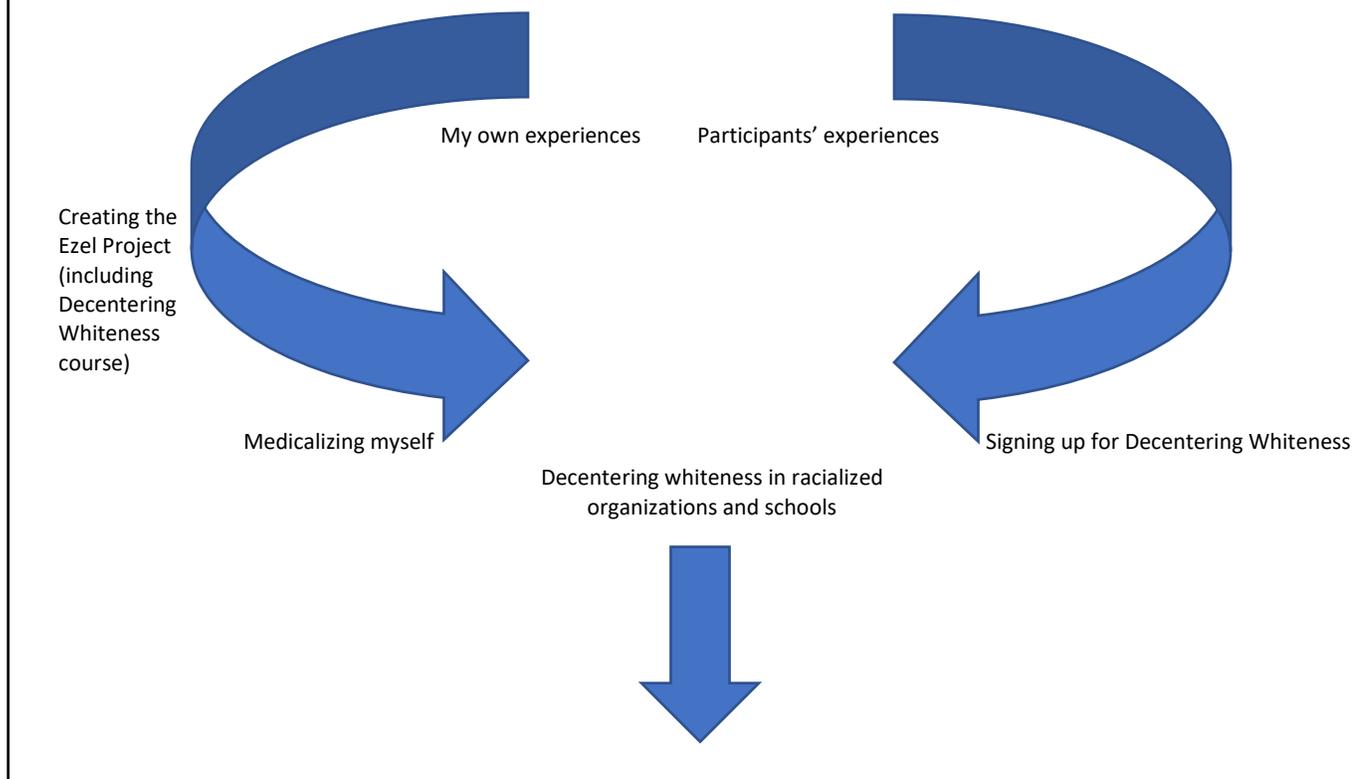
Recall the diagram I referred to as **Figure 2** from **Chapter Two**.



I believe, having completed the interviews and analysis, that I can offer a more applicable version that describes the narrative intersection more accurately, which you can see in **Figure 3** on an upcoming page. At first glance, this probably looks messy, and that is precisely the intent, and represents what I believe I have found. For my own narrative, it is clear that my past, up to and including my early doctoral studies, led me to create the Ezel Project, which includes but is not limited to the Decentering Whiteness courses that my participants signed up for. As I hopefully

made clear in **Chapter One**, everything in my life, and especially the specific time at which Ezel was born, drew me to the type of scholarship that I aim to practice, and, for a time, the course and my podcast and public talks were all of what I felt I needed in order to grow into the scholar I wanted to be. I was, however, held back from my full potential by my hesitancy to either accept or embrace my full identity as a person with ADHD, a neurodivergent Black man, an individual who has been dis/abled, regardless of the actually fairly extensive list of neurological and physical impairments I have since understood that I have, and that I continue to wonder if will be true of Ezel someday. Though I suspect not enough majoritized scholars undergo this sort of reflective work, I am convinced that I cannot seek to convey the narratives of others without a full grasp of my own, and, previously mentioned downsides though there are of the way we rely on medical diagnosis, it became clear that I would not be able to convey the entire story if I did not conduct this necessary inquiry into myself.

The graphic (which, as you can probably tell, is really a few shapes mashed together) now includes an additional arrow for the path of the participants. See **Figure 3** below.

Figure 3

I will speculate on this in more detail later, but I suspect that, had these participants been raised by parents and educators who started from day one with complex and not color-evasive discussions of race and other axes of oppression, they might not have felt the need to take my course at all; maybe those of them who have children will hereby prevent their offspring having to grapple with such concepts for the first time as adults. This is to say that both arrows make U-turns because, in different ways, every single one of my participants had to consciously turn away from the straight and narrow path laid out before them by both the broader society and the people who raised them. Some of them made sharper turns than others, but all of them had to make choices to do things differently, and the hope is that, having completed the course, they are now continuing on a path towards the broader decentering of whiteness in their contexts.

Along the same lines, I also had to turn away from what I understood about myself and my contexts, eschewing the belief that I was more valuable because of my officially codified intelligence – and what this implies about others – and that the things my brain did that I could not forestall were, at the same time, reasons I was less worthwhile. Consequently, though it might perhaps be somewhat expected for research into white individuals who challenge whiteness to demonstrate their having turned away from the lessons around them, I want to be clear that very few of us, white or not, can continue along the straight and narrow path set out for us without upholding the harmful and pervasive ideologies that my work hopes to challenge. This is also why the arrows start at close to the same place.

The two arrows combine at the bottom because my ongoing work, whatever my post-graduation profession ends up being, is meant to continue these efforts long into the future, unless and until it becomes unnecessary, though I am not hopeful of seeing that in my lifetime. Indeed, the fact that both this graphic and **Figure Two** are arrows pointing toward an uncertain destination is a deliberate choice.

To further elucidate the “uncertain destination” idea, I want to return to two essays I mentioned in my literature review, as my data analysis led me to a knot I am unable to fully untangle, a tension between individual development and institutional power. The first of these essays is Helms’s (1990) theory of white racial development, an oft-cited framework for how white individuals can methodically progress towards a version of anti-racism, though, owing to the article’s age, she calls it “non-racism.” Helms’s stages of development were as follows, with a brief summary of each:

- Contact – Lack of awareness, color-evasiveness
- Disintegration – Initial awareness followed by shame, anger, denial

- Reintegration – Buckling under pressure, previous shame towards to anger externalized against the racialized
- Pseudo-Independence – Attempts to understand racism, often distancing from other white individuals
- Immersion/Emersion – Critical of self and white peers, attempt to develop positive white identity
- Autonomy – Continues to be open to new information, understands that racism is systemic

As an example of how this model has been and continues to be employed, in one recent article, Moffitt et al. (2021) used Helms's model to follow several white children over time to observe their progress (or lack thereof) along the stages of development. They found that a not-insignificant percentage of white children did seem to move along the scale effectively to resist racism; the findings recalled some of those I cited in **Chapter Two**, from Crowley (2016), in which a handful of white college students practiced transgressive white racial knowledge. Maybe the children in this more recent study will go on to be the type of college students Crowley spoke to. I hope so. With that said, I have a few important points I want to make that will return us to my own analysis.

To be extremely clear, this is not actually a critique of Moffitt³⁵ and her colleagues, or anyone who uses what is a clearly understandable model, the type of model that slots effectively into published journal articles, a comment which may sound like a dismissal, but, as I have written, I prefer research to be done on majoritized groups instead of the alternative, and as such I do still

³⁵ The latest in this long line of scholars I reached out to regarding their work; she will be talking about this article on my podcast in May.

find this to be valuable. And in fact, in reading through Helms's model again, I can see quite easily how some of what my participants said aligns neatly with various stages, which I will return to on occasion in subsequent chapters. With all of that said, though I am sure Helms herself would not say that her model was intended to imply this³⁶, most of the places I have encountered the model are as standalone examples, where the "Autonomy" stage is presented as an endpoint, even though the text within it indicates that education must continue. For someone who intends to approach anti-racism as a purely intellectual endeavor, one could study this path and take considerable effort to follow what has been laid out without engaging with power in any tangible way. Although of course models are useful as lenses through which to analyze progression, what I believe the data from my inquiry shows is that challenging whiteness is necessarily something of a mess instead of something with a final stage. Any bulleted steps can be transformed into a checklist, and one of the most challenging tightropes to walk as a scholar attempting to make complex ideas digestible without becoming overly simplistic – I do not blame Helms for this. My point is that, were I to be handed a list, I would dutifully follow the steps until I could take advantage of some method through which I could be more efficient; my criticism of checklists for challenging oppression is not just due to my skepticism of others but because I know I myself would default to precisely the same thing. Due to the insights I have gained through my medicalization, I know that is not "laziness" or some other flaw that would lead me to find the quickest path forward, but suffice it to say that there is no particular reason why I would spend the several years it has taken both me and my participants to change the direction of our narratives if all I had to do was complete what I understood to be the steps on a list. Again, Helms was not instructing people to follow simple

³⁶ And this is precisely what Dr. Moffitt told me about Helms's work

steps, but that is unfortunately how such models can be used (or misused). I include this contrast to highlight the fact that **Figure 3** points towards a necessarily uncertain future, a path without a roadmap, but one that I and my participants are all on, in our own ways, simultaneously.

Helms does not have to be the sole target of my mild critique; I chose her work both because I mentioned it earlier and because it is still being used for research on white individuals. That final word there is key, however, because, although, by definition, my solo interviews were conducted with individual participants, I do not believe the potential importance of the Ezel Project is about any one person. Rather, the hope is that it will influence people to return to their contexts and chip away at structural issues by working with others that have also done the necessary, gradual work that these participants are continuing to do, the twist and turn represented by the arrows in **Figure Three**.

The other essay that I want to return to here is, once more, Victor Ray's (2019) theorization of racialized organizations. As I quoted much earlier, he wrote that racialization within organizations leads to scenarios wherein, "(1) racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups; (2) racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distribution of resources; (3) whiteness is a credential; and (4) decoupling is racialized" (p. 2). The explicit aim of my course was for the participants to return to their institutions – as students, faculty, staff, or administrators – and enact substantive change such that the above four points are grappled with and fought. In my understanding, Ray is not pointing out that this is how *particular* organizations are structured, but rather that all organizations under our white supremacist system are inherently racialized unless they are consciously constructed differently. As mentioned, I am critical of any shortcuts to dismantling hierarchies, especially when they are so entrenched, but the difficulty of hoping to work against a structural problem is that, and this next statement is tautological,

organizations cannot participate in my class – individuals do. How can we balance the fact that, with the exception of the four professors from Missouri, individuals who are not even colleagues with one another are participating in a course after which they are meant to alter power structures of which they are already a part? Or, how can individuals challenge institutional power from which they tend to benefit? I am not sure there is a clear answer to this question, though the aforementioned concept of *interest convergence* would suggest that whatever my participants choose to do will only be effective if it benefits white interests in some way. What emerged from my data, then, was this contradiction between the individual and the institution, the distance between the *micro* and the *meso*, the difficulty of changing something larger than what is directly in front of you. As will be made clear, only the participants with a relatively larger amount of institutional power (e.g., a provost and tenured professors) have been able to take substantial steps towards altering their institutions overall, and this does leave one with the uncomfortable feeling that only those few with the most power might ever be able to disrupt the racialization of an organization, not to mention the fact that these are, in fact, still white individuals with said power. So while I am reluctant to point towards an individualistic model for white racial development, I also do understand that the uncertain future on display in subsequent chapters may yet be unsatisfying to some readers, even though I do believe this uncertainty is itself resonant and valuable.

In a certain way, I find that this uncertainty, or tension, does bring my work into closer conversation with the aforementioned ideals of Critical Pedagogy. The quest for a neat resolution is anathema to an ideology that rejects hierarchization, and in examining the data, I had to resist the ingrained urge to insert a proverbial period or exclamation point; the best I can provide is an ellipsis.

I want to address one final aspect of this that readers may wonder about if I do not do so explicitly. As will be clear in subsequent chapters, some of the participants did pinpoint a specific experience that led them along a path away from the standard, be it a class they took (or taught), or a place that they moved to. I admit that I am less interested in the supposed moment of clarity, since I believe focusing on this would serve a similar purpose as the “simple answer” paradigm I decry above – what would stop a reader from learning the lesson that they just have to take one class or move out of their hometown? Additionally, even if it was pinpointed in one class or one experience during an interview, one way in which I will credit Helms is in her model’s clear insistence that many will fall back from their initial realization instead of continuing to move forward. As such, the overall arc, the curve in the arrow, is the source of my conclusions. I will nonetheless mention these moments to some extent when they are relevant to the findings, because they help give the curve its shape, but I am much more interested in how differently each journey began, and the resonance I found in the way their narratives eventually resembled one another.

