

The Revolution Will Be Live-Tweeted: Theoretical Groundings and  
Practical Steps for Building a Positive White Antiracist Identity

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## **Abstract**

Coming to a white antiracist identity can often be a confusing, contradictory process. It can mean dealing with painful emotions, conflict, and alienation. White folks often struggle to come to a positive self-identity within the context of antiracist work. This project uses a Black feminist framework to examine how white folks can come to a positive white antiracist identity and imbed a love ethic into their practice of antiracist work. Black feminist epistemology relies on four dimensions: the validation of lived experiences, personal accountability, an ethic of care, and dialogue. This project draws on Black feminist literature, personal narratives, and my experiences with Twitter to demonstrate how these dimensions connect to the process of building a positive white antiracist identity. Doing antiracist work is most productive when it seeks to bring healing for both non-white folks and white folks, and focuses on closing the gaps between us. When we center Black women, hold one another and ourselves as white folks personally accountable, implement a love ethic, and properly engage tools like Twitter, white folks can come to a productive, healthy, positive white antiracist identity. The process of building a positive white antiracist identity is the first step towards building inclusive, healthy, loving communities.

Keywords: white antiracism, black feminist theory, twitter, love ethic

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## **Introduction**

On January 6, 2015 the NAACP chapter in Colorado Springs was bombed. Luckily no one was hurt, but Twitter was buzzing. Congressman and Civil Rights Movement leader John Lewis was one of many expressing concern. He tweeted, “I am deeply troubled by the bombing in Colorado. It reminds me of another period. These stories cannot be swept under the rug #NAACPBombing” (Lewis). A few days later, another Twitter user responded to Lewis’s tweet with the following: “@repjohnlewis we are tired of hearing about black people. they created their own mess. time for them to clean it up themselves. no more” (@mmcrogan). A screenshot of the original tweet and this response circulated my timeline for a few hours as a reminder that overt racism is very much alive, especially behind the cover of the Internet.

Every day, it seems someone is on TV or Facebook or Twitter desperately trying to convince the world that the solution to the problem of racism in the U.S. is to simply stop talking about it. They maintain that if we stop teaching people about the insidious sides of our history, the bad feelings will go away and everyone will get along. The frightening thing is, the story about the bombing barely made waves in the media. I only saw one person on my Facebook feed share the story, and I had sent him the link. Attempts to silence critiques of racism affect people more than just on an interpersonal level, however. Racism often works in covert institutional ways to obscure our understanding of its manifestation in real life. For example, it works when lawmakers try to erase facts from history books for the fear that they might cast the U.S. in unfavorable light. In one such incident in October of 2014, hundreds of high school students in Jefferson County, Colorado walked out of their classes to protest proposed challenges to

their AP history curriculum that would censor out the “negative” sides of American history.

Following the tragic deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in the summer of 2014, the topic of race has been more at the forefront than I have seen yet in my lifetime. Most days, I feel a massive divide in our country, and the news often frames it as a black/white divide. But each day, as I plug in to news and entertainment media, I find myself—a white woman—on the side pushing for conversations about racism to continue. I wish that meant that I could say that my interest in anti-racism stems from some profound enlightenment that I have been graced with since birth. The truth is, I have thought, said, and done some racist things.

I grew up in Sioux City, a metropolitan area of about 168,000 people on the western edge of Iowa. The racial makeup of the area was approximately 80-85% white. I was raised Catholic. We rarely missed Sunday mass, and my mother worked at the private Catholic school district where my brother and I went to school from kindergarten through high school. That meant that at school we were required to attend another weekly mass and take four years of “religion” classes, which unsurprisingly centered a strict, Roman Catholic worldview. We talked about race in the “*you should love everyone no matter the color of their skin*” way, but the conversation essentially stopped there. My high school was nearly all white, and I remember occasionally taking surveys about race and racism. The general consensus of the surveys, unsurprisingly, was that race was not an issue at my school. Looking back, my perspective has drastically changed.

I can remember an instance where a Black classmate was punished for wearing his hair natural, because it was deemed too distracting or unusual by the fully white administration, faculty, and staff. After graduating high school, it took years of learning

about the history of racial construction and racism to understand why that particular experience was problematic. Despite my overwhelming ignorance, I was starting to get a sense of some of the manifestations of racism that continue to permeate U.S. society. During high school I had two very close friends come out to me. Around the same time, I was in the process of being confirmed as an adult in the church—a decision that was not really left up to me. During the homily of our Confirmation ceremony, the bishop of the diocese, rather than make a statement about being advocates for love or peace, delivered a tirade about the sinfulness of homosexuality and our responsibility as Catholics to spread that message. Somewhere in that church that night were both of my friends who had identified themselves to me as gay and lesbian, respectively, and sitting in my pew, I could sense those words colliding against them, and I felt some shadow of the pain they might have felt.

Throughout high school, I found myself gravitating to environmental and animal rights activism. My senior year, I only applied to one school: the University of Colorado at Boulder. I was accepted into the environmental studies program, and left the Midwest with dreams of becoming an environmental scientist and/or activist. My hometown was barely concerned with recycling, and the organic movement had just begun to infect our grocery stores. In that sense, Boulder promised to be a utopia for me. During my first semester at CU, however, I took two classes that changed the path I would take in school, and subsequently, life. The first was a sociology course titled Environment and Society. It was the first sociology class I had ever taken, and it helped form the way I analyze the world around me. I eventually added sociology as a major.

The second was an honors course titled Honors Diversity Seminar. It was a small class; we could not have numbered more than thirteen including the professor. We ranged

from freshman to seniors, and it was a relatively racially diverse class for CU. The class was challenging in a way I had not yet experienced. We were assigned a heavy load of dense academic theories that I often could not fully comprehend. I was forced to expand my imagination past my own experiences of the world. Each week we were required to synthesize the readings in a short essay, and I quickly found out I could not put these assignments off until the last minute. Our professor was incredibly patient and understanding of the ways that our various privileges (whether it was our race, our gender, our sexuality, our class, etc.) and preceding educations limited our knowledge and veiled certain facts and realities from us. I was introduced to thinkers like Paulo Freire and bell hooks. The class and the professor were brilliant, and I never would have found my way to Ethnic Studies without them.

I cannot understate the importance of that seminar on shaping my thinking, but there were other things going on in my life at the time that made the lessons I was learning in the classroom much more tangible. I was in a relationship with a mixed race man who identified as Black. The fact that I was in an interracial relationship in no way inherently made me a more socially conscious thinker, but from the beginning, our racial identities were a topic of conversation. He was a member of an almost all-white fraternity, and around the time we began to take our relationship more seriously, his brothers tacked a photo of a nearly naked white woman and one of a nearly naked Black man on the massive corkboard in their high-traffic dining room. The woman's head was positioned in the man's crotch and someone had written our names on the photos. In another incident, someone changed my Facebook cover photo to an image of a black bull mounting a white cow. The harassment never felt hateful or violent, but it certainly grounded the lessons I was learning in the classroom in real, lived experiences.

In this manner, I was brought to Ethnic Studies with both academic hunger and a depth of emotional investment that took over my life. I changed my major before the second semester of my freshman year to Ethnic Studies, enrolled in an Intro to Africana Studies course, and my fate was sealed. It has been a journey of incredible growth through which I have found purpose and meaning, but it has also been devastatingly painful. More than anything, it has been humbling. I feel the drive to share my coming-to-consciousness story partially because I know how earth-shattering it can be to be suddenly made aware of the extent of the impact of racism not only on people of color, but in insulating and benefitting white folks. It can be uplifting to know that other people have experienced, are currently experiencing, and will continue to experience some of the same obstacles things you have, are, and will. There is no one-size-fits-all story for becoming antiracist.

Sharing our stories is also important can also help those white folks who might have become isolated from their friends, family, and other white people in general. If in out attempts to distance ourselves from white supremacy, white folks completely isolate ourselves from other white people, we lose the ability to be a vehicle for antiracist activism. We cannot let our evolution in worldview make us feel superior to other white folks. We should ought not tell our stories with the intent of shaming other white people for their ignorance or to receive praise or attention. Simply stating that you are an antiracist activist does not make you so. I certainly do not claim to be an activist, as much of the work I have done on race and racism has been confined to classrooms. Rather, I would identify as being in the process of becoming antiracist, a process that I expect to never end.

In the past few years of studying Ethnic Studies, I have been shown a significantly more elaborate picture of the major Black Movements. Beyond the few paragraphs in my elementary, middle school, and high school history books on the Civil Rights Movement, an entire tradition existed. Still, since August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014, when Michael Brown was shot by Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, I have witnessed an awakening I have only seen the likes of in photographs, films, speeches, and other remnants of the Civil Rights Movement. Not long after protestors began getting tear-gassed by police did side-by-side photographs of Ferguson protestors and 1960s protestors begin circulating Twitter.

I believe we have begun a critical period in anti-oppression activism. The scope of this thesis will be focused on race while simultaneously trying to be aware that we cannot isolate race as one factor out of people's whole identities. In other words, race and racism do not operate in a vacuum. For the purposes of this thesis, I attempt to center Black women's experiences with intersecting oppressions. Rather, Black feminist thought creates a practical framework for understanding how power and oppression work that may be useful for white folks who are seeking to come to a positive antiracist identity. That framework has guided me as a white woman trying to understand the lived experiences of Black women, build my own positive self-identity, and build a loving community using the tools I have available to me.

In order for white women in particular to begin working towards a positive antiracist identity, I believe it is important to know how the tradition of feminism has often been racist in theory and practice. We need to look at the ways that as an institution, feminism has reproduced racial hierarchies and has sidelined, spoken over, or ignored non-white women's voices. Additionally, white women need to continuously honestly try

to uncover their own racist assumptions and behaviors. Even those people with pure intentions do, say, and think things that reinforce racial hierarchies or hurt people. We need to look beyond our intentions and see the impact of our ways of thinking and acting—even the specific words we use. In other words, if we truly hope to be antiracist, it is not enough to just be a well-meaning person. We must be hyper-vigilant of our whiteness and how it has potentially shaped our lives at any moment. When I say hyper-vigilant, I want to be clear that I do not mean that white folks should be constantly punishing themselves for their whiteness. Self-reflection ought to be an opportunity for one to improve oneself, not to do inflict pain on oneself.

The goal of this thesis is to try to synthesize for other white folks some information and guidelines that may be useful for the formation of a positive white antiracist identity. It also seeks to encourage white folks to be proactive in implementing practical steps for dismantling racial hierarchies. This is work that requires a great deal of intellectual and emotional labor. Early on my studies, I often struggled to find realistic ways to put antiracism into everyday practice. Such anxieties around doing antiracist work as a white person can stand in the way of accomplish the task of ending racial oppression. I certainly do not mean to detract from the real issues of antiracism by addressing these obstacles, but to suggest that if white folks are taught to expect and cope with those anxieties, they can focus more on eliminating oppression than worrying about saying or doing the wrong thing. In this thesis, I outline some obstacles white folks might face in coming to a white antiracist identity.

Another goal of this thesis is to illustrate the concept of living with a love ethic. If we can apply the principles of a love ethic to our interactions with all other people, we could affect change on an enormous scale. We should seek to build loving relationships

across race, but we must understand that this alone is not enough to end racism.

Thompson writes, “White people’s intimate relationships with people of color can never be a credential of antiracist consciousness. At the same time, the interactions, dialogues, negotiations, and confrontations that daily life is made of can dramatically change a white person’s understanding of racism” (334). By building individual relationships rooted in a love ethic, we can start to network and form loving communities and eradicate systems of oppression.

Finally, I will analyze Twitter as a potential tool for connecting white folks attempting to form a positive antiracist identity and build loving bond across difference. In terms of connecting people for the explicit intention of activism, Twitter is fast-paced and concise, making it easy to share links, photos, and other people’s tweets. It allows for open, public discussions, the sharing of music, poetry, articles, and other sources of knowledge. Twitter users have demonstrated an incredible ability to connect and mobilize people, demonstrating its potential for antiracist activism. It helps people connect, whether its over antiracism or a love of cats. Unfortunately, Twitter is not immune to the ugly realities of the larger society in which it exists. We must understand its limitations if we are going to maximize its potential.

Despite my always-present insecurities, I am confident in at least one thing: the answer is not silence. In the months following Michael Brown’s shooting in Ferguson, we have been given the opportunity to begin conversations about eradicating racism and commit to carrying on that conversation, as that dialogue will continue to change as we learn more about one another and about ourselves. We desperately need to build diverse, loving communities. I make no apologies for the sentimentality of this thesis; we need to

change the way we relate to one another. We need to make justice, love, and dignity central to our daily lives.

### *Methodology*

My journey towards a positive white antiracist identity started just over three years ago. Ethnic Studies classes guided me through much of that journey, providing me with rich, multidisciplinary knowledge. More so, it has equipped me with the self-esteem and critical skills to do antiracist work of my own accord. In order to understand how my journey towards a positive white antiracist identity is applicable to the goal of building loving community, it is useful to analyze it within the framework of Black feminist epistemology. Collins explains Black feminist epistemology, distinguishing it from other theories of knowledge. Positivism, for example, suggests that, in order for something to be considered knowledge, it must be scientifically verified or mathematically or logically proven. Collins points to some of positivism's limitations, explaining, "Such criteria ask African-American women to objectify ourselves, devalue our emotional life, displace our motivations for furthering knowledge about Black women, and confront in an adversarial relationship those with more social, economic, and professional power" (*Black Feminist Thought* p. 274). Eurocentrism has functioned by interpreting Western epistemologies as inherently superior, a practice that has historically marginalized and annihilated non-Western ideologies and populations. Collins continues, explaining the importance of Black feminist epistemology, "This alternative epistemology uses different standards that are consistent with Black women's criteria for substantiated knowledge and with our criteria for methodological adequacy" (274). She highlights four dimensions of Black

feminist epistemology that separate it from others: lived experience as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue, the ethic of caring, and the ethic of personal accountability.

The first dimension of Black feminist epistemology is that it expands what we deem “a criterion of meaning” beyond positivism’s constraints by acknowledging the validity of lived experiences. According to Collins, there are two types of knowing: knowledge and wisdom. She writes, “This distinction between knowledge and wisdom, and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to Black women’s survival... Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate” (*Black Feminist Thought* 276). Knowledge is the type of information that positivism would recognize as valid: facts that can be verified by science, math, or logic. Wisdom, on the other hand, must be learned through experience. She expands, “Living life as Black women requires wisdom because knowledge about the dynamics of intersecting oppressions has been essential to U.S. Black women’s survival” (275). Wisdom requires awareness and critical thinking skills to pick up on information beyond what can be scientifically, mathematically, or logically proven.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I attempt to center Black women’s lived experiences by drawing on the writings of some foundational Black feminist thinkers. To give some background into Black feminist epistemology and theory, I focused heavily on books such as Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought*, Davis’ *Women, Race, and Class*, and hooks’ *Ain’t I a Woman*, but my focus was not limited to these texts. My research also looked into Jones and Shorter-Gooden’s *Shifting*, which details the results of their African American Women’s Voices Project, in which they surveyed 333 Black women from various backgrounds and conducted seventy-one in-depth interviews. Their work

produced rich qualitative and quantitative data for explaining Black women's experiences with and responses to intersecting oppressions, particularly of race and gender.

A second dimension of Black feminist epistemology is an ethic of personal accountability. Collins explains, "Not only must individuals develop their knowledge claims through dialogue and present them in a style proving their concern for their ideas, but people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims" (*Black Feminist Thought* 284). This acknowledges links between an individual's knowledge claims and his or her character, values, and ethics. In other words, "all views expressed and actions taken are thought to derive from a central set of core beliefs" (284). This dimension holds individuals accountable to their opinions and actions rather than their intentions. Under Black feminist epistemology, knowledge claims made by individuals who connect their morals and ethics with their ideas and actions carry more weight than knowledge claims made by those who do not.

The second chapter of this essay will explore how white folks can begin to build a positive white antiracist identity. By this, I mean a self-identity in which we seek to end racial oppression without feeling self-hatred because of our whiteness. Thompson's *A Promise and a Way of Life* provides insight into how other white folks have gone about forming such an identity. I also reference Laymon's *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America* numerous times to illustrate some of the ways racism manifests in real people's lives. My research here also draws on some of the Black feminist thinkers from the previous chapter, as they also theorize on whiteness and white folks' role in antiracist work.

The third dimension of Black feminist epistemology is that "personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process"

(*Black Feminist Thought* 281-282). This “Ethics of Caring” is comprised of three interrelated components. First is an emphasis on individual uniqueness. Collins expands, “Rooted in a tradition of African humanism, each individual is thought to be a unique expression of a common spirit, power, or energy inherent in all life” (282). A key part of the ethics of caring is respecting and valuing diversity and individuality. The second component regards emotions as appropriate and necessary to dialogue. In the U.S. emotions are typically seen as an obstruction to rational thinking. However, research done on individuals with damage to certain areas of their orbitofrontal cortex has revealed that without emotions, our rationality essentially fails. Haidt explains, “It is only because our emotional brains works so well that our reasoning can work at all” (13). Furthermore, Collins points out, “Emotion indicates that a speaker believes in the validity of an argument” (*Black Feminist Thought* 282). The third and final component is a focus on developing a capacity for empathy. Exercising empathy requires an ability to imagine someone else’s perspective and to place one’s self in that person’s position.

The third chapter of this thesis will analyze how we can implement an ethics of caring, or as I call it, a “love ethic,” into the process of antiracist work. The bulk of my theory in this chapter relies on bell hooks’ *All About Love* and *Killing Rage*, which expand the concept of love beyond that of romantic love to have enormous revolutionary potential. My research in this chapter also references Fromm’s psychological analysis of love, *The Art of Loving*. Again, it also draws on various Black feminist thinkers, as an ethic of care is a feature of Black feminist epistemology.

