

White Apathy and Pedagogical Renegotiations: An *Autohistoria-teoría* of Teaching While Sick, Tired, and Brown

Angie Mejia

In this article, I reflect on my experience as a graduate student and an instructor to examine the embodied risks, professional decisions, and consequences connected to attending graduate school while working as an educator in a predominantly white institution (PWI). Through recollection, memory, and archival data, this autoethnographic text highlights events that led me to reanalyze my “failure” at reaching all of my enrolled students in a sociology of race and ethnicity class and reframe it as a reaction to the social environment of White apathy. This mindframe was supported by the practices of an East Coast university after a racial bias event was publicized in national news media. I argue that we must examine how institutions of higher learning are complicit in fostering racial ecologies of Whiteness that subject Women of Color and others to experience different forms of pain and abuse. In doing so, we can create new movidas (moves) that hold groups accountable and promote healthier learning environments for all.

Keywords: White apathy, Racism, Women of Color, Predominantly White Institutions (PWI), racialized emotions, *Autohistoria-teoría*, Autoethnography

Narratives by Women of Color (WOC) educators (Boutte & Jackson, 2014; Combs, 2017; Elbelazi & Alharbi, 2019; Perlow et al., 2014; Pittman, 2010; Waring & Bordoloi, 2012) and others working at the intersections of race, gender, class, ethnicity and identity have given us a window of how Othered bodies and minds bear the burden of existing in, navigating, and resisting the many types of White affects that comprise our social worlds. This article builds upon their work

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and is further guided by Combs' (2017) theoretical work on space and racialization which urges a close "attentiveness to place as a historical, situational and cultural variable" (p. 495) to understand the multiple risks placed upon educators existing in and navigating Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) of higher education. I map out the particulars of racialized emotions (Bonilla-Silva, 2019) of institutional practices and focus on how institutional, as well as interpersonal, manifestations of Whiteness in the form of racialized apathy, affected various students and myself (as both student and educator) inside and outside of the classroom. The first part of this text details how this campus' climate fomented and normalized toxic ecologies which culminated in a televised racial event, "an occurrence whose racialized character triggers extensive public discussion and consideration of public issues" (Doane, 2006, p. 259) that put this particular university in the national spotlight. The second part examines the classroom space, by focusing on the many acts of resistance that played out inside of it. I end this text with a letter to educators like myself to highlight how pedagogical renegotiations, as part of this resistance, are needed to transform classrooms into refuges for students underserved by PWIs' institutional practices of coddling Whiteness.

Autoethnography as *Autohistoria-teoría*

Colleagues and others often ask me why I choose autoethnographic methods for theoretical and experiential exploration. This article will be my third such publication in the last five years; the other two focused on sexual trauma (A. Mejia, 2011) and biomedicalization (A. P. Mejia, 2018), respectively. As a medium, autoethnography has allowed me to tap into my own theory in the flesh (Moraga, 1983), a "politic born out of necessity" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 19) used to understand and make sense of oppressive spaces. It has also facilitated my engagement in Anzaldúan-inspired practices of *autohistoria-teoría* — that fusion of "cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling, myth, and other forms of theorizing" (Keating, 2009, p. 9) — which would have otherwise been made invalid under more traditional forms of academic knowledge expression and dissemination. As it will be evident throughout this text, and as others have demonstrated via their own explorations of their academic lives as Othered (Ashlee et al., 2017; Boylorn, 2013; Diversi & Moreira, 2016; Elbelazi & Alharbi, 2019; Johnson, 2013; Toyosaki, 2018; Ward Randolph & Weems, 2010), autoethnographic methods allow marginalized individuals in academic spaces to operationalize and make sense of its constitutive, violent practices and give our readers the chance to act and transform their own worlds (Denzin, 2013). For some of us, autoethnographic texts are one of the few methods of epistemological connection and intellectual transformation that allows us to "embrace vulnerability with purpose, make contributions to existing scholarship, and comment on/critique culture and cultural practices." (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 25)

Connecting and transforming via autoethnographic methodologies is risky—professionally and beyond. The autoethnographer knows (or eventually learns) that being raw and honest are necessary to bring attention to obvious silences. In fact, this risk is part of the radical possibilities that attract many scholars to the method. But for the educator? Puh-leeze! We are not racing to make our pedagogical failures public. I think we educators are like a Latinx family; we do not air out dirty laundry. If we are going to talk about failure, we couch it in discourse around methods and strategies to create better classroom environments that will prevent failure. Will I use this autoethnography to reflect on how I failed to be a good educator or as a way to structure my *autohistoria-teoría* of how the physical and emotional body fares after being poisoned by environments comprised of racialized emotions such as White apathy? If were you, I would read this text as a bit of both. Of falling down, crying, and getting up. Of being unapologetic for changing and reframing teaching practices. Of being vulnerable to one's self while at the same time accountable to others in a similar position. And, like many good stories, I will start and end it in the epistolary.