A final aspect of the convergence of the arrows is the way my own integrity required the process of medicalization. As stated throughout the autoethnographic sections of this work, diagnosis is not inherently salvation, and particularly not for racialized individuals. The label can be a constraint, and lead to additional harm (Artiles, 2016), especially if imposed by an external body with power over the individual. With that said, despite the practical difficulty of attaining this diagnosis and the expensive, enervating process I endured to do so once I finally decided it was necessary, I do feel as though the self-determination that this diagnosis exemplifies for me has allowed me to come closer to the type of scholar I can be. In a way, though I do believe that the gradual understanding that challenging whiteness was necessary for me after all of my years in predominantly white contexts, in retrospect I was not quite living a life that challenged these

systems until I completed medicalizing myself. The daily, sometimes hourly, issues that arose because of parts of my brain I was unsuccessfully trying to beat back could not simply be ignored in my work, and though ableism did not appear frequently in the participants' responses, if this is an inquiry into the Ezel Project overall, then my identity and its re-construction, its journey from "smart Black man who is ashamed he has a lot of trouble with certain things" to "Black and proudly neurodivergent man with specific strengths and weaknesses," is central to the story. This is all an explanation for the fact that, throughout the subsequent sections, the themes pulled from the narratives of the participants will sit alongside my own experiences, both before and after I accepted the totality of myself.

Speaking of which, that tension between the individual and the institution is a space my public scholarship has long inhabited. I do believe that my talks and my writing have helped put into words ideas that others had felt but not expressed, but do I have any reason to believe that my, by now, thousands of readers, listeners, and viewers have returned to their institutions and made changes that counteracted their racialization? What evidence do I have that my own work contributes to mesotransformation rather than micro-, individual reflection? For all my effort, for the many racial equity committees I have joined and/or led, little has changed in the institutions with which I am affiliated. Aiming for a substantive shift feels futile much of the time, and this is also reflected in the data from the interviews included below. All of these participants started from a place where they were able to safely gaze at racism and the impact of whiteness without directly engaging with it, and all of them are now making concerted efforts to infuse their daily decisions with departures from what they once assumed. I myself have left behind the safe cocoon of being satisfied living as the exceptional, "smart" Negro in white and ableist spaces, and what has come of it? The organizations remain racialized. In truth, my attempts to effect mesotransformative

change may have only led to individual development among my participants – and myself – yet I do believe that the data will show that there is a chance that some of these institutions are on their way to changing, even if only slightly.

What follows, then, are two chapters based around the themes I uncovered through my analysis, broken into something of a “before” and “after” regarding their decision to turn away from their expected role within whiteness. Though they may not have revolutionized their organizations, I do feel that what they have done is notable, and that they, and the people around them, will be all the better for it.

CHAPTER FIVE: ON THE BOAT

A Central Metaphor

While I was conducting my fourth interview, I was reminded of an experience I had that I believe serves as a fitting metaphor for some of my findings. I had yet to review the transcripts at the time, and had been thinking, as the interviews transpired, of what might lie within them. Although the coding was to be inductive, I knew that, based on my research questions and the aims of my work, some of the codes would concern the participants' relationship with whiteness, and certainly much of what they said ended up being tied to this topic. Eventually, several such codes were developed that referred to different stages of their lives and their evolving identities, and the overarching code I came to use most frequently was one I called "Evolving Understanding of Whiteness." There was, however, too much text not to break this into sub-codes, and it was during said fourth interview that an important idea came to mind.

Several years ago, in 2012, I was fortunate enough to fulfill a lifelong dream and visit the Amazon rainforest, via the northeast corner of Ecuador. I signed up for a small, rustic tour where we stayed in an interesting structure with intermittent hot water and thick mosquito nets. We were cut off from the outside world for a long weekend, which is what I had wanted. Accessing the tour required a short flight from where I was staying in Quito, followed by a two-hour bus ride, and then a three-hour boat trip. I was happy to see animals I had always wanted to see up close, and since we had signed up with a conversation-focused lodge, I was not as worried about visiting the area as I might have been with another type of organization.

Two of the animals we saw on the first day were piranha and caimans, the latter being similar to but smaller than crocodiles, yet plenty big enough that it did not matter if you got too

close. Having shown us this, at the end of the first day, one of our guides took us into the middle of a lagoon at dusk and stopped the motor before jumping in. Having expected to see predators like the ones we had been shown, I had no plans of getting out of the boat at any point during the trip, and I had not even packed a bathing suit with me, but I looked around and everyone else was wearing swimming attire, and had absolutely no fear about diving in. I was quickly alone on the boat, with everyone urging me to jump in, and when I finally did, absolutely convinced that something I could not see was waiting to take a bite out of me, I found that not only was the water surprisingly warm, but that the lagoon was only six or seven feet deep – my feet hit the sand on the bottom immediately. I found out later that the guide knew that these predators preferred to wait along the shoreline and that he had stopped in the middle of the lagoon specifically to avoid them, but he sure had not told us this, and when I jumped off the boat, I had no reason to believe I would be safe in that water.

So why did that story, which I had not thought about much in the intervening years, come to mind during that interview? I think about the places my participants came from, both geographically and ideologically, and how all of these places were seen as safe and secure. They might have wanted to observe something other than their natural environments the way I just wanted to go look at some animals, but ultimately, they were not raised to directly expose themselves to what they perceived to be danger, danger which in their case might include the inability to distance themselves from being complicit in racism, as we saw among Picower's (2009) findings above. With the exception of one or two of the participants who had been more directly exposed to racial slurs, they vaguely knew what was out there in terms of racism and other axes of oppression, but they could safely stay removed from engaging with it directly, because to do so would be to not just take a step out of their comfort zone but to *remain* out of their comfort

zone. They were, like me on my trip, not exactly prepared to get off the boat, but when they finally did, though their discomfort may not have evaporated, but they did find that there was a bottom to the lagoon, and that, though they were still technically in a context that was uncomfortable for most of them, they were not going to get eaten, and that there was a different sort of stability to be found while swimming in the water of the lagoon, even though so much was still unclear to them.

Although it will be explored to some extent, I am less interested in writing about the specific moment when each person took their leap, if only because I believe that trying to pinpoint a singular “cause” is rarely the goal of qualitative work (Bhattacharya, 2017), and also because, for anyone reading this, condensing a complex journey into one step or a few may imply that others can do one particular thing to challenge whiteness more effectively without undergoing a long-term evolution the way these participants have, a recurrence of my hesitance to promote a one-size-fits-all model. Indeed, in my view, each of their stories has two parts: the time in their lives when they were *on the boat*, and the time, up to and including now, when they are swimming *in the water*.

I believe that the potential value in this reportage involves an examination of the ways in which, to follow the metaphor, each “boat” was actually quite different in some respects, implying that there is no one formula for developing into the sort of majoritized individual who moves way from majoritized ideologies. Yes, they all came from predominantly white contexts, and it is worth demonstrating that that does not preclude a challenge to whiteness, but otherwise their upbringings were somewhat disparate. Some were raised in faith communities, some were raised in explicitly progressive areas, some had parents who worked in education, but there were few patterns to their early lives.

What seems, from my analysis, to unite their narratives is much more closely tied to what they are each doing now that they are in the water. The specifics are different based on their professional contexts and their responsibilities, but what struck me the most was how central these concerns were to the way they live on a daily basis. I admit that I began the entire Ezel Project skeptical that anyone who took the course would be as engaged as they were, not just during the Decentering Whiteness course but in the months after the fact. As I mentioned back in **Chapter Two**, it was not just the facts of what happened after the course that interested me, but the participants' feelings regarding these efforts. It was never likely that they would upend the institutions upon which they depend, certainly not in such a short period of time, but what struck me about the thoughtful way they told their stories was that, however successful they do or do not feel they have been, this is not just another item on a checklist for them. As I learned from some of the parents who were interviewed, these participants are not people who return home at the end of the work day and leave ideas at the office but instead involve it in the lessons they teach their children.

When you are looking at axes of oppression from the boat, you can just keep moving, or, as many do, reach down from above to “help” without getting wet. At best, you can bring one person up out of the water and pat yourself on the back, which is how most “diversity” efforts are structured. In other words, I believe the ultimate idea that is likely to emerge from this final analysis is that, to have any chance of challenging ideologies as powerful as whiteness, you have to jump into the water and stay there. This is true of my participants as much as it is true of me and my own narrative, as the Ezel Project, while being examined for this work, is more than just a school assignment for me. I was, like many, raised on meritocratic ideals, and believed for too long that if I worked hard, I could achieve anything, whereas now, with a fuller understanding of

myself and a deeper analysis of the ways that racism and ableism were conceptualized and visited upon me, my scholarship cannot be generated from the safety of the boat. I have experienced racist hate mail and threats after some of my talks, and, no matter what comes after this degree, I am down here in the water, for good. This also aligns with my efforts to move away from teacher-as-sage, as that is merely another version of classifying oneself as superior instead of working alongside those you hope to support.

I will now move into a discussion of the places from which the participants originated, or, how they described their experiences of being *on the boat*.

The Omnipresence of Color-Evasiveness

Many of the participants mentioned learning vaguely about race and racism but without hearing much of anything specific about the concepts. They recalled learning about the value of a nebulous version of equality but were never taught much beyond warm, superficial platitudes.

Many described their hometowns as having *economic* diversity – as Laurel said, “all sorts of socioeconomic status” – but several were clear that racialized people only moved into their towns as a result of industry changes. Sally was raised in Minnesota, in a nominally liberal area – “this progressive, amazing place” – where she attended a high school that was indeed economically diverse. This latter part was something she was told explicitly, as her parents made clear that they wanted her to “be with kids who didn’t have as much as we did.... So that we were appreciative of what we had.” She was clear in explaining to me that, during her adolescence, she had received a mix of what she now sees and harmful messages – or non-messages – about racism and whiteness.

Laurel was raised in what she described as a college town in Pennsylvania, where there were a certain number of Black residents, but most of whom were relatives of academics, “a lot of Black people having to navigate white spaces, and me not realizing and recognizing at that time, like, there's a lot that goes into that.” Like Sally, she understood oppression from a distance – in her case, she was deeply familiar with the way homophobic and ableist slurs were weaponized against her peers – but, also like Sally, she saw racism as something that was not particularly salient in her more Northeastern milieu. Mike told me that he was told to “be nice to everyone,” and although the refugees who gradually started to arrive in his previously-homogenous town were the first time he noted people who looked different from his family, he was never told anything negative about other groups during his adolescence, which was also in Minnesota.

Kim is an interesting case because, while I knew her long before I taught the course, I actually knew nothing *about* her at all. We went to college together, but for whatever reason, we were not close, and I did not even know where she was from. Speaking of her background, then, she was born and raised in California, in an area she described as follows: “Very deeply blue, very Democratic, very progressive, and yet also very wealthy. And so I grew up in an environment where the rhetoric was all about equality, and inclusivity, and trying to create opportunities for all sorts of people, but you would look around and not see all those sorts of people represented.” Her well-funded public high school had a handful of “popular” students of color, but, like Laurel, these classmates came from particular class backgrounds, and this allowed her peers to mostly convince themselves that they were already on the right path in that common, color-evasive way.

For Shirley, when reflecting on her early impressions of race, she shared a story of a childhood visit to New York City in the early 1980s, when her father had taken her along with him on a business trip and they had gone to see their hometown baseball team (the Royals) play at

Yankee Stadium. Not knowing how to use the subway here, they had missed their stop and had to wait for a return trip, and at some point, as she told me, “I remember my dad sort of like, taking me over to the side. And I didn't know what was going on at the time. But he had seen somebody playing with a switchblade. So it was like, yeah, not safe.” What she remembers is not just that this moment occurred but that they never spoke about it again in any detail, and the only message she received was one of danger from a person who was racialized but whose race was never mentioned explicitly. Along similar lines, Christa was raised with a morass of mixed messages, where she was taught to love everyone but also that certain people – from certain, unmentioned demographics – came from the “bad side of town.”

These participants all learned, I would argue, about what Bonilla-Silva (2017) would call *racism without racists*, or, alternatively, understanding that racism exists but is distant from one's life and context, located in a different era or location, which also allows for the othering discourse in evidence above to be seen as divorced from the system of racism. I would also put myself in this category, based on what I was taught in school, since, although my parents were very clear about our own identity, it was my institutions that I unfortunately listened to on the subject. I should add, however, that, especially given my own engagement with Ray and my attempts to challenge a reliance on individual models, that even if they had been taught more explicitly about racism, it might have remained divorced from the institutional forces that uphold it – they were taught that racism was based in interpersonal interactions in other locations, and instead of learning that racism was present in their own lives from particular bad actors, what they ought to have learned was the more subtle ways that the system is upheld. In other words, they were, it seems, two degrees away from the understanding they later gained – they needed to learn not just that

racism was indeed present in their seemingly “nice” context, but also that it is a *macro* (and *meso*) structure.

Here one can see the distance between talk and action, the “rhetoric” Kim referred to leading to no substantive changes. This amorphous understanding of racism as a bad-but-distant thing helped generate white savior mindsets in several of the participants, and in fact this mindset was partially responsible for said participants’ decision to enter the field of education. Kim went on to describe an early white savior mindset that her environment had impressed upon her, a need to “reach” others without an understanding of the power differential between them, after which she articulated at an Ivy League school (mine), which, as one might expect, “didn’t help.” Princeton considers itself to be in service of the nation, but considering its lack of engagement with its complicity in generating the discrepancies that need resolution, this, in her view, just built upon her savior ideology. When Shirley started her career as an educator, she was very intentionally aiming to conduct religious work, “a mission-outreach kind of thing,” the path through which she had entered the field. Christa reflected back on the way she viewed the world before she had her eyes opened at the outset of her doctoral program, telling me, “I just feel like I was living in an alternate reality, you know, like, I’m not even sure that’s the phrase, but like, yeah. I guess that I could go 27 years and pretty much be clueless to like, what so many groups of people experience.”

This last point is worth noting, because, despite having what even they recognize as a harmful motivation, given the evolution they have undergone in the time since entering the field, we might not have these valuable members of the profession if the profession sought those with less harmful worldviews. The question, perhaps to be answered by another scholar or later in my career, is how one can tell who might be open to such evolution and who is destined to remain

mired in savior behavior. The findings here do not offer much of a profile as to who will emerge from color-evasiveness and white saviorism, just additional confirmation that these practices are very common. It is also important to understand that if this work is an attempt to grapple with the influences of both the individual and the institution, the color-evasiveness many of them were raised with was a result of both their parents' individual choices, and the school systems that promoted the same ideology. To counteract this avoidance, both internal and systematic efforts are necessary.

