NICE WHITE TEACHER: HOW NICENESS AND WHITENESS PREVENT ANTI-RACIST PEDAGOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

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With love,

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Title of Study: NICE WHITE TEACHER: HOW NICENESS AND WHITENESS PREVENT ANTI-RACIST PEDAGOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract: My study brought together a group of white educators in sustained critical narrative inquiry groups to tease out, investigate, and interrogate why we, white educators, especially white women, may hold on to an ideology of Niceness (cf. Castagno). Niceness seeks to continue and reinforce "ideologies of dominance across lines of race, gender, and class," protect and shield white educators, mainly white women, "from doing the hard work dismantling inequity," and acts as a "disciplining agent" for educators "who attempt or even consider disrupting structures and ideologies of dominance" (Castagno, 2019, p. xiv). The study sought to understand how white educators are called in, or call one another in, to forgo Niceness and instead choose to continually dismantle white supremacy and promote anti-racist pedagogy in their classrooms and education institutions. This study examines how white educators moved beyond lines of white solidarity instead of embracing the joys of being in a community of "feminist killjoys" (Ahmed, 2017). The collaborative nature of this study allowed for accountability among the participants and me to hold each other in discomfort. My analysis of our collective work produced theoretical and practical insights for teacher educators to disentangle from Niceness.

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INTRODUCTION

"I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail, 1963

Tension. It is that uneasy feeling in the pit of your stomach the moment you know you should say something. It is the moment you are presented with a choice, to express the words you've meant to say or to hold your tongue for peace's sake. However, whose peace becomes protected by saying nothing? As a white educator, I have experienced many moments of tension. Some I have handled well, others I have not.

For example, during the 2013-2014 school year, I taught in an affluent school district in Northeastern Oklahoma, with a population of mostly white students and faculty.

One day during lunch and recess, a Black student and a white[1] student got into a fight on the basketball court. The white student had shoved the Black student, and the Black student felt the act was racially motivated. My partner teacher and I decided to talk with them in the hallway to figure out what may have happened. As the Black student explained why he felt that the white student was racially targeting him, my partner interrupted him by saying, "We don't see color," the "we" implying the white student, her, and me. At the time, I was unaware of colorblindness as a form of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), but even so, something about that statement did not sit right with me. I ignored the tension and chose a negative peace instead. My reasons for continuing the negative peace varied from job security to the ideology that it was not proper or nice to bring up topics of race in the classroom. Lensmire (2017) notes this discomfort in white fears of exile from their white family and friends and the fear of being perceived/perceiving oneself as being complicit in a system that harms them. This ideology of "keeping the peace" raises the question: How does choosing a negative peace over tension serve those in one's classroom and who it does not? This question would follow me into my master's and doctoral programs.

My journey through obtaining my master's degree and pursuing a doctorate has opened my eyes to the issues surrounding racial injustice in education. It was not until my first diversity course during my masters that I learned about white privilege (McIntosh, 1988), the myth of meritocracy (Milner, 2010), and white supremacy as a term referring

1 I have made the choice to not capitalize the "w" in white and whiteness throughout this dissertation proposal in efforts to decenter whiteness. Some sources do not make this same choice so when quoting directly I will respect the original text.

to more than just those who are part of the KKK or committing genocide (see Appendix 1 for more information). In reflection, I can say my reaction was not one of gratitude but complete denial at first. I struggled with the idea of being privileged due to a past full of abuse, poverty, and trauma. One could say I acted from a place of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) while crying to my professor that he had it all wrong. However, now that as I have furthered my studies and questions into this phenomenon and watched classmates react badly to similar topics, I believe it is more complicated than just fragility, but a notion of Niceness that centers on white comfort when white people are made aware they are complicit in structural systems that harm Black and brown students. In fact, it is not white fragility but white violence that maintains the emotional centering of white students and educators when their dominant beliefs and ideas about the world are unsettled (Applebaum, 2017).

There is tension in being uncomfortable. There is tension in sitting with the discomfort of one's own complicity inside a system that has harmed you in different ways. However, this is where the learning happens, in the discomfort. So why, as white educators, are we so quick to want to ease that discomfort for something that feels nicer? Critical whiteness scholar Barbara Applebaum (2017) states, "A pedagogy of discomfort counters universal expectations that teachers must create comfortable environments for students and assumes that comfort can foreclose learning and obstruct change" (p.863). I have been told many times throughout life that one attracts more flies with honey than they do with vinegar. It's a euphemism for being sweet. The sweetness lures more people on your side than bitterness. But what if the goal is not to be well-liked? When working

for social justice, one is bound to ruffle some feathers. Sara Ahmed (2017) explains that "so much inequality is preserved through the appeal of happiness, the appeal to happiness. It is as if the response to power and violence is or should be simply to adjust or modify how we feel" (p. 60). There is happiness in being comfortable, but at what cost? Who is paying the price when white educators soothe white students' discomfort to avoid accountability?

The cultural ideology of Niceness -- that one does not bring up topics that cause that tension -- has made it difficult to meet these issues such as racism head-on. The trope of "everybody just needs to get along" has caused a chasm of not knowing how to sit with the discomfort and tension. The cultural push for Niceness in education has furthered the inequality across racial lines in the classroom and in pedagogical approaches. In this study, I draw from critical race studies, critical whiteness theory, and Black and critical feminist theory to undertake a critical narrative inquiry with a collective of white educators committed to disentangling from Niceness in their lives and in their classrooms. In the following pages, I describe how I arrived at the problem and contextualize Niceness within a longer history of whiteness and education. Finally, I provide a brief overview of the study and subsequent chapters.

Arriving at the Problem

"and you tried to change didn't you?
closed your mouth more
tried to be softer
prettier
less volatile, less awake
but even when sleeping you could feel

him traveling away from you in his dreams
so what did you want to do love
split his head open?
you can't make homes out of human beings
someone should have already told you that
and if he wants to leave
then let him leave
you are terrifying
and strange and beautiful
something not everyone knows how to love."
-Warsan Shire

I was sitting there on the gray couch of our small 700 square foot apartment as I watched the man I loved tell me he was no longer happy with our marriage and that he was moving back in with his parents. Time seemed to slow down like I was hearing everything from the inside of a jar of molasses. Words echoed off the walls and I could not quite make sense of what he was saying. The bowl of spaghetti in my hands fell to the floor and the tears flowed down my face. This is the end, I thought, and I had no idea where to go from here. What was to come next became what I have grown to call marriage purgatory. That cold January day in 2014 will forever remind me of the time that I felt like I had failed. If I could not succeed at marriage, then there must be something wrong with me. I would go on for the next two years just as Warsan Shire describes in her poem above in trying to make myself small. I would be agreeable, I would not anger him, I would not push. I would be the loving doting wife he wanted. In the end, he left anyway. I was crushed but more at the fact that I had lost who I was by trying to be someone I was not.

As a person who identified as a ciswoman at the time, it had been drilled into me from an early age that it was my job to keep the peace from societal standards, female

relatives, and stereotypes in modern media. There were so many times I was told that I would make such a great supporter of my future husband's career, which is why teaching was such a great choice for a "nice young lady" like myself. I could teach while the kids were in school and be off when they were off. My entire push into education from a family member was dictated about how much good it would do for the hypothetical man and children in my life who had not come yet to pass.

However, even in my career, I had the tendency to ask questions, to poke holes in unfounded ideas about pedagogy and curriculum. In fact, during that same week that my husband decided to leave for the first time, I was facing obstacles at my teaching job in an affluent school district in Northeastern Oklahoma. My class was not the quiet one where every student sat quietly and only talked when called upon. Instead, we got up out of our seats, did experiments, were loud but at the same time learning. However, the administration did not see it that way and stated that they would not renew my contract for the next year unless I changed things. Once again, I tried to emulate what their idea of a nice little classroom looked like. I observed other classrooms, attended more professional development, and mimicked and parroted what I thought would make the administration happy. And once again Niceness failed me. In the end, making myself small, "less volatile, less awake" did not work for my marriage, nor did it work in my role as a teacher. I am not someone who sees a problem and can just grin and bear it. I could not make myself small to be seen as a nice delicate lady who people found agreeable. That just was not something I could do, no matter how hard I tried.

Since then, I have become a doctoral student and found a group of students who also took interest in not being agreeable and in dismantling whiteness and examining Niceness. We have shared insights, ideas, books, articles, agreed, disagreed, sat with our discomfort, and, most of all, chose to hold each other accountable with love and dignity that grew beyond peers in the classroom to deep friendships. I began working on naming this notion of resisting societal expectations (i.e., just smiling and nodding, going with the flow) and how these expectations on teachers continue to perpetuate inequity in classrooms, reproducing that persistent expectation that schooling should be apolitical and enabling white educators to avoid attending to race.

Then, I came across the texts that I refer to as my companion texts (Ahmed, 2017), that shined a light on what I could not quite name: *The Price of Nice: How Good Intentions Maintain Educational Inequity* edited by Angelina E. Castagno and *Living a Feminist Life* by Sarah Ahmed. *The Price of Nice* helped me examine how Niceness and whiteness are intertwined in subverting social justice in education. *Living a Feminist Life* gave me the antidote to detach myself from the expectations of Niceness, with words that hit me like a ton of bricks and became part of my identity as a "feminist killjoy." It was like being shown a mirror and finally seeing my true self reflected back. To capture the moment of "aha," I share an excerpt from Ahmed (2017) that illustrates how being the feminist killjoy makes those around you perceive you as the problem instead of the actual problem. Ahmed (2017) describes a family dinner where her sister's partner at the time had said something racist, and she did not let it just slide past:

> Racism was on my mind because racism was in the room. Whatever I said, he became very angry, but an anger that took the form of silence and stares. He sat there, steely faced, for the rest of the dinner, not touching his food. Waiters hovered nervously. We spoke politely around him. When I woke the next morning, my mother called, and she had heard that I had put him off his food. When will you ever learn -- I could hear those unuttered words.
>
> **Poor him**
>
> **Mean**
>
> Memories of being a killjoy at the table flooded back to me, a burning sensation on skin; recalled as being the one who puts others off their food. You sense that an injustice follows pointing out an injustice (p. 39).

Those words rang in my ears: "when will you ever learn." They have been uttered by colleagues, principals, professors, and others. If I could only mature and learn to keep my head down, things would go better for me. But I could not help the need to point out the problem, name the problem.

This is not to say that I have always gone about naming the problem in the most helpful way, nor have I always had all the nuances understood before making my announcement of the problem known. There are times when I trudged ahead in seeking justice for what I thought was a grievance against me or my peers without examining my own whiteness at play. As Ahmed (2017) states, those who engage in this work "have to accept our complicity: we forgo any illusions of purity; we give up the safety of exteriority. If we are not exterior to the problem under investigation, we too are the

problem under investigation" (p. 94). I have given into Niceness and whiteness and have prevented antiracist pedagogy myself. I will explore the context of no purity more in Chapter 4. To put it plainly, as a white educator I am part of the problem, but I can also be a part of the road to resolution.

Positionality/Identity

In Ahmed's (2017) description of feminism, anyone can be a feminist regardless of gender, and I agree with that statement. Although this work focuses on how white women teachers interact with expectations of Niceness and whiteness, I, myself, fall outside of the category of women in this study. I am non-binary and do not relate to the binary of masculine or feminine identities. However, I was raised as a white woman and lived as one until July 2020. I still can see the traps of feminine Niceness specifically in myself and in those times will refer to myself as she. In all other times, I will use the pronouns they/them.

I know this phrasing or pronoun choice can be a little unsettling or uncomfortable but, as in Z Nicolazzo's (2017) words, "I want you to feel the vibrancy" in how myself and others outside the binary exist in a world of constructed ideas of gender (p. 46). This is also why the participants in my study are not all cis, because the teaching field itself is gendered as "women's work" and anyone in the teaching profession is affected by Niceness. As Castagno (2019) states, "Niceness takes on specific qualities among White, female educators, but it is not confined to educators who are White women. The nuances of how Niceness is engaged are locally differentiated, but overall patterns remain firmly

in place" (p. xix). These nuances of Niceness and gender will be teased out more in-depth in Chapters 2 and 4.

Historicizing the Problem

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019b), over 80% of teachers in schools across the United States are white teachers. Meanwhile, that same report states that the classroom is becoming more diverse as each year passes. For example, between 2000 and 2015 the population of American Indian/Alaskan Native students increased 8%, the population of Black students increased by 7%, and the population of Hispanic students increased by 4% (NCTE, 2019a). However, the teaching force has not always been so white. In fact, there were many schools that had well-educated Black teachers and administrators during segregation. These Black educators were more educated than their white counterparts due to receiving tuition scholarships to earn "masters and doctorate degrees at integrated universities like Columbia, Michigan, and New York" (Will, 2019). Meanwhile, white educators received little to no education on the art of teaching and pedagogy. Their training was often in place of high school or college, and they tended to have an equivalent of a sixth to seventh-grade education prior to teacher training (Goldstein, 2014).

This is not to say that segregation was a good thing. Black schools were run down, had little to no supplies due to massive underfunding by the state (Bell, 2004), outdated textbooks, and students often had to travel long distances to get to school without transportation (Goldstein, 2014, Perkins, 2015, Will, 2019). Despite the horrors of segregation, Black teacher associations and movements approached teaching as a

relational community responsibility and built coalitions to fight the inequity that was considered lawful at the time (Perkins, 2015, Will, 2019). Meanwhile, white educators, mothers, and parents worked together as well to keep the gardens of segregation maintained instead of overhauled (McRae, 2018).

Therefore, when *Brown vs Board of Education* (1954) ended the "separate be equal" doctrine, the hope was to integrate these schools and create a more equitable learning environment for a multitude of students. Sadly, that did not happen due to the fallout amongst white folks, policymakers, and teachers after *Brown vs Board of Education* (1954) was passed. Black educators were stripped of their jobs by being dismissed, demoted, or forced to resign (Will, 2019). This in turn left schools going from a percentage rate of 30 to 35% Black teachers and administrators to only 7 to 11% today. The pushout of Black educators continues today due to neoliberal urban school reforms such as school closings, high stakes testing, privatization of schools, charter schools, and bringing in a regime of white under experienced teachers from programs like Teach for America (TFA) in the name of fixing the national teacher shortage (Buras, 2016; Lipman, 2017; Picower & Mayorga, 2015). Meanwhile, many universities are trying to meet the call to diversify the teacher force which would benefit students of color and white students (Strauss, 2015). As a consequence of these actions, the teaching force remains overwhelmingly white and calls for an examination of how it became that way.

The System is Not Broken, It was Built this Way

White educators have been complicit in the whitening of the field of education. Throughout the history of the feminization of teaching during the mid-to-late nineteenth

century (Goldstein, 2014), constructions of respectability politics affected Black educators, especially Black women educators (Cooper, 2018). Black, Indigenous, and teachers of color came to be used as tokenized diversity and *inclusion* pawns in K-12 and higher education instead of being seen for the wealth of knowledge they bring to the classroom (Ahmed, 2012, Collins, 2000). All these pieces of history I believe to be supported not only by the cultural need of Niceness but also the structural formations of education in the U.S.

One example of cultural and structural components working together is the passing of *Brown vs Board of Education* (1954). When desegregation became the law of the land, "school officials feared that white parents would not send their children to black schools or allow them to be instructed by black teachers. Within a short time, black schools were closed and black teachers dismissed" (Bell, 2004, p. 90). One may ask, how is this Niceness? "Justice Robert L. Carter, former NAACP General Counsel, surmised that "the [unique-compliance] formula actually permitted movement toward compliance on terms that the white South could accept" (Bell, 2004, p. 95). In other words, what white folks were comfortable with was the basis of how the Supreme Court decision was enforced or lack thereof from state to state, city to city, and school district to school district. Some school boards shut down all their schools just to avoid complying with the edict (Bell, 2004). It was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the following Title VI funds started giving billions of dollars to schools that desegregation started to see some hopeful momentum (Bell, 2004). However, that hope would not be long-lasting.

An example of prioritizing the pursuit of white feelings/comfort can be found right here in Oklahoma during two Supreme Court fights over three decades. In 1963, a Black parent and concerned citizen named Dr. A.L. Dowell decided to fight racial injustice in terms of a transfer policy, the requirements of moving a student from the school that is located in their district/neighborhood to a school that is outside their district/neighborhood, that the Oklahoma City School Board had in place. Dowell won that court case, and the Oklahoma City Board of Education (OCSB) was given sanctions on their transfer student policies. By 1972, the OCSB had said that the new policies were in place, and by 1977 they had reached what they defined as a unitary system. However, the sanctions remained until the OCSB went back before the Supreme Court in 1991. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the OCSB in *Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell* (1991), lifting the federal desegregation order, even if that meant that public schools in Oklahoma City and elsewhere would become re-segregated again. This resulted in schools that are even more segregated today than they were before *Brown vs Board of Education* (1954) (Orfield et al., 2019). Furthermore, there have been many Oklahoma Civil Rights (OCR) complaints against the Oklahoma City Public School District, including but not limited to Black students being disciplined at a higher percentage than their white peers, with the most recent case happening in 2016 (E. Brown, 2016). Even when laws are passed to move the country towards desegregation, the racist system and white desires push it back towards segregation. However, this problem does not live in the south part of the United States alone, but in the north as well.

In 2020, Chana Joffe-Walt released a five-episodic podcast detailing the issues of school inequity. This time, the focus was not on the many neoliberal school reforms that continue to fail but on *Nice White Parents*. In this podcast, Joffe-Walt (2020) details a sixty-year relationship between "a middle and high school called the School for International Studies, SIS" (although the school would go through many name changes) in Brooklyn, New York, and white parents in the nearby community. Each episode takes listeners through the school's beginnings in 1963 until the modern-day.

Although describing every episode would take too long, there are a few important key points I would like to illuminate. In episode 2, the audience learns that there was a debate on where SIS should be built. The Board of Education had planned to build this school right next to developing housing projects, but these nice white liberal parents came in and said, "No, no, no, don't build it there. Put it closer to the white neighborhood. That way, all our kids can go to school together" (Joffe-Walt, 2020, para. 2). These nice white parents wrote letters and begged the Board of Education to put the school where it could be integrated with Black, Latine, and white children. The Black and Latine parents just wanted their school to be close to them so that their children could have a neighborhood school. The school board sided with the white parents and in 1968 the school opened, but with one catch. Not one single white parent who wrote letters begging for the school to be open closer to them actually sent their students to that school.

Of course, Joffe-Walt (2020) asks these nice white parents why they did not send their children to that school they had begged for in the first place. Many of them gave an

array of explanations about moving to another part of the city or "I believed in integration ideally, but …." then just dropped off without finishing their sentence (Joffe-Walt, 2020). I think the answer that shocked me the most (although it should not) was the answer from one parent who actually visited the school and deemed it unworthy for her child because "I didn't know quite what to make of it because the school had a nice plant [plant as in building]. Physically, it was a nice school. But it just seemed chaotic and noisy, and kids were disruptive" (Joffe-Walt, 2020, para 63). When Joffe-Walt (2020) pressed the parent further about why this parent thought the school was disruptive, she admitted that the school was predominantly Black and Hispanic.

This would not be the first time these nice white parents would intervene in this school in ways that made things much worse for the actual students who attended. In fact, in episode 3, the Black and Latine parents wrote their own letters to the school board asking to be left alone. Integration had become a buzzword for these nice white parents, and the ones who did attend would use the power and money to create expensive French immersion programs (when most of the kids spoke Spanish) and then leave once their child was done at that school. This happened over and over again. The podcast does end somewhat hopefully (episode 5) with ideas about "true" integration in this Brooklyn school but only when the nice white parents had a hard time fighting for spots in other schools against other white parents. However, the research conducted on this podcast ended before the novel coronavirus had come into full effect in New York, and Joffe-Walt (2020) left her audience wondering how that would play a role in the many changes that nice white parents bring to SIS.

Public School for All? The Beginning of the Common Schools Movement

White supremacy structure and cultural Niceness is also how the history of teaching became so feminized and white starting in the mid-late nineteenth century. Instead of taking the history of teaching for granted, we need to ask ourselves: What forces influenced the common schools movement in the nineteenth century, who was allowed to get a "free" public school education, who were their teachers, and what was the purpose of this public school? Below, I analyze the common schools movement's key initiators Catherine Beecher and Horace Mann (so-called "father of public education"), as well as the anti-tax sentiment of the nineteenth century during the common schools movement.

Catherine Beecher and Horace Mann played a role in feminizing and whitening the field of education. However, to give context to how this occurred, I must first tell you about the conditions under which white male educators taught. Their conditions were extremely poor and unsanitary. White male teachers were dealing with underfunded schools, a lack of classroom supplies, and a very short school year. Furthermore, many of these white male educators were working in small one-room schoolhouses with no proper ventilation with up to thirty children of a variety of ages, making as little as $11 dollars a month (Goldstein, 2014). At the time, $11 dollars a month's pay was comparable to the same amount as a "farm laborer and half that of a skilled mechanic" (Goldstein, 2014, p. 21).

As one can imagine, not many white male educators stayed on year to year. In fact, Henry David Thoreau only lasted two weeks and called classroom education a futile

endeavor (Goldstein, 2014). Despite these structural and economic hardships, Beecher went about vilifying male teachers calling them "inherently lazy and stupid." Meanwhile, Mann was a devotee to eugenicist beliefs and a follower of George Combe, a Scottish philosopher who "characterized Mediterranean's as hotheaded and lazy, blacks as brutish, and northern Europeans as hardworking and intelligent" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 22-23). Mann ultimately believed that schools would give "advancement of the race" and was only looking to hire women educators because they were "cheaper than men for the state to employ" (Goldstein, 2014, p. 25). It is unclear what Mann meant by "advancement of the race" but, given his eugenicist ideologies and the fact that enslavement of Africans was still going on in most of the United States in the nineteenth century, one can infer that he meant white. Consequently, the public school system was set up to educate white children—and to educate them in whiteness.

Furthermore, Beecher and Mann believed that white women made great teachers not only because they were "cost-effective" but also because "female educators [are] angelic public servants motivated by Christian faith; wholly unselfish, self-abnegating, and morally pure" (Goldstein, 2014, p. 26). White women educators were seen as the "angel in the house," "nurturer," "motherteacher," meant to bring salvation through education (Goldstein, 2014). The whole goal was to bring about "missionary teachers" to the uneducated masses of the West and believe they were doing "god's work" while not once questioning if this way of educating was right for everyone. This is a phenomenon that Meiners (2002) refers to as the white Lady Bountiful, a persistent icon and narrative found in classrooms all over the United States. In fact, Meiners (2002) calls her the

"ghost in the classrooms" (p. 86). The white Lady Bountiful is everything Beecher and Mann dreamed a teacher would be: moral (coded as Christian, heterosexual, and monogamous), soft-spoken, reminiscent of a colonial governess, maternal, eloquent, and not quick to anger (Meiners, 2002). Adding to the white Lady Bountiful's identity, I would say that she is nice. However, I define this as Niceness that is coded in whiteness because "a nice person is not someone who creates a lot of disturbance, conflict, controversy, or discomfort" (Castagno, 2014, p. 9). Consequently, she has to be nice, because how is someone supposed to be seen as morally good if they dare raise their voice in protest?

Additionally, using that same idea around this narrative of a nice white teacher leaves out what educators of color can or cannot be in the form of respectability politics. Cooper (2018) defines respectability politics as "the belief that Black people can overcome many of every day, acute impacts of racism by dressing properly and having education and social comportment is, first and foremost, performed as a kind of sartorial prerogative" (p. 110). Perhaps, then, one can surmise that respectability politics were created so that a Black educator would feel the need to assimilate to Niceness and whiteness to be seen as morally good in the eyes of white folks. White colleagues' comments such as, "Well you sound so educated" or "I don't even think of you as Black" to their Black colleagues recenters the white gaze and standard.

This standard of acceptance also ensures that the status quo continues. For example, when Black colleagues sought to integrate the 1619 Project[2] into high school curriculums they were met with animosity from politicians and parents alike (Armus, 2020). Republican Tom Cotton from Arkansas wanted to pass legislation that prevented teachers and schools from using federal funds to support and implement the 1619 Project as curriculum (Armus, 2020). Teachers , especially Black and brown teachers, who choose to implement and discuss hard histories despite political and parental pushback are often "put under surveillance and run the risk of being ostracized" (Collins, 2000, p. 273). Ahmed (2012) discusses how these forced restrictions on educators and scholars of color become apparent when one goes against an institution, a colleague, or even a student. Niceness and whiteness ask us to be comfortable in the ways we, white educators, see the world, and when our viewpoint is confronted by Black, Indigenous, and scholars of color's work such as the well-researched journalism that is the 1619 Project, Niceness demands that discomfort be immediately put away. How would things be different if we sat in that discomfort and thought about how Niceness and whiteness have limited our ability to redefine the constructs of "missionary teacher," "angel in the house," and "nice white lady bountiful"? Deconstructing Niceness and whiteness requires discomfort, vulnerability, and a critical reflexive process. It will also require white educators to no longer go along with the status quo but to be what Ahmed (2010/2017) calls a "feminist killjoy," because when they name a problem, for example problematic

[2] The 1619 Project offers "a revealing new origin story for the United States, one that helped explain not only the persistence of anti-Black racism and inequality in American life today, but also the roots of so much of what makes the country unique" (Hannah-Jones, Smith, and Watson, 2019).

curriculum such as celebrating the Oklahoma Land run or the higher disciplinary actions taken against Black and brown students for the same actions as their white peers, these white educators may be seen as the problem that they are naming instead of the structural and institutional problems that exist in education and in society.

Defining Niceness in whiteness

Cultural historian and gender scholar Carrie T. Bramen (2017) discusses the cultural history of "Niceness" among the white middle class in her book *American Niceness*. She starts with how Niceness became culturally synonymous with America due to a belief that we "are decent and good-natured people with the best of intentions. Even if they do serious damage in the world..." (Bramen, 2017, p. 8). It is the notion that we did not mean to or, "That was in the past, let's move on," without ever acknowledging the suffering and damage that we have caused to others. Niceness does not bring to fruition the knowledge that impact is always greater than intention. Instead, Niceness becomes a "get out of jail free card that exempts Americans from acknowledging the consequences of their actions" (Bramen, 2017, p. 9). This is evident in the discussions around the enslavement of Africans and reparations, the forced assimilation of Indigenous people in boarding schools, and even the current iterations of the Black Lives Matter movement (Dowd, 2018, Lomawaima, 1994, Oluo, 2019).

Anthropologist Setha Low (2009) brought attention to this phenomenon of Niceness when she studied how inclusive private housing (i.e., gated communities) in New York and Texas created racist spaces that not only protected "nice white people" but also maintained whiteness even with their "nice liberal views." This becomes relevant

even in Northeastern Oklahoma when a Black furniture delivery man named Travis was accosted by a white man claiming to be the president of the homeowners' association of a gated community (Padilla, 2020). Travis was held up for almost an hour while this white man blocked him in with his car, refusing to move it in the name of, "You must tell me how you got in here," and, "I own 1/18th of this land and it is my job to protect it." Travis had to endure this man's racism and even called the police on him for just trying to do his job. Sadly, this is not just limited to a few isolated events but has happened all over the United States, with Black people not being able to sleep in a lounge outside their door room or even leave an Airbnb without "nice white folks" wanting to know what they are up to (Padilla, 2020).

This brings us back to what Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) said about the white moderate in search of a negative peace to maintain the status quo. Dowd (2018) points to that exact sentiment when white people state, "They should really say #AllLivesMatter," "I'm all for protesting, but do they really have to inconvenience other people," and "No one is going to listen to them if they are going to be so rude like that." In other words, why can't you be nice when you are asking us to stop oppressing you? It echoes MLK's words when he said the white moderate states, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action."

Additionally, white people seek niceness to avoid the discomfort of confronting how they have benefitted from white supremacy and privilege. Oluo (2019) understands why this concept may be hard for many white folks because it erases all ideas of fairness and the American dream. The myth of meritocracy is an idea that anyone can work hard

and good things will happen to nice people. It is a lie that we have been sold since the first ship landed on the east coast of Massachusetts. Consequently, we do not live in a bubble, and the same "nice white people" that question Black bird-watchers in parks (Ransom, 2020), Black Yale students sleeping on couches (Griggs, 2018) and even Black realtors who are just trying to do their job (Andone and Razek, 2021) are the same white folks who work in education. There are white teachers who question Black and brown students about their whereabouts as they walk down the hall or are quick to seek punishment by issuing a referral/write-up all because they decided to walk away while being spoken to (Riddle and Sinclair, 2019). Next, I'll discuss how this continuation of Niceness situated in whiteness shows up in schools and classrooms all over the U.S.

Niceness and Education

Castagno (2019) defines Niceness in education as a tool that "stands as a seductive obstacle for educators" (p. 24). The reason for this seduction is because it can be easy to want to go along with the status quo because speaking out against this notion of Niceness can have a profound impact on how an educator is perceived by their students, colleagues, and administrators. For example, Erica Meiners (2002) noticed on her teacher evaluations that students would comment "professor is too ideological/focuses too much on race/male bashes/doesn't like men/too critical/too depressing/this course made me not want to be a teacher/I did not learn anything useful to use in my classrooms" (p. 92-93). In many universities, teacher evaluations done by students are used as data on whether a professor receives tenure or not. And as stated previously, once you point out the problem you become the problem (Ahmed, 2017).

However, I like to question why that is and believe the answer is rooted in Niceness. For clarification, deconstructing Niceness with a capital "N" is different than just being nice. Niceness with a capital "N" goes beyond the individual discourse of, "Oh, but they meant well," and takes a deeper look at the structural inequity that Niceness reflects and maintains. There may be different cultural ideas of Niceness, but the dominant/universal notions of Niceness in the U.S. are rooted in whiteness (Castagno, 2014). So, for educators and other people, "being nice encourages us to gloss over ugly, tense, or otherwise hurtful things -- and do so carefully and precisely" (Castagno, 2014, p. 9). These ugly things show up in the classroom as keeping the peace or, as Marcuse (1965) calls it, "repressive tolerance," cliché sayings such as, "change the way you see things" (Castagno, 2014) and, "everybody has a right to their opinions" (Ben et. al., 2019).

Therefore, we as people construct what it means to be nice based on how people behave and interact, as well as through discourse (Castagno, 2019, p. x). The yardstick that is used to compare what is *nice* and respectful is measured in whiteness, so if students are not white or not raised in whiteness, they will forever be held to a standard that they are not able to meet. If school is a space for everyone to learn and grow, then white educators must challenge how their curriculum is taught -- not just textbook content but ideas and beliefs embedded into our Eurocentric curriculum that are not explicitly stated as well. It recalls us back to the image of "Lady Bountiful" or the "nice white lady" as the teacher who was like a "colonial governess who was seen as having a unique duty to bring civilization to the 'uncivilized'" (Meiners, 2002, p. 87). Who do we,

white teachers, see as civilized? Who do we see as uncivilized? How does that affect how we teach and how we respond to discussions in our classrooms?

Niceness is in fact not actually nice to those who push against the current, who decide to turn around and walk in the opposite direction of everyone else. The ghost of white Lady Bountiful sold white educators on the idea about being nice and agreeable, to not ask questions, to not challenge the status quo. We must work towards expelling that ghost from the classroom. In doing so, white educators and their white students may have to come to terms with their own white discomfort and learn to sit with it. Deprioritizing white feelings will help in dismantling racist policies, procedures, curriculum, and other factors on the educational stage, because historically prioritizing them got us into the racial unjust systems we have today like education.

Complicating white Fragility and the Need for the Anti-racist Feminist Killjoy

Scene: A diversity and education course at a local university. The year is 2015. The professor has started a conversation surrounding white privilege. The chairs are faced in a "U" pattern and I am centered on the curve of the U facing the professor and my classmates.

> Tears are streaming down my face as I mumble "You don't understand! How can I be privileged when I grew up abused and therefore traumatized?" Hot tears are rolling down my face as the professor tries to reiterate what having white privilege means. I am not fully listening. More tears. More white tears. A classmate gets up from her seat and comes to comfort me. My professor calls for a ten-minute break and I get up to excuse myself to the bathroom.

End scene.

I think about that day in class often. I do not remember every single detail or word that was spoken but I remember the feeling. I felt like my past trauma, growing up poor, an abusive childhood, among other things did not matter because I was white. It struck me hard, and I had a difficult time coming to understand what I fully comprehend now. Critical race and feminist scholar Cheryl Matias (2016) describes this as "experiencing the feelings of whiteness" (p. 7) and also prods us not to stay there but dig deeper into why these emotions come up, to recognize them, to understand where they come from, and to develop "the emotionality ovaries to withstand the ups and downs of discussing race" (p. 3). I mentioned in the beginning of this work that my actions during this class may be labeled as "white fragility" and that I have come to understand how notions of being fragile just continue my own white comfort and enable distraction from anti-racist pedagogy.

Furthermore, there is scholarship pushing back on the idea of "white fragility" since its wording alone makes those who are white seem like they are too feeble to withstand conversations concerning race when in reality we are just uncomfortable (Applebaum, 2017; A.C. Brown, 2018, Hamad, 2020; Ricketts, 2021). In fact, Applebaum (2017) states:

> Comforting not only alleviates white discomfort and preserves white innocence, but it also constitutes feminists of color as the offenders. Feminists of color who offer antiracist critique are labeled as "angry" and carry the burden of being blamed as the source of white discomfort. (p. 865)

Ahmed (2017) also calls out white fragility as a way for white folks to be defensive and "as a defense: as if to say, we won't hear what we can't handle" (p. 179). In those moments, I was defensive, and I did not want to hear what I was being told. My white tears became a distraction from the anti-racist pedagogy that was being taught. The Black and brown students in the room had to endure once again their own pain being sidelined for mine. The white teachers and white students were being Nice with their comfort, but would they have extended the same hand if a Black, Indigenous, Latine, or Asian student was the one who was upset?

Clements and Stutelberg (2019) have both faced similar situations while teaching predominately white pre-service teachers and creating anti-racist pedagogies in the classroom. In Stutelberg's experience, she came up against the white fragility of one of her students when sharing how white supremacy is not just white men in long white robes burning crosses (the KKK) but is upheld by notions of colorblindness (i.e., "I don't see color") and remaining apolitical (i.e., "Politics don't affect me") [See Appendix 1]. DiAngelo's (2018) white fragility discusses why she thinks it is hard for white people to discuss racism because they usually become defensive, emotional, and argumentative. Castagno (2019) relates this white fragility to the ideology of Niceness by stating that:

> White fragility is a sort of protective mechanism for maintaining White racial equilibrium. Similarly, Niceness is a mechanism for maintaining White racial equilibrium – that is, it functions to prevent any sort of challenge or tension (disequilibrium) related to power and structural inequity. (p. xvi)

In other words, white folks do not see themselves as a racialized identity and believe that racism has much more to do with behaviors and practices white people have been taught since birth and takes an unpacking that can seem unkind (Lensmire, 2017). For Stutelberg (2019), her student felt that she had betrayed this code of Niceness by discussing how white supremacy functions at many levels like in a pyramid (see Appendix 1 for more information), and one action upholds them all.

