

ABSTRACT

ENTROCASO, CATHERINE E. White Preference, Trauma, and Culturally Responsive Teaching: A North Carolina Community College Faculty Member's Autoethnography on Culturally Responsive Teaching Implementation Within Four (4) North Carolina Community Colleges (Under the direction of Dr. Jose' Picart.)

The principal social phenomenon under examination in this research study are the researcher's lived experiences and personal observations of faculty and staff resistance to the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in four NC CCs (Institution 1 (Inst1), Institution 2 (Inst2), Institution 3 (Inst3), and Institution 4 (Inst4)). The implementation of CRT in higher education has demonstrated significant positive correlations with increased student success rates (Luginbuhl, 2011; Gay, 2013; Larke, 2013; Lucey and White, 2017, Massar, 2022). The purpose of this critical autoethnographic research study is to help NC CC faculty and leaders to better understand the benefits and the resistance to CRT implementation through the researcher's lived experiences and the lenses of three of her cultural identities; white identity, trauma-survivor identity, and community-college CRT faculty identity. To achieve this goal the researcher employed a Critical Thematic Analysis methodology to answer the following research questions:

RQ1) How, if at all, have my experiences as white identifying and as a trauma survivor impacted me as a CRT instructor in NC CC classrooms (*individual culture analysis*)?

RQ2) How can my insights and lessons learned from implementing CRT in NC CC classrooms inform NC CC teacher preparation and professional development (*classroom culture analysis*)?

RQ3) How can insights and lessons learned from my lived experience inform NC CC leaders
To effectively implement CRT institutionally (*organizational culture analysis*)?

The researcher's literature review identified *culture* as a powerful influence on identity formation (individual culture), effectiveness of classroom teaching and learning for all students (classroom culture), and CC resistance to CRT implementation (institutional culture). In this study the researcher focused specifically on the influence and impacts of *white preference culture* (white privilege, white supremacy culture) on teaching and learning in four NC CCs. The researcher generated three extensive dataset (personal narratives); a narrative of her white identity lived experiences, a narrative of her trauma identity lived experiences, and a narrative of her life experiences implementing CRT in four NC CCs. Critical Thematic Analysis of the three dataset narratives revealed a significant negative impact of the researcher's white identity on CRT implementation in NC CC Inst1 and Inst3, whereas her trauma identity significantly positively impacted her CRT implementation in Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4. The data further revealed that though the researcher's white identity negatively impacted students, her trauma identity helped foster a culture of *empathy* in her NC CC classrooms. The data also revealed a *lack of demonstrated empathy* towards students by both myself, and white-identifying NC CC faculty and staff the researcher observed in Inst1, Inst3, and Inst4. Discussion of the results include several recommendations for individual NC CC faculty members implementing CRT, for classroom instruction and practice, and for institutional leaders seeking to implement CRT at the institution level. These recommendations include faculty reflexivity related to white preference bias, analysis of classroom content and instruction for white preference bias, and for an institutional framework of empathy in action.

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White Preference, Trauma, and Culturally Responsive Teaching: A North Carolina Community College Faculty Member's Autoethnography on Culturally Responsive Teaching Implementation Within Four North Carolina Community Colleges

by
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation firstly to myself.

Secondly, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my son, who gave me the motivation to complete this work. I love you, Finn.

Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to every student I have ever taught. Being entrusted with your education is one of my life's highest honors. Thank you for teaching me even more than I taught you. You've got this.

BIOGRAPHY

I was born into an abusive, white supremacist family. I have experienced significant trauma throughout my life, and I vowed early in my adult life to use my trauma experiences to impact positive change.

I hope my dissertation will assist in informing culturally responsive teaching practices in NC Community Colleges, and community college systems across the country.

Students first.

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You are seen.

You are believed.

You are loved.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) became my primary pedagogical practice over my secondary and higher education (HE) careers, and my students experienced high levels of academic growth, proficiency, and course completion. While CRT was generally accepted as equity practice in my secondary education institutions, I experienced resistance to CRT implementation in the four (4) North Carolina community colleges (NCCCs) in which I was employed from 2015 to 2020. Though I experienced success utilizing CRT practices in NC CCs, I was unaware of how my identification as a white faculty member, and my identification as a trauma survivor, may have contributed to my evolution as a CRT instructor. By using the research methodology of autoethnography, I sought within this study to not only explore why many NCCC agents I worked with resisted CRT implementation, but to also explore my own CRT implementation through three (3) main identity lenses: my identity as a white practitioner, my identity as a trauma survivor, and my identity as a CRT instructor.

Dr. Geneva Gay, the founder of CRT, introduced the pedagogical framework as educational equity practice with a focus on creating a “culture of caring” within classroom settings (2000). According to Gay, a classroom culture of caring requires instructors to be culturally responsive and empathic, resulting in effective instruction of students from varying cultural and diverse backgrounds (2000). Relatedly, HE research consistently demonstrates instructor empathy is directly correlated to a student’s ability to learn and progress (Bozkurt & Ozden, 2010; Kelty, 2018; Meyers et al., 2019). While Gay’s CRT framework outlines multiple objectives for successful CRT implementation, this autoethnographic research study focuses

mostly on instructor empathy and its impacts and implications for student learning within NCCCs.

Through my autoethnographic narratives in Chapter 4, I explored the impact of three of my identities (white, trauma, and educator) on student interactions, student experiences, and student learning within NCCC classrooms. I believed exploring my identity as a CRT instructor could garner insights for other NCCC practitioners and leaders. However, I also wanted to use autoethnographic narratives to explore how my experiences as a white individual, and as a trauma survivor, may or may not have impacted effective or ineffective CRT practices. Prior to this research study, I had not critically examined how my identification as white and my identification as a trauma survivor may have influence on my CRT instruction.

While I consistently experienced high student success rates using CRT in secondary education, I experienced a decline in success rates when I began working for NCCCs in large part because I followed the directives of my fellow faculty and department chairs to employ non-CRT pedagogical approaches. Over time, I reincorporated CRT into my NC CC classrooms with significant success gains until my departure from the NCCCS in December of 2020.

The majority of my colleagues and leaders throughout my NCCC employment identified as white. Many of them told me they did not believe white preference (societally preferred characteristics historically associated with white ideologies) and white supremacy were still embedded in our institutions, departments, and classroom instruction. As a white-identifying faculty member, I wanted to critically examine how my own white preferences may or may not have affected the effectiveness of CRT implementation in my NC CC classrooms, and to share my findings with other white-identifying NCCC agents. As a trauma survivor, I also wanted to explore if a relationship between my own trauma experiences and the trauma experiences of my

students impacted the effectiveness of my CRT instruction. Autoethnography allowed me to position my professional identity as a CRT instructor as a primary data set, as informed by the two (2) additional identities of being white, and surviving trauma. A primary exploration within these three (3) data sets was how I created, and did not create, classrooms of empathy throughout my time in NCCCs.

Effective CRT pedagogical practice is inextricably connected to a classroom educator's ability to connect with the challenges and barriers to academic progression experienced by their students (Gay, 2000). This responsiveness and understanding of students' challenges becomes even more critical in the community college environment, where research suggests that upwards of 94% of students come to institutions already having experienced some level of significant trauma (Butler et al., 2017; Carello, 2014, 2020; Carello & Butler, 2014; Carello & Butler, 2015). I, myself, began my HE journey as a sixteen-year-old at a NCCC with a significant trauma background, the effects of which consistently threatened my forward academic progression.

During my time in the NCCCS, I observed how NCCC institutional policies, particularly those impacting classroom instruction and student support, exacerbate rather than alleviate barriers for marginalized student populations. I also observed how marginalized populations appeared to experience much higher levels of trauma and complex trauma than non-marginalized populations. I believe the NCCC faculty and leader resistance to CRT I experienced demonstrates a lack of understanding as to how classroom culture affects student learning at the HE level, including how dominant cultural norms impact student success. Therefore, the impact of white preference and white supremacist ideologies on student learning is also explored below.

For the purposes of this autoethnographic dissertation, I focused on four (4) NC CC institutions. Three (3) main data sets will be used including my experiences as a CRT instructor in NCCCs, my experiences as a white-identifying faculty member, and my identity as a trauma survivor. Once autoethnographic narratives are generated for each identity, I will analyze my personal CRT experiences at three (3) different levels of CC culture in my autoethnographic narratives:

- My personal life experiences influence on CRT implementation in NC CC classrooms (micro/individual culture)
- Insights and lessons learned from CRT implementation in NC CC classrooms (meso/classroom culture)
- Insights and lessons learned for implementation of CRT institutionally (macro/institutional culture)

I approached analysis using these three (3) levels of culture, attempting to generate insights into not only my individual and classroom experiences with CRT, but to also attempt to capture implications for institutional policy and practice to better inform NCCCS leaders regarding CRT's benefits for advancing student success.

According to Dr. Gay, student engagement (and subsequent learning, and academic progression) is most effectively accomplished by creating a culture of "caring" (Gay, 2000, p. 47). Gay described a successful CRT classroom as one in which there is "concern for person and performance," and necessitates active involvement by a CRT teacher to provoke action toward academic progression while prompting effort and achievement (Gay, 2000, pp.47-76). While CRT is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, Gay's insistence on *empathy as a critical*

component for equity work in teaching and learning is a specific topic of interest in this autoethnographic study.

Because the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) office gives recommendations to its 58 independently governed institutions, it is important to clarify that this autoethnography is not an examination of the NCCCS as a system, but rather of my experiences within four specific institutions which are governed locally. Though the NCCCS does give system-wide recommendations through annual publications including system-wide strategic plans (SP) (North Carolina Community College System, 2018, 2022), there is debate as to the true impact of system recommendations on teaching and learning initiatives in each of the individual NCCC. Therefore, my study's scope was limited to the four (4) individual NCCC institutions where I worked, rather than a broader systemic analysis of the NCCCS.

The NCCC institutions chosen for analysis will be referred to anonymously as Institution 1 (Inst1), Institution 2 (Inst2), Institution 3 (Inst3), and Institution 4 (Inst4):

- Institution 1 (Inst1): 2015-2017, rural, developmental department
 - all white faculty, and department leaders
 - 1300+ students enrolled (DFR 2020, NCES)
 - majority non-white students in my classes
- Institution 2 (Inst2): 2017, urban, developmental department
 - all white faculty, and department leaders
 - 18,000+ students enrolled (DFR 2020, NCES)
 - majority non-white, non-traditional students in my class
- Institution 3 (Inst3): 2017-2020, rural, Humanities Department
 - all white faculty, and department leaders

- 4,800+ students enrolled (Data USA, 2021)
- majority white students in gateway and university transfer English courses; majority non-white students in vocational writing courses
- Institution 4 (Inst4): 2021, rural, Adult Education department
 - all black coworkers and department leaders
 - 100+ students enrolled (VGCC spreadsheet records)
 - majority white students in high school diploma pathways; majority non-white students in GED and HISET pathways

In Chapter 4: Data, I will go more in depth with my experiences at Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4.

Introduction to Autoethnographic Approach

Autoethnography as a research methodology contributes personal stories of marginalization to the wider research literature as an opportunity to critically analyze historical systems, belief systems, and ideologies of oppression (Bhattacharya, 2018; Brock-Utne, 2018; Yazan et al., 2020). A primary power of the autoethnographic research lens lies in its validation of authentic and transparent retelling of personal experience(s) in order to generate insights into a specific phenomenon. The primary phenomenon of interest for this research study is the resistance I observe by NCCC agents towards implementing CRT in their institutions.

I believe this resistance is due in significant part to a misunderstanding by NCCC agents of how institutionalized white preference culture contributes to the marginalization of student populations. My observations suggest that NCCC students often experienced a lack of empathy from NCCCS faculty and leaders, resulting in delayed academic progression, damaged self-esteem, and productivity paralysis. As a NCCC instructor, I personally encountered white supremacy ideology, misogyny, a lack of culturally responsive leadership, and overall

institutional resistance regarding CRT's value as pedagogical practice. It was my belief that through autoethnography, I could explore NCCC agent resistance to CRT while simultaneously turning a critical lens on myself as a CRT instructor.

Historically, and continuing today, the US education system is heavily steeped in Eurocentric white supremacy culture, favoring student assimilation of white preference characteristics as key to academic success (Allen 2004; Applebaum, 2016; Barlow & Dunbar, 2010; Chubbuck, 2004; Gillborn, 2005; Harris, 1993; Le & Matias, 2019; Leonardo, 2009; Leonardo & Boas, 2021; Picower, 2009). White preference characteristics in HE include an attitude of "internalized dominance" by white HE instructors and leaders when interacting with marginalized students (NMAAHC, 2024).

Internalized dominance by HE instructors and leaders includes "accepting their organization's white culture as normal" and "deserved", and is reflected in the non-empathy present in certain HE classrooms (NMAAHC, 2024). Even as HE purports to support equity and inclusion practices, research shows HE institutions who institute such practices typically harm minority students *more*, when equity practices are not internalized individually by institutional agents (Starck et al, 2021). In my own experience, while each NCCC institution I worked within formally adopted institutional equity initiatives, there was simultaneously a deficit of equity in practice at the departmental and classroom levels. The research methodology of autoethnography seeks "to better understand how cultural discourses shape and are shaped by individuals who inhabit, negotiate with, accept, and resist their immediate social groups" (Keles, 2022).

Because US higher education (HE) was formed under Eurocentric value systems, personal narratives have traditionally been shunned for lacking academic value (Clegg, 1993; Davis & Dwyer, 2017; Plummer, 2019). I propose, however, that personal narratives highlighting

the experiences of HE educators deserve a place of inclusion within academia and given equal weight as valued contributions to scholarly research. At the time of this research study, I was unable to find in my extensive literature review not even one autoethnography documenting the lived experiences of a NC CC CRT faculty member.

Background of the Problem

White Supremacy, White Preference, and Community College Culture

US HE institutions and their institutional agents exhibit an enduring preference for whiteness within their policies, procedures, pedagogy, classroom environments, and student support services (Cabrera, 2009, 2014, 2017; Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2014; Linley, 2017; Foste & Tevis, 2022; Woodall, 2013). Public education in the US, including HE, was historically founded and systemically sustained to serve solely white student populations, with the purpose of protecting white power and interests in emerging socio-economic and political landscapes (Allen 2004; Applebaum, 2016; Barlow & Dunbar, 2010; Chubbuck, 2004; Gillborn, 2005; Harris, 1993; Le & Matias, 2019; Leonardo, 2009; Leonardo & Boas, 2021; Picower, 2009). Post Civil Rights Era, enrollment of non-white and non-white presenting student populations increased, but students not adhering to white standards of speaking, writing, behavior, and cultural norms often experienced higher levels of incomplete assignments, with lower levels of attendance, course completion, and graduation (Cabrera, 2009, 2014, 2017; Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2014; Linley, 2017; Foste & Tevis, 2022; Woodall, 2013).

Current NCCCS student success data continues to identify significant disparities between white and non-white populations, including within Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 (NCCCS Dashboards, Accessed 2024). Generally speaking, while the number of underrepresented populations completing HE credentials has increased, including in NCCCs, the proportionality of

success per racial demographics has remained significantly higher for white versus non-white students, although these achievement gaps appear to be closing (US Census Bureau, 2018). Equally alarming is the current ratio of white to non-white degree attainment widening per increasing degree level, specifically in regards to white versus black HE degree achievement: 5:1 some college credits; 7:1 Academic Associates; 8:1 Bachelors; 9:1 Masters; 10:1 Doctorates (US Census Bureau, 2018). Yet in my experience, discussions involving equity initiatives in NCCC institutions were typically devoid of conversations regarding the impacts of white preference and trauma on student achievement.

NC CCs were historically created and funded to educate working-class, white men in order to better meet workforce needs (Link 2018; NCCC 2023; NCCCAA 2013; Quinterno, 2023). Despite increased efforts over the years to address systemic barriers, lower success rates among NCCCS non-white, non-affluent, non-traditional student populations continue to persist at rates disproportionate to the success rates of white students (NCCCS Dashboard Data, Accessed 2023, ACT, 2017; NCCC, 2020; US Census Bureau, 2018). While teacher professional development to improve teaching and learning are embedded as targets in the Strategic Plans of all four (4) NCCCS institutions I worked within, and cultural responsiveness was included in one of the institution's strategic plans, CRT had not been institutionally endorsed through professional development or training. Of all the teaching and learning training provided when I was employed at these NCCCs, none were conducted by individuals with extensive CRT experience or expertise.

A Brief Description of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

CRT is designed to affirm student learners through multidimensional, empowering, and emancipatory classroom instruction (Boykin, 1982, 1986, 1994; Boykin & Bailey, 2000a; Delpit

2006; Gay, 1975, 2002, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Schmeichel, 2012). CRT views an individual's intersectionality of cultures as the access point to improving student learning outcomes. Beyond classroom instruction and course content, CRT additionally requires a practitioner to critically examine their own cultural attitudes, behaviors, and expectations, most notably regarding marginalized student populations. CRT engages students from diverse cultural backgrounds, but requires implementation of reflective practices on behalf of the instructor in order to foster inclusive educational environments (Civitillo et al., 2019; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Kishimoto, 2018). CRT challenges educators to confront their implicit biases, and to acknowledge that practitioner assumptions regarding students and their academic abilities are rooted in cultural biases.

CRT positions the practitioner as the primary cultural influence in any classroom environment, building on literature suggesting the powerful impact teachers can have to both benefit and disrupt student academic performance and progression (Goddard et al., 2000; Howe et al., 2019; Nugent 2009; Pianta, 2016; Tournaki & Podell, 2005; Tyler & Boelter, 2018; Whitaker, 2014). In HE, CRT can be visualized as including three (3) essential components for successful classroom implementation: 1) high academic standards focusing on individual student growth, 2) high cultural competence of the instructor, and the instructor's aptitude for inclusion of student's cultures within the classroom, and 3) the critical, sociopolitical consciousness of the instructor (Johnson, 2022).

Keeping the aforementioned in mind, failure to implement CRT in NC CC Inst1, Inst2, and Inst3 is likely due to the following behaviors I observed during my time in the NCCCS:

- 1) Institutional faculty and leaders demonstrated an insufficient understanding of white preference culture, and its negative effects on student learning

- 2) Institutional faculty members and leaders demonstrated an insufficient understanding of societal, institutional, and the cultural exchanges between students and their instructors
- 3) Institutional faculty members and leaders demonstrate an insufficient understanding of CRT as an essential component of equity work related to student learning

Impact of White Culture Dominance on Student Learning

A student learner and their teacher bring the entirety of their lived experiences (individual cultures) into the classroom creating a unique classroom culture per class. From a micro to a macro perspective, an NCCC student's in-class experience is deeply shaped both by personal life circumstances, but also by broader societal, historical, and cultural factors.

The majority of NCCC student face-to-face (F2F) interactions occur with white faculty members (EDNC, 2020). White faculty often use white-preferred instructional modalities, grading through white-created rubrics and proficiency standards, requiring a white communication style deemed more "professional" and "academic", which often results in negative impacts on student learning (Bednar, 2021; Covarrubias & Quinteros, n.d.; Malmberg, 2020; Mitchum, 2020).

An EDNC (2020) reported, citing the National Center on Education Statistics: "84% of North Carolina's full-time community college instructors identify as non-Hispanic White persons" (EDNC, 2020). Relatedly, it has been my experience that NCCC white faculty express reluctance to have their teaching practices questioned, and of the faculty I interacted with at all four (4) institutions, no white faculty member reported that they reflected on their teaching practices through a white preference lens.

CRT as Critical Equity Work Within NC CCs

The NCCCS 2021 NCCC Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force Report includes mention of “culturally responsive teaching practices,” describing CRT as an “innovative” teaching methodology specifically targeting “historically underserved students” to overcome “common barriers” (NCCCS, 2021). However, CRT is noticeably absent from the task force’s final formal recommendations, in addition to an absence of recommendations regarding teaching and learning overall. Additionally, the 2022-2026 NCCCS Strategic Plan (SP) lacks any mention of equity, no mention of DEIB practices, and only one mention of “culture of belonging” (NCCC, 2022). The 2022-2026 NCCCS SP references a need to “adopt a NCCC framework for inclusive excellence ... and practices to reduce attainment gaps and cultivate a culture of belonging,” but fails to mention the specific pedagogical recommendation of CRT, cultural responsiveness, or mandate equity training for NCCC faculty and leaders.

The 2022-2026 NCCCS SP references “learning” fifteen (15) times, but without additional clarification as to specific learning targets or initiatives. While arguably each of the NCCCS’ fifty-eight (58) institutions are not individually reflected in the system-wide 2022-2026 SP, it can be reasonably assumed that the 2022-2026 NCCCS SP is intended to be reflective of institutional targets the NCCCS does and does not currently externally endorse.

Additionally, I reviewed the SPs of Inst1, Inst 2, Inst3, and Inst4. While equity was mentioned at least once in three (3) of the four (4) plans, and all four (4) strategic plans included references to improving teaching and learning, CRT was noticeably absent from all four (4) strategic plans. I believe the lack of support and/or understanding of CRT’s benefits, but the focus of most NCCC on diversity and equity initiatives, demonstrates an opportunity for this dissertation to assist NCCC leaders in successful CRT implementation.

Purpose of the Study

- Purpose 1: to help NCCC faculty and leaders better understand the influence of white preference and trauma cultures on student learning (individual culture analysis)
- Purpose 2: to help NCCC faculty and leaders better understand the benefits of CRT as a primary pedagogical approach in NCCC classrooms (classroom culture analysis)
- Purpose 3: to share CRT implementation strategies and best practices, and propose suggested methodology on how community colleges can improve teaching and learning (institutional culture analysis)

Research Questions

- 1) How, if at all, have my experiences as white identifying and as a trauma survivor impacted me as a CRT instructor in NC CC classrooms (individual culture analysis)?
- 2) How can my insights and lessons learned from implementing CRT in NC CC classrooms inform NC CC teacher preparation and professional development (classroom culture analysis)?
- 3) How can insights and lessons learned from my lived experience inform NC CC leaders to effectively implement CRT institutionally (organizational culture analysis)?

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- b. A Brief History of Cultural Responsiveness in US Systems
- c. The Rise of Cultural Responsiveness in Education
- d. CRT: Origins and Theory
- e. Effective Integration of CRT in HE: Current Literature and Framework for Data Analysis

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Introduction to Reflexivity

As a researcher conducting an autoethnographic study, reflexivity plays a vital role in protecting the validity of the research outcomes. Autoethnography requires a researcher to create personal narratives documenting lived experiences, but also requires the personal narratives to be analyzed as transparently and accurately as possible (Chang 2008, 2018; Poulos 2021). Through autoethnography, I seek to identify the impact of white supremacy and trauma in my own life, and the connection of my white and trauma identities to my beliefs, behavior, and choices as a CRT educator in NCCC Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4.

Related to reflexivity, see Figure 1 for the conceptual framework employed in this study. To help me understand the factors contributing to NC CC agent resistance to CRT implementation. In my framework, I propose that white preference ideologies and a lack of empathy within teaching and learning environments serve as primary catalysts for such resistance. According to the framework, white preference ideologies and a lack of empathy are interconnected, and mutually contribute to exacerbating opposition to CRT as a valued pedagogical approach.

The framework also illustrates the three primary levels of culture I believe are negatively impacted by white preference and teaching practices lacking empathy to include individual, classroom, and institutional. Through my narratives, I hoped to achieve an understanding of how my own white preference was influenced by my trauma background, and how my white identity influenced my development as a CRT instructor over my career.

From my research, reflexivity is even more critical in autoethnographic research studies, because the researcher is using their own experiences as the data set to be analyzed. Thus, consistent and recursive reflexive practice are required by the autoethnographer to preserve the trustworthiness and validity of the data. Because of the significance of reflexive practice specific to autoethnographic research studies, I discuss reflexivity more in Chapter 3: Methodology.

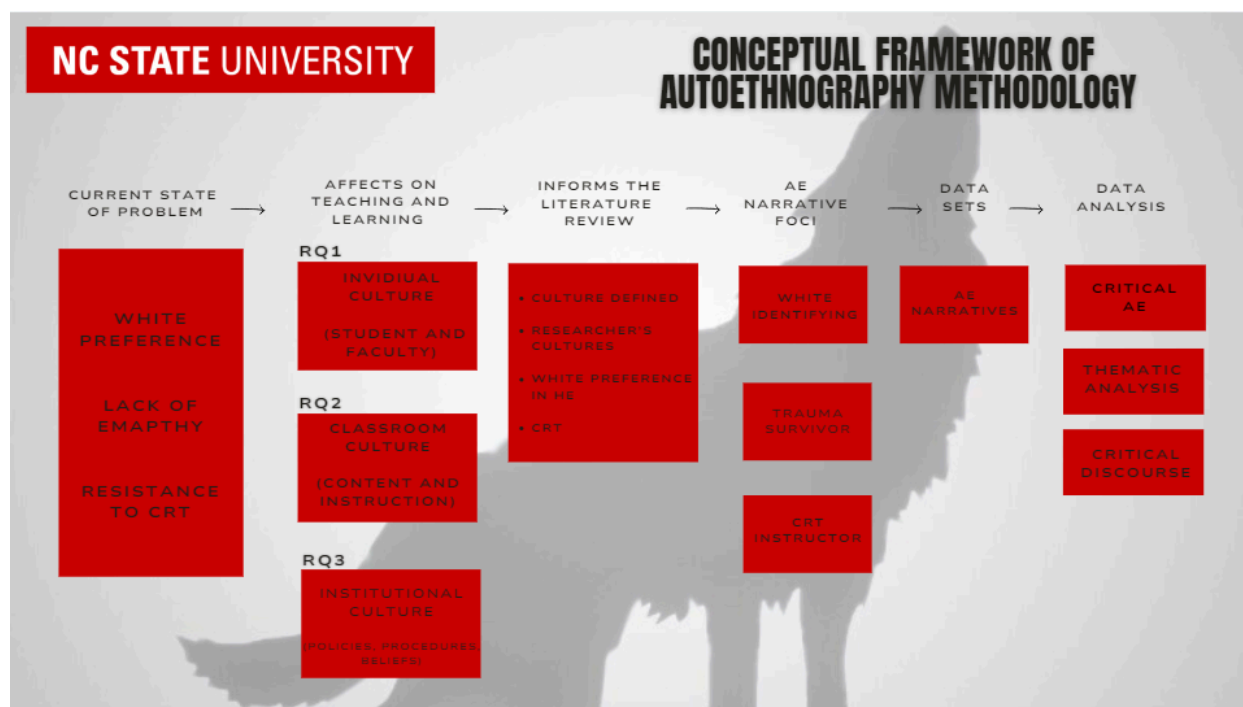
Introduction to Trustworthiness and Validity of Data

In autoethnography, several trustworthiness and validity strategies may be employed including reflexivity of the researcher, triangulation of data sources, member checking, an audit log of the dates and methods of collecting artifacts, data sets, interviews, as well as the use of a research journal (Chang 2008, 2018; Poulos, 2021). For the purposes of my autoethnography, I will be employing reflexivity exercises, triangulation of data sources between my three (3)

anticipated narrative identity data sets (white identity, trauma identity, and CRT instructor identity), and the use of a research journal to document my research process choices including how my autoethnographic narrative drafting was approached, including how the coding of the autoethnographic data set would be coded during qualitative analysis.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Critical Autoethnographic Study



Note: Entrocaso, 2024

Introduction to The Researcher

I began my HE journey at Fayetteville Technical Community College (FTCC) at sixteen (16) years old, as a dual-enrollment high school student. Neither of my parents graduated from college, though they both attempted to take classes at FTCC and dropped out.

My older brother, who earned tens of thousands of dollars in academic and military scholarships upon high school graduation, dropped out of university his junior year due to

substance abuse and mental distress related to our childhood abuse. At my undergraduate graduation, my brother was intoxicated and attempted to walk across the stage with me. I earned my master's while raising a newborn, working full-time, and caring for a military spouse dealing with combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

With fifteen (15) years of instructional experience in both secondary and HE, I also hold credentials as a Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) specializing in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) for autism-spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as an NC Department of Public Instruction secondary education English teaching license.

I am certified in Six Sigma and Trauma-Informed Practices, and have extensive experience in secondary and HE DEIB practice and program evaluation. My instructional and leadership roles have encompassed diverse educational settings including secondary, developmental/remedial, vocational, adult high school, and traditional HE classrooms. Additionally, I have actively participated in cultural responsiveness, DEIB, and school improvement committees, fostering cross-departmental collaborations within NCCCS institutions.

My experiences teaching Title-1 secondary education settings with high rates of poverty, violence, and substance use initiated my interest in CRT. Despite my developed beliefs in support of equity in my later adulthood, my upbringing in a white supremacist household shaped my earlier worldview. My parents white preference ideologies also influenced my development as a CRT instructor, in a variety of negative ways.

Prior to exploring CRT, I would have defensively rejected any accusations of racism or discriminatory practices in my teaching. However, my interactions with students, many times rooted in relatable trauma and efforts to overcome it, motivated my pursuit to develop myself as

an equity-minded, CRT-focused instructor. Witnessing white supremacy characteristics in NC CC institutions manifesting in such ways as sexism, racism, homophobia, and pro-Judeo-Christian ideologies, underscored the urgency of my CRT research focus. I do not identify as non-white; but the trauma experiences I have endured in my life I believe can also be traced to white supremacist characteristics and I believe my openness about both my experiences and my attempts to evolve towards an anti-white supremacist worldview in part contributed to the strength of my relationships with my students.

I did not learn the term “CRT” until I entered this doctorate program; yet, I have been engaging with CRT practices throughout my career, specifically from a trauma-informed perspective. When I experienced significant gains in student success outcomes towards the end of my employment with NC CC Inst3, I finally had the data to show a positive correlation between student success and intentional CRT course content and instruction - only to be identified by senior leadership as “too mothering” to students, too invested in student support, too questioning of leadership decisions affecting equity in our department.

Now I find myself in this research space, asking the questions: Are there aspects of my identities and experiences that resonate with marginalized student populations in such a way that CRT is more or less successful in my classroom settings than others? Has mutual impact by white supremacist institutional characteristics created stronger and therefore more productive connections between myself and my students? How can NC CC institutions be aided in CRT implementation, especially among a majority traumatized student population?

I identify as a white, millennial, woman. I identify as a complex-trauma survivor, an artist, and an academic. I identify as a former Fundamentalist Christian, a former political conservative, and an active agent in dismantling my own and my community’s white supremacist

constructs, beliefs, and worldviews. Having experienced white supremacy in my household growing up, in my interpersonal relationships, and in my places of employment, I believe I am keenly positioned to provide insights from white spaces involving white individuals.

In the context of this dissertation, I believe I am equally as well positioned to explore insights regarding the perspectives of white NC CC agents as they relate to institutional processes within four (4) NC CCs. I will bring a nuanced understanding of my own lived experiences working within NC CC institutions as well as NC CC student experiences I observed. While I will strive for self-awareness and reflexivity, I do recognize my subjectivity may both enhance and simultaneously bias my findings. However, I am committed to transparency throughout this research process, and fully acknowledge the anticipated complexities of my role as both researcher and primary subject participant.

This dissertation study seeks to promote NCCC faculty and leaders understanding of the adverse influence of America's dominant white preference culture on student learning and the benefits of effectively implementing CRT as a college-wide *pedagogical* approach. To accomplish this, I will develop autoethnographic narratives (data) which will help me answer how my personal experiences have influenced the successes and challenges of CRT implementation in NC CC classrooms, while also attempting to explore how my experiences can better inform NC CC teacher preparation, professional development, and overall NC CC institutional equity practice.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

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 - d. CRT: Origins and Theory
 - e. Effective Integration of CRT in HE: Current Literature and Framework for Data
 - f. Analysis

Introduction

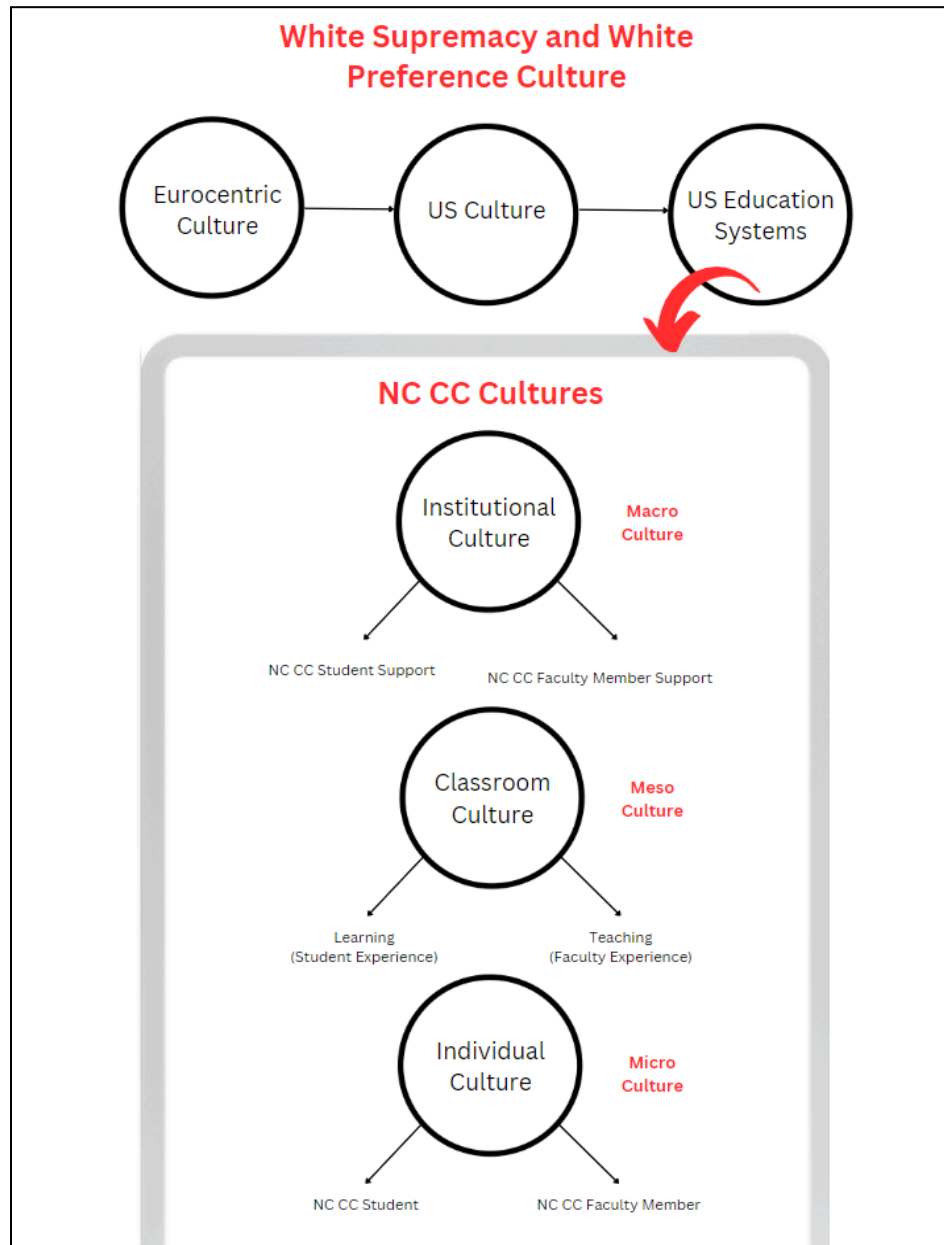
In US society, whiteness characteristics and white culture are the most prized and prioritized characteristics within many societal institutions, including US education systems (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Mills, 1997; Reason & Evans, 2007; Roediger, 2003). Given that the NC CCs are the product of a historically discriminatory society and that the majority of NC CC leaders and faculty identify as white, a critical pressure exists for NC CC leaders to disrupt white preference within NC CC institutions and classrooms. A white preference system, such as an educational system, will not naturally align itself with equity and therefore must be challenged by institutional agents on a consistent and reflective basis (Garvey & Ignatiev, 1997).

As NC CC institutional agents, our ability to challenge white preference practices in NC CC classrooms will first require an understanding of *culture*. For reference, the following infographic illustrates how white preference culture impacts three subsequent levels of culture within a NC CC: individual culture including a student's cultures and the cultures of the faculty member teaching; classroom culture including how content is taught, and how students learn; and institutional culture including how white preference institutions support their students and faculty, respectively.

To establish a context and foundation for the role of context in this research study, I will begin with an exploration of culture as a theoretical concept, along with a brief examination of white preference's adverse effects on both students and faculty in HE. (See Figure 2).

Figure 2

NC CC Institutional Levels Impacted by White Supremacy and White Preference Culture



Note: Entrocaso, 2024; as informed by *How Colleges Change*, Kezar, 2014.

Culture Defined

Etymologically, the term culture originates from the Latin root *cultura/cultus* which encompasses both the physical act of cultivating land for harvest, and the notion of an individual's education, training, and the elements of one's life to which they assign value (Merriam Webster, 2024). Culture, therefore, can be understood in my estimation to be rooted in a person's intentional and purposeful development of selfhood; including what personal characteristics an individual chooses to amplify, and which to diminish within themselves based on the perception of value as assigned by the groups the individual wishes to assimilate within.

Culture, therefore, can be understood as the identities an individual cultivates in order to fit into a social group to which the individual has assigned value. For instance, as a former high school athlete, I can attest to my assimilation into the culture within a highly competitive basketball team as we worked collectively towards our goal of a state championship. As team members, we cultivated our skill sets individually as well as together while progressing towards our collective goal, and our team culture was shaped by each member's training/education, and the significant value we placed on mastering the sport of basketball.

In this example, I already considered myself to embody characteristics of being competitive, driven, teachable, aggressive, and passionate; but playing specifically within that team's culture, I began to assign value to what the team members also assigned value: outside of practice conditioning, strength training, and (good goddess) an endless amount of time practicing free throws. As I demonstrated to my team the assignment of value to improving my athletic performance, my personal value within the team increased to the point where I was named a co-captain both junior and senior year. Culture, then, can be further understood as the

characteristics we develop within ourselves because our environments reinforce that those characteristics hold value according to my understanding.

This initial definition of culture is critically important to understanding how white supremacist ideology and white preference within American society has influenced our individual culture, classroom culture, and organizational culture within NC CC institutions. What we as educators and leaders assign value to is what we expect our students to assimilate within themselves, in order to become successful - regardless of the negative impacts of that assimilation. This mandatory assimilation as part and parcel to recognized academic achievement becomes more insidious when understood as white preference bias.

Did I know when I began my journey as a professional educator in 2008 that this education system's pressure for assimilation was, in actuality, perpetuating patterns of whiteness in my classroom, that in turn enhanced barriers and access for my students? No.

Did I become aware through my journey as a CRT instructor of my own culpability in promoting whiteness, and furthermore did I realize the necessity for white educators to self-reflect on personal ideologies and the adverse influence of their white-preference -classroom-practices on culturally diverse students? Yes.

Unaware, I learned early on in my NC CC career that I would need to learn the language, mannerisms, and behavior expectations of white systemic power in order to be taken seriously as an educational leader. Without this adherence to the expectations of whiteness, I knew my ability to impact change on a policy and institutional level was extremely limited. This process of my assimilation into white professional spaces within Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 will be explored more in Chapters 4 and 5. I will explore how I as a faculty member lost privilege in those same spaces due in large part to my increasing application of CRT strategies.

Beyond the development of individual culture based on societally valued traits, culture, as a societal construct, can be best understood as “all knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values and emotions that we, as human beings, have added to our biological base. Culture is a social phenomenon; it is what we as a society, or a people, share and which enables us to live as a society” (Jarvis, 2006). In other words, societal culture is a *collective* and *historical* construct based on personal, behavioral, and interpersonal value estimations, with these value estimations being defined by those who hold societal power.

Specifically, in the NCCC system office and in the majority of NC CC institutions, institutional power has collectively and historically been held by white, affluent, conservative, Christian men (NCCCS, 2024). My experience as an NC CC faculty member is of students and faculty members being ostracized, criticized, labeled “difficult”, and ultimately separated from NC CCs for not aligning with these white preference characteristics. I will discuss more specific examples of this experience in Chapter 4’s CRT instructor data narrative.

For contextualizing this particular dissertation space, I am defining *culture* as both *individual culture*, which represents the totality of an individual’s identities; and *societal culture* which reflects how a given individual’s cultures/identities interact with and are influenced by ever evolving experiences, history, and environments. Within the context of this dissertation, individual culture will refer to NC CC identities influenced by white preference, and societal culture will refer to this historically dominant white preference culture in the US.

Continuing my example from above, in high school I identified as a female, white, politically conservative, Christian, homeschooled student. These personal identities can therefore be considered my personal “cultures”, cultures that both defined me as a child growing up, and cultures that influenced my CRT.

Identifying at the time as female, Christian, and homeschooled in part allowed me to be accepted within the team environment because I shared cultural values with other team members who were part of an all-girls, Christian, homeschooled basketball team.

However, my personal identities of being white and politically conservative at the same time also isolated me from certain team mates, causing me to never question why the majority of my teammates were white in a sport dominated by black athletes; nor why my coaches were majority white males. I never questioned why my teammates of color always drove separately from the white teammates on game days and to and from practice. I also never questioned the relentless harassment of our single “out” lesbian player for her “masculine” looks, her sexual preference, and her mixed race ethnicity. Individual cultures allow us to find spaces with others who share our identities, but cultural identities also prevent us from seeing wider social trends, even as we as individuals seek to improve our interactions with each other, especially with individuals whose cultures differ from our own.

Individual and institutional culture are inextricably linked to historical and societal culture, because the value we assign to various character traits and behaviors is taught to us by the society we are raised within (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Clark, 2008; Cullen, 1999). In an educational context, I believe this can result in white preference teaching and learning practices that often go unchecked or unrealized.

In my experience, the white preference culture within the NCCCS must be understood and publicly acknowledged, in order for CRT implementation in NC CC classrooms to be successful. A rudimentary analysis of HE in the US reveals a painful history of exclusion, intentional barriers to non-white student progression, and blatant racism, sexism, and homophobia against marginalized populations not able to or not willing to abide by the white

preference norm (Annalakshmi & Venkatesan, 2018; Bickel, R. D., 2008; Bowen et al., 2005; Clements & Portray, 2021; Edwards, J., 2022; Pieronek, C., 2000; Tamura, 2008; Wilson, 1995; Wolff & Himes, 2010). In my experience, NC CC Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 culture demonstrates, not only white supremacist traits, but also had institutional leaders who, intentionally or otherwise, perpetuated a white preference culture which enabled systemic barriers to academic success for students of color to persist. This will be discussed more in Chapter 4.

The value I assigned the sport of basketball was not randomly assigned: my grandparents, whom we visited often, had a basketball and goal at their house (access); my stepfather, his brothers, and an all-star sister all played basketball in high school (familial influence); my all-star aunt was a former coach for the North Carolina State University women's basketball team and head coach of Methodist University's women's basketball team (access, influence, proximity to power); my cousins and I grew up playing basketball at every holiday gathering with me as the only female player (resiliency, endurance, emotional, and strength conditioning); and when I was first homeschooled my 9th grade year, basketball was the primary activity for my high school physical education class held at the local YMCA (access).

Because basketball was a consistent socialization activity in my life growing up, and because those around me assigned such value and prestige to the sport, my viewing of basketball culture as "valuable" was influenced by the social groups, settings, and environments to which I belonged. Culture, therefore, can be seen as endlessly and dimensionally influential, while simultaneously being dependent on an individual or group's experience(s) within a social context. Thus, to understand culture, we must also be willing to honestly scrutinize society.

Exploring the historic and cultural metrics by which individuals assign value and low-value to people and their environments, is essential to understanding how any culture (e.g., NC CCs) is created and sustained. My experiences identifying my own cultural identities, as well as more specifically my time in secondary and NC CC institutions, has long conjured questions: Who do we trust within our social groups to teach us the truth/“truth” of our environment(s)? How do we arrive at the conclusion that certain individuals within a system or institution are the most competent to teach us what system characteristics hold value, and which do not? How does an individual (in this case, an NC CC student or NC CC faculty member) remain authentic to individual cultural identities curated long before entrance into a NC CC, even as those identities clash with the white preference of the HE institution itself?