By the time the participants came to my course, they were not exhibiting the sort of internal resistance in evidence in the Picower (2009) article, the refusal to acknowledge one's whiteness. Similarly, I would not have been able to create the course had I not emerged from color-evasiveness myself and sat with the way whiteness had always controlled my educational and social experiences to an uncomfortable degree. All eleven of us started from a similar place, even with very different identities.

The Nurture of Critical Educator Parents

This only applies to a few of the participants, but it is worth noting that a handful were raised by educators, and that these participants mentioned their parents' positive influence in guiding them. None of them used this word specifically, but I believe what they described in their support from their parents can be summarized as helping them develop *empathy* for their students. For Mike, he explained that his mother was an educator prominent enough to have eventually been hired by the White House, and that she had told him that teaching requires working directly with your students rather than lecturing down towards them. His interpretation of this edict meant that, early in his higher education teaching career, he was open about his own advantages, in terms of

class, gender, and race, among other axes of oppression, in the hope that it would help his students remain open. Kim leaned upon her father, a fifth-grade public school teacher, as she struggled in her initial work in a correctional facility. His lessons, which she began to internalize, encouraged her to attempt to meet her students where they were instead of coming down from on high, and she began to understand that in order to do this she needed to learn much more about the students and the system that had landed them behind bars.

Several participants referred to meeting students “on their level,” and while one could interpret that as implying that the participants were inherently on a higher/more valuable level than their students, I see this as a path through which these participants were led to understand that they were classified by the world around them as being more valuable than said students, and that they thus needed to find a way to shed the resultant deficit mindset. I may be giving them more credit than they would accept, but, at least for those who mention educator parents, the value seems to have been in the generation of empathy.

With all of that said, it has been argued that empathy, while hardly a bad thing, is superficial when it comes to the dismantling of systemic issues, and will only reify extant power structures if it is the endgoal (Zembylas, 2021). Indeed, I learned of empathy as a concept during a middle school reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, alongside the same white classmates who were happy to uphold systems of oppression from that point forward. So, while empathy may have been a useful starting place for the participants mentioned in this section, I would still classify the development of empathy as being “on the boat,” as it does not require a challenge to structural issues. As will be made clear in later sections, you can develop all the empathy in the world, but without the ability to actively shift power, these organizations will only change on a superficial level. This is an issue that confounds me sometimes when I give public talks, which have no guarantee of leading

to action on the behalf of the audience. I enjoy it, and as we saw in the anecdote about Cheryl Matias, these moments can have an impact on people who are open to evolution, so there is inherent value in public scholarship, but I do wonder if it can lead one past empathy and into action.

Unjust World

This is an interesting theme that recurred a few times among the interviews, and one that I might have guessed would recur before conducting the interviews. Perhaps I myself have been influenced by the same “public pedagogy” the likes of which Cann (2015) mentions, which tends to present said white savior teachers as having an innate sense of injustice (even if their approach is wrongheaded). Indeed, part of my hope with this reportage (and my book) is to demonstrate that those who eventually go on to challenge whiteness do not need to have had an early, clear-headed conceptualization of the world’s injustices, and certainly not an early understanding of whiteness. This theme did recur a few times, though.

For some, it was seeing other axes of oppression visited upon those they cared about – e.g., Mitchell developing close relationships with queer individuals through his participation in theater – and for some it was having traumatic experiences themselves. Laurel had been inculcated into the standard color-evasive mindset, but she experienced a rare level of childhood grief that she feels may have made her more open to considering the impact of oppression than she otherwise might have been, even if it took much longer for whiteness itself to become salient. Shirley told me, “I would say it really comes down to working with my students and recognizing when things like don't go so well, some of the barriers that they've encountered, and different times when things

happen to them that frankly, I didn't think were right or fair.” Mitchell told me that these sorts of ideas had helped “prime the pump” for the fuller understanding he later gained.

To speak in quantitative terms, briefly, I suspected before conducting these interviews that an early sense of the world being fundamentally unjust might be, if not *sufficient* for anti-racist evolution, at least *necessary*. Early in my doctoral studies, I had come across a valuable article, in which Wiederkehr et al. (2017) found that racialized middle school students who had ascribed to the meritocratic ideals they were taught actually suffered academically over time once they uncovered the injustice of the world. In other words, they had discovered they were being misled and subsequently lost trust in their institutions. I might have thought that these participants were already challenging the status quo as young children, and that this was just a natural next step for them. As it turns out, though, although a few understood the reality of injustice *overall*, not one mentioned having considered their own whiteness before adulthood. There is a central lesson here that I will bring to the final conclusion, but the first idea that comes to mind is the fact that we cannot assume people will take away a lesson about racism that is merely implied, even if they are among the few that understood the world to be unjust in some fashion.

I should note that I imagine this data might be different were these people from other groups, had they grown up particularly poor or, in the case of Laurel, had expressed their queerness much earlier. Nevertheless, it certainly does not seem to be the case that an early understanding of other forms of injustice is a direct ticket to challenging whiteness, at least among these participants. I find this hopeful, as it suggests that one can make this transition at whatever age one is willing to make the commitment.

Once again, though, I do have to keep in mind the fact that many of their comments about their previous lives focused more on their beliefs and their feelings than on any aspect of power.

Perhaps this is a failing of my questioning, a hesitance to push because I, frankly, like them, and wanted to feel said hope I just mentioned. As I mentioned when describing my research questions, part of the goal with this project, both the courses and this inquiry into them, is a desire to diminish my distrust, so maybe my analysis is necessarily limited by my bias towards an idealism for which I yearn but in which I do not quite believe. Nevertheless, this section is about their previous understanding, so, like me, they did not have a full grasp of any institutional issues before they made the choice to change their own trajectories. When we reach the following chapter, concerning their decisions after the class, the distance – or lack thereof – from a focus on internal beliefs will be important to examine.

Seeking Distance

In contrast to the color-evasiveness that was espoused by their families and institutions, a few participants mentioned encounters with what I am loath to call “overt” racism (but do not know what else to call it). Sally was clear that although her father never used slurs in front of her, he, even now, believes that it was beneficial to have kept her away from the supposed influence of racialized children. As she told me, “Talking with my parents, I realized that my parents were vocally against integrating and busing kids from the city into our schools. And my dad this summer, I mean, told me like, I didn't want ‘those kids’ going to school with you.” Jasmine watched her father use slurs – not about her, but in front of her – and watched her mother lightly and ineffectually challenge him. Gillian had slurs used directly against her by her own classmates, based on the way she was racialized at the time. As she told me, “As I was growing up as a child, I thought everyone was perceiving me as white because I perceived myself as white. And it's only after I became aware that some people weren't perceiving me as white.” She has a Japanese

grandfather, and, in her small, mostly-white town in Appalachia, she was othered and called names. As she explained, “A boy in my senior class in high school signed my yearbook saying, ‘To my favorite Gook, Nip, Jap, love those slant eyes.’” She did make clear that she had essentially suppressed this memory until somewhat recently, but this and other incidents had led her to try and deny her whiteness in college and early adulthood, joining Asian student groups as what she calls an “overcorrection” from a childhood where she had tried to avoid being seen that way. Though both Sally and Jasmine still maintain relationships with their fathers, they both, at some point, recognized that the lessons they were receiving were wrong, and sought to expose themselves to other viewpoints, perhaps more strenuously for Jasmine, given the directness with which her father expressed his racism. To be clear, this does not mean no one else heard such views expressed, but these were the only participants who said as much.

It may seem contradictory to highlight racial slurs while having written above that all eleven of us were mired in color-evasiveness, but this is another place where the tension between the individual and institution recurs. Even for the small number of people who heard explicitly racist remarks, they nonetheless matriculated into color-evasive institutions and a society that teaches the lesson that the bar for “not racism” is extremely low. I do not think it would be fair to say that either color-evasiveness or “overt racism” is more closely tied to the participants’ journeys towards anti-racism, as both color-evasiveness and overt racism have the ability to contribute to an individual’s racism, considering they are both parts of the same racist system.

Roberts and Rizzo (2020) identified seven primary factors in the development of racism: Categories; Factions; Segregation; Hierarchy; Power; Media; and Passivism. Now, some of those factors overlap (e.g., hierarchy and power), but one can see that, for example, color-evasiveness is a form of passivism in its refusal to engage directly with the concept, whereas “overt” racism is

based on categorization, and both are maintained via the segregated spaces in which most of the participants were raised. The point is, one cannot say that either scenario is likelier to lead to an adult who chooses to perpetuate the system of racism, but that both have the capacity to do so, and, in this case, these participants are attempting to evade what has held so many back.

It is also worth noting that even the participants who did not move to Japan have traveled some distance from their homogenous hometowns as they have undergone a (figurative) trek away from whiteness. Now, part of that is the nature of academia, though it is true of the one K-12 participant as well. And some are much farther away (Kentucky to Japan) than others (Minnesota to Wisconsin). I do, however, feel it is valuable to be clear that, just as they have all traveled an ideological distance from the path set out before them – recall the arrows – they have also all traveled a literal distance from the environments that produced them. It is interesting to compare this to my own story, considering, of the eleven narratives in question, mine is the only one where the individual remains firmly ensconced in their hometown, though I did make the ideological journey just like everyone else, and, unlike them, I was not raised in a predominantly white area.

I do not believe one must physically depart in order to evolve in one's understanding of these axes of oppression, though, if you are in a place where, as Christa said, "people tend to stay put," you might be less inclined towards the sort of inquiry that is necessary for the growth exhibited in these narratives. Perhaps the opportunity cost of breaking free from the path was lower for these participants once they removed themselves from locations that may well have been holding them back.

Chapter Summary

The main refrain of the findings related in this chapter, for both the participants and for me, has to be the fact that none of us had any complex understanding of racism or whiteness before events that occurred as adults. The particular events differed for each of us, and the amount of time we stayed “on the boat” did not seem to have much of a pattern, but none of us emerged from childhood or adolescence prepared to challenge these systems. Having spent more time considering the theory in which I am grounding my work, though, the issue was not merely a lack of knowledge, or else anyone who reads the plentiful books on racism and/or whiteness might be fully equipped to fight, but rather the tenor of the missing knowledge. What I mean to say is, it was not just that they (we) did not know how omnipresent whiteness was, but, more importantly, a lack of knowledge of the ways in which it is tied intimately into the systems in which we all participate. There could be no attempt at transforming institutions without an understanding of the fact that the very structure of said institutions was in need of said transformation. I do not blame them (or me) for this – even those who were taught anything explicit about racism, like Kim or Laurel, were taught the individualized version of the concept. A part of me wonders if their focus on evolving beliefs reflects the fact that a model like that of Helms is indeed useful if understood fully as the precursor to any attempt at challenging what Ray has identified – maybe my work can serve as a bridge from individual improvement to institutional iconoclasm. As we turn toward the data regarding their decisions after the course, I plan to examine whether their attempts have remained more individualized or have expanded into that which will lead to mesotransformation, with the caveat that, even if the institutions are likely to remain fully intact, it would not necessarily demonstrate a failure of these participants – or of myself in my life as a public scholar – but rather an invitation to continue to build to a point where transformation becomes inevitable. Let us see.

CHAPTER SIX: INTO THE WATER

What Stuck with Them

The primary topics discussed in the Decentering Whiteness course can be summarized as follows:

- White Leadership
- White Spaces
- White Saviors
- Black Perspectives

I should note that, at least in my planning, these concepts were intended to push participants to consider institutional changes. In our discussions – which I admittedly did not record – I aimed to examine how white leadership upholds certain ideals, how the racialized are endangered both physically and psychologically in white spaces, and how the participants can avoid playing the individualized hero in response to these issues. Whether or not these takeaways were what sat with them will be explored below. For more details on the specific tasks, assignments, and materials used in the course, as well as my decisions in choosing them and the literature that inspired their selection, see **Appendix A**, but in reviewing the data a final time, I thought it important to separate out how the participants responded to the topics.

The topics mentioned most frequently were “white spaces” – within which was a discussion of sundown towns (Loewen, 2005), or municipalities that legally barred Black residents – and “white saviors.” Regarding the latter, Sally mentioned that she has since struggled with how to challenge whiteness without simply recentering herself. Indeed, there appeared to be a persistent

struggle with how much space to take up when these issues arise, and her time in the class may well have increased the salience of that struggle. As she said, “I’ve leaned into more with my teaching just presenting these dilemmas and wrestling with them with my students, and not trying to present myself as the know-it-all.” Laurel echoed this sentiment, saying that her attempts to push against these ingrained forces sometimes felt like trying not to be like everyone else. “That’s just me trying to distance myself from other white people again, right.” Christa said the same thing, a struggle with breaking down systemic issues without merely positioning herself as a savior. It is worth noting here that the “struggle” with being a savior was not expressed by the male participants, but that the men also did not mention feeling as though they had entered the profession with a savior mindset in the first place. We are only talking about two people, though.

The session on white spaces, and sundown towns in particular, seemed to resonate with the most participants, but for differing reasons. Jasmine, for example, was not just horrified by the reality but that she had had such an important piece of relatively contemporary history hidden from her, even while attending well-regarded institutions. Mike completed the assignment and found, to his great surprise, that his own hometown had indeed maintained ordinances barring residents of color. As he told me, “10 months after taking the class there, but that’s, that’s one of the big ones that really stuck with me, because it speaks to the environment that I grew up in.” The reason I feel that it is important to understand that sundown towns were – or, really, *are* – in all pockets of the country is because of reactions such as this, the inability to fully distance oneself from structural exclusion and violence. For his part, although Mitchell did not find his hometown on the list, he did note how many towns near his (and Sally’s, Laurel’s, and Christa’s) current city of residence were.