This is where things can get uncomfortable. Most people on this planet want to be considered a nice person, but tackling white supremacy in educational spaces while cultivating anti-racist pedagogies is not going to feel nice to white people. In fact, Troup and Marinchak (2018) state, "The appeal of niceness is powerful: To be nice is to indicate approval without ethical commitment, moral support, or personal responsibility. Niceness is a practice of valueless affirmation" (p. 66). Therefore, white educators are left with a choice to continue this work and face minimal reactions/loss (i.e., angry feedback on evaluations) or actual status loss (i.e., forced out of a tenure-track position or being harassed by racial hate groups and/or other white people continuously). These complexities are situated in what Mason (2019) calls status treason:

> Status treason first requires that we understand the ways in which our actions and ways of being most often uphold the White supremacist institution instead of BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of color] people we purport to be supporting. Upon that recognition, status treason then asks us to make principled decisions to place the interests, needs, and desires of those BIPOC teacher candidates [or students and faculty] above the demands of the institution (p. 9).

However, despite the discomfort, deconstructing the "nice white lady" and "Lady Bountiful" within educational spaces by firmly calling out white supremacist ideology in the institution of schooling and higher education is necessary. Indeed, this will not feel nice, and one may risk being labeled a "feminist killjoy," but this work is complex and may take going against the status quo, which not everyone is willing to risk.

Overview of the Study

My aim of this study is to collectively uncover, via narrative inquiry, the subtle, disciplining effects of Niceness on the affect and action among a group of white educators. Through storying and re-storying their/my experiences with Niceness, I will engage myself and the participants to come to deeper understandings and insights into mine/their practice of anti-racist pedagogy more broadly.

Research Questions

The main research question guiding this study is: How does Niceness impact white educators' experiences?

The two secondary questions are as follows:

1. How do white teachers build communities with other white educators who are committed to breaking white solidarity lines and further anti-racist work in education?

2. How does a community exploration of whiteness and Niceness shape participants' understanding of anti-racist pedagogy?

Brief Summary of the Study

In this critical narrative inquiry, I draw from critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, and Black and critical feminist theory to examine how Niceness and whiteness have long been the standard valued in education. In Chapter 2, I dive into why white folks and educators tend to not see whiteness as a racialized identity and use notions of class and gender to avoid accountability in discussions about systematic racism in and out of the classroom. Then, I center on Black feminist theory as a way to explore the need to racialize gender and to move on from white women's ideas of femininity and distortions of feminism. From there, I review white women's racism throughout the different feminist movements and how white men's own subjugation of white women has pushed them towards being the peacekeepers and holders of Niceness. I elaborate just exactly how being Nice is a problem that allows educational inequity to foster. I show how teacher education from past to present continues the archetype of Lady Bountiful (a symbol of Niceness) through the training of pre-service teachers, curriculum, and the centering of white feelings. Finally, I detail the significance of this study to show the lacking scholarship around Niceness and whiteness and the importance of sitting with discomfort not only with ourselves but also modeling that ability for our students as well.

In Chapter 3, through the power of critical narrative, I explore my white colleagues and my experiences with Niceness as students and teachers. I draw from the scholarship of bell hooks' (2000) coalition building in *Feminism is for Everybody*; Layla F. Saad's (2020) examples of truth, love, and commitment work to align with decentering whiteness and holding oneself accountable; and Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea's

(2010) circle way framework to facilitate the nature of working in a collaborative group that is “non-hierarchical, structured yet flexible” and lowers the power dynamics between the researcher and participants (Saad, 2020, p. 212). Via these methodological resources, I outline my own critical and collaborative narrative inquiry project. I chose critical and collaborative inquiry because storytelling does political work and aligns with the feminist epistemological point that the “personal is political” (hooks, 2000). The stories and narratives that white women have held and sold for decades in protecting what they thought was sacred -- Niceness and whiteness -- have done immense damage to education (i.e., the Daughters of the Confederacy). I believe that telling stories, or narratives, in a critical collaborative way can construct new knowledge that lets white educators relinquish their grip on Niceness and choose a path that works alongside our fellow Black, Indigenous, and educators of color.

In Chapter 4, I reintroduce the critical inquiry group members and expand on how gender and Niceness are co-constructed by “white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy”(hooks, 2014). Next, I reveal how material and emotional investments into Niceness and whiteness keeps white woman educators from disinvesting and disentangling from Niceness in their professional and personal lives. I foreground the discussion of emotions using Matias (2016), Zembylas (2018), Boler (2004) as well as other critical scholar's work to analyze how fear is capitalized on to keep white teachers in line with Niceness and share narratives from multiple critical group members as they wrestle with their own material and emotional investments into Niceness.

In Chapter 5, I focus the conversation and stories on relational investments into Niceness that show up in the critical group members' personal and professional lives along with nuances of power in choosing to be willful or not (Ahmed, 2017). Throughout this chapter, these white teachers and I shared our personal struggles with holding our family, friends, colleagues, and students accountable while also seeing their humanity and the possibility for change. I also examine how aligning our investments into Niceness with those in power continues to cause harm and further inequity in schooling. Finally, I share the experiences of different critical inquiry group members who plan on continuing their personal work around disinvesting into Niceness with their family and their professional lives as well.

In Chapter 6, I share a personal narrative around my experience with notions of "love" shrouded in hate during a school board meeting over a local school's gender-affirming bathroom policy that some parents and conservative organizations wanted to be over. I use this example to cement my research around Niceness and whiteness as a tool for teachers and parents to say they love all their children without any action to support that statement. Next, I share how community among the critical inquiry groups and I created a space that allowed for vulnerability, strategies to combat Niceness, and learning to embrace being a "feminist killjoy" (Ahmed, 2017). Then, I share concrete takeaways for pre-service and in-service educators such as resistance as a form of anti-racist pedagogy along with implications for teacher education and ideas for future research.

The collaborative nature of this study allowed for accountability among the participants and me to hold each other in discomfort and produced theoretical and

practical insights on how to disentangle from Niceness not only for ourselves but for current and future educators as well. This work is significant because white educators have long been the gatekeepers of curriculum, knowledge, and narratives in the classroom. This gatekeeping is entangled with society, administration, colleagues, and personal observations of Niceness that allow inequity to continue to this day, sixty-plus years after *Brown vs Board* (1954). This work is a call, call to arms, to sit in our tension and forgo the negative peace that wants to swallow us whole. Change only happens when we are uncomfortable, and it is time we get uncomfortable.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this literature review, I connect and weave the work of critical race theory, critical whiteness scholars, and feminist scholars to detail how race, class, and gender help education and curriculum scholars understand how Niceness is reproduced in society, and therefore in the classroom. Using the work of critical whiteness scholars, I expand on how whiteness is afforded to some and not to others, and how the intersections of race and class allow whiteness to continue to be malleable. Moving from there, I show the importance and need for Black feminist theory in racializing gender. For Black women, their gender has always been connected to their race, it is literally in the name. However, white women have been allowed to oscillate between their race and gender, without recognizing their own white racial identity (Deliovsky, 2010; Hamad, 2020). Feminist and sociologist scholars such as Ruth Frankenberg (1993), and Kathy Deliovsky (2010) investigate how white women became the hegemonic ideal or "benchmark" of womanhood as defined and dictated by a capitalist patriarchal society.

It is this hegemonic normative identity that is synonymous with women being read as cis white women that allows Niceness to be reproduced in society and in the classroom. Next, I explore another symbol synonymous with white femininity, Lady Bountiful. Lady Bountiful is to education as Florence Nightingale is to nursing (Meiners, 2002). She is a symbol of Catherine Beecher's missionary and motherteachers of the not-so-distant colonial past; young white women were hired as teachers for their cheap labor and assumed nurturing capabilities because they were women (Goldstein, 2015).

Niceness, like Lady Bountiful, wants to be a continuation of that same ideology where white educators continue the status quo despite having more in common with their students and colleagues of color, especially as teaching in today's neoliberal climate has made the profession of teaching almost undesirable. Yet, white teachers continue to side with whiteness and avoid the discomfort of disrupting Niceness. My study asks the question of why white educators side with Niceness, what happens when they do choose discomfort, and what it takes to build a reflexive practice that concerns itself with dismantling white supremacy to give way to quality anti-racist pedagogy all while holding nuance in positionality of race, class, and gender.

Critical Whiteness Studies

In this section, I will reveal how whiteness/white supremacy infects many aspects of our U.S. culture, society, and politics and how it ties into Niceness and education. First, Critical race studies scholars offer insight into how whiteness permeates within racial, gender, and class structures (Lensmire, 2017; Oluo, 2019; Roediger, 2007). Drawing from their critiques and analyses, I discuss the interrelation of whiteness/white

supremacy in education and the role that Niceness plays by interfering with practical implementations for equitable classrooms. The fundamental texts that support how Niceness and whiteness are connected come from educational leadership scholar Angelina E. Castagno (2014; 2019), education scholar Ian E. Baptiste (2008), and literacy and education scholar Jeanne D. Bissonnette (2016). Along with their work, I consider how multiculturalism in school policy over the last decade has not only furthered racism in schools and classrooms across the country but has also contributed to the Niceness ideology of white teachers (Picower, 2021). Ultimately, this section illuminates how Niceness contributes to whiteness within racial, gender, and class frameworks.

Additionally, this section explains how Niceness sneaks in when discussing white supremacy with white educators and how that Niceness harms Black, Indigenous, students, colleagues, and educators of color. Furthermore, I dive into how the current push for multiculturalism has taken anti-racist pedagogy and boiled it down to reading only about Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) on "special months or days" (i.e. Black History Month) all while watering down BIPOC activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. words and activism. The curriculum is not just what is taught but is also what is purposely omitted and whitewashed for the sake of a narrative that hides the ugly parts of American history. In this section, I will use the critical whiteness scholars before me (Castagno, 2014, 2019; Lensmire, 2017; Matias, 2016; Roediger, 2007), and their scholarship to connect the relationship between whiteness and Niceness among educators, a claim I elaborate on below.

Is it Class? Is it Race? Or is it White Supremacy Delusion Affecting Us All?

"The reality, the depth, and the persistence of the delusion of white supremacy in this country causes any real concept of education to be as remote, and as much to be feared, as change or freedom itself."

James Baldwin, The Price of the Ticket (1985)

Many scholars have examined race and class and their intersections (Lensmire, 2017; Oluo, 2019; Roediger, 2007), including, how whiteness works, who is afforded whiteness, who is provisionally included in whiteness based on geography, language, citizenship, history, gender, class, political sensibilities, and more (Fields, 1982; Frankenberg, 1993; Lensmire, 2017; Morrison, 1992; Roediger, 2007). Frankenberg (1993) speaks to this phenomenon as the "social construction of whiteness" and that "dealing with racism is not merely an option for white people -- that, rather, racism shapes white people's lives and identities in a way that is inseparable from other facets of daily life" (p. 6). However, many of us white folks do not see how our own whiteness is formed by the Othering of people of color, so when conversations of race and class come up, race is almost automatically pushed aside (Lensmire, 2017; Oluo, 2019). White folks claim that "a race card is just in play" and that if a person just works really hard then they will succeed (Fleming, 2018; Oluo, 2019; Wise, 2006). This narrative has been played out in America and in American literature time and time again from Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and taught in our schools (Castagno, 2014; Morrison, 1992). That narrative is constructed by and within popular media, along with those who have the most access to publishing (film, books,

news) and have articulated white poor folks as pathologically racist and ignorant (e.g., *Hillbilly Elegy*), against an enlightened white bourgeoisie. It is this narrative that suggests that white poor people's issues stem from economic hardship or lack of job security due to the "neoliberal and neoconservative" media focus on race versus class issues (Roediger, 2007, p. 8). These narratives seed division that disallows class solidarity to grow among all those who are exploited for their labor and instead pits the idea of racial solidarity above all else. Consequently, this racial solidarity among white workers reflects and fuels white supremacy. "Du Bois argued that white supremacy undermined not just working-class unity but the very vision of many white workers" (as cited in Roediger, 2007, p. 13). White people (white working-class included) see themselves as the norm or the "universal," (Ahmed, 2007) but at the same time, white people do not see themselves as racialized bodies (Deliovsky, 2010). Removing this purposeful blind spot among white folks, or what Ahmed (2017) describes as coming up against a "brick wall," for many feminist and anti-racist scholars, can be tedious work. Plus, one can run the risk of being "heard as old-fashioned, as based on identity politics that we are assumed to be over" or being called an instigator and even becoming the problem for pointing out the problem by discussing hard histories (Ahmed, 2017, p. 155).

However, as Berry (2020) suggests, we must ask: Who is holding the purse strings? Who profits from unlivable wages? Why are white working-class people looking to blame people of color instead of the wealthy elite? After all, isn't the wealthy elite who are breaking the backs of all working-class people? The answer to most of these questions is that "racism benefits the capitalist class" and, historically, "whiteness was a

way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline" (Roediger, 2007, 10, 13). It is important to point out that the white working class has not been just easily "duped" by the white bourgeoisie, but that they are deciding to pair up with them in the name of race solidarity/white supremacy. Furthermore, "white ignorance, thus, will feel like knowledge to those who benefit from the system because it is supported by the social system as knowledge" (Applebaum, 2016, p. 12, original emphasis added). Lensmire (2017) summarizes this ideology perfectly by stating:

> Instead of standing with, identifying with others who have endured generations of horrors and worked too hard, too long in a country that cared little whether they lived or died as long as someone did the work -- instead standing with them, we took pride and comfort in not being them, in not being black. We make love. We murder. We forget, or try to, so we can go on being white. (p. 21)

These ideologies are engrained and homegrown from the education system we take part in during our formative years to the media we consume as young adults and members of society. It is paramount for these conversations to change, that we must examine how race in this country plays a role in contributing to the construction of class hierarchies.

Furthermore, critical race studies scholarship offers significant resources for understanding why race and class must be examined as intertwined. This is evident in the common conversation when racial discrimination against Black and brown people comes up and white folks bring up the old and tired fact that Irish immigrants were also discriminated against when they first arrived in the United States during the nineteenth

century. It is true that “early in our history Irish, Jews, and Italians were considered nonwhite” but as time progressed “they earned the prerogatives and social standing of whites by a process of joining labor unions, swearing fealty to the Democratic Party [now closer to the Republican Party today], and acquiring wealth, sometimes by illegal, or underground means” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 88-89). Therefore, in constructing whiteness as a racial category, “it turns out, [that it] is not only valuable, it is shifting and malleable” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 64). Whiteness was also historically codified as a race through immigration and law during the end of the 18th century. An immigrant could not be given U.S. citizenship unless they were deemed white by the courts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Lopez 1997). This is evident in racist laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which forbid the immigration of Chinese laborers. This racist law would lay the groundwork for future laws just like it to discriminate and racially profile other racial groups like the Japanese during WW2 and Muslim Americans after the September 11 attacks.

Even today, white folks look upon Black and brown immigrants with disdain and buy into false narratives these “foreigners” are to blame for issues in the economy, crime, and other societal issues created by a white supremacist capitalistic state and by those who, mainly elite white folks, uphold the white supremacist capitalistic system. For example, ICE concentration camps hold Mexicans, Central, and South Americans hostage for merely wanting a better life, fleeing countries economically destabilized by United States-backed military coups. Bolivia, a country in South America, suffered at the hands of a 2019 military coup sponsored by the United States. The reason the U.S.

supported and sponsored this coup in Bolivia was directly tied to Evo Morales', the Bolivian president at the time, efforts to limit and control transnational corporate resource extraction (rhetorically, in the name of supposed democracy and freedom) which would hurt their economic bottom line. However, the U.S. sold it to the American public as a way to end the reign of socialism in Bolivia, something that the conservative right thinks is a direct threat to their ideas of freedom (Chauvin & Faiola, 2020). Mohanty (2006) writes, "Where US liberal democratic discourse posed questions about democracy, equality, and autonomy (the American dream realized), neo-liberal, militarist discourse poses questions about the free market, global opportunity, and the protection of US interests inside and outside its national borders" (p. 9). In other words, the U.S. is honestly just looking out for itself and its ability to find and continue ways of capitalist production by means of cheap labor and resources, no matter who is killed, tortured, or exploited. As the capitalist class stoked racial tensions among the Irish and Chinese immigrants in the industrializing U.S., so, today does the capitalist class benefit from stoking racist xenophobia in policy and culture against transnational and multiracial worker solidarity.

The capitalist class used psychological white supremacy to convince Irish workers that they were better immigrants/laborers just because they were white (Roediger, 2007). The narrative of "those immigrants" are stealing your jobs is still widespread. In my own volunteer work in a poor rural city in Northeast Oklahoma during elections, I overheard many such comments about "those dirty Mexicans," "why do I need to show my ID to vote when they don't?" and even comments as sinister as

wondering why the current Covid-19 pandemic isn't killing more "illegals." This racist rhetoric is bought and sold to the white masses of the United States instead of turning to the heart of the problem which is capitalism, imperialism, and white supremacy. White supremacy has been at the center of racial and class issues, even when we white folks try to deny it. As Oluo (2019) states, "White Supremacy is the nation's oldest pyramid scheme. Even those who have lost everything to the scheme are still hanging in there, waiting for their turn to cash out" (p. 12). In summary, we cannot discuss class structures in the United States without a critical racial analysis. In this country, race structures class and continues to pit the poor white working-class against Black, Latine, Asian, and Indigenous communities.

Additionally, Oluo (2019) furthers this point by examining that the reasons someone is poor in rural areas such as Appalachia are not the same reasons that urban areas like Chicago are poor, "even if the outlooks look the same" (p. 13). She also explains that a class-only perspective that only calls for creating more jobs or raising the minimum wage will not fix the fact that a Black man or woman cannot receive a job interview due to "having a Black sounding name" (Oluo, 2019, p. 10). Roediger (2007) argues a similar point in his book, stating that the "working class formation and systematic development of a sense of whiteness went hand in hand for the US white working class" (p. 8). Essentially, to be considered working class, one also has to be white. However, the fact is that most "'average workers' [are] increasingly Black, Latino, Asian and/or female" (Roediger, 2007, p. 19). It also ignores the history of Black, Latine, Asian, and women of color labor in this country. In fact, Roediger (2007) calls this a

“gendered phenomenon” among the white working-class because normally only white males and their need to express their “perils and pride of republican citizenship” (p. 11). So, where does that leave white women and their connections to white supremacy if it is not only a race and class analysis but a gender one as well?

The Need for Racializing Gender: The Importance of Black Feminist Theory

I have demonstrated how the prevalent need of whiteness to “Other" has constructed racial and class hierarchies, but one type of analysis that critical white scholars have generally left out is a gendered one. However, Black feminist theory and Black feminists have painstakingly done the work of analyzing gender along with race and class for decades (Frankenberg, 1993). It is here where I connect the works of feminist scholars bell hooks, Sara Ahmed, Angela Davis, Nirmal Puwar, Patricia Hill Collins, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, members of The Combahee River Collective, and Hortense Spillers. These Black and brown women have detailed their own experiences with Niceness and how Niceness has come to be gendered and racialized, especially in gender and women studies. However, it is important to mention that the scholars above do not use the term Niceness verbatim but point to it in other ways such as respectability politics.

I also think it is important to restate that my own gender identity is complicated and nuanced. I was raised as a cis-hetero white woman and just recently realized that is no longer how I identify. However, thirty-plus years of being seen as lady, woman, girl, etc. have left their mark, and Niceness being a default setting since birth does not get so easily erased despite how I identify now. Even though I am a Trans* queer non-binary

person, I can and still relate to the cultural expectations of gendered norms put on women and those perceived as woman. I can and do still fall into the trap that Niceness lays out despite my gender identity. I am also white, and believe that is important to keep myself within the critique I am laying out in these chapters as I "forgo any illusions of purity" and give up the "safety of exteriority" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 94). In other words, I will not use my gender identity as an escape hatch for the call to racialized gender and its constructs. My plan is to dive into the challenges that Niceness presents not only among Black and brown women's experiences with racism and sexism but also with how white women and feminists contribute to Niceness throughout feminist theory and movements.

When describing feminist theory, one must first explain what feminism means. Especially, with the long-time construct that continues today with the notion of feminists being considered "man-hating," "feminazis" and its racist and classist issues as well (Ahmed, 2017, Davis, 2011, hooks, 2014). Cultural critic and feminist scholar, bell hooks (2000) defines feminism as "feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (p. 1). Feminist scholar and activist Sara Ahmed (2017) goes a bit further by stating:

> Feminism requires supporting women in a struggle to exist in the world. What do I mean by women here? I am referring to all those who travel under the sign women. No feminism worthy of its name would use the sexist idea 'women born women' to create the edges of feminist community, to render transwomen into 'not women,' or 'not born women,' or into men. No one is born a woman; it as an assignment that can shape us; make us; and break us. (p. 14-15).

Ahmed goes on to explain how even those "who were assigned female at birth, let us remind ourselves, are deemed not women in the right way, or not women at all" (p. 15). These "women" are either not feminine enough, not skinny enough, not nice enough, not ladylike enough, "not heterosexual, not mothers, and so on" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 15). Davis (2011) expands on this notion of being a woman with a race and class analysis. She demonstrates how Black women are not only treated differently than their white and non-Black women of color counterparts but treated in such a way that their oppression is the basis for the advancement of certain white and non-Black women of color.

For example, throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, white women feminists worked to unionize to receive better wages and hours and better working conditions. In this case, white women clerks wanted stools to sit on so they were not on their feet all day (Davis, 2011). However, in this fight for better pay, hours, and working conditions, white women feminists conveniently left out the Black and brown women working in their households and "their own exploitive treatment of their maids" (Davis, 2011, 97). This convenient omission was captured in an article entitled 'A Nine-Hour Day for Domestic Servants' by Inez Goodman in 1902. The article "described a conversation with [Goodman and] a feminist friend who had asked her to sign a petition urging employers to furnish seats for women clerks" (Davis, 2011, 97). The feminist friend, Mrs. Jones, expressed to Goodman that these women, "have to stand on their feet ten hours a day and it makes my heart ache to see their tired faces" (as cited in Davis, 2011, 97). Goodman (1902) replied by asking, "how many hours a day does your maid stand upon her feet" (as cited in Davis, 2011, 97). Mrs. Jones becomes shocked and severely underestimates the

time that her maid works by gasping, “five or six I suppose” (as cited in Davis, 2011, 97). The conversation continues with Goodman (1902) probing Mrs. Jones to see that the issue of white women clerks needing better wages, hours, and working conditions should also apply to how their Black and brown domestic workers/maids who spent over fourteen hours on their feet with time to themselves only after Sunday dinner (Davis, 2011).

However, as Goodman (1902) shared these similarities with Mrs. Jones, she became flustered at the truth that she was “perpetuating the very oppression she protested” (p. 98). Although, as Davis (2011) explained, “Yet her contradictory behavior and her inordinate insensitivity are not without explanation, for people who work as servants are generally viewed as less than human beings” (p. 98). Mrs. Jones did not see her own maid as a woman or even a person but as a servant who “labored solely to satisfy her mistress’ needs " (Davis, 2011, p. 98).

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Audre Lorde (1984) also examine how Black women have not always been seen as women and how their anger against racism, sexism, and classism within feminism has been used against them. The idea of how women (coded as white) should behave, act, speak, and anything outside of that is considered, well - not nice. Castagno (2014) sums it up perfectly by saying, “Being nice encourages us to gloss over ugly, tense, or otherwise hurtful things -- and to do so carefully and precisely” (p. 9). When working within feminist scholarship and using feminist theory as critique, one is bound to step on some toes. That is not going to feel very nice, but it is necessary.

Therefore, what does it mean to be seen as outside of what is deemed as "woman" and to take up space in places that were not designed with you in mind? Cultural sociologist and feminist scholar Nirmal Puwar (2004) takes up this question in her book, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender, and Bodies Out of Place*. She states, "Logic and rationality are symbolically male, and women are outside of them. Women are their bodies, but men are not, and women are therefore destined to inferiority in all spheres requiring rationality" (p. 16). "Women are their bodies" takes us to Ahmed's point of how society culturally views womanhood. In the United States, women are supposed to be delicate, small, soft-spoken, negotiators, mothers, heterosexual, Christian, chaste, and ultimately nice. So, what happens when those who define themselves as women occupy space outside those cultural norms? What becomes their label, then? How are they dismissed, overlooked, shunned, and/or deemed emotional? Furthermore, how do white women continue this same ideology of Niceness that has been pressed upon them from generation to generation?

The white masculine body politic definition of a woman purposely left out women's voices in creating the social contract and designing American liberties over 400 years ago (Morrison, 1992, Puwar, 2004). However, one must also examine how this definition of womanhood is synonymous with whiteness. Puwar (2004) states, "There are also, of course, considerable differences between gender and race. While the 'glass ceiling' has been cracked significantly with gender, for 'race' a 'concrete ceiling' has been chipped ever so slightly" (p. 7). American literary critic and Black feminist scholar Hortense J. Spillers (1987) wrote a gripping essay called *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe:*

An American Grammar Book, describing how white enslavers never saw Black women and children as embodied persons, but only flesh. She notes that during the Middle Passage, white oppressors did not record the abuses, deaths, and atrocities against Black women and children. The purposeful omission by white folks complicates gender identity surrounding the meaning of woman for Black women. In other words, the language around sex and gender is not complete for Black women because it is rooted in ideas of "patriarchilized female gender, which from one point of view, is the only female gender there is" (Spillers, 1987, p. 73). In other words, the gender binary is a patriarchal colonial construct that does not allow for alternative ideas about women and how ideas about being a "true woman" is a farce. However, this farce has been used to judge Black women's roles as mother, nurturer, woman, the matriarch, and "gendered femaleness" and instead labels them as mammy's, jezebels, welfare queens, and other controlling images put into place by gender constructs (Collins, 2000; Spillers, 1987).

Similarly, hooks (1981) writes, "The brutal treatment of enslaved black women by white men exposed the depths of male hatred of woman and woman's body. Such treatment was a direct consequence of misogynist attitudes toward women that prevailed in colonial American society" (p. 29). Therefore, if a woman was supposed to be seen as chaste, heterosexual, Christian, virtuous, mothers and stay in their "place" then enslaved Black women were altogether denied this ideal when white enslavers abused, raped, stole their children, destroyed their bodies, and blamed them for all of it. Even in protest, Sojourner Truth "exposes the concept of woman as being culturally constructed" in her famous speech "And ain't I a woman," where she "invokes her status as a mother of

thirteen children, all sold off into slavery, and asks again, ‘And ain’t I a woman?” (Collins, 2000, p. 18). In essence, “Truth deconstructs the category of woman by exposing the gap between her own embodied experience as an African American woman and the very category of ‘woman’” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 88).

Therefore, whiteness was at the center of creating racial and class hierarchies, and so was gender. Deliovsky (2010) states that “the crucial difference between ‘white’ womanhood and ‘black’ womanhood is that African women were ‘sexually fictionalized’’ for the purpose of wealth accumulation by robbing them of their ‘very womanness as persons’” (p. 30). Meanwhile, “English women were imbued with a womanhood that was contingent on their sexual discretion and comportment,’ which did not necessarily reside in being female per se but in their purity as ‘white’ English Christians (Deliovsky, 2010, p. 30). Consequently, this set up the binary that if white women were pure, Black women had to be the opposite. The gender binary rooted in whiteness also created the issue of who is a white woman (i.e., Sicilian women) just as it did with the white working-class (i.e., the Irish). These gender perceptions created by whiteness and the patriarchy set up to decide who could be a “woman” by Eurocentric standards and what type of spaces such women could occupy in a classroom, in the workforce, in the home, and in society as a whole (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Feminist movements throughout the history of the United States have come up to protest these ideals of womanhood, but often left out of those feminist movements is how white women side with their race instead of their gender.

For example, in the “first-wave” of feminist movements when white women were pushing for the right to vote, while maintaining that Black men should not have the right to vote before them (Davis, 2011). The ties that white women have to the white racial identity shows up again during the “second-wave” of feminist movements with the push for abortion rights while ignoring reproductive injustices that Black and brown women faced, such as being sterilized against their will and used as experiments for birth control in Puerto Rico (Davis, 2011). Although abortion access is important, many Black, Indigenous, Trans, and marginalized women face issues such as food insecurity, housing, healthcare, and education that focus on reproductive justice rather than reproductive rights.(Kendall, 2020). Fast forward to today’s “third/fourth wave” feminism and see many white women marching in 2017 in pink pussy hats while just two months prior, over fifty percent of them voted for a candidate who promised to take their reproductive rights away (Peoples, 2017). Feminism is and should be for all women; that is what Black feminist theory shows. Black feminists take an intersectional approach to many social justice issues, such as reproductive justice, by analyzing race, gender, class, and other intersections that affect how society and individuals treat women in those intersections. Meanwhile, white feminism does not consider itself in a racial context but only along the single axis of gender domination (Frankenberg, 1993). White feminism has eroded feminism’s true nature to be intersectional and leaves white women with the hollowness of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). However, “the sad reality is that white women are an oppressed group, they still wield more power than any other group of women--including the power to oppress both men and women of color” (Kendall, 2020,

p. 4). Acknowledging this fact and seeing how white women came to this location among race, class, and gender hierarchies is an important next step in not only recognizing how Niceness continues white supremacy but also how to resist it.

White Women, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Niceness

Thus far, I have explored the critical analysis of race and class and their construction in the United States' labor force. I have explained how Black feminist theory is necessary for understanding gender and racial constructs. Furthermore, I have examined how whiteness among racial and class lines was created to benefit the capitalist class/white elites and continue the buy-in to white supremacy amongst white folks, mainly white men. However, gender is often left out of early critical whiteness theories of analysis, specifically in relation to white women. Jupp, Berry, and Lensmire (2016) noted this erasure when researching studies completed on "white teacher identity literatures from 2004 to 2014" (p. 1151). They discovered that Case and Hemming's (2005) expressed that "researchers pedagogically and reflexively approached the content of antiracist curriculum that 'may be inadvertently excluding White women'" (as cited in Jupp et al. 2016, p. 1165)**.** Due to this earlier erasure, one must look outside of critical whiteness studies to examine the analyses conducted on white women and their participation in upholding white supremacy throughout U.S. history. For example, some of this work includes the classical works of Black feminist bell hooks (1981) *Ain't I A Woman: Black women and feminism* and Angela Davis's (2011) *Women, Race, and Class,* plus British-American sociologist scholar Ruth Frankenberg (1993) and sociologist professor Katerina Deliovsky (2010). These scholars provide the necessary

background and foundation on how white women took part in the racial and class structuring that often only marks the white man as the "bad guy" and leaves our purity and innocence intact, which historically is untrue.

As mentioned earlier, Victorians defined white femininity in terms of purity. Victorian ideals of pure women meant that one had to be chaste, a virgin, heterosexual, seen and not heard, white, and most of all you were agreeable or what I would call nice. This construction of white femininity -- that is, the different ideas about what it means to be a white female -- "can play a pivotal role in negotiating and maintaining concepts of racial and cultural difference" (Ware, 2015, p. 4). And this construction of white femininity becomes even more apparent in Davis (2011) and hooks (1981) seminal texts. Davis (2011) explains how racism was rife within the anti-slavery and suffrage movements, plus second-wave feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Kendall (2021) shows how much white feminism and the narrative of second-wave feminism have left out the voices of radical Black women, Indigenous women, and other women of color. Frankenberg (1993) details how Black and brown women have "worked to specify their histories, and the contemporary shape of their lives in gendered and racial terms, however, a corresponding particularism has too often been lacking on the part of white feminist women" (p. 10). This racial piece for defining white women is missing because we often do not see ourselves in racial ways, only gender, which leaves our standpoint on feminism lacking. Critical race theory is needed because it plays a vital role in analyzing the power of whiteness and its axes of domination (Castagno, 2014).

Furthermore, “whiteness is often associated with innocence and goodness. Brides wear white on their wedding day to signify purity. ‘Snow White’ is a universal fairytale of virtue receiving its just reward” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 85). Whiteness is sold to white women differently than it is to white men. It is more subverted and takes upon this idea of innocence and “pearl-clutching” as a way to dismiss how we behave and are complicit in racist systems and structures. Frankenberg (1993) details this as white women being “well-meaning individuals, the idea of being part of the problem of racism (something I had associated with extremists or institutions but now with myself) was genuinely shocking to us” (p. 3). Fast forward two decades later, and we see educational leadership scholar Angelina E. Castagno give this phenomenon a name: Niceness.

Now, there have been scholars before Castagno’s (2014) ethnographic study on Niceness and whiteness that have pointed towards Niceness as an education and gendered issue, such as Ian E. Baptiste's (2008) *Wages of Niceness* with the conversation about how educators buy into “educational niceness” in adult education circles. Also, Deliovsky’s (2010) book, *White femininity: Race, Gender, and Power*, describes the Niceness phenomenon without mentioning the word ‘nice.’ She examines how “a gendered ‘white’ identity is one that is engaged in daily and incessantly” in forms of language and rituals that create a sense of white unity (p. 72). Castagno (2014) distinctly situates Niceness as a significant form of language and ritual that disciplines and reproduces whiteness in the context of education. She states, "being nice is intimately tied to engaging whiteness, and whiteness itself is aligned with niceness” (Castagno, 2014, p. 8). In other words, “w*hiteness works through nice people”* and, in this case, nice white

educators, even those who say they are committed to social justice or anti-racist pedagogy (Castagno, 2014, p. 8, original emphasis). At the end of her ethnographic study Castagno (2014) discovered that "we need education that combines critical investigations of whiteness, race, and equity with an affective component in order to address the discomfort, guilt, and embarrassment that is likely to ensue from theses investigations" (p. 172). I expand on her work by investigating such discomfort with educators, but also how gender (white women) and the feminization of the field of teaching also plays a role in white educators continuing their dedication to Niceness.

What's Wrong with Being Nice?

This is a question that I receive a lot when talking about the work I am doing and what keeps coming up like the "wayward arm" from the story of *The Willful Child* found in Ahmed's (2017) *Living a Feminist Life* (p. 66-67). With furrowed eyebrows, cranked necks, and looks of dire confusion white educators plead, "Well that's not what I intended." "So, are we just damned if we do and damned if we don't?" "Don't you understand I am a real and raw human and I can't be perfect?" And these words and phrases sound so legitimate that one almost gives in to being nice, to being understanding of the harm they are causing. When do "noble intentions reap harmful effects [?]" (Baptiste, 2008, p. 19). Baptiste (2008) states that the "most lethal form [of] educational niceness promotes what Marcuse (1965) calls repressive tolerance" (p. 21). Marcuse (1965) explains, "Moreover, in endlessly dragging debates over the media, the stupid opinion is treated with the same respect as the intelligent one, the misinformed may talk

as long as the informed, and propaganda rides along with education, truth with falsehood" (p. 94).