The fourth and final dimension of Black feminist epistemology is that it relies on dialogue as tool for assessing knowledge claims. Collins explains:

For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community. A primary epistemological assumption underlying the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is that connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge validation process. (*Black Feminist Thought* 279)

An emphasis on openness, dialogue, and connectedness are required for validating new knowledge. Rather than positivist knowledge which can be proven in solitude through science, math, or logic, Black feminist epistemological knowledge is often validated through processes centered on speaking and listening—processes that require communication and connection with other people. Outside of the academic setting, I have had to search out different spaces where dialogue about antiracist work is being held.

The fourth chapter will analyze Twitter as a tool for building loving community. I check my Twitter account at least once almost every day. I follow nearly 150 other Twitter users, including personal friends, actors, comedians, athletes, writers, musicians, activists, organizations, complete strangers, and parody accounts. It is one of the primary places I get information about entertainment and news media. Over the past two years, Twitter has become an integral part of how I validate knowledge claims, especially regarding issues of race and racism. I live and go to school in almost exclusively white environments, and often feel disconnected from people of color physically and socially, and therefore intellectually. To try to overcome this obstacle, I began to use Twitter with the explicit intention of following individuals who engaged in difficult discussions about systems of oppression, specifically racism. I rarely write my own tweets; my feed consists of retweeted photos, links, and quotes. Most of my time on the website is spent

browsing, following links, reading articles, and reading some of the dialogue surrounding those articles. Rather than focusing on the specific knowledge claims made by individual Twitter users, this thesis is concerned with Twitter's strengths and limitations as a tool for building community by providing a space for dialogue.

## Centering Black Women

The first course I took in Ethnic Studies required me to read an excerpt from bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody*. Before then, I had never thoroughly considered feminism or formed an opinion of it. Over the years, my professors introduced my classmates and me to the work of a number of Black feminist theorists. We read texts such as Angela Davis's *Women, Race, & Class*, Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Sexual Politics* and *Black Feminist Thought*, and hooks' *Ain't I a Woman*. Before, my exposure to Black women was minimal, and hearing their voices in books and essays made me acutely aware of their absence in my life. When I read hooks' words on Black feminism, I was awakened to a whole new theoretical approach. Her version of feminism is much broader than other forms I had encountered before. She writes, "Although the focus is on the black female, our struggle for liberation has significance only if it takes place within a feminist movement that has its fundamental goal the liberation of all people" (*A'int I a Woman* 13). In this version, Black women are not the elusive, peripheral group they had once been in my imagination. Here, Black women's voices are made central, but uplifting other marginalized voices is just as important.

Black feminist thought is distinct for a number of reasons, but its determination in empowering and uplifting *all people* makes it incredibly practical for people of different backgrounds who want to see justice and equity in our world. It provides a framework for critically engaging with how oppression functions in reality. It gave me the tools, as a woman, to see the ways that patriarchy acted against and through me, but it also allowed me, as a white person, to see how my role in perpetuating systems of oppression. Black feminist thought has made space for white women to step up and participate in the healing process. In order for the process of building loving community to be more than a

superficial attempt at keeping the peace, we first actively and consciously center Black women's lived experiences. For white women in particular, we must address the role that we historically and contemporarily play in the domination and suppression of Black women.

### Black Feminist Thought: A Crash Course

No oppressed group or individual should feel that they are obligated to enlighten their oppressor. Regardless, many Black women do willfully take on the task of educating others. These women have paved the way for an incredible, multidisciplinary tradition of multi-faceted anti-oppression work. Studying Black feminist thought has given me the opportunity to learn not just about the specific lived experiences of Black women, but it has also equipped me with critical skills and concepts that help me to understand other manifestations of oppression in the U.S. White women have an enormous amount to learn about their role in the oppression of Black women, in particular those white women who claim to be feminists. Naturally, my understanding of Black feminism is clearly limited to those women's theories that I have directly read. There are certainly Black women who identify as feminists who will disagree with my interpretation of these theories. I recognize Black feminists as a group to be characterized by heterogeneity, and one of the goals of this thesis is to pay respect to that fact. The same goes for Black women as a group, white women as a group, and as a principle, any grouping of people based on social identification.

All considered, it would be impossible to accurately capture the lived of experiences of *all* Black women. How then can we hope to grasp any sense of a consciousness that Black women share? Collins explains, "For individual women, the

particular experiences that accrue to living as a Black woman in the United States can stimulate a distinctive consciousness concerning our own experiences and society overall” (*Black Feminist Thought* 27). Racism and sexism function by making people buy into ideologies that try to explain or justify racial and gender hierarchies. How individuals and institutions in the U.S. treat Black women in reality often is rooted in those ideologies that see Black women through the lenses of different widely held myths. Because we treat Black women as a homogenous group, it follows that they would gather some shared experiences throughout their lifetimes, even if the other conditions of their lives are enormously different.

Recognizing the phenomenon of shared consciousness allowed Black women to build their own distinct school of thought, with its own goals, methods, and concepts. According to Collins, “The overarching purpose of U.S. Black feminist thought is... to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it” (*Black Feminist Thought* 25). Black feminist thought is specifically concerned with empowerment as a way to resist oppression. Collins explains that knowledge is a vital piece of empowerment (291). She points to two major contributions that Black feminist thought has made regarding its ability to resist oppression: “First, Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about unjust power relations... Second, Black feminist thought addresses ongoing epistemological debates concerning the power dynamics that underlie what counts as knowledge (*Black Feminist Thought* 291-292). Black feminist thought is fundamentally concerned with challenging and ending oppression, both theoretically and practically.

Black feminist thought challenges the ideologies that uphold oppression by providing an alternate epistemology, as Collins demonstrates:

Alternative epistemologies challenge all certified knowledge and open up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth. The existence of a self-defined Black women's standpoint using Black feminist epistemology calls into question the content of what currently passes as truth and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at the truth. (*Black Feminist Thought* 290)

The creation of a distinct school of thought meant to specifically address issues faced by Black women was a necessary response to Black women's erasure from, suppression in, and exclusion from broader discussions, even within feminist movements. Black feminist thought expands on some of the principles of feminism in a way that acknowledges how oppressions overlap and intersect. To account for their marginalization and oppression in feminist groups and conversations, many Black women attempted to redefine or rename feminism to better capture their intentions and goals. For example, hooks writes, "I choose to re-appropriate the term 'feminism,' to focus on the fact that to be 'feminist' in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression" (*Ain't I a Woman* 195). Like hooks, many Black feminist theorists stress the importance of ending *all* oppression, not just the oppression of white women or Black men.

Black feminism is unique from general feminism in more than just name, however. Collins points to six distinguishing features that "may provide the common ground that is so sorely needed both among African-American women, and between African-American women and all others whose collective knowledge or thought has a similar purpose" (*Black Feminist Thought* 25). Understanding these distinctions allows us to see Black feminism in its own terms. First, Collins notes that, as long as Black women

experience oppression, Black feminism as an entity will persist as a response. Second, she acknowledges that Black feminism has emerged out of diverse responses to common challenges. Third, she explains the interconnectedness of thought and action. She expands, “changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and... altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness” (34). Fourth, she highlights how Black feminist thought centers the contributions of African-American intellectuals. Fifth, she points to the dynamic nature of both Black feminist thought and practice. She writes, “Neither Black feminist thought as a critical social theory nor Black feminist practice can be static; as social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them” (43). Finally, she stresses the importance of working with in cooperation with other projects for social justice. She notes, “A broad range of African-American women intellectuals have advanced the view that Black women’s struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice” (46). These features, when taken together, set Black feminism apart from other schools of thought.

One central concept of Black feminist thought is intersectionality. Collins illustrates the significance of this concept, explaining, “By embracing a paradigm of intersecting oppressions... as well as Black women’s individual and collective agency within them, Black feminist thought reconceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance” (*Black Feminist Thought* 291-292). Other conceptualizations of systems of oppression tend to see specific forms of oppression as separate entities. These theories fail to see how different identities and oppressions might overlap and intersect, and therefore fail to grasp how those oppressions might manifest in the lives of real people. According to Collins, “An antiracist politic that does not reframe the consensus issue of race in terms of class, gender, sexuality, and age will remain incapable of responding to

the complexities of the new racism” (*Black Sexual Politics* 48). In other words, it is no longer sufficient to simply talk about sexism as though it affects all women in a uniform way.

Intersectionality provides a model for understanding how possessing multiple identities can change the nature of oppression, making it more or less intense or just different. According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden, “Sexism and racial bigotry are often so potent and so intertwined that they end up hidden within one another like pieces of sharp ice that collect in a snowball careening down a hill. They build on one another. Racist attitudes actually lead to a unique and more egregious form of sexism and sexual harassment for Black women” (42). For example, a Black woman and a white woman might both be oppressed by patriarchy, but that oppression will manifest in very different ways in their lives. They cannot divorce their race from the rest of their identity any more than they can stop identifying as women. Jones and Shorter-Gooden explain, “Unfortunately, for African American women racism and sexism do not create an either-or proposition. They don’t get to choose which one will haunt them and which one they’ll be free of” (59). Paradigms that do not attempt to consider intersectionality will always be limited in their ability to accurately capture the ways that oppression manifests in reality.

Understanding the concept of intersectionality reveals two implications about the nature of oppression. First, being oppressed or belonging to an oppressed group does not make an individual immune from oppressing others. For example, a heterosexual Black woman may be aware of how patriarchy and white supremacy oppress her while simultaneously unaware of how she perpetuates heteronormativity. Furthermore, when people internalize messages of inferiority about their own group, they can perpetuate

oppression against people that belong to the same group. Therefore, we cannot assume anyone's innocence in maintaining systems of oppression. Second, oppressions cannot be ranked into a hierarchy of importance. Collins explains that intersectionality "enables African-American women to avoid labeling one form of oppression as more important than others, or one expression of activism as more radical than another" (*Black Feminist Thought* 308). Intersectionality allows us to see that oppression is not a simple matter of "us" versus "them" but rather, involves complex relationships between individuals, the different aspects of their identities, the larger society to which they belong, and the ideologies that create meaning within that society. Attempting to rank forms of oppression in a hierarchy is futile, and doing so only distracts from the task of eliminating systems of oppressions.

The practical application of intersectionality will depend entirely on context. Early feminist movements have often been critiqued as failing to practice intersectionality. According to hooks, "No one bothered to discuss the ways in which sexism operates both independently of and simultaneously with racism to oppress us" (*Ain't I a Woman* 7). White women repeatedly failed to comprehend or grapple with how oppressions based on race and gender intersected. She continues, "Women liberationists did not invite a wholistic analysis of woman's status in society that would take into considerations the varied aspects of our experience. In their eagerness to promote the idea of sisterhood, they ignored the complexity of woman's experience" (190). In order to create an inclusive social justice movement, white women must seek to understand the nuances of intersectionality. We have to make attempts to understand the lived experiences of those with whom we hope to connect.

Understanding Black Women's Experiences with Oppression

Dismantling systems of oppression requires learning not only “how oppression works on a cognitive level but also how it is experienced” (Thompson 312). In order to understand how systems of oppression affect Black women contemporarily, we must explore the origins and evolutions of the ideologies that created and maintained those systems. According to Collins, Black women's oppression takes place in three different dimensions: economic, political, and ideological. She explains, “Taken together the supposedly seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinate place” (*Black Feminist Thought* 7). Systems of oppression are effective because they exercise power and control over a range of dimensions. Dismantling them will require attention to each of the three dimensions.

Ending systems of oppression will also mean understanding the different ways that power and control function. Collins suggests that there are four domains of power. The structural domain organizes oppression, the disciplinary domain manages oppression, the hegemonic domain justifies oppression, and the interpersonal domain is where oppression manifests in everyday life. Analyzing power in these four domains helps us to understand the varied ways that oppression is experienced.

First, the structural domain consists of social institutions, which are organized to reproduce the systems of oppression that keep Black women in a subordinated position. Collins points to the U.S. legal system, labor markets, schools, housing, banking, insurance, and the news media as examples of institutions that have served to perpetuate inequality. Second, despite efforts to end policies that allow for explicit discrimination in the disciplinary domain, Black women are still subjected to control and

surveillance by disciplinary institutions in the U.S. Third, the hegemonic domain serves as the link between the other three domains. Collins explains, “To maintain their power, dominant groups create and maintain a popular system of ‘commonplace’ ideas that support their right to rule” (*Black Feminist Thought* 302). The hegemonic domain functions by convincing people that inequality is the natural order. Collins points to school curricula, religious teachings, community cultures, family histories, and mass media as sites where oppressions are regulated (303). Finally, the interpersonal domain is concerned with the everyday ways individuals treat one another. Collins writes, “Such practices are systematic, recurrent, and so familiar that they go unnoticed” (307). These four domains inform and interact with one another. Working together, they function to maintain oppression in economic, political, and ideological dimensions.

Understanding how power and oppression function theoretically helps us to comprehend the history of white supremacy in the U.S. as it applies to Black women. My education prior to taking Ethnic Studies courses in college utterly failed to teach me about the extent of white supremacy in the U.S. I knew generally about slavery, and I knew generally about the Civil Rights Movement, but the rest of the story was a blind spot in my brain. For a time, this failure to fully understand the extent of racism in the U.S. historically and contemporarily made me believe that Black folks who spoke out about their current oppression were either lying to themselves or lying to the world. I fell victim to a post-racial ideology that erased history. Unfortunately, my experience in the education system was not aberrant, as hooks demonstrates:

...most people tend to see devaluation of black womanhood as occurring only in the context of slavery. In actuality, sexual exploitation of black women continued long after slavery ended and was institutionalized by other oppressive practices.

Devaluation of black womanhood after slavery ended was a conscious, deliberate effort on the part of whites to sabotage mounting black female self-confidence and self-respect. (*Ain't I a Woman* 59)

We must continue to fill the gaps in curriculum for the sake of future generations. The perpetuation of white supremacy in this country is far from over, and ignoring that fact will undoubtedly doom us to the repetition and continuation of oppression.

A thorough understanding of history is vital to understanding the experiences of Black women in the U.S. contemporarily. Unfortunately, that demands a commitment that reaches far beyond the scope of this thesis. However, there are a few historical facts that may help white women position themselves in a historical context to better understand our relation to Black women, especially in the interpersonal domain. The separation of Black women and white women was intentionally maintained following the end of slavery. Jim Crow segregation kept Black folks physically segregated from white folks, but it also functioned in the hegemonic domain by creating stereotypes and myths to justify the separation. Once state-sponsored segregation was overturned, the maintenance of the physical and social separation between Black folks and white folks had to take a new form. Collins explains, “In the context of the new racism, cultural explanations for economic success and poverty substitute for biological arguments concerning intelligence or genetic dispositions for immorality or violence” (*Black Sexual Politics* 41). Contemporarily, the hegemonic domain of power is concerned with maintaining the ideology of cultural inferiority.

My life has been a testament to the perpetuation of segregation. According to the 2010 census, non-Hispanic white folks made up 63.7% of the U.S. population. For the state of Colorado, that number jumps to 70%. In Boulder County, non-Hispanic white

folks made up 79.4% of the population (United States Census Bureau). I came to Boulder believing it was the liberal escape I needed. Instead, I have been exposed to a nefarious form of covert racism, which I can only attribute to the utter lack of diversity in Boulder as a town and on the CU Boulder campus in particular. In 2014, only 643 (2%) of 29,772 students identified as African American (Office of Planning, Budget, and Analysis).

Without the lessons I have learned in Ethnic Studies classrooms on CU's campus, I am afraid that my formal secondary education would have simply reinforced my ignorance of the realities of racial inequality in the U.S. The quote above the western entrance of Norlin Library reads, "Who knows only his own generation remains always a child." What of those who know only their race, gender, class, or sexuality? It ought to be the responsibility and the impulse of all institutions of learning to reach out and make an inclusive space for marginalized folks.

Although de jure segregation has ended, the U.S. has yet to become a practically fully integrated country. Collins explains:

While residential segregation declined overall, for large segments of the Black population, especially poor and working-class African Americans, residential racial segregation within urban areas persisted. The concentration of poor and working-class Black people in racially segregated neighborhoods has been so severe in metropolitan areas with large Black populations, that it is often described as "hypersegregation." (*Black Sexual Politics* 76)

As de facto segregation persists, so do inequalities in access to resources such as good schools, fresh, healthy food, and safe living environments. Collins notes, "By whatever measures used in the United States or on a global scale, people of African descent remain disproportionately clustered at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The effects of these

historical exclusions persist today under a new racism” (*Black Sexual Politics* 32).

Drawing historical links between chattel slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the continuation of segregation in the U.S. is incredibly vital to understanding how racial hierarchies have been created and maintained.

For white women who hope to build cross-racial relationships with Black women, it is of the utmost importance to understand specifically how racial hierarchies are structured to benefit white women at the expense of Black women, as well as how Black women resist and react to this oppression. The term hegemonic femininity refers to a collection of ideal gender standards that women are compared against. Collins explains:

As a group, women are subordinated to men, yet a pecking order among women also produces hegemonic, marginalized, and subordinated femininities. This ideology proscribes behavior for all women based on these assumptions, and then holds all women, including African American women to standards that only some women (including many White ones) may be able to achieve. All women engage an ideology that deems middle-class, heterosexual, White femininity as normative. (*Black Sexual Politics* 193)

In other words, U.S. society upholds standards of beauty that judge feminine beauty against the skin color, body type, hair texture, and facial features of certain white women. Collins continues, “This reliance on these standards of beauty automatically render the majority of African American women at best less beautiful, and at worst, ugly” (194). Internalizing these messages can be toxic for Black women. Jones and Shorter-Gooden note, “The belief that one’s natural self is not good enough, not attractive enough, can lead to a loss of self-esteem” (179). Furthermore, internalizing messages about the

inferiority of Black women's beauty may lead to perpetuation of hierarchies based on skin color, even between Black women.

We must acknowledge how beauty standards are maintained in more than just the interpersonal domain if we are to effectively dismantle racialized notions of beauty. As hooks explains, "Everyone must break through the wall of denial that would have us believe hatred of blackness emerges from troubled individual psyches and acknowledge that it is systematically taught through processes of socialization in white supremacist society" (*Killing Rage* 131). Beauty standards are not just held in the eye of the beholder. Rather, they are created and circulated largely by the hegemonic domain, such as through entertainment media. We must be ready to question representations of femininity and be aware of how those representations are molded and manufactured by patriarchal ideologies and assumptions.

