

**“PUTTING COYOLXAUHQI TOGETHER”: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC
EXPLORATION OF IDENTIFYING AND HEALING FRAGMENTATION THROUGH
DECOLONIAL FEMINIST CREATIVE WRITING PRACTICES**

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DEDICATION

To my favorite daughter. May you show up in your fullness and shine.

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ABSTRACT

There has been a chronic need for more high-quality children's books by minoritized authors, yet few scholars have examined the historic contexts and formative processes impacting such authors' success. This critical autoethnographic study employs a decolonial feminist lens and creative practices to help one children's book writer examine the formative sources impacting both her fragmentation and her inner strength. The Vietnamese American author specifically examines historic sources of Anti-Asian racism in the United States including those that influenced her directly during her childhood. On a personal level, she explores artifacts from her K-12 and college experiences that help her understand her socialization in White-dominant educational and publishing industry systems. Combined, these activities allow her to explore her colonially-influenced fragmentation. Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's *Coyolxauhqui Imperative*, the author uses artmaking, creative writing, embodied grounding practices, and writing to gently make sense of this fragmentation and to help her put her fragmented parts of self back together in a harmonious whole. She also examines the lived experiences that set her on a decolonial path and those that have supported her authenticity and wholeness as a minoritized writer. She offers findings through *autohistoria-teoría* counter-stories and through a rich discussion of the aspects of process which helped her both unveil her fragmentation and heal it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	1
Purpose of the Study	3
Research Questions	3
Significance of the Study	4
Definition of Terms	4
Organization of the Study	6
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	8
Over 100 Years in the “All-White World”: Our Ongoing Need for Diverse Children’s Books. 8	
Pre-1920.....	10
1920s and 1930s	14
1940s and 1950s	22
1960s and 1970s	23
1980s and 1990s	26
2000s and 2010s	32
2020s.....	39
Summary.....	44
Discussion.....	45
Looking Ahead	51

Gaps in the Research: Moving from Products to Processes and Pedagogy	55
Decolonizing the Creative Writing Workshop.....	55
MFA Programs’ Colonialist History	56
My Experiences and Subjectivity	60
Decolonizing MFA Workshops.....	63
(Re)claiming Identities. Perhaps the most influential way to (re)claim minoritized identities in creative writing classrooms is to decenter the.....	64
Rendering Colonization Visible.....	64
Expanding the “Canon.”	65
Examining Positionality.....	66
Unsilencing the Workshop.....	67
(Re)claiming Practices.	69
Teaching and Practicing Critically-Informed Research Skills.....	70
Teaching and Practicing Critically-Informed Pedagogical Skills.....	70
Teaching and Practicing Critically-Informed Editing Skills.	72
(Re)claiming Spaces.	73
Switching Away from “English” Departments.....	73
Changing Recruitment Practices (for Both Students and Faculty).	74
Changing Tenure and Promotion Criteria for Faculty.	75

Creating More Journals, University Presses, and Publishing Houses which Value Cultural Pluralism.....	77
Summary.....	78
A Final Thought.....	78
CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL & METHODOLOGICAL FRAMES AND METHODS	80
Theoretical Framework: An Overview of Postcolonial and Decolonial Theories	80
Colonial Genesis.....	80
Postcolonial Theory	83
Criticisms of Postcolonial Theory.	85
Decolonial Theory	87
Criticisms of Decolonial Theory.....	92
Decolonial Alignment with Critical Race Theory	96
Historic and Ongoing Racialization and Oppression	97
Connecting Decolonial Theory, Critical Race Theory and Feminist Epistemologies.....	99
Decolonial Feminism.....	101
Situating Myself: Positionality	102
Blurring Disciplinary Boundaries	106
Theoretical Framework Summary	109
A Special Note About Process.....	109
Methodological Framework: Critical Autoethnographic Counter-Storytelling.....	111

Autoethnography	112
Critical Autoethnography	113
Counter-Storytelling	115
Methodological Framework Summary	121
Methods: Decolonial Strategies, Challenges, and Opportunities	121
Decolonial Strategies	122
Counter-Storytelling (via CRT Methods)	122
Decolonial Data Collection and Analysis for Counter-storytelling.	125
Healing (via Decolonial Methods)	128
Decolonial Data Collection and Analysis for Healing.	129
Reclaiming (Bridging CRT and Decolonialism)	134
Recursive Process	136
Establishing Decolonial Validity: Rigor and Trustworthiness	137
Methods Summary	140
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	142
Review of Research Purpose and Questions	142
Notes About Findings Format	142
On Process and Reflection	142
On Autohistoria-Teoría	144

On Discussion.....	146
Summary.....	146
Findings: Research Question 1.....	146
Process and Reflection: RQ 1.....	146
Autohistoria-Teoría: RQ 1.....	160
Discussion: RQ 1.....	163
Summary of Findings: RQ 1.....	164
Findings: Research Question 1A.....	164
Process and Reflection: RQ 1A.....	165
Autohistoria-Teoría: RQ 1A.....	186
Discussion: RQ 1A.....	192
Summary of Findings: RQ 1A.....	193
Findings: Research Question 2.....	194
Process and Reflection: RQ 2.....	194
Accounting for my body.....	194
Accounting for my emotions.....	197
Accounting for my spirituality.....	209
Autohistoria-Teoría: RQ 2.....	210
Discussion: RQ 2.....	216

Summary of Findings: RQ 2	217
CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS.....	218
Implications	218
Considerations	220
Future Research.....	226
Implications And Considerations Summary	228
Conclusion.....	228
REFERENCES	230
VITA	264

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Family Tunnel Book.....	151
Figure 2: Pop Culture Tunnel Book.....	154
Figure 3: Found Poem from "Wah Sing, Out Little Chinese Cousin"	157
Figure 4: “Anna” Found Poem	159
Figure 5: Handwritten Notes from High School Family History Assignment	168
Figure 6: A Page from the Author’s Childhood Scrapbook	172
Figure 7: Another Scrapbook Page	173
Figure 8: A Third Scrapbook Page	174
Figure 9: A Handout from the Author’s High School English Class	177
Figure 10: Slow Drawing Example 1.....	200
Figure 11: Slow Drawing Example 2.....	201
Figure 12: Slow Drawing Example 3.....	202
Figure 13: “LoFi Girl” Streaming to Fun Red Vintage TV	208

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When I was a child, I sought escape in fun, fantastic literary worlds. I carried a bag spilling over with books nearly everywhere I went, and I hid behind the pages. Eventually, I started writing my own spooky and funny and otherworldly tales. I took classes to become a writer, earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in children's literature, and published over 65 short stories for young readers.

Yet, somewhere along the way, I stopped writing stories that felt invigorating and enjoyable. Instead, I began to write what I felt would be understood, accepted, desired, and praised by predominantly White classmates, instructors, agents, and editors. Because I am Vietnamese American, I became accustomed to the expectation that I would write stories featuring Vietnamese war-related trauma. I also learned to stop trusting my instincts for how to tell my stories, replacing them with best practices gleaned from centuries of high-quality English Literature. Slowly, I chipped away at what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it and did what I thought was expected and preferred by others, instead. While my work was generally well received, I no longer found it satisfying. I wondered... How did I, as someone who once loved writing, get to this place of feeling so burnt out and unfulfilled? More importantly, how could I regain my authentic voice and joy? And how could I help other minoritized writers feeling similarly to protect or regain their own genuineness and delight?

Statement of the Problem

Children's books play an important role in socializing children into beliefs about race (Bishop, 1990, 1982; Capshaw, 2014). In order to foster a more equitable society, numerous scholars and advocates have suggested we need more high-quality children's books by and about people from minoritized racial and cultural backgrounds (e.g. Magoon, 2020; C. Myers, 2014;

W.D. Myers, 2014; Thomas, 2019; Toliver, 2020, 2018a; Tyner, 2020; Yokota, 2015, and many others). Though much attention has been paid to analyzing representations of race and culture in already-published children's books (e.g. Acevedo, 2017; Barker, 2010; Bishop 2007, 1990, 1982; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Botelho, Young, & Nappi, 2014; Braden & Rodriguez, 2016; Cueto, 2015; Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, & Koehler, 2009; Koss, 2015; Koss, Martinez, & Johnson, 2017; Kurz, 2012; Larrick, 1965; Lee, 2017; McNair, 2008, Thomas, 2019, 2016; Toliver, 2018a, 2018b; Yi, 2020, and numerous others), there is a gap in the research concerning the formative processes that shape minoritized authors' professional development (and, thus, their books). Included in this gap is a need for more scholarship about creative writing workshops and Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programs (Ryan, 2016).

Currently, there are at least 12 MFA programs in the United States that focus on writing for children (Carter, 2021). Creative writing MFA programs in the United States were originally developed to reproduce Eurocentric perspectives (rooted in colonial and imperial values) through popular literature (Saleses, 2021). The founder of the workshop model that is still used in most MFA programs specifically sought to promote "democratic capitalism" (Saleses, 2021) with the goal of spreading "artistic and social values [through stories] that could be weaponized against the threat of Communism" (Saleses, 2021, pp. xv). This workshop model has not been critically examined enough, and consequently, most creative writing pedagogy in the United States, today, still centers and reproduces Whiteness and seeks the cultural assimilation of authors who are Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) (Saleses, 2021). In most American creative writing pedagogy, expectations generally "represent the values of the culturally dominant population: in America that means (straight, cis, able, upper-middle-class) white males" (Saleses, 2021, xv). Further, the housing of creative writing programs within "English"

departments and their historic reification of “canonical” texts (mostly by White, male authors) has led to a privileging of dominant, majoritarian voices and styles (Salesses, 2021).

The fragmentation that occurs as minoritized MFA students are pressured to assimilate toward traditions and styles that do not align with their cultures, identities, voices, and values is harmful to writers’ authentic growth (Adsit, 2017; Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021). If left unrepaired, this fragmentation can even negatively impact minoritized writers’ physical and mental health (Anzaldúa, 2015d; Keating, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this critical autoethnographic study was to employ a decolonial feminist lens and related creative practices (via Anzaldúa’s *Coyolxauhqui Imperative*) to 1) explore my own potentially colonially-influenced fragmentation as a creative writer who writes for children and 2) foster my healing. As someone who hopes to conduct research concerning the decolonization of creative writing MFA pedagogy in the future, I found it important to engage in “homework before fieldwork” (Kakali Bhattacharya, personal communication, February 7, 2021) and deeply engage with my own formative development and fragmentation before attempting to study or influence others’ experiences (Bhattacharya, 2015, p. 496). With these goals in mind, I posed the following research questions.

Research Questions

RQ1: How can a decolonial feminist lens be combined with creative practices to make visible a minoritized writer’s colonially-influenced fragmentation?

RQ1A: What formative experiences/processes have shaped me as a writer (creating fragmentation, but also illuminating an alternate, decolonial path)?

RQ2: How can a decolonial feminist lens be combined with creative practices to heal a minoritized writer’s potentially colonially-influenced fragmentation?

Significance of the Study

While there have been recent calls to decolonize the academic field of creative writing (Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021), scholarship is needed to specifically address the needs and experiences of minoritized writers who write for children. We have an ongoing need for more and better children’s books by and about minoritized people (Tyner, 2020), and studies which address the formative development of minoritized writers could play a part in helping more writers of color to achieve successful and fulfilling careers.

Definition of Terms

Before moving on, I would like to clarify my understanding and use of several terms.

Colonialism can be broadly defined as “a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another” (Kohn & Reddy, 2017, n.p.). More specifically, my use of “colonialism” focuses on settler colonialism, which I define as occurring when settler colonists move to and (often forcibly) seize control of a new territory and its peoples, using both in service to the interest of their original country (Kohn & Reddy, 2017). Though many ancient kingdoms colonized nearby territories, I align with scholars who primarily address the impacts of the European-driven settler colonization which began with the adoption of sailing technologies and spanned from the late 1400s to the anti-colonial, national liberation movements of the mid-1900s (Kohn & Reddy, 2017, n.p.).

Coloniality of gender refers to how Eurocentric patriarchal gender binaries and hierarchies and heteronormativity were imposed upon some cultures through colonial constructs which may not have existed in these cultures, prior to colonization. Over time, these gender

norms have been reproduced through natives' internalization of (and continued deference to) the colonizer's gender norms and ideals (Lugones, 2008; 2007).

Coloniality of power similarly refers to the continued reproduction and hegemony of colonial norms and structures for power (Quijano 2007; 2000; 1992).

Decoloniality problematizes the dominance and hegemonic reproduction of Eurocentric, colonial norms and values. Walsh (2018b) says that decoloniality "does not imply the absence of coloniality but rather the ongoing serpentine movement toward possibilities of other modes of being, thinking, knowing, sensing, and living" (p. 81).

Epistemic de-linking (also spelled "delinking") involves detaching oneself from the belief that Eurocentric ways of knowing are superior and universally-valuable (Mignolo, 2009; 2007; Quijano, 1992).

Epistemic re-existence describes the re-establishment and employment of decolonial and pre-colonial ways of knowing (Mignolo, 2018d). It is not possible (nor desirable) to completely revert to pre-colonial ways of knowing while maintaining our modern understandings, but epistemic re-existence is more about adopting the values that have been erased, silenced, and obscured through colonialism (such as valuing embodiment and intuition over or alongside primarily cognitive ways of knowing).

Eurocentric denotes the centering of European history and cultural, aesthetic, moral, and scientific practices and values and connotes perceived European superiority (Swartz, 1992). Lowe (2015) suggests that Europe was historically positioned as the moral, scientific, and artistic locus of enlightenment to justify European colonialism. Modern Eurocentrism reproduces that positioning and aides the maintenance of the colonialities of gender and power which depend on

perceived Eurocentric superiority and the denigration of people from other lineages and locations.

Fragmentation, for the purposes of this study, refers to silencing, minimizing, and/or erasing parts of self (K. Bhattacharya, personal communication, August, 08, 2021).

Internalized colonization describes the detrimental psychological effects of colonialism on the colonized as colonizers assert (often through force) the superiority of their people, practices, and values, over time. This manufactured positioning can become believed and adopted by oppressed people, leading them to presume and reproduce their (and their people's) own inferiority and subjugation absent the colonizer's direct influence (Fanon, 1961; 1952; Hughes, 1926).

Minoritized refers to the ways race, ethnicity, and other categories of identity are socially constructed such that some groups (predominantly White, male, cis-gendered, and able-bodied) retain dominance while others are socially positioned as less powerful and less influential (Harper, 2012). The term specifically refers to how people "are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of Whiteness" (Harper, 2012, p. 9). A person's minoritized status may change depending on the situation, institution, or system they are working within (Harper, 2012).

Organization of the Study

In Chapter 2 (Literature Review), I historicize the chronic need for more children's books by and about racially and culturally minoritized characters during the past 100+ years. I then explore gaps in the research concerning the professional development of minoritized creative writers who write for young audiences. Finally, I examine the colonial roots of creative writing

pedagogy in the United States of America and offer potential ways to decolonize creative writing workshops.

In Chapter 3, I define my understandings of postcolonial and decolonial theoretical frameworks and situate myself amongst decolonial feminist scholars. I then provide a methodological framework and methods aligning with this theoretical frame, ending by discussing criteria for assessing decolonial work.

In Chapter 4, I provide findings and creative autohistoria-teoría (Anzaldúa, 2015f) counter-stories. These findings and counter-stories illuminate how decolonial feminist creative practices have helped me identify and begin to heal the colonially-influenced fragmentation I've incurred.

I conclude with Chapter 5, which covers a discussion of implications and considerations, as well as directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Decolonial scholarship is not even 100 years old as a field (Lentin, 2019). Much of the work of decolonial scholars involves historicizing events that, through a colonial lens, have been portrayed as evolving naturally and neutrally without colonial influence. In this section, I will historicize (Capshaw, 2014) the lack of racial and cultural diversity in children's literature, showing how dominant groups have maintained an ongoing stronghold over the resources required to make children's publishing equitable. Additionally, I will explore the colonial roots of creative writing MFA programs, suggests ways to decolonize such programs, and illuminate gaps in the research that could help minoritized writers in their professional development as they learn to write for children and build their careers. I will begin by critically analyzing the chronic need for more cultural and racial diversity in American children's literature.

Over 100 Years in the “All-White World”: Our Ongoing Need for Diverse Children's Books

Nancy Larrick's critical 1965 *Saturday Review* article, “The All-White World of Children's Books,” is commonly regarded as the first major call to action that warned the general American public about the lack of racial and cultural diversity in children's literature (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2015). Larrick was a White professor and a founder and president of the International Reading Association (Bayot, 2004). Though her privileged position provided her the credibility and visibility needed to reach a wide audience, Black scholars and advocates had been criticizing the low quantity and quality of books depicting Black youth since at least the mid-1800s (Bishop, 2007; Thomas, 2016). “Pioneers such as Augusta Baker and Pura Belpré had long championed the need for diverse books, but the country sat up and listened after the *Saturday Review* article appeared” (Yokota, 2015, p. 18). Larrick's article gained broad

attention, but it did not spur those with influence into creating enough lasting change (Yokota, 2015). Today, we continue to lack enough quality Children's Literature featuring characters that are Black, Indigenous and other People of Color (BIPOC) (Tyner, 2020, June 16). A diverse array of scholars and advocates continues to raise the same well-worn alarm.

The purpose of this section is to offer an historical overview and timeline chronicling the lack of racial and cultural diversity in children's and young adult literature (CYAL) in the United States of America (USA) over the past 100+ years. Because I am writing within a decolonial framework, I wish to situate this retrospective in terms of how CYAL has played a role in the racialization and continued oppression of minoritized people *and* how it has also been used in decolonial efforts to establish the epistemic de-linking and re-existence (Mignolo, 2018d, p. 106) of victims of the ongoing coloniality of power (Quijano 2007; 2000; 1992). In other words, I wish to show how dominant groups have used children's literature to racialize minoritized people, positioning them as inferior to Whites. I also wish to show how minoritized people have used children's literature to disrupt and resist this harmful racialization. "Viewing reading as sociopolitical practice opens possibilities to reread and rewrite the past and present toward social justice" (Botelho, Young, & Nappi, 2014, p. 49). It is my hope that positioning the history of children's books by and about minoritized people into a sociopolitical context can help with making sense of the past and transforming the future.

Contextualizing this overview is important for an additional reason. "Since troubling discourses of colonialism and supremacy are transmitted via childhood stories, it is absolutely critical that these functions of children's literature are revealed, historicized, and interrogated" (Thomas, 2016, p. 115). Historicizing, or placing the trajectory into a historic social and political context, (Capshaw, 2014) is one of my primary goals because I believe doing so sheds light on

how the colonality of power (Quijano 2007; 2000; 1992) has been maintained *and* subverted via children's publishing. Historicizing also makes visible how minoritized people have used children's stories for de/colonial purposes that move beyond a mere diversifying of characters, and toward undermining the ideological and racialized foundations of White supremacy. These foundations grew out of colonialism and have turned into the systemic racism that continues to harm minoritized people in our nation, today (Lowe, 2015). Thus, I will not only provide an overview of the lack of diversity in children's publishing over the past century; I will also contextualize moves for and against more diversity within the greater context of the nation's political and social history.

Because I have limited space and time, I will focus my work, here, on historicizing children's publishing featuring African American and Black American protagonists. Such historicizing details are often missing in Children's Literature scholarship, but they are important to consider because advocacy within our field has traditionally been compelled by and fueled by what's occurring in our nation at large (Capshaw, 2014). Though I am Asian American, I am focusing on works featuring African American and Black American protagonists because that is the body of work for which the most research is available at this time, and for which I can make the most robust connections to historic events given my limited time and resources right now. My goal is to add to the growing body of work demonstrating the importance of historization (Capshaw, 2014). Future work will seek to similarly historicize Children's Literature featuring characters from other racial and cultural groups.

Pre-1920

Before 1920, most widely-published literature for children featured White characters and was written by White authors (Bishop, 2007). That said, it's a common mistake to believe early

American communities of color (particularly Black communities) had no children's literature (Capshaw & Duane, 2017; Fielder, 2019). Starting as far back as the 1810s, early African American periodicals offered affirming content aimed at Black children. *Juvenile Magazine*, which first appeared in 1811, educated children (especially Black children) about Black achievements, the history of slavery, and important Black figures such as Phyllis Wheatley (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). This magazine was created by the founder of a free school for Black children, and after the school closed due to underfunding in 1813, no more editions were printed (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 20). In 1833, the American Anti-Slavery Society published an abolitionist children's journal called *The Slave's Friend* (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 21). Other periodicals in the 1840s and 1850s (such as *Colored American* and *The Christian Recorder*) included children's sections created specifically for young Black readers (Bishop, 2007; Fielder, 2019). These periodicals were noteworthy because Black authors had few opportunities to produce printed materials in the antebellum USA.

At the time of the 1860 census, there were approximately 500,000 free Black people in the USA, and nearly 4 million who were still enslaved (Bishop, 2007). While there were some Black creators able to publish literature for Black children, most of the storytelling that was aimed at Black children at this time was not produced in print. Prior to emancipation, enslaved Africans often generated and passed on stories and folklore through oral storytelling and songs (Bishop, 2007). Usually, their enslavers prohibited them from attaining the written literacies and publication opportunities necessary to produce and distribute children's magazines or books (Bishop, 2007).

In the mid-to-late 1800s, following the Civil War, this started to change, especially as Christian churches used their resources to create materials for Black youth (Bishop, 2007; Harris,

1990). Unfortunately, these works typically were not conventionally published, meaning they were often made with simple materials and were produced in small batches for community use (Harris, 1990). As a result, they were not widely available in bookstores, schools, and libraries (Harris, 1990). Many of these artifacts also were not durable and were not preserved, preventing modern day scholars from truly capturing the extent of this type of publication (Harris, 1990).

During the late 1800s, a few White authors' depictions of Black characters were conventionally published and made widely available, but these depictions were mostly stereotypical and demeaning. For example, after the end of Civil War reconstruction in 1877, Irish-American author Joel Chandler Harris wrote and published his Uncle Remus tales. These popular stories co-opted Black folklore and they framed plantation life and slavery in nostalgic terms (Sergeant, n.d.). They also popularized characters like Br'er Rabbit, Uncle Ben, and Aunt Jemima who reflected and edified racist stereotypes (Sergeant, n.d.). The few other widely available White-authored books depicting Black characters (such as *Little Black Sambo*, first published in 1899) also negatively portrayed Black characters through racist caricatures (Harris, 1990).

Between the end of Reconstruction and 1920, several shifts occurred helping to set the stage for the greater demand for and publication of quality Black children's literature. Most importantly, opportunities for education led to increased Black literacy, which is defined here simply as the ability to read or write (Bishop, 2007; Harris, 1990). In 1870, 79.9% of non-White ("Black and Other") people ages 14 and older were unable to read or write in any language (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). By 1920, only 23% of the same population remained illiterate (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). A lot happened between the end of Reconstruction and 1920 that set the stage for big, important changes. Perhaps most

significantly, the beginnings of the Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance provided more opportunities for communities of like-minded artists to pool their intellectual and financial resources (Bishop, 2007). Black publishers also grew in number and strength (Harris, 1990). The establishment of The Crisis Publishing Company (founded and supported by leaders from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people or NAACP) was particularly crucial for effecting positive change (Bishop, 2007).

The summer of 1919 was acutely influential. It was a time of escalating racial violence throughout the United States, and became known as the “Red Summer” (History.com Editors, 2020, Aug. 6, n.p.). Many Southern Black people had been moving north, as part of the Great Migration, to places where they had better working opportunities and faced less oppression (History.com Editors, 2020, Aug. 6, n.p.). As U.S. military troops returned from World War I, many White servicemen found that their former jobs had been filled by Southern Blacks (History.com Editors, 2020, Aug. 6, n.p.). Because of these White servicemen’s frustration over financial precarity and deep-rooted racial prejudices, many turned to violence. The Ku Klux Klan led much of this violence (Lynch, 2020, Aug. 17). Though many Black people lost their war-time jobs during the post-war recession, the resulting competition for remaining jobs and for affordable housing resulted in aggression and bloodshed (Lynch, 2020, Aug. 17). Throughout the nation, there were numerous lynchings and race riots targeting Black people, including a riot in Knoxville, TN (History.com Editors, 2020, Aug. 6, n.p.).

At the same time, Black servicemen returned from fighting in the war to face prejudice with newfound confidence and action. “1919 marked the beginning of a growing willingness among African Americans to fight for their rights in the face of oppression and injustice”

(History.com Editors, 2020, Aug. 6, n.p.). This turning point had a lasting impact, resulting in increased activism.

In the December, 1919 edition of *The Crisis* magazine, W.E.B. Du Bois called for the creation of a widely-available periodical that would “seek to teach Universal Love and Brotherhood for all little folk, black and brown and yellow and white” (Du Bois, 1919, p. 286). Around this same time, Du Bois engaged in decolonial theorizing for adult audiences, seeking to illuminate and subvert harmful Eurocentric conceptualizations of Blackness (Weiner, 2018). This decolonial thinking extended to DuBois’ goals for helping Black children foster affirming identities (Fielder, 2019). Thus, the ideological seeds were planted for what would become *The Brownies Book* magazine (Harris, 1990).

1920s and 1930s

By 1920, approximately 300,000 Black people had moved north during the Great Migration (History.com Editors, 2021, Jan. 21, n.p.). Harlem, NY was one of the most popular locations, especially for Black intellectuals and artists, including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B. Du Bois, Louis Armstrong, and others (History.com Editors, 2021, Jan. 21, n.p.). With Du Bois largely leading a cultural shift toward Black pride in Harlem, the arts flourished, resulting in what has become called the Harlem Renaissance (History.com Editors, 2021, Jan. 21, n.p.). The Harlem Renaissance “gave these artists pride in and control over how the Black experience was represented in American culture and set the stage for the Civil Rights Movement” (History.com Editors, 2021, Jan. 21, n.p.). It was a time of immense creativity and community-building, and fertile ground for new artistic offerings created for both adults and children.

In 1920, W.E.B. Du Bois, Augustus Dill, and Black editor Jessie Redmon Fauset published the first edition of *The Brownies Book* (Fielder, 2019; Harris, 1990). Scholars have suggested this magazine was created to offer young Black readers the affirming characters and storylines that had long been lacking in children's books, prior (Harris, 1986). While this is partly true, Fielder (2019) suggested that *The Brownies' Book* was "a continuation of Black print culture's engagement with Black children" (p. 160). Still, *The Brownies' Book's* wide distribution and enduring publishing quality are noteworthy. *The Brownies' Book* was also remarkable because of the use of modern photography instead of illustrations. Photos of contemporary Black children "served as a counter to the racist caricatures of Black people that had theretofore dominated mass print culture" (Fielder, 2019, p. 161). Furthermore, photos helped position real Black youths as children, a position they had long been (and, to this day, often continue to be) denied (Fielder, 2019). Sadly, there were not enough magazine subscriptions to keep the publication going long-term (Horning, 2015).

Around this time, another noteworthy person paved the way for greater diversity in Children's Literature. In 1920, Ernestine Rose was named branch librarian for the 135th Street Branch library in Harlem (Jenkins, 1990). Rose was White, but her formative experiences helped shape her approach to allyship with people of color (Jenkins, 1990). As a college student, Rose worked as a summer substitute for the New York Public Library (Jenkins, 1990). In this temporary position, she was mentored by librarians who were "sympathetic to immigrant life" (Jenkins, 1990, p. 217) and who helped Rose form an appreciation for immigrants' rights to maintain their own culture in their new home. Though many other librarians tried to help "Americanize" immigrants, Rose's mentors helped immigrant patrons to assimilate while also

affirming and supporting their continued participation in their native cultures (Jenkins, 1990). This early experience was foundational to Rose's later work.

After graduating, Rose was hired fulltime by the New York Public Library system. She was assigned to the Seward Park Branch, which was in a predominantly Russian-Jewish immigrant community. She continued to center immigrant patrons' whole identities, requiring her staff to learn about and affirm patrons' cultural traditions and customs to a degree of familiarity that ensured patrons would not feel singled out (negatively or positively) for perceived difference (Jenkins, 1990). Further, she expected staff to know about the "language and literature of the community," (Jenkins, 1990, p. 218), and she helped develop book collections and activities that affirmed her patrons' identities and interests. Rose also worked with Chinese immigrants, adding books in Chinese (especially books about science) (Sandford, 2011). She was one of the first librarians to add books in other languages to collections, specifically with the goal of serving immigrant patrons' interests and needs (Sandford, 2011).

During World War I, Rose took a position abroad serving in the American Library Association (ALA)'s hospital libraries. During this experience, she met many Black soldiers who wanted to improve their literacy. Rose likely realized these men had been denied educational opportunities in the USA because of their race (Jenkins, 1990).

When many Black people moved to New York City during the Great Migration (moving from the southern USA, but also from other countries), Rose was identified as a librarian who had significant experience working with immigrants and who could best meet newcomers' needs (Jenkins, 1990). This is how she came to be hired for the 135th Street Branch Library in Harlem, a library which had once served a Jewish immigrant community, but was now positioned in an area of New York City that was home to a rapidly increasing population of Black newcomers

who had arrived (and were still arriving) during the continued Great Migration. The combination of Rose's formative experiences serving immigrant communities and her work with Black soldiers abroad shaped her ambitions for this library (Jenkins, 1990).

Rose recognized that segregation was the norm in public library systems, but that this norm was unjust and needed to change (Hochman, 2014). Furthermore, Rose understood that the Black families that had migrated to New York City from hostile places in the South needed to see library outreach in trusted communal spaces (like churches) to trust that Black people were welcome in the library (Anderson, 2003). She believed demonstrating a vested interest in the community would foster the community's reciprocated interest (Anderson, 2003). In addition to visiting churches and Sunday schools to engage with the local community and welcome potential library patrons, Rose's staff also partnered with the elementary school across the street from the library, often hosting classes in the library's children's room (Anderson, 2003). Rose prioritized building a strong collection of books in which Black children could take pride learning about Black history and culture (Anderson, 2003).

Additionally, Rose was quick to integrate the library's staff, recognizing the importance of hiring public-facing library assistants from the same cultures as the library's patrons (Jenkins, 1990). Amongst the assistants Rose hired was Pura Belpré, who was hired to help the library better meet the needs of Spanish-speaking patrons. Belpré later became a well-known librarian in her own right (Jenkins, 1990). Additionally, Belpré and another library assistant that Rose hired, Nella Larsen Imes, later became authors (Hochman, 2014).