Google Me This University

Dear Reader,

In the following pages, I will share my perspectives about being a Woman of Color graduate student and adjunct instructor at an unnamed but easy to locate East Coast PWI that tried, and failed to keep various forms of racialized violence against students of Color under wraps. In 2018, this university would be made famous because of a leaked video showing several fraternity pledges performing a skit that divested groups of people with socially marginalized identities of their humanity. After relentless international coverage, the world would remember my alma mater as the university whose fraternity members mimicked the rape of a person in a wheelchair. In 2019, this university would once again grace the front page of CNN when Black students organized to call out the university's lack of response to the constant acts of racial violence against students of Color. Google me this university. I will give you a minute to find the name of my alma mater.

You found it? Good. Yep, you got it; the university with the funny looking citrus mascot. Let's call my alma mater OrangeU, to honor this silly, approachable mascot. OrangeU, while known for many positive things, houses many fraternities that have and continue to systematically perpetrate acts of violence and abuse against those who are not cis-gendered, able-bodied, and White. Understanding and highlighting the

racialized environment enabled by OrangeU's administration warrants the writing of this text.

This video caused a whole lot of surprised gasps and clutched pearls from Very Nice White™ people. "We are not the South!" is something I heard someone at the front desk of the library whisper to a bored student clerk checking in books in the computer. Yeah, there are no confederate flags or statues on campus... that I know of. It was obvious that people were surprised. Some were outraged at the lack of response by the university, while others just shrugged saying that it wasn't that big of a deal.

And what about others? I mean to say, the other Othered. Well, if you were to ask these Othered others, those belonging to groups that are routinely victimized by members of OrangeU's fraternities, they would tell you that their complaints are often met with an institutional set of practices that protects perpetrators and re-traumatizes those who have been attacked and harassed. The video created a very unsatisfying sense of "I told you so," because many of the OrangeU students of Color (and Othered others) who were victimized by their White peers knew that the university has never really worked to change the uniquely toxic culture of Whiteness. OrangeU have always worked to make certain groups of White people are comfortable and safe, often at the detriment of others.

And if you were to ask me, at the time both student and instructor at OrangeU, I would repeat the same things others have already said about the racial climate at this PWI. And since the time of writing this piece, my alma mater is once again front-page news, I believe it is the best time to share with you this story of being the target of racist attacks. A target, like many others at OrangeU, because some felt the need to discipline me and others like myself—foreign, non-normative, chronically ill, or Brown—for daring to exist and occupy space.

This is a true story. The events depicted in this autoethnography took place in an East Coast PWI during the span of two years, from 2017 to 2019. Out of respect to the journal editors and the peer reviewers choosing to engage with this text, some names have been masked. Out of respect for those at OrangeU targeted by fraternity-perpetrated acts of racism, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.

Sincerely,

The Mexican "It"

The Mexican “It”: Feeling Raced in Violent Spaces

Summer 2017: Walking allows me to figure out my writing goal for the day. The rhythmic sound my backpack while I walk, a metronome caused by my limp, does not interrupt this thought process. But the obvious sounds of taunting — the whooping and the laughing attached to a male perpetrator’s desire to mock and dehumanize his target — does. “You walk like a r*tard!” During this walk of being shamed, someone calls me a derogatory name for a person of Mexican descent, one that probably “doesn’t understand English.” I hear them mocking my long straight hair. “Look, it’s a Mexican ‘It’!” (*It* to probably refer to a character with long hair in the *Adams’ Family*.) Trembling, I’m able to catch some of this verbal abuse on video via my cell phone. I was supposed to be writing my dissertation, but instead I’m holding in my tears and calling campus security to file a report.

Saturday has me walking towards the library and forgetting it is game day at OrangeU. (I guess I missed the fucking giant fruit mascot handing out game day swag.) Undergrads are drinking and listening to whatever is blasting on their audio speakers. I tend not to pay attention to other students when I’m in student garb — jeans and a hoodie. Saturday equals time to work on my dissertation. The whooping taunt came, almost in unison, out of the mouths of six or seven “gentlemen” from OrangeU’s chapter of AEPi — a fraternal organization which seeks to guide its members to “develop character, responsibility and a proper set of values through living together in brotherhood.” I guess one way to live out the ethos of AEPi is by calling me derogatory names about my limp, pronounced at times, the only visible reminder of my disability — and my gendered ethnicity as a Latinx cisgender woman with long, straight, black hair.

Acts of marking non-Whiteness in others by fraternity members asserts their power over social spaces they feel entitled to or seek to control (Kiesling, 2001). As a Woman of Color in a campus where racial abuses perpetrated by fraternity-affiliated students, I was somewhat protected by my status as an instructor. I had heard from my non-binary and racial/ethnic minority students of this type of abuse but had never witnessed or experienced it. My dehumanization based on my raced and gendered positionality as it intersected with the visibility of a physical condition from a long term bout of chronic illness and an accident, coupled with the inability of the University in handling the issue promptly, respectfully, and efficiently, had already created a growing sense of not only emotional but also physical distress that I carried with me as I attempted to finish my doctoral dissertation.

A few weeks after this incident, I was offered assistance by the office of student services via a case manager, who would help me find resources such as counseling, time extensions with assignments, orders of protection, and other things to deal with the emotional aftermath of this incident.