Hegemonic femininity is also upheld by a series of beliefs about what behavior is considered appropriate "feminine" behavior. Collins explains, "Achieving respectability pivoted on adhering to standards of White femininity inherited from the tradition of Southern chivalry" (*Black Sexual Politics* 72). Patriarchal systems function by creating norms that differentiated between acceptable and deviant expressions of femininity. These norms placed limitations on the behavior of women. However, intersections of race and class allowed upper class and white women more agency and mobility while further restricted working-class and non-white women. These behavioral norms also helped in the creation of myths and stereotypes of Black women. In some instances, this functioned along with the economic and political dimensions, but the creation and perpetuation of norms that dictate appropriate femininity largely happens in the ideological dimension.

Mass media is one hegemonic institution that contributes to the dissemination of myths and stereotypes of Black women. According to Collins, “the mass media has generated class-specific images of Black women that help justify and shape the new racism of desegregated, color-blind America” (*Black Sexual Politics* 147). Mass media has been critiqued for its underrepresentation of people of color. For example, the 2015 Academy Awards were criticized for a lack of diversity in the acting categories. All twenty nominees in the four acting categories were white, making it the least diverse group of nominees since 1998. Clearly, this is not an accurate depiction of the proportion of Black actors and actresses in the movie industry, but it is reflective of larger issues of representation throughout mass media. Issues of representation of Black women in mainstream media are also concerned with the types of roles Black women are given. Hooks writes, “We must vigilantly challenge negative representations of black women, understanding that they both shape public policy and determine attitudes towards us in everyday life” (*Killing Rage* 85). Because mainstream media plays a role in circulating dominant ideologies, we must take seriously the use of damaging stereotypes to depict Black women’s lives in the media.

One tool the hegemonic domain of power uses to maintain distance between white women and Black women is the creation of myths and controlling images projected onto Black women. Jones and Shorter-Gooden elaborate:

Myths and Stereotypes do much of their damage subconsciously. They seep into the inner psyche and take up residence, affecting how one thinks, feels, and perceives others, even while one purports to be unbiased and tolerant. Even in the most progressive and open-minded people, stereotypes often hold sway. They’re insidious. They’re sneaky. They have had centuries to sink in. And every day

these myths and stereotypes betray our view of ourselves as decent, fair, and just and undermine our hopes and ideals. (34)

In order to maintain their invisible nature, these controlling images must evolve over time or risk being entirely debunked. Collins explains, “it is important to remember that ideologies of gender, race, class, and sexuality that produce the controlling images of Black femininity discussed here are never static. Rather, they are always internally inconsistent, reflect the experiences of the people who agree with and refute them, and thus are constantly subject to struggle” (*Black Sexual Politics* 148). These myths function to dehumanize Black women in order to justify their oppression. They are often transmitted through representations of Black women that rely on narrow controlling images. Jones and Shorter-Gooden categorize these myths into five categories: inferiority myths, unshakability myths, nonfemininity myths, criminality myths, and promiscuity myths.

The effectiveness of these myths is both dependent upon the social distance between white folks and Black women and serves to perpetuate that gap. However, they also function by encouraging Black women to distance themselves from “the rest of Black folks.” Unfortunately, as Jones and Shorter-Gooden point out, “disproving stereotypes does not always dispel them” (16). While numerous Black folks certainly have been successful in transcending and disproving stereotypes, we must be careful to see how that does not equate to dissolving the myths that are placed on Black folks as a group. Rather, eradicating stereotypes and assumptions from our society will require a conscious acknowledgement that these myths are in fact myths—they are fabrications meant to obstruct reality. As Collins states, “Racist and sexist ideologies, if they are disbelieved, lose their impact. Thus, an important feature of the hegemonic domain of

power lies in the need to continually refashion images in order to solicit support for the U.S. matrix of domination” (*Black Feminist Thought* 303). If white women commit to seeing Black women’s whole humanity rather than projecting narrow myths and stereotypes upon them, we can make space for building loving relationships that have the potential to empower both parties.

In order to see Black women as whole humans, it can be useful to be able to identify the myths and controlling images projected onto Black women. Many of these myths occupy our ideologies on a subconscious level. These myths are not necessarily dictated to us explicitly. Rather, they are often imparted to us covertly as explanations or justifications of “the way things are.” Many folks want to believe that the U.S. is a country founded on equity, justice, and individual merit. Unfortunately, that idealism often blinds us from seeing the realities of how inequality and oppression persist in U.S. society. Most white folks do not consciously uphold the principles of white supremacy. However, good intentions do not absolve us when we use words and actions that reinforce systems of oppression. We must be aware of the impact of our words and actions and work to make our intentions match our behavior.

The myth of inferiority makes assumptions about Black women’s abilities and capacities. Jones and Shorter-Gooden stress the burden that disproving myths of inferiority may place on Black women, explaining, “when they finally prove to others that they are hard-working, refined, and intelligent, non-Blacks often deem them to be ‘exceptional’ or ‘different from’ other Black people” (16). Although it may sound compassionate and respectful to acknowledge someone as exceptional, the implicit assumption in telling a Black person that their intelligence or work ethic is exceptional is that generally, Black folks are less intelligent, lazier, and less refined than other people.

Jones and Shorter-Gooden continue, “The message is clear: When Black women are talented, professional, and competent, they’re no longer really Black, because these qualities don’t fit the stereotypes” (17). Such scenarios illustrate the importance of matching your intentions with your words and actions. There are certainly ways to celebrate the success of a Black individual without back-handedly insulting Black folks as a group.

Another issue with the myth of inferiority is that, for many Black women, dispelling that myth means working harder to prove one’s abilities and capacities. Jones and Shorter-Gooden elaborate, “Being deemed exceptional can also mean bearing the burden of living up to unrealistic expectations, never easing up on your workload, always conforming, staying ever mindful of your p’s and q’s to continue justifying your existence” (18). This myth plays out most visibly in the workplace and in educational institutions. Clearly, having to prove oneself by working hard is not an experience unique to Black women, but when Black women have to work harder than their peers just to *justify their existence*, we have see how Black women’s reactions to oppression are more complex than just complaints about general challenges that “everybody” faces. The myth of inferiority functions by teaching people to *expect* Black women as a group to be inferior, and places the burden of debunking that myth onto the individuals it sees as having lowered abilities or capacities.

The myth of unshakability—often referred to as the myth of the Strong Black Woman—on the surface, appears to respect and honor Black women’s resilience in the face of oppression. Unfortunately, viewing Black women as invincible fails to take into consideration their whole humanity. In other words, “These stereotypes render Black women as caricatures instead of whole people with strengths and weaknesses, tender

sides and tough edges. And ultimately they make Black women invisible because they are not seen for all that they really are” (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 19). By suggesting that Black women can *take it* because they possess some inherent abnormal strength, this myth implicitly proposes that Black women are impervious to pain. When we fail to see Black women’s capacity for the full range of human emotions, we erase the emotional and psychological impact that experiencing oppression can have on an individual. Jones and Shorter-Gooden explain, “African American women often find that they are not allowed to be vulnerable or needy, even among their own” (19). The myth of the Strong Black Woman restricts some Black women from expressing and experiencing the whole range of natural human emotions.

As illustrated earlier, hegemonic femininity functions to place all women in a hierarchy centered on beauty standards that only some women might possibly attain. The myth of nonfemininity situates Black women in this hierarchy by positioning them as the epitome of nonfemininity. Many white women buy into this myth and distance themselves socially from Black women in order to maintain their place at the top of the hierarchy. Hooks illustrates the logic behind this justification, explaining, “White women saw black women as a direct threat to their social standing—for how could they be idealized as virtuous, goddess-like creatures if they associated with black women who were seen by the white public as licentious and immoral?” (*Ain’t I a Woman* 131). These evaluations of Black women’s femininity are clearly rooted in patriarchal expectations of womanhood. The myth of nonfemininity teaches us to expect that while some individual Black women may be exceptions to this rule, generally as a group, their physical features and behaviors are inherently nonfeminine.

The myths of criminality and promiscuity replicate this pattern. They teach us to more readily define Black women's behavior as deviant than we would for white women. The myth of criminality justifies harsher punitive treatment of Black women. In 2005, The Sentencing Project determined that Black women were more than three times as likely as white women to be incarcerated in prison or jail. The myth of criminality teaches us to expect Black women to be more prone to criminal behavior. The myth of promiscuity also justifies sexual violence and social shaming of Black women by suggesting that they are inherently hypersexual and promiscuous. This myth manifests in representations in the controlling image of the "Jezebel." Collins writes, "Sexual stereotypes of women of African descent as jezebels not only justified rape, medical experimentation, and unwanted childbearing inflicted upon Black women but it covered up Black women's protests as well" (*Black Sexual Politics* 59). In short, abuse carried out against a Black woman labeled as a "Jezebel" can be justified by the myth that she is always sexually available. Together, these five myths work together to justify or render invisible Black women's oppression.

Controlling images are one tool used to reproduce and disseminate myths about Black women in the hegemonic domain. Many of these controlling images are rooted in myths about Black women that justified their subjugation in chattel slavery. However, as society evolves and changes, old images might need to be altered, and in some cases, the creation of entirely new images may be necessary. Collins points to one example of this happening, writing, "More recently, the stricture of the Black lady and the modern mammy are making room for a new image, namely, the educated Black bitch. These women have money, power, and good jobs. But they are beautiful and, in some ways, they invoke Pam Grier's persona as "Bad Bitches" that control their own bodies and

sexuality” (*Black Sexual Politics* 145). As Black women continue to succeed in different dimensions of society, controlling images must be adjusted or entirely reconfigured to try to find new ways to label Black women’s behavior as unacceptable or unnatural.

Sometimes, controlling images can be repurposed in a way that seems utterly contradictory, as hooks illustrates:

The controlling image of the “bitch” constitutes one representation that depicts Black women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy. Increasingly applied to poor and/or working-class Black women, the representation of the ‘bitch’ constitutes a reworking of the image of the mule of chattel slavery. Whereas the mule was simply stubborn (passive aggressive) and needed prodding and supervision, the bitch is confrontational and actively aggressive. The term bitch is designed to put women in their place. (*Black Feminist Thought* 123)

The numerous versions of the controlling image of the “bitch” speak to its power and versatility in discrediting Black women. No matter how hard these women work to prove their abilities, capacities, validity, and humanity, some people will look at them and see only a caricature; all they see is a “bitch.”

One of the most salient controlling images I have witnessed in interactions between Black and white women is the “Sapphire” image. Hooks illustrates the distinguishing features of the “Sapphire” caricature:

The Sapphire identity has been projected onto any black women who overtly expresses bitterness, anger, and rage about her lot. Consequently, many black women repress these feelings for fear of being regarded as shrewish Sapphires...

The ‘evilness’ of a given black woman may merely be the façade she presents to a

sexist-racist world that she realizes would only exploit her if she were to appear vulnerable. (*Ain't I a Woman* 86)

The “Sapphire” image functions similarly to the myth of unshakability in that it attempts to pathologize Black women’s emotions. This controlling image, however, specifically works to alienate Black women from their ability to express anger. In defense of Black folks’ right to anger, hooks writes, “Many African Americans feel uncontrollable rage when we encounter white supremacist aggression. That rage is not pathological. It is an appropriate response to injustice” (*Killing Rage* 26). By insinuating that a Black woman’s anger stems from her being shrewish or evil, the “Sapphire” image works to erase the real issues that affect Black women emotionally and psychologically.

White women in particular have used the “Sapphire” image as a way to gain power over Black women in the interpersonal domain. Whether done as a conscious effort on the part of a white woman to oppress Black women or as a subconscious reproduction of internalized myths, invoking the “Sapphire” image functions to discredit Black women’s knowledge about their own lived experiences. Hooks testifies to the impact that the “Sapphire” image can have on interactions between Black women and white women:

White women writing about their impressions in scholarly and confessional work often ignore the depth of enmity between the two groups [white women and black women], or see it solely as a black female problem. Many times in feminist circles I have heard white women talk about a particular black woman’s hostility toward white females as though such feelings are not rooted in historical relations and contemporary interactions. Instead of exploring the reasons such hostility exists, or giving it any legitimacy as an appropriate response to domination or

exploitation, they see the black women as being difficult, problematic, irrational, and “insane.” (*Teaching to Transgress* 101-102)

Rather than listening to Black women’s testimony about the uniqueness of their experiences with oppression and acknowledging the validity of Black women’s emotional responses to those experiences, these white women were more concerned with expressing *their* impression of their interactions with Black women. By portraying Black women’s anger as stubbornness, jealousy, irrationality, or insanity, they invalidate the knowledge claims Black women make. Furthermore, they see the problem of Black and white women “not getting along” as stemming from Black women’s anger, which they see as unwarranted and unproductive. They fail to take responsibility for their own behavior.

In some instances, white women project characteristics of the “Sapphire” image onto Black women with whom they have had little to no interaction. Hooks elaborates, “Today many white people who see themselves as nonracist are comfortable with lives... where fear is their first response in any encounter with blackness. This ‘fear’ is the sign of the internalization in the white psyche of white supremacist sentiments” (*Killing Rage* 267-268). Evoking language of fear or intimidation, these white women infantilize themselves, drawing on patriarchal evaluations of femininity that privilege placidity and submission over self-assertiveness. This serves to heighten the perceived “scariness” of the Black woman—regardless of her actual behavior. The perception that Black women tend to be bullies that ought to be feared stands in the way of building loving relationships between Black women and white women. In other words, “As long as black rage continues to be represented as always and only evil and destructive, we lack a vision of militancy that is necessary for transformative revolutionary action” (hooks, *Killing Rage* 19). We have to find a way to let go of the controlling images.

Once we have a basic understanding of how systems of oppression act upon Black women, it is important to see Black women's agency in responding to experiences with oppression. Jones and Shorter-Gooden use the term "Shifting" to categorize "all of the ways African American women respond to and cope with racial and gender stereotypes, bias, and mistreatment" (62). While a great deal of oppression is perpetuated without a conscious effort on the part of the oppressor, determining how to cope with and respond to being oppressed often requires conscious thought and action. Jones and Shorter-Gooden explain, "Our research shows that in response to this unrelenting oppression, many Black women in America today find they must spend significant time, thought, and emotional energy watching every step they take, managing an array of feelings, and altering their behavior in order to cope with it all" (60). Some forms of shifting can take up more than just time, focus, and energy, however. They elaborate, "shifting is often internal, invisible. It's the chipping away at her sense of self, at her feelings of wholeness and centeredness" (7). Each individual woman's response to her experiences with racial and gender oppression will depend entirely on the context in which it plays out. However, Jones and Shorter-Gooden were able to categorize the different forms of shifting they observed in their African American Women's Voices Project into six basic strategies.

The first strategy Black women employ is battling the myths by attempting to disprove or transcend them. As previously illustrated, this is not always successful in *dispelling* stereotypes. Second, some Black women maintain an acute vigilance, scanning surveying, and scrutinizing whatever environment they enter. This strategy can come with serious mental and physical costs. The constant need to analyze can create a sense of paranoia, which can be emotionally and socially isolating. Such strategies can even have physiological effects. According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden, "Black people who

persistently engage in high-effort coping are more likely to have high blood pressure, which is a risk factor for heart disease” (71). This strategy can also bring about exhaustion. Third, some Black women choose to “wall off” the effects of discrimination by minimizing, denying, or ignoring the impact that racism and sexism has on them. This may require Black women to suppress or manage feelings of sadness, anger, disappointment, anxiety, and shame that naturally arise in response to experiencing oppression. This strategy also had some adverse physical side effects. Jones and Shorter-Gooden note, “Black women who accepted and kept silent about racial or gender discrimination were four times more likely to report high blood pressure than those who talked to others about it or took action” (75). Clearly, the consequences of such shifting can be painful, and even dangerous.

The fourth shifting strategy Jones and Shorter-Gooden identified is seeking spiritual and emotional support. They identify churches, religious communities, and friends and family members as some sources of support on which Black women have drawn. Fifth, some Black women choose to retreat to the Black community seeking a “safe harbor.” This might mean adapting to a new set of cultural conventions and codes, a process that presents its own set of challenges. Finally, the sixth strategy is directly fighting back. These women are “no longer content to simply suppress negative emotions. They’re motivated to put an end to the prejudicial demands, pressures, and pulls that kindle the feelings of anxiety, sadness, anger, and shame” (87). Black women’s resistance to oppression takes on many forms. Even the subtlest ways of fighting back contribute toward disassembling systems of oppression.

Many Black feminist thought stresses the importance of not ranking different approaches to activism in terms of validity. In Black feminist thought, the contributions

of contemporary grassroots political activists and Black woman artists are part of a tradition of combining scholarship and activism (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 20). Collins elaborates, “Rather than reducing Black women’s activism to some ‘essentialist’ core of ‘authentic’ Black women’s activism originating in Black feminist imaginations, this approach creates space for diverse African-American women to see how their current or potential everyday activities participate in Black women’s activism” (219). This approach acknowledges how regular folks challenge systems of oppression through their everyday behaviors, like engaging in dialogue, telling jokes, and foot-dragging. According to Collins, “Prevailing definitions of political activism and resistance misunderstand the meaning of these concepts in Black women’s lives. Social science research typically focuses on public, official, visible political activity even though unofficial, private, and seemingly invisible spheres of social life and organization may be equally important” (217). Redefining what is considered activism allows people to recognize how integrating small, everyday acts of resistance into their lives contributes to the larger goals of dismantling systems of oppression.

For white women, understanding the lived experiences of Black women will require much more in-depth research than this thesis could ever hope to cover. It will also require white women to actively seek out Black women’s voices. It will require a willingness to listen and learn from the experiences of these women. This is not meant to be a comprehensive account of Black women’s lives. Rather, it is meant to serve as a springboard from which one can catapult oneself into the deep pool that is Black feminist thought. Hooks testifies to the power in seeking understanding, writing, “Individual black and white females who forged bonds found that we did so by first educating ourselves for critical consciousness and by studying the specific history of social relations between the

two groups in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (*Killing Rage* 219-220). As we expose ourselves to lived experiences of others, we must continue to be introspective and self-reflective and seek to learn some things about ourselves in the process.

