# Engaging Racial Autoethnography as a Teaching Tool for Womanist Inquiry

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Racial autobiography, self-narratives on how one learned about the idea of race, has been underutilized as a tool to familiarize and orient students in the process of critical inquiry for nursing research. The aims of this article are to explore how racial autoethnography: (1) repositions students to effect an epistemological change, (2) challenges dominant ideology, and (3) functions as a link between the student and critical theories for use in nursing research. Students engage in and share reflective narrative about a variety of instructional materials used in the course. Reflective narratives are presented in a framework that addresses white racial identity development. **Key words:** *autoethnography*, *doctoral education*, *knowledge development*, *praxis*, *racial autoethnography*, *womanist theory*

To Lynne, the black people of the South were Art....To her eyes, used to Northern suburbs where every house looked sterile and identical even before it was completely built, where even the flowers were uniform and their nicknames were already in dictionaries, the shrubs incapable of strong odors or surprise of shape, and the people usually stamped with the *seals of their professions* [italics added]; ... to her, ... the South—and the black people living there—was Art.[1(p130)]

IN Alice Walker's[1] novel, *Meridian*, Lynne, a white, Jewish, deeply dedicated civil rights activist from the North shares her vision of black people who live in the South. Lynne's perspective on southern black life and community is informed by her status as an activist, friend, partner, lover, colleague, and advocate for equality and justice during the Civil

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Rights era. Despite multiple interactions as well as living among this community of people, Lynne's perspective romanticizes, exoticizes, and "others" the black people of the South. A similar romanticized gaze is sustained and expressed in the above passage, when Lynne compares the sterility and sameness of the North with the creativity and vibrancy of an oppressive culture of the South. This contrast is later described more fully when she states: "If Mississippi is the worst place in America for black people, it stood to reason, she thought, that the Art that was their lives would flourish best there."[1(p130)]

To her credit, Lynne is able to acknowledge the contradictions and tensions in her views about black people:

This she begged forgiveness for and tried to hide, but it was no use ... "I will pay for this," she often warned herself. "It is probably a sin to think of a people as Art." And yet she would stand perfectly still and the sight of a fat black woman singing to herself in a tattered yellow dress, her voice rich and full of yearning, was always—God forgive her, black folks forgive her—the same weepy miracle that Art always was for her.[1(p130)]

Through Lynne's character in *Meridian*, Walker[1] demonstrates 2 ideas. First, that

we can be profoundly committed to social justice, transformation, and research; yet, without the work of self-discovery, easily slip into ways of thinking (and being) that may prove counter to meaningful understanding of self and others. Second, and less visible, is the idea that values, attitudes, and beliefs are normalized and routinely incorporated (eg, "stamped" and sealed) into professional disciplines as nice, neat, and orderly as the environment Lynne describes above. In other words, the professional education of nurses has "stamped" racist assumptions into its practitioners and researchers by leaving these assumptions largely unchallenged and unproblematized. How can we challenge and expand the traditional ways of thinking as we prepare nurses for careers in research? How can we effectively disrupt and decolonize the thinking about research? How do we encourage a more complicated worldview for the practice of research? How does my social location influence my approach to teaching, and can I use my location to advance a student's understanding of social context as it relates to research? And what are the rewards and risks of centering a womanist approach to teaching?

Although many articles explore the approaches and curriculums for teaching about race/ethnicity, social justice, health, and health disparities, little attention has focused on the role of race, self, and negotiating white racial identity development for the practice of research. This article reports on the ways in which an African American nursing faculty member (J.Y.T.) and 2 white graduate students (M.L.M. and A.O.) incorporate racial autoethnography as a departure point for learning about various health experiences of women and families in the United States. As I am the primary author of the article and also because of the pedagogical approach adopted here, my voice predominates. To highlight the potential impact of the pedagogical strategy, the students who engaged in the course present their reactions to course materials.

The aims of this article are to explore how racial autoethnography: (1) repositions students to effect an epistemological change

(2) challenges dominant ideology, and (3) functions as a link between the student and critical theories for use in nursing research. Students engage in and share reflective narratives about a variety of instructional materials used in the course. The use of a woman-centered pedagogical approach to the course resulted in a transformation experience for the students. Racial identity development theory best captures the students' responses to the race-related content and their shift toward antiracist thinking and scholarship. Reflective narratives are presented in a framework that addresses white racial identity development.