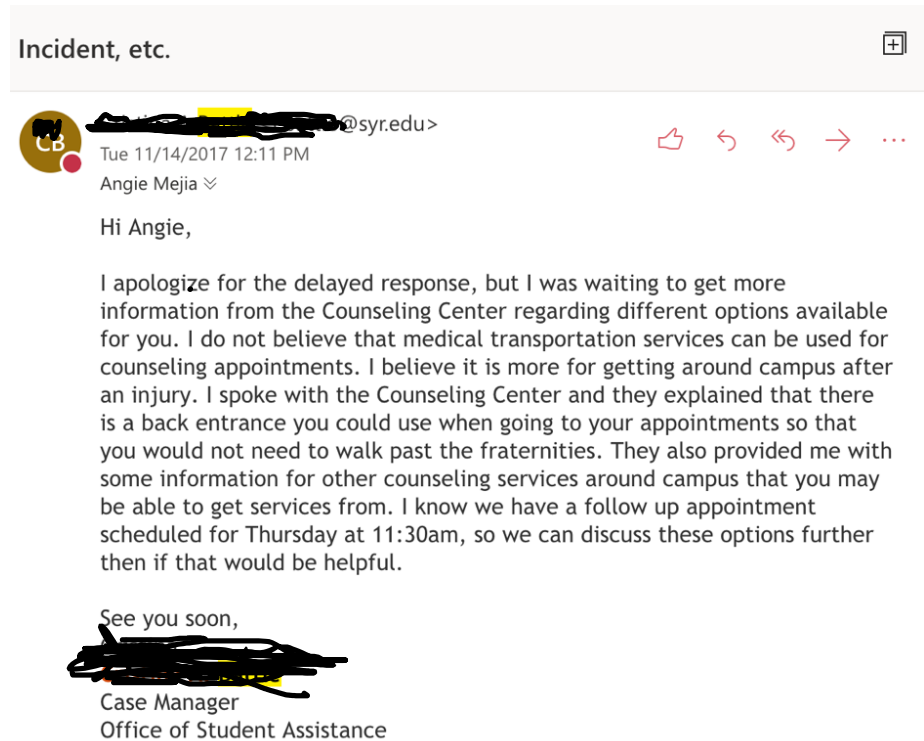


Fig. 1: Email communication with OrangeU's Student Services' Office

OrangeU's counseling center, until recently, was located one housing unit away from the fraternity. The fact that my case manager would later claim not to understand why a Woman of Color would refuse to use the back entrance of the counseling center to avoid further harassment from White fraternity men is indicative of the campus climate non-Whites are forced to navigate day after day. I finally understood what many undergraduate students shared with me: OrangeU's institutional practices are set up to benefit perpetrators of racial violence, rather than those victimized and abused by them.

The Nerd Frat Mess

March 2018: “Did you see?” A fellow PhD student is catching up to me as I try to speed away. I’m not a fast walker, but I really don’t want to talk about this mess. Not now, not ever. That. F*cking. Video. My phone is not loud but each text message notification seems to get louder. To be honest, my phone is so old that the volume no longer goes all the way down, so I hear it every time someone texts me about That. F*cking. Video. A video where someone is on their knees saying how they “solemnly swear to always have hatred in [their] heart for n*ggers, sp*cs and most importantly the f*ckin’ k*kes.” At least That. F*cking. Video. made me feel that my experience of being harassed by an OrangeU fraternity was not unusual. But everyone is sending me texts about That. F*cking. Video. I already take another walking route to avoid other fraternity houses. And because of That. F*cking. Video, I have to find another way home because my new route passes the fraternity that created That. F*cking. Video.

The Nerd Frat Mess, two years to the time of authoring this text, would become an important component of OrangeU’s racial morality play (Doane, 2017) where understandings of racial inequality as structural and historical would be downplayed over explanations of racial incidents as the result of individual acts of racial bias. “Staged” as the result of a racial incident of this magnitude, a racial morality play prompts a process where the individual perpetrators of a racial event are judged in the court of public opinion all the while forgetting the structural nature of racism. After the Nerd Fraternity incident, (I call it Nerd Fraternity because the organization in question served as a professional fraternity for male engineering majors) OrangeU began implementing a set of ineffective responses aimed at fixing the problem of diversity and addressing issues of racial bias by instituting a pass/no pass class offering that would tackle implicit racial bias, without having to mention the words “white” and “privilege” in the same sentence. But as other researchers have shown, institutional responses that do not look at the systematic nature of racial inequality tend to “further facilitat[e]the entrenchment of a new white supremacy, which sometimes is not so different from the old white supremacy” (Zamudio & Rios, 2006, p. 499). In the case of OrangeU, White Supremacy tends to manifest differently with the same vicious outcome when taking into account different spaces. Meaning, what we, the Othered others, see happening in one public space (the quad, the street outside fraternity row, the library) differs slightly than what we see in another (the classroom.)