### Racism in Feminism: A Lesson in Accountability

In accordance with Black feminist epistemology’s reliance on an ethic of personal accountability in validating knowledge claims, white feminists who seek to earn the trust of Black feminists must be willing to acknowledge the history of racism in feminism and take practical steps to stop perpetuating racial hierarchies. Creating loving, inclusive communities in which Black women and white women can build genuine, loving relationships would be mutually beneficial. Hooks states that “all women should experience in racially mixed groups affirmation and support. Racism is the barrier that prevents positive communication and it is not eliminated or challenged by separation” (*Ain’t I a Woman* 152). One way white women can make space for such relationships to take root is to help other white women understand their roles in maintaining systems of oppression.

The first step in this process is self-reflection. Accepting that you have likely played a role in perpetuating systems of oppression, even if you have never intended to oppress anyone can be difficult. Hooks highlights the importance of being able to recognize the assumptions that inform one’s personal worldview:

If the white women who organized the contemporary movement toward feminism were at all remotely aware of racial politics in American history, they would have known that overcoming barriers that separate women from one another would entail confronting the reality of racism, and not just racism as a general evil in

society but the race hatred they might harbor in their own psyches. (*Ain't I a Woman* 122)

Practicing this step regularly will help to us to hone our ability to critically engage with the world around us. Turning this critical eye towards historical and contemporary feminist movements in particular can help us to better picture what a loving community would and would not entail. We can learn from the mistakes of other feminist movements and use that knowledge in creating more inclusive movements for social justice. In particular, we must analyze how appropriation, erasure, devaluation, exclusion, and competition have all stood in the way of feminist movements being diverse, inclusive, loving communities.

Many critiques of white feminists' appropriation of Black women's theories and ideas are a response to the treatment of Black women in the academy. Hooks explains, "It seems at times as though white feminists working in the academy have appropriated discussions of race and racism, while abandoning the effort to construct a space for sisterhood, a space where they could examine and change attitudes and behavior towards black women and all women of color" (*Teaching to Transgress* 103). In other words, these women failed to put their theories into practice. While there is certainly value in discussing issues of race and racism in all-white spaces, we must appreciate the importance of creating spaces where we can engage in dialogue directly with Black women. We must remember, "It is the centuries of activism against racism by people of color that has largely nurtured white antiracism" (Thompson xv). As a sign of respect to the women who create Black feminist theories we must commit ourselves to acknowledging the work they have done and continue to do.

In a similar vein, Collins calls attention to a pattern of suppression that “involves incorporating, changing, and thereby depoliticizing Black feminist ideas” (*Black Feminist Thought* 8). We have to make a conscious effort to not whitewash radical Black feminist theories and ideas. In other words, we need to resist the urge to alter Black feminist ideas in a way that makes them politically sanitized. If we choose to use the words of Black feminists, we have a responsibility to honor the context in which those words were written. We must give proper acknowledgement to the women whose theories we engage with. By doing so, we situate ourselves not as individuals drawing on “sources” in order to make claims, but as one of many voices in a constantly evolving tradition of dialogue.

White women must also acknowledge the numerous ways the mainstream feminist movements have often erased, devalued, or excluded Black women and their knowledge claims. One of the most problematic assumptions about the origins of feminism is that white women brought feminism to Black women (Thompson 169). Erasure functions by rendering Black women’s contributions invisible. According to Collins, “the historical suppression of Black women’s ideas has had a pronounced influence on feminist theory. One pattern of suppression is that of omission” (*Black Feminist Thought* 8). Because Black women’s contributions were often either entirely omitted or attributed elsewhere, thereby erasing Black women from their own work, it may appear that Black women contributed little to the creation of feminist theory. White feminists need to make the effort to seek out and acknowledge the historical contributions that Black women have made to the field of feminist study.

The devaluation of Black women and their knowledge claims in feminist movements takes on many forms. As illustrated earlier, internalizing myths about Black women can lead us to discredit Black women. We must commit ourselves to seeing each

Black woman's full humanity, especially when trying to analyze how we interact with one another on an interpersonal level. Furthermore, we need to take more seriously Black women's knowledge claims. Too often, we fail to see the validity of Black women's arguments when they come directly from Black women. Hooks elaborates on this disturbing trend, explaining, "White women were more willing to 'hear' another white woman talk about racism, yet it is their inability to listen to black women that impedes feminist progress" (*Teaching to Transgress* 102). Rather than trying to speak for Black women, white women should try to center Black women's own accounts of their experiences.

We can address the devaluation of Black women and their voices in feminist movements in two ways. First, if we catch others or ourselves relying on myths and controlling images of Black women, we must consciously try to untangle the myths from reality. We must familiarize ourselves with the different myths and controlling images created to justify Black women's oppression in order to identify them. We must be able and willing to call attention to myths and stereotypes, and how they inform our behavior and thinking. Second, since myths of inferiority still hold weight in our society, we can use our privilege to reach other white folks if they refuse to listen directly to Black women. We can equip other white folks with the skills and information necessary to reveal to them why they ought to listen to Black women. Furthermore, we can center Black women's voices in our various daily lives.

While erasure and devaluation are two very powerful tools used against Black women within feminist movements, nothing functions quite like outright exclusion. Collins explains, "Traditionally, Black women have either been excluded from or assigned subordinate roles within civil rights, women's, labor, or other organizations

devoted to institutional transformation” (*Black Feminist Thought* 232). Moving forward, any movement for women’s rights ought to include representations of a wide variety of women. We have to be willing to call out spaces that exclude marginalized women. Davis points to the Grimke sisters as an example of white women recognizing the need to include Black women’s voices in feminist spaces. She writes, “During the preparations for the founding convention of the National Female Anti-Slavery Society, Angelina Grimke had to take the initiative to guarantee more than a token presence of Black women” (57). If the Grimke sisters could stand up to racial exclusion in the 1830s, white women are certainly capable of doing so today.

Finally, if we hope to build loving relationships across race, we must address the emotional tension between Black women and white women. According to hooks, “Animosity between black and white women’s liberationists was not due solely to disagreement over racism within the women’s movement; it was the end result of years of jealousy, envy, competition, and anger between the two groups” (*Ain’t I a Woman* 153). Centuries of being defined in opposition to one another unsurprisingly have had an effect on how white women and Black women relate to one another. In order to bridge the social gaps between the two groups, white women need to understand their role in promoting and perpetuating emotional tension.

Bridging the gap between us likely will not be painless, but if we commit to healing the causes of our differences, the benefits we will reap in the end far outweigh the discomfort of some difficult discussions. Hooks writes, “It is woman’s acceptance of divisiveness as a natural order that has caused black and white women to cling religiously to the belief that bonding across racial boundaries is impossible, to passively accept the notion that the distances that separate women are immutable” (*Ain’t I a Woman* 156). We

can heal the structural issues that foster feelings jealousy, envy, and anger between individual women by dismantling unnecessary hierarchies that require us to compete when collaboration would be more productive. We can embrace new standards of beauty and validity that value our individuality. Instead of envying one another, we can help other women build healthy self-esteem that allows them to appreciate their own worth, and in the process, teach ourselves how to value diversity and individuality.

Previous attempts at building bonds of “sisterhood” that transcend racial difference have frequently failed. According to hooks, “The methods women have employed to reach one another across racial boundaries have been shallow, superficial, and destined to fail” (*Ain't I a Woman* 157). As we move onward, we must be clear with what we mean by “sisterhood” and hold one another and ourselves accountable, both in word and in action. Hooks grapples with the issue of defining “sisterhood,” explaining, “Critiquing a vision of sisterhood rooted in ‘shared victimization’ I encouraged women to bond on the basis of political solidarity” (*Killing Rage* 51). We do not have to have shared experiences of oppression to share the goal of eradicating systems of oppression. Although patriarchy affects all women, we must understand how intersections of racism, classism, heterosexism, and other oppressions affect the ways that sexism manifests in our lives. If we desire to move beyond shallow interactions with one another, we can choose to build meaningful, loving relationships with other women, even across race, class, and other divisions, and work to build loving communities. Our mission of dismantling patriarchy would be much more productive if we could identify and move beyond the racial hierarchies that have been imbedded in feminist theory and practice.

## **Towards a White Antiracist Identity**

For white folks, coming to terms with the realities of racism in the U.S. contemporarily may be disorienting. For me, that journey has often been emotionally devastating. It took a long time for me to let go of the guilt and shame associated with my whiteness. I finally realized that seeking justice did not have to mean hating myself for being white. Rather, “The task is to develop a white identity that is not based on subjugating others” (Thompson xx). The Ethnic Studies classroom environments in which I have been lucky enough to study have aided me in forming a healthy white antiracist identity. My experiences have helped me form some theoretical and practical guidelines that may be useful for other white folks who hope to begin the journey towards antiracism.

One of the most painful things about studying racial inequality in the U.S. is coping with what Laymon calls *the worst of white folks*. There certainly are still white folks who consciously and willfully propagate overtly racist sentiments. We can see this evidenced in recent events such as the report released by the Department of Justice on their investigation into the Ferguson police department and court system or the video footage of fraternity brothers from the Sigma Alpha Epsilon chapter at the University of Oklahoma participating in a truly egregious racist chant. Such instances are easy to identify as racist; we can point to specific words, phrases, or behaviors the perpetrators used to highlight their bigotry. *The worst of white folks*, however, is not always so easy to distinguish. It is not an isolated group of white folks harboring all of the racist sentiments against non-white folks. *The worst of white folks* is something for which all white folks have the capacity.

While speaking about *the worst of white folks*, Laymon makes a powerful statement: “The worst of me, I understand, has less power than the worst of white folks, but morally is really no better” (Laymon 30). He calls attention to *the worst* in himself, detailing a scenario in which he clearly had good intentions but failed to act in accordance with those intentions. He remembers wanting credit for his good intentions despite his lack of action. We *all* have the capacity for *the worst*—for greed, entitlement, jealousy, hatred, bitterness, arrogance, narcissism, laziness, and the entire spread of self-serving negative emotions. In other words, we all have the capacity to be *the worst*. However, as Laymon points out, *the worst of white folks* has had disproportionate power to exploit, marginalize, and dominate non-white folks in order to maintain a racial hierarchy with white folks at the top.

*The worst of white folks*, although not an established group of individuals, does have some salient characteristics. First, *the worst of white folks* are not strictly found in the South. This assumption stands in the way of seeing the reality of racism throughout our country. Second, the worst of white folks is frequently painted as stemming from problems a particular individual had. Laymon explains, “White Americans were wholly responsible for the worst of white folks, though they would make sure it never wholly defined them” (28). The double standard for discussing *the worst of white folks* and *the worst of Black folks* came under critique following Michael Brown’s death. These criticisms compared the mainstream media’s treatment of white mass murderers with that of Black victims of police shootings. On Twitter, the hashtag #iftheygunnedmedown emerged as a critique of the media’s representation of Brown and other Black victims of police brutality. Twitter users shared side-by-side photos of them, one “respectable” and one “menacing,” to pose the question: *What photo would they use #iftheygunnedmedown?*

The hashtag started a discussion about how white folks, even those who commit mass murder, such as James Holmes, are usually treated as whole humans by the media, while black folks, even those who were gunned down unarmed after committing no crimes, like twelve-year-old Tamir Rice, are subjected to suspicion and scrutiny.

Third, “The worst of white folks really believed that the height of black and brown aspiration should be emulation of itself” (Laymon 28). *The worst of white folks* refuses to see how problematic it is to hold whiteness or white American culture as superior. Ethnocentrism allowed *the worst of white folks* to believe that non-white folks could only succeed by assimilating to normative white culture. This assumption ideologically authorizes white folks to police how respectable they believe non-white folks to be. Relatedly, *the worst of white folks* determines what are acceptable emotional reactions to racial injustice. Laymon explains that *the worst of white folks* “was all at once crazy-making and quick to discipline us for acting crazy” (28). In other words, the worst of white folks pathologizes non-white folks’ righteous emotional responses to being placed under emotional duress.

Fourth, *the worst of white folks* often manipulates, misinterprets, or simply ignores historical facts to justify its thoughts, words, and actions. For example, “It conveniently forgot that it came to this country on a boat, then reacted violently when anything or anyone suggested to share it” (Laymon 28). We have to put an end to the collective ignorance that has been bred through our failing education system. Fifth, *the worst of white folks* has “an insatiable appetite for virtuoso black performance and routine black suffering” (28). White folks often consume Black culture without understanding or respecting the individual artist, athlete, or performer or the communities from which they come. This disconnection between white consumers and Black communities persists,

demonstrating a shallowness of engagement with the themes and messages of Black folks' music, poetry, literature, comedy, and other forms of cultural production. Listening to hip-hop music or following Black folks on Twitter will not inherently make you antiracist. The responsibility lies with the individual; each of us must make the conscious effort to engage with one another on deeper level.

I believe that all white folks have the capacity for *the worst of white folks*. However, I do not believe that we are a doomed race. Making sure that, individually and collectively, *the best* in us is more powerful and more prominent *the worst* in us is a central aspect of creating a positive white antiracist identity. From the personal experiences I have accumulated and lessons I have been taught, I have assembled a set of information that may be useful for other white folks who are working towards a positive white antiracist identity. This journey is neither linear nor standardized, but, through dialogue, we can identify some themes that white folks working towards antiracism may encounter. In this chapter, I outline general theoretical concepts, a set of challenges to anticipate, and practical steps that have been useful for me in working towards a positive white antiracist identity.

### Theoretical Groundings

If we hope to make antiracism more than a shallow project, white folks must seek understanding with a sincerity of learning. Possessing a sincerity of learning demands that we respect our teachers' validity and humanity. It also means asking questions, not to derail a conversation or debate, but to slough off one's own ignorance. It means taking responsibility, when you can, for gathering and synthesizing information for yourself rather than expecting someone else to do the work for you. We cannot do antiracist work

if we are willfully ignorant or expect to get away with doing none of the work ourselves. We must be eager and open to learn.

One way we can help other white folks on that journey is by disrupting the myths that support white folks' ignorance. Hooks poses the question, "how does one overthrow, change, or even challenge a system that you have been taught to admire, to love, to believe in?" (*Ain't I a Woman* 121). Today, if one can access the Internet, one can hypothetically learn anything. Those of us with the privilege of having Internet access ought to engage any opportunity to use it to learn more about our world and the issues that plague it. Helping folks to gain access to the Internet and to develop Internet proficiency and critical thinking and reading skills can empower them enormously. Still, it is acceptable to admit that you need some guidance in working towards antiracism and in helping other white folks do the same.

Colorblind ideology is one major factor I have seen standing in the way of well-meaning white folks gaining a positive white antiracist identity. Collins discusses the divide between those that espouse a colorblind ideology and those who see it as problematic:

...one group believes that treating everyone the same, regardless of color, moves American society toward equality. Within this assimilationist, color-blind version of antiracism, recognizing racial differences, or, in some versions, even using the term race, fosters racism. In contrast, another group argues that recognizing racial differences is an essential first step in unpacking racial meanings that continue to shape social relations. They see a color-conscious, multicultural diversity as the future of American democracy. (*Black Sexual Politics* 46)

According to Collins, this rhetoric of colorblindness has been designed to render social inequalities invisible to the U.S. public (*Black Feminist Thought* 26). This failure to confront issues of racial inequality head-on has dramatically slowed the United States' progress towards racial equity since the Civil Rights Movement. Collins explains, "The assumption is that the U.S. matrix of domination now provides equal treatment because where it once overtly discriminated by race and gender, it now seemingly ignores them. Beliefs such as these thus allow Whites and men to support a host of punitive policies that reinscribe social hierarchies of race and gender" (298). Often, the white supremacist nature of such policies that reinforce racial hierarchies is disguised by class-specific language.

Accepting that inequality still persists in our country can be difficult, especially for those who believe that the U.S. is a meritocracy. The mythology of meritocracy relies on colorblind ideology, and ignores the structural and institutional obstacles that stand in the way of non-white folks' social, economic, and political mobility. Collins explains, "Because the legal system has now formally equalized individual access to housing, schooling, and jobs, any unequal group results, such as those that characterize gaps between Blacks and Whites, must somehow lie within the individuals themselves or their culture" (*Black Feminist Thought* 297). Folks who buy into this mythology believe that everyone in the U.S. has an equal chance of succeeding in our capitalist economy. Those that have experienced the reality of, for example, public schools in densely populated, low-income areas understand the fallacy of this mythology. Coming to terms with reality reveals the persistent necessity of Affirmative Action programs, although they arguably must be developed and evolved.

The mythology of meritocracy in the U.S. also makes it difficult for white folks to understand the concept of privilege. Taking personal accountability for our white privilege means acknowledging that we did not earn most of the things we take for granted. This is not to say that no white person has ever worked hard for what they have, nor is it to say that every white person has equal access to the benefits that white privilege provides. According to hooks, acknowledging our privilege would mean talking about “imperialism, colonization, about the Africans who came here before Columbus... about genocide, about the white colonizers’ exploitation and betrayal of Native Americans; about ways the legal and governmental structures of this society from the Constitution on supported and upheld slavery, apartheid” (*Killing Rage* 188). It can be overwhelming to see the extent of the impact that white supremacy has had on the U.S., especially if one has remained ignorant for much of their life.

Privilege manifests in different ways in everyone’s life. Intersections of gender, class, sexuality, and other identity characteristics might alter a person’s experience of white privilege. However, it often involves a sense of entitlement, an ignorance of non-white folks’ experiences, or disproportionate access to representation and justice. White privilege shields white folks from being seen as inherently suspicious, criminal, aggressive, unreliable, intimidating, dangerous, or otherwise inferior. In a society that claims to believe in a presumption of innocence and in the protection of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, one would think that this “privilege” would be a right afforded to all people. Unfortunately, Black folks continue to have to defend their right to feel as though they belong in their own country, state, or community.