Fleming (2018) explains that "Today, news organizations and media outlets participate in the normalization of white supremacy by taking a 'both sides' approach to racism, a trend that is especially noticeable in the wake of the civil rights movement" (p. 136). White people are more interested in being seen as not a racist than "admitting or confronting their racism" (Fleming, 2018, p. 136). The need to be seen as a "good white person" is evident in playing this "both sides approach" and the idea that "all voices matter" when not everyone experiences systematic and systemic racism on a daily basis. The normalization of white supremacy happens in conversation in our classrooms as well. I have sat in diversity and equity classrooms where the professor's desire was to hear from all perspectives with an equal amount of holding those ideas as probable. People from an array of identities tend to "filter information through our own experiences to see if it computes" and if it does then it is valid, and if it doesn't, then it is not valid (Oluo, 2019, p. 21). However, facing racism is not a universal experience (Oluo, 2019). Those who are racially oppressed are better suited to tell their truth and to shine a light on how the individual level and the system as a whole (Frankenberg, 1993). Ahmed (2012) pinpoints a primary issue with diversity and inclusion in the halls of universities and institutions solely based on performance culture. In fact, Ahmed (2017) states that "Diversity becomes about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing whiteness of organizations" (p. 105). In other words, diversity in name only does not lead

to actual substantive change but allows the continuation of normalizing white supremacy in education.

Diversity as performance is also something that Castagno (2014) discovered while studying whiteness and Niceness within two public schools in Utah. She states that while terms such as 'diversity' and 'equity have been embraced by most educators that "the way diversity is taken up, understood, and even implemented merely serves to maintain the business-as-usual work in schools, which in turn supports and perpetuates the status quo of racialized hierarchies and systems of power and privilege" (Castagno, 2014, p. 170). This "well-intended approach" to diversity keeps "educational policy and practice" as "allies to whiteness" and can be seen in the education reform policies implemented in the last decade (Castagno, 2014, p. 170). And like the wayward arm, Niceness keeps coming up. Coming up to hold whiteness in place, coming up to be assumed as innocent, coming up to redirect Black and brown folks' truth from being heard. Niceness does not want white people to be uncomfortable. Niceness among white folks can come off as a feigned shock, guilt, anger, and other emotions that redirect the accountability away from white folks. As Franklin Leonard (2015) said, "When you're accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression (It's not.)."

Continuing with ideas about how schools perpetuate Niceness and whiteness through education policy and diversity initiatives is not only a critical whiteness issue but is also a curriculum studies issue. Every time there is a racist incident in a classroom that goes viral (i.e. white teachers dressing up as the border wall, homework that asks Black and brown students to list the "pros and cons" of slavery) there is short-lived outrage

(Schwartz, 2018; Wanshel, 2018). This outrage is soon followed up by “bad apple” conversations and/or excuses about intention over impact. The teachers are either suspended with pay or removed from the district just to find a new job elsewhere. These viral incidents shine a light on what happens behind closed doors in many classrooms across the U.S. and in the framework of Bree Picower’s (2021) book *Reading, Writing, and Racism*. The title is a play on words from the cultural idea that education teaches the Three R’s, reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic, but Picower (2021) examines how racism “is inherent and basic to schooling as the Three R’s (p. 2). Picower’s work connects to Niceness because Niceness begs us to look at the individual, to say, 'Well, that’s not what I intended,’ and promise to do better without any recourse. Picower (2021) also shows that these viral incidents go beyond the individual and that “such examples of racist pedagogy, be they through emphasis, omission, or outright lies,” are baked into the historical institutions of schooling in the U.S. (p. 3). Picower’s work also connects to whiteness by investigating white educators and how they enact racism either knowingly or unknowingly, which maintains the systems of white supremacy. Together, whiteness and Niceness keep the curriculum white while serving the idea that there is a middle ground on all discourses, even racist ones. As Alemán (2009) states, “that liberal ideology and Whiteness privileges niceness, civility, and commonalities, which only serves to maintain the status quo, covers up institutionalized racism, and silences experiences of marginalized students and communities” (p. 291). In summary, white educators must no longer accept the normalization of white supremacy. Instead, they reject diversity as a performance and multicultural education as a cure and get

uncomfortable knowing we might get it wrong. Still, that learning takes place in areas of discomfort.

Teacher Education and the Continued Construction of Lady Bountiful

"Why did you want to become a teacher?" is a question I have heard at least a hundred times in my pre-service training and career as an educator. The usual answers from many former peers, colleagues, and educators are "I wanted to make a difference," "I like working with children," "This job works out great with my goals of being a wife and mother," and sometimes "those who can't do, teach." My aunt was a teacher, and she advertised teaching to me as the go-to job if you plan to have a family and just want to make a little extra money. Your husband will have a "real" job. "It's a great supportive role," my aunt told me as I looked over college majors one evening. I did not have any starry ideas of saving children through readings of the three little pigs or being the supportive one. In essence, one could say I was not the type to be docile; I spoke my mind. It was the only way I could survive the trauma that was my childhood. So, I bucked and enrolled in pre-med classes anyway. That led to many heated discussions about my future, and by the time my sophomore year in college rolled around, I was back on the teacher train.

Needless to say, my road to education as a career was not endowed with ideas of saving those less fortunate than me (white saviorism), but more of a promise of a nice little job that would be able to take care of me and my hypothetical family someday. I was told I would be a good educator because I was assumed to have the qualities of the "nice white teacher." Long-time educator and professor of gender and women's studies

Erica Meiners (2002) also recalls these same types of answers her students gave when she asked why they wanted to become a teacher. Their descriptions are focused on being "gracious, nurturing, often soft-spoken, and is usually married (or engaged). The words money, career, union, labor, or even job are rarely mentioned …" (Meiners, 2002, p. 89). The nice white teacher is one who would dress up and teach nice little stories about pilgrims and Native Americans, American heroes, and most of them do not rock the proverbial boat. However, as I started to deconstruct my own white education during my pursuit of a master's degree (2014-2017), I realized that these nice little stories did a great amount of harm to not only Black and brown children, but also my white students as well for continuing a false history that was taught to the parents, their grandparents, and their great-great parents. I'll never forget the look on one of my Black students' faces when I taught on the Tulsa Race Massacre, a horrific event that had been buried in my hometown for almost a century. Her exact words were "I didn't know white people knew about that, just us Black folks did." There she was, all of ten years old, and I at twenty-seven years old and she knew more about hidden and omitted curriculum than I did. Since that time, I have made it a habit to unlearn what I thought my pre-service training had taught me, how racist pedagogy had been taught to me in subtle ways that I had not seen and till I was shown by someone else. This does not mean that I am immune to the ways in which Niceness works, but I believe it has given me another perspective to see how saturated Niceness is in the training of pre-service teachers and professional educators today.

As I explained at the beginning of this literature review, a career in education did not start out as predominantly made up of women, but men. Although, the job itself was

still considered something as a second option if those men could not find work in laboring in fields, mills, or factories (Goldstein, 2015). Furthermore, the teaching profession was not predominantly middle-class white women like it is today, but a way for unmarried women of all races to support themselves instead of having to find a husband to support them. At first glance, that almost sounds quite feminist, especially in the late 19th century. However, the direct push during the common schools' movement for using white women as “lady teachers" was based on gender norms (women were mothers, so, therefore, they were nurturers), white racial identity (to spread the gospel and assimilate the masses in the name of American democracy), and class because women were cheaper to higher than men (Goldstein, 2015). Moreso, the requirements that Catherine Beecher wanted in her “missionary teachers" were “energy, discretion, and self-denying benevolence” as the Catholic nuns of their time (Goldstein, 2015, p. 20). Plus, there was a societal concern at the time that these white women teachers were not intelligent enough to teach children, so the focus was not on academics or arithmetic but on pushing moral superiority (Goldstein, 2015). These women worked in abhorrent conditions, had little to no privacy, shared rooms with either local families or even their students, and these spaces did not have “candlelight or basic sanitation” (Goldstein, 2015, p. 30). However, many stayed and were “grateful for the opportunity and experienced modest success” (Goldstein, 2015, p. 30). Beecher and Mann ultimately created teaching to be the “female equivalent of the ministry: a profession whose prestige would be rooted not in world rewards, such as money or political influence, but in the personal satisfaction that came from serving others" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 30-31). So along with the “deep bias

against women's intellectual and professional capabilities" and the narrative that being a teacher you must be a woman created the idealization and romanticization of teaching that feminized the field of education and seeped into "moral values" ((Goldstein, 2015, p. 31). The emphasis on moral values gave political support to allowing these white women to teach and gave way to the common schools' movement that allowed "masses of low-paid, poorly educated 'motherteachers,' prioritizing faith over academic learning" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 32). These motherteachers/missionary teachers were seen as innocent, docile, and just wanted to do God's work. This idea of doing "God's work" as missionary teachers was a type of performance that Niceness requires. As Bramen (2017) explains, "Christian niceness as a form of social etiquette reinforces the feminine through prescribed behavior" (p. 196). In essence, the teaching profession was born out of a need to colonize, push Christian teachings, and "reproduce patriarchal values" (Meiners, 2002, p.87).

This archetype of teaching came to be known as "white Lady Bountiful," the colonial matriarch, charitable giver, self-sacrificing, republican mother, and the ghost in every classroom (Ford-Smith, 1997; Meiners, 2002). Lady Bountiful is considered a ghost because similar to how Niceness goes unseen as problematic, so does Lady Bountiful. An example of Lady Bountiful and Niceness in today's pop culture is the movie *Freedom Writers* (2007), where Hillary Swank plays a young teacher (Erin Gruwell) dedicated to getting her Black and Latine students to invest in their education by divesting their trauma in journals and reading books about Anne Frank and the Holocaust. Hilary's character, Erin, is designed to sacrifice everything, including her

husband (they divorce halfway into the movie) and works two jobs to pay for new books and field trips for her students. From the outside, all of this seems so Nice of Erin to do this for her students. However, the movie lacks calling out the constructs of white saviorism and instead continues the white savior narrative. The *Freedom Writers* (2007) moves does this by leading the audience to believe that Erin is the hero for sacrificing her own wants and needs to provide books and field trips at her own expense without ever taking notice of the interlocking systems of oppressions that continue to affect the lives of her students once they leave her classroom. Many of them still dealt with homelessness, gang violence, and being over-policed. This movie also sets up false narratives of what teachers are expected to do by society and centers a white savior narrative that if you just work hard enough you can rescue marginalized youth. However, no one asks these same youth if that is what they need or want. When I graduated in 2008 with my bachelor's degree, this movie was all the rage. I was doing a great amount of substitute teaching due to the economic fallout at the time, and I was in a classroom where the main teacher was trying to recreate the same type of lessons she had seen in Freedom Writers. I was sitting next to a Black male student and I remember him telling me "why does this white lady think she can save me, this isn't a Hollywood movie." He went on to explain how he found it all ridiculous and degrading.

I honestly am not sure of my immediate reaction, but I did listen to him and wonder about the narrative this movie was producing for so many other new white teachers going into the classroom for the first time with so many assumptions about their Black and brown students already formulated in their head. Lady Bountiful requires

sacrifice. Niceness tells you that if you don't then you don't truly love your students. Lady Bountiful requires white saviorism. Niceness tells you are making a difference despite the critical scholar's critiques. Lady Bountiful requires constant labor. Niceness says do it with a smile on your face. Together they create a presence that maintains the status quo and disavows anyone who tries to disrupt (Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2014, 2019; Goldstein, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2008; Mason & Ngo, 2019).

Teacher education before the required university degree was quite non-existent and many teachers were hired straight out of primary school, which is the "equivalent of just a sixth or seventh grade education" with their educators most likely having the same educational background (Goldstein, 2015, p. 26). It wasn't until the early 20th century that states started passing laws about education degrees and requirements for high school diplomas that more teacher training requirements were sought after (Goldstein, 2015). Although, I would be remiss if I did not mention that these so-called push for degrees was not out of the best interest for students and their education, but a way for the U.S. government to put up roadblocks against Black teachers and administrators after the passing of *Brown vs Board of Education* (1954) in obtaining these new teaching requirements (Will, 2019).

Additionally, these "regional state colleges" had "lower admission standards than flagship state universities" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 26). Then you add in today's "teacher shortage" and quick fixes such as Teach for America (TFA), which "recruit ambitious people to the classroom, but on a small scale, and do not systematically improve instruction for kids" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 7). Plus, many of them TFA teachers leave

education once their two-year contract is satisfied, which leaves a revolving door of educators in and out of school buildings. The constant revolving door of TFA teachers, along with other types of teacher turnover leaves little to no training beyond basic pedagogy. Continual teacher turnover leaves little room for critical reflection that is required in seeing Niceness not only as a problem, but finding ways to disengage from it.

Much of teacher preparation today continues the prevalence of the status quo, which in this case is Niceness and whiteness all bundled up in our Lady Bountiful ghost. Even when some type of diversity training is offered in pre-service training the university gives a ghettoized version (Ladson-Billings, 2008). The diversity training offered to pre-service teachers is through the lens of multiculturalism. However, multiculturalism has been used by whiteness and Niceness to take an "all sides are equal," staying "neutral" approach, or keeping with the Eurocentric canon and using an additive model of adding a few Black and brown voices (Bissonnette, 2016; Picower, 2021). For example, when discussing the narrative of teaching Columbus and its ode to imperialism/colonization to her pre-service teachers, Picower (2021) discovered that they were more worried about the backlash of these hypothetical students (they assumed to be white) then they would be of Indigenous parents being upset. Once again, showing how "imaginary Whiteness has on teachers' decision-making" (Picower, 2021, p. 43). In the additive model, we see curriculum and instruction that is solely white with a few sprinkles of diversity in pre-service teachers' education. This is equivalent to the "holidays around the world" approach that elementary teachers do (and I was once guilty of doing as well) that reinforces stereotypes about students of color, such as Black students will learn more

efficiently with rap music (Bissonnette, 2016). Alemán (2009) argues that "the politics of education has traditionally been researched, taught, and subsequently practiced without centering issues of race and racism, many educational leadership programs have been rendered ineffective and inequitable policies have gone unchanged" (p. 291). Learning to see how Niceness operates takes a critical reflexive practice in seeing how whiteness and Niceness operate is not taught in pre-service teacher classrooms.

Bissonnette (2016) analyzes this further in discussing how teacher programs prefer Niceness which obstructs actual anti-racist pedagogy along with culturally responsive teaching due to audit culture, pre-service and teacher educators alike, and the curriculum and instruction. Audit culture and its pervasiveness with being watched as a pre-service teacher by a teacher mentor and usually by a university supervisor can lead to continuing the status quo by focusing on passing national standards and ineffectively teaching culturally relevant pedagogy (Bissonnette, 2016). Take Toni's story, for example, in Mason and Ngo's (2019) article on "Teacher Education for Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in the United States." Toni was one of her class's only Black and West African pre-service teachers. Toni's pre-service internship placement was with a white progressive mentor teacher and a white university supervisor. The mentor teacher and Toni got along well, but one day when Toni was teaching a lesson, the university supervisor gave her a note that she wrote very well but that she "did not speak proper English" (Mason & Ngo, 2019, n.p.). This led to a string of events in which the university supervisor profusely stated she meant no harm while Toni was transferred from her school and supervisor. However, as Bissonnette (2016) points out many pre-service

teachers learn from white teacher faculty members who were also not taught “to grapple with their own socio-cultural identities" which does not enable them to prevent experiences like the one Toni had.

A similar experience happened to Lily, a Black Indigenous woman, throughout her education degree. In this specific example, Lily was a freshman in an Introduction to Education class when a discussion started around affirmative action (Ben. et. al., 2019). A white male student complained about not getting his first pick of schools due to “diversity” which Lily quickly pointed out that affirmative action does not provide financial aid or free housing into said colleges and that there are a lot of barriers to Black and brown students getting a quality education beyond just acceptance to a college (Ben. et. al., 2019). So, when the classroom erupted in debate, the white teacher decided to just move on from the conversation and state that “Well focusing on race is probably too narrow, let’s think about the important point we just heard, what about class, and economics for affirmative action? Everyone deserves to go to college. Thinking it’s only about race is ignorant” (Ben. et. al., 2019, p. 149). Later on, that day, Lily was emailed by the said teacher and encouraged to play nice with others despite her strong opinions because they had gotten a few complaints from other students in the class (Ben. et. al., 2019). In this example, the white teacher had every opportunity to hold space for Lily, to decenter white feelings about race, class, and gender but instead did the opposite. White students complain, white students are heard. Black and brown students complain, they are removed from the problem (as in Toni’s case) or labeled as the problem (as in Lily’s case). Hamad (2020) explains that Black and brown women are, “Overwhelmingly

disbelieved when they try to shed light on their experiences of gendered racism, the lack of support they receive adds to the initial trauma, leaving them questioning reality as well as themselves" (p. 14). Furthermore, when white women are called out there are usually white tears to follow and those tears are "attached to the symbol of femininity" only granted to white women (Hamad, 2020, p. 15). When one white woman shows that femininity it puts out a "bat signal" so to speak to other white women demanding a nicer approach to the education a Black or brown woman just gave. This results in tone policing, gaslighting, and emotional labor at the hands of Black and brown women that often goes unnoticed and continues the trauma of racism and sexism in educational spaces.

As Frankenberg (1993) states, white women often do not see themselves as racial beings only gendered. Furthermore, Hamad (2020) examines:

> White women can oscillate between their gender and their race, between being the oppressed and the oppressor. Women of colour are never permitted to exist outside of these constraints: we are both women and people of colour and we are always seen and treated as such. (p. 20)

Here Lady Bountiful is requiring labor, not from white women, but from Black and brown women. Lady Bountiful is perceived to be innocent but that innocence is violent. Bramen (2018) explains "violent innocence" by using "Christopher Bollas's psychoanalytic concept of "violent innocence," which describes how violence is projected onto the other in order to protect oneself from acknowledging one's own capacity to be violent" (p. 7). In other words, to avoid our own discomfort within

realizing our own culpability in white supremacy, white women evade or avoid accountability by claiming that information given to them was not nice and therefore cannot be true. Bramen (2018) explains that "This act of projection keeps one virtuous and innocent in a Manichean world of good against evil" (p. 7). However, Applebaum (2016) states that "The point, however, is not whether one is a good or a bad person. This concern just re-centers white interests and needs over the needs and concerns of people of color" (p. 5). The question should be how white people are maintaining white supremacy, whether knowingly or not (Applebaum, 2016). The centering of whiteness and Niceness was evident in Toni's story because the white university supervisor wanted Toni, a Black woman, to lay out the harm she had been caused in nice, white bite-size pieces so that this white supervisor could learn how to be a better white person without ever thinking about the emotional and mental labor required of Toni. It was also evident in Lily's experience in confronting racial and gendered myths about affirmative action only to have her instructor tell her to tone it down and play nice. In conclusion, it is important to notice when white femininity is being used as a tool to impose Niceness on Black and brown women students, educators, and in our own daily lives.

As stated above, Bissonnette (2016) discusses another example for understanding the pervasiveness of the culture of Niceness and whiteness in teacher education. He uses examples of white faculty members and their white students. Neither demographic is taught explicitly how to grapple with their own identity while working towards a more social justice-oriented classroom. However, those white teachers who are about to "adopt and model culturally responsive teaching practices for their PSTs [pre-service teachers]

face backlash from their administrations" or from their students as well (Bissonnette, 2016, p. 17). In this example, we see how two white professors who have done the critical reflexive work of seeing how Niceness and whiteness continue to impede anti-racist pedagogy come up against white pre-service teachers who have not.

Clements and Stutelberg (2020) both teach predominantly white preschool teachers in universities on the North and East Coasts. In the section written by Stutelberg, she articulates the tensions of being read either as rad or as a “nice white lady.” In the text, she describes wondering how to build trust with her students so she can help them see white supremacy beyond just the KKK and the proud boys, and subvert the ways it seeps into every crack of our society. At the end of the semester, she believes she reached her goal by stating that many of her students had “learned to recognize the cultural scripts of whiteness, of the white woman teacher, and began to explore new ways of performing - as an actively anti-racist teacher, one who thinks critically and systemically about race and racism in the classroom” (Clements and Stutelberg, 2020, p. 147). However, at the end of the semester, Stutelberg received a notice of an anonymous report that one of her students had made. The student wrote a post detailing their grievances about the course and uploaded a visual that Stutelberg had used called the “The Pyramid of White Supremacy" [see Appendix 1] onto a right-wing website, Campus Reform. The student never did come forward and before she knew it, Fox News, online sites, and random strangers were calling Stutelberg a race traitor, among other things, for teaching about racism. However, Clements and Stutelberg (2020) still recommend that white teachers help educate their white students in understanding how whiteness and Niceness work.

Stutelberg's student wanted her to be the "the nice white lady" that she had come to know from her own experiences of education, to not make her question the worldview that she held dear, or that would make the next family holiday more estranged. Stutelberg had created a space to be critically reflexive and the pre-service student rejected it. Who knows what will become of that student and the future harm her ties to whiteness and Niceness will bring upon her own classroom someday? It is safe to say there would have been more harm done in multiple classrooms if Clements and Stutelberg (2020) had not taken it upon themselves to "recognize racist scripts that reproduce racist policies, histories, and practices that have been perpetrated violence on the most vulnerable bodies in our society" (p. 154). This is the work white teachers must do in undoing the ties of whiteness and Niceness and fully disengage from Lady Bountiful for good.

Why this study matters

In the last three decades, few studies have examined Niceness, gender, and whiteness from a curriculum studies perspective. While critical whiteness studies in education have sought to name the issues of whiteness, Jupp et al. (2016) have noted that gender has been understudied. There have been sociological and cultural studies done on the issue of white femininity and racism (i.e. Deliovsky, 2010; Frankenberg, 2003; Ware, 2015) and I seek to contribute to critical whiteness studies and curriculum studies by drawing from these other bodies of critical race, feminist/queer scholarship. Until recently, scholarship has left Niceness an untouched phenomenon in conversations with whiteness and white teachers. Castagno (2014) completed one of the first U.S.-based

studies with two Utah school districts and how Niceness among white faculty prevents true diversity in schools.

However, her background is in educational leadership. There have been more and more recent studies published in regards to Niceness and whiteness in the last couple of years but are more specific to faculty hiring practices (Liera, 2020), Niceness in art education (Dewhurst, 2019), and how Niceness is harmful to students and faculty of color (Castagno, 2019; Orozco, 2019). My study takes these ideas and expands not only on how Niceness works alongside whiteness but also on how it is embedded in white femininity and in the feminization of teaching. If Lady Bountiful's ghost has stuck around this long it is because the predominant white teaching force keeps regurgitating the same racist scripts from teacher education, to diversity classes, to white educators, to white students, and back again. Someone has to throw a cog into this well-oiled racist machine, and it might as well be me. The only way to start solving a problem is to see there is one, and then learning to start sitting that discomfort that Niceness wants us to avoid.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

We live stories that either give our lives meaning
or negate it with meaninglessness.
If we change the stories we live by,
Quite possibly we change our lives. (Okri, 2014, p. 33)

Stories give meaning not only to our lives but to the social and cultural context around them. In essence, "We live by stories" (Okri, 2014, p. 33). When I think of stories/narratives told to me via storybooks, movies, television, etc. that mainly featured white lives growing up in the suburbs, there was always a conflict that arose and was resolved within the thirty-minute runtime of said show. For example, in Season 5, Episode 3 of *Full House* (aptly titled "Take My Sister, Please"), oldest sister DJ asked for her own room instead of continuing to share a room with her middle sister Stephanie. The youngest sister, Michelle, had her own room since she was a baby. DJ's argument was that her entry into high school required more privacy than her younger sisters needed. Their father and two uncles agreed with DJ, and the episode handled the switch of the rooms.

Although there was just one caveat: Stephanie and Michelle did not want to live with each other either. Stephanie, as the middle child (something I very much relate to), had her feelings disrespected and unheard throughout the episode. It got to the point where Stephanie just moved into the bathroom because she felt that no one wanted to live with her. In the end, DJ convinced Stephanie that she got to be the big sister now, and they bribed Michelle with a bag of cookies to seal the deal.

As a sister myself who constantly shared a room with my younger sister, I can relate to both DJ and Stephanie. But unlike this perfect world sitcom, things were never wrapped up so neatly in a bow where everyone was happy with a decision that was not totally their own. I had many arguments with my own sister and, just like Stephanie, my complaints often went unheard. I craved wanting to see my own situations reflected in the TV I watched, but it never happened. Plus, it always angered me when situations, arguments, and family disagreements were solved within thirty minutes or less. TV shows and other media rarely showed a more nuanced complexity to relationships with siblings, families, and other types of relationships. It felt as though Stephanie was pushed into going along to get along. That is a narrative I have felt that I needed to abide by as a sister, daughter, student, teacher, wife, and friend: that being liked or submissive was better than pushing for what I thought needed to be heard. The constant compromise left a burning fire in the pit of my stomach, and being pushed to just be nice and agreeable started to take its toll. After all, no one likes a madwoman or, better yet, a "feminist killjoy" (Ahmed, 2017).

It was not until graduate school where I started reading texts that put words to this narrative of, "if we all just get along," which reframed it as a toxic ideology. I think these narratives and the narratives of Niceness we tell ourselves makes sitting in discomfort hard to do. Sometimes we are not the protagonist in the story; sometimes we need to sit with ourselves and think about how things could have gone differently. Be in the moment, the silence, feel the weight of it, and learn from it. Although Niceness compels us to avoid the uncomfortable and focus on the reframing of best intentions, as Castagno (2019) writes, "In fact, as long as one means well, the actual impact of one's behavior, discourse, or action is often meaningless" (p. x). Niceness provides an escape hatch to avoid addressing the harm created by white people's actions -- in this study, white educators.

Niceness can be difficult to critique, given its varied forms and definitions. I use the definition Castagno (2019) offers:

> Niceness is one mechanism for *reifying structural arrangements* and ideologies of dominance across lines of race, gender, and social class. It functions not only as a *shield to protect (White, female) educators* from having to do the hard work of dismantling inequity but also as a *disciplining agent* for those who attempt or even consider disrupting structures and ideologies of dominance" (p. xiv, emphasis added).

This study engaged in critical narrative inquiry to tease out, investigate, and interrogate why white educators, especially white women, may hold on to an ideology of Niceness while Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) may name their actions as "white

violence" (A.C. Brown, 2018, Ricketts, 2021, Taylor, 2021, Wilson & Tariq, 2021). Further, this study aims to understand how white educators may be called in, or call one another in, to do better and the importance of resisting Niceness for further dismantling white supremacy and promoting anti-racist pedagogy. The pressure or "disciplining agent" of Niceness on those educators who do this work constantly pushes them back into a quiet space, so things can go on just being nice without any discomfort or acknowledgment of how white folks and educators are complicit in this systemic oppression of BIPOC in and outside the classroom. This work is about sitting in that discomfort, giving space to it, and then moving beyond it to break the bonds of Niceness to embracing the joys of being a "feminist killjoy" (Ahmed, 2017) and bringing others along with us. After all, Niceness holds white people hostage to an ideal that not only is harmful to others but to ourselves as well.

Nowadays, one can see Niceness play out in other societal arenas beyond the classroom. For example, when survivors of sexual and domestic abuse, their lawyers, their families, and other supports attempt to hold white male public figures or celebrities accountable for their actions, the cries of "cancel culture" are shrieked from the hills (Loofbourow, 2018). Loofbourow (2018) explains this concept of the "male self-pardon" by examining how quick the public is to forgive a white male celebrity who says he is sorry and just expects absolution directly after the said apology. However, these apologies are a powerful "narrative engine" that pushes the women who are harmed to be "vengeful grudge holders" (Loofbourow, 2018, para. 14, 17). It is important to point out that "for all the fear that cancel culture elicits, it hasn't succeeded in toppling any major

figures — high-level politicians, corporate titans — let alone institutions" (Mishan, 2020, para. 13). Topics like "cancel culture" avoid accountability for one's actions, as does the definition of Niceness that I am using throughout this study. It is the focus on good intentions, bad apple excuses, and not seeing who is truly "canceled" -- those who speak out against systemic racism, sexism, classism, etc. For example, Sarah Hagi (2019), a journalist for *Time* who often receives death threats and calls for her firing for writing about racism and Islamophobia, states, "But when people who believe cancel culture is a problem speak out about its supposed silencing effect, I know they're not talking about those attacks" (para. 13).

Additionally, immediately following President Joe Biden's win, there were calls from both liberal and conservative groups to be kind to Trump supporters; after all, they were having a hard time (Higgins, 2020). Such calls were made after years of gaslighting, mocking, and hate speech from those same Trump supporters. Marcuse (1965) calls this repressive tolerance, where everything becomes tolerated and no clear line exists for what we should or should not accept as a culture. In education, repressive tolerance is evident in the public reactions and discussions about teachers collectively organizing, striking, and demanding more support in and out of the classroom. Castagno (2019) describes an example of this during the 2018 teacher walkouts being labeled as walkouts instead of strikes. Even during the walkouts, a friend's dad told me there are "nicer ways to go about getting what you want." This idea of Niceness expected from teachers and how they should sacrifice everything for their students resembles much of the rhetoric used against those who are in a domestic violence situation and are told to "stay for the kids."

Niceness perpetuates the continuous myth that if one just asks so kindly and sweetly for the oppressor to pull the knife out of their back, things will change. As much of history shows things did not change until collective action demanded it.

Ahmed (2017) describes this same phenomenon by how universities do not discuss how campuses are racist but rather settle on words like *diversity* and *equity*. These words feel nice, but there is no change. A million committees can meet, discuss, plan, and demand change. But until we as white people break up with Niceness for good, things will continue to stay the same. I say *we* and *us* as white educators immersed in this unraveling of societal demands of Niceness because whiteness wants not only me to stay complacent but all white folks. I also do not believe that this unraveling or untangling can happen in a vacuum; this work needs to be done collaboratively.

My aim of this study was to collectively uncover, via narrative inquiry, the subtle, disciplining effects of Niceness on the effect and action among a group of white educators through storying and re-storying their/my experiences with Niceness that engaged myself and my critical inquiry group members to come to deeper understandings and insights into their/mine practice of anti-racist pedagogy more broadly. This is why a critical and collaborative approach to narrative inquiry in the methodology and the analysis is vital to my work.

This study took place over the course of eight weeks during mid-June, July, and two weeks in August 2021, with each meeting, eight meetings total, lasting for an hour to an hour and a half. In the first meeting, we as a group set up the norms that we would abide by during our time together. We decided that this space was a pace of discomfort

and held each other accountable. We defined accountability as agreeing to engage in hard discussions and not letting any member, including myself, try to escape this hard work by taking an emotional exit of "this is just too hard" or "well, I am not like this at all." Our accountability was rooted in critical self-reflection of ourselves and our group members. I also explained that none of our discussions were a form of extraction or a "got you" way of examining their/my stories during our time together. The collaborative and critical part allowed me to share the transcriptions with each member of the study. It also assisted me in deciding on what stories to include in the data analysis of Chapters 4 and 5. Each session, following the first, did a deep dive into a facet of Niceness and whiteness in education such as Niceness and the harm inflicted upon Black, Indigenous, and other students/teachers of color by white teachers (Lily's story in Ben. et. al., 2019), identity (gender and class), position in education (teacher, parent, student, all the above), our own pre-service teacher education experiences, "Lady Bountiful" and "nice white teacher" in our teaching practice and mentoring, emotion and discomfort (not prioritizing white feelings), disentangling ourselves from Niceness and its consequences and building a community of feminist killjoys. Even as I approached how Niceness and whiteness worked together to limit the actual progress of anti-racist pedagogy, I also approached this study to learn from my critical group inquiry members and work as a team. Working as a team meant to further theorize and understand the practical implications of Niceness as an analytic lens.

The path to critical narrative inquiry becomes clearer in studying the critical issues of white supremacy and colonial patriarchal systems at play in the university and

how educators are complicit or actively resisting such structures. As Ochs and Capps (2001) state, “Stories (or narratives) can be a critical means to understanding not only the nature of narrative more broadly, but also the relationship of everyday talk to the social construction of cultural norms and institutional discourses” (as cited in Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 162). I want to highlight the importance of that statement being “a critical means to understanding,” because the purpose of this study is to critically understand the narrative that Niceness often dictates in white educators and how they may construct the world in terms and values of Niceness. In essence, as Okri (2014) stated above, if one can change the story, one can change the narrative and lives of others overall.

Study Overview

Clandinin (2013) defines narrative inquiry as an “approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (p. 17). However, it is essential to explain the difference between narrative inquiry as a methodology and narrative analysis used in many other forms of qualitative inquiry, such as ethnographic research, case studies, life history, auto-ethnographic research, and different types of qualitative methods (Patton, 2002). These differences are in narrative inquiry research’s ontological and epistemological assumptions, the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and the phenomenon studied (Clandinin and Murphy, 2009). Although, in this study, the researcher (me) and the researched (my critical inquiry group members) was a relationship of co-narrators in which “we intentionally put our lives alongside an other's

life" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 23). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explained this more eloquently by stating:

> People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (p. 375)

Narrative inquiry goes beyond analyzing data from interviews, observations, and fieldwork to explain a trend in research, the "storied phenomenon" (Clandinin and Murphy, 2009, p. 598) that becomes the essence of a narrative of a methodology.

I began with the framing of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) because they are well known for their narrative inquiry work in the field of education. These narrative theorists were fundamental to my understanding of narrative inquiry as a methodology. However, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) do not frame their work in critical terms but focus their ideas on narrative inquiry from an interpretive perspective. My study does not follow an interpretive model but a critical and feminist perspective. Although I want to honor their orientation regarding their focus on experience, I move from their interpretive approach to a critical perspective. Therefore, to fully flesh out my critical and collaborative narrative inquiry in this study, I move to Reissman's (2008) critical narrative work along

with adding in Howell's (2013) critical theory and Souto-Manning's (2014) critical narrative analysis. Taking this into consideration, in this chapter, I will elaborate on how I use a critical narrative perspective, including its basis in epistemology and ontology, the ethics and tensions of critical narrative research through my data collection and analysis, and the significance of this work.

Research Questions

The main research question guiding this study is: How does Niceness impact white educators' experiences?

The two secondary questions are as follows:

1. How do white teachers build communities with other white educators who are committed to breaking white solidarity lines and further anti-racist work in education?
2. How does a community exploration of whiteness and Niceness impact participants' understanding of anti-racist pedagogy?

Power Dynamics of white Women

Culturally and historically speaking, white women have not always belonged in institutional spaces (Puwar, 2004). However, white women have used their whiteness to benefit them while continuing the oppression of Black people and other people of color. A historical example was the fight for the right to vote. The suffrage movement erased the efforts of Black feminists such as Mary Church Terrell and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper while uplifting white women such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Davis, 2011). So, while power dynamics ensured and pushed white women into

a submissive role in relation to white men, they also wielded that same power over those they considered to be less-than to gain some resemblance of being equal to their oppressors. In other words, white women banded together with white men based on their race to hopefully find some relief from the inequalities resulting from their gender. This power dynamic is evident in the words of Stanton's ideas about including Black men and women in the right to vote: "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work for or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman" (Davis, 2011, p. 76).