## CONNECTING PEDAGOGY AND THEORY

Similar to many teachers of nursing, I encourage students to explore and articulate the discipline's theoretical, conceptual, and substantive materials relative to research and practice. However, as a woman of African descent, I explore the above critical questions about the pedagogical process in terms of their implications and incorporation of a womanist-black feminist framework for pedagogy at a predominantly white institution in the Midwest. My concept of teaching is grounded in an approach that Freire[2] and hooks[3] passionately describe as the practice of freedom. hooks purports that teachers should strive to "serve as a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in learning."[3(p11)] She further states that teaching should enable transgression or movement against and beyond boundaries: "It is that movement that makes education the practice of freedom."[3(p12)]

My approach to the classroom environment was based on the following suggestions outlined by Beverly Tatum[4] and bell hooks[3]: (1) viewing the classroom as a communal place in which collective effort is required to create and sustain a learning community; (2) encouraging the use of a voice that is engaged in dialogue and is fluid, not fixed or absolute but changing and evolving in response to the world; and (3) practicing

engaged pedagogy—recognizing that each classroom encounter is different and strategies must constantly be changed, invented, and reconceptualized to address each teaching experience. I further incorporated elements of a womanist framework to guide the structure of the course.

Womanist theory was developed by African American women scholars as a framework for analyzing the influence of race, class, and gender on the lives and health of African American women.[5-8] The interdependence of experience, consciousness, and action is a defining feature of womanist theory. This approach allows for the possibility that spontaneous and/or gradual shifts in thinking can occur and that the classroom may serve as a catalyst to become more engaged for a heightened or changed consciousness.

A womanist framework has clearly been articulated by Collins,[8] implemented in research with African American women,[6,9,10] and used in the education of African American nursing scholars.[11] Collins[8] delineates 4 dimensions of womanist epistemology: (1) concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, (2) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, (3) an ethic of caring, and (4) an ethic of personal accountability. An initial challenge was to see whether a womanist framework, one that I closely identify with, could be used as an approach to pedagogy. What could a womanist epistemologic framework for pedagogy incorporate? What is the usefulness of this perspective as a framework to guide teaching about self, social context, and health.

One of the first challenges I face in teaching is the dispersion of authority.[12-14] I do not want my students to think that I have an all-encompassing or extensive foundation for authority to speak on minority health or social context just because I am a woman of African descent. I do not hold expert knowledge solely on the basis of my racial/ethnic status. On the other hand, there is an ever-present risk that my authority and credibility will be challenged because of racial/ethnic bias.[15-17] Still, I encourage students to see that I am a (and they are) cultural, racial, and complex social being about to embark on a semester of mutual and dynamic learning.

## APPROACH AND DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE STRUCTURE

Many nursing students have not encountered the courses that offer a foundation for learning about race/ethnicity, social justice, health and health disparities.[18-23] Research in sociocultural perspectives for family and women's health is an elective in the PhD program. Class occurs in a seminar format that meets over a 15-week semester. Course objectives include the following:

- analyze economic, social, political, historical, cultural, racial, and psychological forces that affect the health of diverse groups of women and families;
- analyze the impact of oppression and ongoing discrimination on the health of women and families;
- explore the values and behavioral roles of "privileged" populations; and
- evaluate approaches to developing and testing of interventions and outcomes that promote and enhance the health outcomes of women and families.

Several strategies were used to accomplish the course objectives and to develop awareness, perspectives, and knowledge: racial autoethnography and autobiography, racial autobiographical analysis, personal journals, seminar discussions, videos, monologues, music, and lastly, food and recipes (such as plantains and collard greens)! I spent a significant amount of class time introducing and building on fundamental concepts important to womanist and feminist thought. From my perspective, a womanist epistemologic framework for pedagogy would incorporate experiential learning, interaction with peers, and opportunities for personal reflection. Therefore, I began the course by focusing on racial autobiography or autoethnography because they provide an opportunity to explore all 4 dimensions of a womanist epistemology. I then build on this experience to further enhance learning opportunities. Although

this article focuses on racism and privilege within the context of US society, racial autoethnography has implications for the study of colonialism, migration, and diaspora. In other words, a racial autoethnography approach could be used to explore the complexity of privilege and power in a global context.

## AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

An autoethnographic approach to inquiry is a research methodology in the qualitative tradition. Autoethnography is one of several terms used to describe research in which the use of self is central to the process of research, and is also labeled as: narrative autoethnography, self-ethnography, autobiography, reflexive ethnography, and more recently, portraiture methodology.[24,25] The popular application of autoethnography is in anthropological and educational research as well as sociology and womanist perspectives. In autoethnography, individuals use themselves as a source for data generation, collection, and analysis, allowing for the exploration of sensitive social and cultural issues. Personal narrative and/or accounts are used to extend self-awareness and understanding across a variety of social concerns and challenges. The use of personal experiences can be a starting point for gaining multiple in-depth and comprehensive viewpoints.

## CONCRETIZING THE PRACTICE OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

I work to design a pedagogy that encourages self-reflexivity and dialogue. I used racial autoethnography to promote a more complex awareness of social context. I wanted to create in the students an awareness of race-class-gender (and other types of differences/similarities) in the context of their research, practice, and everyday lives. Following the examples set by scholars such as Asher,[26] Gillette and Boyle-Baise,[27] Pennington,[28] and Stoddart,[12] I used autoethnography to facilitate and deepen self-

knowledge and our knowing of those who live and labor on the margins and whose health is firmly embedded there. I adapted the autoethnographic mode of inquiry as a foundation or stepping-off point for thinking about power imbalances (eg, race, class, gender, and differences). Readings included the following:

- Minnie Bruce Pratt's Identity: skin, blood, heart,[29]
- Peggy McIntosh's White privilege and male privilege,[30]
- Naomi Wolf's The racism of well-meaning white people,[31]
- Valerie Wesley's Understanding black anger,[32] and
- Naomi Wolf's Understanding white fear[33]

These essays are self-narratives on how one learned about the idea of race. Wesley[32] and Wolf's[33] articles are companion pieces that appeared in *Essence* magazine and model how conversations can occur across the difficult dialogue of race, racism, and race relations. Following these readings, students are instructed to create their own self-racial ethnographies. Bushnell and Henry[34] state

Self-authorship is essential to the development of contextualized knowing because it serves as the point of integration between three factors that make contextualized knowledge so powerful: cognitive (making meaning of knowledge), interpersonal (making meaning of relationships to others) and intrapersonal (making meaning of one's sense of identity).[34(p46)]

Journaling was encouraged to help students to connect with and process experiences that contribute to their perspectives and to further translate how similar/different social contexts shape the perceptions and experiences of others. Reflective journal writing is a useful strategy for research[35] as well as personal and professional development.[36,37] Banks-Wallace asserts:

Journals provide a place for us to weave together our private and professional lives. This allows us to more fully understand how the different contexts in which we live our lives come together to shape various aspects of the research process.[35(p24)]

## AUTOETHNOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

As students engage education as a practice of freedom, they approach readings, class activities, discussions, and written assignments in a critical and self-reflexive way. They grapple with the enormous complexity of power dynamics, race, and privilege in one's life as well as the research and practice in nursing. McIntosh contends that this way of thinking is new for many white students because of lack of awareness about white racial identity: "Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the United States think that racism doesn't affect them because they are not people of color; they do not see 'whiteness' as a racial identity."[30(p85)]

The development of a new awareness and shift in consciousness evoked a wealth of experiences. The students' narratives of the learning experience are the topics for analysis in the next section. I formulate the story about this class in terms of the 6 stages of Helms's[38-40] white racial identity development. The 2 students' reactions to racial autobiography and other course content are varied and presented with minimal editing (or silencing/altering) of their voices by the faculty coauthor. The student coauthors, each of whom wrote about their experiences, draw from course assignments, journals, and postclass and postevent self-reflexivity. These contributions are marked in italics and labeled by the student authors' initials. A student "commentary" precedes and follows the journal entries. This commentary stands in for the scholarly analysis of their journal content. In addition, the "discussion" is incorporated throughout the text. By retaining their voices, I hope that their experiences help illuminate the potential for powerful and sustainable epistemological change.

## WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Models of racial identity development are useful frameworks for understanding the effective and intellectual responses as students process information and come to a greater level of understanding of how cultural and institutional racism exist.[4] For the purpose of this discussion, I use Helms[38-40] model of white racial identity development theory consisting of 6 stages: *contact*, *disintegration*, *reintegration*, *pseudoindependent*, *immersion/emersion*, and *autonomy*.

## Contact

The contact stage of identity is characterized by little or no awareness of individual, cultural, and/or institutional racism and vulnerability. This stage also includes an absence of knowledge about white privilege, benefits, and protection. Pratt describes her experience with privilege and the loss of protection:

Raised to believe that I could be where I wanted and have what I want, as a grown woman I thought I could simply claim what I wanted . . . the shell of my privilege was broken, the shell that had given me a shape in the world, held me apart from the world, protected me from the world. I was astonished at the pain; the extent of my surprise revealed to me the degree of my protection.[29(p27)]

McIntosh also recognizes and writes poignantly about her experiences of privilege and racism:

As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage . . . I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege.[30(p76)]

Writing toward a similar analysis, Segrest elevates the level of conversation and responsibility about whiteness, racism, and privilege when she states:

Racism normalizes whiteness and makes people of color the problem, so white people are generic humans who don't have to look at ourselves. We escape scrutiny, and we escape accountability as a group for creating racism and as individuals for challenging it.[41(p158)]

The contact stage may also include stereotypes, caution, fear, and naïve curiosity about

people of color. Ideas about "others" are learned from family, friends, and/or the media. Comments such as "You don't act like a black person" or "I don't notice what race a person is," may be expressed. Denial of seeing others as raced exemplifies "color-blindness." Carr[42] suggests that the concept of "color-blindness" is in fact the latest in a series of American racist ideologies. The contact stage is entered into as soon as one encounters the idea, actuality, or reality of black people. One's length of time in the contact stage depends on the ability to limit interactions with people of color as well as knowledge about racial issues. One can remain in this stage indefinitely.

### M.L.M.

Pratt[29] uses the metaphor of the "familiar" to describe her position of white privilege and the normalization of white privilege. The following excerpt was written as part of my response to reading Pratt's autoethnography.

Growing up as a white person in an all white community I have never said I lived in a white neighborhood because that was self-evident. I was Catholic and there were some few in my town, maybe 10%, who practiced other religions, of which I was never, taught the names. There were families who lived on the other side of the tracks and I knew I lived on the right side. Everyone I knew had parents, a mother and a father, that were married. I had an uncle who was "divorced" and my parents whispered to me warnings to not mention my absent aunt's name. Differences between me and my peers consisted of whether I lived in town or in the country and whether my father wore normal clothes or work clothes when he left in the morning.

This writing exercise marked the first time that I examined exactly what was my own "familiar." Writing these words marked the beginning of a realization that many of my personal characteristics set me apart because I was part of the white, Christian, heterosexual, middle-class, which establishes societal norms. Being inside of this "circle" allowed me to never consider the forces of being outside or on the margins of my safe world. My

"familiar" was only my own disadvantage and never the realization of the forces of my position of privilege in the creation of "others" oppression. I see now that setting myself apart and denying that I am part of the problem is a place of safety. This safety is freedom from the pain of acknowledging my own responsibility in historical racism. It is much easier and comfortable to continue to believe that wrongs committed in the past were due to someone else's actions. It takes much more courage to see myself as part of a larger whole and accept rather than reject the pain of things that happened long ago.

### A.O.

My reflection writings on the Pratt[29] article included acknowledging that although I knew there were neighborhoods of families in my home town from the Middle East, Hmong culture, and some Asian descent; various cultural grocery stores; and factories of workers from other countries, I was never integrated with these places or individuals.

In my grade school, our Cambodian janitor was my only outlet to cultural diversity. His Cambodian children went to our school, but I never remember inviting them to my birthday parties or slumber parties. We never discussed their cultural background, and how it was different than mine, or how their lives were different and/or similar to mine. I was never taught to ask or think about individuals of other cultures or skin color.

This highlights how, in grade school, I had a total lack of awareness about cultural and institutional racism in my hometown, exemplified by the division of those of color and the majority white population. My life was structured to limit my interaction with people of color, and this limited my acknowledgement of the presence of cultural and ethnic variety.