Teaching Race When You Don't Feel Like It

I open my email app and learn that instead of teaching the gender and sexuality class I was promised, I am now going to be teaching the race and ethnicity class for the fall and winter/spring term. I am forcefully tapping my poor keyboard as I write my last email to P, the head of my department. (As if tapping my old Dell keyboard harder and harder is going to make any difference.) If I'm meant to teach this class, a class that I should not be teaching, a class that no Person of Color (POC) should be teaching, then I will teach it like I have always taught the class. I'll be using The Nerd Frat Mess as one of the case studies. I feel brave telling her that. I hit send inadvertently. Panicky, I want to unsend because I forgot my Latina manners by not adding, "I hope you are feeling restful after a wonderful weekend" after what appears to be a very short email with a greeting line of "Hello."

I had to enter a class that I was not ready to teach again. Using the fraternity incident as a case study would not have been out of the ordinary for me. I tend to use local examples in class to help students develop their sociological imaginations. Since OrangeU boasts around thirty or so Greek-letter organizations that influence cultural life on campus, some of the case studies in my gender and sexuality class were based on concerns about fraternities, often reported in the local student newspaper or campus security incident log. One of these teaching activities had students examining incidents of gendered violence on our campus by comparing them to incidents in a nearby university.

Although risky because of the potential use of controversial themes creating a tense classroom environment, this pedagogical strategy has always helped my students connect sociological concepts to their lived realities. I felt the media sensation triggered by the Nerd Frat Mess would give students more than enough data to complete an assignment that was worth 10% of their grade. By this time, with the accused fraternity members contesting their expulsion from campus via lawsuits, the local news reporting on the ongoing efforts by the school responding to those against the closing of the fraternity house, and social media sharing of abuse experienced at the hands of other Greek-affiliated students, the Nerd Frat Mess was on everyone's radar. But I did not see how I, an educator with years of experience teaching and known for high student-evaluation scores, would have to struggle to change the hearts and minds of some of my White students. I was not expecting how being forced to make decisions to protect students of Color in the classroom would affect my physical and emotional health. The only issue that I envisioned was having to grade too many papers in a not so comfortable room at a not so reasonable hour of the night.

Whose Hearts and Minds Should I Be Concerned About?

Class discussion on gendered racial violence in our campus was so one-sided; most of my POC students were animated and engaged, while most of my White students were in another world all together. I'm ready to just go home and crash. This is very unlike me. I never, ever feel this way after teaching. Until this term, ending class filled me with an almost manic surge of energy, which I would capitalize on as I prepared for next week's class. But now, any energy left is devoted to figuring out what else I can do to get my White students to engage with the material in class. And now someone is asking to see me in my office. I internally groan, but my dedication to my students has always transcended feelings of exhaustion. I am about to tell her that I am not having office hours, but what she has to tell me cannot wait until tomorrow.

I had run out of tricks by the fifth week. I love teaching so much that this has never happened to me before. Teaching is also one of the few things I am not humble about, because I know how to do it well. I may be incompetent in many areas — I cannot sing, draw, craft, cook, understand strategies used in sports, drive a car, or follow simple directions to get places, even with the help of Google Maps. But I know how to teach. I have won teaching awards. I have taught others how to teach and I have been paid to do just that. So, I want to state this again — I never run out of tricks. I have always figured out ways to work with students who are struggling in my class. Is writing a problem? Then maybe a student can demonstrate material by using another medium to communicate their ideas. Non-sociology major taking a methods class — let's work something out during office hours to get you from feeling like you're drowning to at least doggie paddling towards a passing grade. Student is falling asleep in class (most likely because they are working two jobs)? Then that day I conduct our lesson on writing ethnographic notes while walking around the quad; checking in later with the student and hoping to see what else I can do to help them. Come at me with any challenge in the classroom and I will solve it.

Another thing I never experience is feeling emotionally distressed after teaching a class. Due to having to embody an identity devalued by mainstream society, I was aware that emotion labor in the classroom is a problem for POC educators when compared to many of their White counterparts (Ford, 2011). I knew that students would perceive me in a certain way because of my ethnicity, race, and gender. Still, there is a peculiar sense of power attached to the disempowered role of being an advanced graduate student teaching as the instructor of record at a PWI. First, some of my students' evaluation on my competence as a professor was often not based on my intellectual handle on the material. WOC professors are often read as impersonal or aloof (Lee & Johnson-Bailey, 2004),

but it seemed the humor I used in the classroom would be a trait that a small minority of students who did not like my class would use to rate me. And since I was not an educator on the tenure-track, any mistakes attributed to my lack of competence might be chalked up to being a graduate student and not a “real” professor.

But what worried me the most was the collective (and visible) disengagement by a number of White students: eye rolling when we discussed an article about Hurricane Katrina, bored and faraway looks when their POC peers spoke about racial incidents on campus, or failed attempts at hiding their use of electronics to check Instagram instead of listening to our guest speakers. While not certain of it back then, I now know their disengagement was not connected to my lack of trying.