White privilege often manifests as a sense of entitlement to unearned privileges.

White folks' entitlement—believing that one is owed things simply by nature of existing—has a long history of justifying the domination, subordination, and annihilation of people of color. This sense of entitlement justified the colonization of North America and the genocide of American Indian peoples. It allows white folks to believe that no matter how they act, they are entitled to dignity and humanity, a right often not afforded to Black folks. Laymon illustrates:

If white American entitlement meant anything, it meant that no matter how patronizing, unashamed, deliberate, unintentional, poor, rich, rural, urban, ignorant, and destructive white Americans were, black Americans were still encouraged to work for them, write to them, listen to them, talk with them, run from them, emulate them, teach them, dodge them, and ultimately thank them for not being as fucked up as they could be. (52)

This sense of entitlement often comes at the cost of non-white folks' agency and tragically, sometimes their lives.

White folks often take for granted the rights they have access to that most non-white folks do not. When we fail to stay tuned in to the real-life manifestations of racism in the U.S., it can be easy to believe that we are a racially equal country. Our lives can become so sheltered when we live in places like Dakota Dunes, South Dakota or Boulder, Colorado. We can see an example of this form of privilege in the comments Patricia Arquette made backstage at the 2015 Academy Awards. In her acceptance speech, she commented on the wage gap between men and women. Afterwards, she made the following statement: "So the truth is, even though we sort of feel like we have equal rights in America, right under the surface, there are huge issues that are applied that really do affect women. And it's time for all the women in America and all the men that

love women, and all the gay people, and all the people of color that we've all fought for to fight for us now.” Her commentary clearly lacks an intersectional approach and fails to acknowledge the rights that LGBT folks and people of color continue to have to fight for that white women have long taken for granted.

Similarly, white privilege allows white folks to go through their lives completely ignorant of the realities faced by people of color while non-white folks are constantly bombarded with images of white people. Hooks explains, “Since most white people do not have to ‘see’ black people (constantly appearing on billboards, television, movies, in magazines, etc.) and they do not need to be ever on guard nor to observe black people to be safe, they can live as though black people are invisible, and they can imagine that they are also invisible to blacks” (*Killing Rage* 36). This failure to see reality allows white folks to “tune out,” enabling them to remain blissfully ignorant of other people’s suffering. This callousness directly stands in the way of white folks working to disassemble racial hierarchies. We accept the way things are rather than working to end oppression and injustice.

As mentioned previously, acknowledging one’s white privilege can be a difficult task. Once we understand exactly what white privilege is and how it functions, it can be hard to know what to do with that information. Acknowledging privilege ought to function to move us forward, not to halt our progress towards racial equity. It should humble us to our position in larger systems, help us to empathize with others, and mobilize us to do antiracist work. Calling attention to our own privilege should not involve a complete devaluation of the self or an attempt to get attention or praise. Our whiteness does not inherently make us bad, “It only makes us bad and at fault when we abuse and ignore it” (Thelandersson 529). We must not seek to punish ourselves for

inheriting unearned privileges. Rather we must see our privilege of evidence of institutional and interpersonal racial inequality and work to level the playing field. That will mean making those unearned privileges available to all people as basic human rights.

Acknowledging our privilege publicly should not be a shallow attempt to get attention or praise. Even if your self-reflection comes from a place of good intentions, never expect that anyone should praise you for admitting your white privilege. As Thompson writes, “Doing the work requires not asking for credit or recognition” (xviii). Believing that we should be thanked for doing any form of antiracist work comes from a sense of greed. Seeking to acknowledge our privilege ought to stem from a genuine desire to see racial oppression end. If we see working for racial justice rooted in a love ethic, we ought to see seeking personal recognition as a form of greed. The real goal of acknowledging our privilege ought to be calling attention to systemic racism, not calling attention to how “good” we are. Hooks explains, “politics of greed [are] at play when folks seek love. They often want fulfillment immediately. Genuine love is rarely an emotional space where needs are instantly gratified. To know genuine love we have to invest time and commitment” (*All About Love* 114). Antiracist work should not be about instant gratification. We have to commit to the long-term goals of dismantling systems of oppression.

Acknowledging our privilege with the intention of calling attention to and dismantling systems of oppression can aid us in forming a positive white antiracist identity. First, acknowledging one’s own privilege can give us perspective. It can allow us to be humble, to see the things as they really are. If white people can see that we are not neutral—that we have a tangible impact on the lives of other people even when we do not mean to—we might better be able to make informed, responsible decisions in our

everyday lives. Second, acknowledging our privilege should help us to empathize with those who have not been afforded the same advantages. We need to be able to identify not only what our privilege has given to us, but what having differential access to privileges does to non-white folks. It can reveal the places where we might be able to dismantle racial hierarchies. For example, if I acknowledge that my white privilege has allowed me to avoid being seen as criminal by law enforcement, I can do work related to reforming the criminal justice system. Seeing our white privilege for what it is should mobilize us, not freeze us or shame us.

Acknowledging our privilege is the first step in deconstructing the myth that whiteness is neutral and normative. According to Thompson, “it may be impossible to do antiracist work as white people in this country without seeing ourselves as white (xxi). We cannot discard our whiteness. This fact can be painful, since our whiteness often situates us in a racial hierarchy that offers us unearned benefits even when we do not want them. However, if we fail to grapple with the truth, we allow our social, political, and economic systems to be stratified. Hooks illustrates:

When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white supremacist values and beliefs even though they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination (especially domination that involves coercive control), they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they profess to wish to see eradicated.

*(Killing Rage 185)*

Being a well-meaning white person who sees oneself as neutral does nothing to disassemble racial hierarchies. Furthermore, acknowledging our privilege does not mean

that we cease benefitting from it. We have to be proactive to ensure that everyone has access to the same basic rights and opportunities.

Another concept I have seen white folks struggle to comprehend is reverse racism. White folks need to understand the difference between interpersonal discrimination and racism. Interpersonal discrimination takes place when an individual or group treats an individual or group differently than others because of prejudiced opinions. Racism plays out over structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains. In the U.S., racism has taken the shape of white supremacy, in which white people have greater access to power and control. While non-white folks can certainly discriminate against white folks, white folks cannot in the current moment experience racist oppression. The term “reverse racism” is often evoked to attempt to derail or discredit non-white folks’ critiques of whiteness. In the following passage, hooks demonstrates the difference between discriminatory views of white folks and representations of whiteness that acknowledge the history of racism inflicted by white people upon non-white folks:

Without evoking a simplistic essentialist ‘us and them’ dichotomy that suggests black folks merely invert stereotypical racist interpretations so that black becomes synonymous with goodness and white with evil, I want to focus on that representation of whiteness that is not formed in reaction to stereotypes but emerges as a response to the traumatic pain and anguish that remains a consequence of white racist domination, a psychic state that informs and shapes the way black folks ‘see’ whiteness. (*Killing Rage* 38)

Rather than claiming that folks are being reverse racist by talking about the realities or racism historically and contemporarily in the U.S., we have to start actively listening to and considering the implications of what is being said. We have to acknowledge

righteous emotional responses to that traumatic pain and anguish as valid and human responses to domination.

Understanding the fallacy of reverse racism is important to discussions about using politically correct language. While I firmly believe that freedom of speech is of the utmost importance, I do believe we need to be able to criticize the use of words and phrases that have been used successfully to specifically target and harm certain groups of people. Laymon details an incident in which he and a friend got into a fight with a group of white fraternity brothers after the men called them n\*\*\*\*\*s. He writes, “I think and feel a lot but mostly I feel that I can’t do anything to make the boys feel like they’ve made us feel right there” (39). Such words wield enormous power when used by white folks. As I said earlier, I firmly defend our right to freedom of speech, but I do believe that, in most contexts, using such slurs ought to be seen as reprehensible and treated as such. We need to take seriously the power in our words.

To have a positive white antiracist identity, we need to stop seeing ourselves as heroes, saviors, or martyrs or as lifetime members of a special club. First, we cannot approach antiracism as though it were charity. While white folks certainly have a role to fill in dismantling racist hierarchies, we cannot expect to sweep in and save the day by ourselves. We have to make a distinction between trying to fix, save, or rescue people of color and working beside, standing in solidarity with, or being a tool for people of color. The former reinforces the myth that non-white folks are inferior while the latter acknowledges the work that people of color have already done, continue to do, and have plans to do in the future. Second, we cannot see antiracism as a club to which we can achieve lifetime membership. Good intentions do not make a person an “ally” of people of color. Antiracism is an ongoing process, not a fixed identity. It takes commitment;

each day we have to make the choice to resist retreating into the comforts of our white privilege. That does not mean that we have to enter each day as a battle, but rather, we have to understand that working towards antiracism requires conscious thinking and behavior.

Even after we have come to terms with our ignorance, our privilege, and our misconceptions about racism and antiracist work, the journey towards a positive white antiracist identity may still be a difficult one. Acknowledging and accepting reality is only the first step, and moving towards action can be trickier than it sounds. I have certainly struggled in applying the theoretical concepts I have learned in my everyday life. By no means do those struggles outweigh the struggles that come along with encountering racist oppression first-hand, but if white folks can start a dialogue with one another about these hurdles, we might better help one another overcome them and focus on the larger issues at hand in antiracist work. In the following section, I highlight a few of the emotional ups and downs that one might encounter as a white person who seeks to do antiracist work.

### Challenges to Anticipate

White folks are a heterogeneous group—we see this demonstrated virtually everywhere in society. It would be impossible to outline all of the thoughts and emotions that white folks experience when trying to work towards antiracism. However, in my experience as well as in the literature, some themes emerge regarding experiences that white folks have had in doing antiracist work as well as some potential strategies for overcoming those challenges. White folks need to understand that they may encounter vulnerability, isolation, conflict, and emotions such as guilt, shame, fear, inadequacy,

despair, hopelessness, grief, self-hatred, and broken-heartedness, and find ways to cope with these sensations.

Here it is especially useful to view antiracism as an act of love. To create loving bonds, we have to make ourselves vulnerable. While this exposes us to potential harm, we cannot let bitterness and fear stand in the way of building loving relationships across difference. Hooks explains:

False notions of love teach us that it is the place where we will feel no pain, where we will be in a state of constant bliss. We have to expose the falseness of these beliefs to see and accept the reality that suffering and pain do not end when we begin to love. In some cases when we are making the slow journey back from lovelessness to love, our suffering may become more intense... Acceptance of pain is part of loving practice. (*All About Love* 159-160)

Becoming comfortable with vulnerability, I understand, is significantly more difficult in practice than it is in theory. We cannot expect to instantly be able to give others unconditional love, especially when there is so much distrust between white folks and Black folks these days. Because white folks have such differential access to power, we cannot expect Black folks to make themselves vulnerable if we fail to do so. Fromm writes, “whoever shuts himself off in a system of defense, where distance and possession are his means of security, makes himself a prisoner. To be loved, and to love, need courage, the courage to judge certain values as of ultimate concern—and to take the jump and stake everything on these values” (116-117). White folks have to step up and be willing to take that jump.

Furthermore, we cannot be discouraged if individual Black folks hurt us personally or reject our attempts at connecting. Hooks explains, “we cannot exercise

control over the behavior of someone else and we cannot predict or utterly control our response to their actions. We can, however, exercise control over our own actions” (*All About Love* 67). By making ourselves vulnerable, we cannot ensure that we will not feel pain. However if we can visualize the overwhelming benefits that loving communities would bring for *everyone*, our temporary individual discomfort seems insignificant.

Another challenge that white folks might encounter if they choose to do antiracist work is isolation or alienation from other white people. Coming to terms with the realities of racism can make white people feel as though they are “straddling several worlds simultaneously” (Thompson 162). I certainly can identify with that sensation. The overwhelming majority of my friends, family, classmates, and coworkers have been white. The lessons I learned in my early Ethnic Studies classes often made me feel more separated from my friends, family, and peers than empowered. Over the years, however, I have learned how to engage with other white folks about issues of race and racism. It has absolutely been a learning process, and I have often become alienated from friends, peers, and even family members.

As I was first forming an antiracist identity, I found solace from that sense of isolation in my company with the young man I was dating. After the relationship ended, I still felt profoundly disconnected from my friends and family, but now I had also isolated one of the few Black people with whom I had a close, personal relationship. It was very alienating until I fully understood that “Knowing how to be solitary is central to the art of loving” (*All About Love* 140). Coming to a positive white antiracist identity means accepting the possibility that you may be disliked by some folks and entirely rejected from some circles. Furthermore, it means understanding that this isolation is neither permanent nor necessary. Thompson explains, “White people need to know there are

other people, other ways of being, other sensibilities, other communities that will catch them if they take steps away from the assumptions and lifestyles of dominant white culture” (361). One of the benefits of building loving communities is that it can provide support for white folks who want to speak up and act but are afraid to do so.

White folks must also anticipate encountering some conflict on the road towards antiracism. Again, simply having good intentions will not suffice. We must engage directly with non-white folks and other white folks about topics that will undoubtedly cause some conflict along the way. Hooks explains, “Realistically, being part of a loving community does not mean we will not face conflicts, betrayals, negative outcomes from positive actions, or bad things happening to good people. Love allows us to confront these negative realities in a manner that is life-affirming and life-enhancing” (*All About Love* 139). Although dealing with conflict can be difficult, and sometimes fruitless, it is a necessary part of getting to the root of issues of racism. We have to prepare each other and ourselves to engage in healthy, productive conflict. Fromm explains, “Real conflicts between two people, those which do not serve to cover up or to project, but which are experienced on the deep level of inner reality to which they belong, are not destructive. They lead to clarification, they produce a catharsis from which both persons emerge with more knowledge and more strength” (95). This might take some trial and error, as well as a great deal of patience and commitment, but it can be productive.

Most of these challenges stem from interacting with other people, but coming to a positive white antiracist identity frequently also means overcoming some internal obstacles. Dealing with issues of racism can bring about a number of painful emotions for white folks. Again, this is not to detract attention from the painful emotions of actually experiencing racism. Rather, I believe that white folks would better be able to respect

non-white folks' righteous emotions if they could get past their own emotional reactions to talking about or witnessing racism. Not everyone will experience all of these emotions while doing antiracist work, and certainly none of us experience these emotions in exactly the same way. Some of these emotions, such as guilt, shame, and fear, can be largely overcome by creating a positive white antiracist identity. On the other hand, some, such as grief and broken-heartedness threaten to remain with us until systems of oppression are dismantled.

Arguably one of the most prominent emotions white folks experience regarding issues of racism is guilt. Understanding the history of racism in the U.S. and globally for white folks can bring about this feeling. We know we are not personally responsible for creating chattel slavery or segregation or other horrific manifestations of white supremacy, but we often cannot help but feel guilty that other white people did those things to benefit white people as a group. Acknowledging the persistence of white privilege contemporarily can also bring about guilty feelings. If we come to terms with how privilege has functioned in our lives, it makes sense that we would feel some remorse for benefitting from it. Furthermore, as we start to implement antiracist work into our everyday lives, we can feel guilt over not being able to stop every injustice. We have to accept that we cannot stop racism on our own, nor will we be able to do so overnight. To move past this guilt, both personally and for the sake of future generations, we have to do the work to eliminate institutional and interpersonal racism. Once we implement positive changes in our lives, we make the space to forgive ourselves and let go of guilt. This allows us to move forward and build inclusive, loving communities.

Related to guilt is the feeling of shame that can come from seeing your position as an individual white person in relation to systemic racial hierarchies that reinforce

structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal racism for the sake of benefiting white folks as a group. Hooks explains, “Shame breaks and weakens us, keeping us away from the wholeness healing offers. When we practice forgiveness, we let go of shame. Embedded in our shame is always a sense of being unworthy. It separates. Compassion and forgiveness reconnect us” (*All About Love* 217). When we feel ashamed to be in a group that has benefitted from racism, it can make us feel inherently bad. We have to see ourselves as redeemable, and we have to see other white folks as redeemable.

Being a white antiracist might also mean dealing with feelings of inadequacy. To this day, I alternate between feeling confident that I have something to offer and feeling as though my contributions are useless and futile. I worry that, as a white woman, there is nothing useful I can add to conversations about racism. Personally, I have learned to cope with these feelings of inadequacy by turning them into learning experiences and by hearing other folks speak about their own insecurities. Accepting that you will not always have the answers, I have found, is rather healthy. In the classroom setting especially, I have learned an enormous amount by being able to identify the places where I felt inadequate and dedicate time and effort to improving myself in those areas. Slowly but surely, I have become confident in my voice, my creativity, and my intelligence. It has helped to have supportive and encouraging mentors and peers; we should always seek to provide such an environment for others. We can find ways to criticize one another in constructive ways that does not make us feel utterly or inherently inadequate.

Fear can be one of the most immobilizing emotions experienced by white folks in antiracist work. It may seem as though there is just so much to fear: saying or doing the wrong thing, being rejected by other white folks, being misunderstood or willfully

misinterpreted, being targeted in acts of violence, and other potentially uncomfortable or dangerous situations. On the subject of fear, hooks writes:

Fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination. It promotes the desire for separation, the desire not to be known. When we are taught that safety lies always with sameness, the difference, of any kind, will appear as a threat. When we choose to love we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other. (*All About Love* 93)

We cannot let our fear freeze us. Overcoming our fears takes courage and vulnerability, both of which involve risk. It helps to have the support of loving friendships and communities when trying to overcome our fears. There is no quick fix for these fears; we have to build confidence over time by putting ourselves out there and building meaningful relationships founded in trust.