Notably, Rose organized a staff exchange program where her diverse staff and staff from a branch in a predominantly White neighborhood worked together. Rose encouraged close

interracial working experiences as a way to help staff appreciate cultural diversity and each other (Jenkins, 1990).

Rose was aware of her limits as a White person serving a predominantly Black neighborhood. Thus, she invited Black community leaders and scholars to share in the library's governance. Numerous committees were formed to guide the library's growth, its programming, and its use of resources (Jenkins, 1990). Further, the library became a communal meeting space for groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Liberty League of Negro Americans (Jenkins, 1990). Additionally, Rose encouraged the local community to use the library's building as a hub for music recitals, plays, poetry readings, art exhibits, and other artistic and scholarly programming (Jenkins, 1990). Langston Hughes fondly remembered Rose as "warm and wonderful" when he, at nineteen years old, was new to New York City and made the library one of his first stops (Anderson, 2003). Jessie Redmon Fauset (an editor of *The Brownies Book*) volunteered at the library some evenings and encouraged Black creative writers to work on and share their work, there (Skinner, 2015).

In 1921, Rose sensed Black patrons' growing desire for Black literature and for greater knowledge about Black history and heritage. She created a committee of community leaders which included Arthur Schomburg, a Puerto Rican collector of books about Black people (Jenkins, 1990). Though this committee started the library's small, noncirculating collection of books by and about Black people, the library later received a significant grant which allowed them to purchase Schomburg's own outstanding, much larger collection and make it available to the public (Jenkins, 1990). Schomburg's collection was one of the most comprehensive known and included rare and international books, making it a prestigious holding and offering to the local community. Schomburg was appointed the collection's curator, and Rose encouraged both

White and Black students and scholars from within and outside of the Harlem community to access the collection as a way to grow American understanding of Black history, culture, and heritage (Jenkins, 1990). Today, Schomburg's original collection forms the core of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (located in the original 135th Street Library building). This Center hosts one of the largest archives of Black books in the world (Sandford, 2011).

Perhaps more significant, though, was Rose's impact on her field. Rose convened the "Work with Negroes Round Table," at the annual American Library Association (ALA) convention, where she led other (predominantly White) librarians in discussing and developing best practices for working closely with Black communities (Jenkins, 1990). As part of this work, Rose and her staff surveyed 122 public libraries about how they served Black patrons, whether their staffs were integrated, and whether they included Black leadership on their governing boards. Because the American Library Association is (and was at that time) a national organization, librarians who attended the convention varied widely in their prejudices and practices (Jenkins, 1990). Some Southern librarians, especially, resisted Rose's efforts to integrate staff and to encourage community leaders to engage in shared governance. Though the roundtable ended after the 1923 ALA convention, Rose continued her advocacy with the ALA, steadily pushing for the codification of antiracist practices (Jenkins, 1990). In 1939, she presented the Library Bill of Rights, a "manifesto" which "stated that library collections should be selected for the interest of the people in the community regardless of their race or nationality; that library materials should represent all views; and that as an institution with the mission to educate for democratic living, the library's meeting rooms should be open to all regardless of

beliefs or affiliation” (Jenkins, 1990, pp. 225-226). Her impact on the ALA helped to make the field of librarianship significantly more inclusive (Jenkins, 1990).

Over time, Rose’s efforts (and the efforts of likeminded community members) worked to transfer a sense of library stewardship away from her and toward the local Harlem community (Anderson, 2003). Rose’s original goal of gaining the true investment of the Black community (and of them feeling belonging within and ownership of this public library space) was largely achieved (Anderson, 2003). When Rose retired in 1942, a Black library assistant, Dorothy Homer, took over her role as head librarian. Even in her retirement, Rose taught Library Science at Columbia University and published a reform-centered book, *The Public Library in American Life* (Sandford, 2011).

Rose’s work with the 135th Street Branch (Harlem) Library spanned twenty-two years (from 1920 to 1942) (Jenkins, 1990). During this time, Rose impacted the 135th Street Branch Library, the Harlem community, the Harlem Renaissance, and the integration of her field (Hochman, 2014). Her community-centered leadership and demand for shared governance were progressive in her time and offer an example of strong allyship that we can continue to learn from, today. I have included Rose’s entire story in this section for its cohesion, and have placed it here (in the 1920s section of this essay) though the events entailed ultimately exceed the bounds of this part of our timeline. Hence, let us return to other significant events that occurred in the 1920s, just after Rose was first hired at the Harlem library in 1920.

In 1921, Dr. Carter G. Woodson started a publishing company, Associated Publishers (Bishop, 2007). His company was one of the first to publish a substantial number of high-quality children’s books centering Black characters (Bishop, 2007).

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, many White authors wrote books about Black characters that were rife with demeaning stereotypes and racist caricatures (Baker, 1975). Harlem Renaissance writers such as Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes wrote stories with affirming, realistic portrayals of Black characters, but their works at that time reached only a relatively small audience (Baker, 1975). Through the mid-1930s, many stories about Black people continued to focus on plantation life (Baker, 1975). White authors depicted Black characters as speaking in simple, unintelligent dialects, and illustrations were filled with racial stereotypes, such as showing Black characters eating watermelon (Baker, 1975). Such books reinforced racist stereotypes in young White readers, and were insulting to young Black readers (Baker, 1975).

Black educators, scholars, and writers founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and funded a publishing company, Associated Publishers, meant to provide better materials featuring affirming stories about Black historic and contemporary figures (Baker, 1975). Dr. Woodson became the Associated Publishers' director, and wrote two books illuminating Black history (Baker, 1975). Dr. Woodson also is credited with founding what has now become Black History Month.

There is a gap in the scholarly literature surrounding how the Great Depression impacted diversity in children's publishing in the 1930s. What is known is that the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers Project supported the further development of important Black authors like Zora Neale Hurston and Arna Bontemps (Lynch, 2020, Aug. 17). The 135th Street Branch that Ernestine Rose ran hosted a Works Progress Administration Writer's project (Sandford, 2011).

In the 1930s, Librarians continued to play an impactful role in examining and challenging stereotypes and racist caricatures (Baker, 1975). In 1938, New York Public Libraries (NYPL) librarian Augusta Baker started collecting books that would provide positive role models for Black youth while depicting affirming, respectful portrayals of Black characters (Baker, 1975). Importantly, Baker developed three criteria by which to evaluate children's books (focused on language, themes, and illustrations, respectively) (Baker, 1975). From her evaluation of existing books, Baker created a bibliography of 40 books she would recommend, though only a few of those books met her criteria for excellence (Baker, 1975). In future years, most of the books from her original bibliography were removed from the recommendations list as better books became available (Baker, 1975).

1940s and 1950s

In the 1940s, librarians continued to have a substantial impact on Black representation in children's literature. Charlemae Hill Rollins, a Black librarian, was named head of the children's department at the Chicago Public Library. Frustrated by demeaning stereotypes and racist caricatures, she curated a bibliography of quality children's books with positive and accurate representations, entitled *We Build Together* (Horning, 2015). Later, she authored children's book biographies of noteworthy Black leaders and artists, and she went on to become the first Black president of the American Library Association's Children's Services Division in 1957 (Horning, 2015).

During World War II (just as during World War I), there was continued migration north by Black Southern families. Over 1.5 million Black people migrated north during the 1940s, with most moving to cities (Lynch, 2020, Aug. 17, n.p.). Even while the war was still going on, competition for jobs and housing led to violence (Lynch, 2020, Aug. 17, n.p.). Meanwhile, many

Black servicemen fought in segregated units, overseas. The Army started integrating officers, and after the war, in 1949, the U.S. military became fully-integrated (Lynch, 2020, Aug. 17, n.p.).

The integration of the military set the foundation for the Civil Rights Movement. In 1954, school segregation was outlawed via the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* court case (Lynch, 2020, Aug. 17, n.p.). Attempts to integrate schools were often met with violence from angry whites (Lynch, 2020, Aug. 17, n.p.). In 1955-1956, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (and others) led the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Black librarians like Charlemae Hill Rollins continued to work to create criteria for assessing and recommending books featuring Black characters. In 1955, NYPL librarian Augusta Baker published an article called “The Changing Librarian in a Changing Neighborhood” for the American Library Association’s Children’s Services Division (Horning, 2015). She gave “advice on how to make children of color feel welcome at the public library” (Horning, 2015, p. 9). In 1957, Augusta Baker published her bibliography, *Books about Negro Life for Children*, which was based on 18 years of research (Horning, 2015). After she was hired at the 135th St. Branch of the NYPL in Harlem in the late 1930s, Baker started collecting books that would provide positive role models for Black youth while depicting accurate portrayals of Black characters. This set the foundation for her later bibliography and also turned into the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection at the NYPL. Her work drew a lot of attention in NYC and fueled demand for more books depicting positive portrayals of Black characters (Horning, 2015).

1960s and 1970s

Baker was named head of the New York Public Library (NYPL) children’s department in 1961 (Horning, 2015).

In 1962, White author/illustrator Ezra Jack Keats published *The Snowy Day*, which won the Caldecott Medal the following year (Sasser, 2014). *The Snowy Day* became one of the first widely-popular and mainstreamed picture books for children depicting a realistic, affirming portrayal of a Black protagonist simply enjoying the pleasures of everyday life (Sasser, 2014). Though some critics have criticized *The Snowy Day* saying the protagonist, Peter, is “a white child painted brown” (Sasser, 2014, p. 359) and saying Peter’s mother is a “mammy” stereotype, Keats received appreciative letters from notable Harlem Renaissance leaders such as Langston Hughes and from Charlemae Hill Rollins (Sasser, 2014).

The Civil Rights Movement continued to grow throughout the early 1960s, and its peak in the mid-1960s changed the national dialogue so that examining and discussing multicultural children’s books became important to scholars and advocates outside of minoritized communities (Kiefer & Huck, 2010). In 1965, the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) was founded as a coalition to advocate for books that respectfully represented the United States’ racially and culturally diverse society (Horning, 2015).

Later in that same year, Nancy Larrick, founder of the International Reading Association, worked with four Black librarians to look back at the past three years’ books published for children. They found that only 6.7% of American-published children’s books featured at least one Black character. Many of the Black characters that were featured were from places outside the United States (predominantly Africa). “Over the three-year period, only four-fifths of one percent of children’s trade books from the sixty-three publishers [studied]” featured Black American characters (Larrick, 1965, p. 64). Larrick wrote a scathing article entitled “The All-White World of Children’s Books.” In it, she wrote about the need for Black American children

to see more frequent representations of themselves in books. She also wrote about the need for White children to see these representations:

Although his light skin makes him one of the world's minorities, the white child learns from his books that he is the kingfish. There seems little chance of developing the humility so urgently needed for world cooperation, instead of world conflict, as long as our children are brought up on gentle doses of racism through their books. (Larrick, 1965, p. 63).

Though Larrick's article is often seen as the first push to address anti-Black racism and Black erasure in children's books (Thomas, 2016), I hope I have demonstrated just how much Black-led activism occurred before Larrick's article was published. Larrick, a White woman, is often credited for a groundbreaking push for more Black American representation, while more than a century of work by Black activists is overlooked (Thomas, 2016).

Larrick's article was published at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, at a time when national tensions prompted White allies to pay closer attention to how Black people were being treated. Calls for more "accurate and humanizing representations of children of color" snowballed in the 1970s and 1980s due to the post-Civil Rights multicultural education movement (Thomas, 2016, p. 113). In 1975, Virginia Hamilton became the first Black author to win the Newbery Medal for *M.C. Higgins, the Great* (Horning, 2015). Leo Dillon became the first Black illustrator to win the Caldecott Medal the following year (Horning, 2015). In 1977, Mildred D. Taylor became the second Black author to win the Newbery Medal for *Role of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Horning, 2015). Leo Dillon won a second Caldecott that same year (1977), making it the first time ever that a Black author won the Newbery Medal and a Black illustrator won the Caldecott Medal (Horning, 2015).

During this heyday, Chall, Radwin, French & Hall (1975) replicated Larrick's study and documented an increase in representation in books featuring Black American protagonists. This improvement occurred in part as a response to market demand (Myers, 1986). With educators seeking multicultural books in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement (Thomas, 2016), publishers found them more profitable than they had been, prior, leading to greater publication (Myers, 1986).

Unfortunately, this trend was not long-lasting.

1980s and 1990s

Rollock (1984) replicated Larrick's study again almost 10 years after Chall, Radwin, French & Hall, and found a return to scarcity. It seems the nation's arousal to conscientiousness faded to complacency with temporal distance from the fervor of the peak of the Civil Rights Movement. Rollock (1984) wrote:

The volumes of material on the African-American experience for children which were available in the late 1960s and early 1970s have dwindled to a trickle of titles by the same familiar authors. The social consciousness the Civil Rights Movement, once aroused, now seems dormant and has receded to the passive quiet of the years prior to the 1960s. (p. 4)

In 1985, the American Library Association asked the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin- Madison to join the Coretta Scott King Book Awards committee, which recognizes outstanding children's literature by Black creators (Creating Community, 2020, Apr. 21). Out of the 2,500 books published that year, only 18 were by a Black author and/or illustrator. Startled by the disparity between the number of books published by Black and White authors, the CCBC began recording statistics on the number of

children's books published each year by and about people from different races (Creating Community, 2020, Apr. 21). Between 1985 and 2014, the CCBC found that the annual percentage of children's books created by Black authors and illustrators never exceeded 3.5% and the percentage of children's books featuring Black protagonists never rose above 6% (Creating Community, 2020, Apr. 21).

Author Walter Dean Myers predicted this trend. In 1986, Myers published an op-ed in the New York Times entitled "I Actually Thought We'd Revolutionize the Industry." He looked favorably back at the 1970s and the increased opportunities for Black writers that came with post-Civil Rights Movement market demand (particularly by schools and libraries, which were being subsidized by the government) (Myers, 1986). But then, he outlined how government funding ended up being dismantled by President Nixon, and noted that as "the temper of the time was lukewarm" (Myers, 1986, n.p.) Blacks were "no longer a hot political issue" (Myers, 1986, n.p.). As libraries suffered cutbacks and defunding, they bought fewer Black books, which impacted the market. Black writers were suddenly "perceived as no longer being able to sell well" (Myers, 1986, n.p.) and publishing opportunities dried up. He noted, with cynicism, "we will simply have to wait for the next round of race riots, or the next interracial conflict, and the subsequent markets thus created" (Myers, 1986, n.p.). As a side note, it is this observation that makes me concerned about publishing in the 2020s, which I fear may be seeing an only-temporary increase in Black authorship and inclusion due to increased book sales after recent race riots and tensions (more on that, later).

Myers' observations show how the colonialist invention of capitalism still drives racialization today, as markets determine publishing opportunities. Still, Myers noted that in the

1970s, Black authors proved they could write exceptional literature for children, which was something publishing industry professionals doubted, prior (Myers, 1986, n.p.).

In order to fill ongoing publishing gaps in representation, throughout the 1980s and 1990s numerous independent publishing companies were founded specifically to publish stories featuring multicultural and minoritized characters (Flax, 2018). These publishing houses include Cinco Puntos press (founded in 1985), Just Us Books (founded in 1988), Lee and Low (founded in 1991), and Piñata Books (founded in 1994 as an imprint of Arte Público Press) (Flax, 2018).

Additionally, during the 1980s and 1990s, scholars working in higher education also took up greater interest in representations of race in children's literature. Rudine Sims Bishop published *Shadow and Substance* (1982) which surveyed the children's books published by and about Black people after Larrick's (1965) "All-White World" article. Notably, Bishop (1982) created a framework for analysis which helped to make clear whether books were written for cultural outsiders (to read about Black people) or cultural insiders (to read from within Black culture). She created three categories: Social conscience books, which centered the White gaze (Morrison, 1992) and positioned Black people as Other; melting pot books, which reflected assimilationist values and were mostly written by White authors (but for multicultural readers); and culturally conscious books, or books which were largely written by Black authors for Black children, with culturally-affirming and resonant depictions of Black American life (Bishop, 1982). I would position Bishop's (1982) work as decolonial because it makes the White gaze (Morrison, 1992) visible and expresses how culturally conscious books uniquely foster, reflect, and grow Black readers' re-existence (Mignolo, 2018d).

Scholars from other races and cultures grew the body of scholarship turning a critical eye toward children's book analysis, too. Nieto (1982) conducted a content analysis of books

featuring Puerto Rican Characters and Schon (1989) created a bibliography of notable books on the “Hispanic” experience. Jenkins & Austin (1987) devised a bibliography of books featuring Asian American characters, and found that most books about Asians were not by Asian authors. Gilliland (1980) likewise discovered that most books about Indigenous peoples were not written by Indigenous authors, and many relied on stereotypes.

Scholars also turned more of their attention to educational texts used in Elementary schools. President Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of Education, William Bennett came under harsh criticism for his (1988) list of the books he recommended for teachers and school librarians to use with children. The great majority of the books were by White authors and featured White characters (Madigan, 1993). Reimer (1992) also found that very few books on school reading lists and stories in basal readers featured Black main characters and other characters of color. Reimer (1992) additionally noted a trend toward illustrating a “unirace child” (p. 19), meaning illustrations from this time period often featured racially ambiguous non-White children instead of characters that distinctly belonged to a racial group. These were the assimilationist “melting pot” books that Bishop (1982) had described, and were not affirming of or reflective of BIPOC children’s nuanced and recognizable identities.

As Rudine Sims Bishop continued her research trajectory, she developed a now-foundational metaphor to describe how children’s books influence young readers (Bishop, 1990). She suggested that books can be “mirrors” when they allow readers to see themselves and their loved ones represented on the page. This is self-affirming. Books can be “windows,” when they allow readers to look into other cultures and gain understanding and empathy for other people’s lives. While windows are essential for creating empathy, mirrors are desperately needed to help students have a sense of identity and self-worth (Bishop, 1990).

Despite Bishop's explanations of the values of culturally conscious books (Bishop, 1982) and authentic mirrors (Bishop, 1990), in the early 1990s, other scholars continued to note that White authors were being given the most opportunities to publish multicultural books—books they could only write from an outsider's perspective (Reimer, 1992). With unease about this, scholars continued to critically examine the multicultural books being published (Harris, 1992; Bishop, 1993).

Statistics for Black authorship and for the number of Black characters featured in children's books remained stagnant throughout the '90s (Creating Community, 2020, Apr. 21). Around this time, however, critical scholarship in other fields rapidly grew, paving a path for future decades of children's literature inquiry and activism through critical theoretical lenses.

Sociopolitical issues prompted this growth. Notably, the “culture wars” of the 1980s were exacerbated by Ronald Reagan's “War on Drugs,” which resulted in the inequitable demonization and mass incarceration of Black people for nonviolent drug-related crimes (Alexander, 2020). Policies for imprisonment for possession of crack cocaine were much more severe compared with policies for powdered cocaine. This reflected and worsened racial disparities as Black drug users were more likely to use crack and White drug users were more likely to use powdered cocaine. Black drug users were more likely to be imprisoned and they also served harsher sentences than White people who were using the same drugs, but in a different form (Alexander, 2020). The inequitable mass incarceration of nonviolent Black people (particularly men) and the increase in the policing and criminalization of Black neighborhoods during this time caused long-reaching damage to Black communities and intensified existing racial tensions (Alexander, 2020).

Also, in the 1980s and early 1990s, minoritized people “suffered greatly from the withdrawal of civil rights supports” and from politicians’ villainization of immigrants and Black Americans as leeching off of welfare systems (Capshaw, 2014, p. 242). Antagonism grew toward the poor and meritocracy myths developed, further stigmatizing impoverished minoritized communities and unfairly casting “blame for poverty onto poor people rather than acknowledging the political abandonment of the inner cities” (Capshaw, 2014, p. 243). Ironically, children’s books about the Civil Rights Movement flourished during this time, but Capshaw (2014) suggests the reason was that such books “might serve for some as evidence of all that has been done for black people,” thereby further painting minoritized and oppressed communities as ungrateful takers (Capshaw, 2014, p. 243).

Further, in 1991, Black motorist Rodney King was brutally beaten by police, an act caught on videotape and widely broadcast on news networks nationwide (Wallenfeldt, 2020). The four police officers who assaulted him were acquitted of charges by a jury that included no Black jurors (Wallenfeldt, 2020). Rioters throughout Los Angeles turned to violence, looting, and arson (Wallenfeldt, 2020), and racial tensions ran high.

Critical theories and scholarship expanded against the backdrop of these and other national race-related tensions as well as out of growing frustrations over the now long-stalled progress of the Civil Rights Movement. Decolonial feminist writings (by BIPOC scholars such as Anzaldúa, 1990; hooks, 1994; 1984; Lorde, 1983; Morrison, 1992, and others) brought to the foreground the myriad ways women of color and other multiply minoritized people face oppression. These decolonial feminists also offered paths to empowerment, healing, and epistemic re-existence (Mignolo, 2018d).

Likewise, critical race theory (which first emerged with critical legal scholarship by Bell, 1973) picked up steam and was further developed through contributions by many BIPOC scholars including Bell, 1995; 1980; Crenshaw, 1995, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 1989; Matsuda, 1993, and others. This helped BIPOC scholars and White allies make systemic racism and sexism and intersecting (Crenshaw, 1991) oppressions more visible. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) applied critical race theory (CRT) to K-12 classrooms, paving the way for future Education scholars to use CRT to critically analyze pedagogical tools, including children's books.

Practical changes in technology also had a major impact during this time. In 1990, the World Wide Web was launched and by 1995, the internet started to become more popular in people's homes (Jefferson Online, 2016). Microsoft unveiled Windows 95, and Amazon.com, Ebay, and Yahoo.com were all born (Jefferson Online, 2016). These events, along with Google's founding in 1998 (Jefferson Online, 2016), laid the foundation for the changes that would occur in the children's publishing industry and in the field of Children's Literature in the 2000s.

2000s and 2010s

In the 2000s, scholars Solórzano & Yosso (2009; 2002; 2001) devised the critical race theory concept of counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling is "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 138). Though counter-stories are often created in social science, law, and education research as a way of creating stories that push back against majoritarian hegemony (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009), children's literature scholars have examined children's books as counter-stories, too, seeking to illuminate how stories about minoritized

characters may subvert dominant racializing narratives (Chaudhri & Teale, 2013). “In fiction, the way authors and characters name racial reality contributes to a reader’s identity construction and is part of that discourse. Literature plays a key role in telling the counterstories, adding to the diversity of human experiences” (Chaudri & Teale, 2013, p. 361). The development of counter-storytelling methodology and its incorporation into the CRT framework (Solórzano & Yosso 2009; 2002; 2001) gave children’s literature scholars and writers a new way to think about children’s books as a tool for social justice (Chaudri & Teale, 2013).

During the 2000s and 2010s, internet blogs and social media platforms such as Twitter entered the conversation and quickly became a space for connecting diffuse scholars working on antiracist scholarship. Blogs began serving a function similar to the curated bibliographies Black librarians created in the past (Thomas, 2016). Blogs and websites, such as The Brown Bookshelf and The Conscious Kid, allowed (and still allow) for curation and recommendation by parties from the same racial groups depicted in children’s books and from scholars, librarians, and educators reading and reviewing books through a critical, multicultural lens (Thomas, 2016).

In 2008, Barack Obama became the first Black President of the United States. In 2012, he began his second term.

In 2014, Black author Walter Dean Myers and his son, author Christopher Myers, released simultaneous op-eds in the *New York Times*, entitled, “Where are the People of Color in Children’s Books” (W.D. Myers, 2014) and “The Apartheid of Children’s Literature (C. Myers, 2014). These opinion pieces were penned shortly after the CCBC released statistics showing scarcity, yet again, in the number of children’s books published in 2013 by and about Black people. Both pieces began by citing the CCBC’s most recent statistic: “Of 3,200 children’s books published in 2013, just 93 were about black people” (as cited in C. Myers, 2014; W.D. Myers,

2014). Then, each author wrote poignantly about the personal, social, and societal consequences of the historic lack of enough high-quality children's books featuring Black characters. Yokota (2015) suggested that the tremendous impact of Christopher and Walter Dean Myers' respective 2014 New York Times op-eds can best be compared to the impact of Nancy Larrick's 1965 piece in *The Saturday Review*.

Sociopolitical factors may have played a role in the impact of these op-eds. In 2013, The Black Lives Matter movement was founded by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi after a neighborhood watchman, George Zimmerman, was acquitted after shooting dead a teenaged Black boy, Trayvon Martin (Cullors, 2020). Though the Black Lives Matter movement got its start after Zimmerman's acquittal, it picked up a significant following in 2014 after an 18-year-old Black man named Michael Brown was killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri. When the police trial ended in acquittal, Cullors and other organizers coordinated a "Freedom Ride" and mobilized thousands of protestors (Cullors, 2020). After the Ferguson protests many new Black Lives Matter chapters were immediately organized in various cities nationwide and internationally (Cullors, 2020).

The unrest that surrounded these and other instances of police brutality, and the Black Lives Matter movement's work to humanize Black lives and to confront systemic racism and oppression, propelled the United States into an era of social consciousness comparable to the awakening that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement (Siscoe, 2016).

As Walter Dean Myers had cynically predicted years prior (Myers, 1986), ongoing race riots and protests (in response to the above and a growing list of additional Black people killed by excessive police force) helped spur people working in the children's publishing industry into the same action Myers initially saw as a result of the Civil Rights Movement.

2014 brought one more transformative change. After an all-White, all-male panel was scheduled at a major book festival, young adult book authors Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo (and others) organized a three-day online event to raise awareness about the need for more diversity in publishing (WNDB, n.d.). Author Aisha Saeed made one of the first Twitter posts for this event with the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks (WNDB, n.d.). The hashtag took off and a movement grew which resulted in the founding of a nonprofit organization by the same name (We Need Diverse Books). This organization has championed diversity in children's publishing, since (Creating Community, 2020, Apr. 21).

Professional librarian organizations also jumped in to help lead the way to change, again. The American Library Association's awards committee revised their guidelines in 2015, with committee members also being encouraged to seek culturally-specific resources to help them evaluate books for awards (Reese, 2017). Additionally, the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) incorporated new guidelines regarding diversity into their "Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries" (Reese, 2017). That same year, for the first time since 1977, people of color were awarded the Newbery and Caldecott Medals. Black author Kwame Alexander won the Newbery Medal for *The Crossover* and Asian-American illustrator Dan Santat won the Caldecott Medal for *The Adventures of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend*.

In 2015, there was also a slight (but noteworthy) increase in BIPOC characters being featured in children's books; however, problematic books were part of this increase, and harmful stereotypes and outsider-created representations negatively affected minoritized characters' quality and authenticity (Yokota, 2015).

This said, Reese (2017) notes the effectiveness of Native people and Black and other people of color using social media and blogs to raise awareness of limited and poor

representations of culture and race. As a result of online advocacy regarding poor representations, more books started being recalled by publishers and revised to improve accuracy and foster more respectful representation (Reese, 2017). Furthermore, reviewing journals (such as Kirkus and School Library Journal) began implementing policies that aided readers, publishers, and reviewers in increasing racial and cultural awareness (Reese, 2017). For example, in 2016, Kirkus started explicitly naming the race of all characters, including White characters (whereas, in the past, characters' race had only been mentioned if non-White) (Smith, 2016).

As of 2019, the CCBC's data looking back at the previous year (2018) continued to show an over-representation in White authors writing books about Black and other minoritized characters (SLJ Staff, 2019). Critical scholars noted that although some of the statistics continued to improve for the number of characters of color featured in children's books, many of these representations were not authentic or affirming depictions (SLJ Staff, 2019). Adding to Rudine Sims Bishop's "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors" metaphors (Bishop, 1990), Ebony Elizabeth Thomas deemed these poor representations "distorted funhouse mirrors of the self" (SLJ Staff, 2019). Scholars noted, "Children's literature continues to misrepresent underrepresented communities" (SLJ Staff, 2019, n.p.).

The #OwnVoices social media movement has made some strides in improving authentic representation by calling for more books to be published by cultural insiders (authors from the same communities as the minoritized characters they are writing about), but there is still much progress to be made (Creating Community, 2020, Apr. 21).

In addition to online activism, the ivory tower started organizing to help, too. In the late 2010s, a critical mass of scholars developed with an interest in examining the intersections of writing, books, diversity, and social justice. Two groundbreaking journals were founded as a

result. In 2016, the Journal of Creative Writing Studies was established as the first journal specifically housing scholarly inquiry into Creative Writing practices and pedagogy (Ryan, 2016). In the introduction to their inaugural issue, the founding editor, James Ryan, listed specific topics that especially needed more inquiry, including: “studies of creative writing as social action; treatments of craft principles in the context of cultural practices and social and literary theory; work that examines issues of diversity and inclusion in creative writing spaces; histories of the teaching and practice of creative writing inside and outside academia,” and more (Ryan, 2016, p. 1). There have been numerous articles published in this journal, since, which illuminate social justice issues in the creative writing classroom. Yet, no articles (so far) have specifically addressed courses focused on writing for children. This is an area of inquiry that needs to be explored as the number of Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programs for children’s book writers only continues to grow.

When I enrolled in my MFA program in writing for Children at Hollins University in 2003, there were only two or three such programs in existence. There are now programs focusing on writing for children (or with tracks and specializations in that area) at Antioch University, Chatham University, Farleigh Dickinson University, Hamline University, Hollins University, Lesley University, The New School, Pine Manor College, Simmons College, Spaulding University, and Vermont College of Fine Arts (Carter, 2021). Inquiry into the pedagogy in these programs is needed to determine whether curricula are modeled after MFA programs in writing for adults, which were designed to (and continue to) reproduce colonizing and Eurocentric values and perspectives (Salesses, 2021).

Additionally, in 2018, an open-sourced journal focusing on children’s literature was founded in the Library and Information Sciences program at St. Catherine University, entitled

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature (RDYL). In the Editorial Board Statement that introduces the inaugural issue, Slater (2018) wrote, “RDYL will uplift academic work with the goal of considering the ways young people’s texts reflect or depart from accurately portraying the heterogeneity of human experiences” (p. 1). Additionally, directing editors Halko & Dahlen (2018) spoke to the journal’s genesis:

It was clear that we needed a new space for scholarship, one that would actively seek work that was frequently deemed “too political” or “not scholarly enough” by established journals. We brainstormed ideas to address this deficit -- a deficit that drives away promising scholars and reinforces the racial and intellectual hegemony that pervades children’s literature -- and decided that we needed a new journal. (p. 2)

In its short life, RDYL has done much to help decolonize and diversify Children’s Literature inquiry. The editors have sought articles by early-career scholars from minoritized groups, and the open-source platform has allowed the public to access articles without fees or other barriers (Halko & Dahlen, 2018). Further, this journal has produced an academic space for critical inquiry in which historicization and socio-political contextualization are expected and encouraged. As of February, 2022, the journal’s most popular article (Ishizuka & Stephens, 2019) has been downloaded over 329,000 times. It is about anti-Black racism, anti-Asian racism, and White supremacy in Dr. Seuss’ picture books, and contextualizes Seuss’ work within the era in which he wrote (situating his work alongside World War II and Japanese Internment, and positioning it in the still-segregated, pre-Civil Rights Movement United States). It is my hope that this innovative work will pave the way for similar historicization and critical analysis by future scholars.