### Disintegration

Although limited interactions and thinking about people of color may be common, entry into the disintegration stage is encouraged

when students are exposed to information about white privilege, racism, and power dynamics. The general theme of the disintegration stage is an increasing awareness, often conflicted, of one's whiteness. It is during this stage that an individual begins to question and challenge racial realities that they have been taught. At this stage, the veil of innocence or lack of knowledge and awareness is transformed. Individuals begin to understand that "…whiteness is a signifier of power and condition of access in U. S. culture."[41(p157)] This coming to consciousness often includes the experience of guilt, anger, embarrassment, depression, helplessness, anxiety, and/or cognitive dissonance.

### M.L.M.

The realization of my position of white privilege was at times a difficult place to be in. The first quote is in response to reading Pratt[29] and the second is a reflection on the feelings of discomfort that came with realizing my own part in the oppression of people from my position of privilege.

I can think back to the Pratt article and remembering how it changed the way I looked at people, places, events and myself. I suddenly felt as if I was in a fun house, house of mirrors and every mirror that I looked in showed me a different perspective. Sometimes the mirrors showed me how beautiful I was but many times what I saw was ugly. I wanted to be Pratt experiencing the pain and growing in awareness but many times I realized I was one of the people she wrote about that contributed to the pain caused by others.

I remember reading about how one of the characteristics of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was that an experience was so powerful that initially the thoughts and feelings are unspeakable. I don't mean that I have PTSD but I can relate to not being able to find words to express the turmoil that was going on in my head and heart. I think that the ability to eventually talk about these feelings and memories was due to the creation of a safe place where I could share my thoughts and maybe have my ideas threatened but not feel personally threatened. I don't think this was immediate and I am still not confident that I can articulate myself

clearly and fully but sharing my thoughts and writing them down like this is certainly a start.

These comments represent the feelings of guilt, fear, and embarrassment that come with this recognition. It is much easier and comfortable to continue to believe that wrongs committed in the past were because of someone else's actions.

### A.O.

In high school, I was an exemplar of "naïve curiosity" about students of color, in particular, "how and why separate groups formed." Thinking back on high school, I now realize that the white students had more opportunities than those of color in where our lockers were, who we socialized with, etc.

Racial division became clear for me when I was integrated in the public school system. In ninth grade, I chose to leave the private Catholic school system and began to attend the public high school in town. There I experienced that Black students spent time with other Black students but not with the majority of white students at the school; there were other groups of children that I had never seen before. Since I had never considered diversity until then, it fascinated me. I shared a locker with the Cambodian child of our janitor from grade school that year, but we separated lockers in the middle of the year when she wanted to share with another Cambodian student. I suddenly realized how isolated she must have felt in our small grade school. I was in the majority in school and never once felt isolated because of the color of my skin or my family background.

This represents the challenge of new thinking and a sense of discomfort in confronting my own privilege and involvement in racism. Although I was not quite ready to handle this in high school, a journal entry from Dr Taylor's class explains my recent growth:

My family upbringing, my place in society, my cultural origins, and all the opportunities that have been given to me were all under scrutiny by the concepts that I learned in this class. They become under scrutiny because I became aware of the dominant ideology that is embedded in all of these aspects.

## Reintegration

A transformation of beliefs signals entry into either the disintegration or the reintegration stage. In the reintegration stage, the student comes to terms with a white racial identity and clings to ideas/beliefs that one is superior to people of color. In this stage, individuals are more accepting of cultural and institutional racism and the belief that white persons are entitled to privileges, protection, and preferences because they have earned them. An accompanying belief is that adverse social conditions that exist for persons of color are a result of "...inferior social, moral, and intellectual qualities."[38(p60)] Remaining feelings of anxiety and guilt are often replaced by fear and anger and aimed at persons of color. Victim blaming and a belief in white superiority often remains firm despite the information that challenges or contradicts them. The reintegration stage is a relatively comfortable and unproblematic position, and it is easy to become fixated here. However, Helms[38] also notes that a pivotal moment or event can encourage further self-reflection and examination and may activate transition from the reintegration stage. Continued participation in courses that focus on issues of race, class, and gender may also provide a catalyst for deeper self-examination and entry into the pseudoindependent stage.

