Subverting Whiteness:
Pedagogy at the Crossroads of Performance, Culture, and Politics

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Students in our classes, which focus on communication and cultural/sexual difference, performance studies, and communication and the classroom, often ask about the end of political critique—that is, to what future do we do this critical work? For instance, when we talk to our students about current events in class (i.e., the lynching-style murder of James Byrd, Jr., the beating-execution of Matthew Shepard, or the shooting death of Amadou Diallo on the streets of New York by police), we try to understand not only the effects of these instances of cultural violence (how it shapes and produces a public), but to also ask questions about the contexts that breed these tragedies. Thus, our effort is to locate the specific events within larger, more systemic social systems. For instance, can we understand the Matthew Shepard incident as a result of a social system of heterosexism, homophobia, and straight supremacy? Can we see the death of Diallo not as an isolated instance of racial violence, but as part of a larger social system that has produced deaths in places like Cincinnati and Los Angeles?

To do this work, we look outward from these spectacular instances of violence and examine the minute and mundane processes that make these acts possible. In our courses, we examine how instances of racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression are generated through everyday communicative/performative acts—that is, both aesthetic and reiterative. Thus, we seek to understand difference (specifically race) as a performative construct that is always already aesthetic (that is, constructed for an audience or public) and reiterative (that is, repeated and ongoing). By focusing on race as one form of oppression, we examine whiteness as a systematic production of power—as a normative social process based upon a history of domination, recreating itself through naturalized everyday acts—much like heteronormativity or misogyny. Though in this writing we address whiteness, in particular, as a system of power and privilege, such an exploration helps mark the unmarked (Phelan)—making visible the workings of a number of oppressive social relationships. To render whiteness visible requires careful analysis and constant critique of our taken-for-granted norms. But, as our students question, to what end do we do what we do?

We both base our courses, at least in part, in critical race theory, asking how systems of power are reiterated and reaffirmed through our collective communicative, performative, and aesthetic interactions. The foundation of critical race theory and cultural studies means that we infuse all course content with issues of power, refusing to allow matters of race and difference to be

marginalized. These courses look at education, theatre, and everyday communication, as well as other sites such as popular culture or identity. The seemingly simple question we are often asked stands now as the premise of this essay—if these theories and critiques are useful, then where does that leave us in terms of sketching out visions of hope and change? As one student said, if you just tear down social norms, then where do we all stand? This essay is our stand—it is a documenting of how we are making a particular, ongoing research project matter in our lives (and we hope, as a result, in the lives of others). It is a documenting of performance-based research—a mode of research that asks students and other participants to enter into the space of performance and seek possibility as they are engaging in critical theory. What we document here is a problem-posing performance workshop, based in the critical work of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal, that seeks to intervene in the reiterative process of whiteness. It is a response to bell hooks and others who have asked for a critical examination of whiteness not only through the bodies and voices of people of color, but through white experiences as well. It is, in the end, a search for new ways of engaging in a politics of hope.

Blind(ing) Privilege: Whiteness as Performative

In the last ten years, a variety of cross-disciplinary scholars have illuminated (and, in that effort, sought to deconstruct) racial privilege and disadvantage by examining whiteness as a cultural, political location—as an identity created and maintained through our everyday communication.[1] In some of these studies, whiteness is revealed as a strategic rhetoric, a means by which people, working in concert and often unreflectively, levy power and cultural influence. For example, communication and film scholars examine rhetorical constructions of whiteness (see Crenshaw; Dyer; Nakayama and Krizek; Shome). While this perspective may help us understand the role of language (and how social systems and individuals work in concert to create racial oppression) recent efforts by scholars to maintain a focus on the white subject have underscored the importance of deconstructing and challenging white subjectivity in order to promote a more equitable and socially just society. Research here has taken many forms. Critical scholars in theatre have led the way, creating critical performances of whiteness (see Jackson; O'Brien; Warren and Kilgard) that function to mirror, particularly to white audiences, the mechanisms and machinations of their oppressive actions, however unreflective. Ethnographic portraits of whiteness have given depth and immediacy to our understandings of people in lived context (Hartigan; hooks; Warren, *Performing*). Autoethnographers, because they plumb their lived experience for particular details and contradictions about how they create and are created by culture, have constituted a rich repository for the study of how each of us works to understand his or her own ethnic identity (Clark and O'Donnell; Pelias; Warren, "Absence"). Studies in education have also created a critical context for understanding how whiteness permeates our classrooms (see Giroux; Hytten and Adkins; McIntyre); such work functions to remind us of the power of pedagogy to help us see and re-see the actions we take, challenge, or leave unquestioned.