When delving into the examination of culture within a specific system or institution, a culturally responsive practitioner/researcher is tasked with examining the lived experiences of the culturally-variable populations the system/institution serves. Within a HE context, this includes how individual identities and cultures, particularly in interactions between students and educators, would influence the ways in which students benefit or are harmed by educational institutions.

A culturally responsive practitioner/researcher must also examine how a student’s identities and cultures can impact their ability to navigate a HE institution and identify the supports and resources they feel comfortable seeking during enrollment, especially from institutional agents who may not share their cultural backgrounds. Equity-centric improvements in HE necessitate the exploration of individual student culture alongside institutional culture, in order to identify incongruencies between institutional mission, message, and strategic plans and the reality of student experience within our institutions and classrooms.

In order to further our institutional plans for DEIB, it is critical for NC CC faculty and leaders to educate themselves on white preference's devaluation of trauma, especially trauma inflicted on individuals who do not ascribe to white preference standards including such populations as racial minorities, women, religious minorities, and the LGBTQIA+ community (Alvarez, 2020; Quiros et al., 2020). Institutions seeking to become culturally responsive and trauma-informed then necessarily become institutions dedicated to dismantling white supremacist ideologies.

According to Alfred Lopez (2005), author of the critical essay "The Gaze of the White Wolf: Psychoanalysis, Whiteness, and Colonial Trauma", any such institutional analysis for white preference "will require a careful analysis of the impact of race on the colonized in the form of colonial imperatives and regulations. And a critical component of this analysis must in turn include a focus on whiteness as a colonial cultural imperative calculated in every instance to instill in the colonized an internalized sense of their own inferiority and the inevitability of white European rule" (Lopez quoted in Singh, 2019, p. 156).

In other words, the initial steps of dismantling white preference standards within NC CCs requires the recognition that white preference exists, and how the impacts of white preference show up for students and faculty within NC CC classrooms. Without this foundational understanding, equity initiatives are little more than public relation efforts, that are ultimately - placation.

According to the research, white preference (as informed by white supremacy) *is trauma* (Alvarez, 2020; Legha & Martinek, 2023; Liu, et al., 2019; Rivas & Borunda, 2024; Table, 2023; Quiros et al., 2020). Having already discussed how upwards of 84% of NCCCS full-time faculty are white, white preference and its trauma-like effects have a high possibility of being positively

correlated to lower success rates among marginalized NC CC student populations. My experiences with white preference trauma, and of enacting white preference trauma, will be discussed more in Chapter 4.

Though it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to investigate a comprehensive analysis of white preference within NC CC institutions, I do believe in the ability of NC CC agents to connect HE's history of white preference to NC CC student success disparities. If unacknowledged, "[w]hite-dominant, colonial perspective masks systemic racial inequities and prevents collective healing from colonial abuses, such as racism, sexism or xenophobia" (Alvarez, 2020). This kind of in-depth reflection on the effects of white preference both on myself and my NC CC students, especially as a white NC CC practitioner, will be explored in Chapter 4.

Systems, once established, resist change. According to institutional logics experts, a system of any kind will continue in status quo operations and cultural preferences until it no longer serves the system's viability to do so (Kezar & Bernstein-Serra, 2020; Thornton, 2008; Thornton, 2012). In institutional logics this is called isomorphism. Isomorphism is an institution's tendency to change itself only when its survival depends on those changes occurring (Thornton, 2008). According to two of John Meyer and Brian Rowan's (1997; qtd in Thornton, 2008) isomorphic principles:

- 1) [O]rganizations that incorporate societally legitimated rationalized elements in their formal structures maximize their legitimacy and increase their resources and survival capability.
 - a) In other words, and in my experience, NC CCs will continue to incorporate white preference into institutional policies and teaching

methodologies so long as adherence to white preference norms supports the NC CCs viability.

2) “The more an organization's structure is derived from institutionalized myths, the more it maintains elaborate displays of confidence, satisfaction, and good faith, internally and externally” (Meyer & Rowan, 1997, p. 79).

a) Despite strategic plan commitments by Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 to equity and improving student learning, I experienced white and non-white institutional agents directly and inadvertently perpetuate the institutionalized myth of white superiority in all four (4) community colleges.

Based on my observations, Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 conduct institutional operations from a white supremacist ideological framework, which in turn legitimizes student barriers within the institutions themselves. Because the executive teams of all four (4) of these institutions are predominantly white, I would also propose from an institutional logics perspective that these institutions more than likely seek community partnerships and funding from white individuals and/or individuals who also value white preference ideologies. This, in turn, makes white preference adherence cyclical, the oppressive nature of which will persist if not acknowledged, and actively dismantled.

Introduction to Autoethnographer’s Cultures

TW: The following section will include references to sexual assault, domestic violence, poverty, child abuse, substance use, sexual harassment, workplace trauma, student trauma, and white fragility. These experiences will be discussed more in Chapter 4.

My earliest childhood memory is trauma. My daily reality growing up, and as far back as I can remember, involved frequent and consistent levels of physical violence, mental manipulation, grooming behaviors, and sexual abuse.

Trauma followed me directly into my adulthood as well. Two weeks before leaving for undergraduate, a family member sexually assaulted me. When I sought help from my church, my family member married to the assaulter told me “this man is a deacon” and not to tell anyone else.

Two weeks after arriving at undergraduate in August of 2002, I was date raped by a Fort Liberty soldier. This rape resulted in my church excommunicating me because, in part, refusing to “pray a prayer of repentance” for “consenting to premarital sex.” I began college with no family support, separated from my church and faith, and solely financially responsible for paying private university tuition.

I am a first-generation college student. I am a survivor of multiple domestic violence relationships. I was falsely arrested in 2013, resulting in a nearly decade-long court battle for exoneration.

For the majority of my life, I have been a single parent working multiple jobs in addition to my full time employment to stay above the poverty line. I was diagnosed with C-PTSD among other trauma-related diagnoses in 2013. I was not diagnosed with ADHD until 2023. I continue to experience the mental and emotional challenges associated with my cumulative traumatic experiences, though those experiences run concurrent to my pursuit of healing.

I personally relate to the complexities and challenges of navigating trauma while attempting to obtain a HE degree. High levels of adverse childhood experiences (ACES) are positively correlated with higher rates of dropping out of school, mental health disorders,

substance abuse, adverse involvement in the criminal justice system, lower lifetime educational and career achievements, and higher rates of sustained poverty (Bob, 2023; Dees, 2017; Dube et al., 2001; Dube 2003; Finkelhor, 2020; Gilgoff et al., 2020; Karatekin, 2018; Karatekin & Hill, 2019; Walsh et al., 2019).

For me to be defending a doctorate at this point in my life defies significant statistical probabilities as outlined in trauma literature. While trauma has played a significant role in my development as both an individual and also as a CRT instructor, equally as impactful in my experience is my experiences with white supremacist and white preference related traumas. I believe that my trauma experiences contributed to the evolution of my empathic attunement, which relatedly improved my effectiveness as a CRT instructor. My goal is to explore the intersections of these three (3) identities (white identity, trauma identity, and CRT instructor identity) in my Chapter 4 autoethnographic narratives.

Research indicates CRT implementation and trauma-informed practices in HE institutions can enhance student outcomes, but also reduce faculty turnover, and boost faculty morale (Delello et al., 2018; Hollis, 2023; Nelson, 2021; Perry & Daniels, 2016; Phifer & Hull, 2016; Pope-Ruark, 2022; Rahimi et al., 2021; Reiersen & Becker, 2021; Ringle & Savickas, 1983; Stokes & Brunzell, 2020; Thomas et al., 2019; Walkley & Cox, 2013).

As an NC CC employee, I experienced the effects of colleagues and leaders who did not demonstrate trauma-informed practices, including heightened anxiety and hypervigilance regarding my employment, as well as a general sense of ostracization, mockery, and devaluation as having extensive experience with CRT. Yet, despite my negative experiences related to my treatment as a trauma survivor by my NC CC peers and leadership, I still enjoyed a level of protected privilege due being white and white-presenting.

Consistent with our previous discussion of *culture*, I believe I learned which of my character traits held value from the individuals I felt held social capital within my social environments, such as religious leaders, coaches, and my parents, all of which were white, conservative, and Christian. As a white person, white preference was ingrained in me since childhood. Early exposure to non-white neighborhood friends and school peers (many times to the disdain of my white parents) challenged the white supremacist ideology of my family environment, but it ultimately did not assist in that white ideology's deconstruction.

As an example, I distinctly remember an incident involving my step-father in a local sandwich shop when I was about ten (10) years old, during which I played Salt-N-Pepa's megahit song "Shoop" on the restaurant's jukebox. I knew about Salt-N-Pepa because of my black friends at school, and FM radio. The family member in question seeks to be an intimidating man, and when he towered over me, face-to-my-terrified-face, and hissed, "We don't listen to *that* kind of music," I was instantly ashamed. The song played in its entirety while my family member glared at me, physically bracing his body against the transparent talk of sex and sex education while I stared at my sandwich in silence.

Though raised within a white preference household and family, I always found more acceptance among my black peers. Therefore, their influence for the time I attended public school greatly impacted my cultural preferences such as music and art, and also influenced my colloquialisms, my slang, and my sense of style (what precious little I had back then). Black music and art specifically were becoming integrated parts of me culturally, at a time when I had no notion of what appropriation meant. When a family member would dart to change the radio station if a black performer's music came on, it only made me more curious about hip-hop music and black culture. I was attracted to black artists' identities of rebellion, resurrection, power, and

community. I did not see these same identity traits present in my white community and family. Instead, what I experienced was messaging from my parents of compliance, of obedience to authority regardless of that authority's competency, and most specifically a near sycophantic submission to white men.

Relatedly, my female identification, my queer identification, my domestic violence (DV) and sexual assault (SA) identities, and my non-Christian identification drew discrimination throughout my life. These identities, among others, "Other" me from the white supremacist home I grew up in, from my white supremacist family, and created significant conflict between myself and the white preference NC CC leaders (especially white males) I interacted with during my employment at Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, Inst4.

Yet I was, and still am, subject to white preference ideology, thinking, and decision-making. I still hold white supremacist ideologies regardless of my years working towards an anti-white preference worldview. I know this because those ideologies became evident in my classroom practice and policies, as well as when white-preference-informed thoughts enter my mind, and the instinctive assumptions I make from a white preference ideological positionality.

In my experience and especially for white practitioners, CRT implementation fails to be successful when the practitioner is lacking self-awareness of how white preference influences their thoughts and choices. Furthermore, I believe CRT implementation will fail to be successful at classroom levels if department and institutional cultures continue to prioritize white perspectives and experiences. Thus, any successful implementation of CRT, in my experience, *requires* institutional agents to take agency over their own white preference biases, and *intentionally* engage in the deconstruction of those biases.

To this end, Dr. Francis Rains identifies multiple ways individuals, specifically whites, can begin deconstructing biases. For example, one researcher identifies five “benign responses” typically used by whites when engaging in white preference conversations:

- The sense-of-entitlement reaction
 - Ex. Whites who state they deserve their employment positions, especially leadership positions solely because they “worked hard” and therefore “deserve” those positions more than non-white preference candidates
- The citation-of-exceptions response
 - Ex. “With this response, the white academics who utilize it stress that individuals of color exist who have managed to pull themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps ... that hardships can be overcome with merely enough individual effort” which negates institutional white preference
- The well-I-can’t-speak-for-(fill in the blank w/ color) response
 - Ex. “Since the experiences of women of color are so different, the argument goes, many white women cannot possibly teach about women of color or the theories, scholarship, and literature written by academics of color”
- The sense-of-guilt reaction
 - Ex. “This reaction often occurs after a person of color has been asked to share her or his perspectives/experiences on issues of race/racism ... The person of color becomes responsible for the white person’s guilty feelings”
- The color blind and racial neutrality responses

- Ex. color blind responses “You know, some of my best friends are (a color/ethnicity), but I don’t see their color ... I treat all my friends the same” / “Gee, I don’t think of you as a (color/ethnicity)”
- Ex. racial neutrality response “After all, he said, I don’t even think of you as black. Yet sometime later, when another black woman became engaged in an ultimately unsuccessful tenure battle, he confided to me that he wished he could find more blacks like me”

(Rains quoted in Kincheloe et al., 1998, p. 84)

In Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4, I have observed white NC CC faculty and leaders engage in each type of Dr. Rains’ benign responses, and I have also observed each benign response in my own journey towards becoming an anti-racist, CRT NC CC instructor. Examples of my own reflective practice regarding white preference biases will be discussed in Chapter 4.

According to Dr. Rains, the majority of whites who work in HE will not identify discrimination and white preference within their own institutions, mostly because they cannot identify the complexity of white preference’s effects on their individual selves, and on the spaces they occupy including their families, their circle of friends, and their communities (Rains quoted in Kincheloe et al., 1998, p. 81). She goes on to say that for whites, “[c]omments made about racists or racisms simply do not pertain to them. Such a construction of racism as overt, individualistic behavior provides a cloak from immunity from scrutiny”.

Compoundingly, many whites in HE and academia, including faculty members and institutional leaders, continue to engage in conversations about white preference impacts, but do little to implement effective equity practices and/or equity practices with longitudinal institutional endorsement. Additional research notes, “[with]in the academic community, much is

written about racism, race dynamics, and racial attitudes, yet little is done about these same issues personally, departmentally, or institutionally” (Farmer quoted in Kincheloe et al., 1998, p. 79). My experiences at Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 echo this sentiment, and I would add academic institutions and their agents typically display a lack of empathy towards policies, procedures, and practices informed by white preference, even as they espouse intention to close achievement gaps through DEIB initiatives.

On a personal level, empathy was also a trait radically absent in my white supremacist family. Ironically, growing up and now, I feel/felt empathy predominantly from non-white, non-white-preference-informed spaces. These experiences were/are instrumental in my own development of empathy. I feel it important to note that I am not generalizing all white families as lacking empathy; however, given my research and understanding of white preference’s insidiousness, I believe white families capable of empathy - towards what they believe holds value.

My experience with both my white family and white individuals in general is that whites do not view certain life circumstances, realities, or environments as *trauma*. They possessed underdeveloped senses of empathy towards others whom they believe have “self-inflicted, “conquerable,” or “justifiable” circumstances. I experienced this with my own white family’s silence and inaction regarding my repeated and elongated abuse, as well as their silence, inaction, and judgment related to how I chose to cope with the mental and emotional fallout correlated to that abuse. I also experienced this lack of empathy from white institutional leaders related to my termination from Inst3, which I perceive as intentional and calculated, without regard for the impacts on my person or my family.

I have experienced this lack of empathy by whites in public spaces, in the way our treatment of people may vary from skin tone to skin tone. I have experienced this lack of empathy by whites in professional settings, in the entitled way we judge and take action against individuals who possess non-white-preference characteristics (read: religion, sexuality, gender, etc). But the most insidious way I have experienced this lack of empathy is in the way whites absolutely save their most “-ist” comments (racist, sexist, ableist, etc.) for behind closed doors and in all-white settings.

I will never forget a student at Inst3 relaying an encounter he experienced at work with white community members. He relayed the following during a discussion on white privilege and white supremacy. The year was 2019. Donald Trump had been in office for three (3) years, and the rate of white supremacist terrorism in the US had dramatically increased since his inauguration (Anti-Defamation League, Accessed 2024; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2021; Southern Poverty Law Center, Accessed 2024).

The student, who identified as a high-school-aged Hispanic male, told the class he worked at a local Italian restaurant which frequently hosted large groups. The groups were typically set up in a banquet hall towards the back of the restaurant, which was outfitted with large doors that closed off the banquet hall from the rest of the restaurant.

He explained that he worked a shift once where a large group of white men and women had gathered for dinner, and he was their server. He remembered, as he was passing out food orders, looking down and seeing explicitly white supremacist brochures and literature scattered around the table’s surface. Shocked, I asked if he was comfortable sharing his reaction. I remember the student shrugging, shaking his head and kind of half-laughing when he said, “I mean, they come in all the time. Many of them work for the college or around town. I try not to

let it get to me. It just is what it is”. What that student must have felt, serving those individuals - I can’t find words.

Empathy recognizes and responds to *empathic* environments (Steinhausen et al., 2014; Wilson, 2004; Zembylas, 2007). I would propose such research supports the implementation of CRT in NC CCs, because of CRT’s requirement of a classroom culture of “care” (Gay, 2000). For the purposes of this dissertation, I connected Dr. Gay’s concept of empathy and student care with the concepts of *empathic attunement* and *empathic capacity* I discovered in trauma literature.

I believe that while many NC CC practitioners would consider themselves to possess “empathy”, my experience was that many of those same practitioners lacked *empathic attunement* and *empathic capacity* for NC CC students as well as their NC CC peers. For reference, I have summarized each below:

- *Empathic attunement* is an individual’s inherent ability to resonate with another person’s mental and emotional state of being, and the ability to associate an appropriate level of understanding and reaction to another person’s pain and/or trauma. *Empathic attunement* also involves an individual’s ability to interact effectively with the person experiencing the pain/trauma, regardless of if the individual has experienced identical pain/trauma, or not. Additionally, *empathic attunement* requires an individual to have a working knowledge of trauma, how trauma impacts other people, and an understanding that trauma presents uniquely in individuals based on past experiences, identities, and cultures.
- *Empathic capacity* is generally considered one’s “aptitude” for empathic attunement. An individual can be considered to exhibit *empathic capacity* if said

individual successfully demonstrates *empathic attunement*. Much like *empathic attunement*, *empathic capacity* is dependent on the individual's identities, cultures, and lived experiences. In other words, if an individual's identities, cultures, and experiences did not exhibit, teach, or demonstrate empathy towards certain populations, the individual exhibiting empathy towards the same populations would be highly unlikely (Bailey, 2022; Depow, et al., 2021; Stevens & Taber, 2021; Surma-Aho & Holttä, 2022; Wilson, 2004; Yu, et al., 2022).

I believe my own empathic attunement was forged through my trauma, and sharpened the more I learned regarding equity and cultural responsiveness throughout my adulthood. I strongly believe that many of the relationships I was able to build with NC CC students were rooted in our ability to mutually understand the other's trauma and experiences.

While I am not arguing that a NC CC agent must have endured high levels of trauma like myself in order to be empathic towards students, I am strongly arguing that an NC CC agent's ability to relate to the pain and traumas of our students, our peers, and our community cannot be overemphasized. In my estimation and based on the research I have encountered, it is reasonable to assume that if NC CCs were currently successful empathic attunement and genuinely possessed empathic capacity for all student populations, Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 success metrics would positively reflect significant closure of equity gaps and success disparities - and they currently do not (NCCCS Dashboards, 2024). More of my experiences related to NC CC agent non-empathic behavior is discussed in Chapter 4.

I know what assimilation into non-trauma-informed, non-culturally responsive, non-empathic spaces feels like: isolating, painful, frustrating, and at times infuriating. The expectation of my NC CC leaders (especially white, and white male leaders) was typically one of

demurity, acquiescence, and non-confrontation. Because I know firsthand the negative impacts of having my expertise questioned, my personal life judged, and my equity initiatives mocked resulting in the perception of me by NC CC leaders as “combative” for questioning their leadership, their presentation of student success data, and the policies and procedures they endorsed that harmed students. Implications regarding my own empathic attunement and the empathic attunement of NC CC agents with whom I interacted is explored more in Chapters 4 and 5.

Eurocentrism, US White Preference, and Impacts on HE

Eurocentric culture is defined in the literature as culture in which those of European ancestry are positioned as the superior, historically, in such disciplines as the arts, sciences, history, economics, socio-economic development, and military conquest (Amin, 1989, Lambropoulos, 2019). More abstractedly, Eurocentrism is also defined in modern scholarship as:

“[A]n attitude, conceptual apparatus, or set of empirical beliefs that frame Europe as the primary engine and architect of world history, the bearer of universal values and reason, and the pinnacle and therefore model of progress and development. In Eurocentric narratives, the superiority of Europe is evident in its achievements in economic and political systems, technologies, and the high quality of life enjoyed by its societies.

Eurocentrism is more than banal ethnocentric prejudice, however, as it is intimately tied to and indeed constituted in the violence and asymmetry of colonial and imperial encounters. Eurocentrism is what makes this violence not only possible, but also acceptable or justifiable. (Sundberg, 2009)

Eurocentric culture emerged from the era of feudalism, and was significantly informed by the rise of Christianity (Amin, 1989; Lambropoulos, 2019). This historical development led to

the establishment of power structures and systems heavily dominated by Christian, white male, land-owning nobility (Kincheloe et al., 1998). Structures of power, including educational systems, were consequently designed to favor individuals who embodied characteristics such as whiteness, maleness, affluence, literacy, Christianity, and heterosexuality (Amin, 1989; Lambropoulos, 2019).

Within the context of HE teaching and learning, Eurocentrism equates a student's perceived "normalcy" and "acceptability" with identity and cultural characteristics traditionally valued by whites (Alvares & Faruqi, 2014, Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2019). Consequently, a student's perceived "worth" within Eurocentric educational systems, including US HE systems, becomes contingent upon that student's ability to exhibit historically white characteristics or else risk becoming (more) marginalized. Elements of whiteness, including concepts of orderliness, rigidity and routine, intelligence, lifestyle, affluence, and power often serve as the preferred underlying ideologies of many HE faculty members whether conscious or subconscious (Cabreera, 2014, 2020; Lomotey & Smith, 2023; Mcnair et al., 2020).

In US HE, Eurocentric white preference shows up in a myriad of ways - convoluted admissions processes, lack of targeted support for student populations lacking white preference characteristics, predominantly white faculty and institutional leadership, white preference grading policies, and white preference tone, diction, and syntax in written and verbal communications (Ashwin, 2019; Bonnema et al., 2008; Bridges, 2006; Cupples, 2018; Joseph & Searle-Chatterjee, 1990; Lal, 2012; Law, 2007; O'Neil, 1974; Renner, 1998; Sandalow, 1975; Scott, 2021; Sears et al., 2004; Starck et al., 2021; Stewart, 2022; Swail, 2003; Tartar et al., 2023; Wise, 2012). Additionally, white preference in US HE significantly impacts the content and instructional choices of faculty, which tend to prefer "normative discourses" and class

discussions, course content, and assignment guidelines which “socialize students and teachers to accept and validate particular ways of knowing and being” (Kinechole et al., 1998, p. 35).

As an example of white preference in NC CC policy, consider a NC CC attendance policy, located in the institution’s [2016-2017 student handbook](#) (CCCC, 2016). Students are marked absent if a student is not present at the time attendance is taken, or marked tardy if the student arrives within a specified amount of time after class begins. Additionally, consider that at least four (4) policy bullet points leave final decisions regarding attendance and absences “to the discretion of the instructor” (p. 21).

Though I have experienced NC CC leaders propose attendance policies help protect funding more than are punitive against students, my experience and direction from departmental colleagues was very different. At NC CC Inst3, for example, I was personally instructed by both my departmental colleagues (all white) and a white male department leader to use the add/drop policy at a semester’s beginning as a way to “thin” my rosters, especially from “repeater” students taking the course for a second or more time. Additionally, several faculty found humor in how they refused entry to students arriving late to class, how those students “should have prepared better,” “left the house earlier,” with one instructor stating that a female student who was a single mother “should have made better life choices”, and that the student’s inability to come to campus for class was “her own fault”.

Related to an institution’s attendance policy, NC CC policy also grants substantial (and often unsupervised) discretion for NC CC faculty to drop a student from a course due to excessive tardiness and/or absences. CCCC’s attendance policy from above states explicitly four (4) times that exceptions to the attendance policy can be made, but only “at the instructor’s discretion”. Other similar phrasing within the attendance policy involves a student gaining the

“approval” of a CCCC agent in order to remain enrolled in a particular course. Given that white preference is embedded in HE policy and procedures, and given that the majority of NC CC full-time faculty are white, the probabilities of instructors being given unilateral authority to determine if a student’s circumstances are “bad enough” to warrant exception, is particularly insidious.

White preference within our NC CC institutions and system is complex to identify, isolate, and dismantle. I have observed instances where white NC CC faculty explain their decisions regarding assignment guidelines, grading, attendance, participation as exemplary, even as those same decisions consistently and adversely affected student learning and academic progression. While well-meaning for the most part, I believe most NC CC faculty and leaders do not understand the extent to which white preference is embedded in their decision-making processes, nor the extent to which white preference ideology negatively impacts students. My experiences regarding interactions with NC CC faculty related to white preference is discussed more in Chapter 4.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

Culture and Learning: Knowledge Management and Oppressive Systems

Culture, as previously defined within this dissertation, simultaneously defines and limits the transference of knowledge and information, operating as a kind of conduit between a society’s gatekeepers of knowledge, and the pursuers of that knowledge (Alrawi et al., 2011; Khan & Khan, 2015). This often occurs in an unequal and inequitable exchange between said gatekeeper and pursuer (Alrawi et al., 2011; Khan & Khan, 2015).

A large part of a particular culture remaining dominant is related to a concept called knowledge management. Knowledge management (KM) involves how an institution or system

manages the knowledge it disseminates to both its agents and its users (De Long & Fahey, 2000). Knowledge management (KM) within an institution or organization is directly influenced by culture in four key ways (emphasis added):

- Culture shapes the assignment of value to certain knowledge, and furthermore *what knowledge is worth disseminating* to agents and users
- Cultural identities influence *how individuals interact with institutional knowledge* especially when establishing power dynamics of who are the knowledge holders (also identified in the literature as “knowledge hoarders”; this would be NC CC faculty members for this dissertation) and the knowledge receivers (in the NCCCS’ case, our students)
- Culture affects communication between agents and users, and *how effective that communication exchange is* determines whether the user understands how to use the knowledge given by an institutional agent
- Finally, culture shapes knowledge processes, meaning culture affects *what knowledge is created, validated, and distributed* within the institution in multidirectional ways amongst agents and users (De Long & Fahey 2000).

If culture is understood as a deeply ingrained system of beliefs, values, and behaviors that shape how individuals perceive and interact with the world, then it is undeniably influential in the processes of knowledge acquisition, creation, and transfer within systems and organizations, a concept known as “knowledge conversion” (Rai, 2011). While KM is not a primary conceptual framework within this dissertation, the research area of KM is a lens through which I see culture and learning as inextricably connected.

Restructuring HE to be more equitable for students and institutional agents requires a deep understanding of culture, and consequently how culture affects learning between faculty and students. Connectively, many educational theorists assert that the primary purpose of any education system is to teach learners methods out of oppressive societal systems, not reinforce the oppression (Davis, 2016; Dewey, 1916; Finn, 1994; Finn, 1999; Freire, 1968; Gay, 2000; Hooks, 1994).

Consider how culture and learning's bidirectional relationship would be impacted if the culture impacting the learning was inherently discriminatory. If personal identities are formed by one's environmental cultures, and if environmental cultures are informed by the societies in which those cultures are created and exist - then an inherently and systemically oppressive system's ability to assign value to individual identities is determined by the proximity of those identities and their characteristics to those most aligned with the system's oppressors.

In a teaching and learning context, the more a student aligns with the values upheld by a NC CC and its agents, the more social power that student gains within that system, even if this power is often illusory. Consequently, if a student identifies in a manner contrary to the system's oppressive values, they may face one of two outcomes: either they are pressured to adopt the oppressor's traits, leading to potential psychological and emotional distress; or they face additional oppression from institutional agents in efforts to eliminate the student's characteristics that deviate from the system's preferred values. In a classroom setting, this can result in faculty making decisions that negatively impact a student's academic progression, based on embedded white preference ideology which diminishes non-white characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes.

A Brief History of Cultural Responsiveness in US Systems

While pinpointing the exact moment cultural responsiveness emerged as a theoretical framework is challenging, I will begin with the concept of “cultural competency”, which I first discovered in the literature in relation to addressing patient care disparities in the US healthcare system (Cross, 1989).

Cultural competency emerged as an imperative initiative emphasizing a need for proactive measures to enhance patient outcomes, particularly within diverse patient populations (Cross, 1989). According to cultural competency, a culturally competent system of care includes “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or amongst professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (Cross, 1989, p. 7). Cultural competency as a field of study set itself apart from diversity and multiculturalism literature at the time through its inclusion of “competency” within the conversation of diversification of practice in order to best meet patient/user needs.

Simultaneous with cultural competency’s emergence, a deluge of new critical terms and concepts related to the understanding of culture’s impacts on societal systems multiplied exponentially to include Cultural Destructiveness, Cultural Incapacity, Cultural Blindness, Cultural Pre-Competence, and Cultural Proficiency (Cross, 1989).

Regardless of system application, a culturally competent system is consistently described in the literature as one which 1) values diversity 2) has the capacity for cultural self-assessment, 3) is conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact 4) has institutionalized cultural knowledge, and 5) has developed adaptations to diversity. Consider the experiences NC CC students encounter if the five elements of a culturally competent system are missing from NC CC

classrooms. Furthermore, consider white preference's limitation of cultural competency, when applied to NC CC teaching and learning policies and practices.

The Rise of Cultural Responsiveness in Education

Following the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s and 60s, US educational policies were increasingly scrutinized for equity practices (Crenshaw, et al., 1995). Subsequently, over the following decades, pedagogical approaches aimed at closing achievement gaps among marginalized student populations began including more multicultural and diversity-positive curriculum selection and instructional delivery (Banks, 1993; Davis, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dewey, 1916; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tatum, 1997; Vellegas & Lucas, 2002).

Among the emerging literature regarding equity practices in education, the most relevant to my development as a CRT educator is the work of Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, and her educational framework of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1994, 1995, 1997, 2006, 2007). Dr. Ladson-Billings differentiated culturally relevant pedagogy from previous equity-in-education approaches because of her added "cultural relevancy" component, which emphasizes course content, instructional delivery and modalities must be relevant to a student's cultural backgrounds in order for lasting learning to occur (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2007). Dr. Ladson-Billings stresses that diversity in education goes beyond mere representation of a student's cultural identities in a classroom environment, and must necessarily include recognition by the teacher of those student's cultures as *valid*.

Before discovering Dr. Ladson-Billings' concept of cultural relevancy, however, my development as a CRT instructor was significantly influenced by two (2) equity in education texts encountered during my time in my Master's program at the University of North Carolina at

Pembroke (UNCP): Patrick Finn's work *Literacy with an Attitude* (1999), and *ways with words: language, life, and work in communities and classrooms* (1983) by Shirley Brice Heath.

Finn(1999) asserts, in part, that a student's ability to learn (and thus the ability of a teacher to effectively teach that student) is heavily influenced by societal culture . This includes how society influences the student, and how society influences the instructor, and how the subsequent exchange between student and teacher are further influenced by both parties' ability to recognize and validate the cultures of the other.

Dividing US social class into four categories, Finn proposes that the predominant student population in US public schools are from the working class. Finn assigns a cultural identity word to each social class which he asserts encapsulates the central identity of each class' members. The cultural identity word for the working class including, marginalized and underrepresented populations, was "rebellion". Inspired by Finn's work, I began to view my students' rebellion against traditional and white-preference-informed education as what I now believe it was - rebellion against white preference and its oppressive practices that impeded their liberation from the oppressive systems in which they found themselves.

In a similar way, Heath's (1983) *ways with words* significantly shifted my understanding of the potential negative effects of a white teacher teaching non-white students . Growing up, I knew blacks and whites displayed different ways of speaking, and that when black peers talked like me, they were often chastised for "talking white". I took the phrase "talking white" as an accusation, something not to be desired; however, I excelled in my language arts classes because of my training in Eurocentric expectations for writing and written responses.

Furthermore, I did not understand as a small child that every time a teacher instructed us to write in "formal", "professional" language, they meant "white" communication structure,

organization of content, and language usage. Under white cultural belief, for a student not to speak in Standard American English (labeled by many teachers as “professional” English) is to exhibit unprofessionalism and an inferior education. Without intentionality, I assigned these negative personality traits to my students whose vernaculars varied from Standard American English, and thus perpetuated white preference and increased student barriers to course completion.

In *ways with words*, Heath (1983) studies the literacy development of two working-class communities, one predominantly white and the other predominantly black, both communities situated within the same public school district. What she discovered, in part, is that white families begin teaching their children prescribed writing such as letter writing and paragraph structure including topic sentence and support detail sentences; this eventually resulted in an academic advantage once the white children started elementary school. The black community’s children, in contrast, were much more engaging givers of information both verbally and in their writings, and excelled beyond their white peers with providing supporting detail and comprehensive narrative structure; but because these demonstrations of literacy are not as valued in Eurocentric-modeled schools, black children are often identified as “behind” academically, or intellectually deficient.

Finn and Heath, among other such equity-in-teaching experts such as Jonathon Kozol, Mike Rose, Sherman Alexie, Eleanor Kutz, Dr. Ruby Payne, I began to understand how white system preference set non-white and other marginalized students up to fail. I began to understand that in order to differentiate my classroom instruction to validate non-white student cultures, I would need to understand how white preference affected the educational institutions where I worked.

CRT: Origins and Theory

CRT's founding researcher Dr. Geneva Gay (2013) asserts that institutions considering CRT implementation must first embody institutional culture that understands three (3) core propositions in relation to teaching underrepresented students:

- 1) The need for *faculty to create opportunities for the success* of underrepresented student populations
- 2) The need to *develop and maintain cultural competency* regarding underrepresented student populations' lived experiences
- 3) The need for faculty and underrepresented student populations to *learn in tandem how to effectively challenge societal stereotypes* regarding underrepresented student populations and their academic abilities (Gay, 2013, italics added)

In other words, a CRT institution embodies a culture where faculty view creating success opportunities as integral to their role as a teacher; where underrepresented student populations and their cultures are explored, and their lived experiences are validated both by teachers and the institution itself; and where faculty and students learn in conjunction with one another, exchanging cultural information simultaneous to teaching and learning. Without these three (3) core propositions of CRT accepted *prior* to CRT implementation, the CRT implementation will inevitably fail (Gay, 2000, 2013).

Existing under various monikers such as culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally responsive practices, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a theoretical framework for improving the effectiveness of instruction and retention, specifically for minority and culturally diverse students (Boykin, 1982, 1986, 1994; Boykin, A. W. et al., 2005; Delpit, 2006; Gay 1975, 2002, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2018; Ladson-Billings 1994). CRT “filters curriculum content and

teaching strategies through [students] cultural frames of reference to make the content more personally meaningful and easier to master” (Gay, 2010, p. 26).

According to Dr. Gay, CRT “teaches *to and through* the strengths of these students” and is “culturally *validating and affirming*” of student cultures (Gay, 2000, p. 29). Specifically, Dr. Gay outlines six (6) essential qualities that a CRT educator should possess:

- 1) A CRT educator acknowledges all cultural heritages of their students and educates themselves on how cultural legacies “affect students’ dispositions, attitudes and approaches to learning” (Gay, 2000, p. 29-30). The impact of these cultural legacies on students and are valid to discuss and acknowledge within the classroom. Furthermore, the home/personal lives of students are likewise considered valid, and valid to discuss in instructional settings.
- 2) A CRT educator understands they are teaching a holistic person complete with emotionalities, ideological positionalities, and who live in communities that affect their ability to learn (Gay, 2000, p. 30-31). Furthermore, the CRT educator understands that the classroom is its own community, and that students exchange cultural knowledge alongside instructional knowledge being disseminated.
- 3) A CRT educator utilizes “multidimensional” approaches to teaching and learning (Gay, 2000, p. 31). Multidimensional teaching approaches include such practices as the CRT reflecting on “curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments” (Gay, 2000, p. 31). To this end, “[e]motions, beliefs, values, ethos, opinions are scrutinized along with factual information to make curriculum and instruction more reflective of and responsive” (Gay, 2000, p. 31-32).

- 4) A CRT is “empowering”, requiring the implementation of scaffolded student supports that include classroom practices such as collaborative learning, learning test-taking strategies prior to assessment, student-to-student mentoring, and content inclusion that is reflective of student cultures present in a particular course (Gay, 2000, p. 32-33). A CRT educator’s capacity for student empowerment also requires positioning of each student as the “primary source” of individual learning, giving ownership over one’s learning while offering supports for limited skill set areas (Gay, 2000, 33).
- 5) A CRT educator understands the primary purpose of education to be learning to “analyze the effects of inequities on different ethnic individuals and groups, have zero tolerance for these, and [to] become change agents committed to promoting greater equality, justice, and power balances” (Gay, 2000, p. 34). Furthermore, a CRT educator exhibits and models these social justice behaviors with their students, creating a reciprocal experience of equity practice reinforcement that ultimately is aimed towards an understanding of individual liberation from oppressive systems (Gay, 2000, p. 34).
- 6) A CRT educator understands education as “liberation”, and strives to “mak[e] authentic knowledge” regarding systems, society, and their inherent discriminations, accessible to all student populations (Gay, 2000, p. 35). As Gay states, “culturally responsive pedagogy lifts the veil of presumed absolute authority from conceptions of scholarly truth typically taught in schools. It helps students realize that no single version of ‘truth’ is total and permanent. Nor should it be allowed to exist uncontested” (Gay, 2000, p. 35). Faculty, as part of the greater US culture of white preference, are not immune to internalizing false beliefs about the abilities of minority populations, specifically how they are destined to underperform (Nieto, 2004). I would propose that in order for CRT to be effectively

incorporated into NCCC teaching and learning practices, faculty must first acknowledge internalized bias regarding minority student populations and their perceived abilities (Grant & Asimeng–Boahene, 2006), as well as familiarize themselves and create programming around the six (6) CRT educator qualities listed above.

A key element of CRT instruction is student engagement (Gay, 2000), and the ability of the CRT educator to create and sustain said engagement throughout a course's duration. Culturally-informative pedagogy, when intentionally integrated into HE curriculum courses, contributes to the active inclusion and engagement of underrepresented student populations, and improves overall success rates, regardless of cultural identification (Delpit 2006; Gay, 2000, 2010, 2011; Hammond, 2015; Kailin, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995; Larke 2009, 2010, 2013; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003).

Student motivation research that states a student's academic motivation likely rests within that student's personal value system as shaped by their community's culture (Tomal, 2007). Additionally, the majority of students are not organically suited to test-oriented instruction, responding more readily to instructional strategies aimed at capturing initial understanding of a student's cognitive abilities and learning preferences, and paralleled with clear assignment expectations, expectations for course completion, and clear instructions regarding academic progression and credit achievement (Zhang, 1999). Lower success rates across HE for minority and ethnically diverse students has been found to originate from a fundamental divide between home and school cultures (Phalet et al., 2004).

Researchers L. Rychly and E. Graves (2012) states, "If it is true that diverse students are not achieving because of cultural differences in the ways they learn best and the ways they are taught, then it follows that higher and higher percentages of students in the United States will

continue to underachieve” (p. 44). When summarizing CRT for the purposes of their study, Rychly and Graves state, “[s]tudents learn best when they are engaged in their environments and with the information to be learned”, and proposed for students to feel “validated as members of the learning community” (p. 44). If educators are not actively versing themselves in societal, political, community, and institutional cultures, it stands to reason their ability to engage diverse student populations would be limited. Consequently, students who are not engaged through the diverse cultural knowledge of their instructors face potential barriers to academic progression.

Effective Integration of CRT in HE: Current Literature and Framework for Data Analysis

CRT’s successful integration depends significantly on a CRT instructor’s ability to be self-reflective regarding culture and how culture affects student learning. Connectively, the CRT educator must also be keenly aware and engage positively in building empathic classroom and learning environments for students which in turn increase engagement and student sense of belonging (Brown 2004; Hollie 2017; Kozleski, 2010). However, though CRT has seen significant positive results in PK-12 education (Griner & Stewart, 2013; Hollie, 2017; Hollins & Oliver, 1999), its presence in HE literature is limited in scope and saturation.

The researcher Dr. Sharroky Hollie (2017), when writing about culturally responsive strategies for PK-12 institutions, emphasizes five (5) key questions for a CRT to ask recursively of their classroom practices:

- 1) Is my classroom management culturally responsive?
- 2) Is my vocabulary instruction culturally responsive?
- 3) Is my academic literacy instruction culturally responsive?
- 4) Is my academic language instruction culturally responsive?
- 5) Is my learning environment culturally responsive?

Hollie (2017) emphasized that any individual, classroom, or institutional application of CRT must begin with reflection of the educator's own cultures, biases, and identities, and only then can the questions above prove constructive for institutional CRT teaching and learning improvements. Hollie further states that in order for CRT to be effectively implemented, the CRT-focused educator must recognize that their personal knowledge sets must include the history, lived experiences, and societal influences of their students (Hollie, 2017, p. 10).

Current CRT research focuses much more robustly on PK-12 educational institutional outcomes and students; however CRT research in HE has likewise demonstrated significant positive correlations of CRT implementation with of increased student success rates (Luginbuhl, 2011; Gay, 2013; Larke, 2013; Lucey and White, 2017, Massar, 2022). A review of current CRT literature indicates an increased scholarly interest in CRT at the HE level (Ebersole et al., 2016; Heitner & Jennings, 2016; Hutchinson & McAlister-Shields, 2020; Smith & Ayers, 2006); however, research specifically studying CRT's implementation in CC institutions is sparsely found.

CRT literature at the CC level tends to focus solely on African American or Black student populations (Harris & Wood, 2013; Howard, 2021; Howard & Terry, 2011; Smith-Maddox, 1998), with gaps in the literature concerning other marginalized population groups. Individual research studies were found examining US Native American, Mexican, queer, and special education CC student populations (Belgarde et al., 2002; Brockenbrough, 2016; Castro & Cortez, 2017), but with limited generability to specific CC institutions overall.

Dr. Patricia Larke (2013) created a framework for developing effective HE CRT courses, and is in my expertise a framework NC CC leaders can adopt to create more culturally responsive learning environments in their respective institutions:

- 1) Firstly, faculty must become aware of and develop a knowledge base concerning diversity issues including societal history and institutional biases.
- 2) Faculty must develop a depthful understanding of multicultural issues in the communities they teach, and likewise a depthful understanding of how to implement multicultural education strategies.
- 3) Instructional courses must be developed and/or revised through culturally competent and culturally responsive lenses to include the development and revision of syllabi, lectures, and required readings.
- 4) Instructional lessons should be student-centric, designed around the student cultures present in the classroom, and revised per course.
- 5) Instructional lessons should focus on student engagement, based on the student cultures, learning styles, and communication styles of each separate course taught.
- 6) Finally, CRT implementation relies heavily on recursive evaluation of the instructor both through structured reflective practices as well as departmental oversight and support.

Dr. Larke's (2013) framework, for the purposes of my data collection and analysis in Chapters 4 and 5, assisted me in identifying areas in my own CRT practice that did not align with effective CRT implementation. I also revisited Dr. Larke's framework in Chapter 5 for the purposes of developing initial implications and recommendations for NC CCs regarding CRT implementation.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

1. Introduction
2. Justification of Autoethnography as Methodology
3. Autoethnographic Research Design
4. Autoethnography Conventions
5. Application of Identity Lens to Personal Narrative
6. Personal Narrative Drafting Approach: Critical Autoethnography
7. Data Collection
8. Reflexivity
9. Data Analysis
10. Trustworthiness and Validity of Data

Introduction

The purpose of this critical autoethnographic research study is to better understand the resistance to CRT I experienced as a faculty member in NC CC Inst1, Inst 2, Inst 3, and Inst4. I collected autoethnographic personal narrative data to answer the following research questions from Chapter 1:

- 1) How, if at all, have my experiences as white identifying and as a trauma survivor impacted me as a CRT instructor in NC CC classrooms? (individual culture analysis)?
- 2) How can my insights and lessons learned from implementing CRT in NC CC classrooms inform NC CC teacher preparation and professional development? (classroom culture analysis)?

- 3) How can insights and lessons learned from my lived experience inform NCCCS leaders to effectively implement CRT institutionally? (organizational culture analysis)?

Additionally, this research study seeks to achieve three (3) main purposes:

- Purpose 1: to help NC CC faculty and leaders better understand the influence of America's dominant white culture and white preference on student learning.
- Purpose 2: to help NC CC faculty and leaders better understand the benefits of effectively implementing CRT as a college-wide *pedagogical* approach, by describing and analyzing my personal experience within the NCCC attempting to implement CRT.
- Purpose 3: to share CRT implementation strategies and best practices, focus on "10 Ways to Improve CRT Implementation in NC CCs", and propose suggested methodology on how community colleges can improve teaching and learning.