Another example of how white women have used the power dynamics of whiteness is through the concept of safety. In educational spaces, this looks specifically like speaking about being safe and keeping their children safe as ways to further school segregation, white supremacist policies, and thwarting racial justice throughout the decades (McRae, 2018). These white women segregationists were not the only ones standing in the way of racial justice, as many self-proclaimed liberals have done the same thing despite their "good intentions." Take for example how the white liberal parents in the podcast *Nice White Parents* in New York supported inclusion and integration in the 1960s when the SIS school was being built. They wrote letters begging the Board of Education to build the school closer to them and promised to send their children there when it opened. Only they did not. They opted for a school that was not so "loud" and wanted to make sure their kids received the best education. However, this white flight is exactly what kept schools that were predominantly Black and brown students underfunded, and eventually, the state just closed these schools altogether (Bell, 2004).

In an effort to understand this phenomenon Angelina Chapin from *The Cut* magazine sat down with Jane Junn, a political science and gender studies professor at the University of Southern California. Junn stated that part of the reason why white women continue voting in this way is that they are "wanting to stay on top of the racial hierarchy" and that they "have agreed to accept second-class status with their gender, as long as the Republican Party puts them first with race and keeps them safe" (Chapin, 2020, para. 7). Junn also argued that white women are politically socialized this way from birth until they sign up to vote when they are eighteen. This political socialization is echoed in Carrie Bramen's book *American Niceness*, where white womanhood is synonymous with doing what you are supposed to do. In other words, *be nice*. However, white femininity is used to create excuses to avoid being complicit and accountable for racism by using tropes of Niceness, like using emotions or tears that make a group or crowd huddle around white women and shame the person (usually a woman of color) for calling her out (Hamad, 2020). The white woman and her supporters demand Black and brown women apologize for being mean and understand that this white woman is just trying to learn. These entanglements of performing gender weakness while, in the same breath, weaponizing one's whiteness allow Niceness to continue. Exposing those entanglements and questioning them could bring about a more intersectional approach to asking for equality (Crenshaw, 2017) from white kids/students that are growing up now with white moms/teachers who can be given the tools to leave Niceness behind.

Critical Narrative Inquiry

A critical narrative approach is needed to conceptualize the theoretical framework of threading critical race theory, Black and critical feminist theory, and critical whiteness studies. Together they formulate how white educators, mainly white women, often embody the idea of "Lady Bountiful" and "dutiful daughter" by continuing the status quo of being the "nice white lady" and how that power, along with notions of Niceness, show up in the classroom. Critical theory seeks to uncover what is operating in institutions and practices politically, focusing on social justice (Howell, 2013). When combining this critical piece with narrative and feminist theory, allows me to focus on those institutional practices, specifically on gendered equity along with storied experiences from the classroom. For example, this framework can facilitate my exploration of how being "not nice" or taking on the feminist killjoy role may mean that one is challenging institutional practices/the status quo, creating insights and resources for understanding how we might recognize, name, and "leave niceness behind." This exploration can reveal how we may have more capacity/resources to challenge institutions/status quo.

Additionally, using a critical approach disrupts narratives that can continue colonization in the stories white people tell themselves and others (Souto-Manning, 2014). For example, as Souto-Manning (2014) writes,

> One way of envisioning this sort of praxis is an engagement in culture circles – in which individuals engage simultaneously with the word and the world – not only making sense of their lives through co-constructing narratives, but questioning and refuting institutional discourses which may be found in these very narratives

and oppressing their very lives (or at least being used to justify such oppression). (p. 177)

In other words, I am taking both a micro and macro approach to studying and questioning Niceness. The both/and approach is important because as I mentioned earlier there is no purity in this work. White educators are part of the problem and we can also be part of the solution. We do not live in a vacuum where only our individual lives affect only us or where the systematic issues of capitalism, whiteness, and patriarchy are separate from our lives. Weis and Fine (2012) call this attention to both the micro and macro, critical bifocality. Critical bifocality is "a way to render visible the relations between groups to structures of power, to social policies, to history, and to large sociopolitical formations" (Weis & Fine, 2012, p.173). Furthermore, Weis and Fine (2012) describe the importance of researchers making "visible the sinewy linkages or circuits through which structural conditions are enacted in policy and reform institutions as well as the ways in which such conditions come to be woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals" (p. 174). Studying Niceness among this group of white educators goes beyond just our lives and our own entanglements with Niceness, but also within the confines of the historical, political, and social ideas around the gendered field of education, the push for apolitical ideas in classrooms by political pundits, and countless neoliberal reforms from standardized testing to fascist book bannings that complicate how we, teachers, go about disinvesting in Niceness altogether.

Critical narrative inquiry also brings about the political nature of these stories. For example, in recent Black Lives Matter protests this summer after the murders of George

Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others at the police's hands, photo narratives were being passed around on multiple social media sites and news networks with police officers kneeling in solidarity with protesters. Those same police officers used mace, teargas, excessive force, and violent arrest practices against those same protestors hours later (Walker, 2020). There was an outcry from Black activists to stop sharing and promoting these photo ops. Meanwhile, white middle/upper-class liberals who considered themselves allies were clogging up their social media feeds with these photos and making claims about how "we are all part of one race - the human race" (Keating, 2020). I even had multiple white friends who did the same, and many of them are also white educators. When I pointed out the problem of these photo narratives erasing the actual issue of police brutality and the murder of Black citizens, I met pushback. White allies want to believe that a few good cops can make these systemic issues go away.

Consequently, as Keating (2020) succinctly points out, "Sharing images of police officers and protesters hugging it out suggests that anti-Black racism and police brutality are best addressed with niceness, with one-on-one promises of understanding and care" (p. 6). And that is precisely the problem that Castagno (2019) also examines with Niceness because it focuses on the individual instead of the system. Niceness compels us to avoid the uncomfortable and focus on the reframing of best intentions: "In fact, as long as one means well, the actual impact of one's behavior, discourse, or action is often meaningless" (Castagno, 2019, p. x). Niceness is used to excuse police brutality and racism as a few rotten apples; the same interpretation is used in the classroom with white

teachers, which prevents, circumvents, and undermines anti-racist teaching as a whole on local, state, and national levels.

The combination of critical race theory, which seeks to examine racial inequity embedded in education (Ladson-Billings, 1998), along with critical whiteness studies that reveal the underbelly of how racism is at the center of whiteness, white supremacy, white privilege, white solidarity, and maintaining the status quo (Ahmed, 2007; Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; Deliovsky, 2017; Lensmire, 2017; & Saad, 2020) is needed to understand how Niceness has contributed to inequity in classrooms across the United States, with most recently the idea that white students cannot feel uncomfortable when discussing our country's past and present systematic racist systems and prejudice. Furthermore, Black and critical feminist thought can illuminate how white women have been allowed to oscillate between their race and gender without recognizing their own white racial identity (Deliovsky, 2010; Frankenberg, 1993, Hamad, 2020, Ware, 2015). Altogether the triangulation of critical race theory, Black and critical feminist theory, and critical whiteness studies allowed for critical and collaborative narrative analysis of these teachers' lived experiences and how race and gender play a role in notions of Niceness and furthering inequity while resisting antiracist pedagogy.

Storytelling as Political Work

Riessman (2008) states that "Narratives do political work. The social role of stories – how their connection to the flow of power in the wider world – is an important facet of narrative theory" (p. 8). In other words, the first piece of analysis is listening to each individual's story -- in this case, being a white teacher doing anti-racist work in the

classroom – and then analyzing how that phenomenon plays out. The second piece involves taking a second reading through to find how these stories "are examined with the intention to recognize expressions of resistance and emancipation and to highlight and expose the invisible, silenced, or taken-for-granted historical, structural, and ideological forces and conditions that lead to or perpetuate social injustices" (Pitre et al., 2013, p. 122). In this case, the injustices are how Niceness notions further the inequity in schools, because calling out how whiteness operates may anger white teachers' colleagues, parents, administrators, and students (i.e., moments of white rage or violence). As Ahmed (2017) explains, "When you expose a problem you pose a problem" (p. 37). By naming the problem, you become the problem to those who feel you are getting in the way of what they already consider to be progressive.

Meanwhile, when a white teacher examines the need for more anti-racist work in the school, it makes the classroom safer for students of color because their perspectives bring their truths to the forefront and how white supremacist institutions, such as schools, continue to marginalize them further. Bringing in a critical perspective helped eliminate the fears around being a "feminist killjoy," by creating a coalition of white teachers who also want to disentangle themselves from Niceness. Niceness is a construct sold to the American public through narratives. Castagno (2019) states that "niceness is assumed to be a national default mode" and that it fits into a "global narrative" (p. x – xi). Disrupting that narrative can happen by inquiring narratively about lived experiences of those who have worked in deconstructing Niceness and reactions to anti-racist pedagogies in educational spaces.

The justification for using lived experiences and a "storied phenomenon" is based on personal, practical, and social/theoretical (Clandinin, 2013). The personal help explain why this inquiry should matter to individuals in educational spaces, the practical shows why this research may be helpful to the field (such as teaching predominantly white women pre-service teachers), and the social/theoretical comes into focus by showing how this research may develop more theoretical understandings surrounding Niceness and whiteness in connections to anti-racist pedagogy (Clandinin, 2013). For example, Mason's and Ngo's (2019) research focused on how teacher education needs to prepare future educators to teach in a culturally diverse classroom (practical) but not all teacher education courses focus on Niceness, whiteness, and how both maintain those structures (social/theoretical). Using their own experiences about being teacher educators and coming up against the white supremacist institution in their own ways (personal), Mason and Ngo (2019) showed how to combat those systems to create a more just society (social). In this research study, I also used the social, theoretical, and personal to explain how white educators struggle to leave Niceness and whiteness behind both in and out of the classroom.

Data Collection and Participants

My method for gathering participants were to consider those with whom I was already in community and who would be as invested in this work as I am. I chose to work with educators/peers who have been doing this work with me during the past year while working towards a doctorate degree together. We have gathered in groups to discuss and share stories about how we see notions of Niceness play out in the classroom. An

example of this examination was during our curriculum history course when a white male student was upset at the one and only postmodern feminist text used in class to discuss history from a gendered perspective. His ideas of history were that "the victors were the writers" and that should be the end of it. We discussed our frustrations with his point of view and how we may approach a student who felt this way in our class as educators. The discussions grew from different narratives and approaches to how to navigate such a passionate, albeit misguided, response in a way that furthered that student's learning but also did not sabotage others in the room. Through this experience and others, we developed the capacity to move beyond surface conversations about "white privilege" and bias to dig into deeper conversations about whiteness and its detrimental effects.

Oftentimes, the literature suggests that participants can become worried about saying the right thing or being shown in a "bad" light, especially when discussing race and gender (Deliovsky, 2017). Therefore, since my critical inquiry group members had already meaningfully engaged in discussions about how race and gender are embodied differently amongst the class, sexuality, and economic status, there was less of a "social desirability bias" among the critical inquiry group members (Esterberg, 2001, p. 86). In summary, intentionally recruiting my peers and fellow doctoral students allowed me to create an environment that felt safe to critically discuss how notions of Niceness and the classroom's power dynamics embody in raced and gendered ways.

Additionally, I position myself as a participant-researcher in the study. Not only have I created a strong rapport with my critical group inquiry members/friends/peers, but they have also held me accountable by creating a space where I could learn and grow.

The truth is there is no enlightenment stage, there are no cookies or "good boy awards" for doing what is necessary for unpacking Niceness and whiteness, and all of us know this. When other folks across different programs ask me what I am doing for my dissertation, I tell them I am critiquing Niceness. Almost every single response is, "What's wrong with being nice?"

It is important to differentiate that I am not here to advocate that somehow being "mean" or "rude" are the alternatives to Niceness because even those words are coded language. I study Niceness because I want us white folks to sit with why we think a Black woman calling us out for racial injustice is considered rude. I want us to analyze why, when a white woman writes that same knowledge in a book without crediting Black, Indigenous, and other scholars of color, we gobble it up. Why do we ask Black women to be our "mammies" and hold our hands and talk sweetly to us before we will listen? Why do we try to separate ourselves from "those white people" (e.g., the Karens or the Beckys)? How do we hold the tension for committing to anti-racist work and also knowing we are going to mess up and make mistakes? How will we react when we make mistakes? Will we demand Niceness as we cause harm? These tensions and more are what I explored with my critical inquiry group members. Doing this work takes a fundamental understanding that we are all complicit in the system and that no one here is trying to be the "better white." This is not a competition, but a chance for all of us, myself included, to keep learning and limit the harm we do to Black, Indigenous, and other people of color that are in this life with us. This is why I critique Niceness and what I explored through narratives and storytelling of my critical inquiry group members.

In the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021 during our discussions of Niceness and its hold on white folks and educators alike in the classroom (usually during small group work) and social media messaging apps, Gabby, Audrey, Lindsey, Kelly, Erica, and Betty (all pseudonyms) agreed to participate. After my proposal for this study was approved, Molly and Sarah (pseudonyms) stated their interest in wanting to participate in this study as well. Even though I knew many of these educators already, I still held a Zoom meeting to meet with them and discuss the project to see if they think they would be a good fit and answer any preliminary questions for them. I had a goal of wanting to engage with at least eight white educators from various gendered identities invested in doing anti-racist pedagogy, with various levels of understanding about how notions of Niceness play a role in classroom inequity. At the time of the study, I had met my goal of having eight educators join in on this study, plus myself. However, Kelly dropped out of the study after week 1 due to the busyness of her schedule. We also met as two groups instead of one big group due to folks' schedules, vacations, and workloads. Table 1 shows Lindsey, Betty, Audrey, and I connected and discussed Niceness and whiteness on Thursday nights, and Gabby, Molly, Sarah, and Erica convened together with me on Sunday afternoons.

My critical group inquiry members came from different teaching backgrounds (as shown in the table below), such as those teaching in higher education, private education, public education, and/or a combination of the three. Our ages, experiences, and gender identities vary among cisgender (the critical group members) and non-binary (myself).

However, all of our work in an education system is heavily gendered, no matter how we identify personally.

Table 1

Introduction of Teachers

Teachers	Current Role in Education	School Type	No. of Years in Education	Critical Inquiry Group Day
Kelly[3]	Professor, speech communication	Large Public Research University	20	Thursdays
Lindsey	Elementary Teacher	Small private school	12	Thursdays
Betty	High School History Teacher	Religious private school	13	Thursdays
Audrey	Advisor	Community College	12	Thursdays
Molly	Professor, education	Medium-sized public university	22	Sundays
Gabby	Administrator, primary school	Religious private school	24	Sundays
Sarah	Math Teacher	Public School	1	Sundays
Erica	Instructor, education technology	Large public research university	17	Sundays
Megan (Myself)	Ph.D. Candidate/Graduate Assistant	Large public research university	14	Thursdays & Sundays

[3] Kelly dropped out of the study after week 1 due to time constraints on her schedule. This is why the reader will only see her name a few times in the beginning of these narrative stories on Niceness.

In collecting this data, I used the scholarly work of bell hooks (2000) on coalition building and Layla Saad's (2020) philosophy of this work being dedicated to love, truth, and commitment, along with focus group methodology as laid out by Hennink (2013) and Liamputtong (2011). However, I do deviate from the term "focus group" due to its cultural notion of companies gathering participants to see which new chip product tastes best and why. I wanted a word or phrase that showed the joint effort that studying Niceness and whiteness takes. Therefore, I decided on using the terms "critical inquiry groups" and "critical inquiry members" because these words not only took away the assumed notions that the phrase "focus group" contains but also highlighted the critical essence of these groups along with this work being a group effort. Furthermore, working together as a group is a huge part of coalition building and collective organizing.

A part of coalition building and dedicating oneself to this work is to create an open and safe space for discussions. Before our first meeting, I sent out a comprehensive two-page guide, created by TheCircleWay.net, outlining the main characteristics, goals, and norms of Baldwin and Linnea's (2010) *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* whose methodology focuses on creating productive circles within the time frame of each meeting, setting intentions, handling conflict within a group, and having non-hierarchical group-centered discussions, where the participants can learn from each other and I from them, instead of I just being the primary facilitator looking to extract information from them. I go more in-depth on how each norm was created for each critical inquiry group a little later in this chapter.

Using the "circle way" guidelines in the critical inquiry group setting instead of individual interviews allows "the group discussion participants [to] share their views, hear the views of others, and perhaps refine their own views in light of what they have heard." This connects to my second sub-research question on how white educators can build a community by doing anti-racist pedagogy (Hennink, 2013, p. 3). This also lessens my power and influence as the researcher in a group setting and gives more of that to the participants, who can more actively participate in discussion with more people or, in this case, white educators (Wilkinson, 1998a). The aim of these critical inquiry groups is to "gather together to discuss a specific issue with the help of a moderator [myself] in a particular setting where participants feel comfortable enough to engage in dynamic discussion for one or two hours" multiple times over the course of a semester (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 3). It is also important to note that these critical inquiry groups are not meant to "reach consensus on the discussed issues," because not all of them will view the issue of Niceness the same way (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 3).

One of the main reasons I chose to use critical inquiry groups instead of individual interviews is because it is vital to anti-racist work that white folks learn to sit with their discomfort on how diversity work is messy and nuanced. It is this discomfort that conscious raising groups/coalition building set out to do during the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s. hooks (2000) explains that "the most powerful intervention made consciousness-raising groups was the demand that all females confront their internalized sexism, their allegiance to patriarchal thinking and action, their commitment to feminist conversion" (p. 12). Confronting this engrained Niceness that

allows racism to maintain itself within white folks is something that needs to be explored. Furthermore, hooks (2000) reminds us that "the enemy within must be transformed before we can confront the enemy outside (p. 12).

However, we must also understand that there will never be an enlightenment stage where we white folks reach a level of never being racist and that doing anti-racist work is not just a self-help guide on being a better person (Saad, 2020). It's constantly holding oneself accountable while doing the work that must be done daily. Saad (2020) states that doing this work takes truth, love, and commitment. First, it takes a commitment to truth to dig deep and recognize the "real, raw, ugly truths so that you can get to the rotten core of your internalized white supremacy" and that "what you get out of this work and put out into the world will be beyond transformational" (p. 17-18). Secondly, Saad (2020) continues to state that this work is a commitment to love, which is a word many people find hard to define (p. 18). However, love in this work means that "you do this work because you believe that every human being deserves dignity, freedom, and equality" (Saad, 2020, p. 18). It is out of love to reduce harm to BIPOC people and communities. Finally, it takes commitment to do this work. As Saad (2020) so fundamentally states, "this work is hard, there is no way to sugarcoat it. White supremacy is evil," and the "process of examining it and dismantling it will be necessarily painful" (19). However, the goal is not to stay there, wrapped up in our own emotions of guilt, shame, rage, and pushing for intention over reality. The goal is to see those emotions/feelings, hold them, and then work to move past them (Saad, 2020). This work is critical because it is

important to go beyond seeing Niceness and whiteness in other people, to take a hard look at ourselves as well.

This is messy work. This is nuanced work. This work will be a continuous project throughout our lives. As Ahmed (2017) states, we need to "forgo any illusion of purity, we give up the safety of exteriority" (p. 94). This notion goes exactly against what it means to be nice and good, binaries that are not helpful when decentering Niceness and whiteness in the classroom. This is why it is so important that most of the participants have already engaged in work like this previously through taking classes and having discussions in university settings. These experiences and relationships mean there is less of a likelihood that we'll become stuck on those emotions of defensibility, and, instead, grow our commitments to this difficult work.

During this study, I set out to follow The Circle Way guidelines as Baldwin and Linnea (2010) described. Those guidelines entailed three principles: "rotating leadership, sharing responsibility, and relying on wholeness" (p. 26). Rotating leadership creates a nonhierarchical dynamic and keeps the interest of the group, not the individual, at the center (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, p. 27). Sharing responsibility requires everyone to engage in the group, not just me as the researcher. As well, it "breaks old patterns of dominance and passivity and calls people to safeguard the quality of their experience" (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, p. 27). Finally, relying on wholeness helps maintain the synergistic culture of the group through individual participation, creating a sense of togetherness as we participate in the metaphoric circle (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). These three principles, along with Baldwin and Linnea's (2010) three practices -- "listening

with intention, speaking with intention, and tending to the wellbeing of the group/circle" -- will foster the space of accountability without the fear of "getting it wrong" (p. 27-28). As previously mentioned, these guiding principles were given to every critical group member to read over before our first meeting and to engage in discussion about how each group would go about adopting these Circle Way guidelines.

However, during Week 1's meeting, we decided that we would follow the framework but not necessarily all the rules/jobs. For instance, Thursday's group agreed to take the main tenets of the Circle Way as our group norms but decided to forgo all the different assigned roles because many of us (Lindsey, Kelly, and myself) believed that we would become too focused on which role we were doing and less about the content. We decided to use Zoom's available emojis to express our need for a break or needing to hold space before responding. In Sunday's group, we decided to take the basic principles and practices of The Circle Way and hold them as our norms. We also decided to forgo all the different roles and would add back in those measures as needed. Gabby and Erica stated that we are so small of a group that we might not need the roles. I agreed since at first, I thought we would have been one large group instead of two smaller groups. Therefore, I was influenced by the Circle Way guidelines but adapted them to meet each group's needs. Ultimately, this work is not based on extraction, but on coming together or, as Clandinin (2013) would say, "coming alongside," because "relationships are a central way of making sense of the temporal and contextual aspects of narrative inquiry" (p. 34).

Studying Niceness and whiteness with white educators reduces the harm that may come about in the difficulty of this work that would significantly put BIPOC people in harm's way when whiteness tries to defend itself. It also allows us, white educators, not to try to prove we are the "better white" or make sure we are just saying things others want to hear (Deliovsky, 2017). Moreover, when critical inquiry groups lack heterogeneity, hierarchies can form and prevent participants from speaking or adding to the group (Hennink, 2013). In summary, I used coalition building, the need for commitment, truth, love, and the Circle Way to ground my critical inquiry groups in this study. I explored critical narratives around notions of Niceness and whiteness and their impact on anti-racist pedagogy in education, a field with mostly white teachers.

In addition to the meeting as a group, the critical inquiry group members engaged in journaling alongside me between critical inquiry group (CIG) sessions. I had prepared journal prompts in connection with our discussion points for each week about how notions of Niceness affect the inequity of our classrooms or workspace (for those who are not currently in a classroom teaching position) and how our own battles with Niceness show up in relational, emotional, and material ways. For example, one prompt asked, "After reading Meiners (2002) piece on 'Disengaging from the Legacy of Lady Bountiful in Teacher Education Classrooms,' I want to explore how the ghost of Lady Bountiful lives in your classroom (past and present) and how the culture of Niceness keeps her from crossing to the other side." Another journal simply stated, "Continue using this space in ways that benefit you and your process with disentangling yourself from Niceness." The prompts became more open-ended after a mid-study survey I gave after

week 4, where a Thursday CIG member (I kept the survey anonymous since the groups were so small) stated, "The prompts are very helpful, but the topics are very large. I may just be a slow writer - but I definitely feel like I'm not even scratching the surface of a topic." With this helpful feedback, the CIG members were no longer bound to the journal prompts alone but could write a personal reflection and share a video (i.e., a TikTok) that resonated with them. They could also send me voice memos about their interactions or experiences with Niceness during the week. Sometimes CIG members shared their thoughts and ideas at the beginning of the next group discussion but were not forced to by any means.

Additionally, incorporating visuals/media such as TikTok videos, which Molly often did each week to show her understanding of Niceness showing up culturally or socially, in ways she had thought about and in some ways she had not. One example of Molly's experience with how Niceness affects women of color differently came from TikTok user @thekoreanvegan, also known as Joanne Molinaro. She details how her mother, a Korean immigrant, was embarrassed about some aspects of their culture and wanted to shield her daughter from being made fun of by non-Korean friends for the distinct smells of Kimchi. However, Joanne as an adult, wanted to do a kimchi-making video and her mom insisted that they sauce the kimchi on the table instead of the floor, even though Joanne's family and Korean tradition calls for this to happen on the floor. Joanne posted a photo of their kimchi squat on Twitter, only to have another user reply with, "On the floor? I'll pass thanks." Joanne goes on to explain that she is furious but not for herself but for her mom. Molinaro (2021) explained in a TikTok video,

> My 72-year-old mom who spent the last half of her life assimilating into this country and still needs to be afraid of this, that she still needs to be self-conscious about her culture, that she is still being told the white way is the only right way. For the record, I'm done apologizing and so is my mom.

As Molly and others shared these videos with me, they often wrote to me about how Niceness and whiteness as prevention to anti-racist pedagogy became more apparent not only for them as teachers but also as white women in political, personal, and social contexts.

Using visual/media data was important to the CIG members but also to me since one story about this phenomenon started with a picture of a "pyramid of white supremacy" that started a chain of reactions for a fellow educator (Clements and Stutelberg, 2019). The pyramid of white supremacy removes the notion that racists are just those in KKK cloaks and certified Nazis but that the bottom of the pyramid consists of things like "I don't see color," "There are two sides to every story," "Not all white people …" and so on. This graphic can evoke feelings of "white violence" and/or "white fatigue" either in the participants or in the classrooms they teach in. Ijeoma Oluo (2019) describes this phenomenon as the idea of not wanting to accept that one's behavior might be holding up the oppression of others because it "violates everything we've been told about fairness and … [that] hard work paying off and good things happening to good people" (p. 63). Examining how we may have attributed to others' oppression does not feel nice. It is often "very painful, but not nearly as painful as living with the pain caused by unexamined privilege of others" (Oluo, 2019, p. 63). With that in mind, disrupting the

status quo by examining one's own whiteness and the power structures of Niceness and how they play out in the classroom will benefit teachers and students of color who are harmed by Niceness.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis while reviewing my fieldnotes, my analytic memos, three readings of each transcript from the eight weeks of meeting with each critical inquiry group, and their/my journal entries. Thematic analysis is content oriented and considers the what, rather than the how. Thematic analysis also looks at data in ways of themes that are "interpreted in light of thematic developed by the investigator [myself] (influenced prior, and emergent theory, the concrete purpose of an investigation, the data themselves, political commitments, and other factors)" (Riessman, 2008, p. 54). In other words, I believe the structures of Niceness, plus the fear of losing status among their colleagues and administration, play a role in preventing white women teachers from doing anti-racist pedagogical work in their classrooms. This inability to engage in anti-racism further divides the inequity in schools. Therefore, while taking field notes during each group meeting, I sought out emotionally thick moments that happened between the critical group members or for the critical group members themselves. I wrote down these moments in analytic memos each week right after each weekly gathering ended. I started noticing where Niceness came up in each CIG member's own stories and broader discourses in the culture of their upbringing, relationships with family members, colleagues, peers, and students, along with how the expectation of Niceness from those same relationships and the education as an institution.

As I listened and read each transcript I discovered themes of combatting structures of Niceness within the confines of gender (patriarchy), fear around defying the status quo (emotional investments), discussing the cost of what might be at stake for being a “troublemaker” (whiteness and material investments) and conversations around building community and crossing white solidarity lines (relational investments and whiteness). Each and every week there were many examples of how Niceness and whiteness keep white educators from fully investing in anti-racist pedagogy through individual/personal investments with emotional, material, and relational ties as reasons to continue the status quo. Furthermore, there were also the prying eyes of institutional powers that disciplined any teacher who decided to work towards disinvesting and disentangling themselves from Niceness and whiteness such as white supremacy, the patriarchy, and capitalism. With each reading of the gathered data, it became clear once again the need for critical bifocality of paying attention to the micro and macro reasons on why leaving Niceness behind was easier said than done, and painted a picture of why the ghost of Lady Bountiful has been able to stick around as long as she has in education.

Moreover, my ultimate goal is to “make connections between the life worlds depicted in personal narratives and larger social structures – power relations, hidden inequalities, and historical contingencies" (Riessman, 2008, p. 76). Everyone in the critical inquiry group did not have the same ideas about Niceness and anti-racist pedagogical work in the classroom. Lindsey sought civility within a structure she detailed as “Ouch, then Educate " (which I go more in-depth about in Chapter 5). Erica’s narrative centered around encouraging discomfort in unlearning racial myths she learned growing

up white (i.e. colorblindness) and pushing for change in the places that a person can. Gabby continued to make connections of her ingrained ideas of Niceness through the patriarchal ideas passed down through organized religion. Many of us had varied ideas on ways to challenge Niceness and whiteness in and outside the classroom that are detailed in Chapters 4 and 5, along with practical insights for current and future educators in Chapter 6.

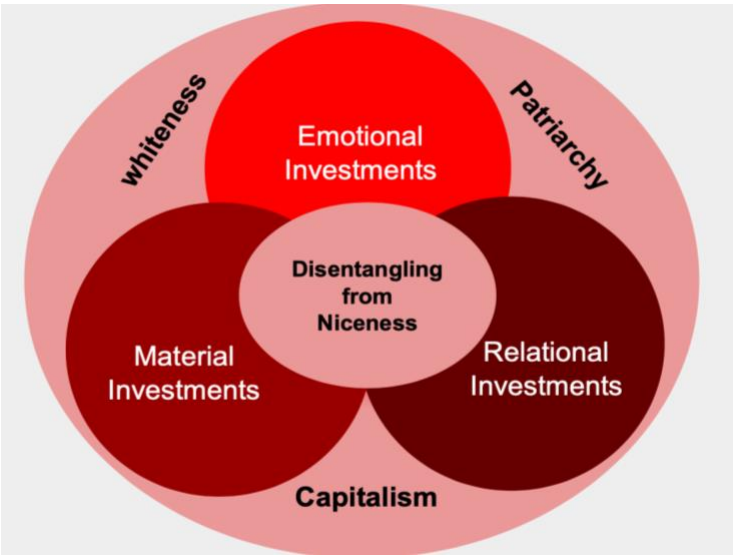
One way to help with that tension is to incorporate not only thematic analysis but also analysis of the group interaction. Analyzing group interaction means examining how different critical inquiry group members responded to one another and me as the facilitator and as a group member too (Liamputtong, 2011). Analyzing group dynamics within the critical inquiry groups is essential because it is one of the main points that sets critical inquiry groups apart from individual interviews (Wilkinson, 1998b). Group dynamics have shown importance in other research using heterogeneous groups (see Munday, 2006) when there is a focus on gender identity and how that collective identity is formed (Liamputtong, 2011). Not only did each critical inquiry group member enter into this study with their own ideas of Niceness and whiteness, but also how easily or less so it is to leave Niceness behind. In an effort to show these tensions, I used group dialogue in specific moments that show the back and forth of discussions around emotional, material, and relational investments into Niceness such as Betty and Audrey's conversation on being complicit in a system that feeds them in Chapter 4. Another example is in Chapter 5 with Erica, Molly, and Gabby's conversation around the difference between saying that as a teacher we care for all our students and how that

shows up in the curriculum we choose, the policies we enact, and ultimately how we treat students whose culture is different than ours. These group dynamics are layered within how each critical group member processed their own investments into Niceness and whiteness and how that processing changed over the course of our time together. All in all, thematic and group dynamics were analyzed in the context of the theoretical framework to provide insight into how notions of Niceness and whiteness circumvent anti-racist pedagogy within white teachers' classrooms.

Additionally, after our meetings concluded, the transcripts were shared with each critical inquiry group member, along with the initial themes of emotional, material, and relational investments into Niceness and their interconnectedness within the larger structural powers of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarch (as seen in Figure 1 below).

Figure 1

Critical Inquiry Groups: Analysis of Themes



In fact, after sharing this figure with each CIG member, Audrey wrote back to me and said, “Ooh! I think that is great! It does a strong job of framing the complications” (personal communication). Gabby wrote me back and stated, “Yes!!! This is perfect! I think it helps bring it all together” (personal communication). Many others emailed or texted back that they liked it or approved it. I would continue this open communication and collaboration throughout the data analysis process. Chapters 4 and 5 were also shared with critical group members having a chance to provide feedback if they wanted to. Molly emailed me not even an hour after sending chapter 5, letting me know that it was her favorite chapter and that I had done a great job. Altogether, critical inquiry group members were allowed to express their opinion throughout each step of the data collection and analysis process. In doing so, this allowed for continued collaboration and ensured that I did not paint my CIG members in one-dimensional ways, especially when tensions around different points of view were described through dialogue and analysis in the subsequent chapters.

Ethical Considerations

There are many strengths and weaknesses of the critical and collaborative narrative inquiry approach to this study. A strength of critical and collaborative narrative inquiry is that “storytelling [can be used] to make sense of the past and to engage in social action through ‘speaking out [to] invite political mobilization and change’” (Pitre et al., 2013, p. 118, Riessman, 2008). In this case, political change may arise from speaking out against dichotomies and hierarchies of white supremacy in relation to theories of Niceness and how Niceness is used as a weapon to keep white women

teachers silent. Critical and collaborative narrative inquiry also allows space for my own narrative of these complexities to be told and applied to the theoretical foundations of educational research.

A weakness of narrative inquiry is in what is called the "narrative truth." Researchers, myself included, have to be aware that "descriptions of past events may have been reconstructed from merged memories and conflated during the telling of particular stories [and] that shared stories provide a specific, evolving, and limited view of the storyteller's world, and that stories remain incomplete" (Pitre et.al., 2013, p. 124). In other words, one has to be careful in taking this work as a "how-to approach" when it comes to inviting other white women teachers to join the fold of becoming a "feminist killjoy" and doing anti-racist pedagogical work. White educators are not a monolith, and navigating each type of school's white supremacist structures will look different to each individual case. Instead, this study will produce theoretical and practical insights on how white educators battle with cultural and structural expectations of Niceness in education through the stories we share about our experiences. After all, if we change the stories we live by, we can quite possibly change our lives and those around us as well (Okri, 2014).

Challenges to this Study

I think it is important to reassert why I chose only to study white teachers, mostly white women, for this study. A vital reason I engaged in a study with white teachers, mostly white women, is because it's important to hear from white women about their own processing about anti-racism and Niceness as there is little research on these critical engagements over time. As stated before, Niceness works differently in an array of

cultures in backgrounds, but it is seen continuously among white educators who use Niceness as an exit route to avoid doing the "hard work of dismantling inequity" (Castagno, 2019, xiv). Also, as a white scholar, researcher, and educator I made the decision to only study white teachers in this study on Niceness and whiteness because I did not want to extract trauma or difficult stories from Black and brown educators in a space where they had to relive that trauma in front of another white person. Due to the restraints of a dissertation, I can be the only principal investigator on this study and I would want Black and brown educators to have the ability to share their stories with a collaborator that understands their positionality and lived experiences on a deeper level. Furthermore, even though heterogeneous groups allow for collective identity (Munday, 2006), there is also a lack of pushback that happens when racially diverse narratives are not present within the critical inquiry groups.