Most significantly, though, Ishizuka & Stephens' (2019) article was cited as part of the body of inquiry and scholarly activism that may have led to the Seuss Estate/Seuss Enterprises letting six books with racist illustrations go out of print in 2021 (Alter & Harris, 2021). This decision prompted complaints about “cancel culture” from mostly White, right-wing media personalities (Alter & Harris, 2021), whose arguments might be considered attempts to uphold White supremacy. A rhetorical analysis of such arguments from a decolonial or CRT standpoint is needed in future research. Regardless, several popular books featuring racist depictions of Black and other minoritized people will no longer be printed, which is a tremendous victory.

In 2019, Black Professor Ebony Elizabeth Thomas published *The Dark Fantastic*, which calls for more and better Black representation in fantastic fiction. Toliver (2020; 2018b) likewise showed that Black protagonists in fantasy and science fiction children's and young adult books inspire hope in Black readers, and offer creative pathways to futurity. These are decolonial outcomes (Mignolo, 2018d).

Further, new children's books focusing on “Black girl magic” and a new Afrofuturist Feminist wave of creativity (Davis, 2020) are rejecting not only the coloniality of power (Quijano 2007; 2000; 1992) but also the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2008; 2007), by foregrounding Black girls' and women's agency and imagining a future where they are no longer oppressed (Davis, 2020). These works could be analyzed via a decolonial feminist lens in future research.

2020s

The 2020s have been tumultuous, so far.

In May, 2020, a Black man named George Floyd was killed by a White police officer who knelt on Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, cutting off his ability to breathe

(Donaghue, 2020, June 04). Video footage of the killing stunned many people of all races out of complacency, spurring nationwide protests and unrest (Donaghue, 2020, June 04). In the wake of this and other ongoing police brutality and state oppression, there have been hundreds of protests for Black lives throughout 2020 and into 2021 (Barker, Baker, & Watkins, 2021, Mar. 20). Unfortunately, many such protests dissolved into additional police brutality, particularly against minoritized protesters (Barker, Baker, & Watkins, 2021). The militarization of police in some cities exacerbated the state-imposed violence against protestors (Barker, Baker, & Watkins, 2021).

Though the vast majority of protestors marching for Black lives were peaceful, Republican legislators proposed anti-protest bills in a number of “red” (Republican-majority) states (Quinton, 2021, Feb. 4). While these legislators have suggested punishments would be applied evenly to all protesting groups, Civil Rights advocates have shown that so far, people protesting for Black Lives Matter and similar antiracist movements, have been treated far more harshly than protestors marching or gathering for conservative causes (Quinton, 2021, Feb. 4).

Additionally, in 2020, a global pandemic occurred due to the COVID-19 virus, which originated in Wuhan, China. President Donald Trump began employing anti-Asian rhetoric, referring to COVID-19 as the “Chinese Virus” on Twitter (Hswen, Xu, Hing, Hawkins, Brownstein, & Gee, 2021). As a result, epidemiologists showed a significant rise in anti-Asian tweets with the hashtag #chinesevirus (about half of 777,582 tweets in the week following Trump’s tweet) compared with only about 10% as many anti-Asian tweets with the hashtag #covid19 (Hswen, Xu, Hing, Hawkins, Brownstein, & Gee, 2021). They concluded that the term “Chinese Virus,” which Trump continued to use, stoked anti-Asian sentiments.

This said, even before the pandemic, President Trump spewed xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and nativist rhetoric (Huber, 2016), largely attempting to paint minoritized people and immigrants as criminals and threats to Whites' job security (Finley & Esposito, 2020). Finley & Esposito (2020) trace how similar nativism has been historically used for political gain from the 1820s through Trump's 2016 election. They assert Trump's ideology supports the dominant (White American) culture's stronghold both via his nativism and his attacks on political correctness and social justice (Finley & Esposito, 2020). Trump's xenophobic, nationalist speeches and tweets echo past politicians' rhetoric in upholding the coloniality of power (Meghji, 2020). As Lowe (2015) noted, oppression of all minoritized groups in the USA has roots in coloniality. Trump's upholding of coloniality can be seen both in his rhetoric upholding White supremacy in the USA *and* in his nationalist rhetoric demanding the United States' dominance over other countries (Meghji, 2020). While this history about Trump's presidency may seem tangential to our discussion about Black representation in children's literature, I will try to show how it is relevant, next.

As a result of the escalating racial tensions and movements to end police brutality and systemic racism, a number of books for children and young adults were published in the late 2010s and early 2020s. These books largely focused on fictionalized police brutality (such as *The Hate U Give*, *How it Went Down*, *All American Boys*, and so on) or were young readers' editions of social justice oriented books first published for adults (such as *Just Mercy*, *Stamped from the Beginning*, and *When they Call you a Terrorist*). Many of these books became best sellers, which likely prompted the capitalist, market-driven publishing industry to publish additional similar books. These books (and other children's and young adult books addressing racism) quickly became a threat to people subscribing to Trump's nationalist and White supremacist

views. Several of the most popular antiracist books ended up appearing on the American Library Association's list of the "Top Ten Most Challenged Books of 2020" (Higgins-Dailey, 2021, Apr. 5). Though the #1 challenged book (*George*, by Alex Gino) was banned for LGBTQ+ content, the second-most banned book was *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds (Higgins-Dailey, 2021, Apr. 5). This book provides "an unvarnished history that both Reynolds and Kendi thought was missing from traditional history lessons and textbooks" (Higgins-Dailey, 2021, Apr. 5). *Stamped* reveals how the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2007; 2000; 1992) has worked to racialize African captives, African Americans, and Black Americans, leading to systemic racism and injustice, today. It is no wonder, then, that those who benefit from the coloniality of power and from ongoing systemic racism wish to ban the book and prevent young people from understanding this history.

Similarly, President Donald Trump and other Republican officials sought to defund and end all government agencies' trainings on racial sensitivity and systemic racism, especially those using critical race theory (Schwartz, 2020, Sept. 5). President Trump's administration also attempted to erase the colonial histories unveiled by the *New York Times*' Pulitzer Prize-winning 1619 Project (by journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones), suggesting he would defund any public schools using the project in their curricula, and calling for "patriotic education" programs to be created, instead (Walker, 2020, Sept. 14, n.p.).

Though Trump lost his re-election bid in 2020, Republican legislators in numerous states continued to promote an agenda that upholds systemic racism by proposing bills that would ban the teaching of "divisive concepts" in public K-12 education (NCAC, 2021, Apr. 13, n.p.). "Divisive concepts" were primarily described in these bills as antiracist content or content subverting sexism or gender bias (NCAC, 2021, Apr. 13, n.p.). Additionally, several bills were

proposed specifically targeting the 1619 Project, which the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) says “frames US history through the lens of slavery and structural racism” (in other words, coloniality’s roots and fruits) (NCAC, 2021, Apr. 13, n.p.).

The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) points out that this book banning seems to be in line with silencing antiracist viewpoints as well as feminist viewpoints. They note that Laurie Halse Anderson’s 1999 young adult novel, *Speak*, returned to the ALA’s list of top 10 banned books in 2020 due to complaints of its “anti-male” message (NCAC, 2021, Apr. 13, n.p.). It is noteworthy that nationalist, patriarchal lawmakers see children’s and young adult books and nonfiction materials for youth as such a threat. A critical discourse analysis of the rhetoric in (and surrounding) these bills and bans could be conducted through a decolonial feminist lens to uncover how their authors try to uphold both the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2007; 2000; 1992) and the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2008; 2007). Meghji (2020) also calls for more theoretical synergy between critical race theory and decoloniality, specifically in the analysis of rhetoric from “Trumpamerica.” It would be fascinating to expose the coloniality and racialization present in arguments for banning or prohibiting social justice-oriented books for young readers.

If President Trump had been re-elected, critical theorists would have likely been silenced, at least within public education (Schwartz, 2020, Sept. 5). This would have had a chilling effect on scholars using critical race theory, feminist, and decolonial theories to analyze children’s books and children’s publishing. Though Joseph Biden was elected president and Trump lost his re-election bid, there are still Republican legislators working to undermine educators’ use of children’s books that expose racism and promote social justice for Black, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized people (NCAC, 2021, Apr. 13, n.p.). Between January, 2021 and February, 2022

(the time of this writing), 156 bills have been introduced in 39 states seeking to limit the teaching of “divisive concepts” (typically related to race, gender, and sexuality) (Sachs & Friedman, February 15, 2022). Of these bills, 105 are aimed at K-12 education (targeting teachers and librarians), while 49 address higher education. 62 include punishment for violators, including monetary punishment and, in some cases, criminal punishment (Sachs & Friedman, February 15, 2022). Many of these bills are pending consideration, and by the time this dissertation is published, could be written into law.

It remains to be seen how bills and bans could impact the educational book-buying market and thus the profitability of social justice-oriented books, overall. It also remains to be seen whether 10-15 years from now the progress made during the 2010s and 2020s will be lost. Myers (1986) thought Black authors were revolutionizing the children’s publishing industry in the 1970s after the Civil Rights Movement. By 1986, the nation’s conscience and consciousness had turned elsewhere, and so had the interest of editors and publishing houses. It is my hope that those of us who are committed to social justice will not let the conscience of our great society become turned away from issues of equality, again.

Summary

There are two main takeaways this historicization of children’s literature trends (Capshaw, 2014) has revealed. First, while White scholar Nancy Larrick (1965) is often credited as issuing the first major call to action that warned the general American public about the lack of racial and cultural diversity in children’s literature (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2015), a rich history of urgent action by minoritized scholars and advocates preceded her (Capshaw & Duane, 2017). This deserves to be foregrounded in more classes and textbooks that cover the history of Children’s Literature.

Second, in my opinion, over the past 100+ years, there have been three major turning points when it appeared BIPOC scholars and advocates were making high-impact, transformative changes to grow and improve the representation of minoritized people in children's stories. All three followed intense periods of national race-related unrest. After "Red Summer" in 1919, *The Brownies Book* was published, providing the first widely-distributed race-affirming magazine for Black children that was printed on durable materials. There were not enough subscriptions to keep the magazine going after 1921. After the height of the Civil Rights Movement, there was increased market and demand for stories featuring Black characters and social justice themes. This provided more opportunities for minoritized authors to publish books and be recognized with awards, but as the nation's social consciousness faded to complacency, so dried up the opportunities. We are currently experiencing the third turning point. Following the Black Lives Matter movement and years of national unrest over the deaths of Michael Brown, George Floyd, and others, there is renewed interest in seeing more Black and other minoritized characters depicted in children's books. If history repeats itself, though, I am hesitant to believe our current growth will continue in an upward long-term trend.

Discussion

Walter Dean Myers' (1986) example inspires my guarded cynicism. The drop in opportunities he and other minoritized writers faced in the 1980s was unimaginable during the post-Civil Rights heyday and boom they experienced in the late 1960s and throughout much of the 1970s. I predict the same drop off in interest and opportunities may occur following our current period of increased social consciousness and upset. Though significant progress has been made since Walter Dean Myers' 2014 op-ed calling for more Black characters in children's literature, I am reluctant to believe our current trajectory of improvement will be sustainable

unless greater systemic changes are made. Despite the increased number of books published featuring Black (and other minoritized) characters since 2014, there has still been little widespread material or systemic power redistribution, as White publishing industry gatekeepers continue to control the vast majority of publishing resources. Children's book publisher Lee and Low's Diversity Baseline Study (Lee & Low Books, Jiménez, & Beckert, 2019) consisted of a survey sent to people in the publishing industry including publishing employees, literary agents, university press employees, and reviewers. Surveys were sent to people in both the children's and adult divisions of each company surveyed. Of the 7,893 responses, 76% of the respondents were White (Lee & Low Books, Jiménez, & Beckert, 2019, n.p.). The researchers compared these results with the findings of their first survey, which was conducted in 2015 in the height of the initial push for diverse books. They noted:

The 2015 survey reported that overall, 79 percent of people who work in publishing self-report as White. Given the sample size difference, this 3 percent change in White employees does not meet the bar for statistically significant change. There is no discernible change to any of the other racial categories. In other words, **the field is just as White today as it was four years ago.** (Emphasis original)

While there was a slight increase in the number of executive-level people of color, the percentage of people working as editors who self-identified as White actually increased from 82 to 85 percent White (Lee & Low Books, Jiménez, & Beckert, 2019, n.p.). The study also showed that literary agents (who broker deals for writers) are statistically similar to the rest of publishing, meaning (overwhelmingly White). Agents were not surveyed in 2015, so there was no way to determine if there had been a shift. These numbers are disheartening because agents and editors are the gatekeepers who determine which books are published and amplified. There is a tendency

“conscious or unconscious—for executives, editors, marketers, sales people, and reviewers to work with, develop, and recommend books by and about people who are like them” (Low, 2016, n.p.). There is also a tendency for White gatekeepers to select and promote books which center the White gaze and for them to give Black authors advice which centers the needs of White readers (Magoon, 2020).

This is not the only way material resources have remained in the control of White professionals.

Additionally, the #PublishingPaidMe movement on Twitter has shown that successful, established Black children’s and young adult authors are often paid far less for their books, sometimes even less than debut White authors (Gomez & Kachka, 2020, Jun. 12). Black young adult novelist L.L. McKinney started the #PublishingPaidMe hashtag in the summer of 2020 with a request for Black and White authors to divulge and compare pay. The disparities are stunning and infuriating. Interestingly, McKinney noted that transparency about pay differences was hard to achieve in the past, but White authors were more willing to disclose their rates in solidarity for social justice in the wake of the protests over George Floyd’s death. McKinney said, “It took Black people being killed and protesting for this to happen” (Gomez & Kachka, 2020, Jun. 12, n.p.).

It is this connection between protests for Black lives and White allyship within the children’s publishing industry that prompts my cynicism. I wonder: Will this current commitment to “diverse books” follow the patterns set forth during and after the Civil Rights Movement? As urgency fades, will White allies return to complacency? Without a shift in material resources, will Black and other minoritized people working in children’s publishing be able to continue to create progress? Further, is the educational market driving sales of books

featuring Black characters right now, and thus also driving the publishing industry's receptiveness to increasing diverse representation?

In many education circles, people (including myself) have offered up antiracist book lists. After George Floyd's death and the protests that followed, compassionate White people nationwide sent books like *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi to the top of the best sellers list (Grundy, 2020, Jul. 21). Interestingly, though, not even a year later (from June, 2020 to April, 2021), the highest-rank book about anti-Black racism still on the New York Times best sellers paperback books list is *White Fragility* by White author Robin DiAngelo, which has spent 136 weeks on the list (NY Times, 2021, Apr. 25, n.p.). As of January, 2021, Publishers Weekly reported *White Fragility* as the "top title on race relations" in 2020, with 867,000 copies sold at that time (Milliot, 2021, Jan. 07). So, again, in the long run, the most material resources are going to a White author who is centering the White gaze (Morrison, 1992).

Meanwhile, in YA fiction, White authors also dominated sales. Stephanie Meyers sold 1.3 million copies of *Midnight Sun* and White author Suzanne Collins sold 1.2 million copies of *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (Milliot, 2021, Jan. 07). Similarly, in juvenile fiction, Dav Pilkey's *Dog Man: Grime and Punishment* sold over 1.2 million copies, and Jeff Kinney's latest *Wimpy Kid* book sold nearly a million. In good news, in YA nonfiction in 2020, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You* by Black authors Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi was the best-selling book, selling around 317,000 copies (Milliot, 2021, Jan. 07).

The sales of antiracist books matters in part because Tuck & Yang (2012) have said that moves such as "decolonizing" reading lists are not enough; material resources must be shifted to make a true difference in decolonization. This is true about anti-racism, too. Sociologist and African American Studies professor Saida Grundy argues that "consciousness raising" books

have been used by past movements, but not always with success. “When offered in lieu of actionable policies regarding equity, consciousness raising can actually undermine Black progress by presenting increased knowledge as the balm for centuries of abuse” (Grundy, 2020, Jul. 21, n.p.). Grundy also points to organizations at companies like Amazon where antiracist readings and presentations by Black scholars have been promoted, yet labor exploitation and other forms of systemic racism persist (n.p.). Similarly, Tuck & Yang (2012) suggest that book lists and similar responses may be “settler moves to innocence,” done mostly to appease White guilt, often without any significant sacrifices or shifts in substantial resources or power that would actually impact systemic changes. This is not to say that such reading is inherently bad; it’s just that “literature and dialogue cannot supplant restorative social policies and laws, organizational change, and structural redress” (Grundy, 2021, Jul. 21, n.p.).

Further, with lawmakers and book-banning parents (and others) seeking to make it harder for teachers to use children’s books to teach about racism, will some teachers concede? Will this impact market demand enough to discourage publishers? Long term studies are needed to explore what sustains or decreases teachers’ interest in incorporating antiracist books. In the 1970s and 1980s, education and library budget cuts were found to be significant deterrents to the continued mass purchase of children’s books featuring Black characters (Myers, 1986). If lawmakers in conservative states successfully forbid school districts from incorporating books with antiracist themes, this could have a chilling impact not only on inclusion in classrooms, but also on market demand and subsequent opportunities.

Also, without significant changes to editorial and literary agency staffs (Lee & Low Books, Jiménez, & Beckert, 2019, n.p.) and without equitable pay for Black authors (Gomez & Kachka, 2020, Jun. 12, n.p.), I have little faith that the publishing industry will continue to

improve if and when the marketability of social justice books subsides. Though we need books featuring Black characters which are *not* focused on social justice, trauma and oppression (C. Myers, 2014; Thomas, 2019; Toliver, 2020; 2018a; 2018b), too often, White readers primarily favor books focused on these themes (Magoon, 2020). Black authors deserve to be able to write what they want from a culturally-conscious (Bishop, 1982), Black-centered perspective regardless of how the market operates. I believe this will mean ceasing to try to reform the capitalist, White-dominant publishing industry system and building a separate system that can somehow be sustained (perhaps something similar to the many online poetry literary magazines run by various groups nationwide). Future research should explore alternative models for publication and the distribution of stories.

This said, there have been some coalitions that have formed within the publishing industry which have given me hope. White authors Adam Gidwitz and Rick Riordan have leveraged their popularity to give BIPOC authors greater opportunities. Gidwitz invites minoritized writers to co-author books in his *Unicorn Rescue Society* series, while Rick Riordan is the publisher for an imprint, Rick Riordan Presents, for which BIPOC authors write thrilling adventure novels based around myths from their unique cultures (much like Riordan did with the Percy Jackson and Magnus Chase series). Both have been wildly successful.

Some publishing houses have also made way for specific imprints focused on publishing BIPOC books. Notably, Kokila at Penguin books (devoted mostly to multicultural #OwnVoices books) and Heartdrum at HarperCollins (devoted exclusively to books by Indigenous authors). The editors managing these imprints are BIPOC women. Though I'm unaware of any studies, thus far, analyzing the books produced by these teams, future scholarship could seek to observe whether the books produced are more "culturally conscious" (Bishop, 1982) than those published

under White editors' imprints. Both Kokila's and Heartdrum's lines are relatively small, but hopefully their success will pave the way for additional opportunities.

Looking Ahead

Today, we are seeing more books written and published featuring Black and other minoritized characters, but many of these books are still being written by White authors (CCBC, 2021, Apr. 16). There also continues to be a centering of Whiteness whether in authorship or by publishing industry gatekeepers (such as agents and editors) pressuring Black authors to center White readers' needs and the "White gaze" (Magoon, 2020). Nearly 100 years ago, in 1927, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that the "themes on which Negro writers naturally write best, with deepest knowledge and clearest understanding, are precisely the themes most editors do not want treated. These are themes which White readers are tired of or do not wish to hear" (p. 276). This still seems to largely be true, today, and it remains to be seen how this will impact publishing by Black and other minoritized authors in the years, ahead (Magoon, 2020).

Looking forward, to truly decolonize Children's Literature and use children's books in service of establishing Black futurity and epistemic re-existence (Quijano 2007; 2000; 1992), we must make space for Black authors to write children's books from their own centeredness without concern for White readers' interests or gaze (Magoon, 2020; Morrison, 1992). This is particularly important for creating the "culturally conscious" (Bishop, 1982) books young Black readers resonate with most and deserve. It is important to recognize how such books can serve to decolonize thought through the imagination. "What we can offer through scholarship and teaching, and what our artists offer, is representation as a form of intervention. Ethnic children's literature is not sociological and it should not be treated that way; it offers room to dream and conceive otherwise" (Capshaw, 2014, p. 251). We need more books by Black authors and about

Black characters which offer children maps to bright futures (C. Myers, 2014). As Johnson (2016) suggested, "Students don't just need diverse literature because it's diverse. They need literature that inspires and awakens their potential to be the narrators of their own existence and to imagine a more just world" (n.p). After the lengthy history I've outlined, the question remains: How do we help Black and other minoritized writers to create and publish more of such books?

Though this analysis has focused on historicizing the need for more books by and about Black people, there is also a dire need for more books by and about other minoritized racial and cultural groups, as well (CCBC, 2021, Apr. 16). Lowe (2015) showed that anti-Black racism and colonialism have shared roots which continue to harm Indigenous people, Asians, Latin Americans, and other racially and culturally minoritized people, today. Per the latest statistics on books by and about people from these backgrounds (CCBC, 2021, Apr. 16), children's literature is still mostly an "All-White World" (Larrick, 1965). I believe critical scholarly inquiry can play a part in changing this.

I hope that I have shown the benefits of historicizing the ebbs and flows of diversity in children's literature by putting this trajectory in conversation with sociohistorical moves toward and away from social justice. There is much more work to be done. Though I have left correlations between sociopolitical events and the fluctuating percentage of Black authorship of children's books largely implied in this piece, future work could be done to make these connections more concrete and perhaps establish causality (through the use of primary source documents from writers and publishers, interviews, and other inquiry). Additionally, much more work is needed to catalogue and historicize representations of Indigenous people and people from other minoritized groups. In particular, work is needed to connect children's literature to the colonality of power (Quijano 2007; 2000; 1992), establishing how children's books have

been used to socialize children into dominant and oppressed positions as the United States' political opinions and power (im)balances have shifted throughout history. McGillis (1999) has taken up some of this work, but there is a need for much more.

Sarah Park Dahlen (2021) is currently working on a book that examines the history of Asian and Asian American literature and that situates this literature against how Asians and Asian Americans have been racialized (and, especially, villainized) during various imperial and colonial campaigns (such as during World War II). De Manuel & Davis (2006) and Cho (2019) have also offered noteworthy historicizing details.

González (2018) is one of few scholars to conduct an in-depth analysis of Latinx children's literature through an explicitly anti-colonial lens. She offers rich historicizing details and contextualization. Unfortunately, her analysis is limited to canonical books published in Spanish in Latin America. Though she sheds light on how such books contributed to the internalized colonization of modern Latin American authors and the ways that colonizing influence have shaped and continue to shape cultural identity (González, 2018), further scholarship is needed to explore initial and enduring colonial influences on Latinx children's literature in the United States. Still, González's findings may inform such work. Significantly, she determined that Indigenous myths such as "Popol Vuh" were translated into Spanish, but altered toward more linear plots to better fit Eurocentric narrative storytelling norms (González, 2018). She also found that the shift from Indigenous to Spanish language erased some of the myths' language-dependent cultural nuances (González, 2018). These findings may be significant for understanding how Eurocentrism and colonization have eroded and erased the storytelling traditions and voices of minoritized people around the world. Illuminating specific

ways this has happened could be important for decolonizing present-day storytelling traditions and establishing epistemic re-existence (Mignolo, 2018d).

Perhaps no group in the United States has been harmed by European settler colonists as much as Indigenous tribes. Their genocide, epistemic erasure, and dehumanization have long been justified by colonizers through a demeaning racialization that has also appeared continuously in how Indigenous peoples are (mis)represented in children's literature. In 2006, Debbie Reese founded the blog and website American Indians in Children's Literature (AICL) where she has created and curated a significant body of critical analyses illuminating these (mis)representations (Reese & Mendoza, 2019, Sept. 30). Jean Mendoza joined Reese as co-editor in 2016. In addition to providing critical analysis, AICL curates book lists with affirming representations, and often provides historicizing details to contextualize the Indigenous racialization and oppression that has been fostered in children's books (Reese & Mendoza, 2019, Sept. 30). Reese & Mendoza's (2019, Sept. 30) website speaks to Indigenous nations' sovereignty and further serves decolonial purposes by making the Eurocentric racialization in children's books visible and by engaging in activism against such racialization.

It will be important for scholars from other minoritized groups (and White allies) to continue to make such Eurocentric racialization visible and to extend beyond literary analysis to explore coloniality and racism in the greater sociopolitical context in any point in time. This will help us understand the resulting influences on children's publishing. Making this visible is crucial to illuminating and subverting systemic reasons for the continued lack of diversity in children's publishing. There is a need to study children's literature in terms of capitalist and educational systems as well.

Gaps in the Research: Moving from Products to Processes and Pedagogy

While a great number of scholars have examined already-published children's books regarding whether depictions of minoritized characters are authentic and affirming, there is a paucity of scholarship concerning the processes leading up to the publication of these books. Hardly any scholars have examined the children's publishing industry, creative writing pedagogy in Children's Literature Master of Fine Arts programs, or the ways children's book writers develop their voices outside of academia.

As a doctoral student in an Education program, I would like to investigate ways to support minoritized creative writers' development in formative spaces by exploring how to decolonize creative writing pedagogy in children's writer's MFA programs. This is vital to helping minoritized children's book writers de-link (Mignolo, 2018d) from the Eurocentric literary and writing norms which continue to reproduce the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2007, 2000, 1992) and center the White gaze (Morrison, 1992), today.

I will speak to how formative spaces might be made decolonized and decolonizing, next.

Decolonizing the Creative Writing Workshop

In 1926, Langston Hughes wrote an opinion piece for *The Nation* entitled "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." In this essay, he described a Black poet's desire to conform to White standards for poetry as being like a "mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America" (p. 692). Hughes discussed and condemned White supremacy's impact on Black writers' self-loathing. He explained how years of conditioning to see White art, writing, values, and habits as superior had resulted in an internalized racism which prevented many Black writers from seeing their (and their communities') talents and worth. He ended by saying that Black writers should express themselves authentically and "without fear or shame" (p. 693). He added,

“If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter... We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves” (p. 693).

Nearly 100 years later, many writers who are Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) still struggle to stand on that mountain and feel free to write authentically from their own perspectives. Worse, most BIPOC writers enrolled in many Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programs are often conditioned to do just the opposite (Adsit, 2017; Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021). In order to recommend ways to transform graduate-level creative writing classrooms so that they are more supportive for and helpful to BIPOC writers, I would like to first make visible how settler colonialism and White supremacy have shaped and continue to shape such formative spaces.

MFA Programs’ Colonialist History

The most widely-used creative writing MFA program pedagogical model, the so-called “workshop model,” originated with the founding of the Iowa Writer’s Workshop (IWW) in 1936 (Salesses, 2021). Most workshops use the IWW’s method: A group of writers sits around a table, critiquing and making suggestions for improving one writer’s work (which they have all carefully read) while that writer remains silent (Salesses, 2021). The workshop instructor tends to facilitate the dynamics in the room, and, through feedback, shapes writers’ understanding of literary merit (Adsit, 2017; Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021). When the IWW began, it was “made up of white males reading white male fiction,” and the norm of silencing the critiqued writer “forced men used to being heard to stop and listen to their likely audience” (Salesses, 2021, p. xx). This practice worked well in such a homogenous group, but it fails when participating writers do not share assumptions, audiences, expectations, and values (Salesses, 2021). In

particular, it most often fails minoritized writers working with predominantly-White classmates because they often end up being pushed toward assimilating into dominant traditions (Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021).

This outcome may have been specifically intended by the IWW's founders.

The IWW was the “first place to formalize the education of creative writing” (Salesses, 2021, p. 20). Its foundational pedagogy was largely shaped by a White poet named Paul Engle, who served as the Workshop's second director (Salesses, 2021). Due to international tensions during the 1940s (particularly surrounding World War II), the IWW sought to resist a perceived threat of communism by positioning participants competitively and by prioritizing individualism instead of collectivism (Bennett, 2015). This was a selling point to applicants. Further, the program “fundraised on claims it would spread American values of freedom [and] of creative writing and art in general as ‘the last refuge of the individual’” (Salesses, 2021, p. 20). Dowling (2019) suggests Engle's competitive, hyper-masculine, individualistic approach to critiquing participants' work alienated those who, before coming to Iowa, had been trained in “communal models drawn from ethnic feminist approaches” (p. 6). Furthermore, the workshop looked to a Eurocentric, male-dominated “canon” for models of excellence (Bennett, 2015). This suggests the reproduction of the colonial values which positioned Europe as the world's locus of enlightenment (Lowe, 2015). Beyond the reification of the Eurocentric “canon,” colonizing and imperial values were privileged at the Iowa Writer's Workshop in other ways, too.

Classes were held in “a set of army barracks left over from World War II” (Dowling, 2019, p. 7), apropos for a competitive program which “through the hard glare of peer criticism fostered a climate of envy, paranoia, and ruthless competition” (Dowling, 2019, p. 8). As the program grew, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (also known as the “G.I. Bill”)

allowed many White, male World War II veterans to register (Bennett, 2015, p. 6). The high number of veterans enrolled combined with Cold War and World War II-based paranoia to create conditions conducive of early program founders' desires to use creative writing to "inoculate the citizenry against fearsome ideologies" (Bennett, 2015, p. 1). Additionally, "For a decade after [World War II], in the name of peace and excellence, overt commitments to collectivist ideals were banished from the American literary mainstream" (Bennett, 2015, p. 3). Thus, the IWW program and its pedagogy were built on an ideological foundation that privileged Western values and norms and specifically sought to exclude and reject Eastern ideals. Because the IWW had little competition within higher academia, its methods became seen as normal and neutral, and then were reproduced and spread by the program's graduates (Salesses, 2021).