As proposed in Chapter 2 faculty and leaders must understand how *culture* affects teaching and learning, and most importantly how white preference culture negatively impacts student learning and progression in the form of *non-empathy culture*. As discussed in Chapter 2, the literature clearly indicates adverse impacts of white preference and residual white supremacist ideology on marginalized populations. Critical autoethnography will allow me to explore my experiences as a white faculty member in NC CCs, specifically in relation to CRT's primary tenet of engaging in empathic teaching and learning practices.

What will follow in this chapter is an explanation of my selected research process through autoethnography including a discussion of overall autoethnographic research design, - autoethnographic assumptions when researching, how my own personal identity lenses of white-identifying and identification as a trauma survivor will be applied to data collection and analysis, the methodology of data collection and data analysis, reflexivity strategies to be used,

and finally a discussion of how I anticipate assessing trustworthiness and validity of the data collected.

Justification of Autoethnography as Methodology

As a lifelong writer and journaler, I view writing as an essential tool both for artistic and personal expression, but also as a therapeutic outlet for trauma. Writing to me has always been a working space for exploration, a safe space for expression where the convolution of my thoughts become materialized and organized through text. Similarly, autoethnographers tend to view “active writing as a way to clarify and make sense of human experience” (Poulos, 2021, p. 31). In this way, Poulos asserts that “[a]utoethnography is a particularly salient approach for attempting to understand the rich but messy emotional-social lives of members of human communities, including the researcher her or himself”. Additionally, because autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology, the researcher necessarily becomes the primary data collection instrument and the primary interpreter of the data collected (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Autoethnography can also be viewed as necessarily political, as autoethnography seeks to understand the complexities of environments, institutions, and systems that individuals find themselves within. Dr. Stacy Jones identifies autoethnography as “radical” and interacts with the “politics committed to creating space for dialogue and debate that instigates and shapes social change” (Jones, 2005, p. 763). Autoethnography, then, is both radical and necessarily political as a means for “creating space for dialogue and debate that instigates and shapes social change” (Reinelt, 1998, p. 286, quoted in Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Autoethnography is still considered by many in the research community to be lacking in efficacy and validation; yet Jones (2005) asserts that in conjunction with autoethnography’s

capacity for radical insights is the belief that autoethnography “does not speak alone” but rather “is meant for more than one voice, for more than personal release and discovery” (p. 764).

Autoethnography, then, “is meant for public display, for an audience”, and through its strategically crafted narratives invites readers to compare their own experiences to those revealed in the researched environments, as well as comparatively to the researcher’s personal experiences.

Jones (2005) emphasizes that autoethnographies operate as “ensemble” texts, textual tapestries made using the personal experiences of the researcher as the primary data source. However, Jones equally emphasizes autoethnographies dependency on the participation of the research audience by requiring the audience to consider the autoethnographic content within their own context of knowledge, understanding, and personal experiences. For the autoethnographer, context and the connection of universal experience are key, which necessitates reflexive questions of “why” and/or “how” a phenomenon came to be, or the why and/or how of why a phenomenon appears to be persisting. Autoethnography does not seek to elevate one researcher’s experiences over another’s in studied environments, but rather to offer personal narrative experience(s) through which connections between researcher and audience members can be made (Antonio et al., 2006; Chang, 2016; Poulos, 2021).

When I began my employment in NC CCs as a CRT-focused instructor, it was under the following assumptions:

- 1) NC CC Humanities and Developmental Instruction colleagues held master’s degrees, specifically in English Education from accredited university teaching preparation programs.

- 2) NC CC faculty colleagues held teaching certifications from the NC Department of Public Instruction or equivalent certifications in pedagogy, curriculum development, and instructional practices.
- 3) Faculty colleagues and leaders shared my belief in the power of CRT to increase student success specifically for our marginalized student populations and would be open to integrating CRT into their classroom and advising practices.

However, throughout my employment I felt constantly, professionally torn between the CRT pedagogy I knew to be effective and the reality of the departments I served within. I began to observe how colleagues with only subject matter credentials/expertise, also considered themselves pedagogical experts. I began to observe how colleagues felt adequately prepared to teach in the NC CC classroom, especially in the critical areas of gateway English, even as they did not understand the white preference seemingly embedded within their syllabi, their course content, and their instructional practices. I also experienced direct and at times hostile resistance from NC CC agents and leaders when speaking out against departmental and classroom practices that did not align with CRT nor equity initiatives.

After conducting a search of the NCSU dissertation database with the help of NCSU's library staff, I discovered no NC CC instructor has completed an autoethnography dissertation research study of their experiences teaching within the NCCCS. Additionally, neither NCSU nor my specific program of Community College Leadership has published a dissertation on the effects and/or impact of CRT in NC CC classrooms. Of the 548 dissertations published since 2007 dealing with community colleges or the NCCCS, only two dissertations researched CRT's application in a classroom setting, both of which were focused on PK-12 education and not HE (Bartley, 2007; McCollum, 2023). Finally, of the 62 NCSU dissertations published since 2007

focusing on White preference and/or white supremacy, only 5 dissertations focused on curriculum and instruction, with zero (0) focused on white preference within the NCCCS, nor the impact of white preference within NC CC classrooms (NCSU Dissertation Database, Accessed 2024).

I believe that my faculty experiences within NC CCs will contribute positively to the literature involving CRT's implementation in HE, and most specifically as hopefully the first research study of many, many to come documenting the experiences of NCCCS faculty and how those experiences relate to successful teaching and learning. I feel uniquely qualified and positioned to utilize autoethnography as a research methodology because of my observations and experiences regarding resistance to CRT's implementation within several NC CCs, even as the primary CRT-educated instructor in NCCCS Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4.

What will follow in this chapter is a discussion of my anticipated autoethnographic research design, a discussion of autoethnographic assumptions when researching, a discussion of how my own personal identity lenses of white-identifying and identification as a trauma survivor will be applied to data collection and analysis, the methodology of data collection and data analysis, reflexivity strategies to be used, and finally a discussion of how I anticipate assessing trustworthiness and validity of the data collected.

Autoethnographic Research Design

As fellow NCSU autoethnographer Dr. Tammy Bird states in her 2012 autoethnographic study focusing on her experiences as the mother of an incarcerated son, “[t]his study will not be about quantity or numerical descriptions. It is about exploring a situation in a particular context as it works to create a voice for a marginalized [person]” (p. 84). Autoethnography assumes the validity of the researcher's experiences as unique, and thus the reader's role is not to make

determinations of validity regarding the researcher's shared experiences, but rather to examine how the researcher's experiences with a given phenomenon interact with those of the reader (Poulos, 2021). Autoethnography seeks to create conversation and connection, especially surrounding complex and/or uncomfortable experiences, and strives to focus on lifting up marginalized voices. In this way, autoethnography seeks to make sense of a research environment through the lens of the researcher's own experiences, especially of marginalization (Chang 2008, 2016; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1997).

Autoethnography is further defined in the literature as contextualizing the lived experiences of the researcher with environmental context, and larger social systems (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021; Chang, 2008, 2016; Clarke, 2005; Creswell, 1998; Denzin, 1997; Poulos, 2021). Autoethnography necessitates the researcher to seek *context, context, context*. The autoethnographer is a private investigator of sorts, but of one's own psyche and being; asking such questions as "why do environments produce the results they do", "what environmental or systemic factors influence my behavior", and "how do I assign value and interpret meaning in relation to the phenomenon being studied"?

Creswell (2003, 2007) describes a *phenomenon* as a core idea or concept that has been personally encountered by the participants of a research study. As previously stated, the phenomenon being studied within this autoethnography is the resistance to CRT implementation that I have experienced within NC CC Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, Inst4. This will necessitate me as the autoethnographer to consider the context within which I experienced resistance to CRT implementation to include (but may not be limited to) my NC CC classrooms, NC CC department spaces, professional development environments, and environments where I interacted with NCCCS students, faculty, and leaders. Because NC CCs are historic institutions of

discrimination against marginalized populations, and because the majority of faculty and leaders are white identifying, and because I experienced white preference resulting in trauma not only in the NC CCs in which I served, but also in my own life experiences, I will include topics of white preference and trauma in my Chapter 4 personal narratives as I attempt to answer my research questions.

I believe that being raised in a white supremacist home, working in predominantly white dominated professional spaces, and working within the NC CCs whose faculty are overwhelmingly white makes me an ideal candidate to speak from the white experience regarding white preference. To borrow the words of Dr. Lars Stoltzfus-Brown (year), also a white-identifying autoethnographer writing about white preference: “[I]t is imperative to introduce my familial history, discuss key experiences, and critically examine the hierarchies of power that operate to silence ... I am using critical autoethnography to trouble the placid surface of whiteness” (quoted in Boylorn & Orbe, 2021, p. 131).

I will pause here to note that one intention of autoethnography as a research design is to “open up spaces of resistance between the individual (auto-) and the collective (-ethno-) where the writing (-graphy) of resistance cannot be foreclosed” (Lionnet, 1990, p. 391). I interpret this to mean that autoethnography focuses on the experiences of an individual within the context of a larger group and/or institution or system and allows the researcher a space to express resistance to certain ideas/practices within their environments. However, autoethnography is not resistance for resistance’s sake. Autoethnography is not a manifesto or diatribe, but rather a methodology using personal experiences to better understand *culture*, and an individual’s relationship to that *culture* (Pelias, 2003, p. 372).

Through autoethnography, complex and deeply felt emotions evolve into “progressive political action, to theory and method that connect politics, pedagogy, and ethics to action in the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). In this way, autoethnography seeks to turn emotional experiences into narratives of action, with autoethnographic research contributing to the solutions of existing disparities, not simply drawing awareness to them. It is my goal that my research study provides not only a space for my own disentanglement of complex emotions as related to my experiences, but also to create pathways of relatability for other NCCCS agents and leaders.

To this end of using autoethnography as a methodology centered around social/organizational change, autoethnographers are tasked with asking five key *critical inquiries* of the environments and phenomena they are studying (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.10):

- 1) “How knowledge, experience, meaning, and resistance are expressed by embodied, tacit, intonational, gestural, improvisational, co-experiential, and covert means”
- 2) “How emotions are important to understanding and theorizing the relationship among self, power, and culture”
- 3) “How body and voice are inseparable from mind and thought as well as how bodies and voices move and are privileged”
- 4) “How selves are constructed, disclosed, and implicated in the telling of personal narratives as well as how these narratives move in and change the contexts of their telling”
- 5) “How stories help us to create, interpret, and change our social, cultural, political, and personal lives”

I will apply these *critical autoethnographic inquiries* to my own dissertation space by prewriting my personal narratives using the following heuristic prompts:

- 1) How was resistance to CRT implementation expressed by NC CC agents during my employment in the NCCCS, and how did those agents come to interpret value or non-value of CRT?
- 2) How are my own emotions regarding my experiences in NC CC classrooms, departments, and institutions important to understanding myself, the power dynamics of my classroom, department, and institution, as well as how does culture play a role for myself and those NCCCS agents I interacted with?
- 3) How, if at all, did trauma inform my interpretation of events and my interactions with other NC CC agents exhibiting resistance to CRT?
- 4) How have I personally viewed my role as a CRT educator, how did I construct that role within my life and classrooms, and what influences affected my evolution as a CRT educator?
- 5) How can my lived experiences as a CRT educator in the NCCCS help to inform positive change for students within NC CCs?

Autoethnography Conventions

According to rhetoric researcher James Moffett, up to 80% of the entire writing process for text creation is spent in the initial stage of prewriting (1989). One of the most influential researchers on the writing process I encountered in my master's program, Moffett proposes that inquiry writing involves "thinking over" and "thinking through" often in the form of recursive, repetitive personal narrative writing exercises (p. 3). In conjunction with the heuristics to be used for prewriting of the personal narratives, I also offer a list of autoethnography conventions as

further prewriting outlining to help me shape the direction of my personal narratives (Poulos, 2021, p. 62-63):

- 1) *Know your audience*: Who am I writing to? What experiences do my audience members bring to this dissertation space?
- 2) *Raise important questions and respond to them*: Am I asking the right questions of myself and my experiences in order to arrive at the most appropriate interpretations and conclusions? Are my responses sufficiently answering the questions I raise?
- 3) *Invite your readers into your world*: How can I write in a way that maintains the curiosity of the audience, as well as remains relatable?
- 4) *Craft vivid scenes*: How can I use figurative language and poetic devices and mechanics to “thicken” my descriptions, make them more engaging and provocative?
- 5) *Develop and deploy interesting characters*: Who are the main characters in my work? Who would I identify as protagonist and antagonist?
- 6) *Write compelling dialogue*: How do I ensure that communication exchanges are represented fairly and accurately, balanced with keeping the reader engaged?
- 7) *Build a sense of action*: How will I use active voice as well as plot line devices to keep the reader “in medias res”?
- 8) *Attend to the passage of time*: How will I show movement of story, especially between my personal story lines and my NC CC story lines?
- 9) *Evoke and invoke emotion*: How can I create a space where readers can identify with my emotions? How can I create a space for readers to navigate their own?

10) *Tie the story to theory*: How will I tie back my personal narrative experiences to CRT and its implementation in NC CCs?

11) *Write some sort of coda (analysis and interpretation)*: How will I interpret my findings once the personal narratives are written? What analysis will be best to use in a dissertation dealing with trauma and white preference?

12) *Write, edit, rewrite, and repeat*: What revision and editing strategies will I use to improve my narratives to be more concise and more effective for my target audience?

I will use these conventions to help gauge the alignment of my Chapter 4 personal narratives to autoethnography, as I navigate the recursive drafting stage.

Application of Identity Lens to Personal Narrative

Because I want to explore NC CC agent resistance to CRT implementation, and because I believe white preference embedded within NC CC institutions is leading to an overall culture of non-empathy towards especially marginalized student populations, I will narrow the scope of my data collection to be through three (3) primary identity lenses: my identification as a white individual, my identification as a complex-trauma survivor, and my identity as a NC CC CRT instructor.

By limiting the application of identity lenses, I as the researcher can better focus on how these two identities affected my perception of self as a CRT educator within NC CCs. For example, how does my identification as white, along with my upbringing in a white preference household by white supremacist parents, affect the pedagogical and instructional choices I made as a NC CC faculty member? Additionally, how does my identity as a complex-trauma survivor connect both with my pedagogical and instructional choices, but also how did it affect my

interactions with other NC CC agents and students? Finally, how was my identity as a NC CC CRT instructor impacted by both my white identity and my trauma identity?

Important to note regarding application of the autoethnographer's personal identities to data collection, additional identities may be touched upon in Chapter 4 that impact the interpretation of the data in Chapter 5. Maintaining the trustworthiness of the data, especially as other identities may or may impact data interpretation, will be discussed in more detail below.

Personal Narrative Drafting Approach: Critical Autoethnography

According to Poulos (2021, p. 74-79), and as informed by experts in autoethnography (Adams, 2011; Adams et al., 2016; Alexander, 2004, 2012; Boylorn & Orbe, 2016; Cloud & Faulkner, 2019; Cooper et al., 2017; Diversi & Moreiera, 2016; Dutta & Basu, 2013; Ettore, 2016; Faulkner, 2018; Fitzpatrick, 2018; Fox, 1996; Gale et al., 2012; Iosefo, 2014; Leavy, 2013, 2015; Pelias, 2004, 2011; Ronai, 1995; Scott, 2019; Spry, 2011; Weems, 2008), autoethnography narrative drafting can be divided into six main approaches: Layered Accounts Autoethnography, Critical Autoethnography, Performance Autoethnography, Poetic Inquiry Autoethnography, Autoethnography as Social Fiction, and Collaborative Autoethnography. Each autoethnographic writing approach is defined briefly below:

- Layered Accounts Autoethnography – researcher analyzes their various roles, positions, and/or identities in relation to the phenomenon in which each phenomenon is approached by multiple roles (Poulos, 2021, p. 68)
- Critical Autoethnography – “intensifies and directs the writing in a critical (rather than purely interpretive) direction to serve up a cultural critique of power, hegemony, hierarchy, and so on”, and “proceeds from an essentially democratic viewpoint that drives the work toward offering solutions to problems of

inequality; democratic participation; workplace, community, or institutional inequity” (p. 69).

- Performance Autoethnography - allows for alternate genres of narrative exploration such as fiction, poetry, stage performance, etc. through which the researcher can present their data collection findings in alternate forms than traditional dissertation final form.
- Poetic Inquiry Autoethnography - a more specific form of Performance Autoethnography, where researchers with backgrounds in poetry and poetic language usage integrate conventions and mechanics of poetry and poetic verse into the presentation of personal narratives (p. 70).
- Autoethnography as Social Fiction - a more specific form of Performance Autoethnography, where researchers create fictional texts reflecting actual lived experiences of the researcher while studying the phenomenon (p. 71).
- Collaborative Autoethnography - the uncommon but impactful method of combining autoethnographical accounts with other researchers studying similar phenomenon (Poulos, 2021)

I will be approaching my personal narratives using Critical Autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016; Holman Jones, 2016; Marx et al., 2017; Reed-Danahay, 2017; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016) because I believe it will allow me to successfully juxtapose personal narrative’s emotive, provocative, and vulnerable nature with societal, cultural, and institutional inequities within the four NCCCs as I experienced them. Critical Autoethnography necessitates an intense questioning of situational context for reasons the phenomenon may exist, including attempting to be acutely aware of “indigenous ways of knowing and creating knowledge” within a specific

research setting. Additionally, Critical Autoethnography primarily focuses on personal narratives and questioning of the status quo “to interrogate the structures of power and lay bare inequities suffered by marginalized communities” (Palmer, 2015).

I believe Critical Autoethnography provides the most salient approach to my research study for relaying lived experiences towards collective impact within NC CCs regarding CRT. Critical Autoethnography seeks to balance a researcher’s internal with their external, to start with self in order to enter and contribute to the collective. Critical Autoethnography encourages the researcher to analyze *culture* as the primary influence on environment, behavior, and actions (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021). In other words, phenomena do not behave in vacuums but rather are intensely impacted by *culture* at micro, meso, and macro levels (Thorton & Ocasio, 2008); and it is the goal of the critical autoethnographer to consistently consider *culture* while navigating personal experiences with the phenomenon. In fact, Critical Autoethnography necessitates “the stories of autoethnographers to be reflected upon, analyzed, and interpreted within their broader sociocultural context” (Chang, 2008, quoted in Boylorn & Orbe, 2021, p. 4).

Critical Autoethnography “require[s] researchers to acknowledge the inevitable privileges we experience alongside marginalization and to take responsibility for our subjective lenses through reflexivity” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021, p. 3). While I do not share marginalization through my white identification, I do share marginalization through my trauma as a woman, as a queer person, as a person of poverty, as a childhood abuse survivor, as a sexual assault survivor, and as a domestic violence survivor. This juxtaposition of my white privilege / white preference belief system with my marginalized identities is a key focus of exploration for me in this research study. To have lived the majority of my life under a white preference belief system, while experiencing extended trauma for my identities that did not ascribe to whiteness characteristics

discussed in Chapter 1, is a critical space for me to understand both as a researcher and as a white identifying individual.

Critical Autoethnography will allow me to explore the intersections between the resistance I experienced to CRT in NC CCs and my own experiences of white preference and privilege, namely through my own trauma. I anticipate exploring how my white identification both assisted and detracted from my development as an effective CRT instructor, as well as finding intersections of connection with NC CC agents and students through my own experiences of white preference trauma. To this end, Critical Autoethnography outlines three goals of a critical autoethnography research study (Holman Jones, 2018):

- 1) To examine systems, institutions, and discourses that privilege some people and marginalize others.
- 2) To mobilize and develop the explanatory frameworks that critical theory provides us, by putting theory into action through storytelling.
- 3) To build new knowledge about the social world in order to stimulate new practices.

I anticipate having the following Critical Autoethnography goals, more specified to my particular research study:

- 1) To examine NC CC Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 for resistance to CRT, specifically examining personal experiences that privileged some people and marginalized others including NC CC students, faculty, and leaders.
- 2) To use CRT's tenet of *empathic learning environments* as theory to discuss experiences within NC CCs, using personal narrative writing.

- 3) To contribute knowledge of CRT, as well as white preference's effects on CRT's implementation to NC CC agents as they work to improve teaching and learning practices for NC CC students.

Data Collection

For this research study, I examined two data sets. One data set is comprised of (3) personal narratives and the second data set included several external textual artifacts. Both data sets are discussed in more detail below.

First-person narrative is the core of autoethnographic research (Antonio et al., 2006; Chang, 2008, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, 2005; Poulos, 2021), and is considered self-reflective data. My experiences with NC CC Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 were between 2015 and 2020; however, I will also be pulling from my own experiences with CRT, as well as experiences of white preference and trauma that predated this time period of analysis. Narrative inquiry, or inquiring of one's thoughts, feelings, belief systems, and relationships to others through personal narrative writing, is an accepted qualitative data collection approach for critical autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2006), and I anticipate using conventional approaches to narrative development such as outlining events in chronological order, using descriptive detail and figurative language, using dialogue where appropriate, identifying themes, and conflict resolution.

For the purposes of this study, self-reflective data will be divided into two sub-categories: personal memory data and self-observation data. Personal memory data and self-observation data (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021; Chang, 2008; Poulos, 2021) both position the critical autoethnographer as the primary research study participant. How they differ is personal memory data includes an "inventorying" of self to include outlining the past within the context of one's emotions.

Self-observational data includes literal recollection of events, interactions, and environments, and requires the researcher to intentionally reflect both before and after data collection (in this case, before and after personal narratives are drafted) on the researcher's ability to report accurately and objectively.

Reflexivity

I used three (3) identity lenses to guide the drafting of personal narratives for my autoethnographic dataset. However, each identity lens was also analyzed for reflexivity to help maintain the integrity of my data.

Firstly, I am aware of the privileges and biases associated with my racial identity, and strived to be mindful of how my biases throughout the research process may have influenced my observations and interpretations within the dataset. I sought feedback from specifically non-white perspectives to help locate instances of unacknowledged white bias.

My personal experiences with trauma undoubtedly influenced my understanding of my experiences with NC CC students and colleagues. While my trauma fostered connections at Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4, it also created certain biases regarding the intent of students and other institutional agents, typically in the form of defensiveness. I attempted to be mindful when generating the data of other ways my trauma experiences may possibly have influenced how certain situations and interactions were portrayed.

My role as a NC CC CRT instructor shaped my understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing students and faculty in NC CC institutions. However, it may also have created biases, as I may have interpreted data in ways more supportive of my own beliefs and experiences. To mitigate this, I drafted narratives about my experiences with NC CC students and agents, considering both my own perspectives and theirs.

Data Analysis

Autoethnographic dissertations, because of their personal narrative inclusion and analysis, offer several potential approaches to data analysis: Thematic Analysis, Reflexive Analysis, Narrative Analysis, Dialogical Analysis, Symbolic Interactionism Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Comparative Analysis, Intersectionality Analysis, Photovoice Analysis, and Emotion Analysis (Antonio et al., 2006; Chang, 2016; Poulos, 2021). However, I am most interested in what themes emerge within my narratives as related to white preference and trauma, and therefore will be utilizing Thematic Analysis when reviewing my collected data.

Thematic Analysis is mainly used in qualitative research to examine multiple perspectives of the research participant (in this case, myself in relation to others), to discover similarities and differences between individuals in a given environment, and to generate unexpected insights (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic Analysis is used to identify themes or patterns in the data (sometimes called codes) and assist the critical autoethnographer in organizing, describing, and interpreting themes that arise from data collection (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Strengths of using Thematic Analysis in my research study include its flexibility for me to recursively write my personal narratives. Thematic analysis allows for repeated analysis of a data set, depending on the themes discovered by the researcher (Brauan & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). Additionally, Thematic Analysis allows for summarizing large amounts of data and identifying overall features of a data set in order for implications to be drawn. Limitations of Thematic Analysis include the same flexibility, as researchers must pay special and consistent attention to their own biases when identifying themes and patterns (Holloway & Todres, 2003).

Furthermore, Thematic Analysis may also result in a lack of consistency for overall data collection if organized writing exercises and revision strategies are not followed.

A key aspect of Thematic Analysis in qualitative research is maintaining trustworthiness of the data, especially in autoethnography due to its risk for bias in data interpretation. Therefore, I will be using the following six phases of thematic analysis as a means of maintaining trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017):

Table 1.

Phases of Thematic Analysis

<u>Phases of Thematic Analysis</u>	<u>Means of Establishing Trustworthiness</u>
Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data	Prolong engagement with data Triangulate different data collection modes Document theoretical and reflective thoughts Document thoughts about potential codes/themes Store raw data in well-organized archives Keep records of all data field notes, transcripts, and reflexive journals
Phase 2: Generating initial codes	Peer debriefing Researcher triangulation Reflexive journaling Use of a coding framework Audit trail of code generation Documentation of all team meeting and peer debriefings
Phase 3: Searching for themes	Researcher Triangulation Diagramming to make sense of theme connections Keep detailed notes about development and hierarchies of concepts and themes

Table 1 (continued).

Phase 4: Reviewing themes	Researcher triangulation Themes and subthemes vetted by team members Test for referential adequacy by returning to raw data
Phase 5: Defining and naming themes	Researcher triangulation Peer debriefing Team consensus on themes Documentation of team meetings regarding themes Documentation of theme naming
Phase 6: Producing the report	Member checking Peer debriefing Describing process of coding and analysis in sufficient details Thick descriptions of context Description of the audit trail Report on reasons for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the entire study

Figure 3. Note: Nowell et al., 2017.

The above will be followed as an outline for drafting personal narratives from Phase 1 to Phase 6. As themes emerge, and as is common with Thematic Analysis, I anticipate the possibility of repeating the Phases of Thematic Analysis in places I require more depth of interpretation.

Trustworthiness and Validity of Data

Because of the nature of autoethnography, “all validity is interpretive and dependent on context”, with an automatic validation given to the internal voice of the autoethnographic researcher (Ellis, 2004, p. 123). However, autoethnographers attempt to balance this inherent subjectivity with rigid trustworthiness strategies.

Figure 3 above shows several ways of establishing trustworthiness alongside the Phases of Thematic Analysis, and are listed as options for a researcher conducting thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). I will specifically be using triangulation as a way of establishing trustworthiness for each phase of narrative drafting and thematic analysis.

Triangulation in data analysis is using three (or more) data points to corroborate stated information, an insurance against solitary bias when reporting situations, or describing environments and interactions (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). I believe using triangulation is especially critical in an autoethnography, but even more so in my proposed research study which anticipates my delving into highly emotional memories.

To accomplish triangulation, I viewed my experiences as a NC CC CRT instructor through two (2) additional identity lenses of white identity and trauma identity. Furthermore, I sought additional research findings to contextualize my experiences, and the experiences of NC CC agents with whom I interacted. Additional review of the literature identified supportive findings related to white preference, CRT in HE, and empathy in action research.

CHAPTER FOUR

Data

“You own everything that happened to you.

Tell your stories.

If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better.”

— Anne Lamott, [Bird by Bird](#)

“The moment Eve bit into the apple, her eyes opened, and she became free.

She exposed the truth of what every woman knows:

to find our sovereign voice often requires a betrayal.”

— Terry Tempest Williams, [When Women Were Birds](#)

“You are a church of broken glass / and hallelujahs. / You are haunted like every other
holy thing. / What tried to destroy you didn't / have the strength. / Still, you stand. /

Sturdy and smelling of smoke.”

— Clementine von Radics, “Little Bird”

Introduction

What will follow is a three narrative data set in bulleted format, as chosen stylistically by me as the narrative author. The three identities chosen for this data set were selected by me as the researcher as the most relevant of my identities to the implementation of CRT. My identities (read also: cultures) of being white identifying and of being a complex trauma survivor directly impacted my implementation of CRT, as they both affected my empathic capacity towards students and towards my colleagues. White identification and trauma identification are present across all three (3) narratives, and can be proposed to be intertwined as relevant to CRT implementation. Each narrative demonstrates observations at the individual (micro), classroom (mecro), and institutional (macro)level for CRT implementation.

White Identity

♪ White Man's World - Jason Isbell ♪

Early Childhood and Elementary School

1. I was born to a white-identifying, military family residing in Ft. Bragg, NC in 1984.
2. My mother's family claims Irish, Welsh, and English heritage. My biological father's family claim Irish and German heritage. Family gatherings were attended solely by whites. Race was not openly discussed throughout my childhood, but we were taught to be proud of being European, and of being "American".

I do not recall my family ever explaining what being "white" meant.

3. My parents divorced when I was 7, and my mother remarried.

My stepfather grew up in rural Fayetteville, NC in a predominantly white area, attending a segregated school until he was in sixth grade. I do not recall him claiming European ancestry, but I do recall him being very proud of his family's Confederacy history, involvement, and "legacy".

Not until my mother's marriage to my stepfather do I recall her demonstrating racist behavior.

I can recall numerous instances with my stepfather in which he made his white supremacist ideologies known. He taught us that segregation was natural and desirable, always framed in a "it's what's best for everyone" kind of way. He would use the n-slur moderately and blamed the behavior of non-whites for "making" him do it. He openly mocked civil rights protests when they came across the news. He perpetuated misinformation regarding non-white use of government programs such as welfare and unemployment.

This casual racism would continue throughout my childhood.

4. I attended predominantly non-white elementary and middle schools. While I had many non-white friends in school, I did not speak to or see them outside of the school building. Of the three friends that lived on my street growing up, only one was black. She is the only non-white friend who ever spent the night at my house.

Around 1994, I was on an elementary school field trip with my class. I was with a group of 4 black female friends.

I remember us walking on some sort of path, sunshine filtering through early spring trees, laughing, trying to tag each other, squealing when we succeeded. I remember commenting on my friend's skin, which was darker brown than our other friends. I remember stating how beautiful I thought her skin was, and how I wished I had skin like that. I remember the smile dropped from her face, and she gave me a look that I still to this day cannot quite decipher. Something between scrutiny and massive distrust.

I remember not understanding her reaction. I went on to say things such as, "But your skin will give you better advantages, you know, because you're black!" and "One day you can be president and you'll get so many more votes because you're black, right?". I do not remember what happened after that, but I do recall a feeling of desperation to fix whatever I had said wrong.

Looking back, I believe this to be one of my first instances of white fragility.

5. My mother and stepfather embedded white supremacist ideology in us in subtle ways, ways that floated under my developing brain's radar and ability to identify.

When they would attend our school awards ceremonies, they would comment on how many of the black students' parents were not in attendance, and how "sad" it was for

those parents not to care enough about their children to show up. They would comment on non-white student achievement as if it were “miraculous” instead of the standard. They used words like “thug” and “hoodlum” to presumably describe someone who was lazy but was almost always in reference to a person of color or a white person exhibiting cultural ties to non-white communities.

Later, in my early adulthood, their racism became more overt. They supported my brother in breaking up with his black fiancée (a break-up he did not desire), because he would be “setting up” their potential children “for a lifetime of unnecessary hardship”. My mother's full Irish father supported their rejection of my brother's fiancée, stating their children would be “n-gglets” and accused my brother of attempting to taint the family bloodline.

My parents supported political candidates who were overtly white preference leaning, with ties to white supremacist organizations and funders. They voted along conservative lines with heavy emphasis on individual liberty. I remember my stepfather quizzing us at the dinner table regarding certain contrived situations tied to his political beliefs such as, what would we do if someone broke into our home and tried to assault our mother? Shooting them was always part of his response. The criminal in these scenarios was almost always a “thug”, drug addict, and non-white.

They stated repeatedly that some people (interpreted as: non-white people) are just “born criminals”, that there was no need for programs such as affirmative action, and that if minorities and women and differently abled folks would just “work harder” they too

could enjoy upward social mobility. My mother used affirmative action to gain minority status at Fayetteville State University, as well as gain minority scholarships.

Ironically, my stepfather is a convicted felon related to embezzlement charges a former business partner filed. Both my parents were accused of embezzling from the church we attended when I was in high school. Yet the framing of these instances was always with them as the wronged parties.

At one point, my stepfather left to become a contractor in Afghanistan, staying out of the country long enough to return when the statute of limitations on other pending charges expired. But when stories came across the news of wrongly convicted non-white felons, their response typically included notions that the wrongly accused had somehow cheated the system to procure their release and deserved to serve lengthy incarceration sentences for their crimes.

6. Growing up white in the American South, white preference presents on a mythological level. Especially considering the “Lost Cause” revision of southern American history, positioning the American Confederacy as defeated always with romantic intention to “rise again”.

My stepfather encouraged this hero worship of Confederate soldiers and lore. He bought me Confederate flag stickers for my school notebooks, a confederate flag bumper sticker for my car.

He spoke often, wistfully nearly, for a time he had no connection to but had been taught by his parents and family should hold value and meaning. He made the Civil War sound like justifiable rebellion, men fighting for their families, their property, their freedoms. He never discussed slavery unless in the context of “states’ rights.”

Middle School

7. In 1996, my brother and I enrolled in middle school at the same time because our elementary school was transitioning 6th graders to the middle school building, and my brother was a rising 7th grader. We both were significantly bullied at school and on the school bus.

There was an incident that year between my brother and a black female student in his class. My brother developed verbal abuse as a defense mechanism against his classmates, and that day he claimed the female student wouldn’t leave his desk alone. A physical altercation ensued, and my brother ended up pulling the student’s shirt over her head to “stop the punches”.

I remember, my stepfather and mother went to the school. My stepfather claimed to have intruded into the black principal’s office. He also alleged that he “almost came across this black mother fucker’s desk”, but that my mother restrained him. The incident became a humorous anecdote they enjoyed sharing with our family.

My brother had been in plenty of fights before, the majority of which were with other white boys in our neighborhood, who fought for fun most days. My stepfather had never intervened. Apparently, my brother being beat up by white boys was perfectly acceptable but being “assaulted” by a non-white student was a bridge too far for my parents.

8. For all of 6th grade I was aggressively bullied almost exclusively by white classmates. I was placed academically into the honors classes, which also were predominantly white. Relatedly, a dichotomy of experiences emerges when I think about my experiences with my non-white classmates.

For example, at one point I attended a birthday party at a local miniature golf location, where a black female classmate spit on me in front of the entire birthday party. I remember I was one of the only white children in attendance.

Conversely, in another instance, I was protected on my school bus each afternoon by a black female 8th grader (who seemed like an adult to me) who saw me being pelted by sticks and rocks one day. The birthday party experience aligned in my mind with my parents’ teachings about non-white populations; the latter experience of being protected by a non-white person, did not.

9. When I was in 7th grade, I was accepted into a local charter school focused on Classical Studies. I would be into my 30s before I realized the insidious nature of a “classical” education: Standard American English taught as the sole mode of communication both

oral and written which focuses much more heavily on writing mechanics than content generation and personal expression; a uniform dress code purported to teach professionalism but was instead inherently racist and sexist; and the creation of the school itself as an access point for marginalized student populations in my community only to have the majority of students in Honors classes, advanced classes, and extracurricular clubs be white.

Homeschool, High School, and Fundamentalist White Christianity

10. Because my parents did not want us to attend a predominantly non-white high school, my mother disenrolled us from public school to homeschool my brother and myself in 1998. I remember her conducting extensive research on homeschooling, checking stacks of books from the library, writing notes and annotating possible curricula. The majority of my homeschooled peers were overwhelmingly white and Christian.

Prior to being homeschooled, my family was casually Christian. My biological father's family is Roman Catholic, my mother's side is some kind of Protestant, and my stepfather ascribes to a kind of All-American-Apple-Pie-Christmas-Easter-Jesus popular in many American southern communities. But Fundamentalist Jesus must have been hanging out in my mother's coffee cup one morning, because seemingly overnight we were Fundamentalist Christian.

11. Though my initial understanding of white preference centered heavily on racial inequalities, in my experience White Christianity perpetuates white preference on

numerous levels, and not just racially:

My new church taught me that the Bible is irrefutable, and therefore passages concerning divine agents utilizing assault, rape, slavery, and murder as conduits for God's Divine Plan were taught as sanctified. While instances of brave and powerful women are all throughout the text, my church chose to present women (and any eventual children they may have) as ultimately objects to be owned, used as pawns in parables teaching passivity and submission. Homosexuality was referenced repeatedly as "deviant", "against God's law", and evidence of internalized sin.

Especially as a young woman, I was expected to internalize the white preference messaging of my church and white male pastoral leaders that anything straying from whiteness, maleness, and Christian theology was improper, inappropriate, and to be avoided at all spiritual costs.

Relatedly, our homeschool community and church placed enormous emphasis on evangelizing, which looking back was really us as teenagers being trained to identify the "Others" in our communities and relentlessly pursue them to join the church. I remember taking an "apologetics" class with other young women in my homeschool community, whose sole purpose was to teach us as Christians how to engage total strangers and "non-believers" into essentially intense intellectual debates surrounding why Christianity was the one and only true path to G/god.

While I was skilled at debate already (I served on our state debate team all four years of high school), I did not understand why we were being taught to “outsmart” someone else with Bible verses and supplementary sources such as Lee Strobel’s *A Case for Christ*, when faith was also taught as felt and not seen.

My church and homeschool peer group taught me to draw lines between “us” and “them”, typically concerning religious differences. The majority of both the church and homeschool group were white. The few non-white parishioners were married to white spouses. While non-white families homeschooled their children as well, nearly the only time I interacted with them was during varsity basketball season.

12. My freshman year of high school, my mother joined what was then referred to as H.O.M.E. (“homes offering meaningful education”), a local homeschool group with families spread out across Cumberland and contiguous counties that would plan events, outings, and educational experiences together.

The group was recruited from local, predominantly white churches. I do not recall any non-Christian families. Additionally, of the white churches I attended or visited growing up, there was always what I perceived to be a token non-white minority. These individuals were prized by our church leadership for bringing culture and vibrancy to the congregations.

Looking back, I believe these individuals and their families were accepted so long as they ascribed to white characteristic behavior, seemingly limiting their own cultural self expressions in order to find spiritual acceptance.

13. As long as I can remember, my mother has loved old Hollywood.

She was an avid classic black and white film connoisseur, and we watched hundreds of old Hollywood films together while she would quilt or sew. I always believed she saw possibilities in these films for the adventure and romance she did not experience in her own adulthood, family, and marriage. The black and white films brought her to a place of escape and imagination. I remember looking forward to this time, especially because I got to spend time with my mother.

I first watched the film *Gone With the Wind* with my mother when I was fairly young, being absolutely smitten with the fact the protagonist's name was Katie, too. From then on, one of my nicknames was "Katie Scarlett" after Vivian Leigh's iconic character. I always thought this was a good thing - Scarlett seemed fearless, tenacious, and endlessly defiant.

Not until years later did I rewatch the film, cringing at the representations of the "happy slaves", the casual use of rape as a method for subduing female characters, and the portrayal of the American South as idyllic prior to the Civil War. I was into my 30s before I accumulated enough research, knowledge, and exposure to non-white culture and history to understand the insidious nature of this revisionist history which portrayed

minorities as submissive, subservient, unintelligent.

Many of the films my mother watched reinforced the white preference messaging I was receiving from my parents, my homeschool community, and my church.

14. In 2002, I began dating a white “cowboy” from Georgia I met while dancing at a local country bar. During that time, a white male friend of his, a known violent drunk, was killed during an altercation with a black male neighbor while both were drinking together. The white male was threatening to kill the black male neighbor with a gun and was subsequently stabbed in self defense by the black male neighbor.

I was 19 years old at the time. I had no non-white friends, and I was attending a private Southern Baptist University that served a predominantly white student body. When asked by the cowboy boyfriend what I thought should be done, I repeated what I had heard my stepfather say multiple times - “string him up”.

As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt enormous shame. But the need to be accepted by the white, “country”, working-class social circle I found myself in mattered more than the black male neighbor’s humanity and life.

Campbell University, 2002-2006

15. From 2002 to 2006, only white students studied in the English department of Campbell University, to my recollection.

All my professors were white, and the department and division leaders were white males. No ethnic (nor women's, queer, etc.) literature classes were offered during this time, with the entirety of my curriculum and readings coming from white European and American authors, mostly male.

Ironically, years later when I sat for my Praxis II exam to clear my secondary English teaching license, I passed with one of the highest scores possible - because the licensure exam was geared overwhelmingly towards white "classics".

16. White Christianity, specifically Southern Baptist doctrine and ideology, were centric to Campbell University's institutional mission at the time. During freshman orientation, I remember a dean showing us a video montage of Campbell's "global" presence. The video included images and reels of international students and clips of mission work in Africa and other so-called "third world regions". The dean went on proudly proclaim how Campbell was a "global leader" in HE.

No non-Christian worship spaces were available on campus throughout my enrollment. The dining halls served predominantly Southern American and Americana fare. International students were recruited to Campbell, but the wider campus was largely

unaware of their presence unless an occasional international student was in your same class. These students could be seen on campus regularly huddled together in their own spaces without much interaction from non-white and/or American peers.

17. All students were required to enroll (and thus pay tuition for) a mandatory “chapel” credit hour per semester. Chapel involved attending a 50 minute session Tuesdays and Thursdays in a large auditorium on central campus, during which students were preached to by a variety of visiting pastors, motivation and guest speakers that to my recollection were always white presenting, Protestant, and reinforced the fundamentalism of my high school homeschool experience.

One particular chapel session involved the two white male content creators of “My Mythical Morning”, a then popular YouTube series by two young men from Buies Creek, the home of Campbell University. I do not remember their sermon message, but what I do remember is them co-opting the popular MTV show “Pimp My Ride”. While the MTV show celebrated upgraded vehicles indicative of black and Latinx cultures, the presentation that day in Chapel was an appropriated version of “Pimp My Ride” in which the content creators filmed their toddlers in “pimped out” small electric cars.

At the time, I thought the skit was entertaining and laughed along with the rest of the auditorium. The fact that these creators were “borrowing” non-white created media to further their career did not cross my mind.

18. Campbell's executive leadership at the time was predominantly white males, with the occasional white female holding departmental or divisional leadership. All presidents of Campbell University were/are white males. Executive leaders for both the famed pharmacy and law schools at Campbell were also white males.

Moreover, white males seemed to occupy nearly all public safety positions in the community to include the on campus security officers, local law enforcement officers, and the on campus fire fighters. While I heard stories about non-white students receiving harsher punishments for similar infractions on campus, I did not pursue a deeper understanding of why this occurred.

19. My junior year, a Catholic student joined the English department. He was hysterically funny, deeply devout, and aspired to joining the priesthood.

This student organized a Catholic bible study on campus to create a safe worship space for himself and other Catholic students. I remember hearing from this student after a particular incident occurred between his bible study group and a group of Protestant students also in the Student Union at the time. Allegedly, the Protestant students began harassing the Catholic students.

At first the harassment was mild, but as the organizing student pushed back against a clear violation of student conduct (the Catholic bible study had been approved by the Vice President of Student Life, and therefore was a protected group on campus), the

Protestant student's harassment rose to vicious verbal assaults and threats of physical harm towards the Catholic students. There was no other precipitation for this harassment other than the students were Catholic and not Protestant.

Though the incident was reported, no repercussions occurred for the students involved in the harassment.

Seattle, Washington, 2007-2008

20. In 2007, I moved to Seattle, Washington in large part because it was as far from Ft. Bragg, NC as I could go without leaving the continental United States.

Seattle culture prides itself on being inclusive and progressive, ideologies I had never been exposed to before. The first time I saw two men holding hands, I visibly giggled and looked around nervously for the mockery that assuredly would have taken place in my hometown and within my family. No one seemed to notice the men. It was as if this coupling was entirely normal and accepted.

Seattle culture also exposed me to entire groups of people I had never interacted with before: the queer community, anarchists, community advocates, unhoused populations, indigenous populations, international districts within Seattle proper. In the year I lived there, I learned more about diversity and inclusion than my entire previous 23 years combined.

I returned to North Carolina in 2008 pregnant with my son.

Secondary Education Teaching Experience, 2008-2013

21. In 2008, I procured my first teaching position at a local high school through North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction's lateral entry program. This program allowed me to begin teaching in a secondary education classroom with only a bachelor's degree, while I earned my teaching license over the next three years.

Having precious little experience with non-white populations, now I was the classroom authority teaching literacy development, reading comprehension, and writing mechanics to classes with sizable non-white populations.