### M.L.M. and A.O.

We had no luck finding "perfect" reintegration quotes for this section. From our discussion at the coffee shop, we agree with Tatum's quote that states, "In my experience, continued participation in a course on racism provides the catalyst for this deeper self-examination."[4(p15)] Because we have been writing an article about our class experience and writing reflective journals about our experience, we have been in a permanent state of self-reflection and really have not had the opportunity to move into a place where we do not have this challenging safety net. We are both grateful for this.

## Pseudoindependent

The pseudoindependent stage is the first stage of formulating a positive self-definition of whiteness. Active questioning of social positions, particularly those related to race, is hallmark. The person begins to leave behind beliefs of white superiority, acknowledges the responsibility of whites for racism and racial formation in the United States, and begins to acknowledge their own unintentional participation in systematic and everyday acts of racism. Individuals in this stage seek out white models of positive whiteness that are a better fit with their new-found knowledge and understanding. The pursuit of an antiracist definition of whiteness marks a person's entry into the immersion/emersion stage.

### M.L.M.

I think the following quote represents a sort of turning point in my worldview. I was able to catch myself doing what is so unknowingly easy for a person of privilege.

Just the other day I met my child's new teacher. She was petite, very young, perfectly tanned and had the whitest teeth I had ever seen. I found myself thinking that with those qualities she could never be the kind of teacher my child needed. During this negative spiral in my mind's eye I caught myself and realized that I was making a judgment based solely on physical attributes that was unfair and unjust. This is exactly what happens with racism . . . physical appearance and stereotype becomes the forefront characteristic in which judgment is made. That is wrong and I was wrong. Somehow I see now what I couldn't or wouldn't see before. . .. Silence keeps the road smooth . . . acknowledging racism in myself and others creates all kinds of pot holes.

Once I accepted my responsibility in perpetuating racism, I began to seek a deeper understanding of my role and potential remedies. For example, I was able to grasp the intellectual and acontextual understanding of some of the social justice–oriented theories but now I had a need for more comprehensive understanding. This motivated me to see how various oppressive forces play out in

practice including applying these concepts to my own research, current events such as Hurricane Katrina, and my own personal interactions with people. I actively sought a connection between theory and practice.

I do not think this stage really comes to an end, at least not for me. I continue to expand my own knowledge of oppression in relation to race, class, and gender to also include role and self-expectations. I also find myself approaching nursing with a critical eye—not in a negative way but seeing constructively how nurses can be aware of their own biases and involved in practices that reduce the effects of racism.

### A.O.

The following writings taken from my *Reflection* journal pages show that watching and reading about people's personal stories added to the depth of my reactions to the theories that we were reading about. Intricate ideas began to influence and shape my thinking.

Complex ideas about men being feminists, white individuals researching other racial groups, and the word "objectivity" really challenged me to learn theories and methods well enough to be able to spin them on their head. Through the fuzziness of learning and accepting these new theories and concepts, I was able to relate these readings to my own thoughts about approaching my own research. I am grateful for the fact that I was challenged to understand that I have a certain position in society that is connected to a history embedded in the greater contexts of race, class, gender, the environment, education, and politics. … After watching the Spike Lee video, *When the Levees Broke*, I want to go to New Orleans and help with Katrina Relief.[43]

After watching the Spike Lee film,[43] I realized the important differences in the way the people of New Orleans experienced these losses. Race and class appeared to play a significant role in the ability to escape the destruction, the way people received assistance, and later efforts to rebuild the city. I found myself asking the question: Did the lack of my government's response to the people who were suffering in New Orleans have to do with the fact that those that had to remain in the city were poor and black? Information seeking during the course marked the beginning of how I began to take ownership of being part of the fight against racism and recognizing white privilege as a researcher. The above journal entry exemplifies the thinking that laid the groundwork to future action that I took after the course was complete.

### Immersion/emersion

The immersion/emersion stage of development surfaces when in redefining a positive white identity, individuals seek to replace racial myths and stereotypes with a more appropriate meaning of whiteness in the United States as well as a global identity of whiteness. Answers to questions "Who am I racially?" and "Who do I want to be?" are sought.[38(p62)] Reading autobiographies, racial autoethnographies, and life stories of others who have come to terms with their own history as a white person as well as how they engage themselves as antiracist activists and allies to people of color is central to this process.