However, there is the tension between having Black and brown teachers in the same study as their white counterparts because they are usually made to speak for their entire race (Castagno, 2019, hooks, 1981, Matias, 2020, Roland, et. al., 2021), are giving a grand amount of emotional labor that others might easily brush aside or disregard altogether (Ahmed, 2017, Collins, 2000, Deliovsky, 2017, Melaku, 2022), and the academy has not caught up to ways to paying for these kinds of heavy emotional labor with the Black and brown students or educators (Deliovsky, 2017, Patai, 1994). I am also reminded of a quote by Assata Shakur and Joanne Chesimard (1981), where they explained,

> We knew that our experiences as black women were completely different from those of our sisters in the white women's movement. And we had no desire to sit in some consciousness-raising group with white women and bare our souls. (p. 56)

I recognize Shakur and Chesimard poignant statement about the differences in the issues that Black women face and compared to those of white women. In that same sentiment, I strongly believe in what the Combahee River Collective (1977) wrote so many years ago that said, "Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak and demand accountability on this issue" (as cited in K.Y. Taylor, 2017, p. 27). With this in mind, I do want to note that there is only so much unraveling white folks and educators can do within heterogeneous white groups and the need for pushback is missing from a more racially and gender diverse group. Therefore, this study is limited to the interpretations of Niceness and whiteness within a few white educators and their continued commitment to breaking away from relational, emotional, material, and structural investments in Niceness in and outside the classroom.

Conclusion

In the end, I believe that investigating these narratives with a critical approach to educational Niceness and speaking out about white supremacist structures will shine a light on the meta-narrative of Niceness and what it truly means to be "nice" to all one's students. Plus, due to the pervasive narrative of "Lady Bountiful" and the "nice white lady," we see the social and cultural effects of Niceness has on not only white educators

and white students, but the Black and brown students they teach, their Black and brown colleagues, and the continued system of inequality that comes at the hands of buying into Niceness (Ahmed, 2017, Castagno 2019, Ben et. al., 2019, Delpit, 2006).

The narrative that teachers are supposed to perform this Niceness on all levels, and when they do not, they are "mean" or even worst a "feminist killjoy," shapes the classroom experiences of students and teachers on a regular basis. My hope with this critical and collaborative narrative research is to change the narrative of Niceness by telling stories of how white educators use anti-racist pedagogy in their classrooms to defy the status quo and deconstruct whiteness to create a better, socially just world. And maybe, in fact, it is actually nice to confront these issues head-on instead of staying silent.

CHAPTER IV

EMOTIONAL AND MATERIAL INVESTMENTS THAT INTERFERE WITH DISENTANGLING WITH NICENESS

Audrey: "But it gets fed [to us] so often, that it's like, not only are you here for the students, but if you decide to leave, you are betraying the students, you are harming the school. But yeah, it's so harmful too, the working conditions. And what about those [actions]...that groups of teachers will do, specifically "We will only work our contract hours!" How unhealthy is it if only doing your job is detrimental and harms a school, and makes news as a noticeable strike? Like just only to do your job.

Betty: As I was listening to you, that's something that has gone through my head the past several years, is that idea of feeling guilty because you want to leave or if I do end up finding another job and leaving. I have been conditioned to feel betrayed like I'm betraying them and not doing what is in my interest. Either way, physically, emotionally, and financially, you know, you're kind of taught to put that aside.

Introduction

Teaching is not an easy job, and being a teacher in Oklahoma compounds that difficulty. The state is consistently ranked in the low 40s out of 50 for most markers of

educational success, including educator wages, test scores, per-student funding, and more. Oklahoma has a high teacher turnover rate and a teacher shortage (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2019). Oklahoma teachers and other state teachers are now facing increased legislation that removes teachers' autonomy from the classroom and incentivizes the privatization of public education (Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2018, Oklahoma State Schools Boards Association, 2021). Add in an ongoing pandemic, where teachers, educators, support staff, administrators, and many others who work in education have been putting their lives on the line with a governor who banned mask mandates during COVID-19's Delta variant surge (Castronuovo, 2021). One could read the room and ask why another study explores what educators are not "getting right" about race, racism, and whiteness? To answer this question, I would say that this is not another study out to get teachers, but more of an ask to come to the table and have the critical conversions we have been avoiding for many years.

One of those conversations that we, white teachers, have avoided is the horrible racial violence against our Black neighbors over a hundred years ago, the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. As I discuss further below, many of my critical group members did not learn about this domestic terrorization in the Greenwood district of Tulsa, then called Black Wall Street, until we were in graduate school. Only one of us (Sarah) learned about the Tulsa Race Massacre in undergrad/pre-service education. However, the novel used to teach about the Tulsa Race Massacre in Sarah's history education courses was a book called *Dreamland Burning*, written by a white woman, Jennifer Latham, who did not grow up in Tulsa. Indigenous scholar, Dr. Debbie Reese of Nambé Pueblo, critiqued this

novel thoroughly. Dr. Reese wrote in detail about one character supposedly being a member of the Osage tribe without the nuances and complexities of being an Indigenous character but written with the characteristics of a white man (Reese, 2017). Reese (2017) also comments on how the book superficially represents Black characters, such as the main character, Rowan,

> With her book, Latham is attempting to create awareness of the riots that happened in Tulsa in 1921. She's using present-day racism to do it. She's created a Black/White character as the device to accomplish her goal. In several places, however, things Rowan says or thinks sound way more White than Black. (para, 15)

During the same time of this study, I attended a writing professional development that also used Latham's book. Latham was even invited to be a guest speaker towards the end of our writing professional development. After her book talk, I asked her about Dr. Reese's critiques and she brushed it off as just not being liked. Molly commented that as a library specialist, she had seen a rise in white folks writing about the Tulsa Race Massacre due to its recent popularity, which made us cringe. And all this was happening during the one-hundredth anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre, in which Black Tulsans were working on community healing and building grassroots campaigns for reparations for Black citizens and survivors along with their families of this horrific event. However, instead of looking into working with Black Tulsans and grassroots movements, such as Justice for Greenwood, the City of Tulsa decided to focus their energies on removing the large painted Black Lives Matter from the street where the only

remnants of Greenwood stand today in the name of not having permits or permission to paint the street (Peiser, 2020).

It was not too long ago that our legislators finally wrote a law stating that the Tulsa Race Massacre needed to be taught, and now they are writing laws saying white folks cannot be uncomfortable, among other things. This uncomfortableness in discussing hard histories and its avoidance is rooted in the micro and macro issues of race, racism, and whiteness (Zembylas, 2018). Also, sitting in the discomfort of our actions as white teachers comes up against our ideas of not wanting to be complicit in systems of oppression and "perpetuating racism" (Zembylas, 2018, p. 91). Thandeka (1999) also explores the production of denial of racial structures that our parents, our teachers, and our ties to whiteness create. These denials and constant push to be comfortable with the idea that things are better now reproduce white comfort within the social and political systems (i.e., Critical Race Theory bans). I believe that Niceness also seeks out this comfortability and will discipline those who try to bring awareness to the fact that we are part of this system. While exploring our ties to whiteness and Niceness in this study, I found that much of this discomfort comes from our emotional, material, and relational investments in white patriarchal capitalist systems and our push and pull between these investments.

Furthermore, the white teachers who joined me on this journey wanted to explore how to sit in discomfort and explore how their experiences with Niceness in their journeys as Oklahoma teachers shape how they conduct anti-racist pedagogy in their classrooms or their work education. Together, we shared how Niceness as an expectation

has been taught to us since we were young children by our parents, teachers, our friends, our families, society, etc. and how we have passed down that same expectation to our children and/or students. Each critical inquiry group explored how our emotional and material investments in Niceness continued the status quo in our classrooms and the interpersonal, societal, and professional conflicts that came up along the way when we chose to go against the grain of this Niceness expectation.

Emotionally, fear of being an outsider in one's family, job/career, and isolation when choosing to break with white solidarity in favor of a more humane approach to teaching and learning was a theme that came up again and again for each of the critical inquiry group members. Along with that fear, material investments of wanting/needing to keep one's job so that we could take care of our families, our elderly parents, our spouses, and ourselves was also a theme among the critical inquiry group members. Therefore, this chapter explores gender expectations of Niceness, emotional and material investments that make disinvesting in Niceness difficult, as well as how emotional and material investments overlap with one another. Additionally, in the next section, I will expand upon my introduction of Lindsey, Kelly, Audrey, Betty, Erica, Molly, Sarah, Gabby, and myself with details about our familial backgrounds and our ideas surrounding Niceness.

Critical Inquiry Group Members

My critical inquiry group members and I came to teaching differently with different expectations and beliefs, although the white savior trope and colonial governess were very much alive in our classrooms. Most of us grew up with the idea that talking

about race made you racist, or that it was not a "polite" conversation to be had at the dinner table or anywhere for that matter, especially for nice young ladies like ourselves. It was not until we started teaching that we began questioning what we had been taught in our upbringing and pre-service education. Table 2, shows a quick overview of each critical inquiry group member and their journey to bringing anti-racist teaching into their classrooms, ideas about Niceness, and familial background.

Table 2

Critical Inquiry Group Members Background Information

Teachers	Background Information
Lindsey	Lindsey has a biracial family via the adoption of her Asian sisters. This made her aware of discrimination in schooling from an early age and she asked a lot of uncomfortable questions that often lead her to get in trouble. She also read the book "Lies My Teacher Told Me" after one of her high school teachers gave her the book. So, when Lindsey became a teacher, she did not want to continue the traditions of how she was educated in school. She also trusted children to be able to talk about hard things. In essence, Lindsey saw the need for anti-racist practices and was committed to being not part of the problem as much as possible. Lindsey also believed that Niceness for her can be seen as avoiding negative emotions or things that make people uncomfortable.
Betty	Betty grew up going to an extremely fundamentalist Christian school with a white supremacist curriculum. Betty was taught from a young age that there was a social hierarchy based on a person's skin color. It was not until she was in college that Betty started learning history from another perspective and discovered the historian Howard Zinn. After that, she began to branch out by reading books by different authors of color, religions, and ethnicities. Betty believed Niceness is about not making waves, not challenging authority and deeply held religious beliefs, or that disagreeing with conservatism is considered not being nice. She also stated that Niceness wants everyone/ "all people" to be comfortable, with all meaning white people.
Kelly	Kelly told us that she grew up with the color-blindness ideology, that loving everyone meant not seeing color, which felt weird to her. Although it was not until graduate school that she started reading and questioning some of those basic beliefs and how harmful they were despite their intention. Kelly admitted that she had not

	even heard the term “anti-racism” until the last three or four years. She also stated, “I'm still very much in process of becoming anti-racist. I'm constantly trying to deconstruct things that I haven't questioned before.” On the topic of Niceness, Kelly shared with us that Niceness is such a sensitive/vulnerable topic because she admits that she wants so badly to be a nice person. She agreed with Lindsey’s and Betty’s definitions of Niceness but also believed that Niceness is part of her core values and wonders how we will make progress if we isolate others. At the same time, she admitted that Niceness was not serving her in trying to make improvements with the racist people in her life.
Audrey	Audrey came from a white middle-class family that was also conservative in politics and religion. Audrey was not quite sure when she came to anti-racist practices but did share with the group that she also grew up in a bubble that told her she should be color-blind as well and not notice injustices that were happening around her. She stated that she finally came out of that bubble, although did not give a direct time of when this occurred. As Audrey started teaching she took with her the philosophy of respecting your elders and doing as you are told. Although, after her first year of teaching she started noticing that this philosophy was not serving her students and in reality, it was ignoring the racist practices that were happening instead of preventing them. Audrey also mentioned that she got to work one on one with a consultant who asked her questions about race and segregation between groups of students that previous mentors had not. Audrey did say that she would like to think that she would have gotten there eventually on her own but was thankful that the consultant her school had brought in was the person that got her to think about anti-racist practices. In terms of Niceness, Audrey was also on board about Niceness being about not making waves. She also added that assuming best intent was connected to Niceness because telling a student of color that a white teacher didn’t mean to harm them with their words, did not sit well with her.
Gabby	Gabby grew up in a white middle-class family that was big on religion. She had always wanted to be a teacher and graduated with her Early Childhood degree in 1997. Her earliest recollection of learning about the anti-bias curriculum was through the NAEYC (National Association of the Education of Young Children) while she was in college. However, it wasn’t until she was on the board of a local non-profit in Tulsa, and was put on a social justice committee that she learned about the Tulsa Race Massacre. Gabby said she remembers being embarrassed that she went so long without knowing about this, but it was the first time she realized that her lived experience was not everyone’s lived experience. She also stated that in her predominantly private religious school they have been working on diversity issues since 2007, but it seems like “we have done a whole lot of talking, and not a whole lot of work because between 2007 and 2020 we haven’t made much progress.” Gabby’s definition of Niceness centered on being polite, cooperative, don’t rock the boat, and the spirit of compromise.

Molly	Molly also came from a white middle-class family, with divorced parents, but both were upper-middle class. She worked in a predominantly African American school and that is where she started to become aware of other people's experiences that were not like her own. For example, a student of hers was telling her that he got to see his dad at the Big Mac over the weekend and she thought he was talking about McDonald's. She then said, "I mean, that's how white I was. And yeah, it took a second. Then I realized, and it just kind of started from there because I didn't have a label for it at that point in my own head. I actually didn't get a label until four years later, when I started working on my masters in school library." She explained to us about the highs and lows from doing that degree to becoming nationally board-certified, to now earning her doctorate. Through Molly's graduate school experience, she was made aware of anti-racist thinking. She stated that she is teaching teachers how to be teachers and anti-racist thinking is part of her everyday conversations. When asked about her definition of Niceness, Molly exclaimed that she too believes Niceness to be rooted in being polite and respectful.
Sarah	Sarah shared with us that her family is partially Hispanic and has family members who have experienced racial discrimination. She stated she hadn't experienced racism because "I'm white, half white. So, my white genes took over." Sarah was the only one of us who learned about the Tulsa Race Massacre in high school and the only one of us who was taught an anti-racism curriculum in her pre-service education in college. Albeit, it was only in her history education course that anti-racism was brought up through books such as Tulsa Burning and Dreamland Burning. She also was taught Native American history as well. Sarah disclosed to us that she knew more than most of her college classmates and that many of them were shocked by the curriculum used in that history education course and that they were very colorblind as well. Sarah told us that Niceness to her meant being kind to everyone.
Erica	Erica came from a predominantly single-parent home, where her mother was her main parent while her father was in and out due to his work in the armed forces. Her grandmother helped raise her too, and her family was on the upper end of the lower class. Erica summarized how she came to anti-racist thinking by acknowledging the colorblindness she grew up around and you were only racist if you said the "N" word or were part of the KKK. Erica continued by saying, "My grandmother was really big into self-education. And she passed that on to me. And so, I read voraciously from the time I was four." She told us that she knew racism was widespread but it was not until about ten years ago that she discovered the term systematic racism and fully grasped how deep and widespread racism issues are in the world and in teaching. She started by becoming dissatisfied with her English curriculum and only reading the "dead white dudes." Next, Erica professed that anti-racist thinking really hit home at an education conference in 2014 where she found herself at a roundtable where educators were discussing Peggy McIntosh's "Unpacking the Knapsack" and she exclaimed that she felt "an explosion in my

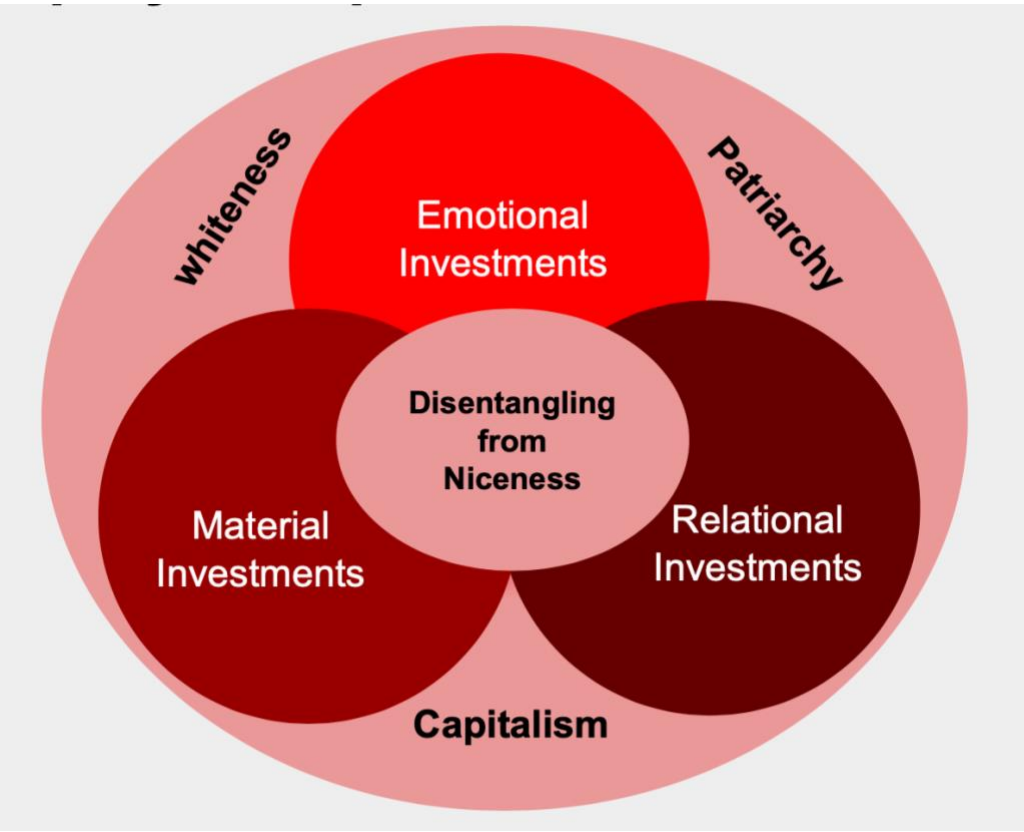
	brain" and all the things she been pushing for in her classroom, all the conversations started to make sense. And since then she has been learning everything she can even when it pisses her off. Erica expressed how she would like to go back to her first set of students and apologize to them now. When asked about how she defines Niceness, Erica wrote out in the chat on Zoom, "Niceness is a way to preserve white (or male or cisgender or heterosexual or Christian) feelings. Rather than feeling the discomfort, acknowledging, and trying to work through it, we fall back on the veneer of being polite or "kind" to each other. It's smiling at your face while continuing to harm you—even when you tell me I'm hurting you. Niceness protects my feelings rather than promoting dialogue and relationships. Midwesterners and Southerners are excellent at this."
Megan (Myself)	I grew up in a lower-class white family where we struggled to stay above the poverty line. My parents were divorced, but I did have a stepfather for most of my childhood but both he and my mother were extremely abusive to me and my siblings. I spent most of my life growing up not thinking about race and just like Erica, I thought only white supremacists were those folks in the KKK or the proud boys. I started unlearning things slowly like how language was coded and racist (i.e. Indian giver) and learned the truth about Columbus and shared that with my fifth graders as well. However, it was not until 2015 when I was doing my master's degree, that I learned about white privilege and the Tulsa Race Massacre. After I got over the shock of my worldview being tested, I started to see what else I need to unlearn, and it has definitely been a process. As I incorporated what I was learning in graduate school into my teaching the more aware I became of racist teaching practices as they happened in schools I worked in and ones I had been a part of myself. As I worked toward my doctorate in education, I felt like there was still so much more I needed to unlearn and I worried about not getting there fast enough to prevent harm while the learning process happens. For me, that is why Niceness became such an attractive topic to study. It offered me a lens to consider how being Nice is coded in ways of comforting whiteness and asking questions for myself as well as others I was in conversation with by asking, "Why wouldn't it be nice to call someone in for their problematic thinking or ways of teaching? Isn't that what a nice, helpful person should do?" I also consider Niceness extremely gendered in the United States, especially among those raised as women. Even as a non-binary person I see how ideas about being a woman, a nice little lady, a good daughter, etc. were heavily layered with the idea that women were to be seen but not heard. I shared with my critical group inquiry members that I believed Niceness was also about not rocking the boat, being polite, and easing the tension the minute it arose whether that be in the classroom or in my personal life as well.

These summaries provide a window into how these groups of white women and one non-binary person started out thinking about their family histories, their cognizance,

and awareness of anti-racist teaching practices, along with their/our first definitions of Niceness. It is with their/my stories and narratives that I will detail how we came to understand how Niceness impacted our experiences as educators and how disentangling from Niceness came up against interpersonal relationships, material investments such as capitalism's way of keeping one a cog in the machine, emotional connections with those who are not devoted to anti-racism, and what it means to hold one another accountable while being in community to push against the flow of the status quo. I show how these different individual and structural investments interconnect with disentangling from Niceness in Figure 1 in Chapter 3 but repeat the diagram here for reader accessibility.

Figure 1

Critical Inquiry Groups: Analysis of Themes



As the figure illuminates, disentangling oneself from Niceness is met with resistance in terms of emotional, material, and relational investments on the individual and community level along with white capitalist patriarchy systems. Emotional investments into Niceness on the individual level were about how each of us dealt with emotions such as fear, betrayal, loss, grief, empathy in terms of our teaching careers, our families/friends' lack of knowledge, or chosen willful ignorance (Applebaum, 2020a, Mills, 2007), and our own choices to stay silent or to speak up when inequity or injustice was in our presence. Many of these emotionalities are tied up in whiteness and our desire to remove guilt, blame, shame, etc., from ourselves and onto the larger systems of power (i.e., patriarchy) as a whole (Matias, 2016, 2020). There were also emotions of staying for the kids/students and choosing one's own mental health over teaching felt like we were not only betraying our students but leaving them to fend for themselves. At the same time, expressing other emotions such as anger, and frustration, or choosing to speak out was gendered and patriarchal beliefs about being a "madwoman," "feminist killjoy," and other emotional caricatures were placed upon us due to our choice not to keep the peace for peace sake (I explore this gendered view of emotion more in the next section).

Furthermore, these emotional investments are also entangled with material and relational investments as well. The same fear of saying the wrong thing when implementing anti-racist pedagogy in the classroom (Linder, 2015) was evident in the fear of losing one's job. Financially (material investments) speaking, many teachers do not make enough money to support themselves let alone their families on their salary alone. Therefore, not only do teachers consider it wise to act the way administrators tell

us to, it is important in keeping food on the table and a roof over our heads. However, capitalism comes into play here too, because teaching is a never-ending job that does not allow time for many teachers to work collaboratively and collectively together for better working conditions. So not only are we materially invested in keeping our jobs as teachers so we can somewhat afford to live, capitalism wears us down to the point we are fearful of losing a job that would replace us in a second if we were to cease to exist or did finally make a choice to leave the teaching profession.

Additionally, our relational investments with our friends and family, colleagues, and students also keep us from disentangling Niceness. As teachers and humans, we want to be well-liked (Clements and Stutelberg, 2019, Linder, 2015), but that need to be liked puts a hindrance on speaking out against inequity and injustice when it is happening in our homes, in our classrooms, or other personal and professional settings. Plus, the desire not to be isolated from these very same people is a tangible fear (Matias, 2020). However, Ignatiev and Garvey (1996) state, "treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity" (p. 10). Therefore, the more we move away from whiteness, the closer we get to choosing humanity, and in doing so, there are bound to be people who are upset and try to pull us back into ways of being nice. Many of the people who become upset in our social spheres of influence are not ready for those moves or may outright refuse to leave whiteness and Niceness behind. Instead, they might choose to discipline us for speaking out against injustice by threatening our belonging within a family or our jobs/careers as teachers. In summary, these individual and compulsory systems make it very difficult to disentangle from Niceness and whiteness altogether. It also makes the process a messy one.

Throughout the next two chapters, there will be conversations around the push and pull of emotional, material, and relational investments on the micro and macro level that we eight teachers navigated, sometimes successfully and sometimes not.

In the following sections, I will show how these seven white educators and I discussed, analyzed, and questioned our emotional, relational, and material investments into Niceness. I will also show how systems and individuals use Niceness as a disciplining agent to stop those who wish to untangle themselves from gender, social, political, and historical ideas of how a "nice white teacher" should behave in the classroom. I set out to show connections through narrative storytelling to each type of investment and its systematic pull to stay in Niceness. Just as these individual and systemic issues overlap, so will teachers' stories. Once again, this is messy, nuanced, and heavy work. Still, I believe "this is our scholarly debt to educational studies in times of swelling inequality gaps: to interrogate how deficit and privilege are made, sustained, justified, and reified over time and space, with a keen eye toward their unmaking" (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Weis & Fine, 2012, p. 177). Furthermore, Niceness works within the historical and social construction of who is considered a woman and, more so, a good woman (Ahmed, 2017, Collins, 2000, Davis, 2011, Lorde, 1984). However, before I can discuss the conditions Niceness sets up in defining a "good woman," I must first connect my own gender identity and how the United States workforce defines women's work (Mohanty, 2003).

Gender Identities and Understanding "Women's Work" as a Cultural Phenomenon

Before we begin, I would like to remind the reader that I am non-binary, which means I do not identify as male or female, nor does this mean I am somewhere in between the "two sexes." My gender exists as big and as wide as a Nebula in space. There are a plethora of gender identities, and I will discuss a few below, but defining all the different gender identities goes beyond the scope of this study[4]. Being non-binary does not change that I was raised with a very heteronormative idea of gender, and I did not escape the societal pressures of performing femininity since I am often perceived as a woman. Gender theorist Judith Butler (2006) discusses how gender performance comes from a place of expected unity, and because we live in a cis heteronormative society that assumes we can only be two sexes or genders, man or woman, then I must be a woman. This assumption comes from the gender binary we all live in and our scrutinized. Critical education scholar Z Nicolazzo (2016) defines the gender binary as "the false assumption that there are only two natural, immutable, and opposed genders (i.e., man and woman) that correspond with only two supposedly natural, immutable, and opposed sexes (i.e., male and female)" (p. 167).

For example, no matter how I dress, act, or look, strangers and even close friends still perceive me as a woman or feminine. Being non-binary does not have a specific look. However, due to society's insistence to put people into boxes, non-binary is often confused with androgynous or appearing masculine and feminine at the same time (i.e.,

[4] Although, I do encourage people to read gender and queer theorists such as Z. Nicolazzo, bell hooks, Eve Sedgwick, Jack Halberstam, Gloria Anzaldúa, Judith Butler, Audre Lorde, Uri McMillan, José Muños, and many others who do this work well and have for many years, some of which I will cite and have cited through this dissertation.

Tilda Swinton, Prince, or E.R. Fightmaster), a look I do not possess. Although my appearance does not make me any less non-binary, many people assume I'm a woman due to the gender binary we all live in American society.

For example, I wear my hair short, I choose not to wear make-up, and most of my wardrobe consists of leggings and long tunics, cis folks still see me as feminine. I live in a larger body, and women constantly tell me what diets I should try without ever being asked if I wanted to know about said diet because I must want to attract the forever-wandering male gaze as someone assumed to be a cis woman. I once stood my ground in an email with a male superior, and he immediately asked me, "why was I being so emotional" and "who hurt me?" Even though I have my pronouns in my bios, my email signature, and I state that I am non-binary, it is a constant "outing" process, and therefore ideas of "womanliness" and being assumed feminine becomes a constant wall I am come up against in my own lived experiences. I also did not always know I was non-binary, so in speaking of myself in the past, I will be using she/her pronouns until I start using they/them pronouns, which began in the summer of 2020. I understand this can be confusing, but it also shows that many Trans, gender non-conforming, and non-binary folks are still affected by the gender binary (Butler, 2006, Nicolazzo, 2016, West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Additionally, the idea of "womanliness" gets applied to those who are women and perceived as women and in fields predominantly dominated by women, such as nursing, teaching, and social work (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009, Wade and Ferree, 2019). Even in fields such as medicine, which up until recently had an issue with medical student gender

parity, are also starting to see many specialties becoming predominantly female, like those that are "viewed as requiring stereotypically female-gendered attributes like being nurturing and valuing relationships" (i.e., obstetrics, gynecology, and pediatrics) and while others remain predominantly male, such as those "viewed as requiring stereotypically male-gendered attributes like technical skills and physical strength" like orthopedic surgery (Pelley and Carnes, 2020, p. 1501).

However, even more shocking is that the more a medical specialty increases the number of women in that specialty, the more pay decreases. So much so that Pelley and Carnes (2020) "saw evidence of a tipping phenomenon, finding that men were deterred from earning a doctoral degree in a field once that field reached a threshold of 24% women" (p. 1500). The pay gap not only affects men working in predominantly female-dominated specialties, but transgender folks saw a change in salary too. Kristen Schilt and Matthew Wiswall (2008) discovered that "after their transitions, the average earnings for transgender men increase slightly, while those for transgender women decline by nearly one-third (as cited in Pelley and Carnes, 2020, p.1501). Overall, the actual doctors employed and their gender identity on an individual level did affect them but not as much as the gender stereotype of their specialty. In other words, if a doctor were in a specialty or field deemed as "woman's work," that doctor would be compensated less, devalued over time, have less access to leadership positions, and have a higher risk of burnout (Pelley and Carnes, 2020). Haines, Deaux, and Lofaro (2016) claim that these issues are due to the constant gender stereotyping of the U.S. workforce that will "require [a] cultural transformation of existing gender norms which are ubiquitous, continually

reinforced, and have shown relatively little change over decades" (as cited in Pelley and Carnes, 2020, p.1504).

The same gender stereotypes/trends in the medical field are also in teaching and education. Brown and Stern (2018) theorize that teachers' work equates to women's work despite how any teacher identifies. For example, Ken, a male teacher, spent seventeen years teaching high school history and watched teachers work long hours and put extra effort long after their contract hours were over for their students just to be laid off a few years later (Brown and Stern, 2018). Ken highlighted how there is an "idea of teachers being expected to make sacrifices even as their time and labor are undervalued" (Brown and Stern, 2018, p. 182). The strong appeal to "do it for the students' ' phenomenon is something that my critical inquiry group members and I had experienced as teachers, which I go into further in Chapter 5 in my analysis and discussion of relational investments. Society's view of femininity relies upon the concepts of gender and Niceness, which tend to equal submission (West and Zimmerman, 1987). What it means to be a "good woman" significantly shapes being a teacher and teacher education.

Gender and Niceness: A "Good Woman" for white Supremacist, Capitalistic Patriarchy

My critical inquiry group members and I were taught from a young age what it means to be a "nice young lady" and eventually, how we took those lessons into our classrooms to reproduce the "nice white teacher/Lady Bountiful" stereotype. As I stated before in chapter two, part of the reasoning behind hiring cis white women into teaching at the inception of public schools is because they could be paid less than men and were

not seen as critical thinkers (Goldstein, 2015, Meiners, 2002). The pay for teachers has always been relatively low, but it is specifically low in most workforces that are predominantly women. The job of teaching or nursing or other related fields is supposedly a "calling," something that we choose to do. When we ask for more money, the public constantly reminds us that being a teacher was our choice. But what about male teachers? Are they also affected by being in a "woman's profession?" In Ken's example from Brown and Stern's (2018) study, the answer would be yes. However, Betty and Audrey experienced this differently regarding who got teaching jobs first and received the extra stipend.

> **Betty**: The framing of teaching into this idea that it's a calling that that doesn't mean that you should be paid well, or that you should be paid a living wage, because, you know, but we can pay men more because they're leaders and their heads of the family. And I was thinking about that, in particular with my job search and looking at how much pay difference there is, between what I get paid now, and even what, even like a public-school teacher makes and sitting there thinking and then also, *I could have a particular job, but I have to wait on coach's assignments.* So, the principal couldn't even tell me whether or not I had the job or not because she had to wait for the administration of the district. (emphasis added)
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> **Audrey**: When you were saying that, I was reminded of hearing an administrator talk about a stipend that was for an extra role, and *talking about how they are going to give that role to a male teacher.* Because of the low teacher salary and that teacher was married with a kid, they were going to need that stipend. Like,

what about any other teacher that has a life to support whether it's theirs or others? (emphasis added)

The idea that only a man is the head of the household directly connects back to how women were and are not seen as people, partners, or heads of households that do wage-earning work (Brown & Stern, 2018, Goldstein, 2015). However, Angela Davis (2011) writes that "many working-class wives and mothers worked on family farms or took in laundry and sewing to bring income to their household; and in fact, in the mid-nineteenth century, most workers in the textile industry were women (as cited in Brown & Stern, 2018, p. 181). Moreso, Goldstein (2015) writes "Black women almost universally worked, whether as slaves in the South or as domestic servants or laundresses in the North" (p. 21). While working-class wives and mothers never were paid well, enslaved Black women never were paid at all (and are still owed reparations). Even in so-called "modern times," the wage gap between white women and white men is about $0.78 to his whole dollar, and it is even less for Black, Latine, Asian, and Indigenous women (Bleiweis, Frye, and Khatter, 2021). Being from Oklahoma, which is one of the worst states to be a woman and most of the time a teacher in (Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2018), it becomes harder to support yourself as a divorced woman, single mother, a single woman taking care of her elderly parents, etc.

During my divorce, I was left holding the financial burden of a brand-new condo and a new car, all bought a year and a half before my then-husband left. The house did not have enough equity to sell and make a profit. I would owe thousands of dollars to the bank and buyer if I sold it. Also, there was a roof leak that needed to be fixed before I

could sell the condo anyway. Since I could not afford all these things alone on a teacher's salary, I moved my sister in as a roommate, got a part-time job at a hotel working the front desk in the evenings, and drove for Uber and Lyft on Friday nights and weekends. Even with all these jobs, I still only barely scraped by at the end of each month. I still showed up and did my best as a teacher every day. Until one day, while napping during my lunch break, I did not wake up to my alarm, and I was ten minutes late for my fourth hour. The teacher covering for me was obviously mad, and I apologized so many times and agreed to take her third hour the next day so she could have two planning periods (which I followed through on). Even with all that, she still complained to the principal who called me into his office the next day to write me up. I can still hear his words when I reflect back. He told me, "I know you're working multiple jobs because you have to carry the mortgage and all this stuff, but **teaching should be your priority**" (emphasis added). And I wanted so badly to say eating is my priority, keeping the lights on is my priority, not just teaching, but I did not say those things. I just let the tears roll down my face and signed the form and handed it back to him. When I told this story to my Thursday Critical Inquiry Group members, Lindsey replied, "I mean, it's just like survival instincts have to kick in for you to realize that what you're dealing with is not an appropriate way to be asked to function as a person." As Brown and Stern (2018) express,

> This creates a vicious cycle where teachers are expected to work harder to raise the performance levels of their students, but at the same time are not fairly

> compensated no matter what they do: after all, in the popular imagination, they are still not the "main breadwinners" in their households. (p. 181)

The public sees good women in a narrow, cis, heterosexual, pleasant, and Lady bountiful way and this same type of gaze lends itself to teaching as well. Good women are the ones who do not make waves, who say yes to the tenth thing stacked on their plate but also do it with a smile on their face. Good women are not feminist killjoys. Ahmed (2017) examines the idea of being a woman/good woman,

> Many women who were assigned female at birth, let us remind ourselves, are deemed not women in the right way, or not women at all, perhaps because of how they do or do not express themselves (they are too good at sports, not feminine enough because of their bodily shape, comportment, or conduct, not heterosexual, not mothers, and so on). (p. 15)

There are so many wrong ways to be a woman and this is due in part to the difficulty of what "the category of women is [and] what follows residing in that category, as well as what follows not residing in that category because of the body you acquire, the desires you have, the paths you follow or do not follow" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 15). The constant judgment of what a woman is or is not is held in place by Niceness. For example, the language to describe outspoken women is often deemed as loud, abrasive, bitchy, stubborn, obstinate, perverse, or willful (Ahmed, 2017). Ahmed uses the metaphor of the Grimm story of the willful child, a child that "would not do as her mother wished" and therefore became sick and eventually passed away. However, even in death, the child's arm kept rising from the grave, and the mother had to continue to return to the gravesite

to strike the child's arm back into the ground (Ahmed, 2017, p. 66). I borrow this metaphor of the willful child with the child representing a willful woman, resisting against patriarchal conditions of the expectation of a nice, soft-spoken, small, sheepish, heterosexual woman, and instead of choosing to keep resisting even as the mother, in this case, Niceness, continues to discipline our resistance back into the ground. The mother, Niceness, shows up in our personal and professional lives as our family members, our colleagues, our administrators, sometimes our students, and even other women as well.