Leoni — usually a very formal student during her interactions with me — has called my attention by using my first name and not by “Professor Last Name.” “What happened?” I ask, worried about her health; one of two issues POC students come to office hours to talk about. “I can’t with people!” she said. Today, in the classroom, something made her upset enough to consider dropping the class. She was sitting behind three of her classmates, people she once considered “somewhat okay,” when she noticed them having their own conversation, via text, while the rest of class discussed a recent racially motivated attack on campus involving a White woman (unconnected to OrangeU) pistol-whipping a Black student walking home. She was upset at her three “somewhat okay” classmates. “You know, I saw Jenny texting Krissy how this [class discussion] was ‘so stupid’ and ‘boring.’” She trembles in anger while describing how “Krissy and Company” texted each other and then “turned around” and later appeared “outraged” when discussing the incident during small group discussion time. There was a time she didn’t think “all White people” would be “heartless.” I am unsure of what to say. Internally, I yearn to show solidarity. I want to say, “I know how you feel,” but I am also Krissy and Company’s professor and I should be figuring out how to help them become a little more invested in class as well.

I now know that disengagement in students like Krissy and her friends was not due to my lack of trying. They just did not care. They were obviously apathetic to the effects of racism on their Black and Brown peers. Their performance was one of a racialized apathy, an affective state comprised of feelings and actions of “indifference and *nonchalance*” (Brown et al., 2019, p. 2, emphasis in the original) at the suffering and pain of POC. This noticeable absence of concern — by Krissy and Company and other students like them — to the racial abuses on campus was

a collective symptom of a larger, already existing, and ongoing problem of systematic racism. The events that preceded the semester and the institutional response to the Nerd Frat Mess merely emboldened some White students to stop hiding their lack of concern for the increase in racialized acts of violence. OrangeU had already confirmed to Krissy and Co. that their comfort as White students was an institutional priority, their well-being and happiness more important than that of their POC peers. Why should they care that others knew they did not care? And it was this inability of so many at OrangeU to really care (and do something to make things better) for POC students, coupled with behaviors by many White students, that made many of us emotionally and physically ill.

After weeks of trying to engage many of my White students, my body was telling me that it would be a waste of time. My stomach pains got so severe that I planned to ask for a Leave of Absence or start looking for another job. My dissertation was set to defend in summer but all I wanted to do was to quit, leave OrangeU, and ~~move~~ move in with my sister until I felt strong enough to come back and finish my degree.

After a whole day of being left on read, my sister responds. “*¡Cállate con tus pendejadas y olvídate ya de eso! ¡En esta casa cama no hay!*” (Shut up with your fuckery and forget about that. There are no spare beds in this house.) “Thanks?” I respond back, telling her that now I’m unable to sleep more than four hours a night, in addition to the stomach pains that plague me throughout the day. “Go to the doctor or smoke something. IDC.” I wrote her one of the longest messages, telling her about the class and the disengagement and the blasé attitude of many students. But then she texts back. “*¿Y los que te necesitan? ¿Y los que quieren aprender? ¿Y que de ellos?*” (And those that need you? And the ones that want to learn? What about them?) She is right. Some of them still wanted to learn.

There were still students that had become invested in the class. To my POC students, the discussions validated their collective anxieties and concerns as students on a campus that suppressed their concerns about their safety over the comfort of White students. To those who were White and receptive (a very small number, unfortunately), the class gave them a vocabulary and a set of practices to start supporting those affected by racialized abuses. Further, I became a source of support for students who were continually being underserved and ignored by the university in other ways. Griffith and colleagues (2019) found that Black students attending PWIs deal with race-based stressors by selectively seeking mentors and spaces that validate their experiences and help them navigate racially hostile spaces. Stomach pains be damned. I am staying because (some) of them need this class.

Beware of the Nones of March

March 6, 2019, 1:30 pm: Darla raised her hand. “Can we use what we see happening in class?” I was a bit confused. “What do you mean?” She un-slouches from her comfortable position and sits up straight. “For our reflection, can we use the reading by Forman [on Katrina] and say that those texting on their phones right now are part of the problem? I mean, look at them, they’ve pretty much checked out.” Record scratch. What do I say? What does ANYONE in my position say? Everyone, even the students targeted by Darla’s accusation, are now looking at me. Do I have to be a good educator all the time? Should she use the reading to talk about what is going on in class right now? This is way beyond my pay grade.

In addition to the obvious “indifference to inequality and lack of action in the face of racial injustice” (Reason & Evans, 2007, p. 69) by some White students during class discussions, their assignments demonstrated a resistance to engage with the curriculum. My attempts to recreate assignments that would have allowed White students to engage cognitively, as well as materially, with issues of Whiteness as related to campus climate and their identities were not doing a single damned thing. I hoped that, by the middle of the term, these students would eventually reach what Reason and Evans refer to “a racially cognizant sense of Whiteness [which] encompasses an understanding of guilt, power, and privilege [while] avoid[ing] the paralysis and victim perspectives” (2007, p. 71) that some people may fall victim to when confronted with their privilege. Some of these activities incorporated the use of social media to explore Bonilla-Silva’s idea of color-blind racism (2017) with group exercises that looked at case studies of successful cross-racial alliances in the region. However, some White students were actively avoiding engaging with the material.