They enjoyed the Black authors assigned towards the end of the course, but ultimately the two main takeaways from most of the interviews were deeply personal understandings of the ease with which white saviorism replaces a genuine challenge to whiteness, as well as the omnipresence of codified oppression, as represented by the ordinances that maintained sundown towns. The participants seemed to understand the way that they, as individuals, were impacted by these institutional issues, but the findings below are based on whether or not their dive “into the water” will have an impact on their academic institutions. In other words, they clearly understood how the institutional issues influenced individual lives, but in choosing to challenge said issues, were they able to move away from individual solutions?

On the Paradox of Seeking Justice in and through Academia

Related to the above, a key issue at hand is whether or not justice is even possible within the system of academia. I and all of my readers would not be involved in the system if we did not believe in the value of inquiry and scholarship, but if Ray’s (2019) concept can be slightly extended from one organization to an entire system, academia is racialized, and always has been. Whiteness is indeed a credential, and given that my participants are all white, there is a question of whether or not they have the capacity to approach some form of justice by participating in a structure from which they benefit. My final research question asks how the participants chose to “substantively decenter whiteness,” but I am a bit concerned that they are attempting to use, as Lorde (1984/2007) might say, *the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house*, a process that is doomed to fail. Indeed, if we consider the interplay between the concepts of interest convergence and racialized organizations, the fact that many “equity” efforts under the neoliberal, colonial system of academia consist of free labor, often by scholars of color (Squire et al., 2018), suggest that this

underresourcing is a deliberate way to reify the status quo. With that said, given their professions, there may only be so many tools at their disposal, which is, itself, proof of the racialized organization that academia represents. I wonder if I might have different findings had I devised some metric by which to measure dec credentialing whiteness.

Journals and Publications

My opinions on the journal system are something south of idealistic. Though I did not label it on the arrow image explicitly, I feel though part of my own turn away from the ideologies pushed onto me is my perhaps stubborn resistance to traditional journal expectations. I am sure there is a bit of petulance in my behavior, but my refusal to write within the box of “academic language,” or to seek answers what I find to be harmful, oppressive research questions is absolutely a part of my own journey towards becoming the public scholar I am, and the person who designed and led these courses. Consequently, when I consider the intra-academic actions that the participants pursued – including journals and the subsequent section on committees – I am analyzing the data through the frameworks I have chosen and my hope that their efforts will change their institutions, as well as my own developing ideology about the inability for journals as currently constructed to pursue mesotransformation on their own.

To be clear, I am well aware I am fortunate to have had my very first two submissions accepted, and considering that the second such article is the one that significantly raised my profile, the class would not exist had I not engaged with journals in some fashion. I have since developed a Matias-inspired obstinance to certain types of reviewer comments. I welcome and encourage critiques on my arguments, on any times I have mistakenly overlooked an article I should be citing, on the clarity of my text, but I am skeptical of times I find comments to be dismissive of my

admittedly unusual writing style, as its distance from “traditional” academic language is always deliberate, though if one reads the Freire work I have cited, that surely resists linguistic restrictions, not that I am close to his level of prowess. With all of that said, I am nonetheless in the process of completing a handful of journal projects, and I am certain I will remain at least somewhat connected to journal publishing after graduation. So, when a few of the participants mentioned they were including their upcoming publications in their efforts to decenter whiteness, I was admittedly skeptical of journals’ ability to achieve any sort of justice. After all, a publication is an individual act, contained within an oppressive system, even though radical ideas do occasionally break through, and journals are perhaps the best example of unpaid yet critically important labor within the system of academia.

Gillian explained that part of her plan is to shift her writing to focus on the decentering of whiteness. She has looked for – and been accepted into – journals where she feels these ideas fit with what the journals seek. This being only a year or so after the course, little has been published, though plenty are scheduled for the remainder of 2022. She knows that she has a certain amount of influence in her corner of the field as an emeritus professor from a well-regarded institution, and that her voice could go a long way to support the more precarious workers in the field. “I’m feeling like, my role is how can I support them to resist the pushback,” she told me, considering it her responsibility to allow those who are not emeritus professors, and not viewed as white, to voice their concerns about oppression with less fear of reprisal.

Christa mentioned that she felt constrained in pursuing more challenging publication topics by her upcoming tenure review. “I’m hoping it’ll happen post tenure, because pre tenure, I have to like, do things that move faster, to be strategic to, you know, meet the number, the quantity of publications.” One can see the contradiction, that only the people with the security of tenure feel

comfortable challenging a system on which they depend, and through which they have ascended – the fact that only the people with more power had any chance to exercise it contradicts what I might have hoped regarding an avoidance of hierarchies, though I cannot say it is surprising. Along these lines, Eileen is, like me, skeptical of journals’ ability to effect change, but she still hopes to try and influence the field through publications, and as such she plans to generate written briefs, with the aim of directly influencing language policy. I hope they, and the others, are able to elicit change through publication, and I would not continue to try to do so myself if I did not believe it was possible, but I am not expecting the revolution to be paywalled. At best, I think that journal articles can, as they did for me, lead to a higher profile that allows other work to develop, so I choose to hold out hope that their publications will be stepping stones to transformative efforts.

Admin Work and Committees

Several participants mentioned joining or leading committees, and as a veteran of more than half a dozen equity-related committees created in the wake of the 2020 uprising, I am familiar with the rhythm of these groups, all of which are, once more, unpaid effort. Indeed, if an institution feels comfortable with the efforts a committee is making, then said institution is going to remain fundamentally the same in the long term – it would not countersign its own demolition. Jasmine described organizing a forum on these topics – a forum at which Gillian spoke – for which one of her goals was to uncover, as she explained, “who doesn't get listened to? Who can we give a microphone to?” She also helped pick plenary speakers for a recent larger conference, and, like Gillian, seeks to support more precarious workers in her context by raising their profiles. When asked if she had received pushback, she said she had not, in particular, but that the lesson she was

beginning to take to heart was that she had to “get into the fights that matter, get into the meaningful ones.”

Gillian joined the DEI committee of a language teaching organization, which is not in itself a challenge to any sort of status quo, but she intends to be very explicit in discussing race and whiteness as part of her role. Speaking of her goals in participating in the committee, she said, “I hope it's a role that I can pull my weight without taking up spaces that are, you know that could have been used for other voices, because I do like to think that I can serve as a bridge.” Unlike many DEI committees, hers does allow her the space to consider the importance of power differentials in her field. As she told me, “one thing I talk about is employment practices and establishing hiring practices that do not penalize people, you know, for showing that they care about issues of diversity and equity and inclusion.” As one person, it seems unlikely she can totally upend Japanese academia, or even Japanese English Language Teaching, but the acknowledgement that there would likely be more speaking out about these axes of oppression if more people felt comfortable in their own positions is important.

Laurel, recently tenured, has ascended to department chair, and is in the process of instituting policies that the graduate students in her department have to meet in order to complete their studies. As she explained, “Telling white people in our program like here, that you're not going to be allowed to espouse racist, sexist, homophobic beliefs in these courses. And you're going to need to sign something that tells us that you agree to this, so that if you do, we can actually have a meeting and you are required to come to the meeting.” She is uncomfortable with a “checklist” approach to combatting racism, but feels that concrete written policies are an effective way to use her own power, to hold white students to account in ways they may not have expected to be before they are allowed to graduate and teach the children of the area.

Eileen mentioned holding a leadership position in a student-led committee, through which she was also involved in choosing themes and guests for their conference. She does, however, feel as though she fell short in some ways. In particular, she said, “if I went back and did anything different, it would be to more explicitly communicate the ideas that I got from the course with that committee, and how I had a vision for that.” Along similar lines, Mitchell is responsible for coordinating the school’s pre-student teaching experience and has brought some of his lessons from the course, particularly what he learned about sundown towns, into what the new students need to learn before being sent into communities. Shirley is working gradually to challenge the district’s language assessment policies that she has come to see as harmful and mired in raciolinguistic ideologies.

Generally, many of the participants seem to be chipping away at standard practices that they find to be oppressive, some with more power than others. They are doing as I suggest during the course and pulling the levers they feel are within their grasp. I suspect that readers may find that their actions are not particularly radical given that they are not attempting to dismantle entire systems – their institutions do indeed remain racialized – but within the roles they currently play, so long as they do not give up any time soon, these seemingly minor administrative efforts have the potential to go a long way. It is a limitation of this study, of course, that I interviewed these participants only a few months to a year after they completed my class, and as such, anything substantive may have yet to occur. I am curious as to how much Laurel’s actual policy changes impact her program, for example, as, even though she is still white, she may have the opportunity to make her program less tolerant of future teachers who will perpetuate racism in their classrooms, which, at the very least, would benefit students in her city. I am less optimistic about any

institutionally-supported committee if said committee is not empowered to challenge the very racialized institution that birthed it.

Hiring with and without Power

Perhaps more than the other themes mentioned here, hiring is connected directly to power, and as such the interviews that detailed a hiring process were of particular interest to me. Of course, not all of the participants are responsible for hiring, but those that have been involved in such a process were certain to mention it to me during their interviews. Jasmine, for example, has been pushing her school to hire racialized candidates that they might have ignored in the past. But there were two interviews that focused more intently on hiring, and I want to place them alongside each other.

Both Mike and Kim were a part of hiring committees with an aim of attracting and securing the employment of individuals of color, the former for a deanship and the latter for a Visiting Assistant Professor. There is, certainly, a large difference between the two – one is an ongoing role, with significantly more job security and pay, and the other is a temporary (three-year) position. Point being, these are not entirely comparable scenarios. Nevertheless, they had similar goals, and I believe the divergent results are instructive.

Mike possesses enough institutional power that he can, and did, create what he referred to as “a new inclusive hiring process for faculty. And I think it's wonderful, I charge our Vice Provost to lead the work, and she's phenomenal. And so now, for any faculty or staff position on campus, the search committee has to go through inclusive hiring training. And it's not just like a 15-minute PowerPoint, there's four sessions.” The implication, of course, being that many institutions will claim to improve their hiring but will develop a short slideshow and call it a day. He is clear that

his work on this is only beginning, and that his subsequent hiring of the school's first Black dean is a positive step, but only a first step, and he plans to continue to build on this work he has initiated, even at a school where donors and trustees have expressed racist views. Yet he, with the support of his school president, has continued. Has whiteness been "substantively decentered" in his institution? Probably not, but in the department with new Black leadership, it can be considered a beginning.

By contrast, Kim is a new tenure-track assistant professor, and has, at the time of this writing, participated in only one hiring process, one of which she was very much not in charge. She explained that this hiring committee, which consisted of her entire – and entirely white – department and an external committee member who was a woman of color, had to rely on said external member to "make [them] do checks," and consider the way they were approaching the process. In the end, they hired another white man, which disappointed her, but she did say she felt he was the "most qualified." Not to be critical of her, but I wonder, had she had the power Mike did, if she could have helped re-determine what "qualified" meant. I also wonder, had they employed something like Mike's new hiring practices, would the same result have occurred? Perhaps so, given the school's location and the reality of her discipline, which is Classics, a field that she feels is making some strides towards evolution, but which remains a discipline where, as she said, "You had somebody standing up and asking Dan-el Padilla Peralta³⁷ how he felt about the possibility of getting his job because he's Black." So maybe there are only so many Classics scholars of color who might have applied, but I do wonder if a white search committee leaning on a colleague of color – again, without extra compensation – is going to have the same process as a

³⁷ A prominent Black Classics scholar we both know from Princeton

committee that has been forced to take the time to consider their decisions from start to finish. Additionally, although they are located in an extremely white area, Mike's location is hardly more hospitable to people of color – as Mike told me, he's had “a couple calls about ‘this critical race theory stuff; tell me, do you guys teach that?’” I say this not to criticize Kim but to reiterate the importance of power in challenging whiteness, for, as much as Kim has evolved on these issues, she is not yet in a position to challenge structures much bigger than she is. With that said, she told me that, when the next set of hires occurs this spring, she was planning to ask me for help directly³⁸, which is not the same as a codified school policy she does not have the power to institute, but I suppose the narratives have intersected more directly once again, especially as I continue to navigate hiring processes from the outside of academia, and will not be employed in the field anytime soon. Maybe a process like Mike's will lead to changes in my own career down the line, though this, of course, would just be an individual improvement.

Teaching

For a group of educators, not too many of the participants mentioned their pedagogy as an avenue through which they were planning to decenter whiteness. Sally did describe being vulnerable with her students, who are largely of the same demographic as she is, about how she was wrestling with these complex topics. As she explained, “Wrestling with and being vulnerable with my own wrestling of these ideas within my own teaching with them and thinking about that as a space of learning that we can come together with the tensions and the dilemmas that we're experiencing.” It is a circuitous sentence, but I think that is actually instructive in that trying to teaching against what you have always been taught is a non-linear process. As mentioned earlier,

³⁸ She never ended up asking, actually.

white educators who are trying to challenge whiteness should not be presented as, like Sally says, “know-it-alls.” Sharing their journeys as part of their pedagogy is a powerful way to upend expectations.

Jasmine is also incorporating her growing knowledge of the way whiteness is centered into her teaching, challenging assumptions her students might make about certain aspects of history. An avid baseball fan who teaches a baseball history course, she has increased the focus on the Negro Leagues in her lessons; in fact, she was quick to inform me that baseball is popular in Japan because of traveling Negro League players rather than white athletes, which I had not known.

Kim reflected on her growth from the time she felt she made several mistakes when teaching in a detention center as a doctoral student to the way she has changed her syllabi now. She told me, “I added units on Mesopotamian medicine, on Egyptian medicine, and focus sessions on issues of race and ethnicity, on gender and sexuality, on mental health. And, and I had an ability module for a version of it I taught last spring.” That last sentence there is the only time ability was mentioned explicitly in the interviews, and it is important to note that she told me she had taken a class, before mine, that included discussions of mental health and dis/ability; I will return to this in **Chapter Seven**, but the topic stuck with her because it had been mentioned *explicitly*. Otherwise, dragging a topic like Classics into the 21st century is a difficult but hardly impossible task. At the least, her students are receiving a different Classics education than the one she received.