In an earlier essay, one of us organized, from across the variety of disciplinary perspectives, four key scholarly approaches to the study of whiteness to help create a nuanced understanding of this seemingly inescapable and overwhelming political and cultural thicket (Warren, "Whiteness"). First, scholars

have analyzed whiteness in order to promote antiracism. For example, Ruth Frankenberg, in her classic book *White Women, Race Matters*, deconstructs white women's talk in order to uncover (and to help them discover) how racism and whiteness saturate their talk. Second, many researchers have investigated how whiteness is embedded in literature, film, and scholarship. Such works explore how taken-for-granted sites, including popular cultural texts or scholarly research, are never politically neutral. For instance, in *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison uncovers how writers of American literature almost always assume a white reader to the exclusion of other ways of seeing or interpreting a text or series of events. Third, scholars who advocate an understanding of whiteness as a rhetorical construct have shifted researchers' attention from whiteness as a stable identity (i.e., this person is or is not white) to whiteness as a discursive way of levying power (i.e., whiteness as a discursive space, existing in our communicative interactions). For instance, communication scholar Christina W. Stage explores how a small-town celebration discursively invokes and rewards whiteness through a series of powerful communication strategies—that is, through the re-historicizing of the community, members recreate the past and locate that past within the discursive space of white power (e.g., settlement narratives that locate the beginnings of the town within a white subject). The fourth and final research trend involves reading whiteness as a performative construct. Judith Butler's analysis of Nella Larsen's *Passing* provides a thought-provoking example of how whiteness as an identity is communicatively reproduced through our everyday actions. In her analysis, white identity is considered a discursive construct that is made and remade through our reiterative patterned communication choices.

We draw strength from each of these modes of analysis as they function to call out whiteness as a political and social force. However, what is often absent from the extant literature are strategies for actively and publicly deconstructing and undermining whiteness as the cultural center. That is, these microanalyses provide hope and incisive critique, but lack sufficient theorizing to change our behavior. In this way, all the approaches here are ways of seeing and critiquing, but few are actively documenting progressive action with others. Alice McIntyre, an education scholar, perhaps comes closest with her action-research-oriented teacher groups in which she debates and teaches about whiteness as she draws her dissertation research data from them; however, the members of the research team have long disbanded by the time the book is written. Thus, what we see missing is an action-oriented research project that holds accountable ourselves and the members of the community we want to inform. How do you make meaningful the critiques above in a way that experientially demands that participants put their bodies on the line? Is there a research process that could make the invisible and naturalized processes of whiteness more visible, more visceral, more present?

We begin this essay with this political and ethical claim: as researchers concerned with whiteness as a means of levying power and privilege over others, we must articulate a process for combating whiteness as a political force in our schools, in our homes, and in our communities. In this writing, we offer our own attempt to call out and combat whiteness: a series of workshops for white students (although nonwhite students were not excluded) that asked them to move past apologia and guilt for their ethnic identity, toward the development of actions that have the potential to challenge cultural oppression. For us, such a process must be both an exercise of the mind and a rethinking through the

body—it must hold both our everyday talk *and* our everyday actions accountable for the ways we each reproduce whiteness as a socially powerful, culturally centered location.

We grounded the frame and method for our workshops in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, employing his methodology for critical literacy groups. This participatory, ethnographic method is ideally suited for engaging and incorporating the body into theories of liberation, thus helping us to maintain our focus on the process, the performances, by which individuals come to enact and constitute oppressive social systems. In addition to articulating our use of this method for enfleshing, engaging, and challenging whiteness, our essay explores how such a mode of engagement allows for participants to see whiteness as a performative process.

Performative Pedagogy: A Pedagogy of Subversion

Recent work in performative pedagogy has created a rich context for (re)considering whiteness literature. Performative pedagogy is an approach to education that moves meaning to the body, asking students to engage in meaning-making through their own living and experiencing bodies:

> A critical, performative pedagogy asks students and teachers to be embodied researchers—to take learning to the body in order to come to know in a more full and powerful way. It is to liberate the body from the shackles of a dualism that privileges the mind over the visceral. It is to ask students to be more fully present, to be more fully engaged, to take more responsibility and agency in their own learning. (Warren, "Performative Pedagogy" 95)

Performative pedagogy demands that students think about identity as performative—to place the question of identity in the space of performance.

Performative pedagogy, while still an undertheorized site of investigation (and pedagogical practice), has groundings in various fields ranging from dance and theatre to English and communication studies. Our commitment to performative pedagogy emerges from traditions of oral interpretation—a field of study where researchers and teachers feel one can develop a thoughtful and complex understanding of a literary or popular text, such as a poem, by performing that text, by reading that text through the body. Wallace A. Bacon's work on the potential of performance is indeed persuasive: "The performing act comes as close, perhaps, as we shall ever get to the transcendence of self into other. It is a form of knowing—not just a *skill* for knowing, but a knowing. [. . .] If the engagement is real, not simply pretended, the self grows" (73). While Bacon here discusses the transcendence of self into the other, his work is a possible way of thinking through whiteness—where whiteness is so invisible to the perceiving white subject that his own racial identity is effectively othered. Thus, the engagement with whiteness is an engagement with the other, a reconceptualization of the self as other.

Certainly the work of Boal is key in this process of engagement. His work on forum theatre alone can be imagined as a productive and engaging site of understanding how power is situated in our lives, in our bodies. His work has been framed by several scholars as performative—most clearly by Elyse Lamm

Pineau, who, aligning her work with Boal's, argues that performative pedagogy is a trickster (that is, subversive) pedagogy. Pineau offers four ways of framing and defining performative pedagogy, noting that through this pedagogical method one might assist in challenging and subverting systems of power such as whiteness. She frames this redefinition as educational poetics, play, process, and power (15). In "Educational Poetics," the banking mode of education characterized by traditional information dispensing into waiting students is reframed into an "educational enterprise [that is] a mutable and ongoing ensemble of narratives and performances" (10). "Educational Play" resituates pedagogy in the body, asking students and teachers to engage in corporeal play—a mode of "experimentation, innovation, critique, and subversion" (15). "Educational Process," on the other hand,

> acknowledges that identities are always multiple, overlapping, ensembles of real and possible selves who enact themselves in direct relation to the context and communities in which they perform. (15)

Here, Pineau locates identity as a performative process, noting how selves are accomplishments of reiterative performative practices. "Educational Power," the last of Pineau's definitional categories, solidly situates performances as "always politically and historically situated, such that they may be viewed as ongoing ideological enactments" (18).