Early IWW graduates established their own creative writing workshop programs based on the Iowa model, and alumni of these programs went on to do the same (Dowling, 2019, p. 10). The IWW's pedagogical norms have since been reproduced through many generations of program development at various schools (Dowling, 2019, p. 10), with MFA-holding graduates seeking and creating opportunities to earn a stable income through teaching. What's especially troubling, though, is that "Workshop graduates were not trained to teach" and there were no pedagogical classes included in the IWW curriculum (Dowling, 2019, p. 10). Instead, the IWW program's focus was to professionalize students so they could compete in the publishing industry (Dowling, 2019, p. 10). So, as the IWW's format was reproduced by its graduates, its pedagogical value went largely un- or under-examined. This has had far-reaching consequences. As of 2019, there were more than three hundred creative writing MFA programs emulating the IWW model (Dowling, 2019, p. 9).

Despite the growth of creative writing workshops and degree programs, pedagogical practices in the field of creative writing have continued to go under-examined (Adsit, 2017; Manery, 2016). Creative writing faculty have traditionally been hired on the assumption that the most-published writers are also the best people to teach creative writing (Dowling, 2019). Further, the workshop model made popular at the IWW has long been under-challenged as the best way to teach creative writing courses (Donnelly, 2009, p. 1). As of 2009, about 90% of instructors teaching creative writing were using an Iowa Writer's Workshop-influenced model (Donnelly, 2009). An updated study is needed to determine whether this is still the case, yet research about creative writing pedagogy is scant (Ryan, 2016). Part of the problem is that compared with other disciplines, graduate programs in creative writing tend to underprepare students for both teaching and research (Donnelly, 2009, p. 6). "Creative writing's practitioners are less aware of the history that informs their practice and less certain how to theorize the principles that undergird their practices" (Donnelly, 2009, pp. 6-7). Some creative writing professors are beginning to shine the bright light of inquiry on both pedagogy and craft (Adsit, 2017; Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021). Attention is particularly being turned toward how we can decolonize the field of creative writing (Chavez, 2020).

This is a primary focus of my research agenda. For me, "decolonizing" the creative writing workshop means delinking (Mignolo, 2007) from Eurocentric norms for creative writing, so that minoritized writers who do not subscribe to such norms can foster their epistemic re-existence (Mignolo, 2018d). Along these lines, decolonizing creative writing in higher education also means creating a culturally-sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012) where diverse voices and practices are valued every bit as much as those rooted in the IWW and the Eurocentric canon. "Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—

linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism” (Paris, 2012). A culturally sustaining creative writing pedagogy would de-center White, Eurocentric storytelling and pedagogical norms as dictating the standards by which all writing should be judged, and would make room for many standards from many cultural and artistic traditions.

This is important because a lot of racially minoritized (BIPOC) workshop participants have felt fragmented in White-dominant courses and programs and have been pressured to write in ways that are not culturally-authentic or empowering (Adsit, 2017; Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021).

My Experiences and Subjectivity

It’s harmful to be a young reader and rarely see positive depictions of people from your race or culture in children’s books (Bishop, 2007, 1990, 1982; Larrick, 1965). As a half-Vietnamese (and half-White) child, I grew up with one well-worn book of Vietnamese folk tales. The few other children’s stories I read which featured Vietnamese characters either portrayed war-related (or refugee) trauma or were highly stereotypical. Even today, it is unusual to find American-published children’s books featuring Vietnamese characters which do not center or at least mention war-related trauma. Because of the scarcity of American-published children’s books featuring Vietnamese characters during my youth, I often turned to books with Asian characters from other countries (such as China and Japan) to find the closest thing I could resembling a “mirror” (Bishop, 1990). Many of these books were wrought with demeaning stereotypes (Yi, 2020), yet as a young reader, I did not recognize the yellow skin, slanted eyes, and other caricaturish features in books like *The Five Chinese Brothers* as being based on racist tropes (Dahlen, 2021).

The vast majority of the books I read as a child featured White characters, animals, or fantasy creatures, as those were (and continue to be) the most common casts of American-published children's books (Creating Community, 2020, Apr. 21; Tyner, 2020). As I began writing my own stories (starting in 2nd grade, but with increased seriousness throughout middle and high school), I segregated my characters into genres and storylines in the same ways they'd been segregated in the books I had read, books which had become maps for my own limited creative journey (C. Myers, 2014). White, animal, and fantasy characters got to have all the fun, while my Asian, Asian American (and later Latinx) characters explored trauma.

These maps (C. Myers, 2014) were reinforced in the creative writing courses I took at numerous universities and in the feedback I received from professionals (particularly agents and editors) within the children's publishing industry. I want to be clear that most of the individual students, teachers, and publishing professionals I have worked with have been warm, professional, and supportive. The MFA in Children's Literature program that I earned my degree from at Hollins University provided an outstanding, enriching community that I'm still highly-involved with a decade after receiving that degree. Hollins was also where my love for critical inquiry emerged, and that foundation has carried me to this current work. The issues I'm raising have long been present at most universities and should not be seen as indictments of any one school (Chavez, 2020).

Despite working with mostly supportive individuals in numerous programs, classrooms, conferences, and conversations, the colonial roots of American children's publishing and creative writing pedagogy have typically taught me or driven me to assimilate to Eurocentric writing norms (for plot structure, character development, etc.) and to center White readers' gaze and understanding (an unfortunate side effect of being one of the only minoritized people, and

often the only minoritized person in many rooms). These colonialist pressures have been likewise identified by other minoritized writers (Chavez, 2020; Díaz, J., 2014, April 30; Magoon, 2020; Salesses, 2021).

Overwhelmingly, stories I've written featuring minoritized characters' trauma have been far better received by mostly-White classmates, teachers, and publishing industry professionals than those which have not plumbed trauma. Magoon (2020) similarly noted that children's and young adult books by Black authors are often pigeonholed with well-worn expectations for topics, tone, and centering the White gaze. Writing conventions rooted in White canonical traditions have been positioned as universal and culturally neutral, though they are not (Salesses, 2021). Consequently, my attempts to break deeply-held expectations and norms have been met with disinterest at best and, more frequently, with pressure to assimilate back to typical expectations. Like other minoritized writers, I have had White peers tell me my poems are "not poetry," and have had teachers, peers, and editors ask me to showcase more of my minoritized characters' trauma and center White readers' understanding, more. This feedback seems to be aimed at helping me to conform to industry norms that are seen as universal, yet these norms are actually rooted in unexamined White traditions (Salesses, 2021). This ongoing push toward assimilation (over the course of decades of interactions) has fostered a deep fragmentation within me (Anzaldúa, 2015d). When I try to center minoritized characters in the types of fantastic fiction I enjoy and I believe minoritized young readers (and White young reads) need (Thomas, 2019), I feel unsure of myself or like I'm venturing somewhere I (and characters who look like me) do not belong. The maps which expand into fun and fantastic worlds (C. Myers, 2014) feel closed off to my whole self. The minoritized parts of my identity trespass if they venture out of traumatic realism or "traditional" (White canon-driven) forms. Again, this is not a result of any

intended harm, but rather the unintended effect of an unexamined colonialist curriculum built on literary traditions that are likewise seen as neutral instead of rooted in specific cultural traditions which are not applicable to all writers (Salesses, 2021). It is important to expose how these traditions impact minoritized writers and make space for more authentic teaching, mentoring, and (especially) writing (Chavez, 2020; Díaz, J., 2014, April 30; Magoon, 2020; Salesses, 2021). As an Education major, I am also particularly interested in exploring how to remove colonialist, Eurocentric traditions from unquestioned dominance in creative writing workshops, and make space for additional cultural traditions, methods, and techniques to be equally valued. Kaneria, Kasun, & Trinh (2021) have suggested that minoritized students developing decolonial understandings need emotional supports as they grow their awareness. Thus, I'm also interested in discovering how to facilitate healing and well-being during periods of epistemic de-linking (Mignolo, 2009) from internalized colonization.

Decolonizing MFA Workshops

According to Zavala (2016), decolonial work seeks to reclaim three things: identities, practices, and spaces. Though many different cultures developed storytelling traditions that long preceded the founding of the IWW, these traditions have not often been taught in university settings (Dowling, 2019). Thus, any “reclaiming” in higher education is not meant to take back something lost from within the Ivory Tower; it's meant, instead, to reclaim pre-colonial ideals and values, and to bring them into academia. Adsit (2017) suggests we must “transform the teaching of literary writing craft into an opportunity for critical reflection on cultural production in its diversity and range” (p. 3).

Because of this, I will use the term “(re)claim” to signify the potential novelty of bringing some pre-colonial values into higher education classrooms where they may or may not have been claimed, before.

This said, formalized academic spaces are often colonized spaces, and it can be difficult for decolonial scholars working in higher education to do subversive work without reproducing at least some of the colonialist practices and philosophies they are seeking to resist (Ortega, 2017). With this caveat in mind, let’s explore how we might (re)claim identities, practices, and spaces and work toward decolonizing the field of creative writing.

(Re)claiming Identities. Perhaps the most influential way to (re)claim minoritized identities in creative writing classrooms is to decenter the perception of Whiteness as universal or neutral (Salesses, 2021). Below, I will list and explain several actions that can be taken toward this goal. This list is not exhaustive of all possibilities, and is a starting point.

Rendering Colonization Visible. Often, the craft principles that are held sacred in Creative Writing workshops are falsely believed to be universally-valued when, instead, they come from distinctly Eurocentric traditions (Adsit, 2017; Salesses, 2021). So much of what is prescribed comes from and benefits the dominant group while serving to silence and erase minoritized voices (Salesses, 2021). This has historic colonialist and imperialist roots and modern-day consequences.

Salesses (2021) says:

In many workshops, in many craft books, the dominance of one tradition of craft, serving one particular audience (white, middle-class, straight, able, etc.), is essentially literary imperialism, a term that should make us wary of the danger especially to emerging minority and marginalized voices. (pp. 5-6)

It is important to expose the cultural situatedness of Creative Writing “craft,” especially where hierarchies of value emerge. Adsit (2017) argues that we should “identify how our aesthetic values and criteria came to be, who set their terms, and how these values risk keeping some works of creative production on the margins” (p. 57). Creative Writing students are conditioned to see certain types of writing as “literary,” and thus better than other types of writing (Adsit, 2017). “This pedagogy of taste is white-centered and male-centered and class-based and it vigilantly maintains its biases” (Adsit, 2017, pp. 61-62). Exposing how colonialism led to the privileging of and reproduction of Eurocentrism (Lowe, 2015), could help to de-center Whiteness in Creative Writing pedagogy, making room for many literary traditions and for many diverse voices and styles to be explored and valued. To assist in this endeavor, students should be exposed to readings by writers from many cultures (Chavez, 2020). This brings us to our next action.

Expanding the “Canon.” The stories and books that have been positioned as the gold standard for quality in most MFA programs (the so-called “canon”) typically have been written by White male authors, writing within Eurocentric traditions (Salesses, 2021). According to Jivraj, Bakshi, & Posocco (2020) “resisting the [reproduction] of the canon, and creating an ‘other’ episteme characterizes decolonial world-making, thereby clearing space for the decolonial option of reemergence” (p. 453). In other words, if we value work from additional cultural lineages, we make space for new writers to follow in diverse traditions, including those which may have been unfairly de-valued during colonization (Jivraj, Bakshi, & Posocco, 2020). Decolonizing creative writing means delinking (Mignolo, 2007), or moving away from the idea that there is only one narrow set of worthwhile practices (in this case, practices with roots in Eurocentric traditions).

To encourage cultural pluralism (Paris, 2012), works by writers from varied racial and cultural backgrounds should be the norm on readings lists for both coursework and comprehensive exams (Adsit, 2017). That said, creative writing students should also have greater opportunities to develop their own readings lists and should be encouraged to position themselves amongst the writers with which they best align. This process of situating oneself could be extended further via the next recommendation.

Examining Positionality. We should encourage creative writers to craft positionality statements (England, 1994) situating themselves racially and culturally compared with other writers. Positionality statements are used in qualitative educational research to help researchers stay aware of how their own cultural and racial backgrounds may influence their abilities to draw conclusions, particularly when working with research participants from other racial or cultural groups (Milner, 2007). Tillman (2002) suggested we should take care to explore whether researchers have the “cultural knowledge to accurately interpret and validate” the experiences of people from other races and cultures (p. 4). Positionality statements can help researchers grow an awareness of how their own cultural backgrounds limit their perceptiveness, which is particularly important when researchers from dominant groups are working with minoritized participants (Milner, 2007).

Milner (2007) offers a series of questions that qualitative researchers can use to explore their positionality. These can be used to create a positionality statement making one’s background and frames of reference explicitly clear both to the researcher and to others. Amongst the questions Milner (2007) offers on p. 395, are:

- “What is my racial and cultural heritage? How do I know?”

- “In what ways do my racial and cultural backgrounds influence how I experience the world, what I emphasize in my research, and how I evaluate and interpret others and their experiences? How do I know?”

These (and the other questions Milner provides) could be re-worded to fit the context of a creative writing workshop and to allow writers to examine how they came to their own culturally-situated beliefs about writing, and how these beliefs shape their evaluation of others’ work. Further, Milner (2007) offers qualitative researchers an additional series of questions to consider about the participants they are working with. These questions help to situate research participants in their own unique cultural traditions and with possibly different formative experiences and values that the researcher may not share (p. 395). A comparable list of questions, or a parallel thought process, could be used for writers participating in workshops to help make their and their peers’ needs, values, and worldviews more visible, particularly regarding how they do or do not align with dominant traditions.

Adsit (2017) offers such a list. Her questions help workshop participants consider their cultural assumptions and biases. Some particularly helpful questions include: “In what ways am I, as a student in a workshop class, reading with different assumptions than the writer’s intended audience?; How do my enmeshments and experiences influence my reading?” (p. 130). Adsit (2017) offers other questions that can help workshop participants understand authors’ choices for characterization, point of view, theme, and other often-considered aspects of story (pp. 130-132). It is not enough for workshop students to make assumptions about their peers’ answers, though. This brings us to the next idea.

Unsilencing the Workshop. During critiques, workshop participants often “impose their own intentions on the text and overwrite it by providing prescriptive comments that manifest

their biases and taste” (Adsit, 2017, p. 129). This is particularly troublesome when mostly-White writers offer criticism and suggestions to racially minoritized writers, thereby imposing dominant norms on these minoritized writers’ work (Adsit, 2017; Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021).

Minoritized writers “may experience this as a silencing, colonizing gesture” (Adsit, 2017, p. 129), which pushes them toward assimilating into the dominant group’s norms. This becomes especially oppressive during traditional workshops where the writers being critiqued are expected to remain silent (Adsit, 2017).

Too often, when a minoritized writer is silenced, others make assumptions that may not be accurate (Chavez, 2020). Nguyen (2019) describes a workshop she participated in, where her mostly-White classmates were unfamiliar with a term she had used in her story, “dim sum.” Because she had to remain silent, her peers spent a significant amount of time trying to figure out the meaning of the term, and then collectively agreed that it was confusing and made the rest of the story confusing. This resulted in pressure for Nguyen to center her White classmates’ understanding, and thus the understanding of White readers. She realized, “The group’s knowledge *was* knowledge. I was the outsider, the strange Asian who needed to adapt my work to what they understood” (Nguyen, 2019, n.p.). This experience is highly-relatable to most minoritized writers (myself included) who have been silenced in workshops with predominantly-White classmates (Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021).

To help minoritized writers center their own culturally-situated voices, Nguyen (2019) recommends “unsilencing” the workshop and allowing creators to make clarifications, ask questions, and help direct the conversation. She says we should start the workshop process by asking writers to explicitly state what they are trying to do in any piece of work being reviewed. She also suggests creating a dialogue between the writer and their peers in which the writer is

encouraged to talk through any sticking points until they begin to find their own solutions. Further, she proposes having the other workshop participants (those who would normally offer critique) ask strategic questions to help the writer talk through particular aspects of their process and make discoveries along the way. Chavez (2020) likewise suggests helping writers to grow their writing through their own observations. This is helpful because it fosters a self-awareness that will be necessary outside of the classroom (Chavez, 2020).

Others also recommend moving away from prescriptive models whereby writers writing from dominant perspectives may judge minoritized writers via assumptions and norms that are not shared (Adsit, 2017; Salesses, 2021). Instead, it may be more helpful for workshop collaborators to reflect back their understandings of the writing and the emotions evoked and/or to offer constructive, open-ended (and not leading) questions to help the writer to expand their thinking about the story and their writing process (Adsit, 2017; Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021).

Students will likely need to be scaffolded into an ability to ask helpful questions (Adsit, 2017), and this requires considerable skill from the instructor. Research is needed to determine best pedagogical practices, yet both research practices and pedagogical practices are not given enough attention in most MFA programs (Donnelly, 2009).

This brings us to our next area of (re)claiming.

(Re)claiming Practices. Greater inquiry is needed to examine creative writing as a field (Donnelly, 2009; Ryan, 2016). In particular, critical inquirers should examine the practices that may uphold systemic racism in the two systems with the (arguably) biggest impact on creative writing: Higher education and the publishing industry. To grow such scholarship and illuminate best practices, we need to offer creative writing graduate students (particularly doctoral students) more quantitative and qualitative research skills (Donnelly, 2009). We also need to reward them,

and tenure track faculty, for using such skills (perhaps through the awarding of assistantships, grants, course releases, and other incentives).

Overall, to decolonize creative writing, we need to teach and practice critically-informed research, pedagogy, and publishing/editing. I will explain possible directions and justifications for each of these categories, below.

Teaching and Practicing Critically-Informed Research Skills. More than anything, the field of Creative Writing needs a greater foundation of research (Ryan, 2016). Donnelly (2009) suggests that MFA and PhD programs in Creative Writing should engage students in research because many norms in the field of Creative Writing have been assumed to be valuable without enough inquiry into best practices (pp. 140-141). To help address the lack of enough Creative Writing inquiry (Donnelly, 2009; Ryan, 2016), more critical research frameworks and methods should be taught that move beyond literary criticism toward also examining the systems which impact teaching, learning, creation, and publication (Donnelly, 2009).

Through research, we should particularly seek to explore and transform best practices for creative writing pedagogy, including exploring how such pedagogy is taught and assessed (Manery, 2016). This brings us to the second way to (re)claim practices.

Teaching and Practicing Critically-Informed Pedagogical Skills. Most of the people who are teaching Creative Writing have never been taught how to teach it (Manery, 2016). There is a tendency in Creative Writing programs to hire prolific and award-winning authors under the assumption that masterful writers will be able to shape writing apprentices through workshop interactions (Manery, 2016). This assumption has left Creative Writing pedagogy largely unexamined (Manery, 2016). Additionally, very little scholarly attention has been paid to how pedagogical norms impact racial tensions and the silencing of minoritized students. Given the

workshop model's colonialist roots (Salesses, 2021), much more attention should be paid to determining its goodness of fit for minoritized students' authentic development. Much more attention should be paid to understanding best practices in pedagogy, period (Manery, 2016). This includes examining how pedagogical practices are being taught and passed down.

Overall, creative writing pedagogy courses are relatively new. In Manery's (2016) study, the earliest such course she could identify was taught in 1996 (60 years after the founding of the IWW) (p. 7). Additionally, in 2016, Manery found that only 33 Creative Writing MFA programs in the United States include pedagogical coursework. Even in the programs where coursework is offered, if it is not required, few students opt to take pedagogy courses (Manery, 2016). So, very few instructors have taken courses where they have built and critiqued practices related specifically to teaching creative writing. This is troublesome considering there are currently more than three hundred creative writing MFA programs emulating the IWW model (Dowling, 2019, p. 9). Manery (2016) suggests that without learning how to teach in a pedagogy-focused course, most creative writing teachers simply replicate what their own instructors did, which usually means replicating IWW processes for critique (p. 34). This leads to reproducing both the IWW model's strengths and weaknesses (Manery, 2016).

In particular, this has implications for reproducing systemic racism. According to Adsit (2017), "The workshop as it has been is not set up to support antiracist and inclusive pedagogy" (p. 128). For example, because most workshop teachers have not received enough instruction on pedagogical skills, they may not know how to scaffold students into respectful conversations about ethnocentrism (in work and in critiquer comments) (Adsit, 2017). They may also be ill-equipped for addressing micro-aggressions during oral critique sessions (Adsit, 2017, p. 128). Unfortunately, though, even instructors who have taken pedagogical courses may not have

adequate skills for addressing racism and fostering equity in classrooms. Of the seven creative writing pedagogy course instructors Manery (2016) interviewed, only one required future instructors to engage with materials related to cultural studies. Thus, even if pedagogical courses are being offered, they may not be taught using critical anti-racist or decolonial frameworks that could help disrupt systemic racism. Overall, much more inquiry is needed into whether and how anti-racist/decolonial pedagogical practices are taught and how they are incorporated into workshops (Manery, 2016). That said, future instructors also need alternatives the IWW format, in general (Adsit, 2017; Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021).

Manery (2016) notes that there are few explicitly codified workshop alternatives, but that one which stands out is Hazel Smith's approach, which Smith explains in her textbook, *The Writing Experiment: Strategies for Innovative Creative Writing* (as cited in Manery, 2016, pp. 35-36). Smith teaches in Australia, which may offer her space to break away from the IWW's dominance in America. Smith's ideas are particularly noteworthy because they are based in critical and cultural theories (Manery, 2016). Since the publication of Manery's 2016 dissertation, several additional critically-framed workshop alternatives have been offered by Adsit (2017), Chavez (2020), and Salesses (2021).

While it seems like more and more instructors and programs are offering workshop alternatives (like faculty/student one-on-one mentorships), "in the absence of empirical research on creative writing programs as a collective, no claims of change or permanence can be supported beyond the local" (Manery, 2016). Therefore, much more research is needed, especially from critical standpoints

Teaching and Practicing Critically-Informed Editing Skills. Much of the value in MFA courses comes from receiving an instructor's editorial feedback, yet many instructors offer

editorial feedback which seeks to move students' work toward Eurocentric canonical values (Salesses, 2021). MFA students should be taught critically-informed editing skills to prepare them for potential roles as instructors or as editors or publishers.

As successful students move into gatekeeping roles in higher education and in the publishing industry, they may be able to have an impact on subverting racism within systems. This brings us to our next area of reclamation.

(Re)claiming Spaces. An important part of decolonizing creative writing programs is (re)claiming spaces so that they are more welcoming to and inclusive of racially-minoritized students and faculty. I have many ideas about how to do this, and will discuss several, below. First and foremost, I think it's vital to change departmental names so that they are more inclusive.

Switching Away from "English" Departments. English classes "position people of color as 'Other' in order to satisfy a meticulously curated white supremacist agenda: a 'classical' education" (Chavez, 2020, p. 22). Starting in high school, students in the United States (in particular) are exposed to "an in-depth study of 'the classics,' a learned standard that privileges white narratives and reinforces white superiority" (Chavez, 2020, p. 22). This harkens back to colonial positioning of Eurocentric art and literature as "enlightened" compared with the work of people in the countries Europeans wished to colonize (Lowe, 2015). Because of this privileging of Eurocentric work as the most valuable, "the fact that English Departments so often house creative writing programs proves problematic, for the infrastructure inherently biases workshop curriculum" (Chavez, 2020, p. 22). In a decolonial move, some universities are moving toward departmental names and norms inclusive of culturally-situated or multicultural "literatures" rather than just "English" literature (Gallien, 2020). Changing "English" departments to

departments of “Languages and Literatures” or adopting similarly more inclusive names might allow for a decolonial reclaiming of departmental spaces (Gallien, 2020), or, at least create an atmosphere where cultural pluralism (Paris, 2012) is not foreclosed through such a limiting name. The resultant shift in values away from one cultural heritage, toward many, could broaden perspectives concerning value within creative writing workshop (or other formative) spaces, too.

Because many people of color have chosen not to enroll in “English” programs (due to an innate understanding of the cultural biases inherent in such programs) (Chavez, 2020), it may also be important for departments to engage with minoritized communities working outside of the ivory tower. There has been a long tradition of minoritized writers teaching poetry and other genres outside of formal academic spaces (Hegamin, 2016). To create more racially and culturally inclusive creative writing programs, greater connection between such programs and non-academic communities is needed, particularly regarding recruitment. This brings us to the next recommended change.

Changing Recruitment Practices (for Both Students and Faculty). Many racially minoritized people have avoided joining MFA programs for a variety of reasons, the most common seeming to be that they do not feel at home in such predominantly-White spaces (Chavez, 2020). My hunch is that programs that are able to recruit and retain more students and faculty of color will likely continue to recruit and retain diverse membership. Chavez (2020) suggests that we should decolonize programs *first* and then seek to recruit students and faculty who might feel more comfortable in inclusive, welcoming spaces.

In addition, once inclusive spaces are created, attention should be given to funding and other supports which might make it easy for minoritized students and faculty to join programs with less personal risk. Significant attention should also be paid to factors which enable such

students' and faculty members' success and retention. For faculty, this means greater attention should be paid to tenure and promotion criteria (Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2020).

Changing Tenure and Promotion Criteria for Faculty. It is difficult for minoritized faculty to effect change without the job security and power tenure provides. Yet, racially-minoritized faculty members' work is often under-valued, particularly if it does not align with (or seeks to subvert) dominant norms (Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2020). This has implications for tenure and promotion (Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2020). Concerning creative writing, departments should closely examine how many racially minoritized faculty members they have on staff and whether these faculty are employed as contingent faculty (adjuncts, lecturers, and short-term visiting professors) or as tenure track faculty.

Regarding the tenure and promotion process, departments should re-assess which publications are seen as having the most cache. This will help prevent epistemic exclusion (Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2020). The concept of epistemic exclusion comes from Black feminist theorists and "questions normative beliefs about what forms of knowledge (epistemology) are valued and which producers of knowledge are deemed legitimate" (p. 2). Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson (2020) found that racially minoritized faculty typically do work that does not fit into dominant norms, and, consequently, their work is more likely to be judged as less-legitimate or less-valuable.

One way this is manifested is in the privileging of work accepted by so-called "top-tier" journals and publishing presses, both of which tend to prefer work that reproduces dominant norms, values, and perspectives (p. 10). Further, racially-minoritized faculty reported feeling like their work was often "incomprehensible" to White colleagues who expected writing to center White norms and be easily understandable within dominant paradigms. Though Settles, Jones,

Buchanan, & Dotson's (2020) work primarily examined scholarly (rather than creative) work, similar prejudices determine "value" in creative publication, too (Adsit, 2017). "Criteria and craft principles used to discuss 'good writing' are culturally contingent...Creative writing has remained discriminatory and uncritical of the tendencies it reinforces" (Adsit, 2017, p. 11). Further, there is an elitism centered in dominant values, whereby certain forms of writing that are often favored by minoritized writers have historically been under-valued, including "activist writing, genre fiction, popular mass-market texts, 'Oprahfied' literature, spoken word and slam poetry, and so-called 'sentimental' literature" (Adsit, 2017, p. 14). These types of writing are also often disparaged in seminal craft texts (Adsit, 2017). Because work which does not subscribe to dominant norms is under-valued, it may not be published as often in top-tier literary journals, or by presses which have greater cache in tenure and promotion dossiers. Departments should consider the difficulties faced by racially minoritized writers who have been shown to be published less than their White peers (CCBC, 2021). Additionally, greater consideration should be given to forms (such as spoken word and slam poetry) which have been embraced by minoritized communities, and looked down on by writers from dominant groups (Adsit, 2017).

There are, of course, many other issues to consider related to the retainment and promotion of minoritized faculty in general (Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2020). But, examining tenure and promotion practices to avoid epistemic exclusion is a good first step (Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2020). Once literary "values" are expanded to be inclusive of a wider variety of styles and forms, departments should also seek to help offer greater opportunities to publish such work, particularly in venues that are respected in academia. This brings us to the final suggestion.

Creating More Journals, University Presses, and Publishing Houses which Value Cultural Pluralism. To reduce literary gatekeeping, which often excludes minoritized writers unless they “imitate whiteness” (Chavez, 2020), more opportunities are needed where people who understand and value cultural pluralism hold editorial and publishing power. Though there are numerous independent journals and small presses devoted to anti-racist and decolonial work, more of such work is needed within universities so that the students learning, there, can be taught and mentored into the inclusive editorial and publishing practices that grow and promote cultural pluralism.

Many people working in publishing have taken creative writing coursework at some point during their educational careers. “Discussions of the literary publishing industry have a connecting line to the higher education curriculum in creative writing” (Adsit, 2017, p. 16). Students who are interested in working in publishing would benefit from gaining editorial experience using anti-racist, decolonial practices. This could have an impact on how future agents, editors, and publishers shape norms within the publishing industry at large.

Further, minoritized students and faculty (particularly tenure-track faculty) also need more respected venues for their work, and university-related journals and presses are often seen as upholding standards for peer review that satisfy university-related gatekeepers’ concerns about quality. It is difficult, of course, to create journals and presses within a colonizing system without reproducing harm (Ortega, 2017). But, with attention to research, pedagogy, and the other practices noted above, perhaps we can, in time, develop enough consciousness and conscientiousness about anti-racist, decolonial praxis to succeed.

Summary

There are numerous ways creative writing MFA workshops and programs might be critically examined and changed through a decolonial lens to foster minoritized students' authenticity and well-being. Primarily, changes can and should be made to help such students (re)claim identities, practices, and spaces. These changes would not necessarily displace Eurocentric traditions, but could make room for culturally pluralistic expansiveness and the honoring and valuing of wider traditions and needs.

A Final Thought

Per Richardson (2018), so often critical work is done by racially minoritized scholars, and solutions are proposed, but the people with power in dominant systems do not provide the resources needed to effect change. I have been an academic for my whole adult life. I am not naïve to the fact that material resources are needed, and it is incredibly difficult for minoritized people doing critical work to be granted such resources by groups who wish to maintain dominance. Sadly, much of what I have outlined, above, may not be possible within our current systems of higher education and publishing. Thus, minoritized writers may need to continue to strengthen ways to develop each other's voices and careers outside of such systems. There is a reason this work has largely existed peripheral to academia (in groups such as Canto Mundo, Cave Canem, Kundiman, Macondo Writers, and so on). It is difficult to simultaneously hold great hope and cynicism about the (de)colonial future of higher education. Over the past few years, I have personally witnessed growth that's tipped the scales in the direction of hope. At UTK, a predominantly white institution, I've been able to learn with three outstanding female writers of color. Prior to my arrival, I had never had that opportunity in a workshop setting. I am not sure what's possible, but I can tolerate that ambiguity, for now.