My first year I was given what were called the "standard" classes, or the non-honors classes. Throughout my career, "standard" classes are predominantly comprised of non-white populations. The honors classes, taught by more veteran teachers, were overwhelmingly white. I remember this infuriating me at the time, especially coming back from a place such as Seattle that exposed me to such progressive ways of looking at race, gender, and sexuality.

Having no former teaching experience, my first year teaching was baptism by fire. My primary teaching methodology was, "teach them how I wish I had been taught", which necessitated me to learn more specifically about the racial cultures present in my classroom. I allowed my students to draft their writing samples in their primary voices,

permitting the use of slang, profanity, and sentence fragments in first drafts in order to teach professional language revisions. Not until years later in my teaching career did I realize my perpetuation of the white preference belief that there is such a thing as “professional” language. Still, my students achieved some of the highest standardized writing test scores in the school’s history.

One experience stands out, as a teacher of white preference bias when it comes to the teaching of writing: A black male student, a known gang member, was placed in my remedial writing sessions prior to an upcoming standardized writing test. He was attentive, engaged, but his writing was considered subpar by his primary English teacher and littered with far too many colloquialisms, slang, and African American Vernacular English.

When the English department received his score from the NC Department of Public Instruction, he was one of the only students in his class at his identified writing ability level to score a proficient score. When we reviewed his writing sample, we realized that he was awarded a proficient score based on his content rather than his mechanics. He wrote about what it meant to him to be a high ranking member of his gang, his reasons for joining and remaining in the gang, and his hopes for his future - all in perfect five-paragraph, three topic paragraph format.

Many of the English teachers that year, myself included, were shocked by his score and

argued against it being awarded.

22. During my time in secondary education, from 2008 until 2013, I realized that the way secondary English teachers tend to emphasize writing mechanics over content is a covert form of white preference. I also realized that the secondary English curriculum was geared towards white preference in its selection of required readings and instructional practices.

When I discovered that the textbook for my 10th grade world literature class included excerpts from Judeo-Christian texts, I spent a week on excerpts from the Qu'ran. Instead of following the pacing guide for my 9th graders that included an entire Shakespeare play when many of my students struggled with reading comprehension and analysis, I swapped the play for the young adult novel *The Hunger Games*. I began more and more amassing experiences of student success through my unorthodox approaches to student learning.

And yet my white preference remained solidly, ignorantly intact.

I remember asking a black female student in front of her class if her hair was real, because I had no concept of black women's hair other than "weaves". I remember having a black male student threaten to slit my throat, and thinking, "well what can you expect from a thug". I remember berating students openly in class, some incidents resulting in students becoming visibly upset and crying, and not considering their home lives, their

traumas, their experiences with white authority figures.

And the list goes on.

23. At the subsequent secondary school where I taught from 2010 to 2012, I was recruited by a white male leader to help revitalize the high school's English department's approaches to student learning, specifically to increase the standardized test scores for 9th and 10th graders.

The school I taught within was fairly new, and was built to combine the two smaller high schools on the western side of the county. The two high schools were built during segregation, and mirrored the towns they were built within with one previous high school serving predominantly white students and the other serving predominantly black students.

When I first started attending the new school, I could feel the tension between the white students and the black students, but what I felt most intensely was the tension between the white teachers and the non-white students.

I began to understand what privilege meant. The school was fairly new, and yet was built with faulty construction. You could see through the crumbling floor of my second story classroom to the outside sidewalk below. The heat did not work in the winter, and the air conditioning did not work in the summer. The school's supply budget was extremely limited, and I found myself scrounging for essential materials such as notebook paper,

writing instruments, and culturally updated textbooks.

And yet the students of this high school exhibited a hunger for knowledge I had not previously encountered. I created culturally relevant lesson plans, included more diverse texts, and revised as I learned more about diversity, equity, and inclusion in my Master's secondary education licensure program. My black and Hispanic students excitedly introduced me to their cultures, and I in turn attempted to embed those cultures in my lessons.

And yet my white preference persisted. I believed part of my job was to teach "the classics" of literature, all of which were written by white authors, and the majority by men who died centuries ago. I believed I was creating space for my students to express themselves but continued to correct their methods of expression.

For example, when studying *Othello*, one of my black male seniors asked to share a rap song with the class that he felt would be Iago's theme song. Looking back, the student had made a connection between an extremely complicated text and the music he listened to, and was excited to share with both me and his peers. I played the song for about a minute, and turned it off, criticizing what I felt was prolific profanity and references to street culture.

This as my own musical tastes included rap and hip hop artists who used identical

language, and with whom I happily sang along with on my commute to and from school.

24. One of my students at this high school was another top ranking gang member and was in my senior English class. Everyone in the school, students and teachers alike, knew him by reputation as the “drug dealer with a heart of gold”. He had an affected, super drawling Southern accent and spoke very slowly, punctuating nearly every sentence with “iiiiiiighhhht!”.

He shared openly about his struggles to make money for his family, how some parents sold him their EBT cards for drugs, and that he would then use the EBT cards to buy food for the kids in his neighborhood. He sold contraband in the lunchroom and after school from his backpack, sodas and candies and such. He told me he had dreams of owning his own business one day.

At 18 years old, he challenged my viewpoint that those in poverty must deserve to be there, that their poverty was in fact evidence of their own laziness and lack of capitalizing on educational opportunities. I had been taught by my parents that drug dealers were out to make a quick buck to splurge on cars, shoes, and women. It never occurred to me that a person dealing drugs was attempting to provide for themselves and their families.

Even as I was using illegal substances at the time, I viewed myself as somehow superior to these students and their families.

25. During my time at this high school, my students set new records in their tested areas. My second year teaching, my students experienced the highest scores in school history. I was reported to the Board of Education, who did not believe my students had the capacity to achieve such scores.

The superintendent at the time was a white male. The school board was majority white members.

26. In my final year of teaching at this high school, I had a black male in my freshman English class. He was a repeater student, with extremely low grades in his previous English courses. I remember feeling a connection to him almost immediately, the way he rarely spoke up in class but how he followed each discussion intently, completed all his work, and began to show remarkable improvement in his work product.

The student was previously involved in a gang but had made the choice to leave. During class transition one day, the student was jumped by a swarm of his former gang peers. I watched the incident unfold across the school's atrium and bolted into the thick of the fight to protect my student. He was shaken, but not severely hurt. He, along with those verified to be involved in the jumping, were sent to in-school-suspension.

From my recollection, what unfolded next was one of the most egregious examples of overt racism against a student. This student was very reserved, very soft-spoken, and hardly ever interacted with authority figures in hostile or instigating ways. Yet according

to my other students who were present, the school official in charge of the ISS classroom repeatedly called the student the n-slur, inches away from his face. While accounts differ, what was officially reported was my student “attacked” the school official. The student was hurt badly enough to be taken to the hospital. He was then sent to the alternative school in the county.

For weeks I was told this student would be allowed to return to school. My planning period was 4th block, and one day I drove the half-hour drive to the alternative school to check on him. I had sent the student’s work to the alternative school as instructed by school leadership, only to find upon arrival that he had not been given the assignments, and therefore had not completed any. I was also informed that the student had been recently sent home for fighting.

When I approached a school official to ask for the student’s home address so I could deliver his assignments personally, I was told “white women aren’t welcome in [X] town”. Instantly, I was incensed. How dare the official tell me that, didn’t they know I was just trying to help my student? I’d been called the next Erin Gruwell, an accomplished teacher who inspired minority students to greatness. It never occurred to me that the reason I was not welcome was due in part to that community’s historical experiences with whites.

When I arrived in the student’s town, no one would speak to me. I felt emboldened by

this, which upon looking back, is tremendously embarrassing. I found the student's house, delivered his assignments, and met his grandmother. The student was allowed to return to school to take his standardized test.

He passed with a proficient score.

27. My next secondary education teaching position was in 2012 at a historically black high school in a city whose school system was forcibly fully desegregated in 1998. I was hired to teach within a boutique program, funded in part from the school's overall budget. The program was marketed as a college-prep program.

In a school of nearly 50% black identifying students, only two (2) black students were enrolled in the program out of an admitted class of 100. Our faculty team of eight (8) was all white and predominantly male with only two (2) female instructors of which I was one. I was removed from my position, in part, because I questioned the eliteness of the program and its special treatment of the white, wealthy students who drove Jaguars to school and spent vacations abroad.

Years later, when attending the North Carolina teacher protest in 2018, I spoke to a white female representative whose family member was one of the two black students to attend the college prep program at this particular school. When I brought my concerns about the program's discriminatory practices to her attention, she politely nodded and wished me

and the other educators the best of luck with our protest.

Military Culture and White Preference

28. Growing up in a military town exposes one to white preference in ways non-military families may not experience. Culturally, there was heavy messaging from the military community regarding husbands going off to “play soldier” while their wives supported them by keeping their households running and raising the children. Women in the military were seen as inferior, especially in physical prowess but also intellectually.

Over the years, I interacted with higher numbers of female service members, but there always felt like an underlying societal current cast shadows on the accomplishments of these women because active duty service is often seen as antithetical to a woman’s place keeping house and home, having children, and serving one’s husband.

Of the white female service members I have known over my life, almost all have been married to white spouses, with most of those spouses being military themselves. A common joke in my social circles at the time was that the men joined to leave their hometowns for adventure; the women joined to find husbands.

29. While President Bill Clinton’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy allowed for members of the LGBTQIA+ community to serve in the armed forces, I had very limited interactions with openly gay service members, nor did I experience advocacy for queer-identifying military personnel.

I vividly remember the backlash against whistleblower Specialist Chelsea Manning when she leaked hundreds of combat-related classified documents demonstrating multiple atrocious acts of aggression and violence by the US military in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The primary attack involved her transgender identity rather than the illegal acts of the US government and its agents.

30. In 2021, I began a second job bartending at a bar that specifically served Special Forces personnel and their retired peers. One entire wall of the bar is covered in individual photos of killed-in-action Special Forces soldiers. On the anniversary of a soldier's death date, we would hold what was called "memorial" which included the reading of a personal biography with achievements submitted by the deceased soldier's family. After the biography was read, we as a bar were instructed to stand at attention and face the American Flag while the "Ballad of the Green Beret" played in its entirety.

For those unfamiliar, the song references Special Forces soldiers as "fearless", "America's best", and "brave". The ending verses of the song reference a "young wife" waiting at home who receives news that her Green Beret has been killed. The song ends with the wife requesting that her son follow in his father's footsteps as a Green Beret.

Even as Special Forces soldiers were returning from Desert Storm, Kosovo, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Iraqi Freedom and physically abusing their wives (in many cases murdering them), the men of the Green Berets (Special Forces colored berets

that only those who successfully complete Special Forces training are allowed to wear) were venerated as “the best of the best”. These men were and are considered the epitome of manhood in this culture. At the time, no women were allowed to test for Special Forces eligibility.

The bar was previously owned by a retired Special Forces commander of great esteem. One day, I was serving him and his two friends when the subject of Critical Race Theory came up. Their exchanges regarding Critical Race Theory were skewed white preference interpretations, and I offered to help clarify their misunderstandings, since a large part of my dissertation was spent researching white preference and its historical discriminatory effects on American systems.

The three of them listened with pursed lips, eyes full of resistance and silent challenges to the research I was citing and the explanation of white. At the end of the interaction, the previous owner slammed his hands down on the bar, raised his voice and proclaimed “Well, I guess I’m the fucking problem then?! I’m going to go cry about my white privilege while I drive my fucking Porsche home.”

A year later, his son would be interrogated in the killing of an unarmed black man. The black man, Jason Walker, was struck by the son’s pickup truck and left unaided by the son, dying in the street some time later. The owner’s son was a high ranking law enforcement official. No formal charges were ever filed, and the investigation was closed.

Trauma Identity

♪ Song Without Reason - Josiah Leming ♪

Early Childhood and Family Abuse

31. My mother told me she wished she'd aborted me. She told me she was in the clinic, but something made her walk out.

Conversely, she was wholly committed to my older brother, a "preemie" baby who took two (2) months to recover in an Air Force base NICU. He is older than me by 18 months. She told me the stress of my brother's NICU recovery took an enormous amount of her mental and emotional energy and finding out I existed equated to a death sentence. Yet she left the clinic.

And I was born. Unwanted, yet here.

32. My very first memory of life is abuse. My biological father instructed me to carry out sex acts on him in a shower. His subsequent years of abuse were explosive and erosive, with an increase in the abuse when my mother served him divorce papers.

The weekend visitations we spent with our biological father after my parents separation involved him drinking heavily, renting porn and watching it with my brother and I, and always culminated in sexual abuse at some point.

To accomplish this, my biological father gave me alcohol. He called it "apple juice".

Years later when I was about 12 years old and at a family Christmas party my aunt had a glass of wine. I smelled it and went to take a sip before she jerked her glass away looking shocked. I remember saying, “But that’s just apple juice? It’s what [X] gave us when we were little”. The conversation did not go further.

33. At seven (7) I was interrogated by Cumberland County Sheriff detectives regarding “indecent liberties with a child” charges against my biological father. On interrogation days, my mother always let me skip school. She primped and preened over me in a way she never did normally - styling my hair with a metric ton of Tresemme, “allowing” me to sneak her blush, taking me to my favorite Japanese restaurant after the interview session concluded.

I was taken to a counselor only once for therapy. To my recollection, there was a male therapist as well as a female therapist in the room. I immediately shut down. I did not want to get my father in trouble. I felt shame for what had happened, even as I had no other context than that the abuse was somehow “love”. When the therapists pressed me to tell them if my father had ever done anything inappropriate with me, I said a single statement about him letting me take a warm bath instead of a cold bath when I had the chickenpox. My mother never took me back.

With the filing of child abuse charges, my mother was able to procure her divorce. She used the threat of arrest against my biological father to also procure the deed to our house which she seemingly immediately moved her new boyfriend (eventual stepfather) into.

The charges against my biological father were ultimately dropped.

The last time I saw my biological father, it was my 8th birthday. I barely stood tall enough to peek out of the window in our kitchen's side door. I recognized his white truck with the camper shell. He walked up to the porch with a wrapped present, dropped it, and left. Missing me standing at the door would have been impossible.

The next time I saw him was in his casket.

34. Elementary school was an extremely challenging time for me, socially. Because of the abuse, I felt strange and peculiarly isolated from my peers. I had an enormous amount of sexual knowledge and was conditioned by my biological father that this was normal. I was an extremely intelligent, artistic child but also extremely lonely.

Nature was the only place I felt truly safe, and I would spend hours and hours outside to avoid being inside my house. Even though at this point my biological father had moved away, my mother's house did not feel safe, especially after my stepfather began physically and emotionally abusing my brother and me almost immediately upon moving in.

I remember always feeling like someone was going to break in and hurt me or hurt my mother. I slept completely under the covers with a little gap by my mouth for air. My bedroom was on the second floor of our home, and I was convinced that my biological father was going to use a ladder to break into my room and kill me for being a bad

daughter. I would often retreat and/or sleep in closets. I knew something dark churned inside of me, but I had no ability to process what had happened to my mind and body, especially without professional therapy.

I felt lost much of the time.

35. The physical abuse with my stepfather began almost immediately from the time he began dating my mother and escalated exponentially after he moved into our house.

My stepfather seeks to be an intimidating man. He is of tall stature, broad shoulders, with ice blue eyes. I mention the eyes, because they were my primary indicator of his rage (and thus his abuse).

The abuse was calculated. By this, I mean he ensured the abuse went under the radar. He would hit me with his hands, grab me, restrain me, throw me, but never punched me. He would hit me with his belt or a thick, wooden paint stick from Lowe's, but always on the back of my upper thighs to the middle of my back - never where the bruises could be seen. I remember after one "spanking" going into my parents' bathroom and seeing what looked like a dusky night sky - all deep purples and blues.

Additionally, my stepfather mixed manipulation heavily into his abuse creating a victim blaming environment in our household. He wasn't abusive, we "made" him do it. We needed to learn discipline. We were too loud, too boisterous, too "disrespectful", too much.

He would go on to legally adopt my brother and me.

36. Throughout my early childhood, I lived a dichotomy between a father I very much loved who had left indefinitely, and a new stepfather I was instructed would love me in ways my biological father had not. Not internalizing my stepfather's ideologies was impossible when faced with needing his approval in order not to be abused.

I developed my people pleasing at a very early age, especially with male figures. One memory floats to mind of me getting up very early on a Saturday morning and washing the kitchen floor with a bucket and a single rag. I felt like Cinderella, and the servitude somehow felt validating.

However, my stepfather's standards were impossibly high and ever shifting it seemed, resulting in further abuse at times. Once when I had not cleaned the kitchen to his alleged specifications, he grabbed my extremely long hair, wrapped it around his fist, and pushed my face aggressively into the counter to "see what [I] had missed".

I felt constantly on edge and confused about what my stepfather expected from me, and because my mother rarely intervened in his abuse, I was even more exasperated as I tried to accommodate his expectations. One time in a Taco Bell, he sent me back up to the counter to order "more tacos". I remember being in full blown panic mode, holding his cash, terrified to ask if he meant just two more tacos, or the full combo meal. I had a full

on mental meltdown because of it. I ordered just two more tacos. When I brought the tray back, he screamed at me in front of the entire restaurant, “how could you be so stupid??”.

Later, a stranger consoled me in the restaurant’s bathroom.

It was the first time I had experienced anyone saying that how my stepfather treated me was wrong.

37. I witnessed my brother’s abuse by my stepfather, but never with my biological father. My brother did not divulge he was abused by our biological father until he was almost 16 years old and began experiencing alarming mental health symptoms that mirrored schizophrenia. Only then was the family aware of what he had endured, too.

But with our stepfather, the abuse was intense towards my brother. In hindsight, I can understand my brother’s behavior towards our stepfather was rebellion against another abusive father figure, coming from a cavernous distrust of abusive men. My stepfather only ever took it as the elusively defined “disrespect”, a moniker he would attach to any behavior my brother and I exhibited that did not align with his (and by influential proxy my mother’s) compliance-based discipline. My stepfather seemed to take great pleasure in tearing my brother down, in beating him bloody at times, in demoralizing and dehumanizing him.

My brother was and is one of the most intensely brilliant intellectuals I have ever met. He

read leaps and bounds above his grade level while in elementary school, reading Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* by age 10. He was a self-taught computer and coding prodigy by 13. He earned the rank of Eagle Scout when he was 18. My brother earned so much in academic and extracurricular activity scholarships that his private university was nearly entirely paid for upon graduating high school.

And yet our stepfather always found a way to degrade him, to belittle him. On a nearly daily basis, there would be some kind of conflict between the two of them almost always resulting in my brother being physically beaten. Because of my brother's (understandably) rebellious nature, he would often fight back in situations when I would acquiesce. Watching my brother in pain was one of the most damaging aspects of my childhood; and yet every time I was secretly grateful that it wasn't me.

38. Sometime after my brother's sixteenth (16th) birthday, I witnessed one of the most terrifying displays of my stepfather's rage to date.

Per precedent, my stepfather had engaged my brother in some sort of conflict over who knows what. Only this time, my stepfather raised a hand to our mother as she attempted (in rare fashion) to intervene between him and my brother. My brother raised his voice and stepped between them.

My stepfather erupted into a series of physical blows to my brother's chest and head, grabbing him by his long, curly hair, and dragging him into another area of our home. My

mother stood in the kitchen like a statue, tears on her cheeks but doing and saying nothing. I could hear my brother's screams of pain and rage; I could hear thumps and bumps and the sound of a body being slammed into the floor and walls. I do not remember what happened immediately afterwards.

The next day being Sunday, we went to our Fundamentalist church, as always. Only this time, a bandage covered one of my brother's ears where our stepfather had nearly ripped it off during the encounter. I remember watching the blood slowly seep through as I listened to the sermon on how the church protects its family, and what a friend we have in Jesus.

39. My stepfather never exhibited the same abusive behavior towards my baby sister, who was born to my mother and stepfather in 1991 making her seven (7) years younger than me.

He never raised a hand to her, never attempted to assault her in any form, and provided her with financial resources he withheld from my brother and me. Through this lack of abuse, he made it clear that she was his favorite among us, creating deep resentment in me at times.

Once, when I was allowed a small number of makeup products to practice "putting my face on", my baby sister sat in our shared room and destroyed nearly all of it while playing dress up. My sister learned early on that she could avoid trouble by (in my

perspective) feigning knowledge of an incident and/or finding a way to blame my brother and me. I feel like even at a young age she understood in her own way how to avoid our shared (step-)father's wrath.

On this rare occasion, my mother challenged him in his disciplining of my baby sister, which at first only included being told "not to do it again". However, this time my stepfather went to a place he had never gone before - he spanked her.

He followed the same ritual he had followed with me and my brother dozens of times already in our early lives: be told to meet him upstairs in our bedroom, pull our pants down to expose our backsides, and put our face in a pillow so that he did not have to listen to us scream in pain or cry.

I only remember the sounds of two (2) to three (3) strikes, before he came downstairs nearly sobbing.

The only time I remember my stepfather crying over how he abused me was the day after he attempted to assault me, when he begged me not to tell my mother.

And I complied.

40. When I remember my mother from the time before she met and married my stepfather, I remember a powerful, insanely savvy, hard-working, beautiful woman. Regardless of the

circumstances in which she left my biological father, she wholly and completely took responsibility for raising my brother and me. She worked at City Hall, she dressed in stylish late 80s pant suits, and always had dinner for us in some capacity when she was working late.

What I remember was a woman being slowly eroded voluntarily for the sake of providing us with a two-parent home. She was deeply impacted by the myth of the American Family and its sibling myth of the American Dream. In some ways I think she felt such an obligation to my brother and me to provide that she was willing to sacrifice parts of herself.

While my mother was physically and emotionally abusive during this time, it paled in comparison to what she allowed to occur in our home at the hands of our stepfather. For example, there was a ritual in our home, started by our stepfather, which resembled almost a military tribunal: my brother and I would be called down from our rooms and made to stand at a sort of attention in the kitchen. He would then proceed to yell, scream, poke, pinch, push, and dehumanize us as if in an interrogation. There were so many “confessions” made resulting in abuse that were entirely elicited because of my stepfather’s intimidation tactics; and because we had “confessed”, we were subsequently punished “justifiably”. My stepfather would beat us in front of our mother, and she would do nothing but hang her head and purse her lips.

I wanted to believe that my tender-hearted mother was still inside herself somewhere. Yet

when I was approaching middle school, her emotional abuse intensified. Most of her abusive commentary centered around my weight and changing body. My mother, ever a slender size 6 beauty, was enormously critical of my softer, wider frame. She also began insinuating that I was intentionally capturing male attention with my new breasts. At the age of 12.

I realized she was adopting my stepfather's abuse tactics when one day she called me into the kitchen. She made me lift up my nightgown exposing me in just my underwear in front of our entire family. She proceeded to pinch and poke my belly and admonish me for being "too fat". Tears streamed down my face, but I only nodded in faux agreement.

Losing her in this way felt like a betrayal, her mirroring of my stepfather's abuse. I could not trust her anymore.

I felt even more alone.

Childhood Poverty Trauma

41. During middle school, my stepfather lost his job. Up to this point, our family could be considered comfortably middle class for the time. Afterwards, the oppressive poverty we experienced would extend for the next 6 years until my stepfather accepted a contractor position in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom.

Experiencing poverty is a trauma unlike assault or abuse, because it is faceless while

simultaneously being felt multiple times a day such as when there isn't enough money to replace the milk, isn't enough money to buy new school clothes or shoes, isn't enough money to repair our home as the ceilings leak from rain storms and our central heat and air systems failed.

My parents refused to apply for government assistance, touting our family as better than "those mooches", referring to other families who were receiving food stamps and government funded healthcare. During this time, I did not see a doctor, did not see a dentist, and was not taken to receive medical care when I experienced multiple injuries, including when I needed stitches, as well as when I fractured my shin bone falling down the back stairs to our house.

My experiences of poverty during this time greatly impacted my relationship with money for the rest of my adult life. I was afraid to spend money, afraid not to work multiple jobs. I became obsessed with self-sufficiency.

42. My stepfather's abuse escalated, I believe in part because of our family's poverty. My parents began fighting in a way I had not seen previously. My stepfather would demean my mother, mock her, insult her, often in front of us kids. I would find her crying in random places in the house during this time, and she'd blow up at me to leave her alone. I never knew what to say to comfort her, but my heart broke each time I saw her wither more and more away from herself.

43. My stepfather's abuse of me and my brother continued throughout this time. And most of it is a redundant blur of beatings, mockings, manipulations, and degradations.

Puberty and Oversexualization

44. My mother's abuse increased when I was brought home to be homeschooled for high school in 1998. Looking back, I realize poverty and my stepfather's erosive treatment of her may have factored into this malicious metamorphosis.

In particular, my mother appeared to be increasingly consumed with a strange form of jealousy towards me that I could not explain. I confusedly transitioned through puberty in 8th grade; yet instead of celebrating my introduction into womanhood as a milestone, my mother's verbal assaults against my body increased. She described me as intentionally seductive at times, as if I had somehow willed my breasts and hips to grow and willed the strange men on the street to send their licentious comments my way.

In particular, I remember an instance where we were returning library books to the library's drop box. I was around fifteen (15) years old at the time. My mother watched me deliver the books to the outside chute from the car and walk back. As I got in, I felt her ember eyes burning into me. Instantly, I felt ashamed, but had no concept of what I had done wrong in that moment.

Still glaring at me, as she put the jalopy van into gear, she said, "you know exactly what you're doing, walking like that".

Sometimes I wonder if she believes I deserved what happened to me.

45. The abuse continued.

Grooming Years

46. A shift happened during my junior year regarding my stepfather's treatment of me. His abuse became less physical during this time, and his compliments of me, my body, and my athletic ability increased. I did not learn the term "grooming" until years later.

My stepfather, who to my recollection never willingly attended any school or extracurricular event of mine, was suddenly courtside at every varsity basketball game. He drove me to out of town games, while my mother mostly stayed home. We talked strategy before and after games, with him giving suggestions on strength and conditioning training to improve my court skills.

I remember feeling incredibly special to have this time with him, as it was my first experience of him as a person instead of an emotional terrorist.

47. My junior year, our homeschool basketball team was invited to a tournament in western North Carolina against other homeschool teams. This was the first year of the homeschool athletic conference for basketball in our state, and the championship was considered a big deal for our small team.

I do not remember what I did or said to precipitate what occurred before I left for the tournament, but I remember vividly my stepfather's reaction. Whatever I had supposedly done required him to hit me sixteen (16) times, one for each of my years of disrespect to that date. He told me I could expect my punishment when I returned from the tournament. I spent the entire weekend in terror, anxious at what was waiting for me when I got home. I played poorly that weekend, my mind elsewhere.

No physical abuse occurred when I returned. Only an incredibly confusing "congratulations", and no mention of the proposed beating I had spent days agonizingly anticipating.

48. Also, during my junior year, I began dating a young man who attended the local public high school. I met him at a church sponsored lock-in event. My stepfather became obsessed with the details of our relationship.

When I broke up with said boyfriend over the summer between my junior and senior year due to distance (he was staying the summer with his father who taught at a university in a middle eastern country), I remember my stepfather pinning me down on our couch, spitting and screaming at me that I was a "slut" and a "bitch" for "breaking up with that boy when he's not here". The encounter was terrifying.

He began to ask incredibly invasive questions regarding my virginity, when I lost it, how

I lost it, and asked for details. At this point I remember sensing something incredibly off, something insidiously sexual percolating within his words and his eyes. He began to comment on how my clothes fit my body, how my chest looked in certain shirts, and suggested dresses he'd prefer me to wear.

This behavior only increased going into my senior year.

49. By senior year, my stepfather was in full grooming mode, giving me credit cards at the height of our family's poverty and telling me to "buy whatever you want" from the local mall. He would pick me up from the local community college at which I took dual enrollment classes, and take me to lunch nearly every week. He bought me small gifts constantly and instructed me to "not tell" my mother.

I felt more and more special, though looking back I can remember times of extreme unease at the comments he would make, and the closeness with which he began to come to my physical body in inappropriate settings.

Two weeks before I left for Campbell University in the summer of 2002, I experienced one of the most negatively impactful encounters with my stepfather to date.

Sexual Assault at Lake House, NC

50. Somehow it was decided that we would go away overnight on a "Daddy and Daughter" date night, as my mother put it to me.

Looking back, I believe this allowance to be astonishingly irresponsible. However, at the time I felt incredibly special.

Not five (5) minutes into driving away from my house, and I felt fear. Agitation.

As if something wasn't quite right.

51. We were barely out of the city limits on our way to a remote lake house location before he began speaking openly about sex, telling me intimate details of him and my mother's relationship, and gleefully explaining how he had visited an adult sex store prior to our overnight.

52. The following incident was reported to three separate law enforcement agencies, and is public record (FPD, CCSD, BCSD reports). The reports all read as follows: once we arrived at the lake house, after an hour of conversation including sexual references to my mother, to myself, and to his own sexual desires, my stepfather gave me alcohol, took me to dinner, afterwards he attempted to sexually assault me in a hot tub on the property.

I first reported the assault in 2018 to the Fayetteville Police Department. There were several reasons I was given for the lack of prosecution against my stepfather. One was that I did not make "a sympathetic victim" because I had used substances in the past and had a history of abusive relationships. Furthermore, I was told I was "not believable", as

well as “seemingly bitter”.

I was also told there was a jurisdiction issue because the alleged assault took place in a different county, even though the grooming behavior had occurred within the agency’s jurisdictional limits.

I was encouraged by a local attorney to report the incident to two (2) additional law enforcement agencies in 2021. While more sympathetic, both agencies declined to prosecute, one allegedly due to jurisdictional issues, and the second because of how the assault was not “bad enough” to convince a jury of mental and emotional distress.

Campbell University, 2002-2006

53. The incident at the lake house occurred two (2) weeks before I left for undergraduate at Campbell University.

My stepfather helped me move into my dorm, gifting me a brand new desktop set-up complete with monitor, tower, keyboard, and matching mouse. The expense of this set-up was well outside of what my family could afford at the time. He also gave me a credit card before he left.

For the next month I did not leave my dorm room except to attend classes and eat in the dining hall. If I did eat, I would come mid morning and mid afternoons, during the least amount of student traffic. I felt numb, which looking back I can surmise was the shock of the incident and the quickness with which it was buried as a family secret. At the time I

felt leprous, as if I had no place in human settings. Often, I would sit in an empty dining hall over a single cup of coffee, or in graveyards that bordered campus in which I could be totally alone. My life began to revolve around the burial of emotions I had no capacity to understand.

I began to internalize what happened to me throughout my childhood - the abuse, the sexualization - as my fault. My biological father would still be around if I hadn't told my mother about his abuse. My mother must be correct that I am somehow intentionally manipulating men with my body, why else would my stepfather have assaulted me?

Within this time frame and mindset, I would be sexually assaulted a third time.

54. In high school, my focus was basketball with winning a state championship as my primary dream. I did not drink; I did not use drugs. I did not sneak out of the house, didn't attend stereotypical high school parties. I was not allowed to go on dates and had no concept of casual sexual hookups.

So when I was invited by some dorm mates to go clubbing in a neighboring city one night, I had no context with which to navigate a social setting that included copious amounts of alcohol, flirtations with strangers, and dangerous proximities to men. The club clothes I was loaned felt strange on my body, which was more used to basketball shorts, tank tops, and flip flops.

We ended up meeting a soldier from Ft. Bragg at a local restaurant after the club closed. My friends encouraged me to give this person my phone number, and within a few days he had invited me into town on a dinner date.

I told him I was Christian and shared my hope of finding a “good Christian man” as a partner. I shared with him my dreams of becoming a writer. He told me about his young son.

When he brought me back to his barracks room, I naively thought we were going to continue talking about meaningful topics. He gave me a drink. Within minutes I felt like I was completely intoxicated, the cup only half empty.

Afterwards, I had bite marks all over my body. His metal braces left cuts, a few of which were bleeding. I had bruises on my arms from where he held me down, and bruises on my inner thighs from where he forced them apart. I sat outside his barracks room door some time afterwards, crying, as he collected his things to drive me back to campus. A female soldier walking through the hallway stopped and asked if I was okay, and he barked at her to leave me alone.

A week later he would call me, asking for a second date.

55. After the date rape, I began having nightmares. Terrifying, full-on night terror episodes. I would wake up screaming. I would wake up drenched in sweat but freezing cold and

shivering. I had dreams where all I could see were long, gnashing, sharp teeth snapping and snarling at me over and over. I had dreams of military compounds I couldn't escape, dreams where something was chasing me and I couldn't outpace it, dreams of being rendered immobile and witnessing severe violence happen to those I loved.

I trusted my pastor's family implicitly at the time. My pastor, his wife, and their children were like a second family to my family. My mother was best friends with my pastor's wife, my brother dated their oldest daughter. These were individuals I had gone through my high school years with, who knew my family intimately. So, when the nightmares reached a peak, I went to my pastor's wife in confidence.

I told her what my stepfather had attempted. I told her about the grooming behavior and my isolation at college, and how the nightmares were debilitating me.

She asked me who else I had told. I said no one except my best friend, her family, and my brother.

She praised this and told me not to tell anyone else.

56. I told my mother about the Ft. Bragg soldier, that we had gone on a date, but did not disclose the assault. Especially in the murky family waters after the lake house incident, I felt wholly unprepared as to how to approach gaining her support through such a difficult time, especially when she had recently told me she knew something occurred at the lake

house, but neither my stepfather nor I would tell her what it was.

She became instantly incensed at my disclosure. I was called slut-shaming names, I was called irresponsible. In the back of my head were flashes from that night, as she berated and belittled me. She said she knew I had engaged in sexual activity before marriage, and that made me no better than a common “hussy”.

This time period of the lake house incident and the date rape was the beginning of a long-standing narrative in my family of me being sexually promiscuous. There were also narratives of me being out of line with both the teachings of the church and failing to show proper allegiance to my family. I was called combative, rebellious, and disrespectful.

I now believe these narratives made it easier for my mother to ignore her husband’s unforgivable indiscretions. At this point in my life, I understand this may have been her only way of surviving in her marriage and the life she had chosen to sustain her. Even as I attempted to make every effort to demonstrate I was a “good daughter”, the efforts often went belittled or unacknowledged entirely.

I felt disposable.

And once again, very very alone.

57. Sometime later, I was called by my pastor to a meeting between him and myself in his pastoral office. I remember walking in and feeling an instant wall of tension. He was sitting at his desk, hands folded in prayer.

He did not ask what occurred between me and the soldier. Instead, he told me the “Holy Spirit is telling me you did more than kiss him.” He demanded I pray a prayer of repentance, or else walk out of his office an “unrepentant sinner not welcome in the church”.

I was shocked. I didn’t know how to respond, except for, “Did the Holy Spirit also tell you he raped me?”. He said he knew the act was consensual. The Holy Spirit told him so.

I still had bruises on my body from the assault.

In an entirely out of character move for me at that time, I refused to pray for repentance. We stared at each other for what felt like eternity. He then instructed me to leave, subsequently stripping me of all involvement in my previous church positions including performing as lead soprano on the church’s praise team, and my position as a youth leader. My pastor’s family no longer invited me to their home for dinners or get-togethers. I felt like I lost three families at once: my own, my pastor’s, and my church.

There is no word I know of to encapsulate the depth of devastation I felt at this time.

The God I thought I knew was nowhere to be found.

58. Three (3) months later I sat in my pastor's living room with him, myself, and his pastoral prodigy whom he was grooming for seminary. This individual was six (6) years older than me, and had attempted to groom me from the age of fifteen (15) when he was a college debate coach, and I was a high school student.

The pastoral prodigy had proposed to me within the previous week, and I was unsure of accepting. This individual also believed that the assault by the soldier was consensual, and that my "soul was in jeopardy" for refusing to repent. My pastor quoted scripture to us, something about how the prophet will sanctify the prostitute. He encouraged the marriage as a conduit through which I could be spiritually redeemed. I felt enormous pressure to concede.

We were married two (2) months later, in a nighttime ceremony with only our parents and pastor's family in attendance. I was not allowed to invite my friends. I was not allowed to make decisions about the ceremony at all, including my pastor telling me the Holy Spirit told him my stepfather would walk me down the aisle, "regardless of what may or may not have occurred".

Fighting back massive mistrust and doubt at my pastor's words, I acquiesced to both the marriage, and to my stepfather "giving me away". To another abuser.

59. It took less than a few weeks for the pastor's prodigy to put his hands on me. His method of physical abuse mimicked my stepfather's in the sense he was careful not to leave identifiable marks on my body.

Only this time, a rage swelled up inside me. I felt powerless over my family's secrets, but not over this marriage. I knew what was happening was wrong, and I knew I wanted no part of Christian housewife submission if it meant being hurt over and over again.

My mother was incredibly embarrassed at my decision to leave my husband after only three (3) months. She seemed to take it as a personal slight against the painstakingly crafted persona she showed to our church and homeschool community. I felt she prioritized her reputation over the safety of me as her daughter.

This would mark the beginning of an acrimony between us that would persist and expand to an explosion.

60. Around this time, my stepfather left to become a contractor in Afghanistan. He would remain out of the country, eleven (11) months out of the year, for the next almost seven (7) years.

61. I experienced two (2) significantly toxic romantic relationships while in undergraduate.

One partner, shortly after our marriage, kicked me out of a vehicle on a major highway, scattering my belongings across the side of the road before slamming me into a fence and the ground as I tried to call 911. A passerby stopped and got out of his car with a gun, intentionally ignoring my partner and asking if I was okay. Several times this partner threatened my life (once memorably with a firearm), but he never hit me. Instead, he followed the pattern of throwing me into walls and door jams, threatening me with his fists when I angered him. I asked my parents for help and protection from his abuse; they declined. I stayed with him for two (2) years.

Another partner used me for my financial aid money that I financed through student loans. He stole thousands of dollars from me, under the guise of “bettering himself”. He would regularly use my vehicle (he did not own one) to meet other women, and then manipulatively state I was irrationally jealous when I confronted him. He was also the first partner who never physically abused me. At one point, I came to my parents asking for spiritual guidance regarding the relationship; they declined and mocked me openly and to my family. I stayed with this partner for over a year.

62. I was sexually assaulted during this time by a family member both my parents were close to, and continued to invite to family gatherings and holidays even after I disclosed the assault. No conversation was ever pursued by my parents following this disclosure.

This became sexual assault number four (4), following my biological father, my stepfather, and the soldier.

63. My family did not support me financially, emotionally, or mentally during undergraduate. And yet, I never failed a course, never missed a major assignment, and graduated as one (1) of only four (4) students from Campbell University's Honors Program out of a graduating class of over 500 students.

On the day of my graduation, my brother showed up with my family, drunk. He had been expelled from his dorm and his Resident Assistant status was revoked for being caught with alcohol and drugs in his room. He dropped out of school shortly thereafter and moved home with our mother. I witnessed his substance abuse increase significantly during this time.

As I was prepared to walk across the stage, somehow my brother appeared right next to me by the stage stairs. He grabbed my arm, almost causing me to fall backwards, stared at me with bloodshot eyes, and sneered, "It should've been me".

Afterwards, there was no celebration, no going to lunch as a family or spending time together. We took a few pictures, and my family loaded into their car and left.

I remember eating a Sonic cheeseburger on the front steps of my rental home, feeling incredibly alone.

The next six months would be a blur of listlessness and dead end jobs.

Post Graduation, Miscarriage, and Seattle, Washington, 2006-2008

64. In the fall of 2006, about six (6) months post-graduation and working for a local community lifestyle magazine, I discovered I was pregnant with my first child. The father and I were no longer together, and yet I grew deeply attached to the idea of being a mother. I already loved this child more than anything I had ever loved in my life.

In January of 2007, I suffered an extraordinarily painful miscarriage. I had only recently found out I was having a little boy. I named him Gabriel.

After Gabriel's death, I fell into the deepest depression. For the first time in my life, I used illegal drugs, taking a particular shine to anything that would deaden the emotional pain I felt suffocated by. The drugs were often supplied by the child's father, who was persistent in getting back together and used my miscarriage as his inroad. In April of 2007, after months of blaming me for my son's death, he convinced me to move to Seattle, Washington with him as he separated from the military.

After the death of my son, I felt like nothing meaningful connected me to my hometown anymore.

I agreed to leave.

65. For the first three (3) months in Seattle, I did not use illegal drugs, but my drinking of alcohol escalated significantly. I had no access to mental health services, and to date had only a handful of therapy sessions to help me navigate the previous twenty-two (22) years of trauma.

Despite this lack of therapy resources, I successfully procured a job at a property title company in a downtown high rise. I found a room to rent on my own and moved away from my son's father in an attempt to gain autonomy and heal.

For the first time in my life, I felt a sense of freedom. Having no vehicle, I spent hours walking the streets of West Seattle, the suburb where I lived. I would buy a cheap cup of coffee and sit in parks, writing poetry. I went for runs on the insane inclines of Seattle streets.

I felt I was discovering who I was for the first time in my life.

66. Shortly after my move, I received word that my brother had been kicked out of our parents' home by our stepfather. My stepfather had called my brother from Afghanistan after my mother had found marijuana and alcohol in his room. My brother told me he was offered a one-way ticket to anywhere in the country he wanted to go, and my stepfather would pay for it, but that he was not welcome in their home.

My brother booked his ticket for Seattle.

Throughout our early adulthood, my brother and I were extremely close, so close people often mistook us for twins. We could speak in a kind of code only we understood. We never spoke about our abuse, mostly because my brother refused, but there was a deeper connection between us that to me appeared unshakeable, given what we had gone through together. My brother spent much of my childhood protecting me from the abuse of our fathers. I felt I literally owed him my life at times.

I was excited to see my brother again, but extremely reluctant to invite him to live with me. I knew how hard it would be for him to start over, even as I was doing it myself, but I did not trust him to not influence me with his substance use.

His first night in the city, he drank every drop of liquor in the house I was staying in.

When he found a place of his own, he lived with a known drug dealer and my deceased son's father. He lost multiple jobs due to his alcohol usage during this time, and many times failed to pay rent. I watched him steadily descend further into alcoholism and mental distress and watched in futile fury as no one in his new social circle attempted to intervene.

Neither did our parents.

67. I became pregnant for the second time in November of 2007.

Losing my first son nearly incapacitated me emotionally and mentally. Before moving to Seattle, I had attempted suicide during a particularly drunk, depressive night. I had been told recently by a fellow church member that my son dying was “God’s will” because I was an unwed mother. This spiritual dichotomy persistently terrorized me day and night, that my alleged sinful behavior was somehow to blame for my son’s death.

I felt like my grief was an affront to God, that He snatched my son’s life from my body as necessary penance. However, this line of thinking did not align with the God I felt in my bones that I knew - one full of love and forgiveness.

My mother told me multiple times to “get over it”, that she had lost two children of her own (a fact unknown to me until I lost my son). When a new pastor suggested I hold a burial for my son, she scoffed at the idea. My first son’s existence felt invisible to everyone external to me. I kept a pair of Converse shoes and his ultrasound pictures and threw all other relics of him away.

When I discovered I was pregnant this second time, I felt nothing positive. No excitement, no urge to share with family and friends. I remember feeling anger - why this child and not my first son? I remember feeling apathetic - surely this child will die too, best not to become attached. I remember feeling the loneliest I had felt to date. Seattle was meant to be my new beginning; and I found myself emptying the last few hundred

dollars in my bank account to book a flight back home, to stay with my mother.

68. Three (3) months before I left Washington state for North Carolina, I was raped by my first son's father after a night he plied me with prescription pills while drinking. I remember him behind me, as I vomited out of an open, second-story window.

This was the fifth sexual assault in five (5) years.

Return to Hometown, NC and Pregnancy

69. When I returned to North Carolina, I was determined to seek therapy. I was diagnosed for the first time with PTSD, and prescribed medication. I had no friends, no peer support, and spent much of my time alone.

My mother was extraordinarily critical of me during this time. She never attempted to communicate why she disagreed with my choices, choosing instead to remind me how broken I was, how my college education was being wasted, but most impactfully warping and woofing a narrative she would tell herself for years to come - that I was somehow to blame for what had happened to me.