Performative pedagogy, as a method and theory of the body, can ask questions in a way that points to the structure and machinery of whiteness. It can put flesh to the concept of whiteness. It can point to whiteness's perceived absence. It can name the norm. Performative pedagogy, in this way, can serve as a pedagogy of the oppressor—it can ask those in positions of power (via sex, race, class, or sexuality) to question their own embodied experiences by demanding that they encounter the other through the mode of performance. For if whiteness functions in dominant discourse as the unmarked center of cultural power, then a performative pedagogy can and must ask how we can create a ground for subversion. Performative pedagogy, as a method of enfleshment that brings theory to the body, can question the normal, stable, inevitable actualization of race, nurturing subversive possibility.

Thus, in order to foreground and engage such constitutive performances, we designed a series of workshops that serve to create space for students to take up and take apart whiteness in their bodies, to make discernable what is already physical by adding heightened critical reflection to that embodiment. These workshops are a means for participants to consider whiteness, to consider the role they play in the making and unmaking of cultural oppression, and to begin subverting the invisibility of whiteness.

But subversion is not as simple as it seems. One might easily misread "subverting," imagining we endorse a view of whiteness research that suggests one can simply undo racism by undermining whiteness to such an extent that it ceases to be the cultural center (see Ignatiev and Garvey; McLaren). While such a vision of the world is well intentioned, it is an enabling fiction at best and a dangerous myth at worst; in effect, such a rhetorical move allows white identified/appearing people an easy out, an easy dismissal of the power of whiteness in our lives and in our actions. Rather than embrace this easy sense of subversion, we take "subverting" as an active verb, in which we grapple with white-

ness in an attempt to unmask it. This is to say, these workshops are a way for participants to see and think about whiteness in ways they have not done before. By pointing out whiteness's power and discursive machinery, we hope to subvert its naturalness, or rather, participate in the process of racial subversion. While we do not think a single two-hour workshop will transform these participants into antiracists, we hope to create spaces for us all to re-envision how race matters (as well as how race comes to matter) in our lives.

Workshopping Whiteness

A young, white, male student in an introductory level communication course has been struggling with the question of whether racism exists—trying to advocate that racism was a thing of the past, an Affirmative Action trick to get more money and jobs for people of color who haven't earned them. This argument is not new, not surprising in any way. However, "Matt" is a good student—young, thoughtful, and highly skeptical. We include him in the workshop, asking him to set aside his struggles, his disbelief and engage the ideas as if the theories we had been reading were true. To be open, even if just for today. He agrees, but has suspicion in his eyes.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire outlines a method for challenging oppressive systems of power. In this method, he works from the voices and stories of those oppressed to build an effective pedagogy with his participants. It was in Freire's participatory, ethnographic method that we found an engaging way of incorporating the body into theories of liberation, enfleshing whiteness. Freire argues that any effort to effect social change must be an engaged action *with* (not *to* or *for*) the people. Freire's method emerged from his work with illiterate farm laborers in Brazil. He wanted to investigate and identify their needs, their interests; then, he worked with them to create an effective pedagogy from those findings, to construct an action plan that aimed to help them undermine the power structures that were keeping them from fulfilling their goals. In our workshops, we sought to build upon Freire's method, adapting and making it meaningful it to the context of US higher education.

Workshops are a particularly appropriate means for engaging Freire's method, as they are not bound by the conventional requirements of the classroom (e.g., syllabi, state standards for student learning outcomes, etc.). We scheduled each workshop to last approximately two hours, which allowed for plenty of discussion and activity. Workshop participants differed depending on the context; that is, sometimes we were invited into undergraduate or graduate courses in communication, theatre, or education classrooms. When the workshop was part of a class, we often asked students to do reading prior to our meeting. However, we presented other workshops at theatre and education conferences, including an annual meeting of Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed. In each of these sessions, participants entered with varying knowledges of the content we were offering, creating a need for us to begin by introducing the members to the literature on whiteness and racism.