Bearing witness to the pain and suffering of others, especially when you feel powerless to help them, can bring about feelings of grief, despair, and rage. We often become desensitized to the harsh realities of this world. Mainstream U.S. society often views violence as normal or necessary responses to a loss of control. Counteracting white privilege demands that we do not turn away from the pain of others to shield ourselves from discomfort. We have to be careful to not get trapped in despair or blind fury, however. In the face of senseless violence and loss of life, it is far too easy to crumple with grief and hopelessness or to let our anger overpower our sensibilities. Hooks gives us some words of encouragement, writing, “Knowing love or the hope of knowing love is the anchor that keeps us from falling into that sea of despair” (*All About Love* 78). We must find healthy ways to express our grief, despair, and rage. Otherwise, they threaten to

consume us, to morph into bitterness, broken-heartedness, or hatred. It might be useful for us to have a broad range of strategies for coping with these emotions. For example, creative outlets, such as making music, painting, dancing, or writing might be used to express or cope with these feelings. Having friends, family, peers, or professionals to talk to can be valuable, as well. Within a loving community, we can keep one another from falling to grief, despair, or overwhelming rage.

Over the past few years, I more often than not felt as though everything I had learned had been a lie. The assumptions around which I structured my identity have been collapsed and it has left me feeling rather adrift and helpless. This sense of hopelessness can come from seeing the extent of racism in our world. When I tune into Twitter and see that another Black or Brown person has been fatally shot by a police officer, my heart hurts, and not just metaphorically. I can feel the physiological effects of grief; I get shaky, my head pounds, my chest aches, and I feel disoriented, like my head is not attached to my body. I absolutely cannot imagine the pain experienced by the families, friends, and communities of these victims. Such hopelessness can also emerge when we see the callousness of other white folks. It is easy to look at other white folks and worry that some white people will just never *get it*. I have certainly felt that sense of hopelessness, but only when I forget how far I have come. I refuse to forget some of the ignorant, racist things I have said or done. It helps to remind me that, by nature of being white, I will always have the capacity for *the worst of white folks*, but that *the worst* in me only has as much power as I allow it to have. If we can accept our own fallibility, it can be easier to help guide other white folks in the right direction. In the following section, I outline some practical tips that white folks might find useful in overcoming the difficulties that come with antiracist work.

White Antiracism in Practice

If we hope to see racial justice become a reality in the U.S., “Race consciousness has to go beyond words to action” (Thompson 318). That action will undoubtedly look colossally different for each individual, but the goal ought to be the same: racial justice, equity, and inclusion. Thompson illustrates one manifestation of white antiracist practice:

A living practice of crossing borders—racial, cultural, and spiritual; a merging of people’s political action and personal lives; a certain flexibility that comes from making one’s home welcome to fellow travelers; a seriousness, a humor, and a liveliness born of a people on the move; an intimacy between white people and people of color—as friends, colleagues, and comrades—that includes taking race seriously but not belaboring the differences; working hard enough across race so that there are times when race is somehow transcended, not covered over or ignored, but also not necessarily considered the most essential or problematic issue among people. (330)

This openness, flexibility, seriousness, joy, intimacy, and transcendence cannot just be wished into existence, however. It takes hard work to create such a solid, functional community. Some steps we can take to work towards this type of community are actively listening and learning, paying attention, thinking critically, making antiracism an everyday task, diversifying, speaking up, building self-esteem, staying true to yourself, and living with a love ethic.

First, active listening and learning are an enormous piece of white antiracist practice. We have to accept our limitations as white folks, and open ourselves up to new information, new perspectives, and new experiences. We will always have room for

growth. It may sound elementary, but we could all benefit by developing our listening skills. We need to be aware not only of the explicit lessons and information that are being taught to us, but also to the information that is implicitly being transmitted. Furthermore, we must see our personal mistakes as learning experiences. If we make ourselves more receptive to learning and growing opportunities, we make room for enormous personal growth. Once we have developed these skills, we can better engage in productive dialogue.

Second, paying attention is key to implementing antiracist work into our lives. Remaining present in our interactions with others, as well as being self-aware, are central pieces to antiracist work. Racial politics are discreetly at play all throughout our lives. If we know where to look, we can find conversations about racial politics that may enrich our experience of working towards a positive white antiracist identity. For example, hip-hop culture can be one particularly powerful place where we can tune in to dialogue about racial politics, but we have to take seriously the messages expressed in hip-hop spaces. Hooks explains, “While it has become ‘cool’ for white folks to hang out with black people and express pleasure in black culture, most white people do not feel that this pleasure should be linked to unlearning racism” (*Killing Rage* 157). If all white consumers of hip-hop culture felt a duty to unlearn their racist indoctrination, I suspect that there would be a much more salient white antiracist presence. On top of being aware of the messages we are being fed, we ought to push ourselves to be more self-aware. Hooks elaborates, “Being aware enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn” (*All About Love* 94). Remaining self-aware means that we pay

attention to how we think, act, and speak and become more decisive and accurate in choosing words and actions that accurately represent the person we hope to be.

Engaging in critical thinking is another valuable practice that white folks ought to employ in antiracist work. Hooks explains, “Living consciously means we think critically about ourselves and the world we live in” (*All About Love* 55). It is always useful to consider the possibility that you might be wrong. That is not to say that you should not be firm in your convictions, but rather to say that it is important to consider multiple perspectives in any argument before deciding on your position. It is also useful to not look at things in terms of a binary. Racial issues should not be viewed in an “us” versus “them” dichotomy. We ought to also be critical of our motives. Hooks notes, “When greedy consumption is the order of the day, dehumanization becomes acceptable” (*All About Love* 115). We must keep in mind that the goals of antiracist work are about liberation, equity, and justice, not punishment, consumption, or seeking attention.

Dismantling systems of racial oppression is not a part-time job. I do not mean that we always have to be battling racism head-on; that would certainly exhaust anybody. Rather, we have to implement minute changes in our lives every day, and commit to seeing that those changes remain a part of our daily practice. Thompson explains, “antiracism does not stand up to the test of time unless it is fully integrated into people’s lives” (362). One way we can ensure that antiracist work is more than just a shallow phase of our lives is to make our personal lives and our homes reflect the communities we want to see in the world at large. We can push to make our homes “an extension of political work, a key place for nurturance and communication” (Thompson 327). It can be difficult to transition between doing antiracist work and being at home if our home environment is not supportive of a positive white antiracist identity. We should seek to

rid our homes of shame, guilt, rage, fear, or other painful emotions, which will allow us to do more productive antiracist work.

My life has been characterized by overwhelming sameness. Diversifying my experiences has helped me grow and evolve. I have been exposed to new ways of looking at old problems. I have been introduced to wonderful new art, career paths, places, ideas, foods, theories, literature, and people. It has given me new perspective into the lives of others, which has allowed me to be more empathetic, more conscious, and more creative. The greatest lesson that diversity has taught me, however, is that there are as many ways of being human as there are people on this planet. None of us have to be a certain way because of norms dictated by race, gender, class, sexuality, age, size, ability, region, or religious affiliation. We all have to fight to protect our right to be individuals, to be diverse, and to be recognized as equally valid, valuable, and human.

One practice that often feels as though it takes great courage is speaking up against racism. Hooks explains the importance of this practice, writing, “All our silences in the face of racist assault are acts of complicity. What does our rage at injustice mean if it can be silenced, erased by individual material comfort?” (*Killing Rage* 19). If we choose to remain silent in response to a racist action or comment, we reinforce the notion that those actions or words are acceptable in society. The refusal to stand up for what we believe in “weakens individual morality and ethics as well as those of the culture” (hooks, *All About Love* 90-91). Especially in all-white settings, it is of the utmost importance that we openly refuse to tolerate bigotry. This does not mean that we constantly have to be confrontational; doing so might, in some situations, put us in danger. Rather, we have to continue to develop our strategies for calling out racism. Some folks might find humor a useful way to call attention to racism. Others might find

patient dialogue more effective. We can each create our own personal style for calling out racist actions or comments that capitalize on our personalities and existing skills.

Sometimes forming a positive antiracist identity means building our own self-esteem in order to better support and encourage others. Hooks explains, “Self-love is the foundation of our loving practice. Without it our other efforts to love fail” (*All About Love* 67). If we can acknowledge that we are deserving of love simply by nature of being, it becomes easier to see other folks’ humanity. Thompson states, “being an activist for the long haul means taking care of oneself daily” (346). This might mean giving yourself the space to experience your human emotions. If you need to cry, cry. If you are overwhelmed with negative emotions, take time to do something that brings you joy. Self-love might also mean giving your physical body the care it needs. When we get too wrapped up in our work, we can forget to give ourselves proper, healthy food or enough sleep. We have to be able to give ourselves the care and affection that we need to sustain us emotionally, physically, and psychologically so that we may continue to do productive antiracist work.

We must be careful to differentiate between healthy self-esteem and pathological narcissism. Hooks illustrates how narcissism stands in the way of living with a love ethic, writing, “Healthy narcissism (the self-acceptance, self-worth, that is the cornerstone of self-love) is replaced by a pathological narcissism (wherein only the self matters) that justifies any action that enables the satisfying of desires. The will to sacrifice on behalf of another, always present when there is love, is annihilated by greed” (*All About Love* 117). That pathological narcissism is the foundation on which white supremacy relies. Fromm writes, “The *selfish* person is interested only in himself, wants everything for himself, feels no pleasure in giving, but only in taking. The world outside is looked at only from

the standpoint of what he can get out of it; he lacks interest in the needs of others, and respect for their dignity and integrity” (56). It is possible to give ourselves love and acceptance without putting our selfish desires above the needs of other folks, but we have to move past narcissism.

There is no right way to do antiracist work. We each have the potential to bring something useful and unique to the table. When it comes to white antiracist work, it is important to practice being authentic to you. Hooks writes, “Creating a false self to mask fears and insecurities has become so common that many of us forget who we are and what we feel underneath the pretense. Breaking through this denial is always the first step in uncovering our longing to be honest and clear” (*All About Love* 48). Part of the experience of coming to a positive white antiracist identity is recognizing how we have constructed a false self and destroying the masks that we have made. Fromm illustrates the importance in staying true to oneself in bonding with others:

...mature *love is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality. Love is an active power in man; a power which breaks through the walls which separate man from his fellow man, which unites him with others; love makes him overcome the sense of isolation and separateness, yet it permits him to be himself, to retain his integrity. In love the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two.* (19)

Being true to oneself takes courage, but it allows for more authentic, meaningful connections with other people.

Finally, we can put antiracism into practice by living with a love ethic. The desire to see an end to oppression in our world comes from a place of love. It reveals an urge to reach out and connect with others, even those that seem different from us. Antiracist

work seeks to return dignity to all people. If we want to live and work with a love ethic, we have to be clear about what that means. Hooks writes, “To practice the art of loving we have first to choose love—admit to ourselves that we want to know love and be loving even if we do not know what that means” (*All About Love* 155). In the following section, I elaborate on what it means to choose to do antiracist work based in a love ethic and what a loving community might look like.

### **Finding My Voice: Exploring Antiracism in Poetry**

One space I have been able to build a positive white antiracist identity is through poetry. Often times, when I fail to find a straightforward way to say something, poetry provides a space where I can explore the contradictions of things like language and identity and society. Coping with the confusion that comes with trying to build a white identity that is not based in the exploitation or oppression of others or in self-hatred is often easier when I use a creative way to express myself. Over the course of writing this thesis, I found some topics too emotionally overwhelming or simply too convoluted to say in a straightforward manner. In those instances, I turned to poetry. The following series stems from this practice.

#### *charades*

I.

I know quiet fury is in my rib there  
is nothing to that on her cheekbone  
upturned

I keep my lips shut  
is why they splinter

I pass you on the path again  
to tell you  
*you matter*  
but

I don't.

II.

I found a megaphone  
that only whispers

all we wanted  
was a chance to talk

III.

I plug in to  
all the dreamers

I see in feeds and tags

I find nothing worthwhile in textbooks

I pull over on  
the side of the road which we will lay on

I feel like demons standing over you

I feel like lies lying down with you

I wonder about mothers  
most days

IV.

you matter  
you matter  
you matter  
you matter  
you matter  
you matter  
you matter  
you matter  
you matter  
you matter  
you matter

V.

please mark if you have experienced one or more of the following in the past seven days:

- a widening or warming sensation in the chest
- a tingling sensation in the tear ducts and/or nose
- a quick gathering of tears in the eyes
- a stabbing or twisting sensation under the ribs
- a ringing in the ears
- a sensitivity to light or sound
- a loss of control over breathing

a flushing and heating of the cheeks, neck, and scalp  
a difficulty getting in or out of bed  
a sensation of being watched or followed  
a nagging or itching sensation in one or both fists

VI.

I found my splinters to not be stitches

I still wobble when I talk

## **With Love**

In that first Ethnic Studies course I took, the professor asked the class what we thought an inclusive, equitable society would look like. I was stumped. I had a general idea, but I could not concretely imagine a world without inequality. It made me wonder if such a society is even possible. Such cynicism, according to hooks, “is the greatest barrier to love. It is rooted in doubt and despair. Fear intensifies our doubt. It paralyzes” (*All About Love* 219). Just over three years later, I feel I am only just beginning to be able to overcome my cynicism. I have seen glimpses of inclusion and equity in places where we give love to one another. I no longer wonder if such a society is possible. I understand that it is an enormous task, but I am beginning to see the small steps we can each take to accomplish it. Coming up with solutions to the issues that plague our society will take time, focus, and collective effort.

I was introduced to Ethnic Studies by sheer chance. I had the opportunity to enroll in an honors course, but the majority of the ones offered were history courses. I had never been fond of history, so I chose a class named Honors Diversity Seminar. I choose to commit to Ethnic Studies out of love. In some ways, this love was attached to the romantic love I felt for the partner I had at the time. He helped me to ground some of the theories and ideas I was learning in the classroom in real experiences. My love for him was not enough, though. Thompson explains, “Love across race cannot, by itself, make a revolution. But it is an essential part of the process” (191). I needed to choose to love beyond him, to choose to see love as more than romance. Hooks explains:

There is no special love exclusively reserved for romantic partners. Genuine love is the foundation of our engagement with ourselves, with family, with friends, with partners, with everyone we choose to love. While we will necessarily behave

differently depending on the nature of a relationship, or have varying degrees of commitment, the values that inform our behavior, when rooted in a love ethic, are always the same for any interaction. (*All About Love* 136)

Choosing one's actions based on a love ethic often means resisting comfort and easiness, but the rewards of giving and receiving love far outweigh temporary discomfort. Living with a love ethic does not mean doing what we want to be happy or passively receiving love from others. Rather, love is "an active force that should lead us into greater communion with the world... loving practice is not aimed at simply giving an individual greater life satisfaction; it is extolled as the primary way we end domination and oppression" (*All About Love* 76). Love is so much more than warm, fuzzy feelings. In the following sections, I will outline the core principles of a love ethic, demonstrate what a loving community might look like, and propose some practical steps for implementing a love ethic in our everyday lives.

### Core Principles of a Love Ethic

Thompson proposes that we see "racial justice as a spiritual act and as [a] responsibility in order to be fully human" (20). Our society desperately needs healing. Seeking to simply rearrange racial hierarchies or act out revenge against white folks is not healing, and most racial justice work understands this fact. White folks need to be able to see that they can be healed as well by dismantling systems of oppression. The primary goal of antiracist work is to end the oppression of people of color. The product of this work is the freedom and empowerment of all people to be their whole, authentic selves and to uncover and maximize their potential.

In order for our love to extend beyond sentimental feelings, we must understand love as a process with which we have to choose to engage. Love is not something that just happens, it is built over time, and it can be easily disrupted by greed, deception, and abuse. The principles of love I outline in this section seek to bring healing to individuals and to society. In order for our love to extend beyond the interpersonal, we must embrace “a global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet” (hooks, *All About Love* 88). We have to be able to see how our lives and our choices have the power to impact others. We cannot see ourselves as neutral, apolitical, or ahistorical. Living with a love ethic means that we seek to heal and be healed. Living with a love ethic means that we abide by the principles of respect, understanding, justice, truth, commitment, responsibility, vulnerability, empathy, and care.

One of the foundational principles of a love ethic is respect. Fromm provides us with a definition of respect:

“Respect is not fear and awe; it denotes, in accordance with the root of the word (*respicere* = to look at), the ability to see a person as he is, to be aware of his unique individuality... Respect, thus, implies the absence of exploitation. I want the loved person to grown and unfold for his own sake, and in his own ways, and not for the purpose of serving me. If I love the other person, I feel one with him or her, but with him *as he is*, not as I need him to be as an object for my use” (26).

We must recognize and acknowledge one another’s validity, humanity, and value.

Feelings of superiority stand in the way of respecting others. Within a love ethic, we see all ways of being as equally valid. Hooks writes, “A love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well” (*All About Love* 87). Understanding that

everyone deserves to be given equal rights requires that we respect the dignity of each person. In the interpersonal domain, we give one another respect by giving others the chance to be heard. We listen to one another and genuinely consider what other folks have to say. We acknowledge that everyone has the right to feel as though they belong. We give ourselves respect by standing up for our own dignity.

Once we can give others respect, recognition, and acknowledgement, we must seek understanding and knowledge. As demonstrated throughout this thesis, trying to understand one another is a necessary piece of doing antiracist work. Jones and Shorter-Gooden write: “The more our misconceptions and prejudices break down, the more we come to understand and celebrate differences, the less shifting Black women and other stigmatized groups will have to do. All people will have more freedom to be who they are, to accept themselves, and to contribute their unique voices and style to this nation and the world” (280). We ought to seek to understand other people and other cultures in their own terms. Fromm illustrates:

If I want to learn the art of loving, I must strive for objectivity in every situation, and become sensitive to the situations where I am not objective. I must try to see the difference between *my* picture of a person and his behavior, as it is narcissistically distorted, and the person’s reality as it exists regardless of my interests, needs, and fears. To have acquired the capacity for objectivity and reason is half the road to achieving the art of loving, but it must be acquired with regard to everybody with whom one comes in contact. (111-112)

Ethnocentrism warps our ability to truly understand one another. A love ethic requires us to continue to see things from different perspectives. We cannot expect to give others the love they need if we only focus on what we need. Fromm explains, “There are many

layers of knowledge; the knowledge which is an aspect of love is one which does not stay at the periphery, but penetrates to the core. It is possible only when I can transcend the concern for myself and see the other person in his own terms” (27). Understanding is the foundation upon which meaningful relationships can be formed. We should be proactive in seeking understanding, knowledge, and wisdom; we have so many opportunities to learn from one another and to offer other folks our knowledge and wisdom.