I did not deserve pity in her eyes, I deserved penance.

As my child grew within me, I felt next to nothing save a lingering sense of spiritual

obligation to give birth instead of seeking other options.

70. I went to work immediately, procuring a position at a local tutoring franchise making \$8 an hour, working less than twenty (20) hours a week. I saved as much as I could, buying the majority of my new child's items such as car seats, strollers, and clothing from yard sales and thrift stores.

At the same time, my mother began to exhibit troubling behavior regarding my unborn child. She bought brand new baby items including a crib, clothes, stroller, and car seat, instructing me that they were for use in her house by her only. Her criticism escalated, most often in some variation of "you're not prepared to be a mother". From what I remember, she did not volunteer parenting expertise that was not simultaneously coated in some kind of verbal acid regarding me as a person.

We fought constantly.

71. My beautiful baby boy was born August 30, 2008, nine (9) days after my 23rd birthday.

My mother refused to let my partner at the time into the delivery room as I underwent an emergency C-section, due to the doctor's discovery of blood in my son's embryonic sac. I lost so much blood as the surgery progressed, I was shaking uncontrollably, and ended up vomiting into my extremely long hair.

My mother made no move to comfort me, or to help clean me up.

She insisted she be the first person to hold my child, forever denying me that moment.

I cried while the surgeons closed up my shivering, depleted body.

Post Pregnancy, 2008-2012

72. I procured a secondary education English teaching position at a local high school prior to my son's birth. For the first time in my life, I was hired in a salaried position, and one that offered health benefits. I had not had health insurance to date in my adult life.

I returned to work after only five (5) weeks post-surgery despite my doctor instructing me the minimum recovery time from a C-section was at least eight (8) to twelve (12) weeks.

I had run through my savings during my maternity leave, and needed to begin receiving paychecks again, despite being in significant physical pain.

73. I married a combat veteran in February of 2009. My stepfather was in town from Afghanistan and attended the magistrate ceremony with my mother. My parents did not attend the reception.

I loved my husband in a deep but not romantic way. I did not feel capable of love the way I saw others experience in their relationships and marriages. Looking back, I realize this is in large part to the unresolved traumas I consistently kept buried regardless of the therapy I had received. I did not return to therapy after my son's birth.

I felt I was leading a double life between the dutiful daughter keeping dark family secrets by projecting perfection, and the life I desperately wanted where I could live happily and loved by those who saw the good in me.

I had two (2) affairs. My drinking escalated during this time, and I started using substances I had not touched since prior to my son's birth. I convinced myself I was functional, never drank during the week, never missed work, and therefore my substance use was justifiable.

In retrospect, I realize my infidelities and substance use re-entered my life when my stepfather notified the family he would be returning home from Afghanistan, permanently.

74. Sometime around 2011, my stepfather was scheduled to return from overseas and resume living in my parents' house.

I remember having a complete mental fracturing at the news. I had no idea what was happening in my body at first. My vision blurred, I couldn't stop shaking, and I felt sick to my stomach. My husband talked me through the episode, and I realized I needed to tell my mother, finally, what had happened at the lake house. My husband drove me to my mother's house.

What followed was a two (2) hour conversation between me and my mother. My mother would not allow my husband in the room, even as I was shrieking and crying at times telling her the details of my stepfather's assault and the assault by the other family member they supported.

For the first time since I could remember when, my mother pulled my head onto her lap, wrapped her arms around me, and stroked my hair and back as I cried. I poured and poured words, all the words I had stuffed and strapped down inside of me came tumbling out. And she held me nearly the entire time. Towards the end, I was crying more from the shock and gratitude of her maternal touch than the traumas I had disclosed.

She promised we would have a conversation between her, me, and my stepfather when he returned.

75. The conversation never happened.

My stepfather returned, and a fresh hell erupted for me mentally being around him constantly with the details I had told my mother lingering in the air above all three (3) of us every time we were in the same room.

I understand on this side of those years that my mother was more than likely protecting her own security. She had been married to my stepfather by that time for twenty (20) years. She had not worked consistently in over ten (10) years. She was wholly dependent

on my stepfather financially.

If true, her security came at my mental and emotional expense.

Once again, I felt disposable. Unloved. And alone.

76. I felt care and concern for my second son after his birth, but I felt incapable of loving him the way other mothers described. Looking back, I can see how my own feelings of unworthiness may have impacted my perception of being a good mother.

When my son was around eighteen (18) months old, I was giving him a bath. One of his favorite games was styling his long hair into dinosaur spikes and then doing our best dinosaur roars and splashes.

I can't quite explain it even now, but all at once I felt my entire chest cave in with the deepest love I had ever encountered in my life. I knew in that instant I would lay down my life for this tiny, curious, incredible child.

77. I remember realizing I had to leave and take my child with me. I remember knowing that if I stayed, either the secrets I kept would destroy me, or I would destroy myself trying to avoid them.

I let my husband know I was leaving, and that I wanted a divorce. I was offered a

teaching position at a coastal North Carolina high school, and I found a fully furnished house. From my marital home, I took only my clothes and personal effects, and my son's entire room including clothes, toys, and furniture.

I finally felt free.

Wilmington, NC 2012-2013

78. Being a single parent was incredibly hard. On a single teacher's salary, and after rent, utilities, daycare, and other necessary expenses, only \$300 was left over for gas and food. I vividly remember slumping to the floor one weekday after work, completely shutting down because the trash needed to be taken out after my son went to sleep. I was exhausted in a way I had never experienced.

Yet during this time, I once again went months without substance use. I established a routine for myself and my son that worked for us, and one that did not revolve around my parents and their opinions or presence.

My son and I spent many nights watching Sesame Street snuggled up in bed after dinner. We cooked together. I would wheel him in his wagon down to a local grocery store, singing songs and pointing out animals along the way. I taught him how to read, how to write his letters, numbers, and his name.

I felt I was finally healing.

79. During this time, no one in my family visited me, including my parents. However, my parents began to pester me persistently about leaving my son with them. I was finishing my master's degree that fall, and they used that context to encourage me to leave my son with them to "take time" for myself.

They insisted on taking him for weekends, often extending the agreed upon time frame to keep him. Later through court documents, I discovered they were telling their circle, attorney, and our family that they were watching my son because I was out of control, abusive, and on drugs.

At one point, my stepfather offered me \$5,000 if I would leave my son with my parents full-time. I refused, completely disgusted at the offer. My parents began to tell me my son did not want to come back home with me. When my son returned home to me, he would tell me how my parents plied him with gifts, food, snacks, movies, and asked him if he wanted to live with them.

Paranoia began to gnaw at me. But still, I complied with their requests, believing I was doing the right thing in maintaining my son's relationship with his grandparents and my extended family.

I had no idea they plotted for over a year to take custody of my son away from me.

80. On May 23, 2013, I was arrested in the town in which I lived by an Alcohol Law Enforcement officer who knew my stepfather personally. Later through subpoenas filed by my public defender, I discovered that my parents intentionally orchestrated my arrest, using their law enforcement connections in order to gain emergency sole custody of my child.

I was later informed through my public defender that my parents had filed reports with the local child protective agency in an attempt to have me investigated as a parent, which the agency declined to pursue due to lack of evidence.

The records also demonstrated that my parents had hired a private investigator to follow me, as well as put a tracker on my vehicle (which was owned by my stepfather) and bugged my home. I was informed they installed keystroke software on their devices, so when I came to their house and logged into emails, bank accounts, etc., they could then collect my passwords in order to monitor essentially my every cyber move.

I was arrested for possession of my then husband's prescription medication which was located in my vehicle after nearly two (2) hours of the present officers literally tearing my vehicle apart including dismantling door frames, seats, and storage spaces.

Phone records indicate my stepfather, my mother, their attorney, and the ALE agent were

calling and texting each other for the two (2) hours leading up to my arrest. My stepfather called the arresting officer immediately before the prescription medication was found, and thus immediately before I was taken into custody. I would find out later their real intention was to have me arrested for the recreational substance I was using on the weekends, a substance I myself had divulged to them that I used occasionally.

The next day I was arraigned on felony drug possession charges. Later that evening, I was served with an emergency custody order granting sole emergency custody to my mother and stepfather, pending trial.

To this day I can still hear the sound of my screams after I was served the papers - guttural, horrific screams that seemed endless.

81. My parents contacted the high school I worked at and informed them I was a “drug addict” citing my arrest. They contacted the media, and news stories ran locally, state-wide, and nationally regarding my arrest. I was placed on administrative leave. I spent my entire savings retaining two (2) attorneys to represent me in my custody case, one of which went no-contact after I paid him close to \$3,000.

I felt utterly abandoned. I felt my son would be lost to me forever.

82. Because I tested positive for an illegal substance, my parents were allowed to retain emergency custody of my son pending a permanent custody trial set for a year out. Even

though court documents indicate the substance found in my system was present at lower recreational levels and not at “addiction levels”, my parents began a campaign in court, in our family, and in the court of public opinion labeling me a drug addict.

For six (6) months, I was only allowed to see my son once every two (2) weeks for two (2) hours, under the supervision of a court representative. I drove four (4) hours round trip and was required to pay a fee each time.

This experience was one of the most humiliating of my life. I knew I was not a drug addict or abusive to my son, but I was treated as such each time: suspicious eyes followed my every move with my son, every hug, the entire time the representative scribbled notes for court record about what I said and how my son responded.

Each time he was escorted out of the facility after our time, I fell absolutely apart with grief and heartbreak.

83. I cannot properly explain the utter helplessness I felt during this time.

Losing my son was devastating enough, but to lose him in such a degrading way worsened the blow. My place of employment forced me to resign, citing my alleged “drug addiction”. My family fractured entirely, with me seemingly losing everyone in my nuclear and extended family in the matter of months. Friends I had for years no longer took my calls or answered texts.

Every court hearing, every time I sat within six (6) feet of my stepfather and mother. I developed a kind of battle and burial behavior of simultaneously preparing myself as both the pro se Defendant Mother, while burying the surge of emotions surrounding my parents and the combined impact of their respective abuses.

I developed heart palpitations, anxiety attacks, and gastric issues during this time.

I would be forced to engage in this mental/emotional dichotomy for nearly eight (8) years.

I knew the truth about myself as a parent, but at every turn it felt I was barraged with messaging to the contrary. I felt I had no voice in the court system, as I felt the months drag on and the custody trial date being pushed out over and over again due to seemingly countless continuances by my parents' attorney.

I felt absolutely abandoned and alone.

84. I was substance free for almost a year. Then my baby sister got married, and my son was in her wedding. My brother and I were not invited. To this day, my baby sister tells people she is an only child.

I picked up for the weekend. The pain of the rejection I was experiencing felt

insurmountable.

A week later I was drug tested.

85. In 2014, my parents were granted sole legal custody and joint physical custody of my son. I was granted visitation in the form of eight (8) hours every Saturday, a single Skype call each Tuesday lasting no more than fifteen (15) minutes maximum, and no additional phone visitation. If a call went too long, my parents would hang up on me or cut the internet to end me and my son's conversation.

My parents refused to grant me any additional access to my son, even as I consistently requested over and over. Negative drug tests continued to accumulate; I underwent court order psychological evaluation. Every expert I went to was unaware of my childhood abuse at the hands of my parents, my parents choosing instead to paint me as maniacal, unstable, and irreparably psychologically damaged – all inconsistent with the evidence I began to accumulate to prove my innocence against their litany of false allegations regarding me as a person, and to regain custody of my child.

I devoted myself to working full time, researching my case full time, and seeing my son.

86. This visitation schedule would continue for two (2) full years before we returned to court in 2016.

I never missed a single visitation.

87. Out of money, I began to educate myself about the law. In February of 2015, I filed my first pro se motion in my custody proceedings.

I spent hours in the local law library reading case law and statutes. I spent hours in the county courthouse where my son resided, reading every active custody case I could find.

I spent hours in the Law Library of UNC Chapel Hill, assisted by a law librarian who seemed to take pity on me and taught me how to read law anthologies and the opinions of district and supreme court justices.

At this point I had been substance free for close to two (2) years. Also, the pending drug possession charges were voluntarily dismissed due to prosecutorial discovery documents indicating my parents involvement, coupled with the lack of evidence regarding my “willing” possession of the found prescription medication.

My parents refused to negotiate new custody terms, and were extremely upset the criminal charges were dismissed, eliminating a critical aspect of their initial request for custody to begin with.

I felt I was finally growing closer to my son coming home.

88. My parents' attorney is a particularly aggressive, abrasive person. She knew my parents through their church.

She took open delight in criticizing me in the most hateful ways in open court, in front of other petitioners and witnesses waiting for their cases to be heard, and to the assumed delight of my parents. She called me a whore. She mocked my education. She alleged I had mental disorders that were not listed by their own clinical psychologist's report. She coerced witnesses and created false affidavits that she submitted to the court. She said I was a liar, that no one had abused me except my biological father. In turn, she said I abused my child relentlessly, and he should never be returned to my custody.

At one point, she filed a motion with the court that I should be denied custody because I was a bisexual woman, engaging in "sexual deviancy". She would wheel in enormous boxes of supposed "evidence" against me, in what I believe was an attempt at intimidation.

One of her main tactics to avoid a change in custody was to delay proceedings with innumerable frivolous motions, with each continuance extending the visitation hell I found myself within. I missed my son every second of every day, in the most painfully literal way.

Facing off with her in court at each hearing, and ultimately at trial, was extraordinarily stressful. But with the legal and civil procedure knowledge I was accumulating through

my pro se research, I began to make strides towards a new custody trial.

89. I represented myself at trial for custody modification in July of 2016.

Of my called witnesses during the 2016 trial, all but two (2) were previously expert witnesses for my parents, who changed their perspective(s) on me as a parent after multiple meetings (at my financial expense). I submitted psychological tests by the clinical psychologist my parents' initially hired, indicating my sole mental diagnosis was PTSD from childhood and young adult trauma, and that I did not qualify for a substance abuse related mental disorder. This witness also testified to my parents' culpability in my PTSD diagnosis and questioned their statement of "just wanting to help Katie get better" by pointing out their inaction in procuring mental health support for me as a child.

The judge indicated she was inclined to grant my motion to modify custody. She also indicated that because my son had already lived with my parents for three (3) years, she was not inclined to grant me primary or sole legal or physical custody at that time, due to his familiarity with my parents' home.

Regardless of the fact I raised my son until he was almost five (5) years old (he was at that time almost eight (8)).

Regardless of the fact that I knew I was already witnessing how my parents' "parenting" was eroding my once vibrant, vivacious, outspoken child.

Regardless of the context of my criminal charges being dismissed, and in light of evidence presented during trial, proving my parents' orchestration of my arrest.

90. During the 2016 trial, I was granted standard secondary custodial visitation in the form of every other weekend, holiday, and summer visitation solely. However, for the first time I was also granted access to my son's academic records and extracurricular activity schedule.

Scheduling between three (3) jobs, I attended every activity of his I could, even if it meant driving four (4) hours round trip from where I lived to see him for a few minutes and give him a hug before my mother angrily whisked him away.

Conflict increased between me and my parents at this point, who appeared to loathe my presence at my son's events. They told the parents of my son's friends and my son's teachers that I was a drug addict, how they had to rescue my son from my abuse. Several times my parents huffily snatched my son away from me when he would cling to me at these events, his eyes brimming with tears. Hardly anyone would interact with me, compounding my feelings of ostracization.

Every spare moment I had between working multiple jobs was dedicated to filing my next motion and seeing my son.

91. I filed a second motion to modify custody in 2017, citing my mother's and stepfather's negative and abusive parenting tactics towards my son, my son's stated desire to live with me full-time, and the refusal of my parents to increase physical visitation and to include me in parenting decisions to which I was now legally entitled.

At trial, when asked if she thought I was a "good mother", my mother took nearly thirty (30) seconds to respond. She sputtered, shook her head repeatedly. Permission was granted to treat her as a hostile witness for her refusal to answer. When pressed as to why sole legal and physical custody should not be returned to me, especially considering the years of my parents testifying they would willingly return my son "when Kate gets better" - she once again referred to my "drug addiction."

At this point, I had been substance free for nearly four (4) years. Though they were given the option to randomly drug test me since 2014, they had declined to do so in over two (2) years.

I was granted primary physical and joint legal custody of my son.

At this point, I had been employed full-time at a local NC community college since 2017. I was hired as a Humanities professor and a University Transfer Advisor. Procuring this position radically improved my financial situation and enabled me precious free time to devote to researching and drafting my legal motions and trial preparation binders. For the first time in my life, I was not working multiple jobs in order to financially survive.

My son came home full-time in August of 2018.

92. In May of 2019, I was accepted into my current doctorate program at North Carolina State University.

My parents and I returned to court August 22, 2019, on several competing contempt motions we had filed against each other in regard to violations of the current custody order. Because I did not force my son to take phone calls with them against his will, I was sentenced to serve six (6) hours in the county jail. The judge, an older white male with particular disdain for me, ordered me to be strip searched to “teach me a lesson”. This experience proved to be exceptionally traumatic for me as a sexual assault survivor. A fact the judge knew from my prior testimony.

When I was released, I was shaking uncontrollably and had to drive over an hour back home. It was my 35th birthday.

The next night, Friday, was the first class of my third semester of doctorate classes.

93. Between 2018 and 2020 my parents increased their harassment of me in regard to my son, for example attempting to access the gated neighborhood we lived in without my permission, attempting to negatively influence my son’s principal, and elongating phone calls and visits against my son’s spoken wishes.

During these two (2) years, my stepfather often was the one to drive my son to the agreed exchange location. The feeling of seeing him each time would disrupt me mentally and emotionally for several days afterwards.

I filed for a fourth modification of custody in 2019, requesting sole legal and physical custody of my son. The presiding judge, our fourth in eight (8) years, granted my request in March of 2021. He admonished my parents in open court for what they had inflicted upon my son, through their perpetuation of custody proceedings without cause.

At this point, I had seven (7) years of no substance use. I was also finishing the final semesters of my doctorate program:

And experienced for the first time what I can only describe as a mental breakdown.

Post Custody Action

94. In December of 2020, I experienced a calculated termination of my position at the community college by my then department chair. I had reported the department chair to human resources and executive leadership for retaliatory and discriminatory behavior both against myself, as well as his encouragement of discrimination against our marginalized students.

I felt entirely abandoned by my institution, and insane with worry about what to do next.

Losing my full-time position as a single parent was devastating, especially prior to my final March 2021 custody trial. My savings would support me and my son for roughly two (2) months.

I applied for unemployment, Medicaid, and EBT, but the benefits took months to be approved. Our local department of human services communicated that because I was choosing to remain enrolled in my doctorate program, I did not qualify for Medicaid. For the same reason, I did not qualify for food stamps. My son was awarded both benefits because he was a minor.

During this time, half my savings went to pay for my doctorate program tuition. I remember attending class around this time when my peers and professor were discussing workforce development. Increased COVID unemployment benefits became a lively topic of conversation. I remember feeling incensed at the comments of “leeching” by those who received said benefits.

Every colleague that spoke up was White, and either married, affluent or both, based on details shared publicly in class over the years. I was the only single parent in the program. I was also the only student actively on government assistance. When I spoke against their perceptions, there was a silence. Then the professor changed the subject.

95. I could not renew the lease of my rental home in March of 2021. During this time, I lost nearly all my possessions in a robbery. Once again, I was faced with figuring out a way to

support myself and my son, find us a safe place to live, and ensure he was supported in school and in his mental health.

During this time, my son came out to me as trans, news I was not at the time prepared to receive. I did not understand what was happening in his mental and emotional spaces. We were exceptionally close when he was younger, and this new information made me feel disconnected from him. I felt he was persistently angry at me for struggling in my understanding of what his transition meant, even as I tried to express my unwavering support of him, as he honored his true state of being.

I moved us into a home in which I rented two (2) of the house's three (3) bedrooms. I began bartending at a local Army Special Forces bar and was able to save enough money to move us into a rental home of our own within three (3) months.

96. Time passed.

I was offered a contract to supervise an adult high school and GED program at a community college. I was offered a contract to teach at a local university. I procured a full-time position at a local charter school. I was making the highest combined salary I had made in my life.

I was miserable.

My son was going through significant emotional and mental evolutions at the time that I now completely support him in but was somewhat helpless to communicate at the time. Our relationship suffered. I believe he harbored (justifiable) resentments regarding his time away from me during the custody trials, and of my initial reaction of confusion and ignorance regarding his transition.

My romantic relationships with men at this time were ultimately unfulfilling, though no longer physically violent. I felt I had outgrown the manipulative and misogynistic behavior I experienced by men in my adult life thus far.

I began to accept loneliness as a status quo.

97. In October of 2022 I met my current partner.

After a lifetime of trauma, for the first time in my life I felt understood. We spent hours talking about anything and everything. He comforted me through trauma episodes. He supports/ed me in my choices and allows/ed me space to heal. He connected with and respects my son.

For the first time in my life, I felt wholly accepted. Unconditionally loved.

I still do.

98. I began seeking mental health supports for my son. We waited months for an appointment at the Duke Gender Clinic. I legally changed his name. I began to experience the fear and stress echoed by other parents of trans children in the sense that I constantly worried about my son's safety - at school especially. I was able to contact and engage queer friendly therapists. His wellbeing was and is paramount.

My son is now entering his sophomore year of high school. He is an incredible, intuitive, creative entity. He is an artist, a poet, a lover of music, and an aspiring athlete. He makes me laugh constantly. His intelligence reminds me of his uncle, my brother.

The single greatest honor of my life has been and will be the opportunity to protect him in large part from the abuse I endured as a child, and to teach him how to protect and believe in himself.

Many times, in our harder times, he was the single reason I endured.

99. I was diagnosed within the last year with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as well as complex PTSD (C-PTSD).

I continue with therapy.

I am the happiest I have ever been.

I am grateful.

NC Community College CRT Instructor Identity

♪ Hold On - The Alabama Shakes ♪

Institution 1 (Inst1)

2015-2017

Roles and Responsibilities:

Academic Success Instructor

Developmental Instructor

Humanities Instructor

High School Liaison Instructor

100. Because I refused a plea deal and requested trial after my 2013 arrest, the prosecutor pushed my case out almost two (2) full years. During these two years, I could not use my Master's Secondary English Education teaching license to obtain full-time, salaried employment in education, due to the pending criminal charges.

I went to work at a local gas station for \$8/hr, working roughly twenty (20) hours a week. From there, at the recommendation of a customer, I was hired to work as front of house in a local restaurant. From there, I heard of an opening at a local Irish pub needing a daytime bartender and server. And from there, I met a customer who encouraged me to apply to NC CC Inst1.

101. In 2015, the criminal charges against me were dismissed due to lack of evidence. This allowed me to apply to NC CC Inst1 without reference to pending criminal charges.

I was hired by the Developmental Department to teach student success and developmental reading and writing courses.

This would be my first time teaching in a community college, as well as in a HE setting.

102. This was also my first time being hired as an adjunct.

I had no previous experience teaching the developmental courses I was assigned, was given a textbook I was unfamiliar with, and given limited guidance by my department's leadership as to how the course would be implemented in order to support the college's wider academic mission.

There was no discussion of student learning outcome requirements for my courses, no discussion of instructional strategies, and very limited contact with my department's leadership once the semester began.

The entirety of my department at the time was white, and the majority could be described as affluent, white, females.

103. I was also informed I would be working for two (2) months before I received a paycheck.

My course schedule at Inst1 included classes typically scheduled during the day or early afternoon, making additional full-time employment anywhere else impossible on top of my existing part-time jobs.

I remember not eating on certain days to save the money to pay for the gas for the 45-minute one-way commute.

I felt extremely grateful for the opportunity.

104. Over my two (2) years teaching at Inst1, Inst1 students reported disliking the white preference instructional practices of professors, such as class-length-lectures without student engagement, and a heavy reliance on individual versus collaborative working sessions with other students.

The majority of student assignments, such as research papers and discussion posts, were graded heavily by white preference “professional” writing standards, with little or no scaffolded writing instruction support in a student’s colloquial language.

Without scaffolding with writing assignments, common formats such as MLA or APA and common argumentative writing outlines create barriers for students with limited writing and reading skill sets. I have seen this affect students by delaying academic progression, as well as negatively affect students’ confidence that they can develop their abilities. I have also heard instructors state these formats are used to “weed out the students who don’t really want to be there”, demonstrating a lack of understanding in

how this type of writing instruction is deeply rooted in white preference.

I encountered many Inst1 students whose final writing assignments were docked significant points for MLA/APA formatting errors, using “inappropriate” colloquialisms and/or slang, or for plagiarism when the students communicated they struggled to find support to improve these “errors”. Even with the advent of a writing support and tutoring center at Inst1, many students found scheduling and transportation for appointments to be extremely challenging in such a vast, rural county. For these students, exasperation in English courses ran high.

105. During this time a colleague said to me, “they take developmental English because they couldn’t hack it in ENG 111”, referring to the students in my courses. My students were described as “unmotivated”, “lacking intellectual aptitude for upper level writing courses”, and “unskilled”.

One day during a break, I overheard my developmental students, “just write the shit how they want you to write it; it don’t matter anyway, just pass the class and get that degree”.

Embarrassingly, I felt more offended than anything. How could they not understand how important “proper” English was? How would they ever find adequate employment if they did not see value in pristine MLA format? If they plagiarized their sources or their writing content, well wasn’t that on them for trying to be sneaky and cheat instead of on me as their instructor of record?

At this point, I significantly adopted white preference standards, at the guidance of my departmental leadership, assuming this type of instruction was “just how it’s done” in HE, regardless of my success with CRT in secondary education. CRT, while present in my initial classes at Inst1, was not a primary focus.

I was intimidated by teaching at a HE institution, and wanted to be viewed as a good team member and colleague. Ironically, years later while employed at Inst3, I would be labeled “combative” and “argumentative” for questioning the lack of CRT instruction at Inst3, and attempting to educate my department on effective CRT instructional strategies.

106. Slowly, I began to reintegrate lessons and activities that worked for my high school students, with my student success rates starting to (just as slowly) improve.

I pause to note my definition of “student success” is not just successful completion of a course, but rather individual student growth towards a particular course’s student learning outcomes as outlined by the institution in which I was teaching. However, personally, the most important marker of student success is identifying growth in a student’s skill sets since the course’s inception. In other words, the most important indicator of “student success” to me as a CRT instructor is whether or not a student’s reading, writing, research, and argumentation skills improved from the beginning of their enrollment in my course.

At one point while looking for an academic article for a lesson, I Googled “reverse racism”. A favorite instructional tactic of mine was to choose modern, controversial articles and allow the students to prewrite argumentative responses in order to practice for their final argumentative research papers. I thought a conversation on “reverse racism” in my diverse class would be an excellent topic to use to teach basic argumentation format in an initial introductory activity.

Instead of “reverse racism” against whites, the search returned “white privilege” as the top result. Every subsequent result on that first page was a link to an article explaining why reverse racism did not exist, and defining white privilege as systemic white preference often unintentionally used to oppress non-white populations economically, legally, environmentally, etc.

I had never heard of white privilege before.

107. Over the course of my employment at Inst1, I began interacting with students who opened up to me about their academic and life experiences, often tying the two inexplicably together.

One semester about a year into my employment, I began to interact and invite my students to interact with texts on white privilege. This was the first time I had used non-fiction, white privilege focused texts in any class I had taught.

During this class, a black female in her late 20s described for our class how white privilege does not show up as a “cash check” for being white, but rather explained how white privilege passes under the radar of whites who are not cognizant of their privilege in certain situations.

For example, she shared that her daughter, whose skin was darker brown like her mama’s, needed tights for a dance recital. The student explained she went to several different stores attempting to locate a pair of nylon tights that matched her daughter’s skin color - and was unsuccessful. She explained how many beauty and hair care products are segregated in major retail stores such as Walmart, with a separate “ethnic hair and beauty care” aisle, with the majority of products sold catering to lighter skin tones, solely.

But perhaps the most impactful experience she relayed regarding her experience with white privilege was in regard to a teenaged family member facing criminal sexual assault charges for engaging in sexual conduct with a white female similar in age. According to the student, the white female teenager had invited her family member to a hotel at a neighboring beach town. When her family discovered that he was black, they called the county sherrifs to arrest the young black male, alleging sexual assault of their daughter. According to her, the young man was illegally arrested without a search warrant, held without bond, and had his cell phone confiscated.

Even though the text messages on his phone suggested the encounter between the two teenagers was consensual, he was arraigned for felony sexual assault.

The connection I felt to this student was immediate, because of my own criminal history and illegal detainment and arrest. However, I was beginning to understand my experience with the criminal justice system, and her family's, were very, very different.

I would never be able to understand what it felt like to be subjected to a criminal justice system as a non-white person.

108. During this time, I had what I can only describe as a contentious relationship with a black male student. He was a younger student, a student athlete, and struggled heavily with writing in Standard American English.

I remember holding a large bias against him because of what I perceived was his "attitude". He often sat in the back of the class, often on his cell phone, and declined to engage in classroom discussions or activities. He was often absent and turned in assignments late on a regular basis.

This student took my course twice, as he did not pass the first developmental course and was required to take one again. He chose me as his instructor. This confused me, because I felt this student inherently did not like me, or my class. One particular interaction stands out in my mind: he was displaying what I perceived as "disrespectful behavior", rolling his eyes and "huffing and puffing" when instructed to engage with the class. I took him into an adjoining classroom to speak with him one-on-one thinking this would help us

have a more productive dialogue.

To my recollection, he would not look me in the eye, stood a distance away from me, and when I asked essentially what the issue was, he seemed to smirk. I was incredibly upset. I felt I was giving him an opportunity to speak, and he was deliberately not engaging with me. I took it extremely personally, at one point saying, “is it because I’m a white teacher?? Is that the issue??” to which he instantly laughed and shook me off.

I remember at the time feeling entitled to my reaction. I remember feeling defensive and angry - who did this student think he was? Didn’t he know I was just trying to help him? Didn’t he know I wasn’t like those other racist white professors?

109. Learning about white privilege piqued my curiosity about white preference, and its effects on myself, my community, and my students. However, my efforts to integrate white privilege topics into my content and instruction was minimal at best.

One day, I was having a conversation with a black female student support staff member. Somehow, we wandered onto the topic of white privilege, and I explained to her what I was trying to do by incorporating the topic into my developmental writing and reading lessons.

She opened up to me that she had been born and raised in Inst1’s rural county and had lived there all her life. We discovered that the gas station I worked at after my arrest was

the same gas station she and her family would visit from time to time. She further explained that her and her family were not allowed to enter through the front door of the gas station for her entire childhood, with the proprietor requiring non-white customers to only be served from an open window in the back of the building. I remember feeling a sense of connection with her, as she shared her painful memories of discrimination and white preference.

I asked if she would come to my class as a guest speaker and speak about her experiences to my students. Looking back, I realize I was pushing her to come speak about a very painful, discriminatory time in her life. I felt connected to her pain from my own trauma experiences but did not have the maturity or knowledge to understand our traumas could never be equalized in that respect due to my own white identification.

She did come to my class but eliciting responses from her proved extremely challenging. She sat at the front of the room, hands folded in her lap, eyes cast downward. As I tried to prompt her to open up like she had in her office to me, she began to cry. She did not recount the gas station experience to my students, nor any other discrimination experiences. The entire interaction felt awkward in a way I couldn't understand.

Later, I would realize there were three (3) young white male students in my class, and only two (2) students of color. I was a white identifying professor.

The fact that I did not take into account how she would feel in such a group setting causes me shame to this day.

Institution 2 (Inst2)

2017

Roles and Responsibilities:

Developmental Education Instructor

110. At Inst2, I was teaching a summer 8-week developmental writing course. After two (2) years teaching as an adjunct, this course at Inst2 was the most diverse set of students I had taught by far.

The majority of students were my age or older. I recall myself being the only white-identifying person in the room. Many of the students were married with families. One student was an immigrant, whose first language was Hindi. One student was Islamic. The majority of the students were taking college classes for the first time. One student needed to pass this final course to keep her day care license, and one student needed to pass as a condition of probation.

111. Because I identified large disparities in the skill sets of the students enrolled, my teaching style thus far in HE began to shift back to the CRT-focused teaching style I implemented in my secondary education classrooms. The preferred teaching style dictated to me by Inst1's department leadership was not going to work for many of the

students present in the course, and I needed to find a style that helped each student reach their goal of passing.

This was the first time I developed truly meaningful relationships with students in HE. While my students at Inst1 trusted me with personal information, and several students communicated with me outside of class about their lives outside of school, the relationships were ultimately classroom focused.

However, at Inst2, I integrated time at the beginning of the semester for us to get to know each other better, to share our lives outside of the classroom. By integrating this time, I began to sense a closeness, a unity among the students and myself. I learned their back stories. I learned their goals, and hopes, and heartaches. I was often able to use a student's cultural background, or cultural identities shared during class time to inform my content selection in the course, especially considering the textbook was extremely difficult for some students to decipher.

The students began to view the class as a type of scholastic family. We would share funny videos during breaks, share food, share hardships and offer advice if solicited. The students consoled one another and celebrated one another in a way I had not experienced at Inst1. Reimplementing the CRT of my secondary education classrooms, I felt I was actually connecting with HE students and through that connection, was assisting them to succeed in the course.

112. I was not given much guidance on how the course should be run from my all white female department leadership. I was given a textbook, and instructed I had wide freedoms in how the course was structured and taught. I considered this to be my opportunity to improve how I taught developmental writing, while hopefully resulting in higher student success rates.

Firstly, I implemented a grading system where a student could redo any assignment as many times as they wanted in order to improve the assignment's score as well as their overall grade. Because I had taken the time to evaluate each student based on early required writing samples, I was able to grade each student's growth individually rather than by a rubric. Early in the course, I stacked my gradebook with majority low-stakes writing assignments for which they were automatically given 100s if completed.

The only firm assignment deadline was the end of the semester, giving many students the opportunity to make up assignments in between their work and home schedules. Instead of stressing the students with a "one-size-fits-all" instructional approach, I began scaffolding each student's assignments individually by adjusting assignment requirements based on the student's skill sets and the rate of their learning growth throughout the course. I would put "suggested deadlines" on assignments to help students stay on track with assignment completion but did not penalize late assignments at all. Contrary to a popular opinion that such adjustments would result in an impossible slew of final assignments to be graded at the end of the semester, only a few students needed such support.

I also made it a point to get to know each student personally, on whatever level they were comfortable sharing. I asked questions about their hobbies, their families, their goals after the course and their goals after graduation. In turn, my students encouraged me to share my own, and in doing so I believe I became less of an authority figure and more relatable to them. Contrary again to what I have heard other HE instructors state, my students did not respect me less the more we shared and worked together.

113. Incredibly, every student was present nearly every class, every week of that semester.

Students who previously shared they were afraid of and/or hated writing courses, who had negative experiences with English teachers in the past, were engaging in prewriting assignments, outlining assignments, drafting and revisions assignments with confidence and engagement.

The CRT implementation seemed to be working.

114. Every student that summer experienced growth towards the course's learning outcomes.

Institution 3 (Inst3)

2017-2020

Roles and Responsibilities:

English and Humanities Instructor

University Transfer Advisor

DEI Committee Member

Resilience Team Member

Professional Development Presenter

Early College ENG Department Liaison

Rape Crisis Center Advocate

115. A former peer from my undergraduate institution contacted me about an open full-time position in the Humanities Department of Inst3, for which they also worked full-time. The peer knew my reputation for high success scores in secondary education, and felt I would be an excellent fit in the department. I was extremely grateful for the job lead for many reasons, one being health insurance and one being the salary at \$45,000 was more money than I had ever made in my professional life.

At the time, I had been teaching for nearly a decade and had earned a Master of Arts in Teaching with a specialization in writing instruction at the secondary and HE levels.

At the time of my hiring, I was under the assumption that each of the nine (9) English instructors also held Masters of Arts in Teaching, when in fact the greater majority of my colleagues held Master's in English, solely with no or limited teaching certifications, licensures, or credits. This departmental reality would fuel a disconnect between myself,

my colleagues, and my department leadership that persisted throughout my employment.

116. The disconnect between my experiences in secondary education and my experiences beginning employment at Inst3 started almost immediately. In secondary education, teachers and staff typically have a week or so of mandatory workdays to set up their classrooms, organize their curriculum, and learn a little about the students they will be receiving that year through past academic records which are readily available.

My first day of work, three (3) days before classes were to start, I showed up at work in jean shorts and a tank top because my experience with attire on “workdays” was casual. To my complete embarrassment when I showed up, everyone else in the department was dressed in business attire, a protocol no one had advised me on prior. I felt enormous judgment by many of my soon to be colleagues, including my department chair.

As the day progressed, it became apparent that there were more unwritten rules in the department I needed to learn but that no one offered to explain, including my department chair. It was assumed that I knew how to operate various softwares with which I had no knowledge or experience; it was assumed that I understood terms such as “gateway English course” and “institutional effectiveness”; it was assumed that I could immediately begin to advise students on academic progression, when I had no previous experience of either advising or of CC program/degree pathways.

I felt lost on what to do to surmount my knowledge gaps and felt unsupported by

departmental leadership. I concentrated on building my courses in Blackboard, creating syllabi, and generally attempting to amass an impossible amount of systems knowledge in the limited days before classes were to begin.

Also, at the time of my hiring, I was nine (9) months away from my third custody trial, facing paycheck to paycheck finances because of trial debt, and struggling with my own traumas which I buried in order to remain employed.

117. Inst3's Humanities Department, which included communication and writing instructors, was almost entirely white save one non-white instructor. The entirety of the English department was white, with the majority of English instructors identifying as female, and both the department chair and the lead instructor were white males.

I was the only single parent in the department. The majority of my colleagues were married with two-incomes.

118. It became quickly apparent that the department culture was instructor-centric rather than student-centric.

At our first department meeting during my first semester, the department chair and a few of my colleagues openly and seemingly unashamedly talked about how our shared students were lacking in skill sets, were generally irresponsible, and looked for "exceptions" that we should be firm in denying.

There was an extremely uncomfortable air of many instructors who felt superior to the students. I remember at one point the department chair starting a round of laughter about how he protected us from “more work” and went on to share strategies that ultimately put the onus of a student’s progression squarely on the student in a kind of absolution of instructor responsibility.

I left that first meeting shocked, confused, and feeling uneasy. I myself had started my HE journey at the local community college in my hometown as a dual-enrollment student at the age of fifteen (15). I had imagined all NC CCs, then, to be a place of opportunity and access, and again assumed that my colleagues shared my intense passion for equity and cultural responsiveness when dealing with all demographics of students.

I would learn over the next three (3) years how very wrong I would be on both accounts.

119. Almost immediately, I could sense the discrimination against non-white student populations, especially black students and black student athletes. I overheard colleagues speaking negatively against “lazy”, “problematic”, “chronically late” students who “just needed to learn more responsibility”.

And yet, no guidance was given throughout the entirety of my employment on how to develop interpersonal relationships with students. Equity practices and trauma-informed teaching was never discussed in department meetings nor through email updates from

leadership. In fact, it would not be until nearly two (2) years later when I was accepted into the 2019 NCSU Community College Leadership EdD cohort that I heard the term “equity” for the first time.

Though Inst3’s SP included references to equity in teaching and learning, I saw no emphasis on equity in actual practice within my department.

120. My first semester was a thrilling time for me. I was employed in a job I loved, I was serving a diverse population of students with a myriad of talents, goals, and pathways, and I truly enjoyed coming into work every day. I felt I had found my “forever” job.

Yet, just like with Inst1, I felt pressure from the status quo of the English department to shelve certain aspects of my CRT practices in order to conform to the expectations of course management set by my department leadership. These practices included reinstating course guidelines I knew were detrimental to student progression such as immovable attendance policies and strict assignment guidelines. I was advised to “use attendance as a way to weed out the undesirables” from my student rosters. I was advised to offer no makeup assignments. I began to realize my department’s culture was one of adherence to white preference norms of teaching and learning.

Yet, I complied.

121. At the time, I was ignorant to the world of student and instructor data available at the college. This meant that I had no way of knowing how negatively I would end up impacting the academic progression of many students. I was told each instructor was trusted (without our chair's oversight) to set their own course expectations, content, and instructional practices. Many of my colleagues appeared to enjoy setting incredibly strict assignment guidelines that many students struggled to understand, and to complete.

This was very often framed as the student's fault, not the instructor's. After all, our all white department was simply holding all students to the same standard of argumentative research and writing; if the student couldn't be successful, that was obviously entirely on them.

122. I remember I was given majority gateway and secondary writing courses as my course load that first year at Inst3. ENG 111 and the subsequent courses (depending on degree pathway) of ENG 112, 114, and 116 are the most grading intensive courses of all Humanities courses offered.

The department chair, his close friend who also taught in the department, and the lead instructor were given very minimal course loads of predominantly Humanities courses, with notorious low student enrollment. The grading load was minimal, especially compared to grading research papers for fully enrolled ENG 111 courses of which many of us were assigned several in a single semester.

I remember the lead instructor at the time being kind and supportive of me attempting to expand my curriculum vitae by requesting to teach humanities and literature courses.

I remember my department chair growing steadily more resentful of me for asking, and for bringing up the course assignment disparity to begin with.

123. My course load typically extended between the hours of 9 am and 2 pm, and I would stay at work often up to 6, 7 pm working on court preparation.

In my ignorance, I was not aware Inst3's personal-time-off (PTO) policy did not require an employee to take a leave day if the employee was under a court subpoena. In other words, even though I was required under subpoena to attend my custody pre-trial hearings throughout my first year of employment, I was not aware of the policy and instead used almost the entirety of my personal days in order to attend court.

During my first year evaluation with my department chair, I remember asking directly what I had done to create what I felt was a hostile environment between the two of us. He indicated that he did not agree with my teaching style, and that I created too much "commotion" in the suite of offices by the "excessive" number of student meetings I would schedule during office hours. He told me other colleagues had complained about the noise of constant students coming in and out of my office, that it resembled "Grand Central Station".

I remember him also stating that he felt my “taking leave” was “excessive”, with no knowledge of my court requirements. When I very truthfully explained I was involved in a custody action regarding my son, his face continued to stare at me, emotionless.

I remember him looking at me as if I were lying. I left the office after our meeting feeling insanely vulnerable.

I could feel the outline of a target being drawn.

124. My second year of teaching, and one (1) year prior to my acceptance into the Community College Leadership program at NCSU, I resolved to reintegrate the CRT strategies I knew helped students.

I noticed my Early College students (read: high school students) were improving more than my “traditional” students (read: non-high school students). While I was happy to see the Early College students succeed at higher rates, I was perplexed as to why my traditional students were not succeeding at the same rates.

Looking back, I understand that while I was reimplementing CRT strategies, my white preference biases were continuing to impact non-white and non-white preference presenting students negatively. In particular, several of my black students.

By mid-term of the semester, it seemed like half my class in each class dropped out completely. At the time, I credited this to the students “not being ready for college work”, echoing the sentiments of my department.

It did not occur to me that my instruction, content, or course guidelines were to blame.

125. I can remember two (2) black students in particular that were impacted negatively by my white preference policies within my courses that first year.

The first was a black male, in his mid twenties, who was enrolled in my ENG 114 course. I had been advised by a member of my department that ENG 114 was the “dumbed down version of ENG 112”, ENG 112 being the ENG 111 companion course for students enrolled in university transfer pathways.

I would realize later in my third year that ENG 114 should not be run as a mini ENG 112, because the overwhelming majority of students enrolled in ENG 114 were going into vocational occupations and/or occupations requiring technical writing. However, at the time, I taught ENG 114 complete with a major research assignment that ultimately was not useful for ENG 114 students entering their workforce fields.

The black male student was often absent from class, and on his personal phone when he was in attendance. I remember taking his behavior personally and calling him out in front of the class several times. I did not understand why he wasn't engaging in the lesson like

the other students. Eventually, he stopped attending class altogether, and did not pass the course. To my recollection, he was at the end of his degree pathway, and not passing my course delayed his degree attainment by an entire additional semester.

126. The second student I can recall whom I impacted negatively with my white preference behavior was a black female in one of my literature courses. This was the first non-white student to call me out on my white preference.

I remember we were reading an excerpt from the black-identifying author James Baldwin, and the text included several usages of the n-word. Without hesitation while reading out loud with the class, I read each instance of the n-word. I did not give it a second thought.