The workshop structure itself, drawn from Freire's method, consisted of four parts. First, we asked participants to investigate whiteness as a cultural phenomenon. Here, participants would work from introductory texts such as their previous reading and/or our opening presentations. Depending on the audience, one of us might open with a performance designed to draw out a

discussion of whiteness. From these texts, workshop members formed small groups, creating "generative themes," or a list of basic assumptions behind whiteness. For example, one group might note the seeming invisibility of whiteness, of the ways the power and privilege stemming from white ethnic identity appear unearned, and so on. Second, participants chose one theme and engaged in a "codification" of the theme, in effect breaking it down into its fundamental parts.[2] At this stage, a group that has chosen to work with the notion of whiteness as invisible or natural might begin to think about the mechanisms that make it invisible (i.e., historical, social, economic conditions that regulate the production of racial power). Third, we all engaged in a "decoding dialogue," raising and entertaining ideas and critical insights. For instance, other groups might challenge the notion of whiteness as invisible, or they might articulate a sense of whiteness as a stable natural identity. These sessions were important in order to collectively reveal misunderstandings about ethnic identity (e.g., the misconception that racism is an individual trait rather than the result of a social system that privileges some at the expense of others), as well as to come to new ways of seeing how whiteness works. Finally, each group created and presented "recodifications" or reconstructions of their theme for the larger group. That group would then create an image (often a static image of their bodies carefully positioned) to illustrate that theme to the rest of the participants. For example, students might represent "ideological struggle" with a frozen embodied illustration of two people arm wrestling, demonstrating two figures locked in tension. Then the groups presented performances in which participants illustrated how they worked to interrupt the ways whiteness harms themselves and others. In these performances, each group shared, via their own lived bodies, the basic or fundamental element of each theme as a problem or question for the general group. We used the remaining time after each performance to describe and process each group's work.

Ethnographic Investigations: Theme Generation

Matt interacts with his group, but does so leaning back in his desk chair, arms crossed, with an expression that says, "I don't buy this." We want to pull Matt out of the room, tell him to open his eyes, to see the world he lives in with critical eyes. He can see if he just lets go of the doubt, the suspicion bred from growing up in this culture of color-blindness that still spreads the myth of meritocracy.

Freire argues, "the starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people" (76). For him, we must begin with the people—that any effort to undermine power structures through a pedagogy of the oppressed must begin *with* the life situations of the people that are implicated in the power struggle. He argues for a "dialogical" method, one that works from the "thematic universe" of people in an effort to allow education to be a practice of freedom. With this beginning in Freire, we decided to begin our workshops from the life situations of people—people's stories about or experiences with racism and violence. Thus, a workshop in whiteness had to begin with collected narratives of struggle, narratives of people in "real-life contexts" and their engagements with whiteness. To begin with stories of whiteness meant that our effort would ask the participants in the workshops to take seriously the life experiences of others in an effort to search out possibility within their life circumstances.

In this way, we begin our workshops by asking the participants to conduct a micro-ethnographic investigation of their encounters with whiteness. By ethnographic investigation, we mean that we ask the participants to explore whiteness in order to find common themes and patterns. Common themes or struggles participants often articulate are: their inability to discern their own deployment of whiteness, the need to explore research trends—for instance, whiteness as terror (that is, bell hooks's metaphor of whiteness that captures the effect of a legacy of racism on the black imagination), or how whiteness is critiqued through performance texts like Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. We do this in several ways, each an attempt to provide texts or sites from which participants can begin to draw together material in order to generate meaningful themes. We often begin the workshops with brief, aesthetic (i.e., stylized or heightened) performances. There are two central texts that we have found particularly useful as a way to set the tone, for drawing the participants into the conversation surrounding white privilege. Many times we begin by performing our own autoethnographic work, foregrounding our own struggles with coming to see whiteness (e.g., Warren, "Absence"; Warren and Fassett). In this sort of performance, we try to unfold and explore an everyday event in order to see how whiteness plays out and protects our own social position or privilege. A second work we frequently draw from is a small piece from Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, in which Silko's speaker narrates how white people came to be. The piece is rather violent, describing whiteness as dominating and disconnected from the earth, and particularly useful for the workshop because it demands that we consider whiteness from the view of the "Other" (i.e., decentering a white perspective). Though we have pointed to two sorts of texts here, there are no doubt countless other texts that would serve to illuminate whiteness; for instance, works by Gloria Anzaldúa, Toni Cade Bambara, bell hooks, Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, Amy Tan, and Alice Walker would be ripe for such exploration.

Beginning the workshops with performance is important because it foregrounds a central idea. This move highlights performance as a way of knowing. That is, participants come to know part of the literature by the performance itself, serving as an entrance into the workshop and the performative themes. Furthermore, such a move establishes performance as an academic method of inquiry. This is to say, performance shifts learning to a meaning-making process in which the participants in the workshop must assemble and construct meaning through the life experiences of others. Additionally, the performances we provide also foreground performance as a meaningful way to theorize—when we ask the participants to perform later, they will already know that we have put ourselves on the line first.

The ethnographic investigation is aided in classrooms where we ask the instructor to assign readings for the class, having them engage some of the literature that will also contribute to their grounding in our collective work. For instance, it is common for us to assign graduate students to read Nakayama and Krizek's essay, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric." We use this piece because it focuses on communication and provides a lens to consider everyday communicative patterns as strategic uses of power—a productive maintenance of domination that protects whiteness's discursive influence. We also assign bell hooks's "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination" because it productively reframes whiteness as terror, a powerful view of whiteness from the perspective

of the other—how the white body comes to represent the power of racism (and further, how the communicative practices embedded in whiteness are used, without intent or malice, to inflict violence). We often use a segment from Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* to capture this sense:

> *Caves across the ocean*
> *in caves of dark hills*
> *white skin people*
> *like the belly of a fish*
> *covered with hair.*
>
> [. . .]
>
> *They will take this world from ocean to ocean*
> *they will turn on each other*
> *they will destroy each other*
> *Up here*
> *in these hills*
> *they will find the rocks,*
> *rocks with veins of green and yellow and black.*
> *They will lay a final pattern with these rocks*
> *they will lay it across the world*
> *and explode everything.* (132–38)

Here, Silko sketches out a logic—a way of seeing how terror is a historical product, a repeated and embodied outcome of a history of suffering. From there, we can connect hooks's notion of whiteness as terror, allowing participants to see a more complicated site for their investigation. Depending upon the nature of the workshop, we might also assign a chapter from Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children* (a book that implicitly critiques education as embedded in systems of whiteness), a short piece of literature or poetry, or video clips from movies such as *Lean On Me* or *187*, which might provide a different kind of textual basis for their investigation. Such texts add additional layers, voices, and experiences to our site of study.