A third core principle of a love ethic is justice. Racism is present in the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains. Eliminating racism will mean seeking justice for individuals oppressed on all of these levels. In the structural domain, justice will mean equal access to housing, schooling, representation, and other institutional resources and opportunities. Laymon illustrates the need for justice on a structural level, writing, “Our grandmothers and great-grandmothers have paid more than their fair share and our nation owes them and their children, and their children’s children, a lifetime of healthy choices and second chances. That would be responsible” (32-33). In the disciplinary domain, justice will mean reforming the criminal justice system. Our current system is tainted by discriminatory policies, from policing to sentencing. Furthermore, punitive justice does not give individuals sufficient opportunities or resources to reintegrate into the community after leaving prison. We ought to explore alternative ways of disciplining folks for engaging in criminal behavior, such as restorative justice programs. In the hegemonic domain, we can work towards justice by questioning our definitions of criminality and deviancy. Too often, those definitions are skewed by stereotypes and controlling images. Finally, in the interpersonal domain, we can demand justice in a number of ways. We can use our votes, our money, our voices, and our bodies to fight injustice. To be clear, justice is not the same thing as vengeance.

While revenge might temporarily make you feel better, justice seeks to provide healing for victims, perpetrators, and the community.

According to hooks, “Trust is the heartbeat of genuine love” (*All About Love* 135). If we hope to make our bonds with one another more than shallow interactions, we have to build trust. The process of building trust takes time. Building trust requires honesty, but we also have to demonstrate our trustworthiness through commitment, responsibility, and vulnerability. Trust requires us to put the collective good above our individual comfort and pleasure. Hooks tell us, “Trusting that another person always intends your good, having a core foundation of loving practice, cannot exist within a context of deception” (46). Intentionally lying or being deceptive makes giving love impossible. Some people cling to racist myths and stereotypes, despite being exposed to the truth. This willful ignorance is a form of deception. It can become incredibly difficult to give someone love when they refuse to see reality.

Honesty is a key component of trust. If we cannot have honesty in the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains in the U.S., we will never be a just society. We have to be honest about the extent of racism at each of those levels. Institutions must implement honesty as one of their core values—from the federal government to the family. Colorblindness projects one of the biggest myths in U.S. society: *the playing field is equal for every individual*. Hooks writes, “Denial is in fact a cornerstone of white European culture, and it has been called out by the major critical voices who speak to, for, and from the location of whiteness (Marx, Freud, Foucault). After all if we all pretend racism does not exist, that we do not know what it is or how to change it—it never has to go away” (*Killing Rage* 5). In order to build trust, we have to

be honest with one another, but we also must be honest with ourselves. We have to make sure we are not in denial about our role in racist systems.

Building trust also means demonstrating our commitment to antiracist work. Antiracism should not be approached as a trend or a phase. It should become a part of your identity. Hooks writes, “Living by a love ethic we learn to value loyalty and commitment to sustained bonds over material advancement” (*All About Love* 88). In other words, we must commit to making the collective good more central than our own individual success. This is not to discourage individuality or progress, but rather to remind us that our lives are inextricably linked by nature of being on this planet together. Commitment to the betterment of the community ensures that generations to come will be better able to succeed. Fromm explains, “To love means to commit oneself without guarantee, to give oneself completely in the hope that our love will produce love in the loved person. Love is an act of faith, and whoever is of little faith is also of little love” (118). If we commit to antiracist work, we have no guarantee of success, but we must keep alive our faith in humanity.

Another factor of building trust is responsibility and accountability. Hooks writes, “Growing up is, at heart, the process of learning to take responsibility for whatever happens in your life. To choose growth is to embrace a love that heals” (*All About Love* 210). When we take responsibility for our actions, we can see that we have control over how we behave and how we speak. With this knowledge, we can choose to keep growing and becoming better versions of ourselves. Fromm explains that taking responsibility must be a voluntary act rather than a chore. It is, he writes, “my response to the needs, expressed or unexpressed, of another human being” (26). It is an act of maturity that stems from a concern for the wellbeing of others. In addition to taking responsibility for

our behavior, we must also hold ourselves accountable to our words and thoughts. We should try to catch ourselves when we say or think irrationally negative things.

In order to have trust, we must also have openness, vulnerability, and communication. Too often, we build two selves: one we present to the world, and one kept to ourselves. Hooks writes, “This division between a false self invented to please others and a more authentic self need not exist when we cultivate positive self-esteem” (*All About Love* 60). When we love and accept ourselves, we open up opportunities to have meaningful connections with other people. Williams explains, “Joy in friendship and love are the product of feeling like we can share all of ourselves” (56). This also means that we must eliminate myths and stereotypes that block other folks from being their authentic selves. Sometimes revealing our true selves can take courage; it can feel as though we are relinquishing our ability to control how other people view us, which can feel as though we are giving them power over us. Hooks writes, “We cannot know love if we remain unable to surrender our attachment to power, if any feeling of vulnerability strikes terror in our hearts” (*All About Love* 221). If our fear of vulnerability is greater than our desire to connect, we are doomed to remain separate and unequal. Finally, we must also be willing and able to engage in honest, respectful communication to keep clarity and transparency in our relationships.

One of the most powerful principles of a love ethic is empathy. If we can empathize with another person, we recognize their humanity. We can try to see from other people’s perspective, to be patient and try to understand where they are coming from. We have to understand that there are different ways of interpreting and reacting to the world, and each of those ways is informed by that individual’s unique lived experiences. To empathize with others is also to accept that we are all imperfect. We all

do things out of greed, fear, and shame. Hooks explains, “Within a loving community we sustain ties by being compassionate and forgiving” (*All About Love* 138). We cannot help one another grow by rejecting each other when we make mistakes. Forgiveness is a powerful tool for those who hope to live with a love ethic. Hooks continues, “Forgiveness is an act of generosity. It requires that we place releasing someone else from the prison of their guilt or anguish over our feelings of outrage or anger. By forgiving we clear a path on the way to love. It is a gesture of respect. True forgiveness requires that we understand the negative actions of another” (139). Forgiveness is vital at the interpersonal level, but it also may be useful to embrace it in the disciplinary domain as well.

Similarly, making generosity and kindness daily practices in our lives is one way we can develop our capacity for empathy. Hooks writes, “Generosity and charity militates against the proliferation of greed” (*All About Love* 117). We should be generous with what we have, whether that is our time, our knowledge, our goods, or even just some support and encouragement. Fromm explains, “The most widespread misunderstanding is that which assumes that giving is ‘giving up’ something, being deprived of, sacrificing... Giving is the highest expression of potency. In the very act of giving, I experience my strength, my wealth, my power. This experience of heightened vitality and potency fills me with joy” (21). We should also try to be grateful of the small ways that other folks are generous with us. Be appreciative of the acts of kindness that others do for you, no matter how small.

Finally, living with a love ethic also means embracing sentimental emotions, like affection, joy, care, and adoration. Fromm writes, “Love is the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love” (25). Our society is well-versed in the themes of fear, rage, shame, guilt, suspicion, jealousy, disgust, revenge, despair, greed, and hatred.

Most of the narratives put forth by both news media and entertainment media revolve around these emotions or the fear of these emotions. From explains that such emotions are passions; they are passively experienced. He writes, “Envy, jealousy, ambition, any kind of greed are passions; love is an action, the practice of a human power, which can be practiced only in freedom and never as the result of a compulsion... In the most general way, the active character of love can be described by stating that love is primarily giving, not receiving” (20-21). We need to uplift more stories of forgiveness, generosity, kindness, communication, empathy, courage, honesty, respect, understanding, justice, commitment, and care. We need a loving community.

### Community in Love

Hooks tells us, “There is no better place to learn the art of loving than in community” (*All About Love* 129). Incorporating the principles of living with a love ethic into antiracist work allows us to create a vision of a loving community. In theory, a loving community is one in which all individuals are treated as equally valid and deserving of love. Individuals work for the collective effort, contributing in their own unique ways. Collins illustrates an example of such a loving community:

Each group speaks from its unique standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups’ standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups’ partial perspectives. (*Black Feminist Thought* 290)

Such a community would eliminate the need for hierarchy. We would rely on cooperation rather than competition to meet our needs. We would practice tolerance of other peoples’

cultures, religions, and languages. Hooks writes, “Everyone has to choose the spiritual practice that best enhances their life. This is why progressive seekers after truth urge us all to be tolerant—to remember that though our paths are many, we are made one community in love” (*All About Love* 82). In such a society, differences in culture would not need to be seen not as oppositional to one another.

In doing antiracist work, we ought to allow ourselves to be hopeful, to dream of living in loving communities. Thompson writes, “If antiracism is both a promise (a politic) and a way of life, then it is not only about what people are against but also what they are for” (330). It is easy to agree that oppression, domination, suppression, marginalization, and violence should be eliminated. In conversations about dismantling systems of oppression, we should also talk about what systems we would like to see built in their place. Hooks writes, “Many citizens of these United States still long to live in a society where beloved community can be formed—where loving ties of care and knowing bind us together in our differences. We cannot surrender that longing—if we do we will never see an end to racism” (*Killing Rage* 263-264). We must engage in dialogue about how we can begin the processes of ending oppression and bringing about healing, justice, and equity. Furthermore, we can dream of a positive white identity that is not based in the subjugation of other folks. If we seek to do antiracist work rooted in a love ethic, we can all become agents of revolutionary love.

If creating loving communities seems too big or too vague of a task, start by working on being loving to the people that are already in your community. Living with a love ethic takes practice. Our friendships especially can be a place for practicing loving. Hooks explains, “Loving friendships provide us with a space to experience the joy of community in a relationship where we learn to process all our issues, to cope with

differences and conflict while staying connected” (*All About Love* 133-134). We do not all have the privilege of having healthy, supportive family environments. Our connections with friends—the people we *choose* to build relationships with—can provide the support, encouragement, and love that our families fail to give us. Hooks continues, “friendship is the place in which a great majority of us have our first glimpse of redemptive love and caring community” (134). We should seek to root all of our relationships in a love ethic.

Undertaking the process of dismantling systems of oppression and building loving communities seems less frightening when we understand the vibrant tradition of people who have already undertaken this work. I am eternally grateful for my Ethnic Studies professors and classmates for exposing me to the history of social justice theory and practice. Hooks writes, “Those who choose to walk on love’s path are well served if they have a guide. That guide can enable us to overcome fear if we trust that they will not lead us astray or abandon us along the way” (*All About Love* 161). Aside from the guidance I have found in the academy, my classmates and friends have helped me understand and practice a love ethic in my everyday life. Even when we feel isolated from the people we know personally, we can find guidance in places like the music and writing of others. Social media gives us another site where we can seek guidance and mentorship if we know where to find it. For white folks in particular, knowing that there is a tradition of white antiracism can help us when we feel isolated and alone. Thompson writes, “Understanding that antiracist activists grow up in a variety of different political settings and political eras makes room for multiple origin stories and counters the notion that there is a single path to social activism” (1). Being aware of a tradition of unique

individuals contributing to antiracism efforts in their own ways can be incredibly empowering for white folks who seek to do antiracist work.

Moving forward, we ought to contribute our own stories so that this tradition can carry on and empower future generations. Hooks writes:

The interracial circle of love that I know can happen because each individual present in it has made his or her own commitment to living an anti-racist life and to furthering the struggle to end white supremacy will become a reality for everyone only if those of us who have created these communities share how they emerge in our lives and the strategies we use to sustain them. (*Killing Rage* 271-272)

We can share our stories interpersonally, or offer them to the world. The beauty of this tradition is that it does not take a singular form. We can share our story through art, be it visual, aural, literary, or other forms. We can create narratives in countless places, especially when we have access to the Internet. Experiencing the different ways that people tell their stories can also bring us enormous fulfillment and joy, especially when those stories manifest in creative ways.

### Love in Practice

Implementing loving practice in antiracist work will look different in each of our lives. In this section, I outline three general methods that folks might find useful for putting the principles of a love ethic into action. These practices take place mostly in the interpersonal domain. First, we can practice affirming our differences. Second, we can engage in productive dialogue. Finally, we can do the work of educating one another and speaking out against racism, seeking to implement policy that is rooted in a love ethic,

and making small everyday changes in our interpersonal interactions across racial difference.

According to hooks, “beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world” (*Killing Rage* 265). When we can see our individualities as making us equally valid rather than stratified, we can celebrate our differences. When we are exposed to other cultures, we can see them as interesting and beautiful, rather than strange and inferior. We refuse to see Black women through the lens of controlling images. We refuse to see them through controlling images or the myths of inferiority, unshakability, nonfemininity, promiscuity, or criminality. Instead, we affirm Black women’s individuality, humanity, ability, and beauty. We can demand to see humanizing representations of Black women in media. No matter what our strategy, we should actively seek to affirm and celebrate our individuality.

Engaging in productive dialogue is a powerful way of validating knowledge claims, overcoming conflict, and helping one another grow. Hooks writes, “Setting a time when both individuals come together to engage in compassionate listening enhances communication and connection. When we are committed to doing the work of love we listen even when it hurts” (*All About Love* 158). Rather than engaging in heated debate, we ought to find ways to talk about racism in healthy, productive spaces. In order to do so, all parties must be ready and willing to engage in active listening. Our criticisms of one another should always be honest but compassionate. We could all benefit from developing our conflict management and communication skills.

Another way to implement loving antiracist practice in our lives is to educate other white folks at every opportunity. Thompson writes, “white-to-white education

about racism is invaluable, particularly when done through everyday interactions” (51). Being able to educate other white folks requires us to be well-informed. Find ways to introduce other white folks directly to the writings of Black feminists. Share work done by Black women artists. Do whatever you can to eliminate ignorance whenever you encounter it, especially when you are the only white person in the room. Hooks explains, “the necessity of changing our thinking so that we see ourselves as being like the one who does change rather than among the among who refuse to change” (*All About Love* 90). We can choose to evolve and change, but we can also help others make an informed decision about whether or not they want to choose growth as well.

We can put loving antiracism into practice by using our vote to shape public policy so that it reflects a politic of love. Hooks writes, “If all public policy was created in the spirit of love, we would not have to worry about unemployment, homelessness, schools failing to teach children, or addiction” (*All About Love* 98). When it comes to voting, we have a responsibility to be proactive in learning about the policies and candidates and to vote in accordance with the principles of a love ethic. If we only accomplish integrating loving practice in the interpersonal domain, we will certainly fail at creating loving communities. We should also seek to reform our structural, disciplinary, and hegemonic domains of power to make them reflect the principles of a love ethic.

Finally, we change our everyday behavior to slowly integrate principles of a love ethic in our lives. Hooks writes, “We can begin by sharing a smile, a warm greeting, a bit of conversation; by doing a kind deed or by acknowledging kindness offered us” (*All About Love* 144). When it comes to the interpersonal domain, we could all do more to reach out and make meaningful connections with one another over differences. We do not

have to have intimate relationships with other people to treat one another with love. We should try to make other people feel loved whenever we can. This may take the form of going out of your way to make someone feel comfortable, but it may also mean giving someone the privacy they deserve. How we interact with individuals will be different depending on the person, the location, and countless other factors. In the end, as long as we consciously try to apply a love ethic in *all* our interactions, we can begin the work of making the interpersonal domain a space for loving relationships and perhaps community.

### **Tweet Resistance**

Social media websites have the capability to connect countless strangers online instantaneously, which makes them potentially useful for organizing a movement for dismantling racial hierarchies. Twitter is one particular site that, if used consciously, could help white folks build meaningful relationships across race and begin the work towards loving relationships and communities. It provides a space where white folks can center Black women's voices in a multifaceted manner. If we abide by the principles of a love ethic in our interactions with one another, Twitter has the potential to be a tool for building loving community. We must be cautious about how we use the site, though; Twitter has its limitations. If we can follow a few practical steps and implement a love ethic, we can more effectively use Twitter as a tool for building loving community.

Twitter has helped me tether the theories and concepts I have learned in the classroom to reality. When I first started using Twitter, I mostly followed classmates and friends along with some actors, comedians, writers, and other celebrities. I was never very active on the website until one of my professors recommended I follow a few Black women who wrote, at least partially, about issues of racism in the U.S. Over time, I began

to see a network of thinkers, writers, and activists emerge that almost constantly engages in dialogue over a multiplicity of issues. Although my feed is centered on Black women's voices, these discussions about social issues almost always have an intersectional approach. If we can recognize some of the ways that we abuse Black women in particular on Twitter, we can alter our behavior to better align it with a love ethic. In this section, I often explicitly speak about the interactions between white women and Black women, but the core principles of a love ethic remain true no matter who we are and with whom we are interacting. To clarify, my intention here is not to suggest that white women are alone in abusing of Black women, or that all white women engage in these behaviors. Rather, I speak specifically to white women so as to not reinforce the idea that white women are neutral or passive when it comes to perpetuating racism.

### Centering Black Women on Twitter

In order to respectfully center Black women's voices, we must identify some of the ways white women often harm Black women online. One way white women have abused Black women on Twitter is by attempting to silence their critiques, especially those concerning experiences with oppression. When Black women attempt to speak about their experiences with racism, some white women try to disrupt the conversation by trying to accuse these women of reverse racism. Too often when Black women attempt to put forth constructive criticism of white women's words or behavior, white women evoke controlling images of Black women as "Sapphires" or "educated Black bitches." For example, in her article titled "Feminism's Toxic Twitter Wars," Michelle Goldberg claims that online, "intersectionality is overwhelmingly about chastisement and rooting out individual sin" (15). She quotes a number of women who felt "savaged," "so scared

to speak right now,” “excoriated,” “tarred,” and “bullied” by “toxic” feminists, but fails to provide any examples of Tweets with such language. Rather, she names a few Black women known for writing on intersectional topics.