The black female student was instantly upset. Later, I would read professor ratings online, one of which she had written, emphatically calling me out as a white professor who had no issue saying a racial slur aloud in class. I was mortified.

It took several months to take her words to heart without feeling the offense of white fragility simultaneously.

The next semester, when reading Baldwin's text again, I recounted to my students the online professor review, and attempted to take accountability for my behavior. I asked if a black student would volunteer to read the passage instead.

Although initially wounded through my own white fragility, I am forever grateful to the black female student for calling me out publicly.

I wish she could know how she helped my self-reflection in a significant way. But I should have never put her, or any of my other black students in that position of uncomfortability in the first place.

127. I believe white preference in educational settings is interlocked with lacking empathy for students, and I can remember several times how my adherence to my department's non-empathy culture negatively impacted students.

One time in an ENG 111 class, a white female student in her 30s was consistently coming to class, but without completed assignments. I would host in-class writing workshops on major assignments, and in this particular class I announced that if you did not have a completed outline, you might as well leave. This student grew visibly upset, slamming her school items into her bag and walking briskly out of class.

When I stopped her at the door and asked her if she was okay, she retorted, "Well I don't have my stuff so you told me I might as well not be here. I've got a disabled kid at home, I was forced to move over the weekend, I lost my job, I'm just trying to make it". I had not even considered how my words would affect someone struggling in their personal lives to even come to class.

In another class, when we were attempting to discuss protests against police brutality that were growing in number after another young black male was killed during a police altercation, I made the decision to show the class, which was pretty evenly half white and half non-white students, footage of the arrest and murder of Eric Garner. At the time, I felt I was doing something important by showing the footage. Looking back, I realize I showed footage of a man's death without the consent of the students watching. I cannot imagine how traumatizing and/or retraumatizing watching that footage must have been for many of those students.

In another instance, I made the decision to show the congressional hearing footage of Brett Kavanaugh as he answered questions related to his nomination to the Supreme Court. The class was working on argumentation, and most of my students stated they had never watched a congressional hearing before. Dr. Christine Ford was slated to testify about a sexual assault she alleged occurred between herself and Kavanaugh when he was intoxicated at a college party, allegations he strongly denied. I required my students to watch Dr. Ford's testimony, and a discussion surrounding sexual assault ensued. One of my Early College students began to sob uncontrollably. I asked the student if they felt comfortable coming back to my office, and talking about what they were feeling. The student revealed their sister had sexually assaulted them for the majority of their childhood, and still lived in the family home in which the student also resided. Looking back, I realize I provided little scaffolding for the lesson, and much like with the Eric Garner footage, I did not give students an option to not participate in the lesson should

they choose, nor did I provide trigger warnings for the content being viewed.

At the same time, many students reported my content and lessons to be much more engaging than those of other professors in the department, that I used relevant and modern context for reading and writing exercises, and that they appreciated my colloquial and relaxed teaching style.

I struggled during this second year at Inst3 to find a balance between the CRT I knew to be effective, and the empathy I too was lacking when it came to my students' hearts and minds when being exposed to my content and instructional choices. I thought I was being progressive, when at times I was exhibiting the same lack of empathy I felt my department lacked.

128. Though I established meaningful relationships with many students during year one (1) at Inst3, year two (2) I experienced a significant increase in the number of students entrusting me with personal aspects of their lives, particularly their trauma experiences.

I did not shy away from controversial topics in my class, often discussing openly my experiences with sexual assault and childhood abuse whenever the two subjects were connected to class discussion or content. The response from many students was positive, although looking back I understand that I should have offered more trauma-informed approaches to such conversations overall such as trigger warnings or allowing students to opt out of the discussion without an attendance or assignment penalty.

My department colleagues began to complain to the department chair because of the number of students, both scheduled and unscheduled, coming in and out of the office suite on any given day to meet with me. My office mate at the time complained regularly about how noisy she perceived the meetings to be, with the students and me often joshing back and forth while walking through an advising meeting or reviewing a particular assignment for class. Her own meeting with students often lasted less than ten (10) minutes. This same office mate was praised by the department as one of our “best” advisors.

During year two (2) at Inst3, students frequently visited my office. Some students cried, at times sharing secrets they stated were undisclosed to anyone else. I offered my own experiences as a show of relatability, and when I did so, many students expressed relief that their trauma experiences were “believed”. One female student was being actively sexually abused by her stepfather, but was concerned about losing her housing, financial support, and family if she disclosed the abuse. Another female student had been sexually abused by her stepfather in the past, but when she disclosed the abuse, her mother sided with the stepfather. Several queer-identifying students sought me out to talk about the discrimination they felt they experienced by other professors and Inst3 agents. Several students talked about their experiences with racism on campus.

When they asked for resources, I did my best to connect them, but realized Inst3 was severely lacking in student supports for trauma, specifically for sexual assault survivors.

This would lead me to partner with the only female Vice President and the local rape crisis center to attempt to bring such resources to campus.

Even after extensive research, networking with community partnerships and experts, the male leadership denied our initiative, citing (incorrectly according to existing policy) that the liability outweighed the benefit.

129. Also, during this time, I began to see my department stayed nearly entirely away from politics in their content and instruction.

Even as I would hear colleagues engage in political conversations amongst themselves in the office suite, and many times the colleagues expressed liberal and/or progressive views, students reported to me that the lack of culturally relevant content made it difficult for them to engage with writing and reading assignments.

At one point, I was called into my chair's office to discuss my use of the "Nasty Woman" poem performed by Ashley Judd at the Women's March of 2017, and written by then nineteen-year-old (19) Nina Donovan. The Women's March was attended by nearly 500,000 women and their supporters, with millions joining the protest worldwide. The protest, and the poem itself were in direct relation to Donald Trump's incendiary comments regarding women, their anatomy, and their lower, negligible purposes in society.

My chair had spoken multiple times in department meetings about our “academic freedom” as professors, and how it was important to the chair that our academic freedom in the selection of our course content be fiercely protected. The chair stated further that they felt this protection was a large part of their job.

Immediately prior to our meeting, a white female student of middle age had stormed into the office previous to this meeting, demanding to be transferred out of my course because I “hated President Trump”. I defended my use of the speech to the chair, for its advocacy of women’s rights especially and the voice it gave to issues facing all American women in a modern context. The chair’s response was to ask me why I couldn’t use Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I A Woman” speech instead, as it was devoid of profanity, and most importantly - controversy.

I remember feeling exasperated at what I felt was the male chair’s lack of understanding of the power of the Donovan selection speaking to issues happening to women *now*. I also felt the chair was out of touch with the reading ability of our students and was suggesting a text that was far more syntactically challenging with dense and often difficult to decipher vocabulary. Of the two selections, the Donovan text was far more accessible for all reading levels as compared to the Truth selection, as well as the point of the lesson was not to burden the student’s with an older, denser text but rather for the students to read the Donovan text and practice annotation skills we’d learned in class.

It felt at the time like he was reaching for a commonly circulated “woman’s text” with the added benefit of being written by a non-white woman, but without the modern context of what it meant like to live as a woman in American society.

This as I knew the chair had held public political office, for a political party espousing support of women’s rights, among other progressive platforms. This as the chair openly espoused liberal ideology as preferential. This as the chair and their spouse, who also was employed at Inst3, proffered themselves as white individuals who understand cultural responsiveness.

His inability to understand the power of the Donovan text selection felt like a slap in the face.

130. I began to realize the chair and his spouse enjoyed what I can only describe as a “protected status” within Inst3. I frequently heard colleagues and institutional leaders praise them for their student advocacy, even as my experiences and the experiences of several students revealed a pattern of public displays of progression while both engaged in white preference student treatment within their respective courses as well as during advising meetings.

I remember one time; an advisee made an appointment with me to review their progress in one of the spouse’s courses in which the student was enrolled. The non-white student was extremely frustrated with the spouse for an email they had sent the student in

response to the student's inquiries about a major assignment. They showed me the email. Because the student had not written their email in Standard American English and used a relaxed email format, the spouse sent back an email, not answering the student's questions which were extremely time sensitive, but rather berating the student's unprofessionalism in email communication. The spouse additionally sent directions on how she would only respond to emails written in a "correct" format. When I reached out to the spouse on behalf of my advisee, I did not receive a response.

The department chair's focus on "mitigating controversy" related to political and cultural topics being taught was increasingly becoming more and more misaligned with implementation of CRT in my courses. While I did experience several instances of my own white preference and bias when attempting this implementation, the feedback from students was overall extremely positive regarding my instructional strategies. Yet, the few times my chair and I spoke about my methodological choices regarding CRT, his focus each time was "not ruffling feathers" as opposed to genuinely attempting to understand my instructional choices. He became increasingly more tense around me during this time, a state that would erupt in the fall of 2020 when on a recorded phone call he called me "problematic", "the only problem in the department", and "the only one I have constantly had an issue with".

I began to sense that my employment was dependent more on following departmental culture than on my actual competence, CRT knowledge, and extensive experience.

I also began to sense a growing tension between the three (3) of us that seemed personal, deep seeded, and difficult to understand.

131. One particular instance of the spouse's lack of cultural responsiveness, but in a context attempting to be culturally responsive, was at an event she organized featuring a Black Arts Movement poet. The spouse organized a multitude of cultural events that brought in speakers, artists, political activists, and often focused on speakers from marginalized communities. I was always excited to attend these events, and I made the events required for my students, often using the content of the speaker's presentations in follow-up lessons in my classrooms.

The spouse typically sent an email out prior to each event to the professors who reserved seats for themselves and their students. The emails typically included brief explanations of what the speaker would be speaking about. This particular event, the email summary explained we would be engaging in a presentation on the Black Arts Movement by acclaimed Black Arts Movement poet, Lenard Moore. I had never heard of the Black Arts Movement before.

It became quickly apparent that Mr. Moore's understanding of his attendance at the event was as a poet performing Black Arts Movement poetry, including his own. There was no explanation given regarding the movement, its history, with Mr. Moore immediately beginning to read from an anthology he had brought with him on stage. Throughout his performance, which lasted approximately an hour, murmurs in the crowd began to

exponentially increase in volume. It appeared the majority of the audience members were confused as to what was happening.

One point of the performance stands out to me the most. Mr. Moore was performing a selection which included repetition of the couplet “a love supreme / a love supreme”.

While I do not remember the poem itself, I do remember the audience’s reaction to how Mr. Moore drawled out “a love supreeeeeeeeeme, a love supreeeeeeeeeme” over and over in a thick, affected accent.

There was an explosion of laughter, much of it derisive. I felt embarrassed for the speaker, who appeared unaffected by the commotion. The spouse who had organized the event could be seen from the sidelines with a look of panic on her face.

I would later learn Mr. Moore is a celebrated original member of the Black Arts Movement, with a high number of accolades both for his writing and his performance ability. Looking back, I wonder how he must have felt in a room full of laughter at his expense.

Only two students approached Mr. Moore after the event, one of which was a young black female who happened to be in my English course that semester. She was holding a copy of Mr. Moore’s poetry and asked him to sign it. I remember leaving the event with the two (2) of them huddled in quiet conversation together, a look of pride on Mr. Moore’s face as my student beamed up at him.

Later, the spouse would send out an email that I interpreted as profusely apologetic for what was labeled as a “misinterpretation of the event”.

132. I began to sense that although many Inst3 members spoke about equality, they lacked a working definition of *equity*.

Once, I witnessed a white male professor with a raised voice speaking to a black male athlete about missing an exam. The professor was visibly agitated and was standing between the black male student and the stairwell access to the exits. The black male student’s back was against the wall. Student athletes are often on scholarship, and endure a sometimes brutal game schedule, often traveling multiple hours away and not getting home until extremely late at night. This, on top of the student athlete’s full course load required to remain enrolled at and playing for the college.

I witnessed sexist behavior multiple times towards women enrolled or wanting to enroll in certain credentialing programs such as automotive technology and motorcycle maintenance.

I myself advised a young woman who was struggling to pass developmental reading and math courses, as to why she thought she was struggling and what I could do to help support her. She broke down in tears, saying she never wanted to go to a university but that her past Inst3 advisors said university transfer was her best option. Come to find out,

the student had worked on motorcycles with her father since she was a small child and was incredibly interested in motorcycle maintenance. When I asked if she knew Inst3 offered motorcycle maintenance and was one of the most sought after programs in that field in our state CC system, she was shocked. She would go on to graduate from the program.

Later, towards the end of my employment at Inst3, I would be on a Zoom call for a department meeting during the pandemic. At this point, our department members had taught half of spring semester and all of summer semester virtually. Large amounts of literature began circulating regarding equity practices for virtual teaching and learning, none of which was disseminated in our department, nor addressed by our department chair. During the Zoom meeting, our department chair was informing our department that division leadership was requiring us to take more data-centric approaches to our instruction, including viewing our own success rates. The chair appeared massively uncomfortable giving us this news.

What followed next felt like instant mutiny.

Comments erupted in the chat, as everyone's microphones were muted while the chair was speaking. I specifically remember adding a comment that I supported this move, suggesting to my colleagues that we were moving towards equity practices that would help students succeed. Of all the disagreeable comments to follow, the one that made my mouth drop open:

“STUDENTS are the problem!!!”

133. Fall and spring semester of my second year I experienced my worst student success scores at Inst3, especially among non-white and non-traditional student populations.

While students reported enjoying my teaching which they generally found engaging and fun, they also reported my assignments were numerous and took up a large amount of time which made completing assignments in other courses difficult.

Around midterm, I would notice around half my enrolled students would stop coming to class. Conversely, many enrolled students would stop completing assignments but would still attend classes, “just to learn”. I was struggling mightily with how to reconcile what I knew I could achieve through my teaching and instruction, and the reality that my teaching and instruction along with my course expectations were creating stress and barriers.

During fall semester, I would apply for entry into a doctorate program focused on community college leadership. I wanted to become a leader in teaching and learning at the community college level. I wanted to learn the institutional system more intimately, as a way to help find the areas of improvement in Inst3 and other NC CC institutions. I wanted to gain the credentials to be taken seriously as a CRT instructor and a CRT professional development lead.

My hopes were high that I could enact real change.

134. Spring semester of my second year, I held an event at my home for students who had joined my newly minted Inst3 speech and debate club. We typically met after school once a week but had recently been discussing a new Netflix documentary regarding financial schemes. The conversation that ensued gave me the idea to have a watch party at my home, where we could be in a comfortable setting with food. The intention was to provide a space where the students could bond, and I could get to know them better as well.

As an undergraduate, I attended events at my professors' homes several times. However, to be sure I was in institutional compliance Inst3, I contacted both the Vice President of Student Services as well as Human Resources. I reviewed institutional policy regarding professor and student interactions off campus. It did not cross my mind to request permission from my chair, as he often stated he tried not to be involved in what he considered micromanaging decisions. I was cleared for the event by both departments I contacted. One department even suggested I could use an institutional vehicle for free for students without transportation to use.

Nearly all the students in attendance contacted me praising the event and offering suggestions for additional documentaries to watch and discuss. I felt elated the event went so successfully, and that we were planning on expanding and inviting more students

to participate.

Sometime later, I was called into a meeting with my chair. I was not told in advance what the meeting would entail. When I walked into the office and saw the head of human resources sitting beside the department chair, I was instantly embarrassed and panicked.

At this point, the chair had been exhibiting a noticeable pattern of avoidance towards me. He would greet each member of the department except for me most mornings, and often walked in wide arcs to avoid direct interaction with me. If I sent him email inquiries, he would take days to respond, or not respond at all. When he did respond, I interpreted his emails as passive aggressive, yet increasingly defensive. Yet in this moment, I felt panic, not being able to understand why human resources would be in attendance.

I felt I was about to lose my job.

135. What followed I can only describe as a humiliating experience, and one the chair seemed to enjoy as a smirk was present for most of the meeting.

He began to outline that he had been informed I had held an event at my home which was attended by Inst3 students. He handed me a printed copy of the same institutional policy I had already reviewed, stating he believed I was in violation of faculty conduct code.

Confused, I affirmed that the event had occurred, and explained my process for gaining approval. He frowned in disapproval but did not continue to contest the policy. He went

on to ask if I had served alcohol at the event, to which I replied “yes, but only to those of age”. He then asked, “well, did you check IDs?”.

I was becoming more and more flustered at what I felt was his attempt to place my job in serious jeopardy by accusing me of serving alcohol to underaged students. I remember telling him I knew the two (2) students who consumed alcohol were of age, because they were both retired military veterans in their late 30s. I remember bursting into tears, while trying to explain I would never jeopardize either my job or a student’s safety. His face looked frozen in disdain, approaching disgust. I felt humiliated, targeted, and incredibly anxious. Ultimately, I was allowed to leave, and to my knowledge no formal reprimand was documented in my personal employment file.

This interaction occurred a few weeks before my third custody trial.

136. In January of 2019, I was invited to interview for the NCSU Community College EdD program on campus along with roughly 100 other potential program candidates.

I managed to scrounge up enough money to book a small Air BnB room close to campus. I arrived late to the venue, having gotten lost on a campus I’d never been to before. When I entered the ballroom where the program candidates, professors, and directors had gathered, it felt like all eyes turned immediately to me causing enormous embarrassment.

As I attempted to settle into an open seat, the only one being directly up front, I looked

around at my peers who were predominantly wearing professional attire such as suits and ties, and dresses with blazers. I would later learn that the room predominantly held individuals who were already executive leaders in their fields and institutions, with me being one of the only members at the faculty level. Because the only dress I owned was worn at the cocktail reception the night before, I was wearing jeans and an oversized sweater.

I felt utterly out of place.

I was put on the spot to introduce myself first to the entire room. I had nothing prepared and was still trying to stow my belongings. I felt awkward, as the room full of suits stared back at me. I managed an introduction and took my seat.

Later, I would be involved in a group activity in which I synthesized a writing sample in real time as I led my table's discussion of the writing prompt. I would go on to interview with the program's director along with two other peers present. One held departmental leadership, who also served on several committees in his institution. One developed curriculum for online learning platforms and was enormously successful.

All three (3) of us would be granted entry into the program the subsequent May.

137. Going into my third year teaching at Inst3, having completed two semesters of doctorate courses and learning for the first time about equity, equity in HE, and more NC

CC institutional knowledge, I was deeply motivated and profoundly determined to share what I had learned with my department and chair. I began to feel strongly that my department members must be operating in ignorance, and if I could just share what I was learning, we would all begin strategizing how best to serve our diverse student population.

I was not received well.

However, I felt I began making progress networking outside of the department, learning more about student success barriers within Inst3 with each relationship I built. With each uncovered barrier, with each cross point between a student's path and institutional ineffectiveness I discovered, I felt emboldened to create relationships with others in my institution who were involved in equity work. I was incredibly excited.

138. Firstly, I attended meetings with institutional effectiveness leaders, who taught me more about data analytics and how to use obtained data. I was introduced to the institutional effectiveness team, who built me dashboards to specifically capture the gateway English success rates of all English instructors from the beginning of my employment, including myself. I only included professors who were full-time employees of Inst3. This was, I believe, approximately twelve (12) individuals. The data was captured over a period of two (2) years.

I requested that no identifying data be included regarding instructor identity, and the

instructors were assigned names of “Professor A”, “Professor B”, etc. However, I also requested my own gateway English student success data, so I could cross compare with my colleagues. Keep in mind, I felt confident in my CRT implementation at the time.

Because I worked so often with this data set, I feel it is memorized in my mind. The data revealed a nearly 60% discrepancy between the instructor with the lowest success rates and the instructor with the highest success rates. The lowest scoring instructor was near a 30% first time student passage rate of ENG 111, and the highest scoring instructor was near a 90% first time student passage rate.

In my estimation, this massive disparity could mean many things, from the full-time instructors perhaps having different assignments, grading methods, or submission requirements, to perhaps a lack of understanding on culturally responsive teaching especially considering the differentiated learning techniques I knew to be successful were typically considered “juvenile” by my peers. Whatever the influential variables, I felt the data set contained an obvious discussion point surrounding improving student success in our department.

I began to grow incredibly excited to share what I had learned with my department. Previously in my doctorate classes, I had learned that the reason ENG 111 first time passage rate data is captured by our system, is because of the positive correlation of ENG 111 first time passage, and a student’s overall likelihood of remaining enrolled, and graduating.

Up to this point in my employment, my department chair omitted to train our department on analyzing student success data, as well as how to incorporate student success data as reflective practice to improve our instruction.

I thought, surely, with the data in hand, we could begin to have authentic conversations in the English department regarding pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching and classroom strategies, and innovative ways to improve our institution's overall gateway English success rates.

I would be wrong.

139. At the time I received the data set, I had been working with the chair of Inst3's Developmental Department, which included developmental reading and writing instructors. That year, an initiative was being launched pairing ENG 111 with a developmental instructor, and as a former developmental instructor I thought I could offer insight to help the developmental instructors understand the expectations of ENG 111, enabling them to better align their instruction with their paired English department instructor.

I remember the chair being extremely excited about the opportunity, and we talked for almost an hour during our first meeting about how beneficial more open communication between our departments would be for students. At one point towards the end of the

conversation, she looked off to the side and in what I interpreted to be a half truth, half joke type of comment, said, “it’s been a struggle, haha, to get anything really going with y’all over there”. She seemed excited to help me learn.

We came up with the idea to lead a joint presentation to the English and Developmental Departments regarding the data set. We brainstormed ways we could improve student success through building relationships between instructors, such as embedding developmental instructors into their developmental students’ ENG 111 courses so the developmental instructors could read assignment guidelines, see grading policies, etc. While she allowed me full control over the presentation and its creation and contents, she told me she would be there to support me and was excited for the presentation to go well.

It did not go well.

140. I did not ask my department chair’s permission to have a meeting with the chair of the Developmental Department because his permission seemed irrelevant given I was a doctoral student in Community College Leadership seeking institutional knowledge and opening communication with another leader in our college.

I emailed each full-time member of our two (2) departments, outlining what the presentation would cover, and inviting everyone to attend, including my chair and lead instructor (who was close personal friends with the chair). I also invited our division dean, and a dean whose oversight included teaching and learning, as well as equity

practice implementation in our institution overall. The only non-white person was the latter dean.

When the presentation began, the chair of the developmental department was present. The two (2) deans were approximately 15 minutes late. My department chair walked in late with the lead instructor, missing my introduction. Roughly four (4) of the twelve (12) English instructors attended, and the two (2) full-time developmental instructors (technically, their entire department). My chair had not responded to my email invitation, and did not RSVP, leaving me to wonder if he was going to attend. I heard my colleagues discussing how the chair told them this presentation was “not mandatory”, and encouraged them not to attend. Now, he was sitting in the room in a defensive posturing of folded arms, at the back of the room, looking at me in what I viewed as contempt. His rejection of what was being said in my presentation was clear to me from the front of the room.

The presentation was at times confusing. I was new to the doctorate program, being in my third semester at this point, and I was articulate at times with the institutional language used by CC leaders when discussing student success rates. I tripped over my words at times, and struggled to keep the attention of several audience members. One English instructor was visibly upset that our instructor data was being displayed on screen, and said later doing so made her enormously uncomfortable. I did not feel helped during the presentation by the Developmental Department chair. The deans were both on their phones.

When the presentation concluded, I did my best to answer questions. I knew from my Master's program that disparities like this indicated instructional disconnects, lack of culturally responsive strategies, and lack of uniformity of instruction between instructors. What I could not articulate at the time was how to fix the problem. While I had initial answers, the audience members seemed to want quick fix type solutions of which I had none.

I remember my department chair and the lead instructor laughing together regarding a private conversation they were having in the back. At one point, he addressed the room (not me) to counter the data's validity. Several of his comments to invalidate the data I presented I knew to be inaccurate from what I was learning in my doctorate program.

I countered him on each point.

The smile from his face and his jovial demeanor (for which he was known institutionally) instantly dropped. His face grew red. He glared at me, shook his head, and sat down.

The target was growing.

141. Another important relationship I felt I formed was between the English department and the Early College on campus.

As a former high school teacher, I knew the demands on these instructors intimately, especially as these instructors prepared students for state standardized English exams. I wanted to help the Early College instructors interact with the English instructors in I3's Humanities department, to address the student feedback showing that the Early College instructors, at times, did not adequately prepare them for ENG 111. More often than not, however, the Early College students in my writing courses stated that the Early College instructors, while excellent teachers, overly prepared the students on mechanics and MLA format, neglecting to teach writing strategies such as prewriting and outlining.

I did not view this student feedback as indication of a lack of expertise or poor instruction by these Early College instructors, but the majority of my department did. I heard disparaging comments regarding the Early College instructors as incompetent, typically with an attempt to turn the criticism into a joke, "what are they teaching them down there??"

Considering my experience in both secondary education and Inst3's English department, I believed the Early College instructors would benefit from interacting with the Inst3 English department to humanize both sides to the other, but also to engage in discussions regarding assignment guidelines and course expectations. I believed this would

While I attended several meetings with the Early College instructors, only two (2) of my Inst3 colleagues attended a meeting as well, one of which was the new lead ENG instructor. This would be the only time the Early College instructors interacted with an

English professor other than myself during that period of time.

While the meetings between myself and the Early College instructors tended to go extremely well, with productive topics of conversation and camaraderie seemingly being built, the meeting attended by the lead instructor and only one (1) additional Inst3 faculty member felt cold, uninviting, and ultimately an ineffective use of the Early College instructors' time.

I felt frustrated by what I perceived to be a blatant lack of respect for the Early College instructors, and apologized profusely after my two (2) colleagues had left, trying to smooth over what I perceived were hurt feelings from the instructors who had given up their planning period to attend the meeting in the first place.

142. As part of a course assignment for my doctorate class at the time, I interviewed my division's dean regarding the dean's view on equity practices, and additionally seeking his advice regarding institutional improvements in teaching and learning. The dean was a white male.

I remember at one point he grew visibly upset. I grew uneasy, as he seemed to feel comfortable enough "just between us" to state he believed equity in HE was just another phase of innovation that would die down in due time.

He relayed to me an interaction he claimed to have had with a former Inst3 President

before that president retired. The president was also a white male. I felt he was attempting to use the anecdote as a means of eliciting my agreement with his stated perspective.

According to the dean, the former Inst3 President had convened a meeting indicating equity was an institutional priority for both students and staff, and institutional practices should be analyzed for effectiveness in relation to increasing equity practices and decreasing student barriers. At the time, the entirety of Inst3's executive leadership was white.

This institutional analysis included analyzing the on-boarding process of full-time Inst3 personnel. At this point, the dean leaned back in his chair somewhat relaxing into his next statement:

“You know he wanted us to hire this math teacher one time, right? There was an opening in the department, and we were instructed, no, required to interview people of color. Now I don't care what your skin color is, I'm not racist. But I do care what your credentials are. I'm not going to hire anyone just because they're black.”

He appeared proud that the one non-white candidate who applied for the opening was not given the position.

143. Somewhere around this time, Inst3 hired a new college president. I was excited at first because she would be Inst3's first female president in the institution's history. I had also heard, both in my doctorate program and around my campus, that she supported equity initiatives, and was deeply committed to improving teaching and learning.

My first impression of her was from the event celebrating her new presidency, which we were all mandated to attend. I remember I had to pick up my son from the bus stop, drive home and change into the required attire, making us late to the venue.

I remember sitting down as a Christian pastor was being introduced. I remember the new Inst3 President stating that she knew that typically all faiths were acknowledged at such events, but that she was Christian, and it was her celebration, and she would have the religious officiant of her own religion giving whatever blessing or prayer was being led.

I was instantly apprehensive. The emotion only grew as the event continued. The event was highly focused on watching the president and her family celebrate on stage, and very little was specifically stated or explained about her vision for our institution.

I remember feeling disappointed as I left.

144. Inst3's President was selected to give a response to a keynote speaker at a well-attended NC community college event. Institutional and system office representatives attended from across the state, and as doctorate students in Community

College Leadership, we were invited to attend. The keynote speaker that year delivered a speech heavily focused on equity, and the need for the intentional, innovative implementation of equity practices in NCCCS institutions.

When Inst3's President gave her response, I was enormously uncomfortable. Instead of addressing the keynote speaker's call to action, she countered in her response by stating the issue of equity was not as bad as some may perceive and proceeded to cite system data repeatedly. At the end of each time she would cite system success, she would repeat the phrase "but we could do better". The phrase felt tacked on, in what I interpreted as placation for those who may not agree with her understanding of student success in our institutions.

I could feel the target growing even more.

145. Fall of 2019, I saw my student success scores significantly improve due in large part to the integration of what I was learning in my doctorate program, with my previous expertise in instructional practices, design, and CRT. During spring semester of 2020, I felt extremely confident in the instruction and content improvements I had made to existing courses, and I felt confident in creating a student-centric environment in my classroom and during office hours.

Students were expressing confidence in their growing writing and reading abilities. They were interacting with one another to complete collaborative projects. Students were

emailing thanking me for including certain content or bringing up certain topics for discussion. I felt I had found balance in my instruction. I felt I had found a secret formula that I was ready to share.

This period of time was my happiest at Inst3.

146. I was able to secure institutional funding to attend the League of Innovation Conference in March 2020 in Seattle, Washington.

As the plane took off, my brother, still living in Seattle, sent me a news link confirming the first COVID-19 death in King County, Washington.

147. When I returned from the conference, I was mandated to quarantine for two (2) weeks. The day I was scheduled to return to campus, the college shut down due to COVID precautions. A time after that, all classes were confirmed to be virtual for the remainder of the semester.

Having taught online classes previously, I knew the challenge of converting a seated course to an online format. The tremendous amount of information disseminated in a classroom setting takes hours of preparation and instructional design experience to convert in a format that is equitably accessible to diverse student populations.

Throughout the pandemic, I worked more hours than I worked when teaching in-person,

on campus. I knew the responsibility I held to structure the courses that spring in ways that would achieve multiple goals, most notably the engagement of students to avoid attrition in attendance and course completion.

To my recollection, I was teaching (2) gateway English courses that semester, one (1) ENG 114 technical writing, one (1) ENG 112 university transfer writing course, along with a literature course, and a humanities course.

I was most worried about my gateway English courses, knowing the high stakes for non-completion associated with ENG 111, and discovering my classes were predominantly first-time college students.

Through many, many hours of revision and revisiting, I ended spring semester feeling confident in my ability to continue CRT implementation during such a chaotic time. I received feedback from students stating other professors did not appear engaged at the same level, neglecting to provide such resources as posting recordings of lecture material, providing information regarding resources such as tutoring and free wi-fi services, and struggling with one-on-one communication to answer questions or clarify assignments.

Let me pause to say, I remember how challenging that time was for teachers. We also were juggling our own families, households, fears, and anxieties.

However, the culture in the department once again appeared much more faculty-focused

than student-centric. I raised concerns repeatedly regarding institutional and departmental policy that based on my experience and expertise appeared antithetical to Inst3's equity focus. At one point, I was reprimanded by the same dean who told the story of "not hiring someone just because they were black". I had emailed him outlining serious concerns about how my department was being guided regarding teaching and instruction. I remember specifically him replying to my email that "this wasn't up for debate" and that he would not engage in "argumentation" with me. That I was to do as I was told.

Emails to my chair often went unresponded to.

148. In August of 2020, before classes were set to begin, I was called to a virtual meeting between the chair and the lead instructor. The chair informed me I was being placed on an employee improvement plan due to what he outlined were a host of concerns.

When I was given an opportunity to respond, I stated, "I feel like you are creating an outline towards my termination". During this meeting, my department chair completely broke character from his typical, passive self. He raised his voice, at times emphasizing his views of me with sharp tones. He made personal attacks. He lost his ability to control the meeting at one point, due to his emotionality.

I recorded the call. I listened to it several times afterwards, feeling more and more panicked at what I perceived was exaggerated perceptions of my alleged ineptitude.

I also realized that to my department, my CRT expertise and ability to connect with students on deeper, meaningful levels was irrelevant.

They wanted me gone.

149. I was incensed. The target was fully formed at this point, and I felt the “improvement plan” was a planned retaliation related to my consistent protests of departmental policies as viewed through my CRT and growing equity expertise. I felt the chair did not take me seriously as said expert. I also felt he had an issue with what he deemed to be my “jumping of chain of command”, even though my initiatives

He seemed more concerned with his personal feelings, rather than with reviewing student success data from spring and summer semesters which indicated my students were among the highest achieving during the pandemic to that point. That success was earned, and not a result of loosening assignment guidelines or the quality of my instruction. He did not appear to consider student success; he wanted me gone.

The next four (4) months would prove to be the most stressful, anxiety-inducing months of my professional career to date.

150. I immediately filed a grievance through human resources, citing retaliatory behavior from my department chair for the implementation of the employee “improvement” plan.

I have little faith the “improvement plan” was conducted with the possibility of me remaining employed at Inst3. Inst3 employees whom I gave as references for myself and to confirm the hostile treatment of my chair went un interviewed.

At one point that November, the grievance was escalated to a Vice President, who on a phone call attempted to soothe my fears regarding termination. I explained my perspective regarding the equity issues in the department, and my fears of being terminated due to my department chair’s insecurities. The Vice President at one point stated not to worry, “no one gets fired for not putting in grades on time”.

He also stated that the department chair had “never been through a grievance process so this is all new for him”, implying (in my perception) the department chair had not experienced any complaints during his tenure. I felt the Vice President was implying that I was somehow the problem and was creating issues where there were none.

I began to sense leadership was involved in my calculated termination.

151. During this time, I met with my Dean, the Vice President over student learning, and the President of Inst3. Ultimately the first two (2) meetings were unproductive. I believed I3’s President’s previous statements about having an open door policy. I truly felt she would see my side, believe in my experiences, and offer support, if I could just be given the opportunity to connect with her.

What stands out to me in retrospect about meeting with the president was what I perceived was the complete dismissal of my concerns and my requests for support while my grievance against the department chair was being investigated.

While she accepted my meeting request, I will never forget the smirk she wore for the entirety of our meeting. I explained my experiences in the department, and how I felt students were being negatively affected. I explained the research I was conducting and the coursework I was completing was antithetical to how I saw the English department being operated by the department chair, and that I was deeply concerned.

She offered no guidance. She offered no rebuttal. She thanked me for my time, and her assistant ushered the next person she was meeting with into the office.

I left feeling dejected, and quite honestly, furious at what I perceived was the rejection of my experiences and my expertise.

I felt I had no one in leadership to turn to for support.

152. December 18, 2020, I was called to a meeting with the same Vice President with whom I had previously spoken to by phone during my grievance process.

Previous to this meeting, I had been sent his “findings” regarding my grievance against my department chair. Among his findings were that I was an accomplished, passionate,

student-centric instructor. Additionally, I was found to be “too mothering” to students, “combative”, “impatient”, and struggled “with balancing student support, while holding students accountable”.

My dismissal from employment was being recommended to Inst3’s President.

When the Zoom call loaded, the head of human resources was also on the call and the two (2) were sharing a laugh.

I knew.

My son was twelve (12) years old at the time. I was the sole financial contributor to our household. I was in my final year of doctorate courses.

Bullseye.

153. I was offered the option to cease employment immediately or finish the current semester. I felt I would be abandoning dozens of students if I chose the first option, and indicated I would finish the semester.

That year, I remember not being able to get out of bed on Christmas Day. I remember ordering Chinese food with what little money we had left. I remember watching my son

open presents, feeling entirely unsure of what the future would hold.

Institution 4 (Inst4)

2021-2023

Roles and Responsibilities:

Administrator, Instructor, and Advisor of Online High School Equivalency Program

154. I continued with doctorate classes during this time, with each new lesson on equity practice implementation feeling like rock salt in a professional wound.

Because I chose to stay enrolled in the program, I was denied EBT food assistance benefits, as well as Medicaid health insurance. I was able to procure unemployment and qualified for the additional pandemic benefits. The money wasn't enough.

I lost my house, because of losing my job. The majority of my belongings were lost in a robbery before I was able to fully move out. I applied, endlessly it seemed, to any NC CC job posting I felt I could competently perform. I received no requests for interviews during the first two (2) years of applying.

At this point, my secondary education teaching license required renewal before I could be hired for secondary English positions. This meant I could not work as a full time secondary education instructor.

I felt lost on how to provide for myself and my son, beyond the unemployment benefits that barely covered our bills.

Doctorate school became my primary motivator.

155. In June of 2020, a member of my doctorate cohort contacted me with a job lead at her institution.

I hold this cohort member in very high regard. My interactions with her, as a non-white executive leader in Inst4, prompted some of my most significant encounters with my own white preference and white biases. Firm and eloquent, unapologetic yet respected, I viewed and still view her as a leader to emulate.

That same month, I was hired as the online administrator and lead instructor of a GED and adult high school program at Inst4. My contract was for twenty (20) hours a week.

I had never taught adult high school before. I was hired, I was told, for my secondary education and previous CC experience.

I was incredibly grateful.

156. I was the only white member of Inst4's GED/adult high school department. My supervisor was a black male, and the two (2) office assistants were black females.

The department's culture was very close-knit, as the three (3) individuals I worked with had worked together for a considerable amount of time prior to my employment. At times I felt like an outsider, and looking back I can recognize I felt like an outsider, because I was. These individuals did not know me, and I can only imagine their experiences with white-identifying individuals throughout their lives and careers. Important to note - the majority of the students in the program were non-white.

I was never treated disrespectfully, but at times I could sense impatience and frustration especially from my direct supervisor related to my lack of understanding of the department's policies and procedures. We had many conversations over the phone over my two (2) years at Inst4 in which we worked to understand each other. I will always be grateful for the direct and informative communication style of Inst4's supervisor, with whom I felt I could be "real". When I would question department policy, I felt heard for the first time in my CC career.

While we did not always agree, the supervisor provided space for me to apply my expertise, and for the most part allowed me the freedom to support students in culturally responsive and equity-informed ways. I felt a renewed sense of purpose at the possibility of applying CRT to Inst4's program.

Over the two (2) years I was employed, student retainment and course/program

completion increased.

157. The program was entirely online, with a requirement of a certain placement score to qualify for entry into the adult high school online program.

I quickly realized the students enrolled were in need of additional supports. Through a CRT lens, I came to realize the overwhelming majority of students enrolled in the program were enrolled due to life circumstances preventing them from attending in-person classes.

I remember a young mother of several young children, whose husband was injured at work and lost his job, struggling to complete her final English course. I remember a young man who stayed with his ailing mother. I spoke to a student who at the time was pregnant and had disenrolled from her local high school in order to focus on online school and the imminent birth of her child. The list went on and on.

I began seeking policies to better assist Inst4's students. For example, at the time students enrolling in the GED/adult high school program were required to travel to one (1) of four (4) Inst4 campuses to physically sign an enrollment form. When I brought this barrier up to my supervisor, he indicated his understanding was the college was not able to accept electronic signatures.

I became a dog with a bone, so to speak. I contacted the NCCCS office and spoke to

several individuals in regard to electronic signature policy. After following up with Inst4's executive leadership, my supervisor was able to introduce electronic signatures for future enrollments the following semester.

In another instance, I realized student transcripts were not being effectively evaluated, causing several students to be saddled with course completion requirements for which they had already received credit from their attended high schools. The adult high school program was structured so that students could complete high school diploma requirements online, and an ineffectively evaluated transcript could delay a student's graduation by a significant amount of time. One student during this time experienced her graduation delayed by an entire year due to her misevaluated transcript.

Once again, my department was receptive to my feedback. I was trained on transcript evaluation and walked through the departmental process of placing students in courses. Students were being retained and completing coursework in high numbers, and students often expressed to me how thankful they were for my support throughout their enrollment.

I felt I was making a difference.

158. My employment with Inst4 ended in June of 2023. The department supervisor and both office assistants had resigned. A new dean was hired over the division. Though I advocated for my retention, the new dean was not convinced.

In full transparency, I was ready to take a step back from both teaching, and my role as a program administrator.

I genuinely questioned whether I would pursue employment within the NCCCS or any educational institution again. I felt weathered and professionally weakened by my experiences promoting CRT and equity in the NC CC institutions where I served.

I completed my doctorate coursework in community college leadership.

My dissertation felt insurmountable.

CHAPTER FIVE

Data Analysis, Findings and Implications

Introduction

My goal for using Critical Autoethnography as my methodology for this study was to conduct a critical analysis of my experiences implementing CRT within NC CCs. Critical Autoethnography “intensifies and directs the writing in a critical (rather than purely interpretive) direction to serve up a *cultural critique of power*, hegemony, hierarchy, and so on”, and “proceeds from an essentially democratic viewpoint that drives the work toward *offering solutions to problems of inequality*; democratic participation; workplace, community, or institutional inequity” (Poulos, 2021, p. 69, italics added). In other words, critical autoethnography seeks to interpret data (i.e. my first-person narrative accounts) in the context of systemic powers and influences that created a particular phenomenon. The phenomenon studied within this dissertation is my observations of NC CC employees' resistance to CRT implementation.

In Chapter 4, I constructed first-person narrative accounts of my lived experiences implementing CRT in NC CCs Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 through the identity lenses of my white racial identity and my trauma survivor identity. In the words of Dr. Lars Stoltzfus-Brown, also a white-identifying autoethnographer writing about white preference: “[I]t is imperative to introduce my familial history, discuss key experiences, and critically examine the hierarchies of power that operate to silence ... I am using critical autoethnography to trouble the placid surface of whiteness” (qtd in Boylorn and Orbe, 2021, p. 131). I hypothesized in Chapter 1 that both my white identity and my trauma identity impacted the effectiveness and/or ineffectiveness of my

CRT implementation in NC CCs. Through the construction of first-person narrative accounts of my experiences, I sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How, if at all, have my experiences as white identifying and as a trauma survivor influenced me as a CRT instructor in NC CC classrooms?
(individual culture analysis)
- 2) How can my insights and lessons learned from implementing CRT in NC CC classrooms inform NC CC teacher preparation and professional development?
(classroom culture analysis)
- 3) How can insights and lessons learned from my lived experience inform NCCCS leader's effort to effectively implement CRT institutionally?
(organizational culture analysis)

Because I selected Critical Autoethnography as my specified methodology, I created my Chapter 4 narratives using the critical autoethnographic inquiries as presented in Chapter 3, which provide the autoethnographer parameters for interpretation of constructed autoethnographic narratives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Critical autoethnographic inquiries are prompts that help facilitate content generation during the drafting process for first-person narrative, autoethnographic data sets. I applied the following critical autoethnographic inquiries while drafting my Chapter 4 data set:

- 1) How is NC CC agent resistance to CRT expressed, embodied, exhibited within Chapter 4's first-person narratives?
- 2) How did my emotions, and the emotions of both NC CC students and NC CC agents, affect my implementation of CRT?

- 3) How are individual, classroom, and institutional power given or withheld regarding CRT implementation in NC CCs?
- 4) How did I develop as a CRT instructor, and what experiences informed that development over the course of my NC CC employment?
- 5) How can my life-experiences as a white, trauma surviving CRT NC CC instructor enhance our understanding of CRT's value as it relates to student success?

”Critical Autoethnography seeks to balance a researcher’s internal with their external, to start with self in order to enter and contribute to the collective. Critical Autoethnography encourages the researcher to analyze *culture* as the primary influence on environment, behavior, and actions” (Boylorn and Orbe, 2021). In other words, phenomena do not behave in vacuums, but rather are intensely impacted by *culture* at micro, meso, and macro levels (Thorton and Ocasio, 2008). Institutional cultures including micro, meso, and macro levels were discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

Dataset Generation and Data Integrity Processes

To better understand the data generation process of autoethnographic personal narratives, see Figure 3. Critical Autoethnography focuses on investigating resistance and analyzing power dynamics within a given environment. Critical Autoethnography seeks to explain why or how a phenomenon occurs, how that phenomenon is contextualized within the lived experiences of the autoethnographer, and to critically examine how power is given and taken away within the studied environment.

Autoethnographic inquiries are questions the researcher asks themselves to generate narrative content and autoethnographic conventions are textual elements typically associated with personal narratives. Autoethnographic lenses are selected by the researcher as a means of

limiting the scope of generated narratives to align more closely with the phenomenon under investigation. Autoethnographic inquiries, conventions, and identity lenses were used to generate content for my personal narratives, and to guide the drafting process.