Some will argue that many of my White students were disengaged from the learning process or confused by the complexity of the material. However, many of their written assignments showed the opposite. This group of students wrote papers that demonstrated their willful colorblindness — a discursive maneuvering where they would show they understood the concepts and the case studies explored in class “but then introduce[e] alternate factors to facilitate misanalysing, ignoring, and/or rejecting the racial dynamics of those examples” (Mueller, 2017, p. 227) — used in the curriculum and brought in by guest speakers. Students’ response papers showed that they understood the concepts and the social mechanisms that constituted them. However, they engaged in ways that fiercely denied the articles’ findings by going out of their way to do outside research and find other peer-reviewed articles that they would then miscite or misinterpret to make

their point. For example, a student would argue against findings on the educational disadvantage of minoritized groups by citing a decontextualized finding from an article showing Black women having the highest rate of enrollment in higher education without bothering to read that same article's discussion behind these phenomena. Others would point out how Bonilla-Silva's interviews in his *Racism without Racists* book were no longer relevant since data had been collected more than ten years ago. Their papers, in all, exemplified what Doane (building upon the work of Charles W. Mills, Feagin and Vera and others such as Jennifer Mueller) sees as White people's practices of "deliberate distortion of the reality of racial inequality and systemic racism for political and psychological purposes" (2017, pp. 985, emphasis on the original). In these writing assignments, many White students went beyond what was asked on the instructions by doing outside library research to find sources that, if miscited, helped them "prove" that the many peer-reviewed sources of knowledge listed in the syllabus were obviously wrong. In addition, these papers showed their unwillingness to explore their own connections to racial privilege, even after one of the assigned reflections required everyone in the class to analyze the incident described above.

March 6, 2019, 1:45 p.m.: Other students are now joining in what has now become a collective accusation to the more disengaged group of students. Yet I remain silent. "I feel hella disrespected when y'all don't give a \$#!%@ about class ..." I want to ask Julius to elaborate on what he means by disrespect when someone else pipes in. "Texting and having side conversations when I'm telling you about campus police harassing me shows me you don't care." Others are nodding and looking at each other. This same student is now staring at some of his peers, "When all of you were in the research class talking about street harassment, I listened, I wanted to learn from you... with you... I didn't get how bad girls had it but I was listening to you... it helped me." Silence. "Why... why can't YOU pay attention and listen, learn from what I have to say?" Someone (I think it was Claudio) shouts out, "They don't want to, bro! They just don't want to." In contrast with the silence, the sound of students' snapping their fingers in solidarity felt like thunderous clapping. My stomach cannot take much more of this. Some students are nodding and angrily staring at those students Darla called attention to earlier. I want to shout, "Enough!" But my only attempt to take control of the room is by my redirecting the conversation to questions about the next assignment due in a week.

What might have changed? I will be honest and say that I have yet to figure it out what roused my POC students to publicly call out examples of White apathy in the classroom. All I can say is that no one forewarned me that the Nones of

March were coming. All I remember is the exhaustion. I was tired of spending so much time prepping for class (trying to think of new assignments and in-class activities to get Krissy and Company to care about the material) and slowly redirected those energies to serve the students who were engaging with the material. As other scholars have argued, allocating “inordinate amounts of attention and catering to white students only reinforces their privilege” (Perlow et al., 2014, p. 250) which ends up eating away time that could be spent on other students. Spending part of my weekends searching the literature for strategies and practices to engage White students meant I was sacrificing time that would have allowed me to recharge and be the healthy and creative educator I was known to be.

...And also, Beware of the Ides of March

March 14, 2019: She ends her last email message with, “I feel this is unfair.” What’s unfair? Is it unfair that I am asking her to use the concepts from the reading correctly? Unfair that I am taking attendance and I have called her to my office to explain why someone else had signed her name on the attendance sheet when I knew she was visibly absent? Or is it unfair that I remained unmoved when she came in last week, crying as she confessed how the stress of her extracurricular commitments forced her to have someone else sign on her behalf?

My email response is brief:

Hi,

I am sorry you feel that way, but I will have to mark you absent for that day and any other days where I see attendance discrepancies. Also, please note that I will not be answering any more back and forth emails as it is spring break.

Best,

Angie

There was no soothsayer to forewarn Krissy and friends that the Ides of March were also coming. Aside from taking my weekend back, I also began instituting more disciplinary and surveillant approaches to attendance and participation (which I hate to do and hardly ever did.) And for myself, I began tracking my somatic symptoms throughout the day and talked to my primary care physician to give me something temporary for stomach pains that she later diagnosed to be symptoms of IBS. Like my girl Elsa, in *Frozen*, I. Let. It. Go: I let go of my worry of trying to find ways to engage students who did not care. I let go of feeling upset

at their willful color blindness in response papers which just centered on feelings of “not being racist” because they “dated Black guys” or being “reversely discriminated” by multicultural activities on campus. Instead of giving extensive comments that would nudge them to expand on their feelings which might drive them to reframe or better understand class concepts, I just wrote which concepts they missed by listing the page number in the reading and exemplifying how they should have written about the concept. Historically, the Ides of March might have marked days for the settling of debts, so it is fitting that I no longer cared about (their) feelings. Some may accuse that I was not doing right by my students, but these pedagogical negotiations were for me to physically survive the rest of the term. And as I later came to realize, these pedagogical renegotiations ended up being vital for some of my students’ emotional health and well-being.