Raza Memon & Jivraj (2020) suggest decolonial efforts can and are occurring without scholars' full understanding or vision of what the end goal may be (p. 488). They suggest that holding a tolerance for this ambiguous direction is important and allows scholars to take the journey that is needed for healing, and not stick to a prescribed path that might limit growth.

Overall, this dissertation is a step toward my own personal healing with hopes that my journey may be instructive to others who have felt fragmented in their professional and personal development. Because colonialism is at the roots of my personal, professional, and creative fragmentation (Anzaldúa, 2015d; Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021), decolonial theories and methods will be most useful for fostering my restoration. The following section will discuss my decolonial theoretical framework, methodological framework, and methods.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL & METHODOLOGICAL FRAMES AND METHODS

Theoretical Framework: An Overview of Postcolonial and Decolonial Theories

I have positioned this section as “an” overview to acknowledge that there are complex conversations and disagreements about the semantic uses of “postcolonial” and “decolonial” (Asher & Ramamurthy, 2020; Bhattacharya, 2016). Throughout the literature I reviewed, I often found incongruence in scholars’ use of these terms, primarily where “postcolonial” was positioned as inclusive of what other scholars would distinguish as “decolonial” theory.

Here, I seek to illuminate my personal understanding of these terms and then position myself in conversation alongside scholars who situate themselves with a shared or similar alignment. Before doing this, however, I wish to provide context for the origins of postcolonial and decolonial theories.

Colonial Genesis

In order to understand postcolonial and decolonial theories, we must first understand what they seek to subvert: Colonialism.

Broadly defined, colonialism is “a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another” (Kohn & Reddy, 2017, n.p.). Colonialism is often conflated with imperialism, but colonialism requires settlement, whereas imperialism does not (Kohn & Reddy, 2017, n.p.). Imperialism involves broad ways one country might control a territory, which could include settlement, but more typically is limited to sovereignty, military domination, resource extraction, or other forms of control which do not require settlement (Kohn & Reddy, 2017, n.p.). Colonialism more specifically requires settler colonists to move to and (often forcibly) seize control of a new territory (and its peoples) (Kohn & Reddy, 2017). Settler colonists live in

and control their subsumed territories in service to the interests of their original countries (Kohn & Reddy, 2017).

Though colonialism occurred when the ancient Roman and Ottoman (and other) empires invaded and took control of nearby territories, the development of sailing technology in the 15th and 16th centuries led to European countries' attempts to take over and control most of the lands, resources, and peoples of the world (Kohn & Reddy, 2017, n.p.). Postcolonial and decolonial scholars primarily address the impacts of this European-driven colonization which spanned from the late 1400s to the anti-colonial, national liberation movements of the mid-1900s (Kohn & Reddy, 2017, n.p.).

Additionally, although people have sought to make sense of and resist European colonization throughout its long history, our current and evolving academic understandings of colonialism have developed largely through hindsight from the vantage points of 20th and 21st century perspectives (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.). Anti-colonial movements gained strength during the mid-1900s, seeking and resulting in the successful overthrow of many colonial powers in various countries worldwide (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.). Early anti-colonial scholars laid the groundwork for what would later become postcolonial and decolonial scholarship. Aimé Césaire (1950) was one of the first scholars to deconstruct the colonial discourse which pitted natives as pagan savages and colonizers as morally enlightened. Césaire (1950) highlighted the brutality of colonizers' violence and slavery. Further, he suggested colonialism ultimately dehumanizes both the colonized and the colonizer. Finally, he showed how European racialization was used to dehumanize Black people in Africa and in countries like his native Caribbean island, Martinique (Césaire, 1950). His work was revolutionary in its time, not just because of his political discourse, but also because he employed a poetic writing style.

Frantz Fanon (1961; 1952) studied under Césaire. Both were from the French colony of Martinique and educated in France, and both were heavily influenced by Marxism. After additionally studying psychiatry, Fanon wrote his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, which examined the harmful psychological effects of colonialism on Black people (Fanon, 1952). In addition to addressing the harms of colonialism, Fanon was also one of the first scholars to name and examine the mechanisms and effects of anti-Black racism, which he understood as an effect of colonialism (Drabinski, 2019). Fanon also expanded on Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of gaze, discussing in particular how the White gaze negatively impacts Blackness (Drabinsky, 2019). Additionally, Fanon developed the concept of a racial inferiority complex, illuminating how anti-Black racism can become internalized by colonized Black people (Drabinsky, 2019). Finally, Fanon offered an anti-Colonial path toward Black liberation, encouraging people to question racism's normalization (Drabinsky, 2019). Fanon offered more concrete direction for anti-Colonialist movements in his later (1961) book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, by suggesting that activists in colonized nations should employ violence to dismantle colonizing governments. This work became foundational in anti-colonial movements to overthrow oppressive settler governments, especially in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia (Drabinsky, 2019).

Two major theoretical conversations grew out of the successful anti-colonial movements that overthrew colonial powers in different parts of the world. Postcolonial scholarship is mostly attributed to scholars speaking to colonization which occurred in South, East, and Southeast Asia, while decolonial scholarship is mainly attributed to scholars speaking to colonization in the Americas (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.). Consequently, postcolonial and decolonial theorists have established differing (but sometimes overlapping) conceptualizations of colonialism and have

sought to understand, address, and subvert it in ways aligning with their respective perspectives (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.).

It is important to note that scholars identifying with both of these lenses are doing anti-colonial work and they have much more in common than disagreements would sometimes suggest (Asher & Ramamurthy, 2020). It is also important to understand that anti-colonial scholarship is relatively new, and not even 100 years old as a field. Consequently, postcolonial and decolonial scholars are trying to make sense of these terms while also often making sense of their own heritages, oppressions, and possibilities for liberation (Asher & Ramamurthy, 2020). Identities and definitions are complex and evolving; sometimes they're oversimplified, and other times, overcomplicated (Asher & Ramamurthy, 2020).

In the following sections, I will delineate my own understandings of postcolonial and decolonial frameworks, situating each in terms of its geographical, sociological, and epistemic roots and consequences. Then, I will explain the decolonial feminist frameworks that grew out of postcolonial, feminist, and critical race theories and situate my own work in alignment with the work of other decolonial feminist and de/colonial (Bhattacharya, 2009) feminist scholars of color.

Postcolonial Theory

Though native people in colonized countries have sought to resist and subvert colonialism for centuries, postcolonial theory as an academic construct became formalized in the late 20th century following successful anti-colonial movements which overthrew European colonial governments in numerous colonized countries, particularly in Asia (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.). Below, I will explain the contributions of three major postcolonial theorists: Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha.

Postcolonial theory is largely attributed to Edward Said's (1978) groundbreaking book, *Orientalism*. Said (1978) suggested European dominance was rationalized by Europeans who positioned themselves in a binary where Europe, the "Occident," was a bastion of scientific and religious enlightenment. Conversely, European scholars and politicians positioned Middle Eastern and other Asian regions as the scientifically and morally underdeveloped "Orient." The Occident became colloquially referred to as the "West" and the Orient became its respective "East." Based on Said's foundational concepts, Postcolonial theory explores and critiques how colonialist traditions "[assume] that western civilization is the pinnacle of progress, while all other cultures are in a process of becoming" (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.).

Similar to Said, postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak (1993) criticized Eurocentric scholars for their epistemic violence against the third-world "Other," a violence enacted through applying colonial lenses to what she calls the "subaltern" (i.e. subordinated and oppressed people in colonized countries such as India). In her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1993), Spivak draws heavily on Marxist ideology to critique the ways Eurocentric scholars often speak for subaltern people instead of soliciting or respecting their firsthand representations of their own ideas. The subaltern are in a sense dehumanized, and because they are seen only as subjects, they are put into the position of the "Other," as less human than the supposedly enlightened Europeans (Spivak, 1993). This essay became foundational for disrupting assumptions about who can speak for whom and for disrupting hierarchies that position the descendants of European enlightenment as the observers and distributors of all trustworthy knowledge.

Another foundational postcolonial theorist is Homi Bhabha, who developed the concept of "unhomeliness" (Bhabha, 1992). This refers to the psychological displacement the colonized (or their descendants) may feel when they are fragmented between cultures (particularly if they

have been displaced from their, or their ancestors' homelands). "To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: Your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee" (Tyson, 2015, p. 403). Bhabha's (1992) work speaks to the common internal tensions and conflicts colonized people may feel when they are forced to adopt the colonizer's culture, yet can never fully belong in it (largely because they are racialized as outsiders). Colonized people may also cease to feel like full members of their ancestors' cultures, especially if they have lost linguistic, religious, or other cultural connections as a result of colonization.

Bhabha (1994) is also credited with developing the concept of "hybridity," which refers to the mixing of native and colonizing cultural elements into something new and blended (potentially in ways that subvert the scope of the dominant culture's reach). Creole language is an example of such mixing (Bhabha, 1994). Overall, Bhabha's work speaks to the lasting effects of losing one's cultural roots and sense of groundedness and belonging due to the fragmenting violence of colonization.

Most postcolonial theory originated with scholars from formerly-colonized countries in Asia, particularly India. One criticism of such scholars is that many were educated at European Universities, distancing them from the "subaltern" and positioning them as "intellectual elites" in their home countries (Tyson, 2015, p. 407). Below, I will explain some additional criticisms.

Criticisms of Postcolonial Theory. A few of the major criticisms about postcolonial theories have been answered by decolonial scholars. One of the main critiques is that postcolonial theorists typically think and write in English (or other European languages, such as French), and tend to favor Eurocentric theories such as Marxism (Lim, 2019, p. 194). Eurocentrism is "an epistemic phenomenon that received its name from the territorial location of actors, languages,

and institutions that managed to project as universal their own world sense and worldview” (Mignolo, 2018b, p. 194). Postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha were heavily influenced by Marxism and also by specific European scholars including Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida (Mignolo, 2007, p. 452). “While Marxism rejects bourgeois modernization theories, it too must be critiqued because it works with the same teleological assumptions as those that motivate bourgeois theories” (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.). Gyan Prakash suggests Marxism was a common early response to colonialism, yet it ultimately reproduced master narratives of European universality and, in anti-colonial Marxist movements, resulted in a return to narratives that continued to erase and ignore pre-colonial values (as cited in Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.). This is not to say that postcolonial work should be rejected. It offers valuable anti-colonial critique. However, decolonial scholars sometimes see such work as complicated (and perhaps partly compromised) by its epistemic proximity to Eurocentrism.

Overall, postcolonial scholars are often criticized for incorporating Eurocentric theories into their frameworks and arguments, as these serve to continue an epistemic colonization that decolonial scholars wish to remove (Lim, 2019). The practice of privileging Eurocentric scholars’ citational authority creates an academic discourse that critics say still remains centered in the colonial (Lim, 2019). Conversely, decolonial scholars often seek critical distance from Eurocentric thought (Lim, 2019, p. 194; Mignolo, 2011).

Another criticism of postcolonial theory is that scholars tend to focus primarily on history (Lim, 2019, p. 194). A “post” colonial orientation often suggests that colonization had its most damaging impacts in the past. This is a major difference between postcolonial work and that of decolonial scholars, who examine and seek to subvert the lingering effects of colonialism in the contemporary world (Lim, 2019, p. 194). “Decolonial philosophers emphasize the importance of

the still lingering structures of colonialism in power, ontology, epistemology, and its entanglement with the imposed categorial logics of race and gender” (Velez & Tuana, 2020).

Finally, postcolonial scholars are often criticized for writing primarily in English, whereas decolonial scholars may be (but are not always) more keenly aware of including diverse linguistic traditions (Lim, 2019).

Decolonial scholarship arose partly in response to the above criticisms (Lim, 2019). I will now discuss decolonial scholarship as I understand it, in greater depth.

Decolonial Theory

Decolonial scholarship mostly originated in South America and suggests that the effects of colonialism have not ended, even in places where lands are no longer directly under European control (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15). So, while “post” colonialism implies after-colonialism, decolonial scholars believe we are not yet past colonialism or its impacts (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15). Further, decolonial scholars suggest that the “coloniality of power” (Quijano, 2007; 2000; 1992) created power structures and a resultant hegemonic reproduction that is perpetually upheld, today, even by people of color with no biological ties to colonial powers. Decolonial scholars seek to illuminate and subvert the ways oppressed people have become internally-colonized over time, resulting in unintentional complicity in their own continued oppression (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.). With this in mind, decoloniality centers “radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 17). It’s important to note, however, that decoloniality does not require eliminating Western (Eurocentric) thought; instead, it moves our understanding and collective valuing beyond Eurocentrism and “the singularity and linearity of the West” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 3).

One complicated example is Paulo Freire, whose work is valued as decolonial, yet is also criticized by decolonial scholars for its perhaps too-heavy Marxist roots (Walsh, 2018b). Freire was perhaps one of the earliest decolonial scholars, so it makes sense he would be impacted by the Marxist ideals that were still popular when he and foundational postcolonial scholars (such as Edward Said) began theorizing. Walsh (2018b) praises Freire's (1970) decolonial definition of pedagogy on one hand and then also criticizes his work by saying "he was the product of the post-World War II Latin American Left, and of Marxist and humanist emancipatory paradigms, postures and worldviews" (p. 89). His post-World War II positioning puts him in a different generation compared with the majority of decolonial scholars who came along much later. Walsh (2018b) acknowledges that Freire began recognizing the colonial roots of some of his philosophies late in life. She advocates for "thinking with and beyond Freire" (p. 91) as some of his work is aligned with modern decolonial practices, while other parts deserve interrogation and expansion. Despite his use of Marxist foundations, I would still consider Freire a decolonial scholar because of his attempts to honor the epistemologies of the oppressed not only in theory, but also in praxis (Freire, 1970).

Generally, decolonial work differs from postcolonial scholarship because it not only theorizes the dismantling of colonial structures that still impact power dynamics and oppression; it also requires proposing and enacting alternative ways and methods of knowing, some of which may even seek to reunite modern peoples with pre-colonial epistemologies (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.; Cherniak & Walker, 2020). One noteworthy scholar who has engaged in such work is Linda Tuhiwai Smith, author of *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012). This groundbreaking book sheds light on how researchers (particularly those working in higher education) have objectified and othered those they have studied, reproducing

colonialism's presumed hierarchical values which position Eurocentric knowledge as superior and more authoritative. Smith (2012) traces this back to European Enlightenment, when knowledge was presumed to be "extracted, appropriated, and distributed" (p. 58). This imperial notion of science has had lasting effects on the types of inquiry that are currently valued in academia (Smith, 2012). The result has been that Eurocentric epistemologies have been regarded more highly than epistemologies from other (and "othered") parts of the world, and consequently, they are often the most rewarded and reproduced (Smith, 2012). While Smith's work is similar to Spivak's in some regards, Smith not only offers a critique, but also a clear alternate path toward de-centering European epistemologies and methods by instead centering Indigenous epistemologies. Walsh (2018c) says "decoloniality seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought" (p. 17). Smith's 2012 book, *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* is one of the most robust roadmaps for displacing Western rationality's dominance in research.

Other foundational scholars have also sought to disrupt Western rationality's epistemic monopoly. Aníbal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo are two prominent decolonial scholars. Quijano (2000; 1992) devised the concept of the "coloniality of power," by which Eurocentric settler colonists (and the systems they served) racialized others to position themselves as dominant and superior. Quijano (1992) further argued that the European paradigm of modernity was used to justify the coloniality of power as Europeans expanded their territories in the name of progress and salvation. Capitalism, world trade, and the resultant labor and power imbalances that drive capitalist profitability were rationalized through modernity (Quijano, 1992). Europeans believed the narrative that they were bringing morality and innovation to an underdeveloped world, and

that justified their violence and profiteering. Quijano (1992) claimed that the racist dynamics that were established through modernity and early capitalism continue to shape politics and economics, today. Additionally, the racialization and resulting hierarchies that were used to position the colonized as inferior to the colonizers have “proved to be longer lasting than Eurocentered colonialism” (Quijano, 2007, p. 171), meaning, they are still influencing today’s power dynamics. So, the coloniality of power is not just about the genesis of coloniality, but it is more so about coloniality’s continued reproduction and hegemony, even today (Quijano, 2007; 1992).

In addition to influencing modern politics and economics, the coloniality of power has also shaped current knowledge. Colonization spread and elevated Eurocentric norms for validating knowledge, yet these norms have become ahistoricized overtime, and painted as universal (Quijano, 1992). Europe was centered early on by Eurocentric colonizers as the locus of enlightenment. It is from this physical (European, and later American) and sociological (White, male, Christian) situatedness that colonial settlers have judged other(ed) forms of knowing (nearly always deeming them inferior and in need of replacement by Eurocentric scientific or moral enlightenment). Quijano (2007; 1992) called for future work to decolonize knowledge through epistemic despredere or, as it has become known in English, de-linking (Mignolo, 2009). De-linking is largely about rejecting Eurocentric ways of knowing as superior or universally-valuable (Quijano, 1992). De-linking means de-centering, not replacing; it means privileging many loci of knowledge and enlightenment (both geographically and historically).

Walter Mignolo built on Quijano’s work in numerous ways, but particularly through the concept of epistemic disobedience. Epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2009) refers to epistemic thinking and writing that is decolonial, rejecting dominant hegemonic epistemological norms and

making them visible through subversion. “Decoloniality is the exercise of power...to undermine the mechanism that keeps it in place requiring obeisance. Such a mechanism is epistemic and so decolonial liberation implies epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo, p. 2018d, p. 115). A goal of epistemic disobedience is to foster re-existence.

Mignolo sees re-existence as the next step after delinking and as “the sustained effort to reorient our human communal praxis of living” (Mignolo, 2018d, p. 106). In particular, re-existence means “epistemic reconstitution” (Mignolo, 2018e, p. 166) and likewise resurrecting the “devalued and demonized praxis of living” that were obscured or lost to colonialism (Mignolo, 2018e, p. 173). On decolonial praxis, Walsh (2018c) says we must engage in:

...The ongoing processes and practices, pedagogies and paths, projects and propositions that build, cultivate, enable, and engender decoloniality, this understood as a praxis— as a walking, asking, reflecting, analyzing, theorizing, and actioning— in continuous movement, contention, relation, and formation. (p. 19)

Further, our praxis must extend to supporting a communal liberation. Epistemic disobedience may produce scholarship that begins in the personal, but ultimately it should illuminate some collective truth (Mignolo, 2009). Through these collective truths, we not only foster re-existence in individuals, but also ultimately in disciplines (Mignolo, 2009). Hence, it is my hope that decolonial creative writers like me can de-link from Eurocentric writing norms and produce stories and pedagogy that will help shift the creative writing discipline toward BIPOC epistemic and creative re-existence.

Now that we understand some of the basic premises of decolonial theory, let’s examine how it has been critiqued.

Criticisms of Decolonial Theory. One major criticism of decolonial theory (particularly that originating in Latin America with scholars like Quijano, Mignolo, and others) is that it overlooks how heteronormativity and binary sex/gender systems have been used to uphold colonial power dynamics (Lugones, 2008; 2007; Velez & Tuana, 2020). Latin American feminist scholar María Lugones built on Quijano's (2000) work on the colonality of power to devise the idea of a colonality of gender (Lugones, 2008; 2007). Lugones (2008) says, "Quijano accepts the capitalist, Eurocentric, and global explanation of gender. This... veils the way in which non-white, colonized women were subordinated and disempowered" (p. 78). She suggests that Eurocentric patriarchal gender binaries and hierarchies and heteronormativity were imposed upon some Latin American cultures through colonialism (Lugones, 2008; 2007; Matallana-Peláez, 2020). Further, just as people of color were racialized by colonists, she suggests colonized people were also gendered and subordinated through Eurocentric sexuality binaries. In other words, both race and gender are colonial constructs (Thomas, 2020). These classifications did not likely exist as "hierarchical organizing criterion" in pre-colonized Indigenous and African societies (Matallana-Peláez, 2020, p. 379), and, instead, were part of a "patriarchalization" (Matallana-Peláez, 2020) where race and gender based oppression work together to (re)produce power structures that primarily serve White, cis-gendered, heterosexual people (Lugones, 2008; 2007; Matallana-Peláez, 2020).

Further, colonized women were doubly-oppressed. Just as people were racialized to position them as inferior to Whites, colonialism "constructed non-white women as existing outside gender, while white bourgeois women were the only ones to have 'counted as women'" (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.). Colonized women were seen as female, but not feminine, and were often spoken of with the same terms used for female animals (Lugones, 2008; 2007). This

intersecting (Crenshaw, 1991) racial and sex/gender-based oppression justified horrific acts such as breeding enslaved women like livestock (and selling their offspring), and stealing Indigenous women's children (Lugones, 2008; 2007). The dehumanization of racialized women was also used by European men to justify these women's sexual exploitation and abuse (Lugones, 2008; 2007). The coloniality of gender broadens understandings and discussions of oppression to include sexism and heteronormativity alongside racism (Lugones, 2010).

Lugones (2007), also seeks to use the coloniality of gender to understand how colonized men are complicit in harming women of color, today. She seeks to understand how "men who have been racialized as inferior, [participate in] the systematic violences inflicted upon women" (Lugones, 2007, p. 188). She also argues that many colonized and racialized men have colluded in the historic and modern oppression of women of color and suggests true decolonization can only happen alongside depatriarchalization (Lugones, 2007). Thus, she and other decolonial feminists seek to historicize and dismantle patriarchalization and heterosexualism as enabling components of the coloniality of power (Matallana-Peláez, 2020).

Another criticism of decolonial work comes from North American Indigenous scholars (such as Tuck & Yang, 2012) who suggest that "decolonizing" should ultimately mean repatriating land to Indigenous peoples. While I have read and I respect Tuck & Yang's (2012) warning against using "decolonization" as a metaphor, I use the term in line with Bhattacharya's (2016) concept of resisting "colonizing knowledge" and "epistemic grand narratives" (p. 314). Bhattacharya (2016) explains that Indigenous peoples may experience and understand colonialism differently compared with people from countries that were formerly colonized (such as India, Vietnam and Mexico) (p. 314). In the latter situation, the formerly colonized may already have the repatriation of land that many Indigenous decolonial scholars seek (especially in

places like the United States, Canada, and Australia). Like Bhattacharya (2016), I find Tuck & Yang's (2012) argument focuses too narrowly on land repatriation, though this aspect of decolonization is certainly important and should be a priority. Tuck & Yang have expanded their views over time, too, to foster greater relationships between Critical Ethnic Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Black Studies, with attention to Queer issues as well (Tuck & Yang, 2016, p. 2).

At the same time, Rowe & Tuck (2016) critique Cultural Studies' erasure of Indigeneity, suggesting frames for examining the shared histories and oppressions of Indigenous people and Black Americans. Yet, in my opinion, they do not speak enough to how de/colonialism is also important to Asian/Asian American, Latinx/Latinx American and other groups who have been impacted by colonial settlers and the coloniality of power (Quijano 2007; 2000; 1992). As a Vietnamese-American person, I am keenly aware of how French colonialism harmed Vietnam, displacing many families including my mother's. I am also cognizant of how the American/Vietnam War was an extension of Eurocentric colonial and imperial ideals. Colonialism has displaced people and erased knowledge in many parts of the world (Lowe, 2015), and though I do value foregrounding Indigenous sovereignty and land repatriation as part of a wider de/colonial charge, I believe there should be ample room for Asian/Asian American and Latinx/Latinx American scholarship within the decolonial umbrella, too.

Similarly, Walsh (2018) suggests scholars (particularly well-meaning White scholars) should resist casting decoloniality as an essentialized power of Indigenous peoples (p. 81). Doing so obscures and excludes the decolonial work being done by other groups who have also faced colonial physical and epistemic violence (p. 81). Additionally, I agree with Garba & Sorentino's (2020) assertion that Tuck and Yang's (2012) focus presumes Indigenous ownership of both colonial oppression and its modern solutions in ways that often exclude or undermine groups

(such as Black Americans) who have also inherited oppressive legacies of colonialism (pp. 765-766). I believe broader concepts of decolonization should be available that foreground Indigenous sovereignty while also making space to address the needs of minoritized people who are still experiencing the epistemic and material impacts of colonization in contexts where land repatriation is not the primary concern (p. 315).

This said, Tuck & Yang's (2012) argument that there must, at some point, be a surrender of material resources from colonizing systems to the colonized is thought-provoking. They suggest that mere epistemic shifts can enable "settler moves to innocence" (p. 1) which appease settler guilt while overlooking or allowing the continued reproduction of complicity. Many English professors, for example, seek to "decolonize" their syllabi by adding literary works by people of color. This is the type of move Tuck & Yang (2012) suggest as being placating, allowing professors within a settler colonist system (in this case, higher education) to feel like they've done something to effect change without shifting material or other resources meaningfully enough to foster the transformative or practical changes required to truly interrupt and alter colonial systems. This is not to say that readings lists shouldn't be diversified—they should! But, it is to say that such moves are only a very small step toward achieving a full "decolonization" of curricula or educational systems (Richardson, 2018).

Furthermore, I am working within a College of Education, so I am particularly interested in how we can avoid "settler moves to innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 1) and, instead, center generational victims of colonization and their futurity and epistemic wholeness as part of more meaningful change. Because my particular focus is creative writing pedagogy, I specifically wonder: How do we help minoritized creative writing students not only read, but also write

themselves into (re)existence? This is perhaps where some of critical race theory's (CRT's) premise of counter-storytelling may be of use in conjunction with decoloniality.

Decolonial Alignment with Critical Race Theory

CRT originated in the 1970s in response to the stalling of social justice advances that began with the civil rights movement in the 1960s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). A lawyer named Derrick Bell (1973) is credited as the “intellectual father figure” of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 6). Bell and others in the legal studies field added significantly to the theory as it evolved (Bell, 1995, 1980; Crenshaw, 1995, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 1989; Freeman, 1978; Matsuda, 1993). Later, education scholars applied CRT to racial disparities within schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Over time, specialized communities formed under CRT's umbrella to offer identity-specific inquiry and advocacy. These CRT subgroups include LatCrit (for Latinos), Asian Crit, an LGBT interest group, and a Muslim and Arab caucus (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

CRT offers numerous tenets (see Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, for a comprehensive overview). Two of these tenets are particularly important to CRT's application to decolonizing creative writing programs and to children's publishing. First, is CRT's “overall commitment to social justice and to ending all forms of subordination on the basis of identities such as race, religion, ethnicity, and ability” (Cappiccie, Chadha, Lin, & Snyder, 2012, p. 47). Second, is CRT's acknowledgement of “the importance of the experiential knowledge of persons of color” (Cappiccie et al., 2012, p. 47), which can challenge dominant narratives about knowledge and truth through stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Overall, CRT's historic and ongoing strength has been its ability to legitimize and amplify the lived realities of marginalized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Critical race theory intersects with anti-colonial theories (both postcolonial and decolonial) in interesting ways that have thus far only shallowly been explored in academia (Meghji, 2020). In the following section, I will discuss how critical race theory and anti-colonial frameworks share an academic genealogy, with each framework addressing oppressions that can be traced back to shared roots in colonialism. Let's start by making these shared roots visible.

Historic and Ongoing Racialization and Oppression

Lowe (2015) notes little attention has been paid to the relationships between settler colonialism in North America, the African slave trade, the importation of Chinese and South Asian indentured servants, and the use of imperialist trade in the East Indies and China to grow European wealth (p. 5). Consequently, she draws together the “relationality” (p. 6) of these aspects in opposition to the “discretely bounded” (p. 6) ways they have been defined by the historians (and other scholars) who have largely descended from Eurocentric epistemic lineages. Colonial slavery, displacement, and genocide are often erased from formal accounts and interpretations of history with European settlers often being portrayed as heroic people who brought civilization to uncivilized peoples and lands (Lowe, 2015, p. 3-4).

Lowe (2015) illuminates the “often obscured connections between European liberalism, settler colonialism in the Americas, the transatlantic slave trade, and the East Indies and China trades in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century” (p. 1). She says colonial settlers attributed negative traits to different groups to rationalize different forms of harm (p. 7). Native peoples in the Americas were portrayed as “uncivilized or non-Christian” (p. 7) and as violent “savages” (p. 9). Captured Africans were dehumanized and considered animal-like chattel and “enslaveable property” (p. 8). Chinese people were construed as a viable alternative or supplement to African Slaves, and to justify their inhumane treatment as indentured servants,

they were often criminalized in courts and depicted as addicts and prostitutes (p. 8). “These distinct yet connected racial logics constituted parts of what was in the nineteenth century an emergent Anglo-American settler imperial imaginary, which continues to be elaborated today, casting differentiated peoples across the globe in relation to liberal ideas of civilization and human freedom” (p. 8). Overall, people were racialized so that they could be dehumanized, and thus abused and used for colonizer’s financial and material gain. “Racial classifications and colonial divisions of humanity emerged in the colonial acquisition of territory, and the management of labor, reproduction, and social space” (Lowe, 2015, p. 8).

Additionally, John Locke’s “definition of the right to property, in which labor entitles one to possession of land” justified European settlers acts of genocide and the displacement of native inhabitants in the Americas (Lowe, 2015, p. 10). Indigenous land was represented as being unclaimed or “insufficiently cultivated” to justify settler seizure (p. 10).

The (often violent) appropriation of native lands was important for European and colonial settlers’ economic expansion, which was enabled by the exploitation of indentured and enslaved laborers and the extraction of natural resources (Lowe, 2015, p. 10). Thus, decolonial scholars and critical race theorists share a common genesis to their oppression, even if this oppression has manifested in different ways. Lowe (2015) suggests that modern race-related social injustice is owed to the combined legacies of settler colonialism, enslavement and indentured servitude (p. 2). The “operations that pronounce colonial divisions of humanity” (including race) are still ongoing, impacting modern ideas of social difference and a continued use of such ideas to justify oppression (Lowe, 2015, p. 7).

While Lowe (2015) connects racialization and colonization, she also cautions against conflating the two (p. 10). Each has complicated nuances, but “these processes share a colonial

past and an ongoing colonial present” (p.10). The power structures and racial hierarchies set into place during settler colonialism are still being reproduced, today (Lowe, 2015). It is these structures and hierarchies that decolonial scholars and critical race theorists both seek to subvert.