All of the participants are making efforts to challenge whiteness in their work in their own ways. Some have been more successful than others, and one’s assessment of whether or not these efforts are substantive is subjective. However, one of the most important findings of my inquiry is the fact that this has not remained a “work project” for any of them. These participants are trying

to live in such a way that these evolving values are exemplified even when they are off the clock. Is the integration of a challenge to whiteness into their daily lives a mesotransformative change? Perhaps less so than the sections above, but it is nonetheless important for any readers, both the committee and potential public consumers, to see that to have any chance of challenging powerful natives, it cannot end at the end of the work day.

Off the Clock

Sally and Mitchell made clear that they take pains to impart these values to their four children. Sally spoke of lessons she teaches her sons about how the world views a Black friend of theirs, enacting specific rules rather than speaking about these issues in the abstract. “The rule is, ‘no Nerf guns in the front yard,’” she said. “And my boys were like, ‘Why? Why can't we?’ You know? And I was like, ‘This is why we're having this conversation, because you guys can do it in the house, if you want to do your Nerf guns, but we can't do it outside with [friend]’. And this is why, and just helping them understand.”

Gillian spoke of her goal to, as she put it, “be a good ancestor,” and avoid shying away from conflicts that she might have avoided before the lessons she has spent the past decade absorbing in my class and others she has taken. Though she struggles with determining the effectiveness of her approach, she is feeling less fear of reprisal. She told me, “This is the best formula I've come up with right now. But I'm still open to, you know, further suggestions. And then the one you have very effectively, you know, egged me on as not being afraid of people getting mad at me.”

Laurel is eager to branch out from the traditional research that has helped her quickly gain tenure and move into more public-facing work, where she feels she can find more resonance.

Despite the aforementioned concrete policy changes she has instituted in her administrative position, she is more concerned with the impact she has outside of the academic world. “I feel like I just need to be more purposeful in my community engagement and just do it more from a community-led space,” she explained, “rather than all the things I thought I knew... Like, actually doing something real. All the research just feels fake to me right now. It all feels like these fake little measuring sticks that we've created that are kind of meaningless.”

Mike spoke about something he actually learned from his teenage daughter and the history she is studying, that he himself was never exposed to; she created a documentary on “racial postcards.” “I'm 49 years old, I'd never heard of a racial postcard,” he said. “No one ever taught me. And it's a lot... an omission that my teachers never taught me. Right. It's sundown towns, things like that. The environment that I was not exposed to continues to be a little bit mind-blowing.” As a reminder, his mother is an educator of national renown, and he is on his own journey towards an eventual college presidency, but his daughter is receiving lessons he never did, and he wants to remain open to what was closed off to him, and not just (or even primarily) in his workplace.

Kim is hoping to continue to make more connections outside of her academic circles, particularly with neighbors of color, who are unfortunately few and far between in her part of the state. Nevertheless, she and her husband are being intentional about changing who they spend their time with, not just for their own sake but for the benefit of their toddler daughter. “It is a very, very white neighborhood,” she lamented. “I have not encountered a single person of color, except at the YMCA swim class... So those are some of the larger goals, to not just be academic about all these things, and like write about them, but to actually live and engage and have friends and have real connections.”

Shirley told me she had never much paid attention to politics before the past several years. She mentioned former President Trump as one impetus for looking more closely at the news, as I am sure was true of many, but also that her time in the course helped push her to follow stories she might have otherwise ignored. As she explained, “I don't engage a whole lot in terms of national politics or even current events, pop culture, all that sort of stuff. Not really my thing. It was, it was interesting to hear what other people were thinking about some of the things that were going on, I think our discussions helped me look at it.” She has resolved to continue to pay more attention to issues she feels she has long had the privilege of ignoring.

Taking a slightly different angle, Jasmine said that her mother's passing had allowed her to feel less obligated to consider returning to the United States, as much of her family has shown little interest in her life or career. Accordingly, she has been able to build stronger personal relationships without feeling a nagging pressure to eventually depart, and a deeper understanding of her own identity has developed. In other words, she is better able to work towards the goals she wants to achieve because she is closer to the person she would like to be. “I noticed the few times that I have gone back home for an extended period of time again,” she said, “like no longer than a month, I revert back to this person that I don't like.” As a result, she is choosing to be intentional with her personal development even when she is not serving in her academic capacity, and it is through this personal development that her interest in moving away from harmful ideologies has emerged.

Eileen says she is allowing herself the space to make mistakes as she attempts to make decentering whiteness a daily practice. She knows she has only just begun what she expects to be a lifelong journey. “There's a long way to go,” she told me. “But like you said, there's not like an

endpoint to imagine I'll get there and then I'll be done. I think we have to think of it as something that's continual unlearning and growth.”

Christa is reconsidering her family’s choice of churches, having observed their cowardice in the wake of the Chauvin murder. She is also making changes to her children’s reading material. Slotted under the rarely-used code I called “Existential Questions,” she also told me she was having larger thoughts about certain aspects of religion in general. “Since your class, I have also been thinking about missionaries,” she said. “This is like what you're supposed to do, right? It's been a long time since I memorized Bible verses. But yeah, so that's something that I've been grappling with, too, is like, is there a place at all for missionary work?” Though I am not a religious person, I do understand the importance of faith to a person’s life, and to question the epistemology in which you have been raised is reminiscent of the way they have all had to turn away from the ideologies of whiteness they have been handed. Indeed, though it is beyond the scope of my dissertation, a possible extension of their development in comparison to religious conversion feels as though it might bear scholarly fruit.

Let us return to one of the central points raised earlier and throughout the findings chapters. These are individual stories, particularly so in this “Off the Clock” section in which they are separate from their institutions. Can the way they live and move through the world have any influence on racialized power? It is surely good that they are making what appear to be less harmful choices, and this is of a piece with a rejection of overarching narratives into which they were initiated. And yes, if they made mesotransformative changes but led exclusionary daily lives, it would be hypocritical. But I do feel as though part of what allows whiteness to retain its hegemony is the tacit acceptance from those who are told to embrace it, so even these individual acts are

worthwhile. They are not a part of transforming institutions, but they are important parts of the participants' narratives.

Chapter Summary

This chapter is meant to demonstrate how these participants have integrated their efforts to challenge whiteness into their daily lives alongside their professional roles, where their impact may have been limited thus far. I admit I was surprised, when I asked the first few participants what they had done after the course ended, that they told me not just what they were doing with their professional work, but how much space these efforts were now taking up in their lives, and, in my view, the inextricable nature of what the participants are trying to do is my most compelling finding. In a way, the only way they can ever come close to decentering whiteness is, ironically, by keeping it front and center – they have *centered decentering whiteness*. And indeed, this is true of me as well, since, not only do I teach these classes, write articles, host a podcast, and so on, but my daily life and ideologies have shifted considerably. This work has changed my opinion on where I would consider raising Ezel, on where I would consider working, on who I spend my time with, and, somewhat amusingly, makes me angry at most of the extremely competitive conversations the other parents have about their kids in the playground. On a sadder note, I have lost many of my casual friends since I began this work, not only due to the nature of the pandemic, but also because there are so few among them I felt I could trust on these issues, and I remembered far too many moments where they demonstrated that they would retreat under the canopy of whiteness if under duress. I have, of course, gained plenty of critical scholar compatriots around the world, which has been encouraging, yet there is a grief to the ending of relationships I did not

expect to lose. With that said, I do not for one second regret the improvement to my social circles, and believe that I, and Ezel, will be far better off in the long run after these excisions.

Now, in the context of Helms and Ray, the “off the clock” stories are personal, individual developments for all eleven of us and not policy changes or even hiring decisions. Although I could probably just ask Dr. Ray his opinion since I maintain contact with him, my interpretation of the fact that all of the participants are changing their daily lives is that, even if individual evolutions are not, themselves, actions that alter institutional power, it does seem to be the case that anyone who is committed to turning away from the narratives pushed onto them is going to have to do so both at work and at home. To give Helms’s model some additional credit, I do wonder if what she had identified as the tendency for individual development to stall might be connected to a realization that one’s life truly does need to fundamentally change, and how uncomfortable some might feel, for example, enforcing Nerf gun rules when the other parents do not. Like the participants, the solidification of my new social circle does not entail mesotransformation in any way, but if I were attempting institutional change while surrounded by my now-former friends, I would suffer psychologically and struggle to achieve anything of note. The individual experiences outside of institutional obligations matter. I now find that the supposed tension between the individual and the institution is actually closer to a search for harmony. It is not one instead of the other, or one before the other – it is both, simultaneously, consistently, and perpetually.

At the outset of this chapter, I asked, “in choosing to challenge [institutional] issues, were they able to move away from individual solutions?” I suppose I am sorry to say that, perhaps with the exception of Laurel’s policy changes to target potentially harmful teachers and Mike’s new hiring process, mostly they appear to have been using their greater understanding of their, as Ray

might say, credentialed whiteness in order have a more positive influence on their institutions, though their institutions will likely continue to perpetuate the same ideologies for the foreseeable future. I would not necessarily say that this is a failure of mesotransformation, though, as all ten of them espoused a commitment to pursuing these efforts for years to come. The lesson here might be that individual actions are much faster and within a person's control, and that the issue would be if they stopped there. As I mentioned very early in this work, I do feel that my goal to pursue justice through specifically meso-level transformation is valuable, which means that I now need to ask whether that angle proved to have been valuable. Clearly, at the micro level, all of the participants made changes, just like I did, but I cannot say that they would not have done so without the course. Indeed, all of us were on our divergent trajectories before I thought of the course and we may well have continued regardless. Additionally, we surely cannot say that they would have been better off pursuing macro changes, especially considering the current political climate and how hostile it might have been to their goals. Unfortunately, mesotransformation does not appear to be all that much easier than macro, so while I might have captured some compelling micro stories about our evolving relationships with whiteness, the only people who were able to make any changes to their institutions were those who already had the power to do so without fear of retribution. In other words, a handful of participants used their power for good, as it were, but the hands in which the power rests are the same as they were before. Mike brought a new Black dean onto the institutional boat, and Laurel developed policies that can potentially kick misbehaving students off, but the hierarchies remain firmly in place, and the identity of leadership has hardly changed. A small part of me wonders if it is indeed possible at a large institution, or, the size at which radical changes become infeasible; a future question to be answer. I do know, at the job where I was eventually hired, most of the leadership is Black – not just not white – and this was a

deliberate effort from the organization's founding forty years ago. Can an organization that classifies whiteness as an unspoken credential cease to do so, or are the improvements made by Mike and Laurel the most that can be hoped for? Perhaps if I were to check back in years from now this will no longer be true, but I cannot say the center of power has shifted, but in a way, that does suggest that my decision to focus on this angle of transformation was worthwhile, if only to further demonstrate the intractability of racialization in organizations.

I unfortunately cannot say whether or not they will forge ahead and, over the next decade, have a hand in a substantive shift in racialized power within their institutions, a clear limitation of this study and perhaps of the questions I asked. I would say that they have a stronger chance of doing so than they did when they were still mired in the narratives with which they were raised, but the mesotransformation has yet to occur.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Before I offer what I feel are my final, summative conclusions, I need to confront a few of this study's limitations.

Limitations

The primary limitations of this work are tied to, though not necessarily caused by, the deliberate choice I made to focus on the individuals who completed my course. Back in **Chapter Three**, I explained my purposeful sampling as follows:

“I chose these participants purposefully because my second research question focuses on white educators who have taken a course that is explicit in its focus on whiteness, and otherwise I would need to search for other courses similar to mine and verify their curricula; I do not believe I would have been able to answer my research questions with any other participants.”

I still believe that the final sentence rings true, but I will admit that there is an unspoken factor that I did not acknowledge in describing my methods, namely the impact of time. I am not sure how I would have gone about verifying the fact that potential participants who were unfamiliar to me were deliberately choosing to challenge whiteness. Perhaps a survey could have been developed, but finessing the questions such that they demonstrated what participation in my course served as a proxy for – that they were eager to delve more deeply into whiteness rather than more superficial diversity or even anti-racism courses – would have been a challenge. I spent far too long searching ERIC and other databases looking for studies that seemed to have asked the same research questions as I did, and although I did not find any, that does not mean I could not have found a way to cast a broader net. It might have taken me the several years that many dissertations last, but

I could have done it. One could see this decision as pragmatic, impatient, or a mix thereof, but it must be acknowledged.

Another time-based limitation is the very question that emerged from my findings, the tension between the individual and the institution. Though from what I described above it appears few of their institutions have undergone substantial shifts, I was also interviewing them a short time after they completed the course. For example, the four Missouri professors finished their sessions in early July, had the summer off, and then I contacted them in early November – they really only had a few months. If I were to propose a study that I thought might better capture long-term institutional change, it might be best to build a case study of a school or an organization and track how it, say, decredentialed whiteness over a period of several years, however such a process might be measured. I am not fond of such research because of how much patience it requires, but it would stand a better chance of illustrating mesotransformation. Accordingly, I was left with what these particular individuals attempted in the short-term.

A further consequence of the self-imposed time crunch was that I did need to focus on the people whose information I already possessed and did not need to conduct any complicated recruitment. I sent out a standardized email with personalized greetings and waited for responses. I then sent out a few reminders in case people had missed it, and after the second set of reminders, I had half of what I thought would be the maximum I could possibly amass as a sample – I hoped for 20 and settled for 10 – and I went ahead with scheduling interviews. And then, by chance, almost all of the participants were academics, maybe because academics are familiar with research (and with dissertations specifically), or maybe because they vacillate between small and large amounts of free time. But that is what happened. Perhaps, if I had been able to cast a wider net, I would have interviewed more people with power, people whose power allowed them to do what

Mike was able to accomplish; I mostly spoke to people who, even if well-respected, like Gillian and Jasmine in Japan, wielded meager amounts of power. On the other hand, I needed clients when I designed the class, and it is worth noting that those with less power – even while possessing the relative privilege of whiteness – were the audience most compelled by my marketing. I think, if I am able to continue offering consulting in the future, I need to find a way to promote my work to people on Mike’s level if I want to have a better chance at influencing institutional practices.