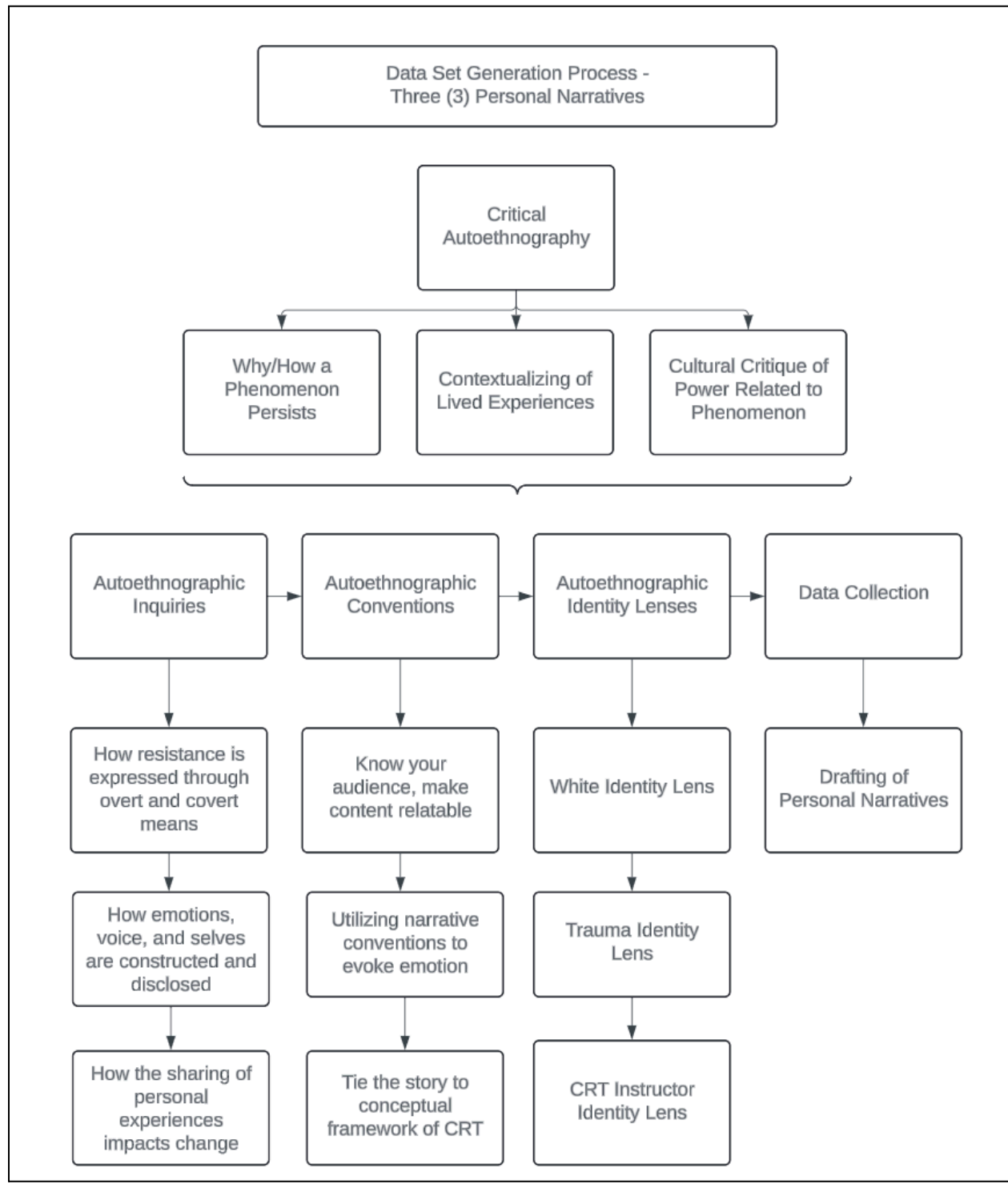


Figure 3, Data Set Generation Process: Personal Narratives (Entrocaso, 2024).

Figure 4 represents my process for maintaining data integrity to include trustworthiness and reflexivity.

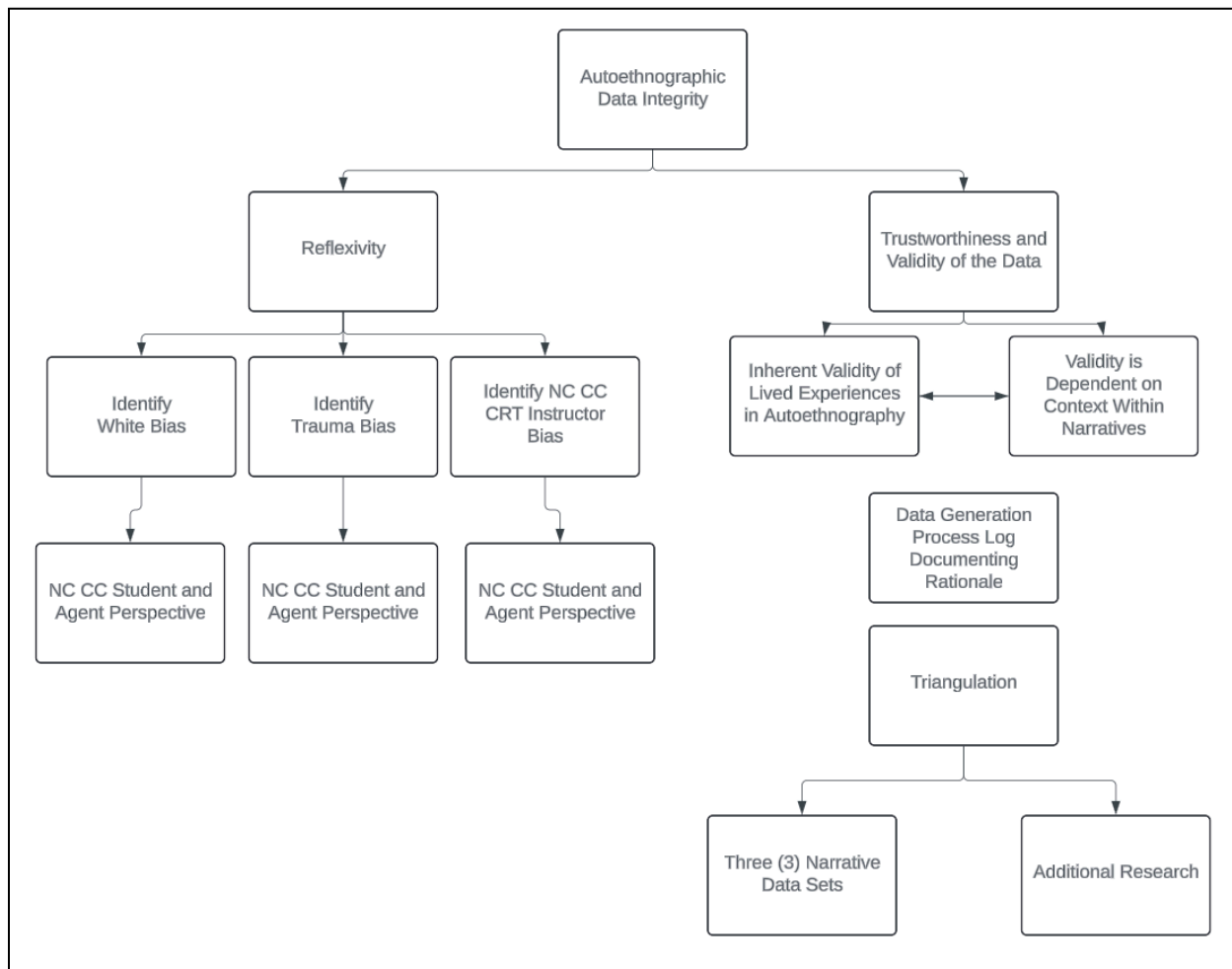


Figure 4, Autoethnographic Data Integrity Process (Entrocaso, 2024).

Reflexivity was exercised throughout the drafting of each identity narrative, and included positioning myself as the researcher in the experiences of NC CC students and agents.

Trustworthiness exercises included a data generation process log documenting my rationale for interpretations of events in my narratives, as well as triangulation of additional research.

Thematic Data Analysis Overview

I used Thematic Analysis to interpret findings related to my data. Thematic Analysis “allows for summarizing large amounts of data and identifying overall features of a data set in order for implications to be drawn” (Entrocaso, 2024).

I used Thematic Analysis in this study to examine myself through multiple perspectives, specifically my white, trauma, and community college instructor identities. I also examined my lived experiences with family members (white and trauma identities), as well as my experiences with NC CC students, faculty colleagues, and other NC CC agents (trauma and CC instructor identities). My goal was to discover how my NC CC identity was affected by my white identity and my trauma identity, and further to discover similarities and differences between how my white identity and my trauma identity impacted my implementation of CRT. I wanted to generate insights about the challenges and benefits of implementing CRT, considering NC CC agent resistance to CRT is this research study’s phenomenon under investigation (Nowell et al, 2017). I also used Thematic Analysis to organize, describe, and interpret themes that emerged from my narratives (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

I approached my Chapter 5 data analysis by engaging with each of the Thematic Analysis trustworthiness guidelines as outlined by Nowell (2017):

- 1) Familiarize yourself with the narrative data
- 2) Generate initial codes
- 3) Search for themes
- 4) Review themes
- 5) Define and name themes
- 6) Produce final analysis report

Initial Atlas.ti Software Familiarity and Coding Environment

Though autoethnography has been validated as a qualitative research approach (Marx et al, 2017; Reed-Danahay, 2017; Holman Jones, 2016; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016; Boylorn & Orbe, 2016; Palmer, 2015), autoethnographic first-person narratives can compromise objectivity during coding and data analysis processes; therefore maintaining a highly structured coding and data analysis environment is critical (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016; Chang, 2016; Poulos, 2021).

All data coding was conducted within an environment where I was alone, the room was silent, and a timer was set for fifteen (15) minute intervals so as to avoid coding and analysis fatigue. Along with independent research regarding the qualitative coding software Atlas.ti, I met three (3) times with a NCSU research librarian to review Atlas.ti's software features, as well as to learn Atlas.ti code creation and Atlas.ti's code-document analysis features.

Generation of initial codes took place over the course of one (1) week post-narrative completion, with subsequent subcode generation occurring over a two (2) day period once initial codes were applied to the Chapter 4 data set. Additionally, Atlas.ti's memo feature was utilized to generate more nuanced data by attaching theme-based memos to codes and subcodes. Atlas.ti memos served as identified themes within the dataset and contributed to Thematic Analysis alongside the initial codes and subcodes.

Atlas.ti Code Creation

I initially coded the Chapter 4 data set using four (4) main codes: "white identity impact CRT", "trauma identity CRT", "effective CRT implementation", and "ineffective CRT implementation". These four (4) main codes were derived from language within my research questions, and were created as a research protocol to focus my analysis within the scope of my research study.

Using an inductive coding approach, I further disaggregated two (2) of the four (4) main codes into subcode categories capturing “positive” impacts of my white and trauma identities on CRT implementation, and “negative” impacts of my white and trauma identities on CRT implementation. I believed that by attaching “positive” impact and “negative” impact, I could more thoroughly analyze the impacts of both my white and trauma identities as related to CRT implementation in NC CC Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4. The four codes and related subcodes can be reviewed below:

- 1) White Identity Impact on CRT
 - a) Positive impacts of white identity on CRT implementation
 - b) Negative impacts of white identity on CRT implementation
- 2) Trauma Identity Impact on CRT
 - a) Positive impacts of trauma identity on CRT implementation
 - b) Negative impacts of trauma identity on CRT implementation
- 3) Effective CRT Implementation
- 4) Ineffective CRT Implementation

For the purpose of this study, I defined “impact” as any instance where I myself, a NC CC student, or an NC CC agent was affected by my behavior, speech, policies, procedures, or classroom instruction as informed by either my white identity or my trauma identity.

I defined “positive impact” as interactions between myself and NC CC students and agents that resulted in what I interpreted as beneficial outcomes. This included instances of student success, student learning growth, networking with institutional agents to increase student success, and positive student responses to my CRT implementation.

I defined “negative impact” as interactions between myself and NC CC students and agents that resulted in what I interpreted as detrimental outcomes. This included instances of my creation of barriers to student success and student learning growth, negative interactions with NC CC agents, and negative student responses to my CRT implementation.

I defined “effective CRT implementation” as instances where my CRT implementation resulted in positive outcomes for students and/or resulted in positive interactions with NC CC students and/or agents.

I defined “ineffective CRT implementation” as instances where my CRT implementation resulted in negative outcomes for students and/or resulted in negative interactions with NC CC students and/or agents.

Initial Findings

Atlas.ti allows researchers to code data by labeling text excerpt entries with one or more codes. These will be referred to in this section as “coded entries”. Additionally, Atlas.ti allows for the labeling of text excerpts by memos, which in this research study operated as identified “themes”.

Initial findings revealed that of 436 coded entries (instances when a code occurred) within the data set, and within 206 identified quotations (see Figure 6), the most frequently identified codes included the main code of “trauma identity impact CRT” (136 coded entries) and the subcode “positive impact trauma CRT” (123 coded entries). Second highest code identifications included the main code of “white identity impact CRT” (53 coded entries) and the subcode of “negative impact white id CRT” (52 coded entries). Finally, the third highest identified codes included the subcode “effective CRT implementation” (29 coded entries), and the subcode “ineffective CRT implementation” (26 coded entries).

		1: Data Set 206
◇ effective CRT implementation	29	29
◇ ineffective CRT implementation	26	26
◇ negative impact white id CRT	52	52
◇ negative trauma impacts CRT	14	14
◇ positive impact trauma CRT	123	123
◇ positive impact white id CRT	3	3
◇ trauma identity impact CRT	136	136
◇ white identity impact CRT	53	53
Totals		436

Figure 5, Atlas.ti Code Frequency, All Codes (Entrocaso, 2024).

The initially coded data set (See Figure 5) demonstrated a positive relationship between my trauma identity and its positive impacts on my CRT implementation, as well as a positive relationship between my white identity and its negative impacts on my CRT implementation.

Additionally, my white identity *negatively* impacted my CRT implementation at significantly higher rates as compared to my trauma identity (52 coded entries versus 14 coded entries). Conversely, my white identity *positively* impacted my CRT implementation at much lower rates as compared to my trauma identity (3 coded entries versus 123 coded entries). Thus, the data revealed significantly higher rates of my trauma identity *positively* impacting my implementation of CRT in NC CCs, and significantly higher rates of my white identity *negatively* impacting my CRT implementation in NC CCs.

	◇ effective CRT implementation ⑤ 29	◇ ineffective CRT implementation ⑤ 26
◇ trauma identity impact CRT ⑤ 136	16	10
◇ white identity impact CRT ⑤ 53	5	16

Figure 6, Atlas.ti Code Frequency, Four (4) Main Codes (Entrocaso, 2024)

When the main codes of “trauma identity impact CRT” and “white identity impact CRT” are compared to the main codes of “effective CRT implementation” and “ineffective CRT implementation” (see Figure 6), the data reveals sixteen (16) co-occurring instances of *effective* CRT implementation as impacted by my *trauma* identity, and five (5) co-occurring instances of *effective* CRT implementation as impacted by my *white* identity (See Figure 7). Comparatively, the data reveals ten (10) instances of *ineffective* CRT implementation as impacted by my *trauma* identity, and sixteen (16) instances of *ineffective* CRT implementation as impacted by my *white* identity.

Of the sixteen (16) identified co-occurring codes for *effective* CRT implementation as impacted by my *trauma* identity, four (4) of the co-occurring codes demonstrated an additional co-occurring code of “ineffective CRT implementation”. This means that four (4) of the sixteen (16) co-occurrences of “trauma identity impact CRT” and “effective CRT implementation” were additionally coded for “ineffective CRT implementation”. This demonstrates text excerpts that demonstrated both effective and ineffective CRT, meaning I was both effective and ineffective in the same lesson or environment when implementing CRT.

Initial Text Excerpt Review

Upon discovering that certain text excerpts were coded multiple times, and at times with conflicting codes (“effective CRT implementation” also coded as “ineffective CRT implementation”), I considered it essential to review the associated text excerpts of multiple

coded data set sections. I believed that by analyzing these multiple coded text excerpts, I could possibly derive deeper insights from the data.

Trauma Identity Text Excerpts

When reviewing the text excerpts associated with the four (4) instances of “ineffective CRT implementation” as related to my trauma identity, all four (4) were connected to an interaction where I attempted to implement CRT and was met with NC CC agent resistance. The remaining twelve (12) codes for *effective* CRT implementation as impacted by my *trauma* identity reveal instances of *positive* student and NC CC agent interactions, as well as *effective* CRT instruction, and course and classroom policies.

Of the ten (10) co-occurring codes for how my *trauma* identity impacted *ineffective* CRT implementation (see Figure 6), the associated text excerpts reveal three (3) instances in which I did not properly scaffold course content and class discussion regarding trauma, and seven (7) instances in which the CRT implementation was ineffective due to NC CC agent resistance/ignorance specifically from my department chair and executive leadership.

White Identity Text Experts

Of the five (5) co-occurring codes for *effective* CRT implementation as impacted by my *white* identity, four (4) coded instances demonstrate that while my CRT implementation was effective, I was operating from a position of white preference and superiority. These coded instances include when I ignored a warning to not visit a historically black community as a white person, and two (2) specific instances of my perpetuation of white preference through my teaching of writing.

The remaining text excerpt for *effective* CRT implementation as impacted by my *white* identity may be related to my lowest NC CC student success scores during my second year

teaching at Inst3. This text excerpt revealed that although my CRT implementation at Inst3 was effective, the effectiveness was overshadowed at times by my perpetuation of white preference in my grading policies and course structure.

Of the sixteen (16) co-occurring codes for *ineffective* CRT implementation as impacted by my *white* identity, fifteen (15) associated text excerpts demonstrate instances in which my white identity either *negatively* impacted students, or I agreed to perpetuate white preference departmental policies I knew to be ineffective in order to maintain employment.

Two (2) of the sixteen (16) coded instances co-occur with “*effective* CRT implementation”, revealing two (2) instances in which my white identity was negatively impacting students, my classroom, and my institution, but I was still able to effectively implement CRT in some capacity.

Overview of Atlas.ti Co-Occurrence Data: White Identity + CRT Implementation

	<u>Effectiveness</u>		<u>Impact</u>	
	◇ effective CRT implementation ③ 29	◇ ineffective CRT implementation ③ 26	◇ negative impact white id CRT ③ 52	◇ positive impact white id CRT ③ 3
◇ negative impact white id CRT ③ 52	5	15		
◇ positive impact white id CRT ③ 3		1		
◇ white identity impact CRT ③ 53	5	16	52	1

Figure 7, Atlas.ti Co-Occurrence Data, White Identity Codes (Entrocaso, 2024)

Once an initial review of textual excerpts was completed, I disaggregated the data by co-occurring codes. While the text excerpts demonstrated qualitative representation of the data, I felt creating Atlas.ti co-occurrence data tables could provide a quantitative perspective with which I could compare how codes related to each other. This was completed, in part, as a check on the trustworthiness of the data exercise, in order to capture any discrepancies in the data.

First, I selected the codes “white identity impact CRT”, and its corresponding subcodes of “positive impact white id CRT” and “negative impact white id CRT” (see Figure 7). I ran an analysis of their co-occurrence with “effective CRT implementation”, “ineffective CRT implementation”, “negative impact white id CRT” and “positive impact white id CRT”.

The data shows that of the five (5) textual instances of my *white* identity’s impact on *effective* CRT implementation in NC CCs, all five (5) instances corresponded to my *white* identity’s negative impact on CRT implementation. Analysis of corresponding textual excerpts revealed instances of negative impacts on students, with two (2) textual instances of acquiescing to white leadership regarding white preference informed policies. This was an important discovery in part because as a trained CRT educator, I did not associate my *white* identity with negative CRT impacts in my classroom.

The data demonstrates only a single instance of my *white* identity *positively* impacting CRT implementation, and the textual excerpt reveals I coded the corresponding experience as “positive” because I was able to, through my identification as a white individual, identify white preference behavior in I3’s president during her inaugural ceremony. All subsequent instances of my *white* identity impacting CRT are *negative*.

I believe that the data demonstrates my *white* identity was the most significant *negative* influence on my *effective* CRT implementation. While revisited in discussion, I believe that the co-occurring code data for *white* identity’s impact on CRT implementation reveals unintentional but significant negative impacts due to my embedded white preference. I also believe that though the data reveals no intentional instances of white preference bias, my white preference upbringing and adherence to white preference informed policies and teaching practices still resulted in barriers for my students.

Overview of Atlas.ti Co-Occurrence Data: Trauma Identity + CRT Implementation

	<u>Effectiveness</u>		<u>Impact</u>	
	◇ effective CRT implementation ⑩ 29	◇ ineffective CRT implementation ⑩ 26	◇ negative trauma impacts CRT ⑩ 14	◇ positive impact trauma CRT ⑩ 123
◇ negative trauma impacts CRT ⑩ 14		6		2
◇ positive impact trauma CRT ⑩ 123	15	7	2	
◇ trauma identity impact CRT ⑩ 136	16	10	10	126

Figure 8, Atlas.ti Co-Occurrence Data, Trauma Identity Codes (Entrocaso, 2024)

Next, I selected the code “trauma identity impact CRT”, and its corresponding subcodes of “positive impact trauma CRT” and “negative impact trauma CRT” (see Figure 8). I then ran an analysis of their co-occurrence with the codes “effective CRT implementation”, “ineffective CRT implementation”, “negative trauma impact CRT” and “positive impact trauma CRT”.

The data demonstrates that of the sixteen (16) textual instances of my *trauma* identity’s impact on *effective* CRT implementation in NC CCs, fifteen (15) instances corresponded to my *trauma* identity’s *positive* impact on CRT implementation in NC CCs. Another review of corresponding textual excerpts revealed instances of my *trauma* identity’s *positive* impacts on students include building strong relationships with students, being trusted by students, and increased levels of student engagement, assignment completion, and course completion.

The data show any coded instance of my *trauma* identity causing *negative* impacts on my *effective* CRT implementation; however, the data does show six (6) instances of my *trauma* identity *negatively* impacting *ineffective* CRT implementation. Of the six (6) identified instances of my *trauma*’s *negative* impacts on *ineffective* CRT implementation, associated textual excerpts reveal two (2) instances of negative interactions with students in which I felt defensive, two (2) instances of non-trauma informed classroom content in which I did not give students the option

to opt out of the class' readings, and two (2) instances of conforming to white leadership's white preference policies out of fear of losing my job.

Atlas.ti Sankey Representations

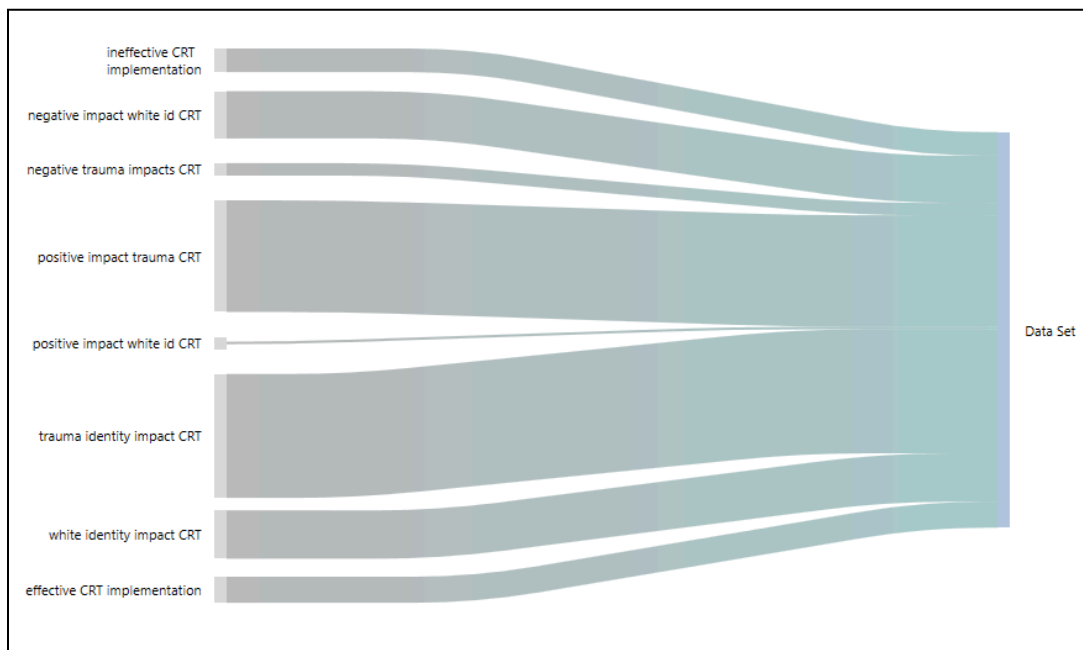


Figure 9, Atlas.ti Sankey representation of all data analysis codes (Entrocaso, 2024)

As a feature of Atlas.ti, codes can be represented in Sankey diagrams for representation of relationships between each other, and between subcodes. Figure 9 shows overall data representation, while Figures 10 and 11 represent co-occurrence data of either my white identity's impact on CRT implementation, and my trauma identity's impacts on CRT implementation.

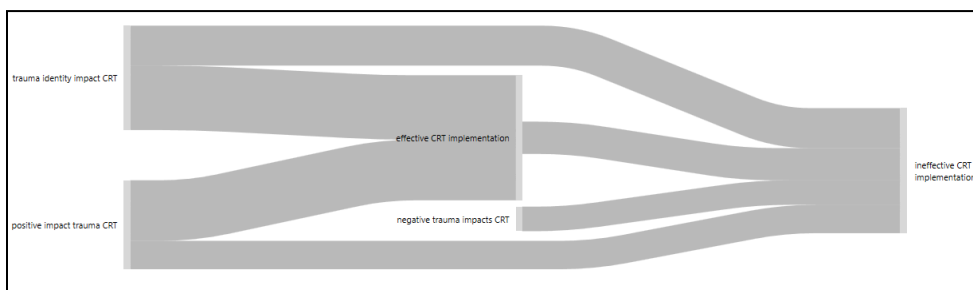


Figure 10, Atlas.ti Sankey representation of trauma identity + CRT implementation codes

As previously discussed, Figure 10 demonstrates my trauma identity was most positively impactful and my white identity was most negatively impactful on NC CC CRT implementation.

Figure 10 demonstrates the relationships between trauma codes (“trauma identity impact CRT”, “positive impact trauma CRT”, “negative trauma impacts CRT”) and the codes “effective CRT implementation” and “ineffective CRT implementation”. The highest, most positive impact on effective CRT implementation is related to my trauma identity.

However, when analyzing “ineffective CRT implementation”, there exists overlap between “ineffective CRT implementation” and the codes “negative trauma impacts CRT” and “effective CRT implementation”. After reviewing the associated textual excerpts, I concluded that although my trauma identity did at times negatively affect CRT implementation, ineffective implementation of CRT coincided with instances of effective CRT implementation in the same NC CC setting.

Figure 10 can be interpreted to highlight a NC CC faculty member’s trauma as beneficial to CRT implementation; however, my trauma identity’s association with “ineffective CRT implementation” may highlight potential barriers to successful implementation when trauma is affecting classroom settings negatively. Overall, Figure 11 suggests that trauma experiences of faculty can significantly and positively influence the effectiveness of CRT.

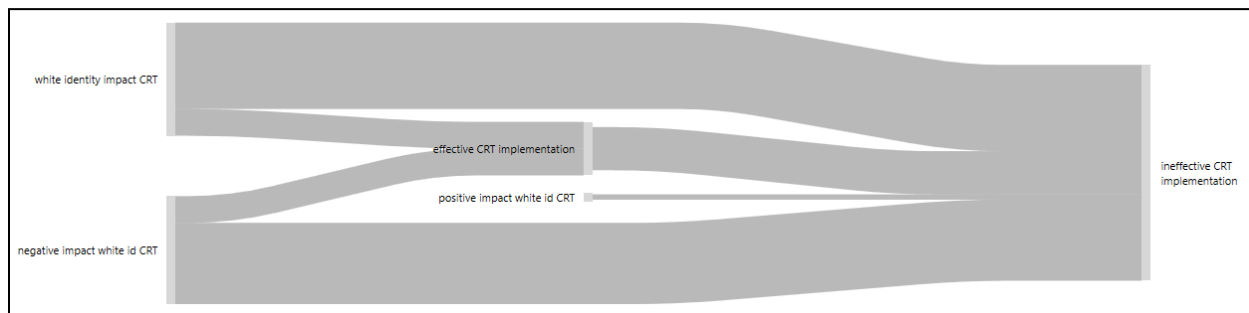


Figure 11, Atlas.ti Sankey representation of white identity + CRT implementation codes (Entrocaso, 2024)

Figure 11 demonstrates the relationship between white identity and CRT implementation's effectiveness. The diagram highlights a positive correlation between white identity and ineffective CRT implementation, but also highlights that even negative white identity characteristics can result in effective CRT implementation.

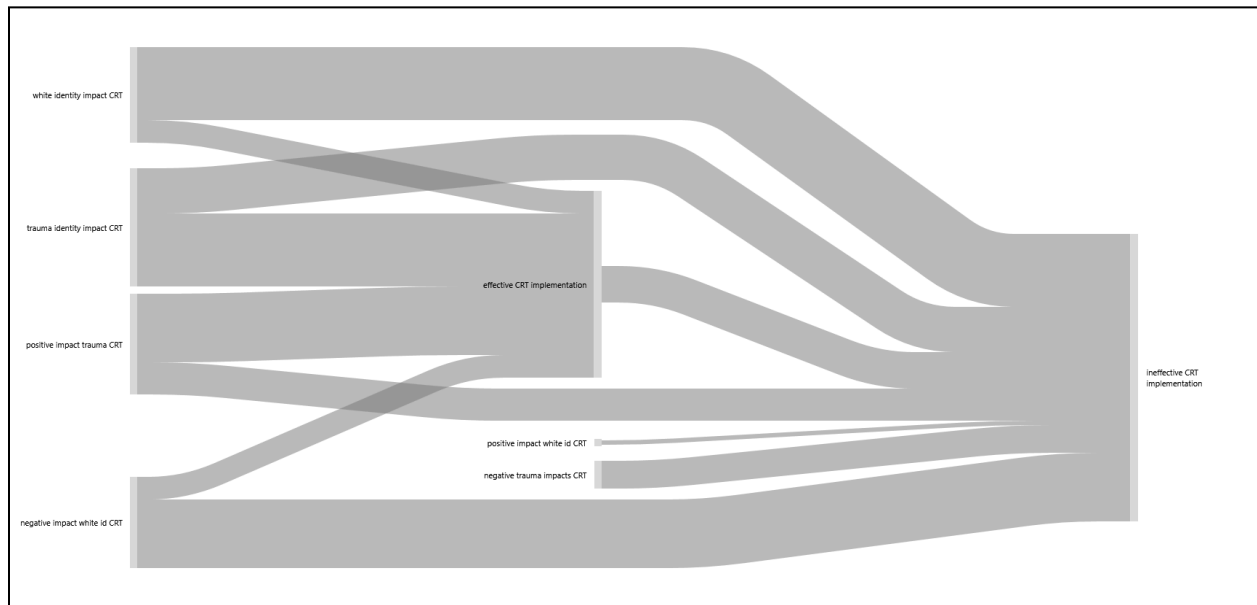


Figure 12, Atlas.ti Sankey representation of white identity and trauma identity codes as they relate positively or negatively to effective or ineffective CRT implementation (Entrocaso, 2024)

Figure 12 shows the relationships between my trauma identity and either effective and ineffective CRT implementation in NC CCs. The Sankey reveals “trauma identity impact CRT” is the most influential code, with sub branches extending from “trauma identity impact CRT” to both “effective” and “ineffective” implementation of CRT. According to the diagram, effective CRT implementation is slightly more influential than ineffective CRT implementation.

Figure 12 also highlights the interconnectedness between white identity and trauma identity, as both branches contribute to both effective and ineffective CRT implementation. The complexity of the interconnectedness of branches within the diagram suggests CRT implementation cannot be viewed as simply a set of individual characteristics, but rather is a

using the “memo” feature in Atlas.ti. Themes were initially labeled using memoing, and then the data was reviewed two (2) more times for theme mining, for a total of three (3) thematic reviews of the data.

Themes occurring three (3) times or more within the data set are shown in Table 2. Once coding was completed, and themes were identified, I observed two overarching categories of themes became apparent: Trauma Themes Impacting CRT Implementation, and Additional Themes Impacting CRT Implementation.

Trauma Themes Impacting CRT Implementation	Number of Times Subcoded in Data Set	Additional Themes Impacting CRT Implementation	Number of Times Subcoded in Data Set
Church Trauma	4	Defensiveness	4
Court Trauma	13	Fear of Losing Job	4
Domestic Violence Trauma	3	Isolation	31
Emotional Abuse Trauma	20	Public Humiliation	5
Law Enforcement Trauma	4	Substance Use	6
Physical Abuse Trauma	8	Unspoken Abuse	6
Poverty Trauma	16	Witnessing Abuse	6
Pregnancy/Birth Trauma	3		
Sexual Abuse, Childhood	3		
Sexual Abuse, Grooming, Childhood	5		
Sexual Assault, Adulthood	6		
Workplace Trauma	18		

Table 2, Atlas.ti memo identification of themes (Entrocaso, 2024)

Trauma Themes Impacting CRT Implementation

Under the thematic category “Trauma Themes Impacting CRT”, twelve (12) subthemes emerged, all connected to abuse or trauma. Of the twelve (12) subthemes, the highest recurring themes were “Court Trauma” (13 entries), “Emotional Abuse Trauma” (20 entries), “Poverty Trauma” (16 entries), and “Workplace Trauma” (18 entries).

When reviewing quotations for “Court Trauma” (13 entries), the theme overlapped the themes of “Law Enforcement Trauma” (4 entries), “Poverty Trauma” (16 entries), “Substance Use” (6 entries), and “Public Humiliation” (5 entries). The final memo for “Court Trauma” connected my criminal and civil court experiences to that of a black female student at Inst1. All thirteen (13) entries for “Court Trauma” were also initially coded as “positive impact trauma CRT”, leading me to believe that I connected my court trauma experiences to classroom empathy and understanding.

When reviewing quotations for “Emotional Abuse Trauma”, all twenty (20) entries are connected to my personal experiences with childhood abuse, domestic violence, and church trauma. Fifteen (15) of the entries are directly related to my childhood and early adulthood experiences, one (1) related to pregnancy/birth trauma, and one (1) overlapped with court trauma. Interestingly, no entries were connected to an experience with a student, but I once again had initially coded all twenty (20) entries as “positive impact trauma CRT”.

When reviewing quotations for “Poverty Trauma” (16 entries), eleven (11) of the entries were related to my own experiences with poverty, versus three (3) of the entries related to my poverty trauma’s effect on students. Additionally, three (3) of the entries were connected to uncertainty and stress related to remaining enrolled in my doctorate program. Four (4) of the entries were directly related to my experiences with NC CC leadership, with two (2) of the four (4) related to my experiences at Inst3. Of the sixteen (16) total “Poverty Trauma” entries, one (1)

was labeled “ineffective CRT implementation, and fourteen (14) were labeled “positive impact trauma CRT”.

Finally, when reviewing quotations for “Workplace Trauma” (18 entries), fifteen (15) were coded “positive impact CRT”, five (5) were coded for ineffective implementation of CRT, and two (2) were labeled as “ineffective CRT implementation”. “Workplace Trauma” was the most varied theme with co-occurring themes of “Emotional Abuse”, “Public Humiliation”, “Isolation”, “Witnessing Abuse”, and “Fear of Losing Job”. When reviewing the two (2) instances of “Workplace Trauma” affecting students, both instances involved me acquiescing to white department leaders, and white preference department policies which negatively impacted students.

Additional Themes Impacting CRT Implementation

Several additional themes emerged alongside trauma themes within the data set, but the most frequent theme by far was “Isolation” (31 entries). The theme of “Isolation” co-occurred with twenty-eight (28) instances of “positive impact CRT”, five (5) instances of “ineffective CRT implementation”, and two (2) instances of “effective CRT implementation”. When reviewing the quotations associated with the theme of “Isolation”, I observed that my feelings of isolation began in childhood as related to the abuse I experienced. Isolation continued as a theme throughout the adulthood and professional parts of my narratives, particularly evident in the context of my implementation of CRT in NC CCs and my fears over losing my employment. Several times in the narratives I refer to feeling “lost”, “disposable”, and “very, very alone”.

Thematic Analysis Intent

Thematic Analysis is mainly used in qualitative research to examine multiple perspectives of the research participants. In most qualitative research the multiple perspectives

are provided by multiple research participants. In this autoethnographic study, I am the only research participant and the multiple perspectives being examined are provided by my white identity and my trauma identity. Thematic Analysis seeks to discover similarities and differences between these identities and their relationship to CRT, and to generate unexpected insights into the phenomenon being examined (resistance to implementing CRT in the NC CC institutions I was employed) (Nowell et al, 2017).

Similarities and differences between my identities and the situations and environments (NC CC institutions) where CRT was being implemented, were identified using Thematic Analysis by -identifying themes or patterns in the data (sometimes called codes), which I then organized, described, and interpreted as “themes” that arise from my narratives (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Summary of Findings

The phenomenon under investigation in this research study is NC CC agent resistance to CRT implementation in NC CC Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4.

Atlas.ti Coding

My research questions sought to investigate this phenomenon by identifying if my white identity and my trauma identity impacted my CRT instructor identity. Coded entries show a clearly higher impact of my trauma identity on CRT implementation (136 entries) than my white identity (53 entries); however, my white identity was the second highest code to occur within the dataset.

Coding of effective CRT implementation (29 entries) was only slightly more recurring than coding of ineffective CRT implementation (26 entries), with six (6) coded entries demonstrating overlap of effective and ineffective CRT implementation. This overlap occurred

because the six (6) coded entries were instances in which my CRT implementation was both effective and ineffective within the same situation or interaction.

Atlas.ti Sankey Diagrams

The Atlas.ti generated Sankey diagrams show the strength of relationships between codes, with larger branches indicating more of a relationship between variables and smaller branches demonstrating less of a relationship between variables.

Figure 10 demonstrates the largest branches extending from the “data set” to the codes “positive impact trauma CRT” and “trauma identity impact CRT”, indicating a strong relationship between these codes and the data set. In other words, these codes occurred the most within the dataset. The second largest branches in Figure 10 were associated with the codes “white identity impact” and “negative impact white id CRT”, indicating these two (2) codes occurred at the second highest rate in the data set. Finally, “effective CRT implementation” and “ineffective CRT implementation” were the third strongest associated codes within the data set.

Figure 10 also demonstrates how the codes of “ineffective CRT implementation” and “effective CRT implementation” were impacted by my trauma codes: “negative trauma impacts CRT”, “positive impact trauma CRT”, and “trauma identity impact CRT”. My trauma identity, and its positive impacts on CRT, were more strongly related to effective CRT implementation than ineffective CRT implementation. The negative impacts of my trauma identity were weakly associated with ineffective CRT, and not related to effective CRT implementation at all.

Figure 11 demonstrates how the codes of “ineffective CRT implementation” and “effective CRT implementation” were impacted by my white identity codes: “negative impact white id CRT”, “positive impact white id CRT”, and “white identity impact CRT”. My white identity, and its negative impacts on CRT, were more strongly related to ineffective CRT

implementation than effective CRT implementation. The positive impacts of my white identity were strongly associated with ineffective CRT, and weakly related to effective CRT implementation.

Figure 12 demonstrates how the codes of “ineffective CRT implementation” and “effective CRT implementation” were impacted by my remaining codes: “negative impact white id CRT”, “positive impact white id CRT”, “white identity impact CRT”, “negative trauma impacts CRT”, “positive impact trauma CRT”, and “trauma identity impact CRT”. The diagram shows that both identities impacted ineffective and effective CRT implementation. However, my trauma identity demonstrated a much stronger relationship with effective CRT than my white identity.

Code-Document Analysis Atlas.ti

The Atlas.ti code-document analysis function analyzes an entire dataset for frequency of words and concepts which are repeated. The more frequently a word or concept is used, the larger the word appears on the code-document analysis infographic.

The code-document analysis (Figure 13) demonstrates that students were the highest word or concept used throughout my dataset, with “time”, “step-father”, “son”, “department”, “mother”, and “school” the second most frequently used. This indicates that students were centered in my research study as the primary narrative focus.

Themes

Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis Using Atlas.ti

I identified themes within the narratives using the memo function in Atlas.ti. This allows a researcher to add additional labels to the dataset that are not codes. I identified my themes

using this function, because I wanted to capture the themes that emerged as I was coded the data (inductive coding).

Nineteen (19) total themes were identified as recurring throughout the dataset. I realized the themes were divided into two (2) main categories: trauma themes impacting CRT implementation, and additional themes impacting CRT implementation.

Of the twelve (12) trauma themes impacting CRT implementation, the three (3) most frequent occurring themes were “Emotional Abuse Trauma”, “Poverty Trauma”, and “Workplace Trauma”. Of the seven (7) additional themes impacting CRT implementation, the highest occurring theme was “Isolation” (31 times occurring) with the next highest themes of “Substance Use”, “Unspoken Abuse”, and “Witnessing Abuse” all occurring only six (6) times each in the dataset.

Figure 14 outlines my Thematic Analysis process using Atlas.ti software. My process began with identifying codes within my data set, analyzing text excerpts, creating Sankey diagrams in Atlas.ti, running Atlas.ti’s code-document analysis, and identifying emergent themes through the use of Atlas.ti’s memo function. The data set is represented in gray, Thematic Analysis steps are represented in red, findings are represented in yellow, and insights and

implications related to my research questions are represented in green.

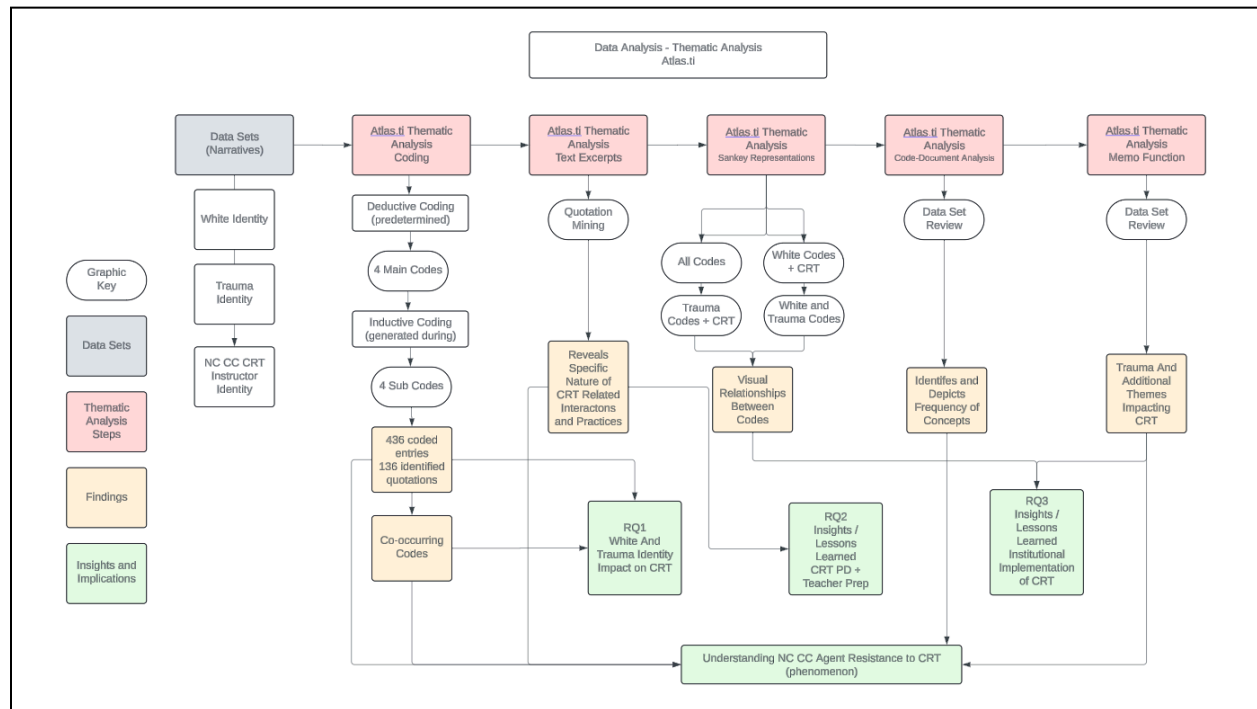


Figure 14, Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis Process (Entrocaso, 2024)

Discussion of Findings

Trauma and Empathy Development

A key finding of my research study was the significantly positive impact of my trauma identity on my CRT implementation at Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4. The data suggest that these positive impacts are due primarily to my development of personal empathy due to the trauma I have experienced throughout my lifetime. While some literature suggests trauma hinders empathy development (Couette et al., 2020; Mazza et al., 2015; Parlar et al., 2014), other research supports my conclusion that higher levels of trauma, and higher variations of experienced traumas, correlate to higher levels of empathy development (Norman, 2023; Tan, 2023; Wang et al., 2021).