It is also important to note that as white women we are also the mother carrying the rod of Niceness to strike down Black and brown women who speak up against racist and sexist systems that we uphold in order to reserve power alongside white men. For instance, choosing civility and making racial discussions in the classroom a "safe space" for everyone is "violent to people of color" (Applebaum, 2020b). Additionally, when Black women speak out against racist and sexist discourse, they are portrayed as the angry Black women or pushed into a nurturer/mammy role by white students, teachers, peers, etc. by their white tears and exclaiming that their family did not take part in enslavement (Collins, 2000, Matias, 2016). Ahmed (2012, 2017) also details how Indigenous, Latina/x, Asian, and other non-Black women of color critiques of whiteness also receive pushback from white teachers, students, and peers. Once again, white teachers, with many being white women, use the rod of Niceness to try to push Black, Indigenous, and other women/scholars of color into silence, but we also use it on each other.

Gabby added to these ideas of what a good woman is by sharing, “as a woman how I was raised about knowing my space, knowing just those almost subliminal messages that were sent to me as a very young child about my response to people and how that you have to be polite, and, and nice.” Our society, cis men, our parents, our teachers, and yes, even other women hold women to this refined ideal of Lady Bountiful who only speaks when spoken to, is seen and not heard, follows the rules without contempt, is heterosexual but also pure, a mother, a guide, and all these ideas of a good woman follow us into teaching.

Good women are also nice women and nice teachers. Good women teachers do not strike but have nicely orchestrated walkouts (Castagno, 2019). In fact, the word strike was not used in the 2018 Oklahoma Teacher Walkouts, a multi-district and county-wide school walkout that happened in April 2018, where educators, parents, students, and support staff gathered at the state capital to campaign for more funding and raises for teachers and staff, and in other places such as Arizona and West Virginia. Castagno (2019) explains this phenomenon of using the word walkout instead of the word strike by explaining, “Like resistors, the word strike connotes a stance that is confrontational and even defiant. Resisters, and those who go on strike, are not nice. But educators are nice, traditionally” (p. xix). Additionally, Castagno (2019) goes on to say, “Even more important, educators occupy ground zero for ensuring that the norms of Niceness are passed on to the next generation” and this is where the harm lies in Niceness and lies with us, white teachers because we continue passing down these norms without question (p. xix).

It is important to analyze Niceness within ourselves even as this vicious cycle is happening, it is important to note the egregious harm that colonization and education have done to many children, especially Indigenous children who were murdered, abused, and forced to assimilate into many first iterations of so-called public schooling (Lomawaima, 1994). As Ahmed (2017) so clearly states, "Education was of course one of the crucial technologies of colonial rule" and missionary teachers of the late eighteenth century carried out that rule the same as modern teachers do now (p. 80). A conversation around colonization and teaching came up with my Thursday inquiry group members when discussing Meiners' (2002) article about Lady Bountiful coupled with the recent discovery of mass graves of Indigenous boarding school children in Canada.

Lindsey: But then going down a really dark place. You know, they uncovered that mass grave of children in Canada.

Myself: Yes

Lindsey: And who was teaching in those schools?

Myself: Yeah (in my head I was thinking, white young women).

Lindsey: And those schools exist. Like the ruins of those schools, some of the buildings still exist all over Oklahoma where the exact same things happened here.

Betty: We had 78. 78 Indigenous schools or Indigenous students in Oklahoma. 78.

Lindsey: Even, now, don't we send young children on mission trips to like cities in the U.S., like on a bus. I mean, there's a lot of the idea of spreading culture, but

it's still that like, it's that **white supremacist mentality of this version of culture is the best version of culture.** And I can't just come and meet you where you're at, and like, share what I know. And you share what, you know, we all learn and grow together. I have to come to fix you. I really like the "Poisonwood Bible" by Barbara Kingsolver. She talks about a missionary family who goes to work in an Indigenous community, where they have no idea what the community's culture is, and claim superiority and it ends up going badly in this book. **But it's still that same idea of like, let me teach you how to sit still at a desk. Let me teach you how to answer 'yes, no, yes, sir, yes, ma'am.'** Let me teach you how to instead of, 'Can I go to the bathroom?' We're gonna be really condescending, and make you say, 'May I go to the bathroom.' And it's the cultural pushing of here's how you become a nice member of our society. What I think is like the **truly critical piece** that you can hold it like, the parts about us and what we're expected to do or bad too. But like, I think that **when you look at the effect it has on the entire community when there's this pressure for everybody to meet this standard if you end up with a community that continues is that colonization force.** So, I'm hoping the next version [she is referring to Lady Bountiful] does not include the colonization piece. (emphasis added)

I question whether we can separate the concept of Lady Bountiful from colonization. As a group we discussed further how given current politics the teacher is being written out of education as a whole with the continued push of school vouchers, privatizing education, erasure of critical theory, and queerness from the curriculum (what

little was there, to begin with) and scripted curriculum. And now with a continued pandemic and a lot of schools going online or some hybrid version, many group members felt that writing the teacher out of the schooling process has just expedited the coming end of public education. However, I think Lindsey said it best when she expressed,

> More and more people aren't gonna see public school as a necessity for those who can figure out how to survive without it. And those who need it are going to get whatever legislation doesn't take from them. So, I don't know what our role becomes as people in the field of education as things we literally have no control over continue to shift. **But we can just try not to make it worse as we go along** (emphasis added).

I think analyzing how we came to Niceness and how we begin to disentangle ourselves from Niceness is one of those ways in which white teachers can go about teaching in public schools and other forms of education without making it worse. Although, this disentanglement is easier said than done, and requires a committed effort, critical reflection, and a community of other teachers who are also dedicated to leaving Niceness behind. Next, I discuss and analyze how my critical group members and I did struggle with leaving Niceness when it came to material and emotional investments such as fear of losing one's job, fear of getting anti-racist pedagogy wrong, fear of being complicit, being a white bystander, and how those fears are compounded with systems of oppression such as capitalism and patriarchy along with Niceness and whiteness as well.

Material Investments and Capitalism

At the beginning of this study in June 2021, there were five states (Montana, Idaho Florida, Arkansas, and Oklahoma) that had banned in one way or another critical race theory, sometimes not using that specific language instead opting for words such as "divisive concepts," limits on how teachers can discuss race and gender, or lessons that "indoctrinate" students or "promote one race or sex above another" (Schwartz, 2022). However, Oklahoma's Governor Keven Stitt signed House Bill (HB) 1775 which limited how teachers could talk about race and gender. Some of those limits included teaching how racism is systematic and oppressive, the myth of meritocracy, and that no one should feel uncomfortable on account of their race or sex. At the time of doing this study, there were not any new rules that went with this newly signed law so many of my group members talked about the public's confusion around critical race theory (CRT) and how it had become this huge thing that most people do not fully understand, but they are still at school board meetings raging that CRT is somehow bad for their children. Plus, at the time of our discussion, there were not any rules for this new law, and as Gabby put it,

> Or if it's to, you know, let's outlaw critical race theory discussions. And because we have such fragility in who we are, then that's what it is. But it's, I think all three things [Niceness, white fragility, and religion] have the ultimate goal of maintaining whiteness and keeping that at the center of everything.

Molly, Sarah, and I agreed (Erica was absent that week) with Gabby that once whiteness feels threatened it will do everything in its power to stay in power.

However, then towards the end of this study, around week six, emergency rules did come down, citing that if a school employee broke the HB1775 law, the following could occur: a school that failed to comply could lose its accreditation status or have it downgraded and any school employee could have their license or certificate suspended (Eger, 2021). So, I asked my Sunday critical inquiry group on week six about the new rules because they had brought up the CRT bans the week prior, that came along with HB1775, and if they thought Niceness would have "an effect on your decision making or how you discuss race in the classroom or come up against these conversations in the classroom?" Molly did state that she was worried about her student teachers, but that for her personally, "no, it's not going to for her personally stop me." She continued that the dean at her university has her back and if something did go awry then she was confident that her university would continue to support her. Erica did admit that she was a little scared of the fact that she is on a yearly contract with her university, but she also said that she had the support of her dean.

She also mentioned that she was worried about her students as well because they want to dive into critical conversations but also need to keep their jobs. So, Erica told them that "sometimes because we live in a society where you have to have a paycheck. Sometimes you do have to be a little bit more careful until you do get that tenure." Although she did mention her complete disgust with the idea that this law now says you cannot make someone uncomfortable, she retorted "are you kidding me?!" However, I liked Sarah's point about centering white people's feelings by stating, "I'm sure, Black students feel uncomfortable talking about slavery, you know." And that is where I feel

this law breaks down because it only asks about white comfortability, which Niceness does. Niceness prioritizes white feelings above all else, which puts the emotional and material burdens of speaking out on teachers/scholars/feminists/and people of color (Applebaum, 2017).

Nevertheless, it is not only immoral laws that keep us white teachers materially invested in Niceness, but also the need to feel like we are innocent and that it is only the system or the macro things at fault. Frankenberg (1993) talks about this good/bad, pure/impure binary approach that comes "into play within respect to racism and or 'prejudice'" (p. 148). And these binaries often get us into trouble because it puts the pursuit of being anti-racist or using anti-racist pedagogy as someone who can only follow that path if we are perfect. This binary also shows up in our relational investments into Niceness that I detail further in chapter six. For now, I want to echo what Ahmed (2017) states about equality being a "bumpy ride" (p. 167). Although we still must take care (Ojuo, 2019) in our approaches to learning and making mistakes when speaking out about racial and/or sexist policies going on in our schools and classrooms, we also have to sit with the discomfort that we are also complicit in the systems in which we work and live.

Emotional Investments in Niceness and whiteness

Emotions are gendered as feminine (Ahmed, 2004). Emotional women are often considered "biologically 'too emotional' while at the same time we are considered "too "irrational" to serve in positions of political power; while also requiring women to cultivate her emotionality in order to serve as ideal mothers and teachers" (Boler & Zembylas, 2016, p. 18-19). Emotions can also be shoved into binaries such "boys don't

cry" or "girls shouldn't be angry" which I argue is one of the breeding grounds of Niceness that starts young and keeps being normalized by society and culture as women, transwomen, and those who are perceived as women grow up being conditioned to be polite and not rock the boat (Boler, 2004). However, only analyzing emotions from a gendered perspective would be a mistake, and instead, there also has to be a racial analysis of emotion as well. For example, as we saw with Lily in chapter 2, a white male student in her class could loudly proclaim that affirmative action had gone too far by letting in folks who didn't "deserve to be there" and that he would have "gone to Harvard if they didn't have to have safe seats for diversity students" (Ben. et. al., 2019, p. 149). He was not called emotional, he was not told to reign his "big personality in" like Lily was when she replied back to this student by saying, "'You know that's not true,' she said calmly, but firmly. 'Affirmative Action doesn't mean free money or free admission'" and then added "'Racism has stopped way too many people from making their lives better through school. And if a few entitled-ass White men don't get their first-choice school, that's something I think we can all live with'" (Ben. et. al., 2019, p. 149). Emotions are not just our own but are formed by socio-cultural dynamics we live in and one cannot separate them from gender and racial constructions that exist in "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2014).

During our time together, the critical inquiry members and I discussed an array of emotions such as fear, betrayal, loss, grief, empathy, etc. that came up when analyzing and reflecting on how Niceness either evoked these emotions in ourselves, our families, colleagues, and as well as others in our sphere of influence. Emotional investments with

those same people, mainly family, made it difficult at times to disentangle from Niceness. There are also investments into whiteness and emotion, especially when white women's tears are used to invoke harm to Black men and women and other people of color. We saw this as a group in analyzing a video in week five about an incident that took place in a New Jersey shopping mall (Victoria's Secret) and how a white woman named Abigail Elphick weaponized her white tears to create the illusion that the Black woman, Ijeoma Ukenta, was threatening her all because she recorded Abigail hitting her after Ms. Ukenta asked her to put a mask on or walk away from her. (Kai, 2021, Ukenta, 2021). The duality of emotions laden by white women, such as the Victoria's Secret Karens or the Barbecue Becky, are used as a form of power over Black women and other women of color (Matias, 2019). Emotional investments into Niceness intersect with whiteness in the fear that we, white teachers, expressed in getting conversations about race, gender, sexuality, etc. wrong.

Fear and whiteness

In week two of our critical inquiry group meeting consisted of reading the excerpt from Ben. et. al. (2019) chapter nine in *The Price of Nice* that shares the story of Lily, a Black Indigenous student, confronting a white male student on his lack of understanding of affirmative action, only to be told by the white professor later in an email that shed needed to "play nice with others" and "think about walking a mile in each other's moccasins" (p. 150). I chose to start with this excerpt because it framed not only the harm Niceness caused to Black, Indigenous, and students of color, but I also believe it would spark a conversation about how ill-prepared white teachers are to facilitate conversations

around race. I also wanted to know what my critical group members thought about this scenario in particular along with how they would react in a similar situation or if they had already been in a similar situation like Lily's as the student, teacher, or white bystander in the room. Below is an excerpt from those conversations.

> **Myself:** So, some of you already mentioned that you have seen a scenario similar to this as a student or as a teacher, if we were willing to share that story and what happened?
>
> **Lindsey**: I've heard other teachers talk about experiences like this in a class and say, "I just shut it down immediately." And I was like, we're not going to talk about that. And you'll pull the student aside afterward and tell them that that was not appropriate classroom behavior or appropriate classroom, like discussion topics. And I've seen it in situations that related to bullying as well, like not necessarily a whole lot that had to do with race specifically, but like, I had a student with two dads and a teacher I worked with at the time told her [student] she couldn't talk about her home life, because it would make other people uncomfortable. Because she brought it up during class discussions. When somebody said something about Mom, you know, well, everybody has mom, and she's like, I have two dads. So, like, this teacher was like, no, we're not gonna talk about that. It's not okay. **And, um, and so it was almost like this pride for shutting it down.** So, when I've heard other people tell stories, as teachers who have done this, it's been really prideful. I have occasionally heard a teacher tell about a situation like this and then say, **I just didn't know what to do**. And so, I

just moved on to something different. And I like that, to me, it is probably like the most common response, **especially in elementary education**, that when this stuff comes up, **teachers don't feel like they're qualified to lead those kinds of conversations.**

Betty: I totally agree, because the fact that we don't have these conversations, in general, is why we have such a problem talking about difficult things. We, in school, it's like, well, you know, we shouldn't you don't rock the boat, or we shouldn't have any kind of controversy. And it's the fact that we aren't doing this is why when you go to college or when you get out, you know when you sit there and look on the internet.

The conversation continued on about how we approach difficult conversations, in which I asked Thursday's group if taking a debate-style approach adds to the difficulty of facilitating these critical conversations. Lindsey discussed how the debate/speech style is ineffective in these conversations and used an example of how climate change there is always one scientist that discusses the reality of climate change and one scientist who thinks its hogwash, but how that is not an accurate representation of how the majority of the scientific community thinks about climate change and its incoming effects on Earth and society as we know it. Lindsey goes on to say, "if you were actually going to represent it, you would have 99 scientists saying climate change is real. And one scientist saying we're not sure yet. And that would be an accurate representation of the sides."

A similar conversation to Lily's story happened in my Sunday Group as well, but Erica, Molly, and Gabby were angrier at the white professor in the room for handling the

conversation around affirmative action so badly and his response in the email he sent to Lily afterward. Molly stated that she took issue with the professor's comment about walking in another person's moccasins and that it was "stepping on somebody's culture that you have no business stepping on, ever!" Gabby added, "I think the phrase big personality stuck out to me, I've been accused of having a big personality, and I've actually used that phrase to describe others as well. So, to me, it's just a really nice way of saying: Keep your mouth shut. And so that phrase, I think there's a lot of Niceness attached to that phrase." Erica restated what Thursday's group thought about learning how to facilitate these types of conversations and not just shut them down.

However, if we all agreed that shutting down these types of conversations was not the best way to include anti-racist pedagogy in our classroom, then why do similar scenarios like Lily's still occur, and why have we not said something different when we are the student or teacher in the room? One answer to this question lies in the fear of getting it wrong as a white person. Critical whiteness scholar Cheryl E. Matias (2020) describes this fear,

> Whites have long been taught to comply to whiteness lest be ostracized from the white community. This fear of being abandoned by the community has given rise to their consciousness, sense of self, or even identity in general, conjures up the humanly fear of isolation. (p. 177)

Unitarian Reverend Thandeka (1999) examines how ideas of fear are rooted in guilt and shame through white adults' narratives of how they, as children, learned from their white communities and families about what was and was not acceptable. For example,

Thandeka (1999) retells how Sarah, as a teenager, brought home a friend to play with after school. When this friend left, Sarah's mom told her not to invite that friend over again. When Sarah asked why, her mother said, "Because she is colored" (p. 2). It was at that moment that Sarah became dismayed, "because she realized that, for the first time in her life, her relationship with her mother was threatened, and it was because she interacted with a person of color in a way deemed inappropriate by her white community" (Jaffee, 2020, p. 671). As a child, I was told something similar by my white mother when I started "dating" a Black classmate in the fifth grade. My mother told me under no certain terms was I to hang out with this young Black man again because only women who could not get a white man dated Black men. As I reflect back on this event now, I felt confused about why she was so upset. Yet, due to her violent temper, I obeyed. I did not date outside of my race again until I was in my upper twenties.

Niceness presses on these fears of abandonment and exclusion. Lindsey stated, "And it's this white solidarity thing. If you put a toe out of line, your community will punish you for that." Niceness becomes a disciplining agent by emotionally stoking the fears of white folks that were planted in us since we were young. However, this fear does not excuse us from staying silent in these situations, especially in the classroom. As Betty shared with us, "So there could have been somebody who wanted to say something, but didn't. So, by not saying anything, you're still being sort of complicit in that whole conversation."

Continuing with this thread of complicitness, I asked my Sunday group, also during week 2, why as white bystanders do we not say anything? Was it Niceness holding

us back or something else? More importantly, why are we not saying something when we see this happen? In response, Gabby wondered if it was due to the authority of the professor and that "if we argue against her, then you know, then we're not on, you know, then we are an enemy, it's like this line is drawn or something." Molly also stated that she feared her professor's reactions during her master's program because it was the "kind of program that you couldn't make any Cs, you had to make all As and Bs in order to stay in the program. So, everybody was constantly aware of living in fear of that." Being a white bystander for many of the critical inquiry group members was about choosing to stay inside the lines of white solidarity by staying silent so that we do not anger the person in authority. This does not necessarily mean that the authority figure has to be white for this to happen, because white supremacy ideals and notions infect everyone and pushes them to conform to white ideas of respect and respectability, which is another form of Niceness. In Gabby and Molly's example, it was their professor's power over them and their grade in the class that kept them quiet and the fear that speaking up could cost them more than they were willing to pay. As Thandeka (1999) and Matias (2020) suggest, we are disciplined to want to belong even when we know what is going on is wrong.

Erica offered a counter view of this idea of fear and saying the wrong thing or being discounted by the white community. She stated,

> You know, falling into that trap of there is a right thing. Now, not necessarily, sometimes it's just speaking up and saying, 'Hmm, I'm not sure that that's right.' And I don't know why it's not right. But it doesn't feel like I could have said

something. And that's generally what got me. But for the most part, I am a speaker upper, even if it makes me want to throw up because by nature I am shy.

Erica's comments brought up a memory for Gabby about a class she had attended in the spring semester that, ironically, was about diversity issues in education. Very similar to the situation with Lily, the Black and Indigenous student whose professor invalidated her feelings in class, in another class, there was a Black student who had admitted that she was feeling hopeless with everything going on in the world right now, and the professor told her that she just should not feel that way. Gabby shared that everyone expressed shock, and even though many of the classmates were texting about how the professor invalidated her Black student's lived experience, no one at the moment said anything. However, after listening to Erica's explanation, that she too feels the fear but chooses to speak up anyway, Gabby realized that even if she had said the wrong thing it was better to say something instead of nothing. Gabby illuminated how Niceness and the fear of being the troublemaker shaped her experience at the moment, "I didn't want to be perceived as this troublemaker or somebody going against the grain. So, you just keep your mouth shut, even though every fiber of your being and your heart knows that that's not the right thing to do."

Gabby's words reminded me of Thandeka's (1999) analysis of how white people come to learn to be white. I and the Sunday critical inquiry group would learn later that similar to Thandeka's participant, Sarah's, experience with her own mother's racism, Gabby shared with us that she "did grow up sitting around the table, and there were definitely things that we talked about, and then there were definitely topics that were not

discussed." We all had people around the tables we grew up with that taught us to be nice, and polite, and not discuss topics that were "off-limits" (usually meaning race) and it is our job now to unlearn those teachings. Not only are we supposed to unlearn these teachings but step out of our comfort and into the fear of knowing that we will get it wrong (Oluo, 2019). Although there are many different tips that Oluo (2019) gives in her book, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, to lessen the harm that comes from making those mistakes when talking about race or speaking up in those conversations, one of those is to "take care in your conversations, remember that you are dealing with the real hurt of human beings. But be brave in that care, be honest in that care" (p. 52).

I discussed emotional investments into Niceness and connections with whiteness when it comes to the fear of getting these conversations wrong or wondering how the white community will treat us once we start to speak up. I also mentioned Gabby and Molly's narratives of the power that professors hold. Additionally, administrators hold the power to keep us employed just like professors hold the power over our grades in class. Along with emotional investments, I also examined how material investments and capitalism keep the fear of losing one's job especially now with new laws in Oklahoma that forbade teachers from making any student "uncomfortable" about their sex and/or race at the forefront of any discussion about going against such terrible laws. However, critical group inquiry members who felt they had the support of their administrators, spoke adamantly about teaching from an anti-racist perspective and teaching their pre-service teachers how to do the same. In fact, due to how poorly lawmakers wrote HB1775 some teachers are looking into using this new law in favor of Trans rights for

Trans youth who are being made uncomfortable by many of their cis white heteronormative teachers and peers. This kind of subversion of moving away from what the law originally attended, centering white comfort, and moving to continue the fight for the rights of Trans youth has been discussed as "malicious compliance," or "good trouble," something I discuss more in-depth as implications for teacher practice later on in Chapter 6 (Flint and Toledo, 2021, Lewis, 2016).

Subversion of these new CRT bans and anti-Trans bills is one way for educators to join forces with Black and brown teacher activists in the fight for equal rights. However, neither capitalism nor the white elites want this to happen, and instead, they have been trying to use whiteness as crumbs of bread that keep us tied to these material investments into Niceness. As Lensmire (2017) details in his book *White Folks*, capitalism and white elites keep this narrative of "othering" going, and if they can divide up the privilege by giving us some and none to folks of color, then we lower class, poor white people will keep fighting for those scraps instead of joining together with Black, Indigenous, and people of color to fight for equal rights for all. This is evident in how material investments keep white people, and white teachers from disengaging with Niceness, which is intertwined with participants' emotional investments.

Connections to Emotional Investments (fear) and Complicitness in the System

Betty and Audrey discussed at length during week 3 (Lindsey was absent that week) how the system that we see harms students every day and our own complicitness in being in that same system that reproduces those harms. At one point, Audrey even called it "carrot capitalism" because she felt that her paycheck was the carrot that kept

her coming back even when she felt like she could help the kids in her own classroom, but as a whole, the school was still failing them. An edited for clarity version of their conversation is below.

> **Betty:** "I feel that sometimes I have to uphold this system because the system feeds me."
>
> **Audrey**: **"**But if you're in the bad system, you're trying to be that light. I don't know. It is still allowed. **It hides things even if you don't want it.**"
>
> **Betty:** But in reality, unless you actually become a serious troublemaker **rebel**, and you intentionally spread **discontent** amongst the ranks, it's probably **not** going to change.
>
> **Audrey**: But in like the average teacher's day, you don't even have to have deliberate deflect [away from these critical conversations], **there's just so much busyness that you could always be doing work, without ever really addressing the important things. You just try to survive in that system.**
>
> **Betty**: **Does that make us complicit**, even though we're trying to do the best but also keep our head down to survive? Does that make us really complicit in keeping the system going and keeping those structures in place?
>
> **Audrey**: I felt that no matter what we did, we were still a part of the system. **So, it was still [being] complicit.** And obviously, we didn't do good things, but even good things **we did in ways that reinforced the system.**

Betty: If the Karens from these school board meetings are to be believed and that also can kind of make me think twice about, okay, **how much of that Niceness am I going to have to employ in order to keep my job**?

Audrey: But yeah, I feel like it was a choice between: Do you have the individual influence? Or do you have influence in the system? Do you make a little bubble where you're protecting kids or trying to protect kids from a system? Or do you go change the system? How do you navigate doing both? Because **I don't think I found a good answer to how I could do both and keep my health.** If there are more teachers doing it, then it's maybe less work all around.

Discussion: Emotional *and* Material Investments into Niceness

I want to repeat Audrey's last sentence here, "If there are more teachers doing it, then it's maybe less work all around." The hope for the community is evident in this statement. Alone, we are as Betty stated before, "cogs in the machine," but what if we could get multiple cogs to turn around and say no I am no longer avoiding critical race conversations in my classroom, or I can make a stand because I know I have community support to back me. As Lindsey did later say in our last week together, week 8, we must have a "bigger awareness of the effect of your actions and the system of those actions, as opposed to like those little things that make you feel like you're not a bad person, or like that you're just not racist." Disinvesting or untangling from Niceness is not and will not be an easy process, and as Ahmed (2017) shares that the willful child story "operates most powerfully as an ideology: the implication that disobedience is lonely and unsupported" (p. 84). However, "we can willfully hear the story as a plea: to join arms, to

show the arms joined. We assemble a feminist army in response to this plea" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 84). We can create a feminist by being in a collective, group, or partnership with others on the same feminist killjoy path. A feminist army is essential to not getting swallowed up by the fear of loneliness and is also necessary for making change.

For example, I have seen how just two small critical inquiry groups over the course of eight weeks we were able to tease out what keeps us invested in Niceness and have difficult conversations about our own culpability. This does not mean that none of us will use Niceness again in a way to keep our job, get a job, avoid being uncomfortable, giving into fear, etc. but we do know that we have a place to go to tease out these feelings, questions, and a place to be held accountable. As poet Kyle "Guante" Tran Myhre (2014, 2020) states, "white supremacy is not a shark; it is the water." So, whether we are swimming in the water, on some type of vessel, or even just standing in the water a few inches deep, white supremacy affects us all. Working in small critical inquiry groups is not a cure for racism or a course in how to be anti-racist. These critical inquiry groups are the way to first see how Niceness plays a role in keeping us locked into systems of oppression and then using a community to learn from one another, ask different questions (like Betty and Audrey did about being complicity), and as Erica said, it's about being "willing to pivot when new information changes."

Conclusion

As I have said before, disentangling Niceness is easier said than done. In the next chapter, I elaborate by examining our relational investments with family, friends, other loved ones, colleagues, and our students. Interrelated with material and emotional

investments, our relationships in white communities can discipline our efforts to enact anti-racist change. How do we disentangle from Niceness if that means we are no longer invited to the family holiday dinner table? And how do see ourselves growing as a community of feminist killjoys?

Over the course of our eight weeks together, I found that even the most dedicated white educators still struggled with letting go of Niceness when it came to ideas of respect, fear of retaliation from administration, and being excluded from personal and professional relationships when embracing Ahmed's (2017) feminist killjoy. Through each group's discussion of their fears, and their own senses of betrayal either by themselves or others, we worked through hard moments that helped us put that fear to the side and consider other types of costs that come from siding with Niceness.

CHAPTER V

RELATIONAL INVESTMENTS: SCHOOLING, FAMILY TIES, AND THE COST OF CHOOSING WILLFULNESS

Tension, like the willful child's arm, keeps coming up again and again for me. There was tension in discussions of whiteness, Niceness, and how to do anti-racist work "properly" within the contexts of our professional and personal relationships during our eight weeks together in critical inquiry groups. I wanted to foreground this tension in the discussion and analysis of relational investments of white teachers in Niceness and whiteness. As stated before, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote an entire letter about how the white moderate worried more about keeping a negative peace than seeking out justice (King, 1963/1992). King (1963/1992) continues by stating that the white moderate who prefers this negative peace is comfortable telling Black and brown people fighting for justice "to wait for a 'more convenient season." He argues that such complacency from people who mean well "is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will." For me, the choice of a negative peace over tension could not be more evident than in the wake of the protests against police brutality after the horrendous murder of

George Floyd in May 2020. I watched many of my friends, many of them educators themselves, who I believed would stand for justice instead turn their attention to how these protests and protestors (mainly Black men and women) were not doing protesting in the "right way" or should I say the "nice way," because they were building fires, looting, and undertaking other types of property destruction.

Journalist Ramenda Cyrus (2021) writes about how the white gaze looks at moments of civil disobedience such as protests. She states how, "Media coverage tended to focus on the aftermath of riots, reinforcing white discomfort and solidifying resistance to anything other than a "peaceful" protest" (Cyrus, 2021, para. 8). And there is that word again: peace. White moderates of the 1960s and the white liberals of today harp on wanting peace by having a conversation, listening to both sides, and focusing on civil discourse when discussing hard histories or human rights movements. However, like Assata Shakur (1987) writes, "Nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them" (p. 174). In other words, asking nicely will not bring about the peace and justice that Black and brown people need, and white people's attention to Niceness results in continued oppression in the system that benefits a majority of cis-hetero white folks and white teachers while mandating that there is a nice way to go about advocating for one's human rights. At the same time, these calls for Niceness by our cis-hetero white family, friends, peers, etc., also exploits many poor/lower class white folks, queer white people, and other white folks who sit in other intersections of multiple marginalized identities (i.e., disabled, fat bodies, neurodivergent, etc.).

Relational Investments: Schooling and Professional Relationships

As teachers, we are taught the idea that caring for and loving students means treating everyone the same, to be fair. If one student gets something, the other does not, and as a teacher you might be playing favorites or showing bias. However, Boltanski (1999) examines "benign feelings" such as "empathy, compassion, and even love" for *all students* "are grounded in a discourse of universal morality, often resort[ing] to a sentimental-oriented discourse of suffering that remains superficial, and engage in politically-correct performances" (as cited in Matias, 2016, p. 27). In other words, it sounds really nice to say as a teacher, you love all your students the same, but how does that love show up in classroom policies, discipline, and curriculum? Audrey dove into the idea of treating everyone the same and its pitfalls in the first week of her journal entries.

> I associate the Niceness that I got tangled up in with the idea of assuming the best intentions - which, of course, I think started with good intentions. I can't imagine how many times students have been punished in schools for disrespect when they legitimately didn't hear something a teacher said, just because when a situation was **ambiguous, those in power chose to assume the worst**. In hundreds of interactions with students, I feel like I did my best in the situation if I assumed that the student was acting with the best intentions. **Also, remembering that I had a choice to be there and often the student did not**. I believed students when they told me their reasoning for a situation. I think that kind of assuming best intentions was a good practice to have, but I think that the place it became wrong and 'Niceness' became involved was when I assumed **best intentions on**

> **everyone's part** and **tried to ask students to assume best intentions despite their prior experiences**. I wonder how many times I tried to talk a student through an interaction they had with another teacher, and I tried to make sure the student assumed the best intentions on the part of that other adult. "What if they didn't mean it like that? What if they meant it like this…?" When I really didn't have the experience to know how that other teacher meant it or if it was a part of a pattern of interactions. **I feel like niceness prioritizes calm over all else, including truth**. **Niceness assumes the best intent instead of digging to bring up the reality of the way things are**. Niceness is classroom management - an idea that if things are orderly, then something must be good in them. If things are disorderly, then there must be something bad as the cause (emphasis added).

Audrey describes Niceness and its relationship to power. Power plays an important role when looking at relational investments into Niceness at the individual and systematic levels (white supremacist capitalistic patriarchy). Audrey examines how she had a choice to be in that school, and many of those students did not. Audrey worked in an alternative school where many of the students were wards of the state, had juvenile records, or due to racist, classist, and sexist school policies, these students were sent to alternative schooling after the public school system pushed/kicked them out. Audrey also discusses choice as a form of power, in deciding what intent or intention another teacher may have had in disciplining a student the way they did. Although towards the end of her journal entry, Audrey reflects on the choice of intention, a form of power that is not always available to everyone, especially her students. Even if a student were to be calm

and rational when speaking to an angry authority figure, which should not be the requirement, another teacher's bias and choosing to be racist, classist, sexist, etc., to a student is not in that student's control. Ahmed (2017) discusses choice as a form of power. She states that sometimes we line ourselves up with those in power either due to exhaustion or just not wanting to live up to the consequences of getting out of line with power or authority (Ahmed, 2017). At times, Audrey did align herself relationally to her colleagues and administrators to maintain those relationships and to keep the peace by not being seen critically questioning the other teachers or administrators in the building.

However, Ahmed (2017) explains further on choosing to be willful by saying, "Other times we might realize: we are willing to pay the costs of not being in line because getting in line would compromise too much" (p. 55). Relationally, students, especially Black and brown students, have little power or choice in how their mostly white teachers treat them. Black and brown students are also more likely to be pushed out of regular schooling for resisting power structures that reside in public, private, and higher education as a whole or become ostracized by their white teachers that have the power to control their grades, their future letters of recommendation, possible future jobs, applications to college, applications into graduate school. Lily, the Black and Indigenous student who spoke up in class about affirmative action not erasing all the obstacles for Black, Indigenous, and other students of color, experienced this very fear of not pleasing her white professor, who emailed her and suggested that she play nice with others and "reign in her big personality" (Ben et. al., 2019, p. 150). Her immediate reaction to the infuriating email was that she would not be able to graduate or receive letters of

recommendation if the professor" thought she was mean" (Ben et. al., 2019, p. 150). Lily then had to conform to the Niceness and whiteness in that classroom by smiling, keeping to herself, and using only short answers to questions with "no responses to opinions, even if they were racist" (Ben et. al., 2019, p. 150). For students like Lily, the continued comfort of white students by teachers relationally investing in whiteness via Niceness is harmful and pushes us white teachers to question exactly who are we investing in and why.

As Audrey reflected over her long decade of teaching in public schools, she began to realize the act of assuming the best intentions of everyone involved in an array of interactions with students (i.e., disciplinary interactions), especially Black and brown students, and other colleagues was an act of Niceness that snuck into to what she thought was good pedagogy at the beginning of her teaching career. After this realization, Audrey tried to find ways to subvert the power dynamics and relationships she had with her colleagues and administrators as much as she could, but as she also shared with us in Thursday's CIG, there is only so much good one can do by closing one's door and just doing what was good for her students. The students beyond the four walls of Audrey's classroom were continually left in the hands of another teacher who may or may not choose to go outside the lines of power.