However, the ideal of having students read some work before they arrive has not always been possible, especially when this workshop occurs outside of classes, in community spaces, or at academic conferences. In these contexts, we have no ability to provide participants with readings, nor do we necessarily want the workshops to always rely on academic readings for the experience to be meaningful. In such instances, we increase the introductory performances in order to give them more content up front (e.g., we might perform a series of different and seemingly divergent texts—some poetic and some scholarly). Sometimes we also focus the workshop on several central issues, posting academic quotations and definitions around the room and inviting the participants to visit concepts and respond to them on blank paper attached under them. We try to choose quotations that are relatively accessible, foregrounding whiteness as absence, whiteness as cultural terror, and whiteness as privilege. These selected bits of text are short and provide an opportunity for participants to view and encounter different voices and experiences. For instance, we often include this line from Peggy McIntosh's essay on white privilege: "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps,

guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks" (291). Within McIntosh's text, workshop participants can think about how white privilege functions within this society, asking themselves how privilege might function as invisible and seemingly weightless. In relation to quotations like these, we try to talk about individualism, oppression, power, and other factors involved in whiteness studies, but center the conversation on three central tenets (invisibility, terror, and privilege) in order to focus our conversation. As facilitators, we also serve as a possible site of investigation, allowing participants to ask us questions and respond to the performances.

After all the texts have been presented, the participants spend twenty minutes engaged in discussion with each other, reviewing various quotations, as well as asking each other questions about the nature of whiteness; in effect, their goal is to cull the themes emergent in these varied texts. In groups, participants articulate themes that stem from the readings, the texts, the performances, or their own experience—i.e., themes that investigate whiteness as a cultural construct based in power. This theme generation is an effort to capture Freire's notion of "generative themes"—the meaningful connection between the people/individual narratives and people/institutions we are actively investigating (see Shor). Some examples of generative themes participants have explored in our workshops include: research trends in whiteness (i.e., whiteness as terror, as strategy, as performance, or as the reoccurring white hero); continuing struggles with whiteness (i.e., self as oppressor); or, whiteness's key terms (such as privilege, power, or the myth of meritocracy[3]).

As students work toward their goals, we try to stress that it is not appropriate to use these workshops as an opportunity to talk about white guilt or "reverse discrimination," but to take seriously the social conditions in which they are positioned—indeed, we do sometimes have participants who want to deny whiteness's centrality. We ask these participants to pretend, just for this workshop, that what they read, what they hear, and what they encounter is what it is—to imagine what life would be like if these things were indeed true. Usually, by the end of the workshop, the students will begin to reflect on the possibility of this reality, if not personally, then at least that these voices (in performance and the literature) might experience that kind of life. Our desire here is to distance the resistant students from the trappings of intent. This is to say, whiteness is not so much about individual actions based in diabolical intentions but rather that whiteness is more insidious, more a structure of power that flows through them in covert or unconscious ways. Thus, white people are trapped just as much as the voices they encounter in the framing texts; they just happen to be ensnared in their own privilege. This is not to say we let these students off the hook, but rather that our goal is to challenge them to at least see the problem as structural. From there, resistant students at least have the possibility of genuine self-reflection on their everyday behaviors and interactions. But without recognizing the fact that systems of oppression exist, they will never see their roles within them.

Codification

Matt sits in his group visibly angry, with his lip jutting out and a scowl on his young white face. The conversation begins; other participants begin to discuss whiteness and racism. He mostly listens, but occasionally offers a correc-

tive. I can tell he has done some work on this—he knows the issues but doesn't believe them. Perhaps his own lived experience counters the experiences in the readings and discussions, but the evidence that he has read/thought about these issues is clear.

Freire claims, "the coding of an existential situation is the representation of that situation, showing some of its constituent elements in interaction" (86). Thus, he argues that once students/participants have identified generative themes, the researcher transitions the group into a codification process. The researchers (the workshop facilitator and participants) work to identify and break down the parts of the themes (within the narratives). This portion of the method is vital— it allows for the complexity of the theme to be unearthed—to take a complex set of narratives/performances and unmask the elemental parts that make up the theme. The main initiative within this part of the method is to break the theme into its "constitutive elements in interaction" (Freire 86)—to find out the basis for what makes that theme possible.