Connecting Decolonial Theory, Critical Race Theory and Feminist Epistemologies

Like Lowe (2015), Walsh (2018c) also points out that the same people who colonized South and North America also brought people native from Africa here by force (p. 18). Therefore, some of the original wounds that have led to CRT and decolonial frameworks have shared colonial roots (Walsh, 2018c). Because of this, Schur (2000) argues that critical race theory should fall under the greater umbrella of postcolonial theory. Schur (2000) also suggests that writers like Toni Morrison and legal scholars like Richard Delgado are part of “one common movement” (p. xiii) where the goals of anti-colonialism and critical race theory overlap.

Mignolo & Walsh (2018) believe decolonial scholars should “delink” from Western practices and avoid what Audre Lorde (1983) called “the master’s tools” (as cited in Mignolo & Walsh, 2018 p. 7). To do so, they point to the legacies of scholars such as W.E.B. Dubois, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa (pp. 8-9), who are retrospectively spoken of as ancestors of CRT and decoloniality, though they did not necessarily identify their own work in such categories during their lifetimes. Thomas (2020) notes that “Although Black women and intellectuals are cited in many decolonial works, the work of Black women is rarely—if ever—presented on its own as a contribution to decolonial theory” (pp. 13-14). Like Thomas (2020), I believe the Black women who have been embraced as foremothers of Black feminism should also be more officially included in the lineage of decolonial feminists, and I support the call for more scholars and activists of color to form coalitions and illuminate work that has crossed formerly-drawn boundaries.

Walsh (2018c) discusses decoloniality's twentieth century advancement particularly through the works of Black scholars like W.E.B. DuBois and Audre Lorde who valued seeking and illuminating many perspectives and forms of thinking and expression (p. 17). There are a number of other Black scholars and artists who have sought to de-center Whiteness and Eurocentrism in analytical and creative processes and who are, in my opinion, decolonial scholars and artists. My list of scholars doing work that reflects the values of both critical race theory and decolonial lenses includes (but is not limited to) Cynthia Dillard, who developed "endarkened feminism" as a way to remember ancestors' ways of knowing (Dillard, 2012; 2008; 2000); Toni Morrison, who suggested decolonizing creative writer's imagination by de-centering the White gaze (1992); Audre Lorde (1983), who famously stated "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"; bell hooks (1994; 1984) who urges us to seek knowledge and expression allowing us to transgress human-made boundaries of sex, race, culture, and class; Claudia Rankine, who asks us to expand the "racial imaginary" (Rankine, Loffreda, & Cap, 2015), and others. Further, I consider each of the above scholars and artists to be decolonial feminists because they also illuminate and subvert the intersecting (Crenshaw, 1991) ways women of color are dually oppressed due to both their perceived gender and their race.

In colonized and post-colonized territories, women often were (and are) dually oppressed based on both their race and biological sex (Lugones, 2010; 2008; 2007). While it's difficult to pinpoint the exact time, it seems that decolonialism and second-wave feminism became intersecting frames for several prominent Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) female scholars and artists somewhere between the late 1970s and early 1990s (Mack-Canty, 2004). BIPOC women such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) and Chandra Mohanty (1988) became frustrated with White-dominant, Eurocentric feminist theorizing (Walsh, 2018a, p. 39), while

also seeking to reject the “master’s tools” (Lorde, 1983) and reconnect with pre-colonial ways of knowing (Anzaldúa, 2015d; 1990). This scholarship paved the way for decolonial feminism’s further development as part of the subsequent third wave of feminism (Mack-Canty, 2004).

Decolonial Feminism

Decolonial feminism “displace[s] the Western rationality and hegemonic discourse of white, Eurocentered feminism” (Walsh, 2018a, p. 39). Decolonial feminist scholars also question “why the western academy thinks it can adequately teach any subject while looking at it uniquely from an epistemically western – and most frequently male – perspective” (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.). Dar, Dy, & Rodriguez (2018, July 12) commit to working in the decolonial feminist traditions established by BIPOC “foremothers” such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Gloria Anzaldúa. They state that they are “speaking truth to power from the margins...as [these foremothers] did, from a perspective of fullness and abundance rather than scarcity and lack” (n.p.). I situate myself amongst these and other decolonial, feminist women of color include Chandra Mohanty (1988), T. Minh-Ha Trinh (1989), Toni Morrison (1992), Emma Pérez (1999), Chela Sandoval (2000), Maria Lugones (2010; 2008; 2007), Cathy Park Hong (2020), Jeong-Eun Rhee (2021), Ana Louise Keating, and Kakali Bhattacharya (Bhattacharya & Keating, 2018). My work aligns well with these particular decolonial feminists in part because we are all decolonial feminist women of color working in the United States, where inter-generational immigration complicates unhomeliness and feelings of fragmentation and disintegration (Bhabha, 1994; 1992).

Like Dar, Dy, & Rodriguez (2018, July 12), I also consider specific theorists to be part of my epistemic genealogy. The specific foremother who has influenced my growth the most, and who feels like a direct epistemic ancestor is the late Gloria Anzaldúa. Consequently, I also align

myself with Anzaldúa's living contemporaries, Ana Louise Keating and Kakali Bhattacharya, who seek to write themselves into existence (Bhattacharya & Keating, 2018) and help others do the same.

Before I explain the parts of Anzaldúa's theorizing which are foundational to my own analytic frame, I would like to briefly discuss how my lived experiences intersect with Anzaldúa's.

Situating Myself: Positionality

I am interracial, half-Vietnamese and half-White, which means my ancestors were both colonized and colonizers. I am also married to a Mexican American man, with whom I share a beautiful, mixed-race child. For many years, our blended family lived in the Rio Grande Valley, at the southernmost edge of the Texas/Mexico Borderlands (Anzaldúa, 2012). There, I attended and then taught at a Hispanic serving institute (HSI), the same university from which Gloria Anzaldúa earned her bachelor's degree decades before. Though I did not grow up in the Borderlands, I moved there when I was 17 years old and remained until I was 35. I spent most of my adult life there, and the area had an outsized impact on my ability to make sense of my multiracial and multicultural identity.

Borderlands theory is a multicultural feminist theory that grew out of W.E.B. Dubois' ideas on double consciousness (Hurtado, 2010). Gloria Anzaldúa grew up along the Texas/Mexico border, and she understood "Borderlands" as not just representing physical borders, but also as a place where cultures collide and mix, often within individual people (Anzaldúa, 2012). Anzaldúa understood that a mixed racial and cultural ancestry can mean having multiple identities that are often at tension with each other. But, instead of seeing this as a deficit, she explored how negotiating identity borders leads to varied and nuanced perspectives

(Anzaldúa, 2012). As a Mexican American, Anzaldúa's ancestors were a mixture of Indigenous colonized people and European colonizers. Consequently, she felt both multifaceted (for having expansive heritages and experiences) and fragmented (by the tensions of colonial and colonized ancestry). She named the intellectual and emotional third space that's accessible to people negotiating similar internal borders "nepantla," which is "a Nahuatl word meaning 'in-between space'" (Keating, 2015, p. xxxiv). Specifically, nepantla is a space where we negotiate our identity tensions, particularly as we become aware of and seek to subvert the harmful colonized narratives about our minoritized identities that we may have been socialized into believing.

During an Anzaldúan nepantla, individual and collective self-definitions and belief systems are destabilized as we begin questioning our previously accepted world-views (our epistemologies, ontologies, and/or ethics)...This loosening of restrictive worldviews—while extremely painful—can create shifts in consciousness and, thus, opportunities for change. (Keating, 2015, p. xxxv)

Throughout my doctoral program, I have taken coursework that has caused me to question my previously-accepted worldviews. I have also more recently significantly expanded my awareness about the historic and ongoing racialization, colonization and oppression of Asian and Asian American people (Chang, 2021, March 22). Additionally, I have witnessed the ongoing racialization and violence Asians and Asian Americans in the United States have faced since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Asia In-Depth, 2021, April 9). These events have shifted my consciousness (Keating, 2015, p. xxxv), making me want to take action as a "nepantlera."

Living within and among multiple worlds, nepantleras use these liminal perspectives...to question 'consensual reality' (our status quo stories) and develop alternative

perspectives—ideas, theories, actions, and beliefs that partially reflect but partially exceed existing worldviews. They invent relational theories and tactics with which they can reconceive and in other ways transform the various worlds in which we exist.

(Keating, 2015, p. xxxvi)

Anzaldúa's concept of "las nepantleras" refers to "threshold people, those who move within and among multiple worlds and use their movement in the service of transformation" (Keating, 2015, p. xxxv). As a mixed-race person with ancestors who were both responsible for and recipients of colonial violence, and as someone who lived along a physical international border amongst many others who share this conflicting situatedness, I, like Anzaldúa, consider myself a nepantlera from the Borderlands.

Moving from the Borderlands of South Texas to Tennessee exacerbated my awareness of myself as minoritized and fostered a desire to transform and open my mind and others' minds. I am actually originally from Tennessee, where I lived until I was six years old. My father's family has deep roots in Tennessee, and some of his ancestors were amongst the founding colonizers of the state. My father's great-great-great-great-grandfather, Abel Gower Sr., was part of the Donelson Flotilla of settler colonists who "settled" (meaning, seized) the native lands which became middle Tennessee. Gower Sr. was killed by Chickamauga tribesmen when he was trying to cultivate and harvest corn his family had planted on stolen Chickamauga land. Though I imagine his death (and the killing of his son, Abel Gower, Jr. during the same incident) had a tremendous negative impact on generations to come, I disavow the Gowers' settler colonialism. Though I did not become aware of this aspect of my paternal lineage until I was well into my doctoral program, these ancestors' acts of colonization have become part of my motivation for doing anti-colonial work.

The other part of my background is my mother's heritage. As a Vietnamese woman, she endured French colonialism as a child, and then the Vietnam/American war as an adult. The violences of these colonialist and imperialist occupations had a tremendous, lifelong traumatizing impact on both her and her immediate family. There is unhealed trauma on my mother's side that keeps me (and, to a large degree, her) from fully understanding our family's history and heritage.

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where I'm pursuing my PhD, is a predominantly-White institution (PWI). Though I am half-White, I am also half-Asian American, and thus often racialized and minoritized as non-White (especially with my married name being Garcia, which often results in people mistakenly assuming I am Mexican American). During my first semester, I was asked to serve on a diversity committee, and since then, I have spent the majority of my time trying to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in my teaching, research, and service activities. I have come to accept Anzaldúa's idea that people from mixed cultures must "build bridges between all these worlds as we traffic back and forth between them, detribalizing and retribalizing in different and various communities" (Anzaldúa, 2015a, p. 264). But what I refuse is the hegemonic push for people of color to yield to White, dominant, styles of discourse (Pathak, 2010). The rhetoric of the dominant culture "is a rhetoric riddled with ideologies of Racism which hush our voices so that we cannot articulate our victimization" (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxiii). Positivist scholarship holds a "presumptive privilege" deeply rooted in and constantly reproducing the colonization of academia (Pathak, 2010, p. 9). Similar presumptive privileges are built into creative pedagogy (Salesses, 2021). I wish to push back against this academic colonization and the fragmentation it has exacerbated in me and others.

Like Anzaldúa, I have felt drawn to writing as a way to put back together the parts of myself that have been disjointed by a White supremacist, settler colonist society (Lowe, 2015) where I've often felt pressured to conceal or suppress the minoritized parts of my identity. Anzaldúa's (2002) "Coyolxauhqui imperative" is named for a mythic Aztec figure who was dismembered and broken into pieces. Through the process Anzaldúa lays out in the Coyolxauhqui imperative, she implores us to use our critical consciousness and creativity to heal and reintegrate the parts of ourselves that have been fragmented. Because I am no longer willing to participate in my own oppression, I aim to use this process to facilitate my own unlearning, de-linking, and re-existence. The autohistoria-teoría and creative works that I develop during the process could be useful to other writers and readers as counterstory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Through my example, I particularly hope to offer other decolonial feminist writers a potential path toward establishing their own epistemic re-existence through creative practices, too

Blurring Disciplinary Boundaries

I have attempted to delineate postcolonial and decolonial theories, but it is important to note that this delineation is in subservience to western norms for creating clearly defined disciplinary borders (Lim, 2019, p. 195). In being true to my own epistemological position, I do not personally feel the need to draw firm territorial lines between these two kindred schools of thought. Lim (2019) suggests that decolonial scholars seek to resist reproducing colonialist binaries which might push them into competition with postcolonial thought (p. 195). Instead, decolonial scholars welcome postcolonial partnership in illuminating and addressing the harm done by colonialism (Lim, 2019, p. 195). Further, decolonial scholars hold "an intentional disrespect for disciplinary territorialism since both [decolonial and postcolonial theorists] are victims of such western constructions of knowledge" (Lim, 2019, p. 195). Further, Asher &

Ramamurthy (2020) suggest that postcolonial and decolonial scholarly lineages have long been tied to geographic boundaries (positioning postcolonial work as embodied by Indian scholars and decolonial work as embodied by scholars from the Americas). They suggest perceived differences are largely constructs rooted in colonialism (Asher & Ramamurthy, 2020, p. 5) and call for postcolonial and decolonial scholars to unite around their shared anticolonial roots and goals.

It is incredibly difficult to work within the Ivory Tower and avoid what Ortega (2017) referred to as “decolonial woes,” or the performance of the colonial categorical logics we are trying to dismantle. Though I am also opposed to colonially-influenced ideals of academic territorialism, I nonetheless defined borders in this section in a way that reproduced these academic norms. I understand my field’s expectation for clarity, and I will admit the process of researching and writing this section helped me make sense of scholarly lineages and my own position. That said, the tensions I felt while drawing defined borders (while not fully believing they should be prioritized) illuminate the impossibility of doing fully decolonial work within a system (American higher education) with significant colonial influences.

Acknowledging this conflict of interests, Bhattacharya (2009) uses the terms “de/colonial” and “de/colonizing” to describe her own research and to convey how throughout her ongoing journey, “multiple colonizing and resisting discourses exist and interact simultaneously” (p. 105). Similarly, Walsh (2018b) says that decoloniality “does not imply the absence of coloniality but rather the ongoing serpentine movement toward possibilities of other modes of being, thinking, knowing, sensing, and living” (p. 81). I concede that I cannot fully separate myself from colonial influence, especially while working in a formalized academic

setting with colonial roots (Bhattacharya, 2009). Despite my best attempts to subvert colonialism, there will be ways I am complicit in reproducing colonialist norms.

This said, I also agree with Bhattacharya's (2016) suggestion that semantics are important, but not my primary concern:

What interests me more than the semantic uses of decolonizing, anticolonial, or postcolonial are the ways in which colonizing discourses cause material suffering and damage on a regular and pervasive basis. I am not as focused on the sloppy or nuanced use of terms as I am on the epistemic and ontological invasion of colonizing discourses that regulate and perpetuate social structures of oppression, manifesting into daily struggles in the hybridized lives of people. Specifically, I am interested in how these struggles show up in academia for people of color. (p. 315)

Because I am currently working within a College of Education, I also am interested in how colonizing discourses have impacted and continue to impact Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) in academia and in the United States at large. The centuries of racialization that occurred to justify colonial violence and imperial appropriation resulted in hierarchies and imbalances of power that continue to be reproduced, today (Lowe, 2015).

Richardson (2018) suggests one criticism of decolonial work is that it is so undervalued in higher education that scholars working in universities are often denied the resources needed to effect change. Consequently, he notes de/colonial scholars should be careful to consider pathways which move beyond intellectual exercise. For this reason, I plan to incorporate elements from both de/colonial and CRT frameworks into my methods. Jivraj (2020) combines CRT and decolonial frameworks and praxis to facilitate simultaneous re-existence and resistance (p. 567). The following section will clarify how the CRT concept of counter-storytelling can be

combined with de/colonial methods to produce narratives which foster epistemic re-existing (Mignolo, 2018c, pp. 146-147) while also illuminating practical paths for transformative change.

Theoretical Framework Summary

The European colonization of countries worldwide (which began in the 1400s) was justified by positioning White Europeans as morally and scientifically enlightened and all Others as morally and scientifically inferior. Over the centuries, since, resultant racialization and hierarchies of dominance have remained deeply engrained, so much so that even in countries where colonialist powers have been overthrown, there is still an internalized colonization that positions Eurocentric knowledge as more valuable than pre-Colonial knowledge. Modern day postcolonial, decolonial, and critical race theory scholars all attempt to address the lingering harms of colonization in different, but aligning ways. Their shared aim is to value and foreground the knowledge and experiences of minoritized peoples and to subvert the unquestioned dominance of White supremacy and superiority. Decolonial feminists not only foreground the experiences of people who are racially and culturally minoritized, but also elevate the voices of people minoritized on the basis of sex, sexuality, and gender. It is with this alignment that I, a Vietnamese American woman, approach this work to reclaim creative and contemplative practices that align with my position as a woman of color instead of pushing me to assimilate to the as-yet un/under-questioned creative writing disciplinary norms initiated and largely reproduced by Eurocentric, White men. In the following section, I will describe a methodological framework and the methods that align with this theoretical positioning.

A Special Note About Process

Before proceeding, I wish to provide a special note about an unconventional choice I've made. In my department, it's normative to submit one's methodological framework and ideas for

methods as part of the “prospectus,” or the plan outlining how a scholar will conduct their dissertation research. The prospectus is usually written in future tense (e.g. “I will...”). Then, once it is approved and the dissertation study is completed, the scholar usually revises this section to reflect what they have done in past tense (e.g. “I did x, y, and z...”). I have made the purposeful decision not to revise my methodological framework and methods sections into past tense, and I’d like to explain why.

The impulse to control a process from pre-planning and from only the rational mind is a colonizing impulse that should be avoided in this type of decolonial work (Anzaldúa, 2015e). Because we are socialized to plan our studies in advance, I left my proposed methods section as it was originally written in Ch. 3 to show my thought process leading up to my study. This is to clarify for others how one might initially devise some guiding possibilities and starting points, but then allow for flexibility as intuition and embodiment are allowed to direct what comes next.

In Ch. 4, as part of my findings, I will offer an overview of the methods I ultimately employed. This is to offer a comprehensive example of a journey from anticipatory planning to (and through) a process that, after initial planning, was led by intuition and embodiment. I wish to show how my plans provided a direction, but not a map, so that others will feel similarly empowered to follow their inquiry where their intuition and embodiment leads.

The processes I used should not be seen as prescriptive but should just be considered alongside other scholars’ methods as one of the aforementioned guiding possibilities. As I continue engaging in this type of work, I anticipate that I will likely draw on some of the tactics that I mentioned in my original methods section but did not feel pulled toward (through intuition and embodied responses) during this particular study. So, with this information in mind, here are my methodological framework and the methods I envisioned at the outset of my study.

Methodological Framework: Critical Autoethnographic Counter-Storytelling

Presumptive privileges (Pathak, 2010), which presume the dominant group's norms will be valued, are built into creative pedagogy (Salesses, 2021). Similarly, BIPOC qualitative scholars have noted how positivistic scholarship also holds a presumptive privilege deeply rooted in and constantly reproducing the colonization of academia (Pathak, 2010, p. 9). I wish to push back against this creative and academic colonization (and the fragmentation it has caused in me and other BIPOC writers) by using culturally-relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) research methods to foster insights which might help decolonize the pedagogy of creative writing craft. For far too long, assumptions about what works best for teaching creative writing have gone unexamined (Ryan, 2016). This has implications for all creative writing students and teachers, but particularly for those who are minoritized (like me).

When craft is taught unreflexively, within a limited understanding of the canon, it reinforces narrow ideas about whose stories are important and what makes a story beautiful, moving, or good. We need to re-think craft and the teaching of it to better serve writers with increasingly diverse backgrounds, which means diverse ways of telling stories. Like in revision, the fiction writer must break down what she thinks she knows about her craft in order to liberate it. (Salesses, 2021, pp. xv-xvi)

My dissertation centers on this goal of examining “what I think I know” so that I may “liberate” my own craft and, in doing so, begin to shape creative writing pedagogy that is culturally sustaining (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012) for myself and for other BIPOC children's book writers. “Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism” (Paris, 2012). A culturally sustaining creative writing pedagogy would de-center White, Eurocentric storytelling norms as dictating the

standards by which all writing should be judged and would make room for many standards from many cultural and artistic traditions.

The question is: How do I do this work from within the colonizing system of higher education without reproducing the same oppression (Ortega, 2017) that I seek to dismantle? “When we, the objects, become the subjects, and look at and analyze our own experiences, a danger arises that we may look through the master’s gaze, speak through his tongue, use his methodology” (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxiii). Of course, as Lorde (1983) argued, we cannot dismantle the master’s house with his tools. We, the minoritized and marginalized, need tools of our own, particularly tools which do not further colonize. “The quest is to find innovative tools and discourses able to represent the diversity of human experience without relying on outmoded, linear, and colonizing representations” (Hurtado, 2010, p. 35). Critical autoethnographic counter-storytelling can offer such emancipatory tools.

Let’s break down what “critical autoethnographic counter-storytelling” means to me. First, let’s establish a definition of autoethnography in general.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) consists of “both the method and product of researching and writing about personal lived experiences and their relationship to culture” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 4). Overall, autoethnographers examine their own lives in order to draw conclusions from within and about cultures (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography is conducted through theoretical lenses and standpoints (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). So, putting “critical” and “autoethnography” together, critical autoethnography is autoethnography conducted through critical lenses.

Critical Autoethnography

In critical autoethnography, critical lenses are employed to illuminate power dynamics and the ways dominant groups oppress others based on their minoritized race, gender, sexuality, class, and/or other components of identity (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). According to Boylorn & Orbe (2014, p. 10), critical lenses “[legitimate] first-person accounts of discrimination and difference and can therefore aid in the critique of colonialism, racism, sexism, nationalism, regionalism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism.” So, critical autoethnography seeks to not only expose how people are minoritized, marginalized, and oppressed, but specifically to do so *from the viewpoint of* the minoritized, marginalized, and oppressed. Additionally, critical autoethnography is meant to challenge oppressive practices and systems and inspire people to effect change in resistance (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014).

Overall, critical autoethnography has three purposes: “to understand the lived experience of real people in context, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 19). Thus, critical autoethnography is inherently political, and meant to subvert oppression (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). The means of subversion are dependent on the tactics called for by the specific critical theoretical lense(s) being employed.

In my case, I will be primarily using a decolonial feminist lens, while also drawing on the critical race theory (CRT) concept of counter-storytelling, which has decolonial feminist roots (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). One major goal of decolonial scholarship is epistemic “de-linking” (Mignolo, 2009; 2007) by which BIPOC scholars seek to reject Eurocentric ways of knowing (Hess-Biber, 2007) as superior or universally-valuable (Quijano, 1992). Decolonial feminists further seek to resist not only internalized Eurocentrism, but also any related internalized

heteropatriarchy (Arvin, Tuck, & Morril, 2013). In Education, decolonial feminist scholars question “why the western academy thinks it can adequately teach any subject while looking at it uniquely from an epistemically western – and most frequently male – perspective” (Lentin, 2019, Oct. 15, n.p.). This questioning is particularly pertinent to my inquiry into creative writing pedagogy because creative writing MFA workshops generally position literature by White men of European descent as a gold standard and locate the creative writing norms that are related to the traditions of such writers as universally-valuable (Adsit, 2017; Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021).

Because I hold an MFA and have also developed writing skills in numerous workshops outside of my MFA program, it is important for me to identify how I have internalized such literary and writing values and norms, and to attempt to de-link (Mignolo, 2009; 2007) from the norms which do not serve my authenticity as a female creative writer of color. Critical autoethnography through a decolonial feminist lens will help me to use writing as a way of discovering where I stand, how I have been shaped, how I might use creativity to repair any fragmentation, and how I wish to move forward (Raza Memon & Jivraj, 2020). This will help me not only de-link from the colonialities of power (Quijano, 2007; 2000; 1992) and gender (Lugones, 2008), but also begin establishing my own epistemic re-existence (Mignolo, 2009) that draws on my ways of knowing as a woman of color (Hess-Biber, 2007). In sum, my decolonial feminist lens will allow me to examine my internal colonization and begin to heal the psychological and spiritual wounds it has caused (Anzaldúa, 2002).

That said, by using decolonial and CRT lenses, together, I can look not only at how to transform colonization within myself, but also at how to change the narratives which allow colonization to be reproduced through (and to reproduce) systemic racism in higher education. In

this academic context, CRT is “a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25). Colonization is the root of racialization, and continues to impact racial hierarchies and disparities, today (Lowe, 2015). Thus, I believe it is important to address both colonization and racism, together, and to do so with the relative strengths decolonial and CRT lenses can provide. Jivraj (2020) argued scholars should combine decolonial and CRT frameworks and praxis to facilitate simultaneous re-existence and resistance (p. 567). Other scholars include CRT methods as part of decolonial research, too. According to Zavala (2016), “Three major methodologies or strategies in decolonial education projects include counter/storytelling, healing, and reclaiming” (p. 2). Counter-storytelling is one of the main methodologies used for CRT research, but it has decolonial roots and can serve decolonial aims (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; 2001). Thus, I plan to address all three of the strategies Zavala (2016) listed, starting with counter-storytelling, which encompasses the main aspect of CRT that I will pair with my decolonial feminist lens.

Counter-Storytelling

CRT scholar Richard Delgado (1995; 1989) argued that social reality is constructed largely through discourse, and stories can be used to identify and challenge oppressive discourses and alternatives. Building on this, Solórzano & Yosso, (2002; 2001) proposed using “counter-stories” to illuminate minoritized perspectives and interrupt dominant discourses that produce and reproduce oppression, particularly related to race and gender.

Counter-stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; 2001) counter the unexamined assumptions in majoritarian stories or stories that are made and reproduced by the dominant culture (Freeman,

Mathison, & Wilcox, 2006). “A majoritarian story is one that privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28). Because of internal colonization, “People of color often buy into and even tell majoritarian stories,” often distorting or erasing minoritized perspectives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28). In creative writing workshops, stories from the dominant Eurocentric, White, male perspective are seen as natural and neutral (Adsit, 2017; Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021). In 2002, Solórzano & Yosso wrote that in education pedagogy, many “argue that students of color should assimilate to the dominant White middle-class culture to succeed in school and in life” (p. 31). Though this has likely improved some over the past 20 years, in Creative Writing pedagogy and in Children’s Literature and children’s publishing, assimilation to the norms developed by White, Eurocentric, male writers is still often the goal (Adsit, 2017; Chavez, 2020; Magoon, 2020; Salesses, 2021).

Counter-storytelling is “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). By de-centering majoritarian perspectives and highlighting minoritized lived experiences, counter-storytelling works as “a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Counter-stories can also challenge dominant discourses about gender (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Fernández (2002) suggested there are four methodological benefits of CRT counter-storytelling by minoritized participants:

- 1) Participants can reflect on their own lived experiences;

- 2) Narratives offer a way of making minoritized participants' stories visible to the greater public;
- 3) Counter-storytelling subverts the dominant stories that have been socially constructed through colonialism and racialization;
- 4) Counter-storytelling can foster individual and collective consciousness, paving the way to social action.

In education, teachers and professors from dominant groups may be unaware of their unconscious racism and sexism and the prejudices built into the systems and pedagogical models they employ (Fernández, 2002). Counter-stories from minoritized students can help both the students and their educators become aware of and challenge oppressive dominant ideologies, practices, and educational systems (Fernández, 2002). Because I am both a student and an educator (as a graduate teaching associate in a doctoral program), I am in a position where my counter-stories can speak to various educational perspectives. It is important to me, however, that the impact of my work eventually extends beyond the ivory tower.

To do this, I look to the numerous children's and young adult authors who have used counter-storytelling in advocacy for de-centering Eurocentric, White, patriarchal norms and values in children's publishing. Though these authors have not, to my knowledge, specifically referred to what they are doing as counter-storytelling, they are, nonetheless, employing stories from a minoritized perspective in order to move children's publishing toward racial, gender, (and other) equity.

The most prominent example of this is probably a pair of New York Times op-eds by authors Walter Dean Myers (2014) and Christopher Myers (2014). These op-eds exposed White dominance in children's publishing and in the characters represented in children's books. The

Myers also used their op-eds to offer alternatives that would move racially-minoritized authors and characters toward greater inclusion and equity. These op-eds were written from very personal perspectives, with personal stories and insights driving powerful logical and emotional themes. The impact of these op-eds was tremendous (Yokota, 2015). They are seen as a turning point in drawing awareness to racial disparities in children's publishing and in inspiring advocates toward action (Yokota, 2015).

Shortly after the Myers' 2014 op-eds, the We Need Diverse Books movement began. In 2014, after an all-White, all-male panel was scheduled at Book Con, young adult book authors Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo (and others) organized a three-day online event to raise awareness about the need for more diversity in publishing (WNDB, n.d.). Using author Aisha Saeed's hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks, this event featured tweets and posts with many counter-stories from minoritized writers. The popular event turned into an ongoing movement, and later a nonprofit organization was formed by the same name (Creating Community, 2020, Apr. 21). It has championed diversity (regarding race, gender, sexuality, and ability) in children's publishing, ever since (Creating Community, 2020, Apr. 21).

Additional counter-storytelling based movements have started online, as well. In February, 2018, children's book authors Grace Lin and Karen Blumenthal founded the #KidlitWomen Facebook page, blog series, and podcast as a response to gender inequality in the children's publishing industry (Kirch, 2018). Bookending this decision were allegations of sexual harassment against several prolific male children's book "rock star" authors weeks prior (Maher, 2018) and Women's History Month approaching in March (the perfect time to launch a page for women's rights) (Kirch, 2018). Central to the decision was a growing frustration with the consistent marginalization of women in children's literature and an overwhelming desire for

women to be publicly heard (Kirch, 2018). Though #KidlitWomen originally centered a feminist lens, the counter-stories that were told revealed intersections (Crenshaw, 1991) of gender and race-based oppression, leading to greater awareness of the experiences of people who are multiply minoritized and marginalized due to their sex, gender, and race.

Most recently, novelist Kekla Magoon wrote of her personal experiences being pressured toward centering the White gaze (Magoon, 2020) and about her efforts and desire to write, instead, for and from a Black-centered perspective. Also in 2020, Black young adult novelist L.L. McKinney started the #PublishingPaidMe hashtag in the summer of 2020 with a request for Black and White authors to divulge and compare pay (Gomez, D. & Kachka, B., 2020, Jun. 21). The stunning disparities exposed a wide pay gap with even White debut authors earning significantly more money than award-winning Black authors. This has interrupted false narratives of equity in publishing and has exposed minoritized perspectives that were largely invisible to White authors, prior (Gomez, D. & Kachka, B., 2020, Jun. 21). Though it is too soon to determine the effects of this counter-storytelling, there has been increased dialogue about inequity and multiracial pledges for solidarity in finding solutions (Gomez, D. & Kachka, B., 2020, Jun. 21).