One day after having the students create dramatic skits to explore reproductive health policy, I see Darla and Claudio walking up to me. “When are we doing more theater?” Darla shakes her head and then playfully shows him the palm of her hand as if saying, “whatever.” “You got this fool all into this.” Claudio bows to me and Darla, waiting for our applause. Darla reluctantly joins me in my enthusiastic clapping. “Bravo!”

“Our speaker was lit!” Diana was now interested in volunteering with a local youth organization after hearing the work of a graduate student who came to speak about cross-racial collaborations in the area. She asked me if I had time to make an official introduction via email. “Of course!”

“Is that Puerto Rican sterilization movie online?” Patricia wants to see the rest of *La Operación*, since I only showed a segment in class. We have so little time, but she wants to watch it with her grandmother, a woman born in Bayamon, Puerto Rico during the 1950s. “Messed up! I want to hear what she has to say.” I want to hear what she thinks too!

It was in my failure to do right by *all* of my students, that I was doing right to *some* of my students — students of Color and others who were failed by our University. In my failure as an educator, I could at least do right by them and myself by nurturing a space where they could learn the language of sociology to make sense of their world and the structural and institutional barriers that robbed them of their ability to thrive, academically and otherwise. I began teaching them (and those few White students that were still interested in learning this language) without that overwhelming concern over whether Krissy and Company simply did not care about racism on campus or were just disengaged from learning. My

redirection of energies and my approach to the readings, lectures, and discussion seemed to have recalibrated the climate inside the classroom. POC students' experiences outside the classroom, experiences once ungrammatical to others, were validated and then examined using the analytical process of the sociological imagination. These students now had the vocabulary to examine, verbalize, and map out the effects and consequences of OrangeU's racial climate. Students tried not to call out racially apathetic behaviors publicly. (I will not say they were always successful but their call outs were not as severe as those during that March incident.) And even if they used these concepts to publicly call out some of their White peers in class, I knew that Krissy and Company were going to be ok. How could they not be ok? The rest of the university was making sure they did not challenge themselves or their other White peers to think about their privilege in transformative ways. Our administration was busy delivering trainings and listening sessions on racial bias that did not address systematic forms of oppression. My task as an educator needed to be one of fostering a discursive space to allow certain students (those the university has harmed and will continue to harm in their quest to maintain the racial status quo) to gain a vocabulary to make sense of their worlds.

From Tense Civility to Discursive Conflict

My classroom, until the Nones of March that is, was a space defined by a tense civility where collective racial apathy, as it intersected with Whiteness, gender, class, local racial economies, and the unique social life of campus (dominated by Greek life) defined how some White students engaged with class material and their peers. My students of Color, and some of their White peers, would share their feelings of anger ... but only in private, during office hours, or via email. Their anger pointed at the visible detachment they observed from a number of White students — most of them female and affiliated with Greek organizations on campus — when discussing issues of race and racism on campus. As I later came to realize, this disengagement was not the result of not understanding class materials, since many White students (which Leoni had humorously dubbed “Krissy and Company”) were very aware of what the authors were saying. In their papers, this group of students engaged in complicated rhetorical and (mis)citational dances to disprove every empirical finding on class texts that focused on the effects of racism in America.

Racial discourses are contextual fields for “political/ideological struggles” (Doane, 2006, p. 256) to play out, influenced “by the changing structure of racial conflicts and racial ideologies” (p. 257) that define and shape a specific time and place. These racial discourses, as responses to racial events, and in the case of my students, the Nerd Frat Mess “are used strategically to attract or retain adherents and to neutralize and discredit opposing viewpoints” (Doane, 2017, p. 978). My

students of Color, and some of their White ally peers, understood that the racial climate at OrangeU was the result of institutional practices that protected and accommodated Whiteness over the safety of other students. For the majority of White students, the Nerd Frat event, when they bothered to discuss it publicly or via their response papers, was a “bad thing” that happened in our campus but that did not reflect how others on campus felt about race. “Talking about it” did nothing to “solve the issue of racism,” according to some of them; while others gave us examples of how White students on campus “couldn’t be racist” because they listened to “Black music” and many had dated “Blacks and Asians.” Others would say that the Nerd Frat Mess was not really about race because one or two people on the video were members of racial/ethnic minoritized groups. And Krissy and Company might have said that the Nerd Frat Mess was a non-issue because it was not a “social” fraternity.

A Letter to POC Educators Daring to Teach while Navigating Hostile Academic Spaces

Dear Colleague,

At the beginning of this *autobistoria-teoría*, I remarked that the paper was my own way of reflecting on my “failures” of educating while Brown, foreign, ill, and exhausted. I did this as a way to encourage you to examine your own past recollections of “failure” and the ones that you have yet to experience, but should put to print, so you can reframe them as practices to assure your own survival and that of your students.

I’ll be honest. It was painful to see how racially privileged students did not really care or want to see why they should care about issues of racial injustice happening in our campus and experienced by their POC peers. Those of you who see student indifference in your own classroom may have overanalyzed it as evidence of your failure to engage them in class. No. Not today, not ever. Stop with that nonsense. I am confident that you will find ways to come to terms with this without letting it emotionally affect you and your students of Color. Disengagement by some of your White students might very well be their problem, not your problem or of your doing.