Now, not everyone who took my class was an academic or even in the field of education at all. For example, the two other people who shared the very first cohort with Kim were an art historian and a dog trainer, and there was also a medical student in a later cohort who had really interesting insights into the whiteness of medicine. I also taught an entire group of employees at a non-profit, and though that non-profit is education-adjacent, none were likely to consider themselves educators, though I would have found a way to interview them had they responded with interest. Even among the educators, not all were academics. In addition to Shirley, there were several adult educators, and then there were the three people whom, by the time I had defended my proposal, I had already interviewed for the relevant section of my book³⁹. What this meant is that the data I did gather from these participants was necessarily more similar than it otherwise might have been, both in that I choose the course registrants and also based upon who expressed interest among them. Does this make my research weaker? Perhaps. I believe it would be interesting to expand this to anyone who takes my course in the future, as well as building a valid way to assess external participants and their willingness to challenge whiteness specifically. This would be the work of several years, and if I do end up working in an academic capacity, I may

³⁹ I needed to finish the book manuscript before I started the IRB process, and so they are simply not quoted directly.

well pursue it. And if not, I encourage anyone who finds the eventual publication of portions of these findings to build upon the work in a manner that is compelling to them.

As is detailed in **Appendix A**, this was a course created out of an individual's urgency and frustration, and had I planned it over a longer period of time, I might have included more pressure on producing tangible institutional change. The "final project" asks them to make an action plan, but there are no "teeth" – I challenge their plan in the final session but they are under no obligation to actually transform their institutions. Were I hired on by an institution that was open to actual change, I might be able to write about my direct role in mesotransformation in the future. As such, the work, and this inquiry into it, is limited by my own status as a freelance educational consultant, although, as Kim mentioned, she felt more comfortable being honest with me because I was not her colleague, so there are drawbacks to being a part of an institution as well.

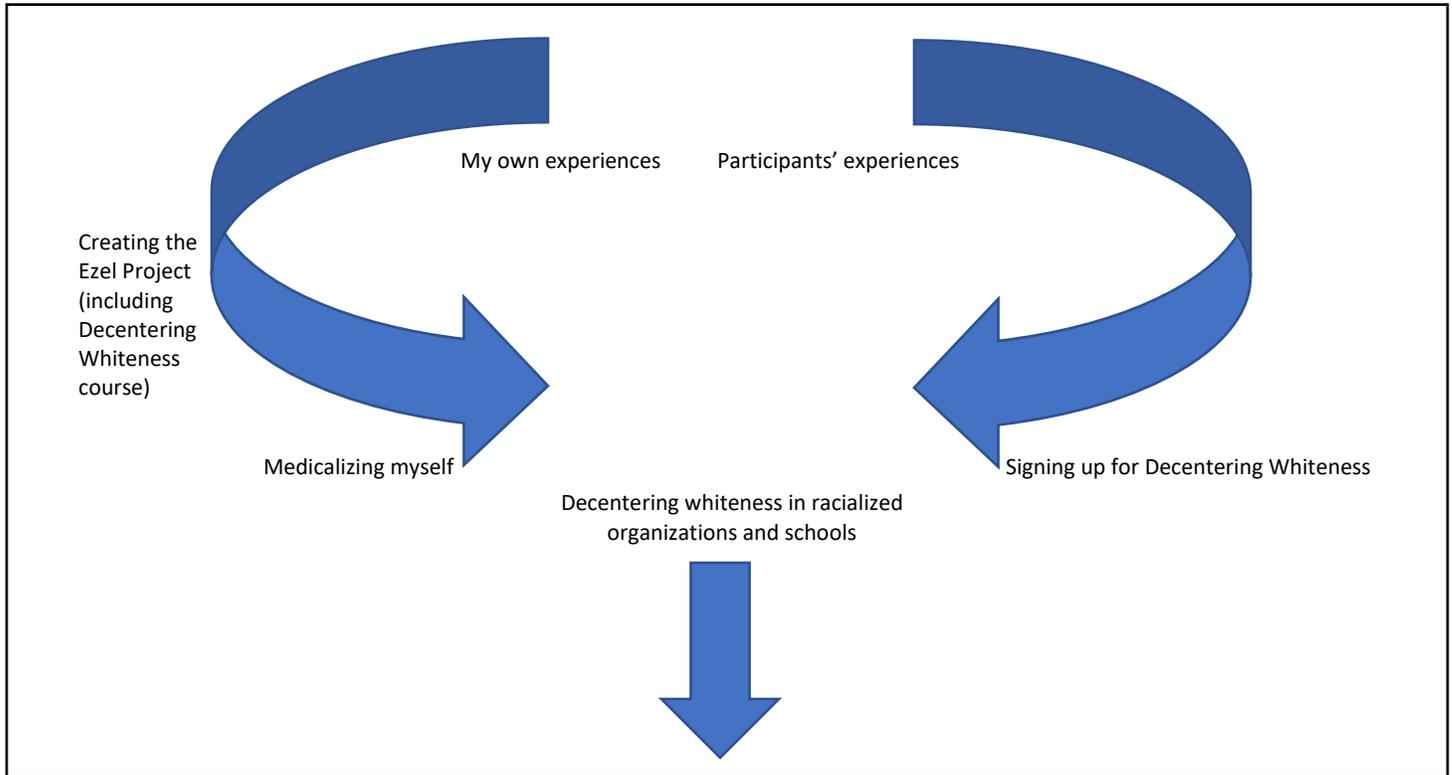
I can only speculate on this, but the final conclusions I am about to share are certainly dependent upon the nature of academia as a profession. Yes, these participants centered decentering whiteness, but how many other careers expect constant written output as well as administrative work and committee participation? I believe that, to have any chance at success, you need to make these changes across the full scope of your life – you need to get in the water, rather than reaching down from inside of the boat – but I also believe that that is much easier to do so in a career that depends upon deep inquiry. In other words, I do wonder if, had it been nine K-12 employees and one academic instead, they might have approached their ongoing efforts differently, with fewer avenues for doing so. In a way, the narrowness of this inquiry is both a detriment and a means of clarification, in that it is certainly only a snapshot into how white educators at large might respond to these issues, but, at the same time, I do believe what I have uncovered is the full, complex story of something singular: The Ezel Project.

The New Master Narrative of the Ezel Project

For a final time, my research questions were as follows:

1. How have my multiple identities and my experiences as an educator and an academic within racialized and ableist organizations shaped the development of my mesotransformative decentering whiteness courses?
2. A. How do white educators describe the way that their experiences and prior relationship to whiteness influenced their decision to join a course on decentering whiteness?
B. How did that participation in this course shape their efforts at substantively decentering whiteness in their racialized and ableist organizations?

In the Syed (2016) article I cited in describing master narratives much earlier, the author speaks of broader societal narratives – e.g., the “American Dream” – that manage to elide power imbalances while assigning responsibilities to individuals. Master narratives are the roles we are all meant to follow, lest we be seen as disruptive. In borrowing the term here and applying it to my project, I intend to demonstrate, with these final conclusions, that this work represents a new master narrative for everyone involved. I once again refer to **Figure 3** and the turns in the arrows.



I could choose to say that my project represents a rejection of my participation in the master narrative that had been set out before me, and the same for the participants, but I believe that is too limiting. I consider The Ezel Project to be not just a rejection but the creation of a new master narrative in which all eleven of us, and, by extension, our colleagues, students, and children, are now engaging, and of which we are the authors. It is a narrative without defined life stages once we have leapt off the boat, and one without the milestones that we are told to pursue. Sure, we still live in the world, and many of the participants will achieve tenure, buy houses, raise children to adulthood, and so forth. But through the work we have done together, and through what we will all continue to do, we have found our way to the methods through which we can craft our own narratives. That same master narrative we are choosing to reject demands we stay individualized and isolated, and although many of their answers focused on their individual acts, I believe that,

even if it will take much more time for our institutions to change, we are something of a collective in our attempts to navigate the water together, and that is a counterstory all of us are telling together.

The following represents both the final answers to my research questions as well as what I feel are the reasons why the Ezel Project has the capacity to build towards a new master narrative.

Explicit Content

The title of this sub-section is something of a cheeky reference to the “Parental Advisory: Explicit Content” stickers that have been affixed to album covers for the past few decades. However, I make this reference purposefully, as the explicitness – meaning “directness” rather than “vulgarity” – of the Decentering Whiteness course was an important part of its appeal and its potential impact. Among others, Sally and Kim mentioned that the title appealed to them because it was clearly going to force them to sit with their own identity and their decisions more than similar courses they had taken in the past. As Kim told me, “What none of these other programs was doing, was asking me to look at myself and where I grew up.” Indeed, the title was something of a warning to anyone who was more eager to sit comfortably inside of the now-archaic “diversity” discourse, and this decision is tied directly to my research question regarding why the participants chose the course in the first place. Additionally, in many of the participants’ narratives, there were echoes of the importance of explicit guidance having helped them along the path towards my course, from a course Mike had taught in years past that forced him to reflect on his own identity, to the fact that many of the participants found me because of my similarly-titled journal article. If we refer back to the literature that helped me build the course and its tenets, much of what recurred in the research was a desire for white individuals to distance themselves from the

reality of their identities, and by being direct in my messaging, I attracted clients who felt prepared to engage with these topics frankly, while others were repulsed by what I was attempting to do and, in one case, stopped speaking to me. In Picower's (2009) article, for example, one of her students hid behind her ethnicity and her religion as a way to avoid grappling with her whiteness, and from day one of my course, such obfuscation was impossible, not because of any particular skill I demonstrated but because, from the marketing, to the discussions I had with prospective clients, to my opening presentation, our goals were set forth clearly and explicitly. The marketing material for the Ezel Project course states, "This is not a diversity training. It's a project designed to help people decide how best to dismantle white supremacy in their context through collective action" ("The Ezel Project," 2020). I am not certain how much actually dismantling has occurred, but no one who signed up for the course could possibly have logged on for day one unclear as to what we would be working towards. With that said, the call to collective action might have been explicit in both the marketing and the final assignment, yet even the four professors who were actual colleagues chose to pursue their goals separately. For all of this section's emphasis on explicitness, I was not explicit enough about the necessity for collectives, further demonstrating the importance of directness.

I had no idea whether or not people would enjoy the course when I debuted it, but I suspected that what many of the courses that sprung up in the summer of 2020 would be lacking was the commitment to directness, and this was confirmed through every wan "training" I suffered through at my own workplace. I had considered offering a more circumspect and color-evasive "diversity" type course years ago, thinking I might sneak more subversive ideas in when the audience least expected it, but as Kim highlighted for me, many of the participants enjoyed the course because of the trust we had built in our (virtual) classroom, which might have been

impossible had I tried to bamboozle people into something more explicit than what they had expected. As she told me, “All of the things that I look back to now, were less about kind of the larger concepts, which I felt like I, you know, had mostly gotten some exposure to through these other trainings. But that the way in which the course made me connect my own personal background, where I grew up, what I'm doing, the choices I'm making, to those topics.”

Another reason that explicitness is part of the project's role in shifting narratives is because of the influence of Critical Race Theory. The reference to album covers is not incidental, as many of those albums deemed unsafe for children are made by Black musicians, who have long been seen as a menace to polite society while making direct and blunt music. Similarly, though few would admit this, I suspect what makes CRT so terrifying to certain parents is its explicit insistence on the central role racism has long played in our society; the fact that it refuses to quietly hint at systemic racism unsettles people. Even the Republican party has been forced to admit that some version of “overt” racism exists (Wallace-Wells, 2021), yet what many cannot absorb is the reality of how whiteness has built a society around its own apotheosis. Given that CRT is one of the frameworks of both this inquiry and the construction of my course, it makes sense that explicitness is also one of the reasons why the Ezel Project is able to play a part in shifting personal and professional narratives, even though I admittedly fell short on underlining the theory in our actual sessions. A part of me was reticent to focus too much on the literature, as I wanted the course to appeal to those outside of the ivory tower, but that meant I was not nearly as direct as I could have been about CRT, Dis/Crit, and Critical Whiteness's lessons about societal construction and the ways that harm is built into our systems. Given I designed the course after only two years of school, I was less confident in building the sessions than I would be had I planned it in 2022, and I can see where my frameworks would have been useful in my facilitation, even if they helped guide my

choices and were implied in the lessons. A missed opportunity, but one I hope to continue to correct with my ongoing public scholarship.

Speaking of Dis/Crit, one unfortunate way in which the importance of explicitness was further underlined was through the fact that ableism did not feature very often in their narratives. For me, my understanding of dis/ability and its conceptualization were made clear by an explicit education in my Disability Studies course with which one of my readers should be familiar. From there, I was finally ready to explore my own identity, which eventually led to the self-medicalization that factored into this inquiry. Had we not explicitly discussed the way that racism and ableism were consciously built alongside each other, particularly in the United States (Nielsen, 2012), I might have taken several more years to come to important revelations about myself, and I surely would not have brought this additional axis of oppression into my scholarship at all. *Ability-evasiveness* does not appear to have been coined as a term among all of the literature I reviewed⁴⁰, but, although I was certainly not afraid to discuss the concept, I do believe, had I created the course after my diagnosis, I would have ensured I focused more intently on the issue. In the interviews, several of the participants used words now seen as ableist (e.g., “dumb,” “idiot,”), mostly when referring to themselves or ignorant white individuals, but I still could have done better in the course delivery to focus on these topics. I do bring this discussion quite centrally into my book, and into every invited talk that I deliver, but I clearly did not center the discussion of ability as much as I could have in the course. The fact that Kim mentioned both ability and mental health in her interview because they were explicit topics in a previous course she had taken suggests to me that, had I done more of this, or been farther along in my own journey, the narratives

⁴⁰ I guess I will be coining it myself once this is published to ProQuest.

would have included more explicit thoughts on the way that ableism ties into the racism that they are trying to fight again. I do hope that by fighting against whiteness, the ableism that surely exists in their contexts will be lessened, but that is a bit like those who claim that eliminating poverty will resolve racism; we need to be explicit about the issue to address it effectively, and we need, once again, to place resources behind the effort.