In the context of these workshops, we ask the participants to choose one theme to investigate further—to choose one major issue that they find fruitful for further inquiry. In this portion of their group work, we ask them to break down their chosen theme as much as possible to identify the major issues involved. How deep can they get into this concept or theme—can they find the different elements present in the theme? Can they break it down to the central issues involved? For instance, in one workshop, a group was considering the individual white subject within the system of white privilege. In this theme, they discovered that at the heart of their issue was a combination of guilt, pain, helplessness, and pleasure. They felt extreme guilt and pain when considering the perspective of nonwhite people and their struggles. They knew it wasn't right that some have racial privilege, but also felt they had no ability to intercede or to effect change. They noted that they felt helpless and without a clear focus as to where one could even begin to consider making a change in the world. Additionally, they admitted a certain amount of pleasure in this privilege. After all, reflecting on their own position meant wondering how race affects their every move. It was easier, they noted, to let it go, to not have to do that work all the time. This, they concluded, was the pleasure of whiteness; for what could be more seductive than the pleasure of privilege? Here, the participants connect their own struggles with whiteness to power in general, commenting on how power is not only about constraining others but about the pleasure born of enacting and embodying those subject locations. This analogy is particularly apt as it mirrors the literature on whiteness; such literature borrows from Michel Foucault's conception of power (in this case, racism) as a system not owned by a few, but rather as a system that flows through us all.

This phase of the project is vital, for it seeks the movement from the specific context of whiteness into the larger realm of oppression. This shift gets to the underlying factors, naming or codifying them as elements or structures that make possible the theme in the first place—these elements serve as the foundation upon which the theme is built. If we return to the above example, we see the foundations upon which the individual white subject, in the system of whiteness, is constructed. That is, the privileged subject stands at the crossroads of many factors that ultimately work to construct her identity as one without agency. Thus, these participants foreground guilt, leading to hopelessness, which ultimately breeds a diverting of responsibility for change to people of color. Such a

position fails to hold white people accountable for the perpetuation and solidi-
fication of racism.

Decoding Dialogue

*Matt's group has selected "whiteness as terror" for their key concept to
explore. They begin discussing the theme, each trying to build on each other's
understandings of bell hooks's work. Occasionally, one of us stops by to ask
the group some questions, trying to complicate the layers in hooks's argument.
What lies beneath her anger? What kinds of conditions must be present for this
kind of argument to even be possible? We are working with the whole group,
but we are watching Matt. We are searching for signs he is hearing hooks's
story.*

Freire: "During the decoding process, the coordinator must not only listen
to the individuals, but must challenge them, posing as problems both the codi-
fied existential situation and their own answers" (99). An important phase in
Freire's methodology is the decoding dialogue—an engagement between the
workshop facilitator and the members working through the codification pro-
cess. This stage in the process foregrounds the role of dialogue across all the
participants, including the facilitator(s), in questioning, shaping, and extending
a group's understanding of their themes. We must do this in order for the per-
formance work that is to come to be successful. This engagement foregrounds
Freire's emphasis upon communication and dialogue, arguing that through a
critical engagement with the participants' codifications, more and more move-
ment can be made toward finding what is at the heart of the generative theme
on which the group has chosen to focus.

This next stage in the workshop is a brief but important moment for par-
ticipants to critically engage the work embedded in their theme. This "decoding
dialogue" is where the facilitator probes their theme and their codification work.
He might do so in one of two ways. Time permitting, he might ask each group
to present their theme and their analysis. He then poses questions and chal-
lenges to them (similar to Ira Shor's notion of problem posing) to help them
continue to work through the issue. The other participants also ask questions in
an effort to continue exploring the possible structures in place that make pos-
sible that particular facet of whiteness. Once each group has had the opportu-
nity to engage in this decoding dialogue, they resume group work. However,
often time is a constraint to this process and so, after allowing some time for
groups to codify their themes, the facilitator might engage in this process indi-
vidually with each group. While participants lose the opportunity to preview
their work to the larger group and gain their insights, they still have had the
opportunity to engage in a problem-posing activity.

The benefits of this decoding dialogue are many. First, the members' work
is articulated out loud, often allowing the participants to uncover the gaps or
structures they have forgotten to highlight during their initial conversation. Sec-
ond, basic questions about how they came up with their codifications allow an
opportunity for group members to "defend" their arguments. Often this defense
allows for a deeper level of analysis, making space for further interrogation of
their theme. Third, we find that the facilitator's role as a problem-poser allows
her to take to the participants the expertise she brings to the workshop as

someone who has spent many years studying this issue—she can communicate theories, concerns, or questions to them in the form of a problem, often allowing them to see where their codification work has stopped. Thus, posed problems can often allow them to move a complicated theoretical issue or concept into the heart of their generative theme. This engagement is an opportunity to push their ideas and work in ways that open up space for a more critical investigation into the workings of whiteness.

Recodification

Moments before they take stage, Matt's group discusses and plots their work. We can see Matt getting more involved. He is trying. "Well," he says, "bell hooks describes whiteness as terror—can we have me standing over everyone else, kind of towering over you all?" He is engaging, complicating the ideas of his group—he is advancing the sophisticated nature of their task, by asking challenging questions, and by allowing his skepticism to make their effort stronger. Whether or not Matt is believing the arguments in his own mind, he's making them in his body. We can see Matt and the others begin to add flesh to hooks's ideas. It has the potential to be a powerful investigation into the workings of whiteness.

Matt's group take their places. The image is Matt, standing on a table, towering over the bodies of his colleagues. His hands are outstretched, his fingers spread as they point and direct imagined violence to those below him. His face is a painful mix of anger and power, yet his lips are curled in a smile. This is the face of pleasure, as the body of whiteness wields its power over the others. This image is terrifying.