While it is difficult to pinpoint the concrete, material outcomes of the above counter-storytelling-based advocacy, there is at least one recent example where outcomes can be measured. The #DignidadLiteraria movement, founded by Latinx authors David Bowles, who writes for children and young adults, along with authors Myriam Gurba and Robert Lovato (who write for adults) was created in response to a book entitled *American Dirt* which received a large publishing advance and inclusion in Oprah Winfrey's book club. The book, written by White and Puerto Rican author Jeanine Cummins, featured culturally-inauthentic depictions of Mexican

migrants and was widely-criticized for receiving much more money and publicity than books about Mexican immigrants by actual Mexican or Mexican American authors. Gurba in particular used counter-storytelling to convey the experiences of marginalized Mexican American authors and to demand change (Gurba, 2020, Apr. 9). Gurba, Bowles, and Lovato arranged a meeting with executives from the publishing house that published Cummins' book, and were able to secure a written agreement for specific corporate, systemic, and material changes, including concrete goals for increased minority representation in the publishing staff and in the authors whose books are acquired (Kirch & Maher, 2020). Ultimately, the #DignidadLiteraria movement's progress will shift resources and decision-making power to minoritized people working in publishing so that more stories about Mexican and Mexican American (and other Latinx) people are likely to be published by authors with lived experiences from the same culture(s) they are writing about (Kirch & Maher, 2020).

Along these same lines, the #OwnVoices movement in children's publishing has also pushed for more culturally-authentic children's stories informed by authors' lived experiences. #OwnVoices advocates promote "the importance of 'cultural insiders' portraying their own identities" (Creating Community, 2020, Apr. 21, n.p.). This is to avoid problematic representations that have been created by cultural outsiders, "ranging from harmful stereotypes to inauthentic narratives" (Creating Community, 2020, Apr. 21, n.p.). Overall, the #OwnVoices movement is not only using counter-storytelling to express the frustrations of minoritized writers and readers, but also to request more culturally-authentic children's books that can serve as counter-stories, themselves. Such stories are important for minoritized children's well-being and for children from majoritarian groups' education and empathy (Bishop, 1982).

So, it is clear that counter-storytelling has the potential to illuminate and transform oppressive systems and practices both within academia and in the publishing industry. Though my work is starting in academia, it will extend outward to children's publishing in the future. These two systems are related, and both must be transformed in order to produce the high-quality, culturally-authentic children's books young readers need.

Methodological Framework Summary

In sum, combining “critical,” “autoethnographic” and “counter-storytelling” into “critical autoethnographic counter-storytelling” means that I will examine my own lived experiences through critical (decolonial feminist and CRT) lenses, and write counter-stories from within these theoretical perspectives highlighting my experiences as a minoritized person working within and against the dominant values in a colonizing system. Further, I will conduct this work with the explicit political goal of subverting this system by using counter-stories to establish both my individual re-existence and paths toward collective resistance (Jivraj, 2020).

Now that we've clarified my methodological framework, let's explore the specific methods I will use.

Methods: Decolonial Strategies, Challenges, and Opportunities

Because I am a creative writer, writing is the method of inquiry (Leavy, 2013; Richardson, 2000b) which aligns best with my personality, skills, and strengths. It is my way of understanding and making sense of the world (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Richardson, 2000b). It is also my way of giving back a creative offering that could be healing for and useful to others (Adams & Ellis, 2014). In qualitative research, writing may simultaneously serve as a method of data collection, analysis, inquiry, and representation (Leavy, 2013). This means that writing can comprise both my research process and product. By formulating critical

autoethnographic counter-stories, I can come to discover knowledge through writing and then pass what I've learned to others through my written, creative work (Leavy, 2013).

Decolonial Strategies

Because I am framing my critical autoethnographic counter-storytelling through both CRT and decolonial feminist lenses, I will use methods from both of these respective theoretical frameworks. As Zavala (2016) mentioned, the three strategies used in decolonial research are counter-storytelling (which is tied to CRT), healing, and reclaiming (p. 2). Let's explore the methods I will use for each strategy.

Counter-Storytelling (via CRT Methods)

CRT has decolonial roots (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) and counter-storytelling comes directly from those roots. Solórzano & Yosso (2002) cite decolonial theorist Gloria Anzladúa's call for new theories and theorizing methods as the epigraph and inspiration for their seminal article on Critical Race Methodology and counter-storytelling (p. 23). Further, they offer a decolonial definition of race, suggesting "Eurocentric versions of U.S. history reveal race to be a socially constructed category, created to differentiate racial groups and to show the superiority or dominance of one race over another" (p. 24). Therefore, counter-storytelling is a CRT-based method which aligns well with decoloniality.

To ensure strong alignment, I will seek to write counter-stories with an explicitly decolonial aim. Zavala (2016) says that in decolonial work, counter-storytelling requires "naming and remembering" (p. 2). Naming involves identifying and making visible the ways colonized people are "encircled by colonialism and its structural arrangements and cultural logics" (Zavala, 2016, p. 3). In other words, it means illuminating how colonized people's identities have been shaped and reproduced as marginalized and minoritized through coloniality

(Zavala, 2016). Counter-storytelling fulfills the goals of naming when it “challenges the master storylines of Modernity, Eurocentrism, and coloniality” (Zavala, 2016, p. 3). While CRT typically foregrounds minoritized people’s lived experiences, decolonial counter-stories do so while speaking specifically to colonialism (Zavala, 2016). This can mean first identifying how the colonialities of power (Quijano, 2007; 2000; 1992) and gender (Lugones, 2008) are reproduced (especially via internal colonization). After achieving a greater awareness of this, counter-stories can be created which disrupt master narratives by instead centering the voices and inherent worth of “people whose experiences are not often told” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32).

As a Vietnamese-American writer, I have been dismayed that Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American people are seldom depicted in children’s books, and when they are, their stories almost always feature trauma, particularly trauma related to war and displacement (Yi, 2020). I have found that this single story (Adichie, 2009) only reveals a very narrow understanding of Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American identity.

Outside of children’s books, I have been becoming aware of how Asians and Asian Americans have been racialized in the United States (Hong, 2020). “Naming and remembering” (Zavala, 2016) will likely mean creating counter-stories that expose and talk back to the history of American anti-Asian racism and to the colonialism and imperialism led by the United States against Asians abroad. It will also mean exploring how Asian women have specifically been multiply-minoritized and pushed into subservient positions of both race and gender (Lowe, 2015). In particular, I will seek to make sense of these issues in regard to my own identity, and understand how my identity has been fractured as a result of all of the above. I will attempt to

expose any resultant pain and marginalization but also seek to show Asian/Asian-American women's under-acknowledged strengths.

One major type of counter-story is the personal story or narrative. "Personal stories or narratives recount an individual's experiences with various forms of racism and sexism. Often, these personal counter-stories are autobiographical reflections of the author, juxtaposed...within the context of a larger sociopolitical critique" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Additionally, critical race methodology "strategically uses multiple methods, often unconventional and creative, to draw on the knowledge of people of color who are traditionally excluded as an official part of the academy" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 37). Thus, counter-stories can take the shape of creative essays, poetry, songs, films, plays, and other artistic and hybrid/mixed forms (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 37). These varied creative forms are also normative in autoethnographic work linking the personal and cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). I plan to craft personal narratives about my and my female, Asian/Asian-American family members' lived experiences using various creative and hybrid forms. This work will follow decolonial feminist traditions for self-expression in personal narratives.

There have been several female scholars of color who have used poetry, fiction, and other creative forms in their decolonial counter-storytelling. In *Canícula*, Norma E. Cantú's fiction "helps decolonize knowledge and being" (Poks, 2015, p. 63). Poks (2015) calls *Canícula* "autoethnobiography" because "It adapts the canonical genre of Western autobiography but transcends generic classifications and dislodges epistemological certainties by fusing verifiable facts (the Western regime of knowledge) with community beliefs and memories lodged in the colonized bodies" (p. 68). Some of these beliefs and memories are represented through fiction, though they are almost allegorical, and anchored in decolonial truths (Poks, 2015). Similarly,

Zora Neale Hurston's fiction has ethnographic and anthropological roots. "Hurston's turn to ethnographic fiction allowed her to use an intersectional approach to writing that challenged dominant understandings of race, class, and gender as she simultaneously challenged an academy that excluded her work" (Leavy & Harris, 2019, p. 209).

Cathy Park Hong (2020) has also subverted majoritarian stories about Asian Americans through a combination of essays and creative nonfiction (2020) and through her earlier poetry (as discussed by Spaide, 2018). Further, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* used inventive language to "creatively disrupt[t] the linguistic assumption that underlies the racial category 'Asian American'" (Joo & Lux, 2012, p. 8).

Decolonial feminist scholars Audre Lorde (1984) and Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) both wrote counter-stories in numerous formats, including poetry, and their work was featured alongside the myriad forms of expression "radical women of color" used to convey their viewpoints in the book Anzaldúa co-edited with Cherrie Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). Similarly, various creative processes and products were developed in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (edited by Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002). These works will serve as models for my own. The creative forms employed are vital to decolonial healing (Anzaldúa, 2002), which is why I wish to include them in my own work, too.

Decolonial Data Collection and Analysis for Counter-storytelling.

For ideas about process, I look to Anzaldúa, whose epistemology most closely matches my own. She says, "Writing is the site where I critique reality, identity, language, and dominant culture's representation and ideological control" (Anzaldúa, 2015g, p. 3). Though Anzaldúa does not call her auto-ethnographic work counter-storytelling (likely because that concept and term became

popular during the last two years of her short life), she says, “I come to knowledge...through images and ‘stories’” (Anzaldúa, 2015g, p. 4).

Keating (2015), Anzaldúa’s friend, writing partner, and the editor of *Light in the Dark*, gives insights into Anzaldúa’s procedures. Anzaldúa took a decolonial standpoint and would often start with a question, experience, or feeling (Keating, 2015, p. xii), and build from there.

“Generally, Anzaldúa began a new project by meditating, visualizing, freewriting, and collecting diverse source materials; these materials were often hybrid and apparently random, including some or all of the following: dreams, meditations, journal entries, films she had seen, thoughts scribbled in notebooks and on pieces of paper, article clippings, scholarly books, observations from her interactions with human and nonhuman others, lecture notes, transcripts from previous lectures and interviews, and other ‘writing notas.’” (Keating, 2015, p. xi-xii)

Anzaldúa worked to cobble these pieces together in “various assemblages,” then underwent a recursive form of repeated revision until she felt the words would “move in readers’ bodies and transform them, from the inside out” (Keating, 2015, p. xii). Much of her work was “epistemological, intuitive, and communal...the writing process was, itself, a co-creator of the theories—a co-author of sorts” (Keating, 2015, p. xii). Further, not all of her connections were made during a state of writing. She would often meditate on images from a decolonial standpoint and develop a conscious awareness that she *then* conveyed to others through stories (Anzaldúa, 2015g, p. 4). Of course, this awareness deepened and grew through the act of writing, partly due to her grounding in embodiment. She claimed, “The body responds physically, emotionally, and intellectually to external and internal stimuli, and writing records, orders, and theorizes about these responses” (p. 5). She described more of her process in detail on pp. 6-8,

explaining using a combination of embodiment, a connection to emotions, and images to translate knowledge into narratives which “attemp[t] to revise the master story” (p. 7). Her revisions of the master story were counter-stories and acts of both resistance and re-existence (Jivraj, 2020).

My process of data collection and data analysis will be modeled on Anzaldúa’s methods (as described, above), with a shared emphasis on “images and stories” and embodied resonance as guiding factors. Similarly, I will look to Bhattacharya (2021) for techniques on creating visual and poetic mixed media elements through an Anzaldúan process of embodied creation. Bhattacharya (2021) notes that this type of assemblage work is practice-based inquiry through which “the practice itself becomes a site of inquiry” (p. 166). As such, an intention and centering of the desire to be resonant with oneself and one’s audience becomes more important than the explicit steps positivist researchers would expect and employ (Bhattacharya, 2021, p. 166). Further, Bhattacharya (personal communication, February 7, 2021) says that in critical autoethnographic work, there is typically not a predetermined plan, as you will not know what the analysis will look like until you start writing/creating. This can be difficult for scholars who’ve been trained in positivist traditions (Bhattacharya, 2021). However, like Anzaldúa, Bhattacharya (2021) found that resisting the colonial impulse to control inquiry allows for greater expansiveness into pathways one might not be able to anticipate in planning (p. 166). This can be quite rewarding as discoveries are organically made, many which align with embodied emotions that might be suppressed through restrictive and detached positivist/colonial designs (Bhattacharya, 2021).

Though the unexpected trajectories in decolonial work can be rewarding, surprises can also sometimes be upsetting, especially when writing ventures into emotionally-difficult terrain

(as it should, per Anzaldúa) (Keating, 2015). For Anzaldúa, decolonial, deeply-personal writing could be both liberating and traumatic (Keating, 2015). So, she developed additional processes to foster her continued healing while doing the work of sifting through her fragmented parts and putting herself back together, again (Anzaldúa, 2002). I will incorporate her decolonial methods as I seek my own decolonial integration and healing.

Healing (via Decolonial Methods)

Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) said, “Let us be the healing of the wound” (p. 9). According to Keating (2015), this can be interpreted as an “invitation to move through and beyond trauma and rage, transforming it into social-justice work” (p. xxiii).

Decolonial healing occurs on two levels: spiritual/psychological and social/collective (Zavala, 2016, p. 3). For the purposes of this project, I will focus primarily on my own spiritual/psychological healing during my research and writing process, with the hope of offering an end product/offering that might be useful to social/collective healing.

To establish my own spiritual/psychological well-being, I will engage in Gloria Anzaldúa’s Coyolxauhqui Imperative (Anzaldúa, 2002), with the hopes that it will help me process and heal my trauma and anger so that I can move through it (Keating, 2015). The Coyolxauhqui Imperative is based in Indigenous mythic symbolism.

According to Aztec mythic history, when Coyolxauhqui tried to kill her mother, her brother, Huizilopochtli (Eastern Hummingbird and War God), decapitated her, flinging her head into the sky and throwing her body down the sacred mountain, where it broke into a thousand pieces. Depicted as a ‘huge round stone’ filled with dismembered body parts, Coyolxauhqui serves as Anzaldúa’s ‘light in the dark,’ representing a complex

holism—both the acknowledgement of painful fragmentation and the promise of transformative healing. (Keating, 2015, p. xxi)

The Coyolxauhqui Imperative (Anzaldúa, 2002) requires those who've been marginalized due to colonialism, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, to examine their fragmentation, and use creativity and self-care to put themselves back together, again.

Decolonial Data Collection and Analysis for Healing.

Anzaldúa (2002) conveys the Coyolxauhqui Imperative largely through a personal narrative about her thoughts, emotions, physical feelings, and practices as she tries to cope with 9/11. She does not offer a linear process or sequential steps for readers to follow to enact the “imperative” in their own lives; however, in additional writings (Anzaldúa, 2015c; 2015e; 2015f) she offers educative insights that provide specific, discrete actions one can take and paths for healing. This work is built on the idea of facing “unresolved discordance” directly (Anzaldúa, 2015c). “For racialized people, managing losses, the trauma of racism, and other colonial abuses affect our self-conceptions, our very identity, fragmenting our psyches” (Anzaldúa, 2015c, p. 87). Anzaldúa suggests that when facing “racial or gender wounding,” you feel dismembered and “lose parts of your soul as an immediate strategy to minimize the pain and cope” (Anzaldúa, 2015c, p. 87). Internal colonization prolongs the pain and prevents healing. “You struggle to redeem yourself, but you can never live up to the white dominant ideal you’ve been forced to internalized,” and thus, “unresolved discordance” prevents healing (Anzaldúa, 2015c, p. 87). Anzaldúa calls this state *susto* (fright) and offers several ways to resolve one’s discordance.

First, she suggests going through a process of mourning wounds and losses by moving through stages similar to those in the grieving process (Anzaldúa, 2015c, p. 88).

If you name, acknowledge, mourn, and grieve your losses and violations instead of trying to retain what you've lost through a nostalgic attempt at preservations, you learn not just to survive but to imbue that survival with new meaning. Through activist and creative work you help heal yourself and others. (Anzaldúa, 2015c, p. 88)

Anzaldúa acknowledges this is not easy and suggests that this work should ultimately lead to integrating all parts of self, even those for which we hold negative feelings like contempt (Anzaldúa, 2015c, p. 89). To achieve this self-acceptance requires healing. Anzaldúa defines healing as “taking back the scattered energy and soul loss wrought by woundings. Healing means using the life force and strength that comes with *el ánimo* to act positively on one's own and on other's behalf” (Anzaldúa, 2015c, p. 89). Curiously, though, she suggests, “you don't heal the wound; the wound heals you” (Anzaldúa, 2015c, p. 89). In other words, we must face our wounding(s) and “plunge [our] hands into the mess,” while engaging in the creative acts and embodied, spiritual meditative connections that are often devalued by the dominant culture (Anzaldúa, 2015c, p. 89). Anzaldúa argues that we must create “spaces and times for healing to happen,” engaging in a purposeful practice of meditative prayer (Anzaldúa, 2015c, p. 90), developing contemplative practices (Anzaldúa, 2015c, p. 92), and creating new artistic means of expression that generate healing energy and “support transformation” (Anzaldúa, 2015c, p. 92).

Additionally, Anzaldúa warns that trying to control this process too much will inhibit it (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 95). The goal instead should be to “cultivate an acute awareness” of what is happening without watching so intently that we stop our internal processes from naturally unfolding (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 95). The impulse to control is a colonizing impulse that should be avoided in this decolonial work (Anzaldúa, 2015e).

Furthermore, an important aspect of healing is to pay attention to the body (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 97). Radical selfcare is recommended, especially attending to and nurturing physical health, and also prioritizing stress relief. “If your daily process doesn’t allow you to finish and still have a life, you’ll have to create another schedule” (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 97). Anzaldúa says that trauma and healing have to work their way through the body, and we must take good care of ourselves knowing how we can be physically impacted (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 97).

Though these practices may be purposefully incorporated, some aspects of healing happen outside our control. Anzaldúa (2015e) expresses the value of tapping into the subconscious and unconscious by staying attuned to dreams and unconscious images (p. 98) and translating our dreams and visions into words and images for others (p. 102). She also suggests that we should not try to force forms onto these expressions that come from deep within. This type of knowledge “chooses its own form and style without your conscious guidance. Your task is to block the ego’s insistence that you write ‘better,’ that you use the methodology of the head” (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 103). Instead, we can let the physical act of creation be a kind of dream-like trance and “keep the critical editing voice at bay” (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 104).

Because those of us in academia have likely developed a critical editing voice through our exposure to Western/Eurocentric education, this is particularly important for re-claiming self and establishing epistemic re-existence. Additionally, Anzaldúa advises ending the day by “suggest[ing] to your subconscious that it dream up another part of the story and surprise you in the morning” (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 104). This overall tapping into the subconscious and unconscious allows us to express ideas, emotions, and connections we may repress due to our internalized colonization and the filters that we’ve placed on ourselves through years of conditioning (Anzaldúa, 2015e).

Similarly, Anzaldúa (2015e) mentions the importance of getting back in touch with one's body, and the body as a source of knowing. Eurocentric colonial positivism often disregards the body in favor of the rational mind. Anzaldúa rejects this, returning to the decolonial body as a site of resonance. "Writing is nothing if not a bodily act. An image produces a physiological reaction experienced in strong feelings (hate, desire, fear) and manifests itself in...bodily changes...An image produces emotion" (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 105). By writing to create emotions in our readers, we can bring them into embodiment, too, as these emotions foster physical changes in their bodies and thus trigger an embodied knowing (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 105). Anzaldúa (2015e) also expresses the importance of turning to art-making to loosen up when blocked (p. 107), and trying to center an "imaginal consciousness" rather than a "rational consciousness" during such times (p. 108).

Further, healing requires shadow work, and facing the parts of ourselves we do not wish to acknowledge (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 111). You must "admit that the interior shadow is a part of you" (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 111) and accept it as a valued part of yourself as you rebuild your fragmented pieces into a cohesive whole. Doing this can require time and space for processing and radical self-care.

Also, receiving feedback from "comadres" (women who are friends and can align with and help you reach your desired vision) is also a part of healing (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 113). It seems important that your comadres offer feedback to "help you say what you are trying to express," instead of moving you toward their or someone else's vision (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 113).

Anzaldúa cautions that there will be blocks and setbacks, particularly when you "must change some basic beliefs about yourself, your writing habits, and your ability to do the work"

(Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 114). Trying to hang on to dysfunctional parts of self or exert control over an unfolding process are counterproductive. “To become unblocked something must give...Your ambition, your obsession with perfection. You have to let go of the illusion that the writer exerts full conscious control over her writing process” (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 114).

Finally, letting go of this control allows work to come together from a deep space of embodiment, enabling epistemic re-existence through the images and emotions that arise, there. We must almost channel what surfaces and then translate it for others, trusting the process to happen without our Western-trained minds taking full control. “Writing is an alchemical process demanding dissolution so that the transmutation of images and emotions into words may occur. If you’ve done your job, the reader will also undergo an alchemical process” (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 115). Implicit in this is the idea that the reader’s emotional and physical reactions may act as validation of conveyed knowledge.

As you may intuit, the healing aspects Anzaldúa offers seem to happen while one is concurrently engaged in other activities (such as writing counter-stories). These healing practices surround such work and require awareness and purposefulness so that one does not get lost in the difficult process of writing without ways to sustain and pursue well-being and wholeness (Anzaldúa, 2015e).

To ensure I am engaging in the Coyolxauqui Imperative and the healing processes Anzaldúa describes, I will record my writing notas (Keating, 2015) by engaging in memoing and journaling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as both a space of inquiry and a potential data set I can later mine through a CRT lens to create counter-stories for other people. These counter-stories will illuminate the process of attending to spiritual/psychological wellness while engaging in decolonial creative writing. I will use these counter-stories to juxtapose my past experiences

using majoritarian creative writing methods vs. decolonial methods that center my embodied ways of knowing (Hess-Biber, 2007) and that prioritize my well-being. This brings us to the third and final decolonial strategy, reclaiming.

Reclaiming (Bridging CRT and Decolonialism)

According to Zavala (2016), reclaiming entails moving ourselves away from colonialism and toward pre-colonial ways of being, knowing, acting, and living. We can reclaim identities, practices, and spaces (Zavala, 2016, p. 2).

It would be presumptuous to try to predict or control what I may reclaim after using the Coyolxauhqui Imperative to begin exposing, exploring, and healing my fragmentation. As Anzaldúa (2015e) noted, it is important to let the process unfold without trying to exert too much control. There are numerous possibilities for what I might possibly reclaim, but I plan to let my unconscious and subconscious lead me to what my spirit needs (Anzaldúa, 2015e).

On this side, I imagine numerous paths.

I would like to eventually reclaim identity through counter-storytelling in children's books. This might emerge in the form of a children's story that speaks back to and subverts majoritarian stories about Vietnamese/Vietnamese-American people. Anzaldúa (2001) did similar work in her children's picture book *Prietita and the Ghost Woman*, a decolonial feminist reclaiming of the La Llorona myth, in which she made the maligned character into a heroine.

I have long wanted to write my own children's story from a Vietnamese perspective that does not include the single story (Adichie, 2009) of Vietnamese war-torn trauma. I think many published (American) books about Vietnamese people center on war-related trauma not only because that is something Vietnamese people grapple with in their writing, but also because that is what White editors, agents, and readers expect to read about. I hope to determine whether my

processes of decolonial self-reflection, healing, and transformation will help me to create an authentic Vietnamese-American counter-story for children that does not center the White gaze (as discussed by Magoon, 2020; Morrison, 1992) and White war-related expectations.

Of course, “counter-stories need not be created only as a direct response to majoritarian stories” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). In fact, as Morrison (1992) implies, only responding to majoritarian stories would in itself mean centering the White gaze. Counter-storytelling can also involve telling the stories that are publicly unheard or under-acknowledged from within and for minoritized survival (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). So, part of my work reclaiming identity might entail determining what stories about Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American identity I would want to tell for a Vietnamese-American audience if I were not considering the White gaze. Then, I would need to likely return to some of Anzaldúa’s processes to keep my culture centered while writing such stories from and for an insider’s perspective. Anzaldúa asks us to “decolonize reality” by engaging “the facultad of your imagination” (2015b, pp. 43-44). I certainly believe creative children’s books are a great space for doing this, as children help shape the future, and if we can decolonize their imaginations, we can help decolonize the future world.

As far as reclaiming practices, I hope to eventually determine pedagogical processes that could help other creative writers (and instructors) decolonize craft. Reflexivity on my process will become a data set from which I can later attempt to write a counter-story offering tools to other writers, or from which I can offer craft-based guidance in some other form.

Finally, concerning reclaiming spaces, I anticipate a reclaiming of my own body and my centeredness within it.

Eventually, I would like to reclaim spaces in the ivory tower and in the children’s publishing industry, though I am not sure I can “reclaim” spaces in either as space has never

been fully granted to minoritized people in such White-dominant fields and physical buildings. This may mean reclaiming spaces outside of such systems where creative work and pre-colonial ways of knowing (Hess-Biber, 2007) can be prioritized.

Again, these are some potential areas for reclaiming, but I will not know what I can reclaim until I have gone through my initial counter-storytelling (to “name and remember”) and healing (through the Coyolxauhqui Imperative). It is only at that point that I will be able to move toward reclamation. Most likely, I will be able to reclaim very little during the course of this dissertation, and this initial work will set me on a trajectory toward reclamation that will occur later in my creative and academic careers.

Recursive Process

It is important to note that there is no end to this journey. Counter-storytelling, healing, and reclaiming do not happen in a linear process; they can happen simultaneously or in a back and forth zig-zagging, and they inform and build on each other in a recursive way.

They interweave yet their relationship to each other is dynamic rather than linear and developmental rather than foundational. Each is dimension of the other. For example, the process of counter/storytelling in decolonial education is itself tied to the process of healing, which is also a part of the process of reclaiming. (Zavala, 2016, p. 2)

Additionally, Anzaldúa (2002) suggests there is no endpoint to the Coyolxauhqui imperative. Going through the Coyolxauhqui Imperative is just one step in achieving a state of *conocimiento*, or “reflective consciousness” (Anzaldúa, 2015f, p. 120). Anzaldúa lists seven stages of *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2015f) which people will go through repeatedly (and not necessarily in order) at different times in their lives. Returning to Coyolxauhqui, or the unconscious, and engaging the Coyolxauhqui Imperative of healing fragmentation through

creativity and self-care is vital to continued well-being and growth in the continual quest for *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2015f, p. 133).

As I pursue resistance and re-existence (Jivraj, 2020) I hope to become knowledgeable about strategies for counter-storytelling, healing, and reclaiming, so that I can offer these tools to other minoritized writers for children as we collectively seek to decolonize our field.

Though I clearly see the value in decolonial, critical autoethnographic work, such work is often challenged by scholars in academia who are working from dominant perspectives (primarily positivistic, colonialist traditions of inquiry). Thus, it will be important for me to be able to stand up for my work and the people it serves.

Establishing Decolonial Validity: Rigor and Trustworthiness

Scholars working to maintain dominant, colonizer frameworks and hierarchies typically seek to critique decolonial work using colonizing standards for “validity” (Smith, 2012). Yet, decolonial scholars often do not trust positivistic research methods and criteria as Western/Colonial scholarship has so frequently been weaponized. “The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remain a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples” (Smith, 2012, p. 1). Smith (2012) speaks of “researching back” as akin to talking or writing back to colonialist constructs (p. 8) and asserts that resisting colonial research methods and criteria for excellence allows the colonized to retrieve and remake ownership of their identities (p. 4).

The subjectivity that is seen as a weakness through colonial lenses is a strength through the decolonial perspective because it allows minoritized people to speak with their own voices instead of being spoken for as research subjects in colonizers’ studies (Chawla & Atay, 2018). Autoethnography, specifically, is a good fit for decolonial work (Chawla & Atay, 2018), and

“acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on the research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 274). Furthermore, critical autoethnographic counter-storytelling, in particular, values personal stories and challenges “objective” coloniality’s centrality in knowledge production (Dutta, 2018). Though work within academia is unlikely to be purely decolonial (Bhattacharya, 2009), it can be done with great reflexivity, thoughtfulness, and care, and with the researcher taking consistent efforts to de-center ontologically and epistemologically unaligned colonial methods, values, and standards.

The question remains, though: If decolonial work does not employ colonial, positivist standards for validity (Smith, 2012), how can decolonial autoethnographies be evaluated?

Decolonial scholar Kakali Bhattacharya (personal communication, February 7, 2021) suggested criteria for excellence established by Adams & Ellis (2014) are a good fit for assessing decolonial, critical autoethnographic work. Adams & Ellis (2014) state, “Validity in autoethnography means that our work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible” (p. 269). Adams & Ellis (2014) also list seven expectations for high-quality, rigorous autoethnographies. Per p. 269, autoethnographies should:

- (1) Use personal experience;
- (2) Have a familiarity with existing research;
- (3) Describe and/or critique cultural experience;
- (4) Illuminate insider knowledge;
- (5) Break silence and reclaim voice about a topic;
- (6) Maneuver through pain, confusion, anger, and/or uncertainty;

(7) Be accessible

In addition to these criteria, other scholars offer benchmarks for establishing trustworthiness which align with this study's aims and decolonial feminist theoretical/methodological underpinnings. Pelias (2011) suggests scholars should recognize and illuminate how bodies are "historically, culturally, and individually situated" (p. 667).

Additionally, many scholars suggest autoethnographies should touch not only the mind, but also the emotions (which, in colonial science are often removed in the name of distance and objectivity). Leavy (2015) proposes that autoethnographic research should be conveyed in ways that not only promote cognitive understanding, but that also have an affective impact. Gloria Anzaldúa's emotive writing (Anzaldúa, 2015d), for example, was designed to make readers "feel," and her use of creative forms was part of her decolonial activism (Raza Memon & Jivraj, 2020, p. 486). The "courage to express in different forms" and rebel against academic norms which intellectualize, is important for demonstrating decolonial alignment (Raza Memon & Jivraj, 2020, p. 486). Further, embodied reactions move beyond the intellectual, broadening the audience's resonance, which can also be an indicator of autoethnographic trustworthiness (Adams & Ellis, 2014). Anzaldúa (2015e) suggested that when she writes and creates, she tries to convey emotions and knowledge viscerally enough that readers will end up feeling the same sensations and emotions she feels. It is my goal to similarly write/paint/sing/collage/create until I have expressed something which matches how I feel and which can convey an emotional, embodied understanding to my audience.