It will also be painfully obvious to see how racially privileged students might not only be apathetic but also openly hostile to socio-behavioral and humanities-based scholarship on race and ethnicity, especially when authored and produced by non-White scholars. At the time of writing this text, I have been following social media discussions about

students at Georgia Southern University burning books written by a Latinx scholar that was invited to speak at their campus. In cases such as this, your pedagogical renegotiations might be that of finding ways of assuring your physical safety and that of your POC students.

While my initial approach to teaching privileged students subscribed to Cabrera et al's (2016) practices of "assertive pedagogy of racial agitation" (p. 132) to shake them out of their "racial arrested development" by engaging in practices that could shift "moments of dissonance ... [into] ... transformative learning experiences" (p. 131), these were for naught when OrangeU administration's lukewarm responses to the Nerd Frat incident supported a campus culture which empowered students, many of them White, to not care about the effects of a racially hostile campus on their POC classmates. As scholars of teaching and learning, it is important to understand how White Nationalist thinking in the US has emboldened students (and even those outside academic spaces) to threaten violence toward educators that seek to challenge misconceptions about racism and other forms of oppression. The emotions of students that defend Whiteness in the classroom are no longer "safe" that they stay at the level of tense discussions. Teaching to transform is now eliciting emotions than turn indignation and White fragility into very real threats to one's physical safety.

Spaces for POC students seeking to heal the wounds of racial abuses do exist on campuses like OrangeU. However, these "healing places may not be safe as faculty and students have to navigate through and across hostile spaces to get there" (Combs 2017, p. 498). As scholars and educators, we may fall into a hopeless cycle of ruminative thinking when we sit down and analyze how our efforts, in and outside the classroom, do not materialize into transformative change. My hope is that our classroom teaching continues to provide the foundation that can help students make sense of and learn to verbalize and critically examine multiple forms of social oppression so they can create their own interventions for change. The space we create in the classroom is healing because of the tools we provide to navigate the toxic spaces outside of it.

I do want to end this text by telling you that your job matters and that you should not doubt the ways you go about doing this job. It is not your pedagogical strategies that are failing when you cannot reach some White students; their disengagement is a manifestation of their racialized privilege as it intersects with the institutional practices that normalize White violence. It is not you; it is some of them. (Repeat that mantra.)

And instead of stressing yourself thinking about how to shake them from that apathy, redirect your energies toward those students who need you most. I believe you can do this. I wish you the best of luck.

Con mucho respeto,

Angie

Epilogue

November 2019: I'm on my couch reading faculty notes on some first-year seminar subcommittee matter. (Yeah, I know am supposed to be protected on my first year as a tenured-track faculty, but I guess this bit of service snuck up on me!) So, as an eager new faculty member learning the working culture of my new school, I am multitasking by reading faculty notes and watching the web livestream of the OrangeU administration-led campus conversation (yep, another one) about recent acts of racial harassment on campus.

(Hold up... What?)

Come on! Really? Why are y'all surprised? Racial violence being *de rigueur* at OrangeU. A few days ago, students reported someone drawing a swastika on the wall; three days ago, a Black woman student was harassed (very reminiscent to my experience two year ago) by several fraternity brothers and their guests. Surrounding her, they shouted the N word as she attempted to walk away, but they followed her to continue terrorizing her. And two days after that, someone airdropped the New Zealand shooter's manifesto to people studying at the library late at night. OrangeU, once again, on YouTube and the news. For six days, Black and Brown students have been occupying the lobby of one of the campus buildings and have presented OrangeU's Chancellor with a letter of demands to be met, or his resignation if he is unwilling to sign it. In his grey suit, which accentuates the frog-belly parlor of his skin, the Chancellor is being livestreamed online and is telling the crowd how he cares for all students. Okay then, time to get back to my notes. I promised the chair of this committee that I would make sure that ...

"SIGN OR RESIGN!" Frog-Belly is being drowned out by shouting. All I see are students with fists raised in the air walking out of the venue. And now he is cut off as almost all of the students get up to leave. On the video, almost all of the students have walked out of the venue, and the few still sitting down are on their phones. More shouts of "SIGN

OR RESIGN!” before the livestream suddenly goes black. I immediately go to social media to try and find more videos.

And then I see them: Some of my Summer 2018 and Spring 2019 students are there: one walking in front; another one, with professional camera equipment in tow, is taking pictures of the crowd. On social media, another one is live tweeting what is happening outside the venue where the listening session was taking place. I let out a scream because I am mega fangirling while jumping up and down and scaring my cats. My students from that class are joining others to tell OrangeU’s Chancellor that they are tired and had enough.

See me: in my pajamas, still jumping up and down while I use my iPad to retweet posts. I ask Alexa to dial my former dissertation advisor’s number because I know she will be there walking in solidarity with my students. “We are all walking toward Frog-Belly’s mansion!” She has to shout this out because everyone else is chanting “SIGN OR RESIGN!” She disconnects because she knows we won’t be able to hear each other out. “I wish I was there,” I text back, sad that I can’t join. I spend the rest of the night reading and retweeting tweets; my notes now long forgotten.

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