Once the breakdown of the theme and the decoding dialogue are completed, we ask participants to begin "recodification." Here, we ask them to re-imagine and re-present the theme to the audience, to explore the theme for and with us through a visual, embodied, image—a performance that situates their bodies in relation to each other to illuminate the ideological themes they have chosen. This recodification may be simple or compound (i.e., a simple figure positioned in various ways or a complex image with multiple bodies), but it must ask the audience to re-imagine the basic essential parts that make possible the theme in the first place (Freire 102). We offer students some guidance about how to construct and build their images; however, our goal is mainly to encourage them to search their own experiences for images and ideas about what to create. The point here is not to create finalized and crafted performances; but rather, to engage in the process of making abstract and difficult themes concrete in and through their own bodies.

While Freire describes this phase of the method as a "codification" of the decoded theme, we find that this move is really a recodification process—an effort to re-present the parts or elements of the original theme. Thus, participants can offer their effort to find a way of representing their analytical work through another form—a form that tries to capture the meanings through "the best channel" possible. Freire describes multiple ways that one can work to capture the meanings uncovered during the group work, but we specifically ask the participants to work in the medium of performance—asking them to encounter the recodification effort through the media of their own bodies. This is

especially important when dealing with issues of whiteness and race, because to put their critical analysis into their bodies is to enflesh the theory, moving complicated theoretical and cultural issues into their own life experiences in ways that demand attention.

In the workshops, we ask each group to identify their theme and analyze the elements embedded within it; in effect, asking groups to summarize the steps they have taken thus far. From there, we move into the recodification process. That is, the facilitator asks the participants to resituate their structural analysis into a different site or different embodiment. From the elements, they must reflesh the theme as a problem, as a heightened performative question to the larger group. Here, the students must create a performance for the large group to consider, exploring not the specifics of their original generated theme, but building upon the codification work that took place in the second phase. If we return to the group who dealt with the individual in a system, we see a concrete problem posed to the group that details not only the essence of the first theme, but one that builds from the analysis in which they engaged. The performance began with a white female as the rope in a tug-of-war. On one side, an African American man gently pulled on her arm, whispering, "You can do it. Do what's right. You can do it." On the other side, another white woman pulled on her other arm and stated loudly that, "It's hard. Why bother? It's so much work. You can't change the whole world." The central figure turned her head from left to right, her face wrinkled in frustration as she got pulled from each of the competing messages. Finally, she broke out of the tug-of-war game and went up to each member of the audience who sat watching, asking them, "What should I do? Can you help me?" Finally, she went back to the tug-of-war, again getting pulled, and stated, "I don't know what to do." The performance ended, and the performers sat back down, a problem posed for our consideration rather than a ready-made solution.

After each performance, we work to debrief the experience, asking the participants to critically engage what just happened. Beginning with description, the other group members begin to read the performance, asking questions of each other and pointing out the nuances of each performance. We generally have to help get conversations started, but as the process continues, the participants often become adept at deciphering the performance piece. In the above example, comments started with obvious readings, participants noting that the tug-of-war served as a metaphor for the struggle with privilege and the desire for social change. However, as we continued, they began to note the complexity of this brief performance. They noted that the voice of privilege was much more forceful than the voice of social change, suggesting that privilege is powerful. The body of the black man as the voice of resistance was significant; many asked if this performance could have been done in reverse. This raised a key question: Does the discourse of whiteness need a white body? Further, one male group member noted that when the struggling woman asked whether he would help her, he remained silent. He never interceded in her struggle, leaving her without any assistance or ally. Thus, while the performance began with internal struggle, the group member also felt implicated in the maintenance of privilege—the silence of this person as an audience member metaphorically suggests the implication of white silence in the protection of white privilege and the construction of white feelings of helplessness. Each performance is explored and treated as another text to add to our collective understandings of these issues.

Subverting Whiteness/Enfleshing Theory

Matt approaches us after the workshop and tells us he enjoyed the process, but felt that the image of him did not accurately represent whiteness—"I never feel like I'm doing that." Is he correcting us? One of us responds: "Maybe you don't intend it, but what if that is how others see you?" He pauses and then, in a quiet voice, notes, "I don't want others to see me like that . . . They probably don't . . ." We could ask him: Could that be the point? It may not be as easy as what one wants to see, but what one fails to see. Looking at his face—no longer angry, no longer smiling—we wonder what he's thinking as he picks up his backpack and walks away.

Boal ends *Theatre of the Oppressed* by calling on performance as a method for questioning and critiquing the process of social construction, noting that if we levy attack only on the site or product of that construction, we fail to account for how it came to be: "It is not the myth that must be destroyed; it is the mystification. It is not the hero that must be belittled; it is his struggle that must be magnified" (190). In effect, Boal signals a shift from the existence of oppressive systems to a focus on how such systems, or myths, come to be implemented and executed by individuals. We take this call to heart, working to advocate change to social systems through a focus on process, on how individuals are not just products of social systems, but also producers and agents. Our workshops aim to illuminate and interrupt the processes by which whiteness, as a social system of power and privilege, comes to be mystified. Further, in these workshops, we seek to interrupt and demystify this reproduction of power.