### M.L.M.

I realize that my privilege allows me to assess a person and, in seconds, claim judgments about their ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class.

My prejudice and racism are there when I notice the troupe of young man trespassing through my yard with jeans wore way below their beltline and feel disgust that details of their underwear are visible to me. It is also there when I pass the accident with the Asian man and I know that the collision was his fault due to his lack of driving skills. My ignorance and prejudice are there when I wonder how my lesbian neighbors explain to their daughter how it is she has no father.

Somewhat simultaneous with the course experience, I began exploring Buddhism. There is a belief in Buddhism that whatever was in my past is in me now. This includes molecules from my predecessors as well as memories. It is all part of me and

connected with the larger world. This concept has helped me acknowledge my responsibility in creating and perpetuating racism. I cannot separate myself from the historical or present racism. It is a part of me. Now, I recognize that I have to decide what I am going to do about it.

### A.O.

This entry occurred after the completion of the course and focuses on my need to reconcile and develop a new meaning of life for people at the margins. I had the opportunity to work at a free clinic in Biloxi, Mississippi, for Katrina survivors after taking Dr Taylor's course. Although I was volunteering one and a half years after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf coast, the damage to families' lives was still largely recognizable.

When I arrived in the clinic one early morning, the physician we were working with said to me, "This is not a natural disaster we're dealing with; it's a personal disaster." Recognizing the lack of power that these individuals had was a skill that I developed in Dr. Taylor's course. Power differentials in Mississippi dictated who received proper resources to rebuild their lives and who did not receive resources.

There was a sense of safety on my own behalf to know that I was in a position to go and help others while staying in my comfortable lodge and clinic. I was fascinated with the greater political, racial, and social symbolism that affected these people's lives. However, I was not prepared for the transformation of thoughts that would occur when I went. I was willing to immerse myself in this social situation, but immersed myself as a nurse in a privileged position. I still struggle with how this affected me; I felt guilty about it, helpless at the racism, classism, and political systems that were working against these honorable individuals.

### Autonomy

The autonomy stage is characterized by internalizing, further developing, and enacting new definition(s) of whiteness. In this stage, the person abandons the need to oppress, exoticize, idealize, and/or denigrate people because of socially constructed categories such as race. They vacate personal, institutional, and cultural racism because the threat associated with these categories no longer exists. Autonomous persons embrace opportunities to interact and learn from multicultural exchanges. Autonomy may be conceptualized as "racial self-actualization or transcendence"; however it is more accurate to think of it ". . .as an ongoing process. . .wherein the person is continually open to new information and new ways of thinking about racial and cultural variable."[38(p66)] In my experience, continued self-reflection and interrogation of whiteness provides the epistemological changes that challenge dominant ideology and functions as a critical link for the practice of nursing research.

### M.L.M.

I do not think that the process of overcoming my own racism is quick. I think realizing and undoing all I have been taught and conditioned to think about people who are unlike me requires more than making a few friends of people of color or overrepresenting the people of color in my research. I think it is a long time and, maybe, eternal struggle to recognize the acts of racism in my own actions and in the larger world and move toward making a change.

I often think of ways to combat the things I now know about. Sometimes the problems require complex solutions but sometimes humility and inspiring respect and dignity are actions I can always undertake as a starting point.

Before taking this course, I envisioned activism as grand statements of protest and calls for social change that only people with large amounts of resources could undertake. An important lesson for me was seeing that activism has a "daily-ness." It is through these daily engagements of activism that I learn I can make a difference and I see people of color and other

marginalized individuals as models for engaging in this type of activism.

Viewing the documentary "*When the Levees Broke*" helped me to understand how individual stories added a lot to the total picture of Hurricane Katrina. I can also apply this approach to building nursing science. I realize that seeing all women's health experience, the same erases the contributions of individual stories. I also realize that asking how structural oppressions related to race and class can account for some of these differences in the way women experience health. I think understanding experiences based on differences in social position is important in the ability to be able to move nursing science forward by highlighting rather than erasing these differences in experiences. It moves the science more parallel to goals of social justice.[43]

Also important for me in my approach as a future nurse researcher in women's health is that "we" women do not experience health in the same way and that social determinants of health play an important role in the health of individuals of oppressed and marginalized groups.