Trauma is a great unifier among those who share traumatic experiences, and I could relate to the trauma experiences of many students and colleagues due to my own significant trauma background. My white identity, however, persisted in its negative effects on students and my relationships with institutional agents regardless of the connections my trauma helped me form.

While my trauma identity significantly and positively influenced my CRT implementation at Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4, my trauma and white identities also negatively impacted students through my lack of empathy in several instances. A recurring theme throughout the data set was my inability to connect with certain students and institutional agents at Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4, which at times resulted in interpersonal conflict. I attribute this lack of empathy to my white identity's white preference biases, as in each instance I lacked empathy, the data was coded for white identity negative impact.

While my empathy developed significantly due to my trauma, I also believe my white-privileged, white supremacist upbringing significantly influenced my empathy development in negative ways. In Chapter 4, the data revealed a tension between my trauma identity's capacity to relate to and positively impact students, while my white identity's implicit biases resulted in negative effects on students including creating barriers to assignment, course, and pathway completion.

The data set also revealed multiple instances where NC CC faculty members lacked empathy towards students, and where department chairs, supervisors, and executive leaders at NC CC Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 demonstrated a lack of empathy both towards students, and myself as an instructor. Interestingly, the data also shows that the more I integrated empathy into my CRT implementation, the more alienated and isolated I became from colleagues and

supervisors at all four (4) institutions. However, the more I exhibited empathy in my teaching and advising, the higher success rates I observed among my students.

Having observed this tension between my trauma identity and my white identity multiple times throughout my data, I would assert another key insight is the significant and positive role my empathy played in teaching and advising at Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4, many times leading to higher rates of student success. However, the data also consistently shows that whenever white preference, whether conscious or subconscious, was present in situations involving either myself or my colleagues - the resulting negative effects on students were significant. These included adherence to white preference classroom, departmental, and institutional policies across all four (4) studied institutions.

Empathy Defined

While the scholarship regarding empathy is complex and vast, for the purposes of my discussion I define empathy as encompassing both cognitive empathy and emotional empathy. Cognitive empathy is defined in the literature as a person's ability to understand another person's perspectives and feelings, and also includes a person's ability to imagine another person's experiences (Abramson et al., 2020; Perry & Shamay-Tsoory, 2013; Smith, 2006; Spaulding, 2017). Emotional empathy is defined in the literature as a person's ability to resonate personally with another person's feelings, and includes a person's ability to share their own feelings with another in an emotional exchange (Khanjani et al., 2015; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972; Smith, 2006).

Educational research on the cognitive and emotional empathy of instructors in classrooms highlights the significant impact of empathy on students' social functioning, information processing, and successful interactions with both their instructor and classroom peers (Cooper et

al., 1999; Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009; Khanjani et al., 2015; Lucas, 2011; Meyers et al., 2019; Nechita, 2018; Zhou, 2022). Higher education literature regarding empathy, compared to PK-12 institutions, reveals higher rates of instructors and institutional leaders lacking empathic understanding and behavior in both teaching and learning, as well as in institutional practices (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018; Maxwell, 2017; Meyers et al., 2019; Zembylas, 2012).

An initial review of my data revealed similar experiences with empathy from NC CC institutional agents as reported in previous studies. I observed NC CC agents, including myself, engage in judgemental behavior regarding certain students' learning abilities, exercise our “instructor discretion” regarding enrollment or grading policies that contributed to barriers to academic progression, and maintain a clear separation between “us” as faculty and “them” as students.

In Inst1, Inst2, and Inst 3 I worked in predominantly or all white departments. In all four (4) institutions I worked for executive leaders who were predominantly or all white. In all four (4) institutions I was instructed that faculty discretion was the ultimate authority in the classroom. Additionally, in all four (4) institutions, teaching and learning were strategic plan targets; yet I did not observe CRT being actively utilized by anyone in my departments other than myself.

I believe my data demonstrates a significant connection between the lack of empathy I observed among Inst1, Inst 2, Inst3, and Inst 4's institutional agents, and the embedded white preference culture in HE that influenced multiple levels of institutional culture at all four (4) institutions. What will follow is an exploration of this connection.

White Preference Culture and Lack of Empathy

White preference culture (see also: white supremacy culture, white privilege culture), exhibits and exacerbates a *lack of empathy* in institutions and environments in which historical characteristics of whiteness are more highly valued (Chu-Lien Chao et al., 2014; Coleman, 2017; Gaines, 2017; Gardner, 2021; Hobson & Whigham, 2018; Uehline & Yalch, 2021; Wolf, 2018). These characteristics include prioritizing of white culture over other cultures, a denial of racism, colorblindness, white fragility, othering, and tokenism, to name a few attributers of white preference culture (DiAngelo, 2018; hooks, 1990; McIntosh, 1998).

If white preference culture exhibits and exacerbates a lack of empathy in institutions, then it logically follows that the lack of empathy I observed in all four (4) institutions, where faculty and executive leaders were overwhelmingly white, suggests a strong presence of and adherence to white preference culture. This conclusion is further supported by my data, which indicates every coded instance of my white identity influencing interactions with students at Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 resulted in negative effects for the students involved. These included students who discontinued enrollment in my courses, acrimonious relationships with students, and students who felt they could not trust me - all of which demonstrate a lack of empathy by a white instructor.

Research indicates that when white-identifying individuals enjoy higher levels of privilege within a given environment, they exhibit lower levels of empathy (Uehline & Yalch, 2021; Wolf, 2018). Even with awareness of white preference (white supremacy, white privilege), white-identifying individuals tend to exhibit more empathy towards other white-identifying individuals, or individuals who demonstrate white preference characteristics, as they exhibit less empathy towards individuals and environments that are not informed by white preference (Chu-Lien Chao, 2014). My data suggests that I also exhibited a preference for white students at

various times, an adherence to white preference policies I knew were detrimental for students, and departmental cultures in which I was not obligated to pursue cultural diversity.

One research study discovered a negative correlation between racial colorblindness (read: “I don’t see race”) and empathy, indicating that the more an individual claims “race” is not a significant factor in interpersonal interactions, the lower their empathic capacity (Gardner, 2021). A separate research study found that “higher empathic concern significantly predicted higher levels of White privilege awareness”, indicating a white-identifying individual’s empathic capacity was higher when their own privilege was acknowledged (Wolf, 2018, p.1). In the context of HE, white faculty and leaders actually reinforce white preference (white supremacy, white privilege), and distinctly lack an ability to empathize with the historical and societal experiences of non-white populations (Hobson & Whigham, 2018).

NC CC agents, especially white-identifying agents, are not immune to this damaging perpetuation of white preference (white supremacy, white privilege), and hold responsibility for white preference's negative effects on our students and colleagues. We are also responsible for gaining white preference self-awareness, whether through individual research, in collaborative settings with non-white populations, or by conducting research studies focusing on white preference’s effects on teaching and learning in NC CC institutions.

I believe that acknowledgement by NC CC leaders of white preference’s significant negative influence on our institutions is critical for the effectiveness of future NC CC policy and practice, particularly in connection to teaching and learning. Through my research study, I have come to conclude that NC CCs cultural preference for whiteness in its policies, procedures, student support services, and most importantly in its direct instruction of students, is a form of *oppression* against the students we serve. In this sense, perpetuating white preference practices

creates trauma, both for NC CC students, but also for NC CC institutional agents.

Acknowledged or not, intentional or not, the culture in the NC CC institutions I worked was complicit in perpetuating white preference. In my observations, the most damaging perpetuation of white preference in Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 was connected to teaching and learning practices lacking empathy and CRT. I also believe that without the implementation of CRT, and without integration of empathic teaching practices in NC CC classrooms, the perpetuation of white preference within NC CC institutions, and its harmful effects on NC CC students, is inevitable.

Research Question One (1): Individual Culture Analysis

Research Question 1: How, if at all, have my experiences as white identifying, and as a trauma survivor, impacted me as a CRT instructor in NC CC classrooms?

CRT's Connection to Empathy

In this section, I will discuss how my research study data provided insights into Research Question 1 (RQ1). As outlined in Chapter 1, RQ1 focused on analyzing CRT implementation at NC CC Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 in relation to the individual cultures of students, and my individual cultures as a white instructor with a trauma background.

My white identity contributed to a lack of empathy towards NC CC students; my trauma identity contributed to my empathy development, which in turn affected my students in significantly positive ways. Dr. Geneva Gay, the originator of CRT, describes the “power of caring” as a critical component of successful CRT implementation (2000, p. 45). I propose that her definition of caring, as applied to CRT, inherently includes both cognitive and emotional empathy. Therefore, I believe that for CRT to be effectively implemented at the individual level

(as posited in RQ1) - specifically between an NC CC instructor and an NC CC student - both instructor and student must actively value and practice empathy.

Related to white preference behavior exhibited by educators (specifically white educators), Dr. Gay goes on to state:

“[w]hile most teachers are not blatant racists, many probably are cultural hegemonists. They expect all students to behave according to the school’s cultural standards of normality. When [diverse] students fail to comply, the teachers find them unlovable, problematic, and difficult to honor or embrace without equivocation. Rather than build on what the students have in order to make their learning easier and better, the teachers want to correct and compensate for their ‘cultural deprivations’. This means making ethnically diverse students conform to middle-class, Eurocentric cultural norms” (2000, p. 46).

Dr. Gay describes that in order for an instructor to exhibit empathy, their relationships with students should be able to be “characterized by patience, persistence, facilitation, validation, and empowerment” whereas uncaring relationships with students are “distinguished by impatience, intolerance, dictations, and control” (2000, p. 46).

Gay describes a teacher’s genuine care for students as “one of the major pillars of culturally responsive pedagogy”, and that caring (including cognitive and emotional empathy for the purposes of this study) “is manifested in the form of teacher attitudes, expectations, and behaviors about students’ human value, intellectual capacity, and performance responsibilities” (2000, p. 45). Gay proposes that if empathy is lacking in the classroom, the absence of it can be seen in an instructor’s treatment of students; likewise if empathy is present, interpersonal relationships between faculty and students will be positive and supportive.

Significant to me is that both my empathy and my lack of empathy , operated simultaneously in Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4. I was able to establish meaningful, trusting relationships with students, and at the same time alienated others. I was able to bring diverse perspectives and content to students, and at the same time exhibited white preference ideology in multiple, negatively impactful ways. I was able to facilitate depthful learning, and at the same time operated from an unempathetic position regarding the enforcement of white preference departmental/institutional policies and procedures.

My research suggests that empathy is a crucial, if not *the* most critical, element in the relationship between an NC CC faculty member and student. Based on observations at Inst1, Inst2, Inst2, and Inst4, I found that the one-on-one interactions between faculty and students often provide the most significant opportunities for empathetic exchanges - not on a classroom level, not on an institutional level, but in the *individual*.

As a CRT instructor, whose empathy was deepened through trauma, I have found that trust is essential for effective knowledge exchange between teacher and student. If NC CC agents continue to operate from positions lacking empathy and perpetuate a white preference culture, we will struggle to establish the trust necessary for facilitating meaningful learning experiences.

Related to the effects of lacking empathy on students, instructors who exhibit a lack of self-awareness as to how white preference negatively impacts students, typically generate lower levels of success than CRT instructors (Gay, 2000, p. 47). Instructors who acknowledge white preference, however, who acknowledge diverse cultures in the classroom, and who acknowledge that all students should be supported where they are and not where they are expected to be, typically experience much higher levels of student success (2000, p. 47).

Consistent with my research findings, other researchers have concluded that the effective implementation of CRT requires empathy (Rieckhoff et al., 2020; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Ullman & Hecsh, 2011; Warren, 2013; Warren, 2018). Without empathy, a CRT instructor may experience difficulty in fully understanding and appreciating the cultural perspectives of students, hindering their ability to develop a culturally responsive classroom environment.

Vulnerability as a Primary Trait of Empathy

Finally, as related to RQ1, my research revealed that my personal experiences with trauma have significantly influenced my understanding of *vulnerability* as related to my development of empathy towards students. My data demonstrates a strong connection between my expression of empathy towards students, and my willingness to be vulnerable in front of them about my own traumas, insecurities, and hardships. Even as my data demonstrated my empathy was often absent from classroom settings as influenced by my white identity, coded data for effective CRT implementation nearly always involved an element of me exhibiting vulnerability for my students.

Vulnerability as a trait of empathy is supported in the literature as a necessary component of empathy's effective expression in professional settings (Boston et al., 2001; Margri, 2020; Marin-Avila, 2023; Wei et al., 2021). In HE, the lack of vulnerability exhibited by faculty members has been connected to white preference, as vulnerability in classroom settings has not typically been viewed as a professional or desirable trait (Jackson, 2018). In fact, the emergence of *vulnerability theory* in HE literature demonstrates that vulnerability in HE settings is effective in meeting student and community needs (Lieberwitz, 2021).

Research also indicates that an individual student's ability to successfully navigate HE settings resulting in degree completion is increasingly being limited due to HE institutions

becoming increasingly more focused on “entrenched bureaucracy, diminished collegiality, and the abuse of vulnerable academics”, rather than student success (Olesiyenko & Tierney, 2018, p.1). While I observed positive outcomes when expressing vulnerability in classroom settings, I simultaneously experienced anxiety that my vulnerability with students would result in being labeled as “unprofessional” by my colleagues and supervisors. In fact, many HE faculty believe they cannot exhibit vulnerability to their students or to their colleagues for fear of retaliation by their leadership, resulting in the possible termination of their employment (Olesiyenko & Tierney, 2018).

While I was able to achieve vulnerability with my students at Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4, I was not able to achieve the same level of vulnerability with my NC CC colleagues and leaders. In fact, the highest recurring theme in my data set was not trauma, nor CRT implementation, but *isolation*. Of the thirty-one (31) identified instances of me feeling isolated, fifteen (15) occurred at Inst3, during my most effective CRT implementation time period. The remaining sixteen (16) isolation excerpts were connected to my trauma experiences in childhood and early adulthood.

I reference the high occurrence of *isolation* within the data set to illustrate my individual experience with vulnerability as related to empathy and CRT implementation. Based on the data, my trauma isolated me mentally and emotionally from my parents, family members, and peers because I did not believe they could understand the depth of pain I found myself in. Still, I found individuals in my life who fostered vulnerability in me, and encouraged me to share my experiences as a way of understanding and processing them. I personally understand how much vulnerability and empathy can assist in healing and stabilization of one’s life.

In summary, I believe my experiences as white identifying, and as a trauma survivor, impacted me as a CRT instructor in NC CC classrooms by highlighting the benefits of *empathy* and *vulnerability* between NC faculty and students. Furthermore, the data and my literature support *empathy* and *vulnerability* to be *necessary* for successful CRT implementation in HE. In summary, my data and the supporting literature review reveal how perpetuation of white preference in NC CC policies and procedure have detrimental effects, and negative impacts in the form of trauma on individuals navigating HE.

Research Question Two (2): Classroom Culture Analysis

Research Question 2: How can my insights and lessons learned from implementing CRT in NC CC classrooms inform NC CC teacher preparation and professional development?

Individual Culture As Related to Classroom Culture

In this section, I will discuss my observations regarding how my research study gave insights into Research Question 2 (RQ2). As outlined in Chapter 1, RQ2 focused on analyzing how I implemented CRT within my classrooms in NC CC Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4. As RQ1 focused on *individual culture* as connected to CRT implementation, RQ2 focused on *classroom culture*.

My response to RQ2 draws on data and findings from study to provide “insights” and “lessons learned” for successfully implementing CRT in NC CCs. While analyzing the data set for RQ2, I defined “insights” as findings relevant to theoretical or conceptual aspects of CRT implementation, and “lessons learned” as findings relevant to the real-world practice and conduct of CRT. Therefore, my response to RQ2 includes both theoretical insights, and practical lessons learned that emerged from my analysis of the data, emphasizing my lived-experience attempting to implement CRT in NC CC Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, Inst4.

The culture in my NC CC classrooms were influenced by both the individual cultures of students and my individual cultures as the instructor (white identifying and a trauma survivor). As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, an individual's culture (or more accurately collection of cultures into an individual identity) is a highly influential factor on positive and effective classroom culture, including both the culture of the student and the culture of the instructor (Gay, 2000; Smith, 2023; Watkins, 2012). In this way, teachers and students exchange cultures in each classroom setting, and the positive or negative aspects of those cultures combine to create either an effective or ineffective learning environment.

Both my white identity and my trauma identity significantly impacted my NC CC classroom culture, and thus affected my CRT implementation. The data set indicates my white identity, as an individual raised in white preference culture, negatively impacted classroom culture. Examples of these negative impacts of my white identity on my classroom culture include alienation of students, contributing to the discomfort of students, and contributing to the perpetuation of white preference informed classroom policies and practices.

In Inst1 and Inst3, while limiting my CRT implementation due to a white preference institutional culture, I observed higher rates of student dropout, incomplete assignments, and non-participation in class activities and discussions. At Inst1, my first NC CC position, I nearly completely conformed to white preference policies and procedures at the direction of my leadership. At Inst3, even after creating an incredibly positive classroom culture at Inst2, I once again reverted back to white preference course policies and procedures due to fear of losing my employment. No instance exists in the data set of my white identity contributing to a positive classroom culture in any of the four (4) institutions studied.

My trauma identity and culture negatively affected my classroom culture at Inst1 and Inst3, primarily through my trauma symptom of defensiveness, which emerged as a recurring theme four (4) times in the dataset. In my experience, defensiveness as a trauma symptom is typically rooted in fear, which is also supported by my data. Additional themes recurring in the data set and related to defensiveness include fear of losing my job (4 times), public humiliation (5 times), and witnessing abuse (6 times). Fear of losing my job occurred at Inst1 (1 time) and Inst3 (3 times), public humiliation and witnessing abuse each happened once within the data related to Inst3.

My defensiveness negatively impacted my classroom cultures at Inst1 and Inst3 by creating acrimonious exchanges between myself and students, and contributing to a feeling of isolation as my defensiveness alienated both my students and colleagues at times in both institutions. Defensiveness also stunted my ability to diversify my course content and teaching practices at both Inst1 and Inst3. Negative impact of my trauma on classroom culture was not observed in either Inst2 or Inst4.

My trauma identity and culture positively impacted my classroom culture at a much higher rate than negatively. Positive impacts of my trauma identity on CRT implementation, leading to the creation of a positive, empathic, vulnerable classroom culture, occurred one hundred and twenty-three (123) times within the data set.

Of the total number of times trauma was coded as positively impacting CRT implementation, eighty-seven (87) instances were related to childhood and adulthood traumas I experienced, and were not directly linked to CRT implementation. However, upon review of the remaining thirty-six (36) instances of trauma positively impacting CRT implementation in the data set, the majority occurred at Inst3 and involved me connecting my past trauma experiences

to current student experiences. Sharing of trauma resulting in a positive classroom environment was also observed at Inst1, Inst2, and Inst4. I believe this demonstrates that I connected most with students through shared traumas and vulnerabilities.

I believe my data demonstrates the significant role of my trauma identity in contributing to my classroom CRT culture. The high number of occurrences of positive trauma impact in my data reflects my ability to empathize with the traumas of my students on multiple levels and through my various trauma experiences which paralleled theirs. At Inst1, and during my first year at Inst3, the data demonstrated the lowest positive impacts of poverty on classroom culture. Conversely, at Inst2, and my last two (2) years at Inst3, and at Inst4, the data demonstrated the majority of positive impacts of my trauma on my classroom culture.

Demonstrating empathy for my students' traumatic experiences facilitated a classroom culture of vulnerability, which in turn increased trust between my students and myself. As my vulnerability grew in my NC CC classrooms, I observed lower dropout rates, higher participation and engagement, and higher course completion rates in Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4. A more thorough discussion of a classroom culture of empathy is discussed below.

Classroom Culture: Insights and Lessons Learned

As discussed in RQ1's analysis, Dr. Gay emphasizes a classroom of "caring" as a *requirement* for effective CRT implementation (Gay, 2000, p. 45). For the purposes of this research study, I consider Dr. Gay's concept of caring as synonymous with *empathy*. As previously discussed, *vulnerability* is a key aspect of empathy and plays a vital role in successful CRT implementation in NC CC classrooms.

An initial insight concerning CRT's implementation, and the creation of a classroom culture of empathy, is how power is given to or taken from students in a classroom setting by NC

CC faculty members. In my experience in Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4, many faculty consider themselves the central and sole authority in classroom cultures, and do not consider students to have equal authority of knowledge.

Several times in the dataset I refer to my observations of NC CC faculty members labeling students “lazy”, “problematic”, “incapable”, and “unmotivated”. No instances occur in the data set of my faculty colleagues implementing classroom cultures of empathy and vulnerability. In fact, several faculty members relayed to me that they felt doing so would be “inappropriate” and was “not part of their job”. All faculty members observed in Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 were white.

The concept of faculty holding supreme authority in HE classrooms is historical and rooted in Eurocentrism and white preference (Rudasill et al., 2023; Sivasubramaniam, 2022). Many of the faculty I observed in Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 expressed that caring for students outside of the classroom was not part of their job duties. Likewise, creating classroom cultures of community and care were not an expectation of any department supervisor I worked under. However, in each instance the faculty member and department supervisor saw themselves as the sole classroom authority, with many balking at departmental intrusion into their courses.

Through my research I would assert that in order for CRT implementation to be successful at the classroom culture level, NC CC faculty members (especially white faculty members) must first acknowledge how white preference bias has historically informed our institutions, our pedagogical practices, and our attitudes towards students. According to the dataset, when I was operating purely from a white identity standpoint, my classroom culture suffered and my students felt disconnected from both the course content, and my instruction.

While other insights in the data could possibly be drawn, I believe the insight of white preference's impact on classroom culture is the most vital insight to report within my discussion section. White preference, as previously discussed, demonstrates a significant lack of empathy, which is required for effective CRT implementation. I would further assert that white preference's lack of empathy *is traumatic* to the students we serve.

My data suggests that faculty must acknowledge current manifestations of white preference bias within classroom cultures as an initial step to creating classrooms of caring. Additionally, I believe consistent, reflective practice of NC CC faculty which should involve analyzing white preference biases by examining my course content and instructional practices is crucial to dismantling the negative effects on NC CC classroom cultures.

Given that the overwhelming majority of NC CC full-time faculty are white (EDNC, 2020), the likelihood that white preference bias and its substantial deleterious effects on students will persist in NC CC classrooms. NC CCs must first acknowledge these circumstances in order to improve student academic success.

CRT Implementation Lessons Learned

In this section, I identify several lessons learned related to the findings in this study that can help inform the effective implementation of classroom CRT. I believe NC CC instructors can integrate some of these lessons learned into their CRT classrooms in order to facilitate a more empathic classroom culture. Beside each recommendation is a reference to the dataset of which NC CC institution I learned these lessons from, according to the data set:

- Conduct a student culture assessment near the beginning of each semester in order to learn your students' respective cultures. Allow students to decline to answer certain questions if they deem them too private. (Inst3)

- Do not assume the skillsets of students present, and use the first week or two of the semester to reteach skills such as reading comprehension strategies, annotation of texts, note taking, searching for and locating information online, and how to navigate learning management systems. (Inst1, Inst3)
- Allow students to redo minor and major assignments as learning opportunities. I required my students to meet with me if they wanted to revise an assignment, which further built our relationship and assisted in their understanding of what was incorrect on their first assignment submission, and how they can earn back full points. (Inst2, Inst3, Inst4)
- Be compassionate and generous regarding deadlines. Do not assume the faculty member is the authority regarding which student experience is “bad enough” to warrant assignment extensions. (Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, Inst4)
- Use the student culture assessment to determine if the course content is relevant to the cultures present in the classroom. Review and revise course content accordingly to reflect the current students’ cultures, per class, per semester. (Inst1, Inst2, Inst3)
- Create a safe place in the classroom for students to express themselves, teaching and modeling respectful discussion and argumentation format, and allow students opportunities to respectfully disagree with both you as the instructor, as well as their peers. (Inst2, Inst3)
- Scaffold controversial, provocative, or trauma-informed content and instruction with trigger warnings, taking into account the cultures present in the classroom. (Inst1, Inst3)

- Allow students to opt out of certain discussion topics either by leaving early, or not penalizing them for being absent. Provide alternate assignments for students who are not comfortable with certain course content. (Inst3, Inst4)
- Model valuing all student cultures and attempt to include all cultures present in a given classroom in a semester's lesson plans, assignments, content, and activities. For example, acknowledge cultural holidays, cultural aesthetics, and cultural events in the community. Encourage students to celebrate one another. (Inst2, Inst3)
- Create opportunities for collaborative learning, and allow students to help one another on assignments per class session. Allow students to opt out of working with peers if their learning needs are better supported with individual work. (Inst3)
- Ask, don't assume. Students know their needs better than faculty, and to assume we as faculty know better is residual white preference. (Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, Inst4)
- Provide opportunities for students to express their needs, such as a "ticket-out-the-door" assessment, which entails asking students to write down on an index card (or virtual space) what they currently need the most, or have the most questions about. Repeat throughout the semester, especially during challenging and/or final assignments. (Inst2, Inst3)
- Create opportunities for students to analyze their learning needs using formal learning assessments, and assist them in finding support. Conduct these learning needs assessments multiple times throughout a semester to capture if the needs have changed. (Inst3)

- Encourage students to attend office hours, and set student appointments for at least a half hour. Some students need five minutes of that time; others need the full session in order for their questions to be answered. (Inst2, Inst3, Inst4)
- Do not apply a “one-size-fits-all” mentality to course content, course instruction, advising, or office hours. (Inst2, Inst3, Inst4)
- Resist defensiveness when students disagree with the instructor or their peers, or if they appear to have “an attitude” / appear “disrespectful”. If said situations occur, allow the student a full opportunity to express what they are thinking/feeling per their comfort level. Do not call students out in front of their peers, but rather offer a private meeting outside of class. (Inst1, Inst3)
- Express and model concern, compassion, empathy, and vulnerability for students to encourage them to build trust with the instructor as well as their peers. (Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, Inst4)

Research Question Three (3): Institutional Culture

Research Question 3: How can insights and lessons learned from my lived experience inform NCCCS leaders to effectively implement CRT institutionally?

In this section, I will discuss how my research study provided insights into Research Question 3 (RQ3). As outlined in Chapter 1, RQ3 focused on analyzing CRT implementation at NC CC Inst1, Inst2, Inst3, and Inst4 in relation to institutional culture. RQ1 focused on *individual culture* as connected to CRT implementation, RQ2 focused on *classroom culture*, and now RQ3 is focused on *institutional culture*.

Institutional culture in HE has become increasingly corporatized, with many HE institutions valuing community partnerships, institutional improvements, and institutional

expansion, over teaching and learning foci (Dee et al., 2023). Teaching and learning initiatives, such as CRT, cannot succeed in HE classrooms if institutional leaders and change agents do not actively encourage and support these initiatives (Ginsberg & Bernstein, 2011). Additionally, research suggests that when faculty are empowered as institutional change agents and equipped with tools such as data analytics training, they can effectively use data to identify areas of improvement in their teaching practices (Rehrey et al., 2019).

When students are prioritized and centralized as primary institutional stakeholders in HE institutions, their feedback indicates environments conducive to meaningful learning, as well as meaningful interactions with institutional agents are the primary contributors to their success (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020). Furthermore, CC teaching and learning equity initiatives that are aimed at *specific* populations and developing *population specific* supports, experience higher student success rates (Felix, 2021). Cultural responsiveness through mentorship and student support services across the CC institution, and not just in the classroom, have also demonstrated positive impacts on student success (Anderson & Deil-Amen, 2023).

Previous research has shown that in order for CC institutions to enact lasting and impactful change, institutional culture *must consider the impact of historically discriminatory practices* that negatively impact students (Pope & LePeau, 2012; Rodriguez & Escobar, 2023). CC students report feeling isolated on campuses that lack the acknowledgement of historically discriminatory institutional practices, as well as experiencing significant difficulty in navigating spaces of resistance to equity initiatives on campus, such as classrooms (Felix et al., 2023). Additional research suggests that CCs, while publicized as institutions of access and opportunity, often fail to see embedded barriers as the responsibility of the institution, often blaming the CC student, solely, if they are unable to achieve academic success (McCambly et al., 2023).

Regarding teaching and learning, research indicates that faculty should actively engage in equity work by first acknowledging the internalized biases within their institutional culture, and by engaging in self-reflection to identify internalized biases within their own classrooms and teaching practices (Palafox, 2023). In order to be considered an equity-minded educator, faculty must be self-aware, perceive themselves as learners, and accept pedagogical interventions as guided by experts (Palafox, 2023). Additionally, faculty should be trained in *active* learning strategies which include critical thinking lessons, inquiry strategies, and analysis exercises in mostly collaborative settings with peers (Theobald et al., 2020; Wang, 2020). In combination, acknowledgement of institutional biases, as well as the evolving self-awareness of faculty, demonstrates significant opportunities for equity initiatives to be sustainable and endure.

Institutional Culture: Insights and Lessons Learned

My NC CC supervision experience is limited to Inst4 at which I supervised an online GED/Adult High School online program. All other employment in NC CCs has been solely as faculty. I believe that faculty with effective CRT backgrounds should be consulted as experts regarding CRT implementation at an institutional level. NC CC institutional leaders should also seek out faculty with pedagogy credentials, certifications, and degrees to help guide CRT initiatives from a pedagogical, instructional, and best practices perspective. External CRT consultants are also available to advise NC CC leaders on CRT implementation.

Relatedly, NC CC leaders should be aware of the lack of autoethnographic studies involving faculty experience in NC CC institutions. I would encourage leaders to develop faculty satisfaction surveys focused specifically on teaching and learning within the classroom. These studies should be informed by CRT tenets, as well as empathy-focused best teaching practices, to

determine the level of the faculty's CRT engagement. The surveys should also be informed by a specific institution's target student populations, and their learning needs.

I recommend NC CC leaders conduct this type of survey at least once per year over the period of CRT implementation. Institutional CRT implementation efforts should continue for at least three (3) years. Department chairs should review the faculty survey data with a pedagogical and CRT focused expert. From there, a CRT consultant or a faculty member already engaged in CRT can assist in facilitating professional development focused on CRT strategies and best practices.

Organizational change is authorized, encouraged, and supported by executive leadership. However, in the case of teaching and learning, leaders should empower faculty who are currently teaching, who hold teaching credentials, and who have experience with implementing CRT and empathy-based practices in the classroom to best determine instructional strategies that are most effective for a particular institution's student populations.

NC CC leaders should provide faculty with training on their individual student success data, which should be disaggregated using the most granular demographic information possible. This allows faculty to view demographic data as separate student cultures present in past courses. With this information, a CRT instructor has a clear idea of where their strengths and weaknesses lie, as well as which student populations they are effectively teaching and which populations they are not. Subsequently, a CRT instructor has a better idea of which cultures were present in their classrooms, and can adjust their future content and instruction accordingly.

In addition, NC CC leaders should require faculty to analyze student success data at least twice a semester for courses they are currently teaching - once at midterm, and once at each semester's end. Again, faculty should be guided by their leaders and institutional effectiveness

teams on how to interpret their student success data, as well as trained by CRT experts on how best to address student success disparities by revising course content and instructional practices.

NC CC department chairs should be tasked with holding professional development throughout a semester, in part based on instructor request and need, and in part based on CRT strategies that will help assist NC CC instructors in improving their student success rates. These professional development training sessions should be held four (4) times a semester, twice before midterm, and twice after midterm. Department-led professional development should also include opportunities for faculty to lead presentations and discussions regarding their own effective CRT strategies.

When applied to NC CC classrooms, Dr. Gay's classroom culture of caring should also include NC CC *institutional acknowledgment of white preference*, and how the experiences of our students within an institution informed by white preference would affect teaching and learning. CRT is quintessential institutional equity practice, regardless of system. Without CRT, HE systems become insulators of white preference, regardless of the equity they espouse (Schmeichel, 2012).

Finally, my findings and my experiences reveal insights on the impact that organizational power dynamics and power differentials have on faculty in the classroom and on their status in academic departments. Power dynamics resulted in restraining my academic freedom and exerted pressure on faculty to adhere to existing cultural norms of instruction, rather than fully implementing CRT.

Empathy in Action: Organizational Model

For students, but particularly for marginalized populations, the development of *empathy* is vital for any system striving to integrate equitable practices aimed at enhancing system

outcomes (Busby and Gardner, 2008; Kania et al, 2016; MacGregor, 2023). *Strategic empathy*, or the intentional implementation of empathic practices within an institution or classroom, has shown to improve relationships between students and faculty, resulting in higher levels of academic achievement (Zemylas, 2011).

Empathy as part of strategic initiatives can be informed by a plethora of organizational change frameworks, including the Empathy and Change Management framework that includes two sequential steps of empathy development and subsequently action areas for empathy maintenance (Dhivakaran, 2023). Change management involves transitioning institutional agents and stakeholders from a current state to a desired future state (Dhivakaran, 2023). I found this framework a helpful starting point for NC CC leaders who are learning about empathy and its impact on their institutions.

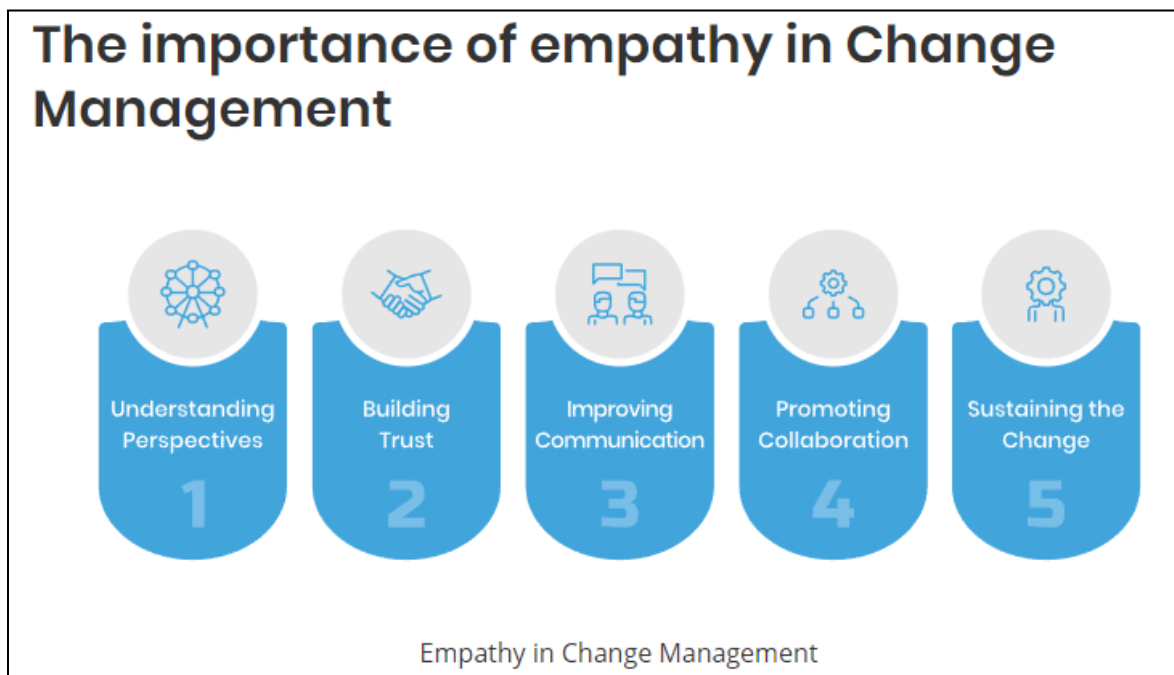


Figure 15. Empathy in Change Management, Dhivakaran, 2023

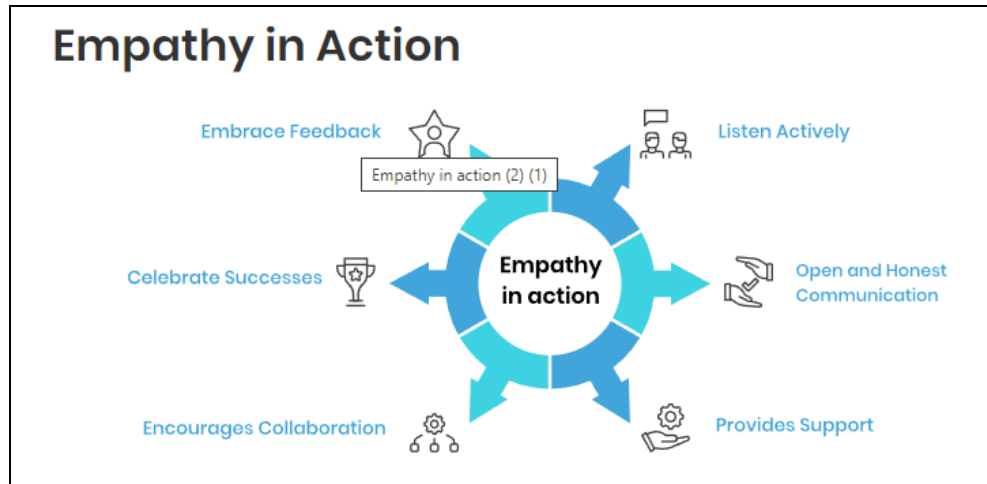


Figure 16. Empathy in Action, Dhivakaran, 2023

NCCC leaders should consider two key insights from the Empathy and Change Management framework:

- 1) The centering of empathy at the core of institutional initiatives *begins with understanding the perspectives of others*, in order to build trust with stakeholders. Only then can communication and collaboration be improved between faculty members and their students, and NC CC leaders with their faculty.
- 2) Empathy in action is a recursive process for NC CC leaders, with ongoing approaches to listening actively, engaging in open and honest communication, providing support to faculty especially, encouraging collaboration, celebrating successes, and embracing feedback.

Implications of the Research Findings for Theory and Practice

Implications for Theory

- 1) Rethinking Trauma and Empathy in Educational Contexts: My research study challenges the idea that trauma always impedes empathy development, and alternatively, the findings suggest that trauma can be a powerful catalyst for developing empathy,

especially when combined with cultural responsiveness. NC CC leaders and faculty should pursue an understanding of the relationship between trauma and empathy in educational settings within their institutions, and the effects of trauma on both a student's ability to learn, and an instructor's ability to teach effectively.

- 2) Expanding the Understanding of White Preference: White preference's insidious nature permeates HE institutions, including NC CCs. Even among well-intentioned individuals, white preference can manifest within classrooms, and within teacher and student interactions. NC CC leaders and faculty should pursue a more nuanced understanding of white preference beyond its overt forms, including self-reflective practice.
- 3) The Importance of Self-Reflection and Vulnerability: Culturally responsive teaching environments require consistent and intentional self-reflection by the CRT instructor. Teaching practices and student outcomes should be reviewed on a regular basis using data-centric and student-centric approaches. Avoid centralization of the instructor as the classroom authority, and develop the CRT instructor as the classroom facilitator. Model vulnerability and encourage vulnerability within the classroom.

Implications for Practice

- 1) Prioritizing Empathy and Vulnerability: CRT instructors should strive to cultivate empathy and vulnerability in their classrooms. This can include creating a safe space for open dialogue, sharing of personal experiences, and modeling empathy in interactions with students.
- 2) Addressing White Preference: NC CC leaders should actively address white preference culture as they continue to promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging initiatives within their institutions. This can include training faculty and staff on implicit bias and

microaggressions, creating inclusive course content, training on communication among diverse cultures, and fostering supportive environments for marginalized students.

- 3) Integrating Trauma-Informed Practices: Faculty should be trained on trauma-informed practices into their course content selection, assignment guidelines, and instructional practices. This can include training faculty to understand the impact of trauma on students' learning and behavior in order to create a safe and supportive learning environment. I would also recommend faculty be assessed for the impacts of their own trauma. Resources should be readily available to assist both students and faculty navigate trauma and its symptoms.
- 4) Encouraging Self-Reflection and Professional Development: NC CC leaders and faculty should engage in ongoing self-reflection exercises and professional development opportunities regarding CRT, empathy, and trauma-informed practices. Self-reflection will help the institutional agent assess and begin to dismantle their own personal biases, while professional development opportunities give leaders and faculty members the opportunity to enrich their own learning, improve their teaching practices, and develop effective strategies for student support and academic success.

Limitations

The study's reliance on autoethnography could have introduced biases during data collection and data analysis. Reliance on self-reported data had the possibility of introducing bias into the results. While autoethnography allows for personal narratives as valid, the researcher's objectivity may be influenced by variable circumstances and environments during data collection potentially causing results to be limited in scope and depth.

While several aspects of the dataset appeared to be positively or negatively correlated, autoethnography does not include a quantitative component with which to pursue mathematical association of codes and themes. Likewise, causation is difficult to establish between codes and themes, making isolation of the impact of coded text excerpts difficult.

Despite these limitations, single-participant research studies can be valuable tools to explore new research questions, and provide in-depth insights into an individual's experiences. However, the limitations of the study are important to acknowledge for how they may have impacted data collection and data analysis.

Implications for Future Research

The potential and limitations of this research study emphasize the need for more studies that explore the lived experiences of a single participant generating multiple narratives/data sets from multiple self-identities, as an alternative to studies that examine single narratives generated by multiple observers.

I have not found any autoethnographic studies of NC CCs conducted by a current or former NC CC faculty member, nor have I found a study by a CC faculty member conducting autoethnography through a white identity and trauma identity lens. My research study contributes to the growing number of autoethnographic research on CRT, and expands the limited literature on HE autoethnographies exploring CRT's benefits for HE students.

My research study discovered a significant relationship between my trauma identity and effective CRT implementation, as well as a significant relationship between my white identity and ineffective CRT implementation. Future research could explore the possible correlation between a faculty member's trauma background and its impact on teaching practices, as well as a faculty member's white identity and its impact on teaching practices. Furthermore, future

research could and should include more accounts of faculty experiences within NC CCs. I would propose these research studies should also focus specifically on non-white faculty's experiences within NC CCs.

Though CRT is commonly practiced in PK-12, research studies focusing on the implementation of CRT in NC CCs are limited. I would suggest future studies focus not only on CRT implementation in NC CC classrooms, but also explore what defines and characterizes a culturally responsive NC CC department and institution. Furthermore, analysis of CRT in NC CCs should not be limited to solely university transfer courses / curriculum courses, but should also include vocational and continuing education courses at NC CCs.

Other potential research methodologies for exploring faculty experience within NC CCs include semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and the Delphi technique. Semi-structured interviews would allow for a wider participant group from which to draw more generalizable findings, as well as can pursue both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Focus groups, as opposed to semi-structured interviews, can provide insight regarding shared experiences as opposed to individual ones within a NC CC setting. Finally, the Delphi technique would be beneficial to potentially garner consensus from experts regarding CRT implementation best practices.

Additionally, my research study holds several implications for policy and practice. NC CC faculty members will benefit from my research study as an example of reflective practice regarding CRT instruction. Specifically white identifying NC CC faculty members may benefit from my exploration of how a white-identifying faculty member's white preference bias may negatively impact NC CC students.

My findings can be applied to improve NC CC institutional teaching and learning policies, as well as faculty and executive leader professional development. My findings can also be applied to classroom and institutional culture as a means of identifying embedded white preference bias.

Finally, I believe my research study may serve as an example of what a first-generation trauma survivor can achieve as a NC CC CRT instructor, and as an academic in HE.

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