When working with issues of power and cultural violence, we have tried to move our conversations from the bodies of those most readily implicated (i.e., white people) to conversations about how such beliefs, such problematic social constructs (i.e., white supremacy) have created the possibility for inequality. In drawing on Boal's work, we focus our critical energy on the mystification process, rather than the bodies who stand as a result. This is an especially difficult tack to take when addressing racism and whiteness, for often the tendency is for white people to assume that such activist work levies critique at them alone. It is often difficult to move white people from assuming such a critical project is about them as individuals, to a place where they see themselves as parts of complex social, cultural, and political systems that levy privilege and power to some, while denying it to others.

Boal's argument that performance activists and teachers should work against the mystification process, not the myth; work against the struggles, not the hero, reminds us that this sort of performance work is significant precisely because it attempts to destroy not the white person, but rather the illusions, trappings, and power games that make whiteness so powerful. It is the process of interactive performance that these kinds of workshops foreground that can allow a resistant white participant to engage in a critique of white power and privilege without lapsing into feelings of guilt or self-pity, which can too easily reduce conversations of race and racism to individual actions without calling out the system that makes those actions possible. These kinds of performances allow the theories and engagements with critical race theory to move participants in ways that matter—through listening, understanding, and then recreating their qualities in ways that speak to them. This mode of embodiment moves theory through their bodies, effecting change in experiential ways.

The notion that performance allows an embodied understanding of theory is not new. It is as old as the disciplinary investigation of literature through interpretative performance, as common as the introductory performance and interpretation courses in communication and theatre departments across the country. However, where these workshops, as performative investigations, further our disciplinary conversations about whiteness and racial inequality is through the enfleshment of that which is so taken for granted that one often fails to recognize her own work in creating such assumptions. Many times students or participants come up to us after the workshop to tell us that they never realized that they were involved in racism until they broke down and rebuilt the thematic elements of racism. The opportunity to engage this discourse through their bodies made the absent present, made the theory visceral, made them consider how they were implicated in the production and sustenance of whiteness's cultural centrality.

Further, this engagement engenders less defensiveness for white subjects because it begins with their experiential interaction with this material, giving acknowledgment to their voices and their experiences. And while their understandings of power and racial inequality are being challenged, they are not individually identified as evil racists who are inflicting intentional harm onto others. Rather, these workshops attempt to move them to reflect on their own everyday behaviors by helping them to see that they too are caught up in systems of cultural power. As Foucault made clear, power is not a zero-sum game, an item that some may possess and so others may not. Rather, power is fluid, flowing through everyone but not fixed anywhere in particular. When we remove the white subject from the site of direct critique, we avoid the defensive mechanisms that white privilege breeds. It is here that we might just move toward subverting their notions of how racism functions. And if we do that, whiteness loses its naturalness and is seen as the construct it is.

But one should never lose sight of the fact that this pedagogy asks white students/participants to question themselves and their relation to whiteness. It destabilizes the comfort with which they live their lives. Often, we learn from white students who participate in these workshops that they can't imagine living their lives in the same way after this experience. Indeed, some say that they now are obsessed with their own social position and can't watch television, listen to politicians, interact with other members of their family, or teach in the same way that they used to because they are so uncomfortable with their awareness of their cultural privilege that they must search out some kind of change. Thus, they move from comfort to discomfort, from safety to risk. While we want to acknowledge their feelings of discomfort and vulnerability, we also want to embrace and celebrate that repositioning.

Subversion or interruption of the myth is no simple process. Sometimes participants just walk away. Clearly, this one interaction with whiteness will not displace the profound influence of white racism in the world. The world will not be fully transformed by this experience, even if individuals narrate that sensation to us in the moment. It is the power of whiteness to continually repair any cracks in its foundation, for, just as the powerful voice of privilege in the performance example above noted, "it is so much work" to engage racism every day. Many will again succumb to the alluring pleasure of privilege. However, the residue of performance will stain their bodies; it will remain long after they have walked out of these workshops. When that white woman who felt the conflict of privilege and the desire for social action encounters racism, she might

just feel those hands on her arms, tugging. That visceral sensation of performance arises and she is again in that workshop, again struggling to find an answer, to find out "what to do." It is there that we find the hope that performance nurtures. It is there, in the body, that the process of subverting whiteness continues.

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Notes

1. Nakayama and Krizek argue that whiteness should be examined through a spatial metaphor and not essentialized to particular raced bodies, arguing that whiteness is both a discursive location and a rhetorical construction. In this manner, whiteness is a communication phenomenon that levies power through a reliance on particular patterned strategies. In this way, "social space" or "discursive location" serve as effective metaphors because they resist the tendency to locate race in the site of bodies, essentializing race and reducing the ability to change. See Nakayama and Krizek for detailed information on the benefits of this way of seeing racial identity.

2. For the purposes of this analysis and articulation of the workshop process, we use Freire's terminology from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; however, in the workshops, we use more readily accessible terms in our instructions. For instance, we ask students to analyze or break down ideas, instead of asking them, in Freire's language, to engage in "codification."

3. The myth of meritocracy is the illusion that what we have in life is the product of what we have earned. Scholars such as Ruth Frankenberg, Peggy McIntosh, and others have debunked this notion, arguing that to believe this one must ignore systems of power and privilege that have created (and continue to create) social differences.

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