For example, Goldberg states that Twitter user @Karnythia (Mikki Kendall) started the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen without giving any context about the actual conversation Kendall started by using that hashtag (13). In reality, #solidarityisforwhitewomen was meant to reframe the criticisms that Black women have been making for generations of white women’s shallow attempts at sisterhood. White women often fail to see that these conversations are not meant to exclude white women, but rather shift a conversation that has long been focused strictly on white women to center marginalized peoples’ voices. We need to understand that specificity does not have to mean exclusion. Collins writes, “Partiality, and not universality, is the condition of being heard; individuals and groups forwarding knowledge claims without owning their position are deemed less credible than those who do” (*Black Feminist Thought* 290). All women do not experience the world in the same way. White women cannot expect to have our knowledge claims taken seriously if we fail to be accountable for the ways that we perpetuate racism and other systems of oppression, even as we are oppressed by patriarchy. White women need to understand that having our voices decentered does not mean that we will fall to the bottom of a racial hierarchy; rather, we need to see what we stand to benefit from deconstructing racial hierarchies altogether.

Furthermore, we need to stop attempting to derail Black women’s conversations about their unique experiences with intersecting oppressions. There is a time and a place for conversations about white women’s unique experiences, but such conversations are not always appropriate if they are interjected to safe spaces and specific conversations

held by non-white women. White women particularly need to have self-reflective conversations with other white women about how we perpetuate racism, even when we have positive intentions. Most importantly, we need to understand that we do not need to derail peoples' conversations to engage in discussions about our unique experiences.

Another way that white women sometimes abuse Black women on Twitter is by erasing them altogether. Many Black women have raised concerns about plagiarism of their ideas and words. A group of women who identified as an "online collective of Black, AfroIndigenous, and NDN women" wrote a post titled #ThisTweetCalledMyBack to highlight the ways that non-white women's grassroots online activism is erased or mocked and devalued. White women need to start recognizing and acknowledging all of the practical, intellectual, and emotional work that Black women have accomplished by using Twitter as a tool. For example, writer and activist @FeministaJones started the hashtag #NMOS14, which stands for National Moment of Silence 2014, in an attempt to organize a multi-city peaceful, silent vigil to mourn the deaths of Michael Brown and other victims of police brutality. Just five days after Brown's death, on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014, over one-hundred vigils were simultaneously held in over forty states in connection with the hashtag #NMOS14. Black women have done and continue to do vital antiracist work, and far too often their labor is discredited or completely erased. We have to proactively resist this erasure, and give Black women proper credit for the work they do.

Some of the abuse that Black women face on Twitter is much more pointed. While overt racism and sexism are rarely tolerated in public settings nowadays, the anonymity of the Internet provides a place where folks can spew bigotry without receiving the social sanctions they might face in real life. The comments sections on any webpage, while often monitored to some extent, often become a place where people can

voice their overtly bigoted opinion. If you ever doubt that racism is still alive and well, we only need to look through the comments section of an article on a racial issue or watch a popular Black feminist Twitter user's mentions for a day or so to find an example of blatant racism or sexism. Black women are viciously and overtly attacked with racist and sexist language behind the anonymity of the Internet. This abuse ranges from derogatory insults to death threats. In such a public forum, it can be difficult to protect individual users from such overt attacks.

Sometimes when we interact with others online, we can forget that we are interacting with real people with real emotions and their own lives and obligations. We cannot expect Black women to do the work of enlightening us. We can build relationships with Black women who are willing to be helpful guides or mentors, but we have to recognize that Black feminist Twitter users are not online for our personal needs. We cannot expect to dictate what Black women Twitter users talk about, the way they choose to talk about those issues, and most importantly, their interpretation of their own lived experiences. We also need to stop trying to limit Black women from expressing the entire range of human emotions. Rather we should focus on taking responsibility for our own behavior when we experience powerful emotional reactions. For example, if a conversation becomes unproductively heated, rather than allow the conversation to deteriorate into shouting, perhaps suggest revisiting the issue when both parties can listen to what the other is saying more respectfully and responsibly.

On Twitter, we often silence Black women, erase their practical, intellectual, and emotional work, overtly abuse them, and fail to honor their whole humanity. That these forms of abuse still transpire online contradict the notion that we live in a post-racial society. While racism has become more taboo in the last decades, it still very much exists

and affects the lives of non-white folks in the U.S. Centering Black women on Twitter will not in and of itself deconstruct racial hierarchies, but if we can use the site productively and consciously, it has the potential to be a tool for creating loving community.

### Twitter's Potential Strengths

As illustrated earlier in this thesis, *de facto* segregation remains a barrier between Black women and white women's loving relationships. When I was deciding whether or not to attend college in Boulder, I had not considered diversity an important factor. I never realized the extent to which I was living in segregated conditions until I visited New York City on a vacation the summer following my first year of college. After that trip, I became increasingly aware of the sheer lack of diversity on the CU Boulder campus. Aside from my Ethnic Studies courses, my classrooms have tended to only have a small handful of non-white students. I have absolutely had classes that were exclusively comprised of white students. This lack of contact with non-white people has left me feeling stuck. How are white folks living in racially homogenous environments supposed to reach out and build loving community if institutional racism functions to keep them physically and socially separated from people of color? Although Twitter certainly has some limitations, which I will address in the subsequent section, it also has the potential to connect segregated white folks seeking to form a positive white antiracist identity with active non-white folks already doing antiracist work.

As I have mentioned, Twitter has enormous potential for organizing masses of people over social issues, such as police brutality. Thompson speaks to the value in organizing, writing, "Organizing gives people who might otherwise be completely on

their own a context to get involved” (8). I have often felt isolated in Boulder, but through the #NMOS14 hashtag, I was able to connect with a few like-minded individuals that live and go to school near me. Even more importantly, I felt connected to a nation-wide collective of people who felt the need to stand up against police brutality, especially against Black and Brown people. Hooks speaks about connecting to a larger consciousness, writing, “For our efforts to end white supremacy to be truly effective, individual struggle to change consciousness must be fundamentally linked to collective effort to transform those structures that reinforce and perpetuate white supremacy” (*Killing Rage* 195). Twitter allowed me to feel connected to a collective effort where, without it, I would have felt isolated and alone.

Twitter can also be a useful tool for using dialogue to validate knowledge claims. The format of the website allows for the rapid sharing of ideas. Users can instantly converse with one another, providing live dialogue. Thompson writes, “through the written word, which can teach many at once, and through the controversies and understanding generated when people talk about what they have read, the movement as a discursive entity is now beginning to absorb, confront, and be transformed by these new insights” (152). Twitter is one example of a place where the written word can be disseminated to the public and where people can discuss theories, ideas, and issues that they have read about. In this way, Twitter has the potential to be a space for the creation and circulation of intellectual work.

The dialogue that happens in these spaces is very similar to the dialogue that I have encountered in my Ethnic Studies classrooms, but without the control of the academy. Yet, in my experience, the same quality of conversation is occurring in grassroots, online communities as in academic settings. Dialogue is central in Black

feminist epistemology. Collins explains, “Not to be confused with adversarial debate, the use of dialogue has deep roots in African-based oral traditions and in African-American culture” (*Black Feminist Thought* 279). The intellectual work being done on Twitter must not be discounted or devalued. Black women Twitter users are not simply complaining about the obstacles they face in life, they are engaging in productive dialogue grounded in their real, lived experiences with racism and other oppressions.

If we can see the value in engaging in dialogue in online spaces like Twitter, we can begin to build networks online centered on the collective good. Collins states, “A primary epistemological assumption underlying the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is that connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge validation process” (*Black Feminist Thought* 279). We cannot come to an understanding about the realities of racism in isolation. In order to effectively dismantle racial hierarchies, we have to come together to come up with solutions that do not reinforce the marginalization, exploitation, or subjugation of any people. It may be a time-consuming process, but for once, we ought to emphasize thoroughness over hastiness in coming up with solutions for ending racism.

Twitter also can provide individuals with social anxiety a place to begin to build friendships across difference if they struggle to do so in real situations. Of course, we should not only seek to be friends with people of color online. As illustrated earlier, coming to a positive white antiracist identity can isolate white folks from their friends, family, and other white folks. Especially for white folks living in largely racially homogeneous regions, it can feel as though you are completely alone. In these instances, building a supportive network on websites like Twitter can make us feel attached socially and intellectually to other people again.

Similarly, Twitter can provide a space for folks working for antiracism work to come together across race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and region to build close loving relationships. Hooks explains, “When we hear another person’s thoughts, beliefs, and feelings, it is more difficult to project on to them our perceptions of who they are. It is harder to be manipulative” (*All About Love* 49). Twitter is useful because it creates a space where activists and intellectuals can demonstrate their whole humanity. I follow a number of Twitter users who explicitly and consciously theorize about racial issues. In addition to this intellectual work, they also share their opinions on non-racial topics, share their lived experiences, and engage in general camaraderie with their online peers and friends. In this way, they put forth multi-faceted personalities that build a sort of intimacy between the individual writing the tweet and the individual reading the tweet. While this intimacy has its dangers, it also has the potential to humanize individuals. If we can see Twitter as a place where we can try to exercise understanding and empathy, we can begin to see the value in one another, to celebrate one another’s individuality, and perhaps eventually build relationships based in solidarity and love.

If used cautiously and consciously, Twitter has the potential to bridge the gaps that persist between white women and Black women. We have to be aware of the ways that we have abused and continue to abuse Black women online and offline. Once we eradicate these behaviors, we can begin to reach out with love to Black women, even if we have to start in the safety of the Internet. Our goal must be to see our loving relationships with individual Black women as motivation for dismantling racial hierarchies and other systems of oppression. Unfortunately, Twitter is not a perfect tool for accomplishing this goal. In the following section, I will discuss some of Twitter’s drawbacks.

### Twitter's Potential Limitations

Twitter, like most social media websites, allows for anonymous usage. While this feature has its upsides, such as allowing for entertaining parody accounts, it also users to make discriminatory, abusive, and even threatening comments without facing any social or disciplinary sanctions. Twitter allows users to block and report abusive users, but there are certainly ways of circumventing this obstacle. Individuals who chose to engage in public conversations on websites like Twitter must be emotionally and psychologically prepared to face anonymous users.

Social media websites like Twitter provide a place where intimate connections can be built between people who otherwise might never meet. Unfortunately, we must be careful about the information we put on the Internet. Threats made online can become significantly more dangerous when strangers can access our phone numbers, home addresses, places of work, and other personal information. We have to be careful about what we put on the Internet. The very information that we use to bond with one another can be used against us. The Internet has enormous potential for productive, beneficial work, but it also can make us vulnerable to violence and abuse, and we cannot take that issue lightly. We ought to engage in dialogue about how to make the Internet a safer place to engage in difficult discussions about racism and other oppressions.

Another limitation of Twitter is the fact that people often share information that is out of context or completely false. We have to be careful not to form opinions based on falsified information or information taken out of context. We can overcome this limitation by developing our critical reading skills and by fact-checking as much information ourselves as possible. If we discover that information might indeed be false,

we have a duty to question that information, even if the information might support our existing opinions. Twitter can be incredibly useful at sharing real-time witness accounts of events, but we have to be able to differentiate between valid accounts and falsified accounts.

Twitter clearly is an imperfect tool for engaging in discussions about racism and antiracist work. However, we can begin to discuss ways to improve and evolve Twitter as a tool, or to create new, similar tools, that can help white folks connect with non-white folks to build loving relationships and work to dismantle racial hierarchies. If we can maximize on Twitter's strengths and consciously center Black women and other marginalized folks, Twitter can be a powerful tool for creating loving community. In the following section, I propose three general ways that white folks can use Twitter to build a positive white antiracist identity, loving relationships, and ideally, loving community.

### Practicing Loving Antiracism on Twitter

The generalizations I make in this section are for specificity's sake alone. These practical steps can be useful, ideally, for everyone. I do not mean to suggest that only white folks need to do work in these areas. However, I do maintain that white folks must step up in order to dismantle racial hierarchies. When engaging with Twitter as a tool, we can work to be self aware, to apply the principles of a love ethic to all of our interactions, and to do our own homework. By following these practical steps, we can hopefully begin to form a positive white antiracist identity and build loving bonds with others across difference based in political solidarity.

When we choose to use Twitter, we have to be self-aware. If our accounts are public, we can expect any of our tweets to be viewed, theoretically, by anyone. We have

to be aware of what it is appropriate for us to say. Surely, we can push the boundaries of what is appropriate, but we must be careful not to be exploitative, oppressive, or otherwise harmful in the process. Ideally, all of our tweets would be thoughtfully constructed, but I understand that would likely take away from the spontaneity of the website. We are only human. We can expect that we will probably make mistakes along the way, and might end up hurting others, even when we intend goodwill. In these instances, rather than jumping to the defensive, be patient, and listen to what the other person has to say. If someone says you have hurt them, you can try to make your intentions clear, but understand that that does not undo any harm that you might have done. Never underestimate the power of a simple apology. Be courageous and mature enough to admit when you make a mistake and make the necessary changes to not hurt people in the same way again.

Apply the concepts of a love ethic in all of your interactions. You do not need to agree with people or like them to treat them with a love ethic. It can be difficult, but try to see others as with compassion and empathy, even when they seem like *the worst of folks*. As white folks trying to come to a positive white antiracist identity, it can sometimes be difficult to relate to other white people. If we hope to ever get those people to see their role in reinforcing racial hierarchies, we have to be patient and forgiving. That being said, we do not need to subject ourselves to continued abuse in the name of forgiveness. There are people out there who will seek to harm us, no matter how much we show them love. We have every right to put boundaries up to protect ourselves until those people are ready to stop being abusive. We have to be empathetic if Black women are suspicious of our attempts at connecting. White women have a long history of abusing and neglecting Black women, and understandably, some Black women are cautious about interacting

with white women. We have to understand that these boundaries are understandable protections from abuse, and we have to build trust in order to move past those boundaries. We must treat Black women with all of the principles of a love ethic if white women ever hope to build sisterhood and loving community.

Finally, white people need to do their own homework regarding issues of racism and other oppressions. The information is out there in an enormous variety of forms. Black women's voices can be found in books, blogs, essays, poems, songs, sculptures, paintings, photography, tweets, novels, memoirs, and other spaces. Although *de facto* segregation persists, we live in an age of incredibly efficient information sharing. We can build sisterhood and community without proximity and start the work towards building living community, but we have to be proactive. White folks need to learn the skills to educate themselves and educate other white folks. We need to take responsibility for our own lives and our own education.

## **Conclusion**

At least once in the course of writing this thesis, I was sure I was going to fail. Even as I wrote about having courage and staying true to oneself, I felt my self-esteem waver. Clearly my journey towards a positive white antiracist identity is far from over. White folks who want to do antiracist work would find our way on that journey much easier if we could overcome our separateness with one another and with non-white folks. The goal of this thesis was to outline some foundational theoretical concepts and practical that may be useful for guiding white folks through the contradictions and obstacles that accompany antiracist work.

One implication of my research is constructing a different way of analyzing antiracist work as a way of healing our separateness and woundedness. Antiracist work must remain focused on eliminating racism from the political, economic, and ideological domains. Yet, in order to reach this goal, white folks must be able to identify the role they have to play in dismantling racial hierarchies. Implementing the principles of a love ethic into antiracist work can provide white folks the space for doing productive antiracist work in which they reap the benefits of building loving communities as well. These benefits may not reflect mainstream measures of success, but rather manifest as acceptance and celebration of difference, encouragement, and care. In this way, we can begin to see concepts such as white privilege not as an attack on white folks, but as an attempt to provide non-white folks with the same basic dignities and rights that are often only offered to white folks. The work of building loving communities cannot be done in solitude, and white folks need to be able to identify places where they can contribute to antiracist work.

Additionally, this thesis sought to provide white folks with a framework for doing antiracist work—that is, dismantling racial hierarchies—while maintaining a positive self-identity. If the goal of antiracist work is the empowerment and uplift of all people, white folks need to be able to build self-identities that are not based in the subjugation of others, but that also does not rely on self-hatred, shame, alienation, guilt, or fear. When we understand the difference between healthy self-love that involves self-acceptance and feelings of self-worth and pathological narcissism that relies on greed, we can understand the difference between white folks accepting and loving themselves as whole beings and perpetuating white supremacy. We must be conscious of these differences and help one another to build positive self-identities that can allow us to confidently and productively do antiracist work. Furthermore, we must be understanding and forgiving of one another's and our own human fallibility. We will undoubtedly mess up along the way, but so long as we do not allow our slipups to freeze us, we retain the ability to redeem ourselves and learn from our mistakes.

A third implication of this study is the validation of the emotions one might experience in coming to a positive white antiracist identity. While it is of the utmost importance that white folks do not overpower conversations about antiracism by centering their own issues over non-white folks' issues, there must be a space for white folks to engage in dialogue about the experiences of doing antiracist work as a white person. The goal of these conversations should be to brainstorm strategies and create support systems between white folks for overcoming emotional, psychological, and practical obstacles that stand in the way of doing the work of dismantling systems of racial oppression. Emotions such as fear, grief, shame, guilt, and despair can threaten our ability to do productive, useful antiracist work. We can equip one another with the

information and practical strategies for coping with and resisting the negative aspects of doing antiracist work as a white person. Then, we can better focus our attention on dismantling racial hierarchies in the political, economic, and ideological domains.

Finally, the real goal of this project is to see loving communities become a reality. Through this thesis, I wanted to demonstrate a vision of communities based in the core principles of a love ethic: respect, understanding, justice, trust, empathy, and care. Our self-identities and relationships with others across difference are clearly of the utmost importance, but they should not be seen as the end goal of antiracist work. Rather, they are simply the first steps we can take towards creating loving, inclusive, diverse, equitable communities. Some of the practical steps I have outlined in this paper will take time, focus, and a great deal of trial and error. We cannot hope to build healthy self-esteem or to implement a love ethic in all of our interactions overnight. Such steps will take commitment. Other steps can be put into practice today. It takes very little effort to extend to a stranger a warm, welcoming smile. No matter how small of a first step we make, a step towards love is a step in the right direction.

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