Regarding Critical Pedagogy, I was clear to mention Freire in the first week of every session, but otherwise we did not expound upon his ideals more explicitly. The question becomes, can something qualify as Critical Pedagogy if it does not directly declare its presence within the framework? I believe that the structure of the course, the focus on facilitated discussions and a flattening of hierarchy during the sessions, as Kim spoke of positively in describing the comfort she felt in examining herself in new ways, all mean that the actual course would find approval among Freirian scholars, but I also know that perhaps it was a bridge too far to expect that placing myself among the participants as a peer and rejecting a higher status position would lead to their challenging power within their institutions. I ultimately was too tentative in course construction, and it is a lesson for any future curricula I develop, which is, appropriately enough, the primary responsibility of my new job, so I will have plenty of opportunity to lean upon Freire as I complete my work.

In the two years I have been giving invited talks, I have only rarely received resistance from audience members. The fact that the title always includes the word “whiteness” turns away many who might not be eager to engage in such a discussion, but a few people listen to what I have to say and grow angry with me. Much of the time, what seems to set them off is the very fact that I am not comfortably sitting inside of the “diversity” discourse, or even “anti-racism” as it became more common as a topic in 2020. The fact that I insist on talking about whiteness is a vital

aspect of my work, and the narratives of the participants demonstrate that this obstinance has been worthwhile, both for me and for them.

From Inquiry to Empathy and Avoiding Individual Heroics

Unlike the previous conclusion, this concept was not consciously planned, and emerged only from the interviews, as well as a few stray comments that occurred during the course sessions. The medical student I mentioned during the **Limitations** section above mentioned “empathy” a few times, both during class and in additional conversations we had before she eventually took the course. One of the reasons that not being able to include her is a hindrance to this work is because she did have some valuable insight on the empathy that turned out to be related to this inquiry, but I can reference the way our discussions shaped my work. I will return to our discussions shortly.

As I mentioned earlier, I first learned about the concept of empathy when I was ten and my English class was reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This otherwise-all-white classroom was being taught that empathy meant, figuratively, walking a mile in someone else’s shoes, but, unfortunately, the way most of my classmates learned about this with respect to racism was to read about slavery, lynching, South African apartheid and other phenomena from which it was easy to distance themselves, while I sat through each such lesson and felt it very directly. With no criticism meant to Harper Lee, the fact that my nominally progressive school felt the best way to induce empathy was by assigning us one (1) yearly book that may or may not have centered racialized people – *To Kill a Mockingbird* is, of course, really about a white family – is how adults end up needing to take a course where whiteness is the explicit focus⁴¹. My insight with respect to all of

⁴¹ Although, interestingly enough, the particular English teacher who taught us Harper Lee’s book was an exception to the school’s color-evasive approach, and has remained, for me, an example that white teachers in white spaces have always had the capacity to do better than

this was that, although I did want to feature influential work by Black writers, I saved this material for the back half of the course, because I felt that this “book club” approach to challenging hierarchies allows people to evade the self-inquiry that is necessary for the transformation I wanted to achieve. Reading books is wonderful – or else I would not have written one – but, even if supported by a profound discussion, there is little incentive to travel from the page to institutional change.

I could have constructed the course similarly to other equity efforts in which I have participated, where we might have started by reading Black authors and discussing their work. Given that the aspects of the course that seemed to resonate the most with the participants were sundown towns and white saviorism, though, I feel my approach was useful. Those two topics seem to have had an impact because, with the former, many of the participants had not been exposed to the concept at all, or, upon deeper inquiry, found their own hometown on the [database](#) maintained by Tougaloo College, where the book’s late author, Dr. James Loewen, taught. At the very least, as had been the case for me when I read the book, their eyes were opened to how widespread municipal ordinances against certain residents were, and through this lens, it became impossible for the participants to stay separate from the whiteness being analyzed in the course. The participants were asked to consider their own upbringings, and with this in mind, the focus on sundown towns forced a specific type of reflection that helped them place their own adolescence in contrast to families, and children, who were not able to grow as freely as they could, through no fault of their own. Additionally, the week we spend on sundown towns and other white spaces asks the participants to consider the impact that seeing homogeneity as the norm has even on the

expected on these issues, especially considering the era. She is still teaching there, but avoids the internet, so I hope I can find her and give this to her someday.

families who did not choose a location because of a preference for whiteness. I believe that this aspect of the course helped the participants extend the concepts we discussed into other facets of their lives, in a way that made the impact more lasting.

The time we spent on white saviorism encouraged many of the participants to examine the ideologies they had brought with them into the field of education and/or academia. At no point did I accuse the people in these courses of being white saviors, partially because I did not actually know and partially owing to my belief that a critical pedagogue should not make any assumptions, but many of them admitted to, at the very least, having started from such a place. The frequent “struggle” that several participants mentioned is tied to their deeper understanding of the many ways a savior ideology can manifest in their work, and the difficulty of balancing the imminent need to push against the structures in their context as much as possible without “taking over” and presenting themselves as heroic for having done so. I do not actually have a definitive answer for how to straddle this line, nor do I want to provide a simple one, but a part of me feels as though always having to walk a tightrope in this way helps develop a sense of empathy for the racialized who are always having to think twice about their own actions lest they be punished accordingly, and for those who persevere, a sense of solidarity and common struggle is possible.

The aim of the savior section of the course is to move them away from individual heroism, but as we saw above, much of what they have actually achieved thus far is still a litany of individual changes. I would not classify any of what they have done to be savior behavior, but, participation in any “helping” profession (including education) can simply make people feel good (Szuster, 2016), and can thus be corroded into the act of saving, as many the participants noted about their inspiration for joining the field. The value of Critical Pedagogy is moving away from “teacher as sage,” and so here, when I consider, for example, Sally’s insistence on being vulnerable with her

students about her own limitations, I see this as a means of moving away from saviorism and towards the humility necessary to understand the value of challenging whiteness in their institutions, even if they have not fully achieved these goals thus far.

As has been mentioned a few times now, the fact that many of the participants had their eyes opened to their need to pursue these ideas further through courses they took in graduate school is not incidental. For better or worse, inquiry is meant to be a central part of graduate study, and of doctoral study in particular, and we students are, in reputable programs at least, given the space to explore complex issues more deeply than we might have been in undergraduate studies, or in a sixth-grade English class. Does this mean that all graduate students are ready to challenge whiteness? Certainly not, but I do think that the combination of the explicitness – in both their classes and in mine – plus the inquiry inherent to graduate school – all ten participants, along with myself, have, at least, a Master’s degree – combines to provide the groundwork for the self-analysis necessary for an avoidance of savior behavior to develop and become central to these individuals’ work, and lives.

I am not sure the Ezel Project is effective for those who simply want to follow the crowd, which is also why the explicitness is vital to ward off those who might be less committed to the work. For these participants, it was important not just that they take the time to build their capacity to empathize, but also that they, in some fashion, recognize that those around them, either at work, at home, or in the broader society, may not be taking the time to do so, and that they are willing to look back at their younger selves as having fallen short, but with the willingness to do better instead of an immobilizing guilt.

Endless Effort

I return to Victor Ray's (2019) concept of racialized organizations for a final time as I consider the new master narrative of the Ezel Project. Having come to this final set of conclusions, I see now that the racialization of organizations and the ableism that undergirds this process are both powerful factors in the master narrative we are all meant to follow and that the Decentering Whiteness course and The Ezel Project overall are meant to reject. For the participants, and for me, new counterstories are being authored, turning our arrows sharply away from what we were expected to follow without question. The people who benefit from the "hardened power structures" I mentioned back in the very first paragraph of this dissertation are not eager to relinquish their position, and it is going to require the collaboration of a great deal of us to shift and distribute that power in an equitable way. The findings here may have indicated that most of their efforts are thus far individual, but, as I said above, I hope that everyone who has participated in The Ezel Project can coalesce into a collective over time and that institutions really do change as a result. The Decentering Whiteness course is a very small part of what I hope to do, because it is going to take a great deal of institutional change to keep Ezel safe.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the importance of considering intersectionality in sharing my findings. Though I cannot say I have much of significance to share about the participants' gender identities, the fact is that these individuals were not just white, they were of certain genders, classes, and abilities, and to pretend that only their race mattered in shaping their – and my – narrative would be short-sighted. I am certain that my findings would be different had I interviewed only men, or more people who had been raised in poverty, or people who are dis/abled (or, to be perfectly accurate, people who shared their dis/ability status with me). Accordingly, I include this here in the conclusion to indicate that the final lessons I draw from

what my analysis revealed are specific to these eleven stories, and that the Master Narratives pushed upon them, and me, were decidedly middle- and upper-class narratives; though I am about to move into the fact that these changes require ceaseless effort, I am mindful of the fact that those who need to expend said effort on mere survival were not among my participants, and are unlikely to ever be my audience. I have no desire to lecture working class or poor readers, and, as one can see in the **Appendix A**, my entire course was built out of frustration with my well-to-do peers.

With that said, one of the ways that these new narratives have been built is through the fact that this work requires endless, exhaustive effort, especially from those who have the ability to opt in or opt out of these potentially destabilizing challenges. The Decentering Whiteness course might only be six weeks long, but the work is a lifelong responsibility, one which encompasses careers, child-rearing, and every other facet of a person's life. Instead of reaching down from our boats to possibly pull a few extra racialized people on board with us, we have chosen, even if fearful of our lack of preparation, to jump down into the water and remain there. Indeed, if traditional "diversity" efforts were designed to pluck a few lucky souls out of the water and then cease efforts accordingly, The Ezel Project, I now understand, would prefer a future in which there are no boats, and more and more people join us in the water, where we can create a ripple effect that would impact everyone. The participants may seem to be engaging in small-scale work, much of which is under-resourced at best and with a limited reach. Additionally, while we do not know how many of their colleagues will join them over time, but, at the very least, there are students, and scholars, who will benefit from their efforts, and I can only hope that they lean upon each other when they understandably grow weary of the work in which they are engaging. They are welcome to lean upon me, too.

When I think of The Ezel Project, I think of the participants, and the distance they have traveled from the past, up through their time in the course, and on into an uncertain future. I think of myself, and my certitude that this is the right direction for me to travel, even if the steps I take to reach each new achievement are impossible to predict. And, of course, I think of the project's namesake, who has no idea of what I am trying to do, but will hopefully benefit anyway, not just because of the way that the project will hopefully make him safer, but also because my own arrow turn has made me a better and more empathetic father to him. Like most people, he is unlikely to ever sit down and read a dissertation, even one with his name in the title, but I hope that it matters to him all the same someday. Tuck and Yang (2014) warned that academia has more time for nice words than an actual commitment to justice, but for Ezel's sake, and the sake of everyone who looks and thinks like he does, I thought it was important that I try.

The Ezel Project is necessarily unfinished. The Ezel Project Inquiry hereby concludes with the hope that more scholars and educators make the choice to step away from their old narratives and into something new, into a future where whiteness is no longer a credential, and where organizations and schools value all of us the way they have often failed to. It is going to take a lifetime for these institutions to undergo the mesotransformation they require, but for Ezel's sake, I have to believe it is possible.

Onward, then.

JPB Gerald

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Appendix A: Course Design

Background

It would be dishonest not to admit that the course was originally planned rather quickly. We all know that the events of May 2020 seemed to happen rapidly, particularly the back-to-back news stories about George Floyd and Amy Cooper. As traumatic as the former was (and remains)⁴², it fit a more established pattern, sadly enough. I am not surprised at what the police are capable of, though the nonchalance involved was most likely what inspired so strong of a public response. Nevertheless, it was the latter news story that really got under my skin, with no pun intended.

I know Amy Cooper. Not literally, but I know many people with precisely her profile. She is a financially successful white woman in early middle-age who by all accounts is politically progressive, yet will, as we all saw, endanger the life of a Black man when he tries to correct her. I do not have a large number of friends who are police, and truth be told, I also do not know very many people in circumstances as difficult as those of George Floyd. Suffice it to say that, as enraging as they are, each police murder affects me from a bit of a remove, because, although I worry about myself and my son, I do believe the chances are fairly low because I rarely drive and I do not live where they tend to patrol aggressively, which is its own commentary on class that I do not currently have space for.

After the Amy Cooper video went viral, though, friends started sending me messages with questions. One friend, wary that alerting the authorities for any reason would be seen as similar to

⁴² I still have never watched the full video because I cannot subject myself to these things anymore

Cooper's actions, asked me if calling the police on a Black man wielding a knife was the wrong thing to do. Another person asked me what to do to help her daughter not be racist, an enervating question in many ways. These were, indeed, well-to-do women in their thirties and forties, and when I told my wife this was happening, she said that my long-gestating plan to offer some sort of education on whiteness needed to be enacted immediately. I told myself that, were I a lawyer (like my mother), there would only be so much legal advice I would be willing to give out for free, and with these two as examples, I took the bold step of asking them if they would be interested in a class were I to put one together. The one asking for help with her daughter and racism ignored me (and has not spoken to me since), and the other, who had been worried about calling the police on a man with a knife, said she was open to it, and became one of my first students (who eventually recruited the person who became Kim). This, of course, meant I had to actually create a class.