### A.O.

Moved by some of the readings of this course such as Henderson's[44] article about participatory research and Stacks[45] book *All Our Kin*, I wanted to learn more about participatory research and building on community strengths. Another opportunity was presented to me to practice some of the methods learned in Dr. Taylor's class. I recently practiced community-based participatory research in an internship with minority communities of low socioeconomic status in a large urban setting. This is an excerpt from my diaries about this internship.

There were neighborhoods that were dirtier, farther away from the mainstream community centers. These neighborhoods were usually for those with lower socioeconomic status. I was surprisingly comfortable when driving to these locations as a researcher, although warned by the other nursing researchers to lock my car doors and drive there during the daylight hours. I felt a strong compassion for these individuals and recognized that

limited power and resources put them in these positions in society; it was not because they were malicious people.

My formation of thought has changed a lot since the beginning of my doctoral courses, and Dr Taylor's course was able to articulately link my call to a vocation of community health service and the intellectual pursuit of rigorous social research. However, I have become more comfortable with beginning to build community relationships to better the health of its citizens.

### EMPOWERING PRAXIS

This course starts with a personal focus of having students write and talk about race, social class, and/or gender (to name a few). Students were able to make theoretical connections to health and research. They acquired a pattern of "emancipatory knowing" through racial autoethnography. Chinn and Kramer define *emancipatory knowing* as "…the ability to recognize barriers that create unfair and unjust conditions and to analyze complex elements of the social and political context, to change a situation to one that improves people's lives."[46(p296)] Praxis was fundamental to their knowledge development:

### M.L.M.

After the course, I feel that I have new glasses that have focused my vision and allowed me to see the invisible societal forces that separate women's health experience often based on race and class differences. I think the personal "work" offered by the course led me, maybe not always willingly, outside my normalcy and self-created boundaries. But . . . I survived . . . and, in realizing this, I am more willing to cross these boundaries and risk the comfort by traversing into other realms of personal and professional growth.

### A.O.

Humming along on my doctoral coursework, the essay written by Pratt stopped me

in my tracks. Her beautiful critique of our privileges, questioning everything about the way we grow up, our family's beliefs and values, and what to do for social justice have inspired me to think about my life in a completely different light. Reading the Pratt's essay at the start of class opened my eyes to taking a critical approach to my own personal upbringing in the context of certain privileges that I had been given without thinking about it . . . One of the greatest lessons I learned during this time was to think about how my research will affect the individuals who I am conducting researching with.

Powerful epistemological changes occurred through written autoethnographies and also through the viewing of 2 videos— Tim Wise's,[47] *The Hidden Cost of Privilege: How Racism Harms White People* and Spike Lee's[43] *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts. When the Levees Broke* is a documentary film directed by Spike Lee about the devastation of New Orleans, Louisiana, due to the failure of the levees during Hurricane Katrina. Although not available when I taught the course, a recently developed curriculum package titled *Teaching the Levees: A Curriculum of Civic Engagement* is designed to encourage dialogues about race and class in America. A free copy is available at http://www.teachingthelevees.org/teaching_the_levees.pdf.

The transformations experienced in the students are conceptualized via a white identity development model; however, there are limitations inherent to racial identity models.[48,49] The sequencing and progressive movement through designated stages may not be systematic. Furthermore, the (re)centering of white(ness-identified) is often problematic when exploring racial identity and politics in America.[50]

## CONCLUSION

Promoting student development should include empowering students as change agents with a greater awareness of self and the social context of health and nursing. The use of racial autoethnography is one teaching strategy to encourage thinking about social conditions and barriers that impede health and influence healthcare, practice, and research. I bear witness to a transformation of perspective that I believe will be sustained and that students will use the skills they have acquired to explore the relationship of social, political, economic, racial, and global politics on the nature of scientific inquiry.

Walker's[1] opening insightful quote helps us understand that we must engage in dialogue through pedagogical interventions that interrupt the curriculum. hooks asserts "[t]he classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy,"[3(p12)] thus we may resist and change the nature in which we educate researchers and send them into the community "stamp with the seals of their professions."[1(p130)]

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