Therefore, Castagno (2014) explains, "Undoing structural inequity would require structural and system approaches; it would also require work that might call into question the value we typically place on colorblindness, meritocracy, and equality" (p. 43). There are systems of oppression at play that keep Niceness and whiteness at the center of

education and the continued inequality in our public, private, and higher education campuses. Audrey realized that assuming the best intentions of the adult, whether it be an administrator or a colleague, often caused harm to that same student because of the imbalance of power in the adult-child relationship. Castagno (2014) claims this focus on intention is a distraction. She states, "When we focus on intent, we generally lose sight of the real, material outcome. If racial equity and justice are what we seek, we need to move away from an emphasis on whether somebody or something 'meant well'" (Castagno, 2014, p. 43-44). Good intentions are synchronous with Niceness and keep the focus on willful ignorance, deficit ideas of learning, and performative inclusion that continue to perpetuate inequality throughout education today (Ahmed, 2017, Applebaum, 2020b, Castagno, 2014, 2019, Matias 2016, Mills, 2007).

Relational investments into Niceness are evident among our choices to align or subvert power dynamics. There are times we have the ability to fully make a choice to obstruct relations of power such as with an administrator or another colleague. Although choosing to subvert power/authority can ripple out and affect change, it can also push us to the outskirts where our voices are heard less and less. In other words, we may be punished for choosing to step away from Niceness. Audrey framed this in a conversation during week three about having to choose between having "broad influence or specific influence." She explained further that when she worked in a regular public school she felt that she had broad influence by being on committees where she "could help influence big decisions" albeit failing (i.e. being shot down by other colleagues and/or administrators), but she said, at least "my voice was in that room." She admitted that in this regular public

school she had very “little specific control in my classroom” and when “kids would get suspended for things that I didn’t think they should get suspended for, my voice wasn’t there. It was just a zero-tolerance policy, but I was closer to the sphere of influence in education.”

When Audrey moved to the alternative school, she described to us that she had specific influence and “more control over my classroom and what we taught and how we interacted” with one another. She explained that she just had so much more control over what she could do in her own classroom than in her previous environment. In other words, she had more choice and power and how she went about investing in her students relationally. However, she felt like she had lost “every committee I had an influence on, I lost connections with people who had more power to change things.” So, for Audrey, the power of choice came down to deciding what kind of influence she could have, and she “didn't’ feel like I had the choice to do both.” Relating back to Ahmed’s (2017) description of choice as power, as educators, we do have to make choices on whether to go against the grain of Niceness or to get in line with Niceness. Both choices have their own outcomes and/or consequences. I will continue to tease out these tensions surrounding relational investments into Niceness with conversations from different group members and how they made sense of their own lines in the sand and what empowers them to hold those lines.

Furthermore, analyzing how the teachers in my critical inquiry groups and I discussed Niceness within our own variety of relationships, whether with our friends and families, our relationship with our students, our relationship with teaching as a whole, or

our overall relationship with Niceness requires a nuanced understanding of power and willfulness within in the system and within our own personal relationships. In the next section, I will introduce the salient conversations around Niceness and relationships while "zooming in and out" (A. Mason, personal communication, April 9, 2022) of systematic structures that also keep these investments difficult to detangle and disinvest in altogether. Towards the end of those conversations, I will add in the different group's ideas on building a community of feminist killjoys as a way to enact change at micro and macro levels of education, curriculum, and schooling as a whole.

Relational Investments: Family Ties that Bind and Investigating Niceness

The educators in my critical inquiry group approached how they saw Niceness and whiteness within their different relationships in a variety of ways. Similarly, to the power within choice that Audrey faced in choosing who to relationally invest in (students' wellbeing or keeping the peace with her admin/colleagues) and how those choices invested into Niceness or away from Niceness in school relationships, others in the critical inquiry groups struggled with choice when it came to familial relationships. In choosing to be willful and doing anti-racist work with our families and friends, we have to accept that there will be pushback. Ahmed (2017) describes the choice of being willful as choosing unhappy paths, by being seen as obstinate or stubborn for refusing to go with the flow. Restricting the flow of Niceness is not always an easy choice, but a necessary one.

However, Ahmed (2017) also knows that being willful is "a life paradox" because willfulness may not always be speaking out, but sometimes it's just standing firm and that

“sometimes you can hold on only by becoming stubborn” (p. 82). Sometimes the only resistance is saying, “I am not taking part in this conversation.” Lindsey shared a poignant statement a Black male speaker at her church told the congregation, “I refuse to participate in my own dehumanization” or the dehumanization of others. Choosing to be willful, choosing to resist, choosing how we relationally invest ourselves with others in a way that moves away from Niceness may seem like a lonely destination, to be the feminist killjoy who is constantly going against the flow of racist, sexist, classist, etc. conversations with loved ones, but it is essential to remember the fear of loneliness is a fear constructed out of white supremacy. These battles against Niceness are not waged in the dark, all alone, like we are some version of the chosen one in a dystopian teen novel. Instead, we can and should do this work of being willful in collective and collaborative action, as we did in these critical inquiry groups. It might be easy to get caught up in the idea of what we will lose by choosing to be willful, a tension that did arise within the conversations around familial relationships. However, Ahmed (2017) reminds us, “We must not be intimidated by threats of what or who we lose " instead, we must reclaim willfulness by centering “the experiences of black women and women of color” (p. 82-83). Choosing to center anti-racist pedagogy in our classrooms and our personal relations from the scholarship of Black women and women of color and decentering our white comfort is one way forward in continuing to be willful. We must choose to work against not only individual investments into Niceness but also against white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that would very much like to keep Niceness and whiteness at the forefront of our choices in to subvert or not to subvert power.

In the following paragraphs, many critical inquiry group members struggled with when to be willful and stop the flow of conversations regarding familial relationships and disinvesting from Niceness and whiteness. These struggles revolved around knowing that as white folks, we needed to be having these conversations with people we are in a relationship with, but also fearing that being too willful would have those same people shut down and refuse to listen. There was no one way or one path to finding balance in our choices. Different critical inquiry group members chose to subvert or not subvert power depending on the context of the situation they were in at the time. For example, when Betty felt that she was in control of how she could come and go from a situation with her family, she was more obstinate about their classist and racist view on politics in the U.S. When Betty felt less safe and had no exit plan for a family situation, she chose to be silent and just ignore the conversation altogether. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will continue analyzing when critical group members and I did choose to align ourselves with Niceness and when we did not, and the tensions that came along with those same choices.

Lindsey continuously proclaimed that she would not describe herself as a nice person, and neither would her friends and family. Betty stated multiple times that sometimes she felt like she did fall into Niceness within the contexts of the family but with teaching, she was not afraid to call a student out if they were being purposely sexist, which she labeled as "not necessarily Niceness, it's kind of bitchiness." Audrey spent most of the time torn between what was kindness and what was Niceness. In Sunday's CIG, Erica, Sarah, and I had an easier time stating how we felt amongst our families and

peers because going against authority figures in our lives was an act of survival growing up. At times, we wanted our students and colleagues to like us, so we also became entangled with Niceness in professional friendships. Molly, Kelly, and Gabby stated they grew up with the idea of Niceness ingrained in them and often found it very difficult to speak out of fear of becoming a troublemaker or waiting until it was safer by obtaining tenure in their careers. As I have already mentioned in Chapter 4, much of this Niceness became ingrained into us as young children. Women are socialized to stay quiet, be a buffer when things become tense, and not rock the boat. However, as we start to unlearn these notions of Niceness in adulthood, we are still met with expectations from others (i.e., other white women, white teachers, white men, family, friends, etc.) to perform Niceness.

Niceness: white tears, white fears

During week five, each group watched a video of a white woman named Abigail Elphick (dubbed Victoria's Secret Karen) using her white tears, laying on the ground, screaming about not wanting to be filmed, pretending to pass out, and other extreme theatrics all to put a Black woman named Ijeoma Ukenta in harm's way. Abigail struck Ijeoma because Ijeoma asked Abigail to put on a mask or stay at least six feet away. Ijeoma began filming Abigail's dramatic reactions for her safety and having evidence of what occurred (Ukenta, 2021). Before watching the video, I asked each group to notice how they felt in their bodies as they watched the video and what thoughts came up as they watched the video. I chose this video because I think it is important to assess how we, as white folks, respond to this type of white violence through the use of white

women's tears (A.C. Brown, 2018, Ricketts, 2021, S. R. Taylor, 2021, Wilson & Tariq, 2021). I also think it is important to discuss how these types of reactions from white students also show up in the classroom, how we respond to them as white teachers, and who we comfort and who we do not comfort in moments like these.

In Thursday's group, Lindsey admitted that she wanted to know more information and events before the video began. However, Lindsey stated, "I have to remind myself that there's a very clear visual of this person and attempted assault at this person." I admitted that I did the same thing not with the video but in a daycare class with three-year-old's that I was teaching (summer 2021). A young girl came up to me crying and told me a little boy had hit her, and without thinking, I said, "Well, what did you do?" And then I immediately was like, "'No, no, what? What?' No, it doesn't matter. It does not matter what you did. You don't deserve to get hit." Niceness wants us to believe that there are always two sides to every story and that each person should be able to tell theirs with equal footing. However, we have to draw lines in the sand and say, "This is not okay; what you did was wrong and hurtful."

The conversation between Lindsey, Betty, Audrey, and I continued around empathy and justice. Lindsey wanted to look into Abigail's background and the conditions of Abigail's upbringing to think it was ok to engage in extreme reactions such as falling on the floor and screaming in a Victoria's Secret. Lindsey's reasoned

> I can have empathy for this person because to me, you're out of the house at eighteen, and you've been exposed to your parent's views your whole life. And all of the sudden because you've had this fear built up that people of color are gonna

> lie about you and put you on the internet and get rid of you forever through cancel culture. And suddenly, that becomes a reality. Like, the level of breakdown, I can have empathy for understanding a little bit more about this person's background and the fact that this person is still young. But sympathy and empathy aren't the same things. And I don't have sympathy.

However, Betty and I's reaction was one of zero empathy. Betty claimed,

> I didn't even have any empathy at all, even knowing that, well actually in particular, because of her background, that makes me have less empathy for her. Because to me, that whole thing didn't even look real. It didn't even like her tears. It didn't even look like she was actually crying. It looks more like a show to me.

Betty also said that Abigail knew precisely what she was doing and "knew how to get out of facing the responsibility." I mentioned that I also lacked empathy for Abigail and was more empathetic towards what was happening to Ijeoma Ukenta and what would have happened if this scene did not occur in such a public space like the mall but in a dark parking lot.

Lindsey re-explained why she felt empathy for Abigail,

> "I think the empathy piece for me comes because I struggle a lot with having people that I love deeply that I know, in certain circumstances, could become that person. **And, like, it's hard for me to balance like how can I love this person and not think they're a terrible person, but also know that this is a part of them**?" (emphasis added).

And this is where those relationship ties come into play, along with emotional ones too, when analyzing why we as white educators hold on to Niceness. From this point on we would discuss at great length a question I posed by bell hooks (1998) that asks, “How do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?” (as cited in McLeod, 2019). Before I begin to analyze these conversations with hooks (1998) questions in mind. I first want to share Sunday’s CIG initial thoughts on this same video and their responses as well. Then I will analyze them as a whole.

After watching the video, I asked Sunday’s CIG members the same question as Thursday’s CIG. Erica was gone during week five but made comments about relationships with teaching and students that continued this conversation in week six that I will dive into a little later in this chapter. Gabby stated that at first, she was in total disbelief that the whole situation had played out as it did (with Abigail screaming about not wanting to be filmed, Ijeoma continuing to film for her protection, and the white bystanders either doing nothing or asking Ijeoma to leave Abigail alone instead of the other way around). Gabby then added, “To me, that's whiteness and niceness to like a tee. Like, even if I was the one that was wrong. If I cry, everybody's gonna feel sorry for me and know that I'm the victim and side with me.” Molly stated that she also felt shocked by the entirety of Abigail’s actions but also agreed with Gabby that Abigail was playing the victim. Then, Sarah told us something that deeply disturbed the other critical group members and me as well. She told us that there was a TikTok, a video social media site,

that set up this kind of white violence as a challenge for white women to use their tears in situations that ultimately harm Black and brown women and men.

The audacity to approach this type of white violence just made me ill. I think what is worse is that I should not be surprised that this type of challenge would garner viral public attention due to our white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. However, I was still angered by the fact that this was happening, and to make matters worse the same social media website, TikTok that allowed these videos to continue, was the same one that took down the videos Ijeoma posted and also removed her account as well (Kai, 2021). Meanwhile, those who reposted the same videos Ijeoma recorded did not have their content removed, nor were they banned from the site.

Gabby and Molly, who have both taught first grade in their teaching careers, stated that this act that Abigail was doing was a learned behavior. I shared the same daycare example with Sunday's group that I did with Thursday's group. Sarah agreed by adding, "It's more like built-in, I guess what our parents did too but what we learned and how they dealt with it. And our school and our daycare. That's what we learned by seeing, I guess." Molly even suggested that it is ingrained into us (meaning white women) that it is close to Pavlov's theory and shared that,

> We hear the little bells, we see the things. Our caregivers, parents, family members, etc., have taught white women how to use crying as default to get out of trouble and weaponize those tears against Black and brown folks. And that's what we teach, whether we're teaching in K to 12 or those of us who are mentoring student teachers.

Our conversation surrounding this event led to discussion around the relationships we have with Niceness that was taught to us by our families and how we brought that into our teaching careers.

Niceness, Karens, and Social Media

Using the conversations around Victoria's Secret Karen's volatile reaction to her actions and the discussion that followed in the later meetings, I will discuss and analyze how the critical inquiry group members and my personal relationships with our families and our careers as teachers have been situated in Niceness and whiteness. I will also be zooming out on how structural and systematic systems, along with power, discipline those who try to leave Niceness behind individually.

Let's return now to the discussion of Lindsey's empathy and lack thereof for Betty and I. Lindsey's honest admittance of "how can I love this person and not think they're a terrible person" because she knew that her family members or co-workers could have reacted just as Abigail did. She went on to add that she felt it was her responsibility as a,

> "Woke or whatever white person to do the educating and the work with other white people because it is not people of color's responsibility, so then it's probably mine. And so, I think that's part of the reason I look for empathy, not to justify. But because I live in Oklahoma, and gosh, like, anywhere I work that could be a co-worker who freaks out like that somewhere or, you know, gosh, the wrong day, it could be my mom. And like, ``What would I say to her in that situation?"

Lindsey continued by wondering how she would get a person she knew or someone like Abigail to calm down and not do any more damage than she already caused. Lindsey explained that a big piece of her empathy was surrounded by her own family and wanting her nephew to grow up in a "slightly different environment" than her sister-in-law did. Although, she admitted that this work is frustratingly slow due to white fragility because "if somebody thinks you're calling them a racist, the conversation is over, and no growth happens."

Lindsey's honest discussion about how to interact with her family members reminded me of a quote by Austin Channing Brown (2018) in her book *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*. She discusses how many of us white folks want so desperately to believe that racist actions such as Abigails are single isolated events. Brown (2018) writes

> This is why the word racist offends 'nice white people' so deeply. It challenges their self-indignation as good people. Sadly, most white people are more worried about being called racist than about whether or not their actions are in fact racist or harmful. (p. 104)

I do not think Lindsey herself is offended by the word racist more than the act of racism, but I do think she points out that so many white folks like us are, whether they be our past selves, our family members, or our co-workers. In the conversation, I also admitted that this is where I struggle the most, and I shared bell hooks (1998) quote with them about wanting to see the humanity in people while still holding them accountable.

For me, there is little distance between empathy and apathy. We have seen so many times how easy it is for American society to forgive a white person just because they said they were sorry. At the time of this conversation, in the summer of 2021, I used the example of Louis C.K., a comedian, who had sexually assaulted five women, who were also comedians, and was back on tour using what he had done as new material (Ortiz, 2017; Hamedy 2022). I frustratedly stated that he was never truly "canceled" but that he may have lost some notoriety and some Netflix deals, but he was fine beyond that. And then, recently, on April 3, 2022, Louis C.K. won a Grammy for best comedy album (Hamedy, 2022). Louis C.K. was never held accountable for his actions, and many white men and women escape accountability. Loofbourow (2018) calls this a "self-pardon" where white people, men, in particular, will say they will do better, and that is somehow enough. So, I asked again where we draw the line between being empathetic for people's mistakes and saying, "I am sorry." Yet, just saying sorry is not enough. There are more steps to reconciliation and healing than just one apology.

Betty noticed that Abigail was not apologizing or "taking responsibility for her actions." She added that even during the recording, the camera did not show Abigail's idea of who she was, and that is where her empathy for Abigail ended. Lindsey pressed on that she has had her moments, but "nothing to this degree" where she did apologize because she was an adult. However, she felt that Abigail was not mentally an adult, even though she was twenty-three years old when the recording took place. In the end, Abigail admitted to acting the way she did base on the fear she would lose her job and apartment. I also searched to see if anything ever came of Ms. Ukenta's police report against

Abigail, but there was no new information from any reputable sources that I could find. Our society had already moved on.

Furthermore, another so-called "Karen," named Amy Cooper, a white woman, had called the cops on Christian Cooper (no relation to Amy), a Black man who was in Central Park birdwatching, and asked Amy to put her dog on a leash. Instead, Amy called the police and in hysterics, added panic to her voice and specifically stated, "there's a man, African American, he's got a bicycle helmet. He's recording me and threatening my dog and me" (Booker, 2021). However, from the video that Mr. Cooper is filming, you can see that this is an outright lie. When all this occurred in May 2020, Amy's job fired her, her dog was taken from her, and she was charged with a Class A misdemeanor for falsely filing a police report (Booker 2021, Ransom, 2020). Fast forward to one year later, and Amy had her dog back; she was no longer facing criminal charges due to completing a total of five therapy sessions, and she is now suing her former employer for discriminating "against her because of her race and gender" (Kennedy, 2021). Additionally, Amy still claims she is not a racist and did not "mean to cause harm to the African American community" (Booker, 2021). And there we are again, with good intentions and meaning well, the phrases so often used by Nice white people when they want their actions against Black and brown communities to be quickly forgotten or just chalked up to an honest mistake.

Nice white Folks, Family, and Hard Histories

Once again, I am reminded of Austin Channing Brown's (2018) poignant words on nice white people and their focus on their intentions and goodness rather than their

impact. She declares, “When you believe niceness disproves the presence of racism, it’s easy to start believing bigotry is rare and that the label racist should be applied only to mean-spirited, intentional acts of discrimination” (A.C. Brown, 2018, p. 101). However, this entire Niceness ideology completely ignores “how racism operates in systems and structures enabled by nice people” and in turn puts the burden on Black women and men to “be nice in return, rather than truthful” (A.C. Brown, 2018, p. 18). As I briefly mentioned before, Castagno (2014) examines the root of Niceness is white folks claiming they meant well and focusing on their good intentions rather than their impact. This leads me to an important analogy that Erica told to our Sunday CIG members in week six. She explained,

> And, yes, I used to be one of those ‘not every white person’ kind of people until someone used the very, very, very simple analogy. And I stress simple because I'm so stupid for not having listened to people before, and it took something this easy to make me see. But you know, you're walking past another person on a sidewalk and you bump into that person. You didn't mean to bump into that person, but you still managed to knock them off the sidewalk like they get hit by a car. Sure, you didn't mean to do that, but that person was still hurt by your actions.

Often, another focus we as white folks like to turn to is the concept of what we will be giving up by not giving into Niceness rather than what could be gained. In the continued conversation during week five, Lindsey mentioned that she had held her own version of a conscious raising group after the very public murder of George Floyd by

police in May 2020. She expressed that the white women in her neighborhood realized suddenly that they are racist and had been participating in “Neo-segregation like I've moved my family to the suburbs because that's what you do. When I said good school, I meant mostly white school, even though I never would have said that out loud.” Then when these white women voiced their concerns with their family members, such as “it’s not okay for the police to murder people even if they’ve committed a crime and their family members lept on them” (Lindsey). Those same family members did not invite these white women to the next family event and Lindsey expressed that it was very much a white solidarity thing and that “the price of being a responsible white person now is often much higher than people are realistically willing to pay, does it mean that your child doesn't have grandparents anymore? Like, it just seems like such high stakes.”

Be that as it may, I have a really hard time with this because I have had to cut out family members for other reasons and it was not easy to do but it was very much worth it. So, I struggle to find any kind of empathy when this is what many white folks find as a loss, when the Black, Indigenous and other communities of color are not only losing their family through national and state violence but still find the courage to go against the system knowing full well it could mean life or death. However, many white people draw the line at whether they have to spend Thanksgiving alone or not, and I just cannot fathom those two scenarios as the same types of loss. Although, teacher and education activist, Christine E. Sleeter (1996) tells us that “No white person is exempt from pressures from other white people to ‘fit in,’ with the price of nonconformity often being

the loss of approval and friendship" (p. 263). And as Lindsey stated earlier, not every white person is willing to pay that price.

Furthermore, Lindsey did say that she had no problem with not being invited to the next family event due to standing up or not staying silent when family members are saying racist things. Although, she points out that most white people do not feel like they can be excluded from family, so they stay quiet when grandparents, parents, or other family members make questionable comments and tell themselves, "they're not going to change anyway, and if you say something, it'll just make it worse" (Lindsey).

Betty also added that she has fallen into similar thinking at family events because the family member making questionable comments was her Uncle, a white professor, and also her ride for the evening. She stated that she probably has gotten into the conversation about white and class privilege, and if you grow up poor, there is still a privilege in being white. However, in this case, she chose to stay silent and stated that even if she had said anything, it would have fallen on deaf ears, like, ``I would just be sitting there talking, and there would be nothing happening" (Betty). Although to not paint Betty in a one-dimensional light, she did say that during another family outing, the subject of Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation on the Supreme Court and she very loudly exclaimed in the middle of the restaurant, "I screamed that Brett Kavanaugh was a dickhead and had absolutely no place being on the Supreme Court. And everybody in my family was just like "whaaaaaaaaaat" (drags out the word for emphasis). Also, Lindsey mentioned that,

> If we don't deal with these deep-seated things that we were raised around, you know, the voices of our ancestors that programmed our brain from a young age,

then it pops up when we don't want it to. **And we're still responsible for those actions, even if they suck and make us look bad** (emphasis added).

Lindsey's words confer with Thandeka's (1999) psychoanalysis of whiteness in which the white racial identity brings about "an impaired sense of a core self," which is created by multiple "episodes in which a person's difference from a white ideal was attacked by her or his own caretaker(s)" (p. 127). Molly, Gabby, and Sarah's echoed these sentiments as growing up and being educated in whiteness and Niceness, such as crying to get what you want, as learned behavior and how your parents teach you through their actions.

Sleeter (2011) examines how family matters and whiteness are taught to us by stories passed down from generation to generation but often leaves out the contexts of race and class. As white educators, these familial contexts do not live solely beyond the classroom contract hours, but come into our classroom with how we think about Black and brown families, our ideas and notions of "civil discourse," and those same fears that arise when calling out or calling in a family member for racist or sexist comments, show up with our colleagues as well. In the next section, I will mainly use Sunday's critical inquiry groups' continued conversation around Abigail's white woman tears and how to confront those in the classroom without derailing the discussion or stopping it altogether to comfort whiteness and emotionalities whiteness (Matias, 2016).

A Bridge between Emotional and Relational Investments to the Past and Whiteness & Niceness as a Whole

Matias (2016) opens her book, *Feeling White: Whiteness, Emotionality, and Education* with a story of a white women student named Haley crying that she and her

family never enslaved people and because of this "fact" racism is not her fault. The conversation continues as Haley is comforted by a white male student Thurston. Meanwhile, the emotions of the Black women in the room were ignored and, in turn, being called "racist for bringing it up," with it being the topic of race (Matias, 2016, p. 1). This idea of our families never enslaving Black men and women is a common resistance in many classrooms where teachers make critical and anti-racist pedagogy in the classroom a priority (Applebaum, 2017, Applebaum, 2020b, Bonilla-Silva, 2006, Castagno, 2019, Cushing-Leubner, 2020, Matias, 2016, Matias, 2020). Although, I found Lindsey's poignant words on whether our families did or did not enslave Black men and women something that we white teachers could reflect on and even bring up with our students. This conversation also shows that whiteness and Niceness go beyond the individual/micro-investments into Niceness and whiteness, but the larger powers at play in how as white folks, we benefit from a racist system whether we took part in building it or not (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). The conversation went as follows during week two of our discussion of how Lily, a Black and Indigenous woman, was treated by her white professor and white students in her class and the importance of learning how to facilitate a conversation around race with our students instead of just shutting it down.

> **Lindsey:** On the other end of the spectrum, my family has been here, like I've traced back multiple sides, but almost all of my ancestors were here in the late 1600s. Nobody really emigrated hereafter 1700. That said, my family line is only composed of northeastern white Europeans. And while nobody in my family enslaved people, it's not because they didn't want to. And nobody in my family

participated in the Tulsa Race Massacre because they weren't in Tulsa. That's probably the only reason. There's just this idea of like," oh, but not my family!" And then I don't know, I look around at everything that's happening. I'm like, no, definitely my family.

Betty: Yes

Lindsey: Because that was what was considered what you did as a person to be a good person and in your community. Like, that was how things happened. These white supremacists [and the] racist society have been part of America since 1619. Like it's not…

Betty: Yeah

Lindsey: …not something that you could have escaped, even if you wanted to. You know, just the process, like if you decided in the South that you wanted to sell like, you wanted to free all of the people that you had enslaved, you literally couldn't do it. Like, there were laws preventing you from being able to. So, this idea of like, "I'm a white person in this country, and I didn't do anything," you know, "My ancestors didn't do it," whatever. It's like, you know what, we all benefited somewhat a little bit somehow.

Betty: Yeah!

Lindsey: That doesn't mean you can't be part of the solution.

It's important to remember that "Racial injustices, like slavery and our system of mass incarceration, were purposeful inventions, but instead of seeking to understand how we got here, the national narrative remains filled with comforting myths, patchwork

timelines, and colonial ideals" (A.C. Brown, 2018, p. 113). As mentioned in Chapter 4 and earlier in this chapter, this continued push to "try to live comfortably in ignorance of America's racial history" is not only in our familial, personal, emotional, and material investments with Niceness and whiteness, but it something we are also passing down to our students as well (A.C. Brown, 2018, p. 113).

Educational Relationships and Niceness

Throughout our meetings as a group, we discussed ways in which our relationship to the Lady Bountiful narrative had us, white educators, buying into Niceness and whiteness as the best way to bring about teaching and learning in our classrooms. Even when we thought we were being rebels like Erica had mentioned earlier in week three by claiming,

> You haven't forked off on anything, you're not blazing any trails, you just kind of have your own little thing very parallel and very, very, very close. It's like the highway, and then you have those service roads on the side. I was on the service road. And that was me, thinking I was such a badass.

Her reasons for this claim are because she thought if she could teach her students how to survive in a white supremacist culture (i.e., respectability politics as in using "proper" English, dressing professionally, etc.) then her students, especially her Black and brown students, could become successful since education would be their "saving grace" (Erica). Molly expressed, "One thing that I think comes out and Lady bountiful is grit. And it's one of those things that we teach or that we were taught to teach if that makes sense."

Critical literacy educator Noah Asher Golden (2017) also echoes Molly's sentiments on grit by saying, "The popularity of what I and others call the "grit narrative of success" as the answer to systemic issues and needs in urban schools and communities is of deep concern" (p. 347). Golden (2017) continues by explaining that these communities "cannot 'overcome' inequitable funding patterns and structural opportunity gaps through adoption of a grit narrative" (p. 347). As Erica would say, "there's no way to self-care your way out of an oppressive system." The grit narrative and Lady bountiful go hand in hand because it buys into other ideologies such as the myth of meritocracy (Milner, 2010), and that urban students (usually Black and brown students) somehow lack the "structure" or "culture" to be successful in school (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 108). Weis and Fine's (2012) critical bifocality that I defined and explained in Chapter 3 comes back into play. Weis and Fine (2012) express that we do not live our lives in individual spheres but that the systems and structural constraints do impact our own lives and the institutions we reside. Critical education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) sums up these ideas of grit by stating, "We lack complex understandings of how individual, family, community, school, and societal factors interact to create school failure for some students" (p. 106).

It is important to remember that looking into how to change ourselves through critical reflection is needed, but so is the nuance that power, systematic oppression, and white supremacy patriarchal capitalism are also there as part of the systems we are fighting and also benefit from. These nuances and effects of larger systems on change are not something that Erica, Gabby, Molly, and I learned in our pre-service education

courses and something we learned while as educators and going back to get our masters or doctorates in education. Sarah was introduced to some topics on critical conversations around American history, but not in literacy, math, or her science courses.

Many ways anti-racist learning showed up is in the choice of our curriculum through books and how we set up our community in our classrooms with our students. Erica stopped reading just all the "dead white dudes" as she called them (i.e., Shakespeare, Steinback, Hemingway, etc.). Molly who became a library media specialist halfway through her career examined that the books one chooses as a teacher can have an impact on many students. She also mentioned how much we, as elementary teachers, need to stop reading *Indian in the Cupboard* by Lynne Reid Banks, because of its awful portrayal of Indigenous people and the lack of discussion around the book when teachers do read it in class. Erica also talked about how we can say we support our students and put up pride flags and Black Lives Matter flags, but at the end of the day if you are teaching from a book, like Harry Potter, which has a transphobic author, then as teachers we are saying "her opinion, who she is, as an author matters more than those trans kids in my class" (Erica). She goes on to express that there is a difference between just having books in the classroom that a student can read and then books around which teachers create whole unit plans around like class discussions, activities, and assignments.

Embracing an anti-racist pedagogy in the classroom may mean many of us will have to give up on activities (i.e., Family history tree), books (i.e., Dr. Seuss), and things we have emotional relationships with teaching because they have been passed down or are familiar to us. We, white educators, also must start to notice when we are giving in to

those learned Lady Bountiful traits such as crying to get our way. An example of this is a story Gabby shared with us on how her school had a petition going on to change their school mascot because the individual in the mascot emblem is a colonizer. She told us the teachers discussing the issue of this mascot were having a very passionate conversation, and then "in that meeting, there were two white women who were in tears, talking in that meeting, saying we cannot take this thing away, it's our school's tradition" (Gabby). Although, Gabby did tell us that the conversation about the mascot ended due to her colleague's white women's tears.

Another example was when Sarah saw a similar incident happen in a Black sororities and fraternities meeting during our conversations. She said the Black student speakers were having pointed discussions on racism and white privilege when a white woman student started crying. This white woman student claimed that reverse racism happened to her while she lived in Atlanta and Sarah said that "everyone was saying that's not the same thing. Like, we get you're trying to like to compare it, but it's not the same thing." I then asked her if the conversation continued after this or if the white woman's tears derailed the conversation altogether. Sarah stated that the conversation came to a halt from what she could remember, and the room became awkward and tense. Even though those tears were not loud and screaming like Abigail's were from the Victoria's Secret incident, these white women teachers and students still stopped the flow of conversation that could have ultimately led to reconciliation or a better understanding of power within education systems and ourselves. Matias (2016) situates these reactions by white teachers and students by framing, "Individual oppressor groups make these

moves compulsively to squelch the shameful dissonance between their idealized beliefs and the knowledge of their actual actions" (p. 52). In the same context, as Lindsey mentioned above, unless white folks deal with our own deep-seated emotions around whiteness and Niceness, the vitriol needed to keep distancing ourselves from the complex understandings of being part of the system will keep happening.

One way to break the cycle of continuing Niceness and whiteness when these conversations come up in our classrooms with our students is to start understanding the complications of "all" and the "well, let's just listen to everybody's perspective," as Erica called it in our conversation around having critical conversations in the classroom. In week two, Lindsey advocated for the idea of "Ouch, Then Educate." She expanded on this by explaining that the students and she have "essential agreements for hard conversations in her classroom in her classroom." For example, she said that if someone says something hurtful or upsetting, "They just say, Oh, hold on, like that statement hurt me. Here's why. Ouch. Then Educate. Just to give yourself time to take a breath before you respond." For a classroom of fifth graders, this is a wonderful way to start having those needed conversations. Although, as students get older, I do worry about the need to draw harder lines in the sand.

For example, during the spring semester of this school year (2022), I taught Sociology of Gender at a regional university. I also set up norms or essential agreements with my students regarding the discussion board (the class was completely online and asynchronous). One of these norms was, "We are **NOT** debating anyone's humanity. You don't have to agree but challenging anyone's gender identity or gender expression is not

okay." For me, this meant that debating how anyone identifies was not up for conversation. One student tested this norm by wanting to write her main paper for my class about Trans athletes taking away her chances to win medals on a sports team because she was not running against "real women." I knew immediately that I could not allow this to happen for many reasons. There is zero peer-reviewed research on this topic that would prove her so-called research question. Secondly, it was a borderline Title XI violation. Thirdly, I was also worried about the damage this would do to the Trans student I did have in class, having to see their classmates' presentations at the end of the semester. I wrote all this up professionally in an email and gave other suggestions over gender and sports research the student could do. It took a couple of weeks before I heard from the student again, but she agreed and chose a topic about wage gaps in sports instead.

Some teachers applauded this. Others thought I was not allowing civil discourse to happen in the classroom. However, civility is similar to Niceness and whiteness. Critical educator and queer activist Cris Mayo (2001) claims, "rather than seeing civility as opposed to discrimination, civility can be seen as a central activity of discrimination." (p. 79). Applebaum (2020b) applies Mayo's ideas further by stating, "Civility can mask rather than engage with conflict and difference, and it can create a façade of respect that conceals discrimination and the disregard of those who are deemed 'uncivil'" (p. 720). The call for civility here was to comfort the white cis-hetero student in terms of "well, she needed to find out or learn on her own," but instead, I used civility, in this case, to protect my trans student and help my cis student on to a different path that would allow

her to pass my class. In the end, everyone still learned different things, but in this case, an already marginalized group was not marginalized further.

Conclusion

Overall, our relational investments into Niceness and whiteness show up at home with our families and in our classrooms. Many teachers become disciplined into being versions of Nice white teachers by the school boards, administrators, colleagues, and even our students, who expect a certain amount of Niceness from us (Clements and Stutelberg, 2020). When choosing to be willful and speak out against these systems or the individuals in our life, such as family members, there is needed consideration of safety and power. Erica felt empowered to speak up about the curriculum over Twitter, a social media platform. Lindsey felt empowered to have these conversations through essential agreements. Many of us also felt empowered knowing that we had a community on which we could rely to bounce ideas off of and folks that would help us integrate our feelings on Lady Bountiful traits such as the notion of respect. For example, Betty and Lindsey discussed respect and how we expect a certain kind of respect that becomes coded in whiteness and Niceness as white teachers. Betty claimed that no matter a student's race, once a teacher allows disrespect in the classroom, it opens the door to other issues. However, Lindsey pushed back and stated, "I think white people need to understand how to own their feelings better. Yeah [to] understand that the way that they feel is not necessarily somebody else's responsibility." Lindsey says that a teacher,

> We can feel intimidated or can feel disrespectful, or disrespected. But that doesn't mean that the person was behaving in a way that was disrespectful. Just because you feel uncomfortable in a situation or you feel angry, doesn't mean that the other person's actions are the cause, like white people are terrible at dealing with their own emotions and shit.