In designing the course, I had to think about a few things. First of all, what it would actually be, along with what was realistic but also what was necessary to actually accomplish something substantive. As mentioned above, I knew there would be a great deal of diluted diversity trainings popping up around the country, and that almost all of it would be offered online due to the pandemic. I decided immediately that I did not want to approach the course design from a gentle, patient perspective, because, truthfully, I was rather furious at a lot of my peers for their years of apathy on racism and whiteness. As I also mentioned above, my article *Worth the Risk: Towards Decentring*⁴³ *Whiteness in English Language Teaching* had just been published in the BCTEAL journal, and I decided to build a course around some of the lessons contained in that work. I did

⁴³ Canadian journal required Canadian spelling

not limit the course to language teachers, though, as I gathered that would be too small of an audience, but the general principles were the same.

There were a lot of aspects to consider, all of which I planned over a few days. I could have taken my time, but I am not really capable of patience, and also, I thought it better to try something and then re-adjust for future courses, though of course now I would include more of a focus on ability. I also had no clue if anyone would sign up or not, even though my one friend had expressed interest. But at first, I needed to figure out the format. Online, yes, and via Zoom, considering I had a “pro” account that did not limit my usage. But how many sessions, and how long would each session be? And then, of course, what would be contained in each session, and what would the end goal be?

I originally decided on five sessions, both because it is a round number, and also because I had gotten it into my head that it would be pitched as the educational equivalent of a one-credit graduate course, three-credit versions of which often last about fifteen weeks. Purely because of my own experience being tired of work calls and knowing I would have to plan around Ezel’s own sleep schedule, I decided the classes would last an hour each, which would allow for extra time if needed in any given class. When I started to consider both the end goal and the actual curriculum, though, I changed my mind on the number of sessions.

I knew that any class I taught would be student- or client-centered, as this format aligns with the frameworks to which I ascribe. I had no desire to try and plan out five full slideshows and lectures, and I simply do not believe that adults enjoy being talked at; most of the sessions would thus be facilitated discussions. But I thought about the people who had approached me with whiteness questions before I offered them a class, and they, and anyone else I might offer the class, had come with very different levels of understanding about key concepts and terminology. If

students signed up for the course and needed to be corrected or coached on the language at the outset, disaster might ensue. So I decided that the first session needed to include an overview of the terms I would be using, and some of the concepts that would be central to the course. These terminology and concept slides then became the introduction to the many conference presentations and invited talks I have given on decentering whiteness over the past few years⁴⁴, as establishing a shared understanding of aspects of whiteness and racism is a central tenet of my public scholarship and of the entire Ezel Project.

Consequently, this left me with a six-week course, five sessions and an introduction.⁴⁵ Six hours is not actually that much time, and certainly not enough to completely invert someone's understanding of racism, but I figured that the material and activities I assigned would carry the remaining load effectively, and also I doubted anyone would sign up for a much longer commitment than that. Finally, it was time to actually plan the curriculum, and this was a task I undertook from the back, by which I mean that I had to answer what I wanted them to achieve overall before I could determine how we might get there.

In most of the bad trainings that I have attended, and even some I have been forced to design at my day job, participants are asked to make some sort of vague, undefined commitment at the end. No one follows up on these, and there is no reason to believe they will be completed. The concept of a commitment is not a problem – indeed it is a good idea – but the lack of weight is the issue. From one of my previous interests in behavioral design, I knew that having people take the time to lay out *the steps* in a plan increases their chances of doing so (Datta & Mullainathan, 2014), as it was employed to great success in the most recent presidential election

⁴⁴ Over a dozen now

⁴⁵ In my notes about each course, the introduction is referred to as “Session Zero.”

(National Education Administration, 2020). With my goal of effecting organizational change – though I did not come up with “mesotransformative” until months later – I decided that the participants would be instructed to end the course with a workable and detailed plan to decenter whiteness in their contexts. Here is the final assignment as posed to the students at the end of the penultimate class:

- Final Assignment: A collective action plan.
 - Dates, times, parties involved
 - How will you know you’ve succeeded?
 - What happens if you don’t?
 - What happens if you do? Do you stop?

Working backwards from this destination, I asked myself what they would need to know in order to create a workable plan.

I considered the sources on whiteness I mentioned in **Chapter Two** above, particularly the lessons I learned from Ullucci, Crowley, Picower, Cann, and Zamudio and Rios. As a reminder, the literature showed that whites had strong desires to distance themselves from whiteness and racism, a desire to position themselves as saviors, with a need to better understand how whiteness had shaped their lives and careers and to have a supported space where they could build towards the sort of concrete action that the final assignment would represent. With the first week set for an introduction and the final for participants to share and discuss their action plans, I wanted to address the remainder of these ideas in the four unoccupied sessions and the assignments in between.

I decided that the primary idea was connecting aspects of whiteness related to individual experience to the broader organizational impact of whiteness. I used Ullucci's idea of the racial autobiography as a starting point, and then decided I would "zoom out," as it were, to have the class address the impact of white leadership in organizations, followed by an exploration of white spaces, and finally a week in which they would take what they had learned so far and tie it to their own contexts. Below you will find an outline of the curriculum and the weekly assignments.

Decoding and Decentering Whiteness Course Outline and Curriculum

- **Session Zero: Introduction and Terminology**
 - Format: Powerpoint presentation
 - Assignment(s):
 - Racial Autobiography
- **Session One: White Leadership**
 - Format: Recap/sharing of racial autobiographies, discussion of disconnect between white leadership and employees of color
 - Assignment(s):
 - Readings on "Sundown Towns" (Loewen, 2005)
 - Instruction to research racial exclusion in participants' childhood hometown/current location, as well as reviewing racial identification of leadership at places of employment
- **Session Two: White Spaces**
 - Focus: Discussion of readings and findings from research about hometown racial exclusion and leadership at place of employment

- Assignment(s):
 - Podcast on exemplar of white saviorism
 - Instruction to detail the many factors that allowed the woman in the above episode (Renee Bach) to get away with what she did.
- **Session Three: White Saviors**
 - Focus: Discussion of Renee Bach and, more importantly, her enablers, and how not to be a white savior in addressing issues.
 - Assignment(s):
 - Four of six (their choice) of “classic” Black authors writing about different aspects of racism and whiteness – DuBois, Fanon, Baldwin (x 2), Davis, Lorde.⁴⁶
 - Instruction to connect chosen readings to their own context.
- **Session Four: Contextualizing**
 - Focus: Discussion of their chosen readings and their connection to their own context.
 - Assignment:
 - Final Assignment (see above)
- **Session Five: Action Plans**
 - Focus: Sharing (and interrogation⁴⁷) of action plans.

Session Zero

⁴⁶ Attempted to include different genders, sexualities, and writing styles.

⁴⁷ I planned to ask pointed questions about each plan, and allow other students to do the same, as I remain haunted by the toothless planning of trainings I have endured.

As described above, this first week is called "zero" because it's a different format from the others and an establishment of key concepts and ground rules. Most of this session is comprised of a powerpoint presentation I developed for my talks on decentering whiteness in language teaching, with the difference being that, in my talks, I delve more deeply into the language-based concepts in my article, whereas, for this session, we veer off into course goals and a preview of the rest of the curriculum. Participants introduce themselves briefly, but full detailed introductions are saved for the following week because the assignment at the end of this session is the aforementioned "racial autobiography." I end by explaining the fact that all assignments will be emailed to them within an hour of the end of the class, and that ultimately, the course is for their benefit, so the amount of time they choose to spend on the assignments will determine how much they will get out of it.

Session One

This session has often been the most challenging one for me, because it represents the transition from an instructor-led lecture format to a facilitated discussion. We begin by discussing the participants' racial autobiographies, which I caution them should only last around five minutes each after the first group spent almost the entire hour sharing their stories, leaving us no time to discuss anything new⁴⁸. After these discussions, we turn our attention to white leadership, and the disconnection between the image that racialized organizations put forth and who actually makes the decisions. I often use the website of a well-known chain restaurant with particularly awkward messaging and an all-white leadership corps with racialized frontline workers, but you can use just about any company, or indeed just about any school, considering how many deans are white at

⁴⁸ Adjusting on the fly has been key to the success of these courses

schools that claim to care about Black lives. I end by assigning a few readings, most notably the introduction to the book *Sundown Towns* (Loewen, 2005), in preparation for a discussion on the impact of white spaces. Participants are also instructed to review the websites of their own institutions for the demographics of leadership, along with the racial composition of the towns and cities where they have lived.

Session Two

We begin this session by discussing what participants have learned about their own institutions, hometowns, and places of residence, and by examining the potential impact of said whiteness not only on the racialized but also on white children (and adults). This week is usually, from my vantage point, where the class begins to "click," as the somewhat disparate topics begin to coalesce into a clearer understanding of the ubiquity of whiteness and the harm that can result. For language teachers especially, the consideration of how whiteness pervades almost all public spaces allows such participants to analyze how their students might be impacted by these unmentioned expectations and by the ideal against which they will be measured. I end by assigning a different sort of task, a podcast episode about a particularly egregious white savior named Renee Bach, a young adult who established a clinic in Uganda without medical training (or even a college degree) and allowed 105 children to die (Aizenman & Gharib, 2019).

Session Three

The point of including the Renee Bach story is not so much to horrify (although it is horrifying), but to help participants resist the urge to respond to the issues we have discussed by trying to play the hero and center oneself in resolving the issue. In discussing her story, we examine the structures that had to be in place in order for her to cause the damage she caused, which means

we discuss mission trips, nonprofits, and whiteness as an automatic symbol of gravitas. By the end of this session, participants are meant to be prepared to consider their own contexts and how we can possibly effect change without playing the hero. Accordingly, at this point, I consider the students prepared to read "classic" Black writers, and give them the choice to read four from a group of six texts, texts which capture of a range of eras, topics, author positionalities, and styles. Again, in adopting this curriculum, you are free to choose different texts, but the point is to choose carefully. Providing participants with a choice went over well, and all were able to find work that spoke to them. The texts were Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Stranger in the Village* (1955), Fanon's aforementioned *The Negro and Language* (1952), Davis's *The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework* (1982), Lorde's *The Uses of Anger* (1984/2007), and, for the ambitious, DuBois's *Transubstantiation of a Poor White* (DuBois, 1935). The DuBois chapter is nearly 80 pages, and only one person has chosen to take it on. I commend her!

Session Four

Because my participants were predominantly language teachers, the Fanon essay has been the most popular discussion point among all the options, but ultimately this session is designed to allow the participants to draw connections across different axes of oppression in conjunction with the binary between whiteness and all it holds in opposition. I ask simply that participants consider where they might be able to substantively change their context, and they are given the final assignment without any other reading to consider for the final session.

Session Five

In this final session, everyone shares their plans, and I, along with the other participants, ask pointed questions to help these plans come closer to the clarity necessary to actually put them

in place. With only one or two exceptions, every participant has been engaged in the work and returned for the final session prepared to enact some sort of change in the context around them, and with many of my participants in the language space, there is a chance that if they all succeed in the longterm, this course will have had some small role in shifting the field. But that will depend on whether or not the participants feel the course was influential in their ability to decenter whiteness, and that will be determined through the narratives in both my dissertation and in the section that follows.

Every final session is bittersweet for me because I really do enjoy the class, and it feels, from my perspective, as though I really do have the chance to have an impact on whiteness in language education, and in education more broadly for the other participants. I had no idea as to whether or not this would work when I planned it. I am also, as a teacher, pretty allergic to lesson plans, so aside from the start and finish, I wanted to remain flexible and dynamic, and indeed, I altered the curriculum over time, particularly in the six final reading choices. What was important to me as I planned the course and led my first groups through it was that I gave as compelling a tour of whiteness as I could. They could spend years reading the many books on whiteness⁴⁹, but, in their six weeks in my class, I wanted these students to see the threads connecting their own racial identity, their workspaces, where they had been raised⁵⁰, and how little has changed since titans like Baldwin and Lorde were writing about these issues. The best I can say about this curriculum is that it was an educated guess, but it seems to have resonated with the students, provided space for this inquiry, and eventually led to an expanded, credit-bearing course I am currently teaching at Adelphi University, so perhaps I guessed pretty well.

⁴⁹ A group which will soon include my own book

⁵⁰ And where they were choosing to raise their own families

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter



Invitation to Participate in The ‘Ezel Project’ Inquiry

I hope this message finds you well.

I am writing to you because you participated in my “Decoding and Decentering Whiteness” course. As you might remember, I am in the process of completing my doctorate in Instructional Leadership at CUNY – Hunter College, and the only remaining task is the completion of my dissertation, which is centered on whiteness and education, in particular on white educators who choose to challenge whiteness in their context. Accordingly, I will be conducting a study for which I will be interviewing white educators who have taken part in my “Decoding and Decentering Whiteness” course to ask them about their past relationship with whiteness and race, and the actions they have or have not taken to challenge whiteness after the conclusion of their course. There is no obligation for course participants to take part in these interviews. If you are interested in being interviewed, please respond to this email. Thank you

You May Qualify If You

- Are white
- Are currently employed in the field of education

Participation Involves

- A two-hour zoom interview

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Based off of my narrative inquiry research questions, which are:

- A. How do white educators describe the way that their experiences and prior relationship to whiteness influenced their decision to join a course on decentering whiteness?
- B. How did that participation in this course shape their efforts at substantively decentering whiteness in their racialized and ableist organizations?

All questions will be supplemented with follow-up questions.

Part A – Prior Relationship to Whiteness

- At what point did you become aware of your whiteness?
- How did this affect your life growing up?
- How has whiteness affected your career in education?
- What would you describe as having caused your interest in a course on decentering whiteness?

Part B – Course Experience and Post-Course Actions

- What aspects of the course did you find to be the most relevant to your own experience and context?
- What was the action plan you developed, and what concrete effects were/are you hoping for?
- How far along are you on your action plan, and how successful would you say that you have been?
- In what ways would you say that your experience in the course influenced your ongoing relationship with whiteness?
- Do you have plans to continue to challenge whiteness in your context, and your life? If so, what are they?