Matias (2016) echoes Linsey's words by informing us that "White teacher candidates must learn to re-learn their emotions. Instead of resonating in guilt, ferociously denying the salience of race or crying emotional angst, they must be re-directed to racially-just projects" (p. 135). An example Matias (2016) offers as a racially-just project is "it is okay to be angry, sad, and guilty - but then transform those feelings to projects of anti-racism despite the discomfort of feel again" (p. 135). The work of sitting in these emotions that Matias (2016) talks about above is creating a community where emotions are not only discussed but teased out without harming Black and brown people who do not need to hear our hangs ups of why letting go of racist family members is difficult, or how we are more afraid of losing our job than we are speaking up and going against the flow. I do not say these statements as judgments but as an effort to put the burden of learning to deal with our biases and racism back on ourselves, so when we do enter racially diverse anti-racist projects, we are not derailing them with our white tears, hang-ups, guilt, shame, etc. Instead, we can become better accomplices and co-conspirators in the critical and anti-racist teaching needed in the classroom (Love, 2019).

CHAPTER VI

LEAVING NICENESS BEHIND IS A STRUGGLE

Your Love is Killing Me/Us

You say that you love me,
but your love is killing me.
You say we can agree to disagree,
but you are disagreeing with basic human rights.
You say that we can have a civil discourse
and that I should hear both sides.
But your rhetoric causes fear in the hearts of people
and turns my life into a political game.
Your love is killing me.
You say we are all human,
but in the same breath threatened my life
because it is not something that is known to you
Due to your continued willful ignorance.
Your love is killing me…
So, when I say I don't want your love
It's because your love isn't loving at all.
But daggers dressed in pretty cloth.
Please just STOP!
Your love is killing us.

By: Megan Ruby

Introduction

I wrote this poem after attending a local school board meeting in which some parents and conservative organizations spewed outrage over the district's gender-affirming bathroom policy. Since 2015, Stillwater Public Schools (SPS) has allowed any student to use the bathroom of their choice that aligns with their gender identity, a policy that has a significant impact on Trans youths' experiences in school. Given the past two years of political mudslinging and hate, anti-Trans bills are on the rise across many Republican-controlled states, Oklahoma included. As a Trans/non-binary person myself and with my passion for social justice, I went to the board meeting to stand up for Trans youth and Trans rights. There were many speakers, some for Trans inclusivity and many against the idea that gender identity can change and is flexible. White men and women spewed transphobic language around body parts and said that men "pretending to be women" should not use the same restroom as their precious, fragile little darling girls. I could discuss how these so-called fears become centered around toxic masculinity. These parents are not afraid of Trans kids or people but society's inability to hold cis men accountable. However, that would be a much longer discussion and beyond the scope of my dissertation.

I bring this event up because of the rhetoric of "love" to pass on hate to Trans individuals who were different from these cis white heteronormative parents and in the name of protecting cis women and girls. Almost every single speaker uttered phrases such as "I don't hate Trans youth, I just disagree with you," "I love you, but I don't want you in the bathroom that makes you feel safe," and "We can love one another but

disagree with what's right" and so on. This mantra of love was not about actually loving a Trans kid or wanting Trans kids to feel safe at school. This form of love was used as Niceness to say I see you within my frames of reference only and I will do everything in my power to stop you from changing how I see the world.

Additionally, many white women spoke about their feelings of unsafety. They told stories with tears in their eyes about how they were scared to change during gym class, getting their period at school, and the many different changes that puberty brings to those assigned females at birth. They cried and pleaded with the SPS board that a "biological male" in the restroom when they were growing up would have made life so much more challenging than being a "regular" teenager going through puberty. However, these white women's tears that pleaded for "safety" from Trans youth and adults do not affect white cis men when they are the ones perpetuating the harm. For example, when Christine Blasey Ford testified before the Senate against the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh due to the crimes he allegedly committed against her, she was emotional and gave heart-wrenching testimony (Hammad, 2020). However, Dr. Ford's testimony did not stop the confirmation of her alleged abuser from taking a seat in the highest court in the country. Hammad (2020) explains why these white women's tears do not sway white men when they are the perpetrators because "they were never designed to implicate white men" (p. 71). Instead, white women's tears become a tool to subjugate multiple marginalized identities such as Black and brown men and women, queer people, and Trans youth and adults (Ahmed, 2004, Hammad, 2020, Matias, 2016). We saw this first hand with Abigail Elphick's and Amy Cooper's weaponizing of white women's tears

against a Black birdwatcher, Chris Cooper, and a Black woman, Ijeoma Ukenta, just trying to do some shopping. These white women's tears only become a serious matter when the person at "fault" was not a white cis-heterosexual male. Then and only then did white cis men feel that they had a strong duty to protect their white women and daughters.

Furthermore, Ahmed (2004) explores the narratives of this vitriol and hate only comes to the surface when whiteness feels threatened. The hate these parents and conservative groups spewed at the SPS board meeting was grounded in the idea that the world they knew became something they no longer recognized. So instead of learning about people and stepping outside their worldview, they chose to fear and used that fear to spew hate. These white cis parents' fears revolved around the notion that their way of life would no longer exist, including their history, futures, and children's futures (Ahmed, 2004). However, these white cis parents did not consider the fear, pain, loneliness, and comfort of the Trans folks in the meeting or the Trans youth in our schools. Ahmed (2004) explains this hatred as "a discourse of pain" because white folks, including white women, paint a picture of themselves as the victim or "injured party" due to the "hurt or even damage by the invasion of others" (p. 43). The othering that continues to happen through concepts of Niceness and whiteness continues to produce harm along the intersections of gender and whiteness. In summary, harm does happen to white women when white cis men are the perpetrators of violence in many forms. Still, white women also weaponize their white tears to cause harm to folks of color, queer people, Trans youth, and more by leaning on the fragility of their gender.

This hateful rhetoric disguised as "love" reminded me of the same rhetoric used in classrooms across the country: "but I love all my students the same." However, as Betty pointed out earlier, the word *all* is coded in white cis heteronormative students, and those who do not fit that mold are disciplined or punished until they do. As many of us know, love is a verb or an action, and discriminating against Trans youth, Black and brown students, banning CRT, centering white comfortability and emotionalities, aligning ourselves relationally to power, and choosing Niceness is not love. As white educators, we must ask ourselves, "Whose pain are we angry about? Whose misdeeds do we feel guilt for? Whose loneliness do we seek to comfort?" (Matias, 2016, p. 63). In critically self-reflecting on our answers to these questions, I believe we will find the response to who we truly love and if that love is actually inclusive of *all* students or not.

Creating Community and Embracing the Feminist Killjoy

During our eight weeks together, my critical inquiry group members and I created a space to share our pitfalls, mistakes, and understandings of Niceness and whiteness at the micro and macro levels and most importantly, the need to be vulnerable with one another. One of the outcomes of the study was ideas and examples of how people will act from this point forward in addition to what they got out of it. Molly started out with her pseudonym from the beginning till the second to last week and called me asking me if she could share her true identity with the Sunday group because she wanted to stay in contact with the group after our official time together was over. Erica, who admittedly felt alone in her own journey in her unlearning of colorblindness, the myth of meritocracy, and speaking out against systems of oppression, told us that this group made her hopeful that

many other Oklahoma educators "are willing to put in the effort, and the time and have the self-reflection." Gabby came in every week with a new realization of how Niceness and her religious upbringing had kept her from realizing the connections to Lady Bountiful, whiteness, and her familial relationships. Halfway through our time together, Gabby told Sunday's group members and me, "this has been much more rewarding for me than I expected. And, and I don't know that I would have done this had I not been a part of this. So, this is really important. Good work." Although there is no way to quantify how much of a difference these conversations made (nor is that the goal), Gabby, along with others, mentioned many times how they continued these conversations around Niceness and whiteness with their families, friends, and colleagues.

For example, Gabby had conversations with her daughter and sister. Molly had them with a fellow teacher, Lindsey spoke up in a car full of friends on the way to a vacation, and Sarah has become more vocal on social media. Audrey, Betty, Erica, and I are still having conversations about Niceness and whiteness throughout this past school year. However, this does not mean that there we have solved all our issues and disentangled from Niceness and whiteness altogether. After all, this is a process and a complex, messy one as well.

Members of each critical inquiry group shared important takeaways. Gabby shared that she thinks having a community to rely on is essential to her growth, along with learning to embrace the "trouble maker" identity (i.e., feminist killjoy) and that "we don't all have to be experts today. Just as long as we're constantly self-evaluating and trying to move down the road." Erica again mentioned that being in community made her

feel hopeful, which is not a common word she would use to describe herself. She even humorously and exasperatedly said, “I really am feeling more hopeful. I know. I can't believe I'm using that word. But yeah, we're hopeful.” Molly stated that the conversations with Gabby, Erica, and Sarah “made me stop and ponder and go, well, you know what, I think that's a good idea,” especially with how she approaches teaching her pre-service educators given recent bans on CRT and discussion of LGBTQIA++ in the classroom. Sarah shared with Molly about the different student teaching sites in a specific Oklahoma city and how to address anti-racist pedagogy for those students since Sarah had lived in the same town and gone to those same schools. The kind of information that would have not been able to be shared if we had not had the opportunity to be in community with one another.

In Thursday’s group, our discussion around community and its importance for crossing white solidarity lines and furthering anti-racist pedagogy in the classroom was important to many of us in various ways. Betty disclosed that she realized that disentangling and disinvesting in Niceness and whiteness is “a whole process.” She has begun to see “things from other people's perspectives, you know, whether it was Indigenous people, or African Americans or so on and so forth, and that helps me see, um, other experiences that were not my own” (Betty). Audrey shared that she had more questions than answers but was thankful for this time and space to ask questions and see how Niceness and whiteness are stumbling blocks when embracing anti-racist pedagogy. Lindsey made a significant point about Niceness and whiteness's “good intentions,”

> Doing this work is not about proving that we as white folks are good people, but that looking into "the bigger awareness of the effect your actions and the system of those actions, as opposed to like those little things that make you feel like you're not a bad person, or that you're just not racist.

She goes on to talk about how as white folks and teachers we should not continue Niceness and whiteness narratives such as sending one's kids to the "good schools" which is synonymous or coded, with mostly white schools. As Betty said, disentangling and disinvesting from Niceness and whiteness in relational contexts takes constant work and critical self-reflection. It will take a commitment to unlearn and avoid defensiveness in the process. The metaphor I used the most was continuing our journey to push away Niceness and embrace the life of a feminist killjoy. It's a lot like taking a long trip down an unknown route. There will be times we make the wrong turn, we get off on the wrong exits, we stay too long in one place, or we pay the price for taking more time to get where we want to be. However, just like taking an unknown route, we have the North Star, like GPS, to guide us. The North Star is the brightest star in the sky, and "it never changes position -- it always points north" (Love, 2019, p, 122). Professor and abolitionist teacher Bettina Love defines theory as her North Star because "theory consistently explains patterns of injustice when sound bites, flamboyant yet hollow teaching practices, and myths about dark people block ideas of humanity, justice, and dignity. Theory is a 'location for healing,' like the North Star" (p. 122). As white scholars, we have critical race theory, Black and critical feminism, and critical whiteness studies to guide us, like North Star (or modern GPS). When we make those incorrect moves, and when evolving

theory comes to alert us that we are on the wrong path or took a wrong turn, we need and should learn to pivot and change.

Disentangling from Niceness and whiteness is constant course correction and learning that being corrected does not make oneself incapable of doing the hard work. It just means there are times when we will get it wrong, and accepting this truth will help white teachers and white folks in education in the long run. Also, as a quick side note, “theory does not solve issues -- only action and solidarity can do that, -- but theory gives you the language to fight, knowledge to stand on, and a humbling reality of what intersectional social justice is up against" (Love, 2019, p. 122). In other words, we should not always be dependent on theory only but also put our labor into learning and unlearning ways of whiteness and Niceness by reading anti-racist works by Black and brown authors, paying for Black and brown speakers to come to our professional developments, seeking out media that centers Black and brown folks experiences, and more. In conclusion, I follow up on this metaphor with practical takeaways for white educators in the field and those in pre-service education. I also offer implications for future research and continuing our journey of discarding Niceness behind in hopes for a future of schooling that has the critical conversations that are so desperately needed in this space and time.

Implications of Research in Theory and Practice

Ahmed (2017) writes, ``the choice in being willful “is not a story of a lonely person fighting against the tide of social traffic. No: this is not that story” (p. 82). In choosing to do critical inquiry groups as part of this critical and collaborative narrative

inquiry into how Niceness impacts white educator's experiences, I discovered that white teachers could build communities with one another and have uncomfortable/critical conversations about how to break the lines of white solidarity and continue their anti-racist work in the classroom and their personal lives as well. Betty and Audrey came to terms with their own complicitness in the education system in community with one another. Our education system did not think of Black and brown students at its conception. In conversation, Gabby, Erica, and Molly investigated their own likeness to Lady Bountiful and came to terms with their lack of anti-racist pedagogy in their classrooms when they first started teaching. These critical inquiry groups gave space for critical and collaborative conversations about Niceness and whiteness as part of larger oppressive systems (white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism) and assessing our own emotional, material, and relational investments into Niceness and whiteness. We were able to be upfront about our fears of getting anti-racist pedagogy wrong and offered feedback about how that fear is a trap to keep us silenced. We discussed what our personal and professional lives would look like if we did indeed embrace the feminist killjoy persona. White women are already really good at stopping the flow of critical and anti-racist conversations with our white tears, so what if we turned that ability to stop the flow of racist, classist, sexist, etc., conversations from our colleagues, families, peers, and even ourselves.

Another takeaway from this research is the implications of methodologically making a critical and collaborative narrative inquiry with established relationships with the study's educators/narrators/critical inquiry group members. Methodologically, I set

out to hear, record, and critically investigate my critical inquiry group members' stories along with my own on how Niceness and whiteness affect the implementation of anti-racist pedagogy in the classroom. However, I did not initially consider how the collaboration and standing relationship pieces of this study would affect the stories from week to week and how they would build off of each other.

One reason I did not consider this as a more significant implication is that speaking with educators, peers in my classes, discussions online, within my friendships, etc., about critical issues in anti-racist teaching is how I exist in this world. Just like the willful child's arm coming up repeatedly, these conversations for myself with others also kept coming up. I have engaged in conversations about anti-racism with my physical therapist, my doctor, my friends, my family members, my colleagues, my students, and many others as well. I firmly believe that when the opportunity arises to discuss and share knowledge about how systems of oppression work within macro and micro levels, one must take that opportunity to engage in critical conversations instead of just polite conversation that is dictated by Niceness and whiteness. I also believe this work cannot be done in isolation, but by being in community with others who are also committed to anti-racism ways of being in their personal and professional lives.

So, when it came time to begin my study on Niceness and whiteness and how it impedes anti-racist pedagogy in the classroom, it felt natural to choose to come together in those conversations with people/educators I already knew. The difference is that this time these conversations would happen within a research project that had its own systematic processes with regular meetings, readings, and journal entries. However, for

me it was not about doing certain things or following certain procedures, research-wise, (although I did have discussion questions and topics ready for each CIG group every week) but about anti-racism as a way of being in the world and constantly engaging in inquiry with those I am in relationship with. I demonstrated this engagement with anti-racism methodologically but it also grew out of my own way of being in the world with classmates, friends, and colleagues, which also shaped not only the research process but also the analysis and dissemination as I wrote and shared my work.

The entire research process was based in collaboration with every CIG member and continuing are conversations on Niceness and whiteness even after the study concluded. The standing relationships and collaboration pieces helped me keep nuance and complexity within view and not paint anyone educator with broad strokes. It also allowed each CIG member to share their own pitfalls with Niceness and whiteness and how they have found ways to learn from those mistakes and continue working towards disentangling from Niceness and whiteness as a whole. I believe future researchers doing a critical and collaborative inquiry, can consider who they are in community with already and how extending those conversations in a formal research setting can still allow for organic, nuance, and complex knowledge to come forward while still taking a critical approach on ways we can continue to work at centering anti-racist ways of being and pedagogy.

Another methodological takeaway I discovered when doing a critical and collaborative narrative inquiry was considering the length of group meetings, readings, and journal prompts. It is important to think about how to balance the work necessary, the

time, the fatigue, and the depth of the work for each educator/narrator/participant in the study. For instance, at first, I feared that if each critical inquiry group member did not answer each question or stay on task with everything I planned, my study would fall apart. However, the opposite happened, and the stories of each CIG member became enriched by the other. The continued collaboration throughout this research project from what topics we should spend longer on (i.e., Lady Bountiful took two weeks instead of my original plan of one week) and not adhering to every pre-written-out question I came up with allowed all of us involved in this study to move and reflect on our critical consciousness and processing of our choices throughout each week.

Altogether, the collaborative piece of my critical and collaborative narrative inquiry became essential to how each educator was able to tell difficult but necessary stories on how they went along or disrupted Niceness in their classrooms. The community we built together helped teach us how to have these critical conversations not only with each other but with those in our inner circle as well. I also believe that having previously established relationships with each CIG member, allowed me to continue my way of being in the world with a collaborative approach and let the methodology organically expand. I think this is something future researchers who enact upon a critical and collaborative research design should consider in their work as well. In summary, the implications for future research and pedagogy with this critical and collaborative design are investing in being a co-participant and not just the researcher, taking feedback from participants on how they want to engage with the content from week to week, and letting the methodology organically take shape by trusting one's participants and the

relationships that are already in place.

Resistance as Anti-Racist Pedagogy

The critical inquiry group members and I discussed that we were fearful of losing our jobs at times and offered ways to disinvest in material investments and disentangle from Niceness. Erica explained she used the "Trojan horse method" in her teaching by having such good evaluations from her college students, the administration gave her more freedom. Then she used that freedom to cause disruptions and push back against cis heteronormative texts and assignments. When she was a high school English teacher, she found ways to connect needed discussion on racism, classism, sexism, and other strategic forms of oppression to a standard. Erica even shares how to connect anything back to a standard with her pre-service teachers if parents or administrators come knocking or have questions about what they are teaching and why. Erica summed up her acts of resistance by saying,

> So, I have had to learn to disrupt where I can and disrupt as often as I can. And so, it may be a small thing. But it still is a disruption. It's still a place where I did not let the status quo win.

Gabby added to that by saying how much she liked the phrase "disrupt where you can" and has found that when she does speak up, she has found that "whenever I have the courage to do that (meaning disrupting the flow of the status quo), and never once been left by myself, immediately somebody jumps in with me." Gabby and Erica's conversation reminded me of Collins' (2000) articulation of "working the cracks" (p. 300). The concept was inspired by Collins' friend/colleague who used her insider

knowledge to find the “pressure points” or weaknesses inside bureaucratic policies to push for change (p. 300). She did this successfully and “without much fanfare” (Collins, 2000, p. 300). Sometimes she even did this work without mentioning certain words “such as ‘racism,’ ‘sexism,’ ‘discrimination,’ and the like,” and found “innovative ways to work the system so that it will become more fair” (Collins, 2000, p. 300). Even though many of us would like to tear down the system altogether, we cannot do that work on an individual level but through collective action. Many times, that collective action can happen through another form of resisting, making “good trouble, necessary trouble,” or even through acts of “malicious compliance" (Bernstein, 2022, Flint and Toledo, 2021, Lewis, 2016).

As mentioned previously, Oklahoma legislators recently passed a law that forbids any educator, administrator, or school staff to make a student feel uncomfortable about their race or gender. HB1775 was written with the cis-hetero white child in mind. Many teachers are now looking at how to use this law to make schools safer places for LGBTQIIA+ youth to feel more comfortable. This kind of action is known as malicious compliance on different social media platforms such as Facebook and Reddit. Malicious compliance is “the act of strictly following the orders of your superior while knowing the outcome will be the opposite of what they wanted” (Bernstein, 2022, para 5). I find this phrase so wonderfully antagonizing because it mobilizes the words of ignorant laws against those who meant to create more discrimination. Teachers in Florida have done something similar with their state’s “Don’t Say Gay” law. The law, in fact, does not mention “gay” in the wording. Instead, it states, “it’s now illegal to address gender

identity or sexual orientation issues in schools for students from kindergarten through third grade" and only "age-appropriate" conversations are allowed for fourth through twelfth grade, with no clear definition of what "age-appropriate" means (Papenfuss, 2022). A group of English teachers in Palm Beach County, Florida, have let parents know they will comply with the new law by ridding their classrooms of heterosexual orientation subject matter, including books, assignments, and even pronouns (Papenfuss, 2022). That's right, these teachers will no longer be using him or her, but calling every student they/them. A right-wing group called Moms for Liberty is up in arms about it. Maliciously complying with these laws is good trouble and necessary trouble because many anti-Trans legislators are creating a fake cultural war for their own political gain. It has nothing to do with what students are or are not being taught in the classroom.

Sometimes outright willfulness due to the paradoxes of power is not always possible for every teacher. In this case, standing firm and refusing to participate in racist, sexist, ableist, classist, and other types of oppressive conversations by walking away or by stating that you are unwilling to participate in the dehumanization of others or oneself. This strategy to disinvest into Niceness is relationally articulated by Lindsey, who shared a conversation with a Black man who spoke at her non-denominational church.

> **Lindsey**: "But one of the Black men in our church made the comment shortly after the Black Lives Matter protests where the truck went through the crowd there. One of the things he said is, look, **I refuse to participate in my own dehumanization.** And I thought, you know, at the bare minimum, I can just

refuse to participate in the dehumanization of others. And if that means, I'm going to say, ``I'm sorry this conversation is not okay for me, I'm leaving."

Just saying these words can stop the flow of conversation and force a colleague, friend, family member, etc., to stop and think about what they are saying. Most of all, a refusal to engage in harmful rhetoric makes it known to those engaging in this type of harmful behavior and conversation is not okay. It's a simple phrase, but, as Lindsey iterates, "I think that just holding that line, I refuse to participate in the dehumanization of others. I'm not going to knowingly do it. I'm not going to be an accessory to it. And that's, that's my line." However, teachers leaving the conversation or the room where egregious conversations are happening is not always possible. Therefore, I provide other concrete examples or insights into what disinvesting from Niceness and whiteness looks like in pre-service teacher education.

Implications for Teacher Education

Critical Inquiry Groups like the ones in this study can be created in teacher education courses with a focus on the impact that is greater than intention, teaching and modeling for pre-service educators how to have critical conversations in the classroom, and illustrating how we as white educators need to let go of the binary of "good/bad" persona and instead question if what we are doing in the classroom is maintaining white supremacy or not (Applebaum, 2016). One of the main topics we discussed in these critical inquiry groups is: whose comfort are we prioritizing in critical conversations in our classrooms? And, who are we shutting down because the conversation becomes too tense for us due to our lack of knowledge on facilitating these critical conversations?

Audrey had already brought up how Niceness focuses on intention over impact, and how Niceness just wants to smooth things over even if the thing it is hiding is the truth.

Another strategy Audrey and I discussed outside of the group was the notion of calling in versus calling out. Audrey also brought this conversation up in the group and shared with us how callouts are not for the person saying the dehumanizing thing but are for "anybody else there. It's so supportive, like, I'm not going to change this person's mind by anything I say right now. But I need myself and everyone else to know that this is something that's not okay." Audrey goes on to share that call-ins help with "one-on-one conversations, where we're gonna slowly question ideas and talk through things." Now, deciding when to use a call-out versus a call-in can be tricky and should be based on the situation. Using Lily's example once more, the Black and Indigenous student whose white professor shut down the conversation on race and affirmative action, if I had been her teacher in the room when Lily corrected the white male student's ignorant beliefs about affirmative action, I would have thanked Lily for her poignant words and also shared research and graphics to back up how affirmative action has benefited white women more than it has Black and brown students trying to go to college (Puwar, 2004).

Furthermore, I would have made sure the readings for that week also shared information regarding affirmative action and its inability to rid our entire education system of racism. If the white male student had pushed back harder, I would have continued asking questions to probe his thinking but ultimately would have moved on if his rhetoric continued to be unhelpful and harmful. It is important to have essential agreements at the beginning of a course or class that sets up how class discussions will

go. These essential agreements allow for pivoting, redirection, and reminders to students that the class/course centers on anti-racist pedagogy. Therefore, when whiteness tries to center itself in the discussion, educators can say, “remember, we are centering anti-racism, feminist, and critical theory in the class/course,” and pivot the conversation back to that center. For Lindsey, essential agreements set the ground rules for discussion, and she tells her elementary students that they cannot attack people, only ideas.

As an adjunct professor, I made it clear from the beginning the topics allowed when teaching about gender and society (i.e., no dead naming, using wrong pronouns on purpose, questioning anyone's gender identity, and so on). We also shared in these groups to let students know that things will get uncomfortable and that we will work our way through that tension instead of just removing the tension altogether. I often come back to the analogy that, as educators, we do not stop teaching a subject because it is hard, like math, for example. If a student does not understand how to do long division, we do not just stop teaching long division and go, “ok, you are right, this is too hard, here’s a calculator,” and then never speak of long division again. So why do we do this around conversations about hard histories and race? I believe it is due to a lack of not knowing or not being shown how to facilitate conversations centered on anti-racist pedagogy. Many teacher education programs are starting to correct this error since Sarah did have some training in her pre-service teaching on anti-racist pedagogy. In contrast, the rest of us who have been in the classroom did not until we went back to school for graduate degrees.

Overall, this study contributes to and extends the literature in teacher education around antiracist pedagogy by aiming for a more nuanced approach for white teachers,

especially white women educators, to study the gendered, raced, and classed dimensions of whiteness and white supremacy continually upheld via practices of Niceness. Since public schooling's inception in the late 1800s, Niceness has been a standard for teacher educators, students, colleagues, administrators, and other stakeholders. Niceness has also been a disciplining agent to any educator that has tried to sidestep, disentangle, or disinvest in Niceness. With the additions of the Lady Bountiful archetype and whiteness, the expectation of Niceness has continued inequity in our public, private, and higher education schools. This research sheds light on how Niceness has held on for many centuries, changing shape, but never entirely going away. To add to Meiners's (2002) ghostly Lady Bountiful, Niceness haunts all those who set out to become educators. However, leaving Niceness is a struggle and takes a nuanced approach when informing pre-service teachers and teacher educators about the slipperiness of Niceness, whiteness, and systems of power that keep them at the forefront of our curriculum and our curriculum policies and narratives in the classroom.

This research first shows how Niceness came to be the expectation of teaching, how Niceness continues to oppress Black and brown students, teachers, and administrators, and exploit lower-class white folks. From there, I not only reveal how Niceness operates but what keeps educators continuing Niceness in the classrooms and in our personal lives via emotional, material, and relational investments. Within those investments, I show how power and being willful against Niceness come in many forms by either loudly resisting by making good trouble or standing firm when being stubborn is the only way to go against the tide of Niceness (Ahmed 2017, Lewis 2016). Finally, I

offer strategies for white educators to continue to disrupt, disinvest, and disentangle themselves from Niceness by being in community with one another and embracing the discomfort of our complicitness inside the educational systems in the U.S.

Mostly, there is not one prescription or one way in fighting and resisting Niceness and whiteness, but with the continued community and a focus on grassroots efforts within teacher critical inquiry groups, we can continue the conversation on the hard work that is still ahead. As I said before, this work is a call to arms, to sit with the tension and uncomfortableness of white educators' complacency, but not to stay there and instead draw on community to create change, starting with ourselves and those in our spheres of influence. As Bettina Love (2019) states, theory can only guide us in the right direction. We also need action and solidarity with our Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latine, and brown teacher-scholars as co-conspirators "in conjunction with the community and with an analysis of Whiteness, racism, sexism, homophobia, and neoliberalism" needs to be at the forefront of continuing the work of disentangling from Niceness and fore fronting anti-racist pedagogy (Love, 2019, p. 135).

Future Research

This study brought together eight white teachers with a multitude of different experiences in public, private, and higher education classrooms. Due to the heterogeneity of race and mostly gender (I was the only non-binary person), we were able to discuss our pitfalls, missteps, and failures, as well as our hopes to continue critical reflection of ourselves, our journey of unlearning racist teaching practices such as colorblind ideology and the myth of meritocracy without harming Black and brown teachers. However,

teacher education classrooms are not heterogeneous, and educators should factor this in when creating critical inquiry groups in pre-service classrooms or in-service teacher professional development. Therefore, the continued analysis of how whiteness and Niceness within teacher education programs contribute to inequity in schooling, curriculum, policy by white educators and white stakeholders, and its effects on Black and brown students and teachers when creating critical inquiry groups in classrooms or teacher professional development.

In future studies, scholars should be aware of creating not only spaces for white teachers to reflect on their teaching practices critically but also creating Black education spaces (Warren and Coles, 2020) to allow for a space for Black and brown students to talk and discuss their own lived experiences and not be the sole contributors of resisting white supremacy. Creating these Black and brown education spaces for Black and brown students will give them a reprieve from code-switching (Mason and Ngo, 2019). It will also offer a space not to be continually traumatized, ignored, or have their emotional labor taken for granted when confronting the complicitness of white teachers and white teachers' reactions to being held accountable.

I also suggest future research on documenting (and therefore learning how to mitigate) the costs of antiracist action. Research on supporting/ inoculating white teachers against punishment for breaking white solidarity lines and strengthening motivations to do so would continue the conversation of disinvesting and disentangling with Niceness. This research would extend upon critical inquiry groups by putting strategies such as good trouble and malicious compliance into action (Bernstein, 2022, Flint and Toledo,

2021, Lewis, 2016). Continued research documenting how white teachers coming up against Niceness and whiteness is timely and vital, especially with all these new CRT bans and anti-LGBTQIIA+ laws in many states, including Oklahoma. White teachers would be able to continue to be in community with one another and share ideas on centering anti-racist pedagogy in their classrooms. Erica shared that being in this critical inquiry group helped her be vulnerable and allowed her to practice and "space to put what I've learned" outside of theory and into practice. Erica also stated that part of that practice is finding a way to do "something that is organized that we can all plug into," something beyond high-profile teacher unions, such as the Oklahoma Educators Association (OEA), that continually sides with the status quo.

Brown and Stern (2018) also found their teachers to be frustrated with their union, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), due to PFT's staff domination and making decisions "in a top-down fashion" (p. 176). The teachers also commented on how "there was no sense of community engagement, of community involvement, or of democracy; in other words, the values of the PFT were antithetical to those of social justice unionism" (Brown and Stern, 2018, p. 176). Therefore, the Philadelphia teachers formed their own teacher-led union called WE, which focused on partnering with communities and centering on social justice (Brown and Stern, 2018). Continued research with critical inquiry groups that focus on building community, crossing white solidarity lines, and putting action into resisting Niceness would also add to the analysis here on how the fear of loneliness in this anti-racist work is a lie from white supremacy. As Erica also mentioned, "there is safety in numbers."

Future research could help answer questions such as, how do these teachers take these strategies of making good and necessary trouble, malicious compliance, setting essential agreements, centering impact over the intention, and using call-ins and call-outs effectively (Bernstein, 2022, Flint and Toledo, 2021, Lewis, 2016)? More studies can also research whether teachers are maliciously compliant or making good trouble, how many teachers are pushed out of education, or whether they can stay and continue their work. Overall, looking into how white educators continue to center anti-racist pedagogy within a community of teachers who are doing the same creates change within the educational system as a whole, or are we still working at the individual level only. Lastly, future research could assess the strengths and weaknesses of working in a dedicated community and what other issues may arise once these communities begin having large amounts of people/members. Does that change the course away or towards centering anti-racist pedagogy and social justice practice?

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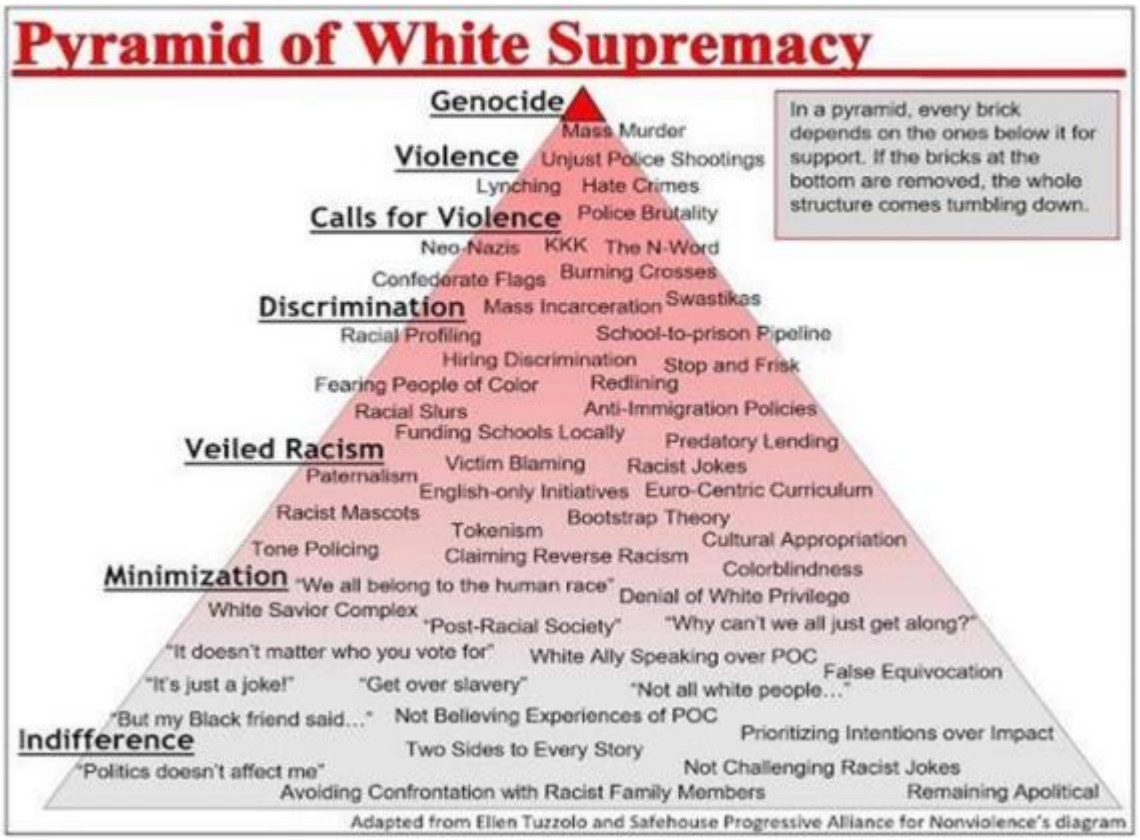
APPENDICES

The Pyramid of White Supremacy



VITA

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