Artistic and aesthetic merit are also central to establishing trustworthiness by making work more accessible and fostering resonance (Adams & Ellis, 2014; Richardson, 2000a). Autoethnography can take "innovative representational forms" including poetry, art, music, and

other nontraditional forms which “transcend emotionally sterile and intellectually inaccessible academic walls” (Adams & Ellis, 2014, p. 264). To foster a sense of narrative truth (Bochner, 2002) and trustworthiness, creative skills should be demonstrated that bring writing and art to life, or at least make it impactful enough to create an emotional reaction (Richardson, 2000a).

As a social scientist holding an MFA in creative writing, I find decolonial autoethnography allows me to use both my intellectual and creative skills to convey culturally-situated truths from my minoritized perspective. It is important to me that my work resonates first and foremost with my intended audience, other minoritized writers who have faced colonial fragmentation and who seek healing. If outsider audiences gain empathy and understanding in a way that helps decolonize MFA programs, that is a bonus.

Though a common criticism of decolonial, critical autoethnography is that the work seems to happen in a vacuum or seems self-indulgent, qualitative research values “homework before fieldwork” (Kakali Bhattacharya, personal communication, February 7, 2021). For scholars facing colonial fragmentation, it can be especially important to conduct self-analysis and improve self-awareness (Salesses, 2021). It is my hope that this process will help me identify and heal my colonial fragmentation, and that I will be able to employ my creative writing and other artistic skills to the degree where my work resonates with other minoritized creative writers who may be similarly situated (as described by Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021).

Methods Summary

Overall, decolonial feminist methods allow scholars to use embodiment and intuition, relying on their physical and emotional feelings as valid information which can then be conveyed to others through creative work which creates an emotive response. Gloria Anzaldúa’s

Coyolxauhqui Imperative provides a recursive process for collecting, interpreting, and conveying embodied knowledge while facilitating a path toward healing fragmentation.

While Western, positivistic scholars seek “objective” knowledge, decolonial feminists acknowledge subjectivity and center the experiences and insights of individuals whose voices have often been silenced or erased in colonialist and imperialist research. Attempting to do decolonial work within a colonial system (higher education/academia) is tricky, and even the most careful work will not likely be purely decolonial (Bhattacharya, 2009). All the same, efforts can be taken to center decolonial ideas. Of special importance is the resistance of positivist criteria for validity, which often seek to depersonalize (and often dehumanize) subjects (causing centuries of harm and distrust in many indigenous and other colonized communities). Instead, criteria for rigor and trustworthiness that align with decolonial theories and autoethnographic methodology (such as guidelines offered by Adams & Ellis, 2014) may be employed to assess validity in ways that are congruent with these frameworks and their respective traditions and values.

In sum, I hope that the methods employed in this study, the findings, and how they are conveyed will all serve to expand decolonial possibilities within academia.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Review of Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this critical autoethnographic study was to employ a decolonial feminist lens and related creative practices (via Anzaldúa's Coyolxauhqui Imperative) to 1) examine my own potentially colonially-influenced fragmentation as a creative writer who writes for children and 2) foster my healing. I explored the following research questions:

RQ1: How can a decolonial feminist lens be combined with creative practices to make visible a minoritized writer's colonially-influenced fragmentation?

RQ1A: What formative experiences/processes have shaped me as a writer (creating fragmentation, but also illuminating an alternate, decolonial path)?

RQ2: How can a decolonial feminist lens be combined with creative practices to heal a minoritized writer's potentially colonially-influenced fragmentation?

Notes About Findings Format

In response to each research question, I have provided three sections titled as follows: Process and reflection, autohistoria-teoría, and discussion. Below, I've provided some notes to explain my reasoning for this formatting and to orient readers to how I have organized my findings.

On Process and Reflection

Two of my research questions started with "How can a decolonial feminist lens be combined with creative practices..." Thus, I have incorporated process-oriented insights into my findings for each of these questions. So much of this study ended up being about "how" to put my lens together with creative processes in ways that could both inform and heal me.

In my program, doctoral students submit the first three chapters of their dissertation as a “prospectus,” or proposed plan for their full dissertation, before moving ahead with their study with their dissertation committee’s consent. This was tough for me to do because the Coyolxhauqui Imperative (Anzaldúa, 2002) specifically asks writers *not* to make detailed plans, as such planning can sometimes lead to forfeiting important directions for inquiry (and resultant insights) which might emerge during an intuition and embodiment-led process. Consequently, per Anzaldúa’s (2015e) advice, I tried to use my proposed methods section as more of a compass than a map.

The norm in my department is for students to go back and revise their methods section after completing their study to better reflect the methods used in practice. After finishing my study, I chose not to do this because I wanted to make the differences between my planned and actual methods transparent for others who wish to do similar intuition and embodiment-led work in situations where academic norms and protocols require pre-planning for a process that should, instead, evolve organically (Anzaldúa, 2015e). I also wanted to demonstrate that it is okay to make loose plans available to a thesis or dissertation committee while still allowing for the flexibility and freedom to follow the creative process (with intention) and see where it leads.

Instead of closely following my pre-designed plans, I used them as a starting point and as a place to consider possibilities reflected in others’ aligned work. It was helpful to observe and learn from others’ best practices while not limiting the possibilities of my own journey. I then tried to “cultivate an acute awareness” of my evolving process while foregrounding my intuitive and embodied responses and allowing them to lead me from moment to moment (Anzaldúa, 2015e, p. 95). Throughout the process, I kept a reflexivity journal that ended up being over 100 pages long. I used this space to cognitively debrief and make sense of what I was doing and how

my activities were helping me learn and heal. This post-inquiry/activity reflecting allowed me to be more body and intuition led in moments of creative exploration instead of examining every move as it happened. After several months of working, I analyzed this journal via process and emotions coding (Saldaña, 2016) to see what trends I could identify. I also engaged in analytic memoing (Saldaña, 2016) as I reflected on what was and was not working in my process. I tried to adapt my future work in the direction of what was working well. While I found this coding and the basic themes I generated to be informative, the coding process seemed to create a distance, prioritizing my cognitive faculties, again. After some cursory coding and memoing, I pulled back from this work because I did not want these activities to distract me from my intention to use embodied creative writing and art making practices as my primary site of inquiry (Anzaldúa, 2015g; Bhattacharya, 2021; Keating, 2015). Thus, while discussing the findings for each individual research question, I have focused on providing details on the embodied, intuitive, artistic and creative practice-based aspects of process that were most important to answering each question. I've also incorporated some of my reflections on what I learned by engaging in said processes, and connections I was able to make to my family, to history, and to the larger sociopolitical world.

On Autohistoria-Teoría

In alignment with my decolonial framework, I knew that one product of my inquiry would be counter-stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, 2002, 2001; Swartz, 1992). I did not, however, initially plan for the creative form these counter-stories would take because I did not want a pre-decided form to impose limits on the direction of my inquiry. After engaging in recursive freewriting and determining that my reflections were coming through as both autobiographical and as process-oriented, I chose autohistoria-teoría as the best fit form to revise

and continue writing toward. Autohistoria-teoría is defined as “a personal essay that theorizes” (Anzaldúa, 2015f, p. 238). It was “developed by Anzaldúa to describe a relational form of autobiographical writing that includes both life-story and self-reflection on this storytelling process” (Keating & González-López, 2011, p. 241). This self-reflection on lived experiences provides fodder for theorizing, changing how we see and relate to shared paradigms (Pitts, 2016). Through autohistoria-teoría, writers can “expose the limitations in the existing paradigms and create new stories of healing, self-growth, cultural critique, and individual/collective transformation” (Keating & González-López, 2011, p. 241). The form is particularly powerful for allowing minoritized women to re-define their identities through self-narration (Pitts, 2016).

Autohistoria-teorías can contain a mixture of scholarly and poetic writing, as Anzaldúa’s work often did (Keating, 2015). Some individual pieces may be purely poetic/creative, or purely theoretical, but work together in conversation with other writings within the same collection (Anzaldúa, 1987). When writing an autohistoria-teoría, Anzaldúa processed her thoughts through the writing practice (Keating, 2015). She followed her writing where her intuition led her, looking for embodied reactions as clues to whether she was onto a resonant idea (Keating, 2015). Through a process of ongoing revision, Anzaldúa sought to refine her ideas and her communication of them with the goal of creating embodied responses in readers (Keating, 2015). I have attempted to do the same, but because I am starting at a beginner’s level and working within the time boundaries of my dissertation’s deadlines, I know I may need to continue revising my work after my dissertation is published. I take solace in knowing Anzaldúa returned to and revised numerous projects for decades throughout her life (Keating, 2015).

Each autohistoria-teoría draft will be followed by discussion.

On Discussion

Because I reflect at length and make many connections during each “process and reflection” section, I have reserved discussion for additional insights that may not have fit into the flow of the rest of my conversation. Thus, my “discussion” sections are comparatively brief and comprised of extraneous notes that I want to keep tightly tied to each research question. Additional implications, considerations, and calls for future research appear in Ch. 5.

Summary

For each research question, I have provided my findings in three sections covering my process and reflections, an autohistoria-teoría, and a brief discussion. These findings are organized by the numerical order of each research question (RQ), starting with the first.

Findings: Research Question 1

The first research question asked: How can a decolonial feminist lens be combined with creative practices to make visible a minoritized writer’s colonially-influenced fragmentation? Let’s look at the process through which I attempted to answer this question.

Process and Reflection: RQ 1

I began by creating an archive of personal and historic artifacts that could help me understand the effects of coloniality on my life. Keating (2015) said that Gloria Anzaldúa would begin new projects by gathering an archive of diverse source materials that seemed random but were selected based on her intuition and embodied responses. Similarly, I paid close attention to how my body reacted to the various materials I found, keeping only items that created a strong positive or negative physical response.

I looked for personal artifacts in my own boxes of keepsakes which includes objects from my own past as well as those related to my late father’s childhood and military career. I also

looked through my mothers' mementos, though I should note that there are some sentimental items she allows me to see and others that are off limits for her own personal reasons. I have respected her boundaries.

I additionally combed through public archives and databases for materials that might help me understand the history of the United States' colonial and imperial activities in Asian countries, and the roots of anti-Asian racism here at home. I spent countless hours sifting through archival materials from the Library of Congress, Smithsonian Museums, New York Public Library, Federal Bureau of Investigation Reading Room (declassified records), Harvard Digital Collections, National Archive, and in other databases.

I later found the anthology *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*, edited by John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats (2014), which was an excellent resource comprised of many historic documents and images that served to racialize Asian people and create fear about them (through "Yellow Peril" propaganda) to justify violence and abuse against them (Tchen & Yates, 2014). Further, I was fortunate to purchase four books from Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* series through a Goodwill auction. This 1910s-1920s series was crucial in developing the Yellow Peril trope that was used to dehumanize Asians for decades to come (Tchen & Yates, 2014). Reading these books created the most physical response of any non-familial archival materials, and I spent a lot of time trying to process my feelings about them.

I should note that it took over two months to put together my initial archive, and I only kept about 30% of the overall materials that I reviewed. At times, it was tedious sorting through and considering so many possible items. I want to be transparent about this so that anyone hoping to do similar work will know that archive building may happen slowly. Though it took around two months to reach the point where I felt I had gathered enough materials to start

working with them, I continued adding to my archive throughout my dissertation process.

Despite the tediousness of searching and sorting, I found it thrilling to discover something new. I eventually started examining medical and psychological studies on the effects of refugee trauma on following generations. This is difficult but compelling information to process. Continuous discovery became a distraction at some points, and if I were doing this type of study again, I would likely put some boundaries around my archive building (like limiting this work to one day per week) so that the tempting and never-ending archive-related tasks would not monopolize my time.

In addition to amassing archival materials, I gathered art supplies to give myself variety in the media I could use in my constructive, creative play. I bought a wooden secretary desk at an estate sale which I filled with various types of paper, pens, markers, paints, glues, and other art-making materials. I tried to let my own joy and curiosity dictate the types of materials I chose. I acknowledge that being able to stockpile a significant variety of materials requires privilege others might not have. I do not think it's necessary to collect such extensive artmaking resources and I believe creative sensemaking can be achieved with a smaller number of low-cost items such as a pad of paper, some watercolors, and a marker or pen. Comic artist Lynda Barry has suggested that these simple materials are plenty for creative processing and she offers insights into how to use them in her 2019 book, *Making Comics*, which I drew on extensively as I created my own processes.

When I first read some of Barry's books, I felt drawn to her way of using embodiment and intuition to create art without self-judgment. I assumed she was a White woman (based on her curly reddish hair, fair skin, and name). I thought to myself, "Even though she's White, this way of working feels so Asian." My intuitive sense of there being some Asian influence was

confirmed later as I found out that Barry is actually half-Filipina (Barry, 2017). She became a role model to me as a mixed-race, White and Asian, creative writer and artist seeking to depart from Eurocentric methods and work in a more culturally-aligned, self-nurturing way. I especially relied on her tactics for using artifacts to evoke memories, and her methods for avoiding self-judgment while working (Barry, 2008).

Once I accumulated a significant archive of art supplies, historic documents, photographs, and other such materials to work with (enough that I felt pulled to begin creating something from these myriad pieces), I engaged in artmaking to help make sense of the artifacts.

Before each creative session, I employed rituals to help me enter my work (as recommended by D. K. Nguyen, personal communication, July 27, 2021). These rituals included lighting electric incense on my ancestral altar and asking the ancestors that love me to help me in my process (as recommended by J. Harjo, personal communication, Fall, 2018). I also participated in grounding exercises (K. Bhattacharya, personal communication, July 24, 2020; Menakem, 2017). These exercises were primarily aimed at helping me to center my purpose, become aware of my body, and feel my body supported by my chair and the floor (Menakem, 2017). Grounding additionally involved deep breaths to calm my nervous system (Menakem, 2017), which was particularly helpful when looking at dehumanizing materials. At times, engaging with these materials felt too intense, and I stopped my engagement to focus on self-care. Activities related to these protective measures are discussed in my findings for RQ 2.

I looked to Bhattacharya & Payne (2016) and Bhattacharya (2021) for examples of artmaking practices as decolonial, autoethnographic inquiry. Bhattacharya & Payne (2016) used a physical device (a mirror that was framed as a window might be) as a canvas to help evoke a particularly desired sense-making. Similarly, I sought out a physical form that would help me

process the assemblage (Keating, 2015) of artifacts I intuitively felt led to piece together. I decided to work with a tunnel book form, a handmade book in which every page has a concentric shape that is a little smaller than the preceding page, creating a “tunnel” effect. I chose this form because moving physically between the winnowing pages felt, to me, like moving through time. I picked paint colors that matched the emotions I was feeling about the material I was working with. I chose an ombre design to further create the “tunnel” effect because flipping from light to dark shades of the same color created a sense of depth and direction.

For the first tunnel book (Figure 1), I chose photographs of family members, moving from my maternal grandmother to my parents’ childhoods, young adulthoods, and then on the last page, a picture of my nuclear family with myself in the center. The opening picture and quote are from a movie, *The Quiet American* (Mankiewicz & Greene, 1958). My mother and my maternal grandmother were extras in this movie when it was filmed in Saigon in 1956, yet neither ever got to see the film. As part of my archival work, I obtained a copy and watched it with my mom (her first viewing). Perhaps the most special moment of my dissertation journey was when we were watching the movie and my mother jumped out of her seat and yelled, “There’s my mom!” The woman on the far right on the opening page of my first tunnel book is my maternal grandmother. I never got to meet her, and have only seen very few pictures of her, so seeing her in motion as an extra in this movie was incredibly surreal and moving. The movie also provided me an interesting peek at an imagined French colonial Vietnam. The story is set before the Vietnam/American war and focuses on an idealistic American and a jaded British journalist at odds with each other about Vietnam’s fate, the role of communism in the country, and the role of the West to address it (or not).

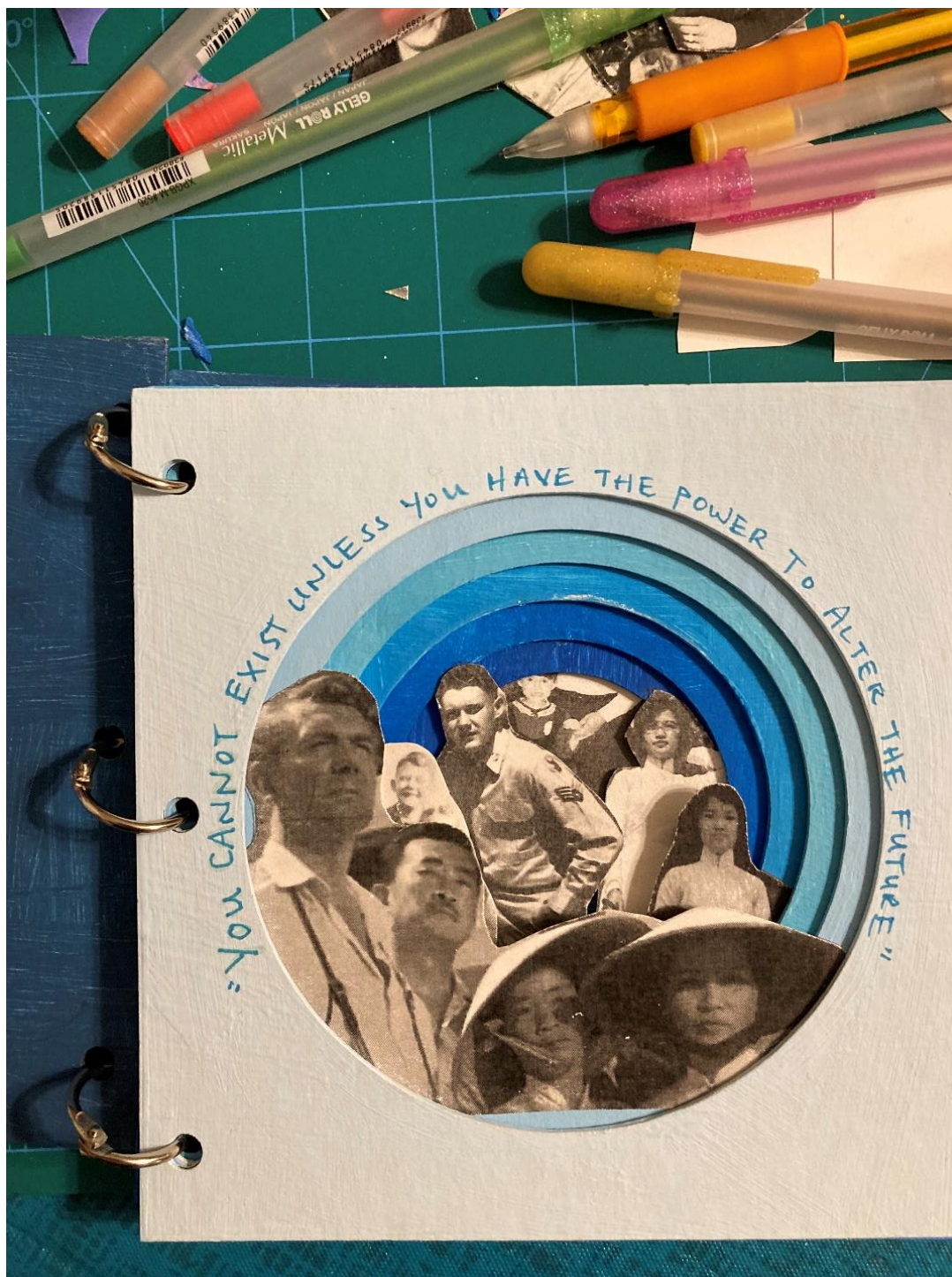


Figure 1: Family Tunnel Book

Though the movie is fictionalized (but inspired by some real people and events), watching it and seeing my grandmother in it drove home Vietnam's lengthy history of colonization. This experience also reminded me that some of our family's colonially-influenced trauma started long before the United States' involvement in the Vietnam/American War. Vietnam has long-contended with French colonialism and, before that, Chinese occupation. Generations of my ancestors were impacted.

From this picture, I moved through time examining how my parents' very different lives were parallel. On separate pages, there are pictures of them as young teenagers standing with their younger siblings. Both of my parents took caregiver roles in their family due to similar hardships, and neither was afforded a typical childhood because each had too many responsibilities. Next, there is a page showing my father as a young Airman and my mother in her young adulthood. Both forfeited higher education and took on jobs as young adults to support their families. Finally, the last picture shows my parents with me between them as the bridging of these two families, people, and their cultures. Though my parents' lives had many similarities, they were also very different as my father worked for the U.S. military and my mom's country eventually was occupied by that military. As I created this book, I examined other family artifacts (such as my dad's military papers and my mom's paperwork related to her jobs in Vietnam) that I did not include in the tunnel book, but that I was better able to process because of this art-making exercise. Tracing my family lines and my parents' experiences this way helped me make sense of commonalities and tensions and how these separate, and then intertwined paths both led to my existence and to my conflicted feelings, today. This activity also helped me feel compassion for both of my parents and their difficult lives as I juxtaposed examining family

history with analyzing the greater social contexts into which my parents were born (the Great Depression for my father; French colonialism for my mother).

As I made sense of my family's experiences within the greater sociopolitical contexts of their early lives, my historic archival work showed me how Asians and Asian Americans were dehumanized in popular culture from the 1800s onward in the United States (Tchen & Yates, 2014). This made me think about dehumanizing depictions of Asians and Asian Americans that were prominent in my psyche during my own childhood. I created another tunnel book (Figure 2), this time with concentric square shapes as a nod to Bishop's (1990) "windows and mirrors" metaphors. For an in-depth look at all the pages of my tunnel books, visit lizparkergarcia.com.

In this tunnel book, I moved chronologically, examining the oldest to newest racist and dehumanizing depictions of Asians and Asian Americans that I was exposed to throughout my childhood. This tunnel book progresses from the slant-eyed mushrooms in *Fantasia* (Grant & Huemer, 1940), to Dr. Seuss' racist (Ishizuka & Stephens, 2019) depictions of Asians in *And to Think I Saw it On Mulberry Street* (1937) and *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950). I've included yellow-skinned Chinese boy from *The Story About Ping* (Flack, 1961). Though these books were written decades before my birth, they were still popular during my childhood. Next come the sinister, anthropomorphic "Siamese" cats from *Lady and the Tramp* (Jackson, Geronimi & Luske, 1955) and the goofy Shun Gon from *Aristocats* (Reitherman, 1970), all of whom spoke with exaggerated accents. I was born in the 1980s, and even then, there were stereotypical characters prominently featured in movies. Two of the most memorable are Mr. Miyagi from *The Karate Kid* (Avildsen, 1984) and "Dong" from *Sixteen Candles* (Hughes, 1984).



Figure 2: Pop Culture Tunnel Book

The final page of the tunnel book features Margaret Cho (and her on-screen mother) from the sitcom *All American Girl*. This show was groundbreaking when it premiered, and I recall being awestricken by seeing Asian American people living their everyday lives on a primetime sitcom. Looking back at old episodes through my current decolonial feminist lens, I can see many harmful stereotypes at work. Upon doing some digging I found that Margaret Cho was not given creative control over the show, which was mostly written by White male writers who built on her ideas without giving her much (if any) input (Woo, September 15, 2014).

Creating this timeline alongside my family's was very educative. I was able to see the racist children's media that was available during my father's childhood in the 1930s-early 1940s, which helped me understand his social positioning in joining the military directly after World War II (a time period during which there were far greater anti-Asian influences in the general consciousness in the United States due to the conflict with Japan). The 1930s were also the decade during which the Iowa Writer's Workshop originated (Salesses, 2021). It's helpful to know how anti-Asian pop culture grew throughout the 1940s and 50s alongside fears about communism (Tchen & Yeats, 2014), and to be able to connect this to the Iowa Writer Workshop's explicitly anti-communist ideals (Bennett, 2015). It was out of these ideals that the workshop model became focused on individualism and competition rather than collective well-being (Bennett, 2015; Salesses, 2021).

It's noteworthy to me that *Lady and the Tramp* was released just one year before my mother and maternal grandmother filmed *The Quiet American*. As a child, *Lady and the Tramp* was my favorite movie. I despised and feared the evil "Siamese" cats not fully realizing that they were supposed to caricaturize and demonize Asian people like me, my mother, and maternal grandmother. Putting these two movies together on a timeline in my consciousness helps me to

understand how people in the United States were being conditioned to fear and despise Asians at the time when my mother was around my daughter's age, a time leading up to the Vietnam/American war. It's a chilling realization.

Considering other archival materials together helped me make sense of how my parents were positioned as each arrived in the other's birth country. My father went to Vietnam in the 1960s as a well-established non-commissioned officer. He likely saw this as his duty after years of anti-Communist conditioning (though, I cannot confirm this as he passed away several years ago). My mother came to the United States as a refugee in 1975 and found herself in a country where Asians had been maligned in the public eye for decades and where there were still prevalent ill feelings about the Vietnam/American War (Tchen & Yeats, 2014). It is no wonder that she chose to name me after the Queen of England in order to try and offer me some assimilative protection.

As I moved on from my tunnel books and dug deeper into my archived materials, the process of exploring anti-Asian, racist documents and images grew increasingly harrowing. I felt pulled toward subversion as a way to protect and defend myself from the psychological violence I felt while immersed in such items. Like an oyster making a pearl around an irritating bit of sand, I found myself continually transforming painful documents with art as a way to make the racism easier to process and bear. I created several found poems as acts of protective subversion. To create these, I started by examining an anti-Asian, racist story or document, and sought out words to isolate that, alone, took on a more affirming quality.

I've provided two representative examples. The first (Figure 3) is from an educational book entitled *Wah Sing Our Little Chinese Cousin* (Campbell, 1904). Though at its time this book was likely progressive, through today's eyes, it's outrageously racist.

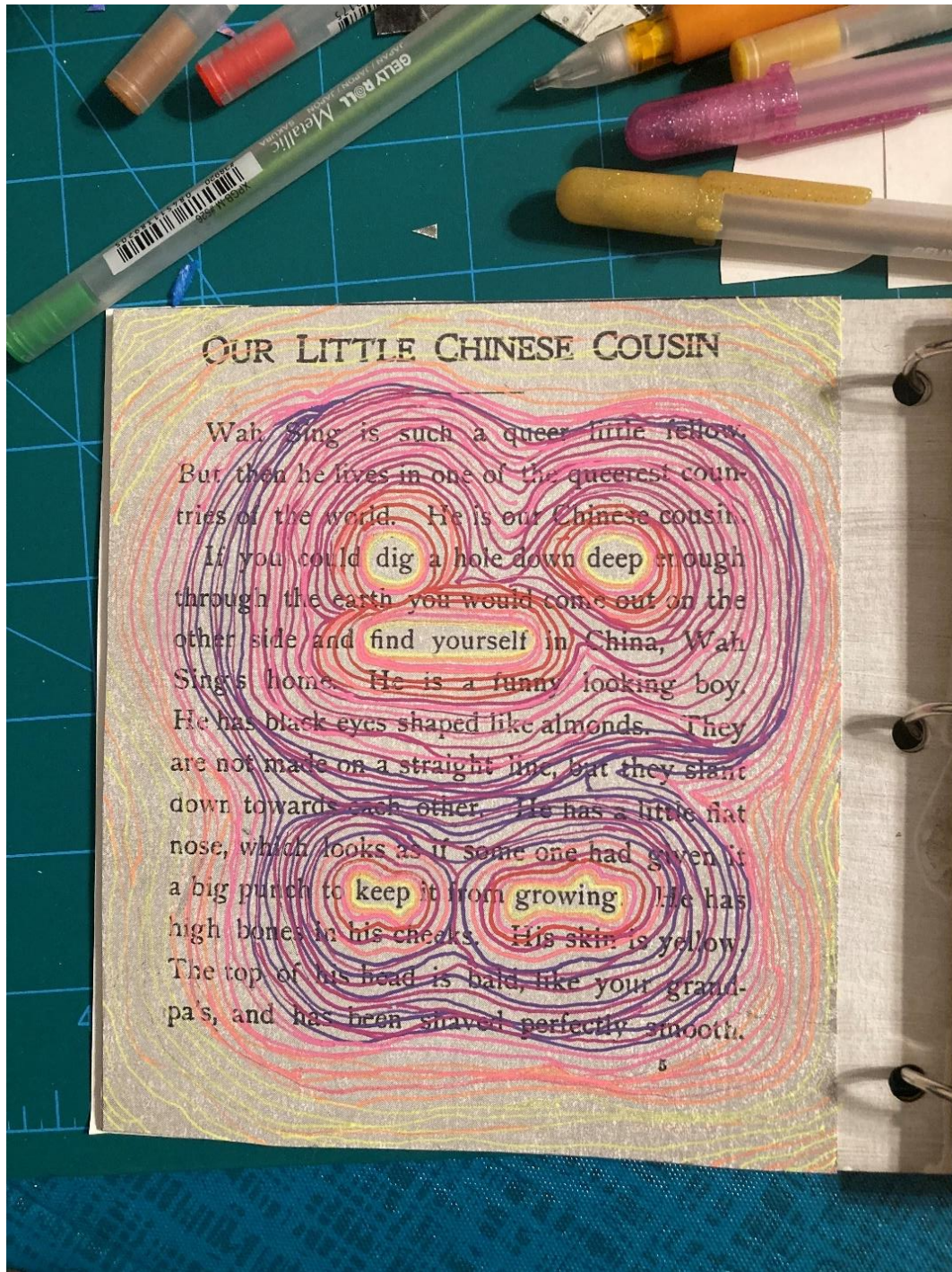


Figure 3: Found Poem from "Wah Sing, Out Little Chinese Cousin"

The book refers to Wah Sing as a “queer little fellow” and a “funny looking boy,” pointing out his features in exoticizing, demeaning, and exaggerated language (p. 5). I found it particularly hurtful that this depiction appeared in an educational book (one that was likely used in schools). My body physically reacted to this book with tension and distress. I found myself immediately scanning the beginning page for words that I could use to create a new meaning. Using my favorite gel pens, I carved out a found poem, circling words that served as a message to me to stay centered on my purpose.

I then drew rounded shapes around the words, obscuring most of the racist text and trying to create the effect of an elevation map where my found words would rise up like the tops of mountains, high above the rest of the distressing story. Upon doing this, my body relaxed and I felt prepared to continue with my archival work.

In the second example (Figure 4), I combined found poetry taken from p. 186 of Sax Rohmer's (1917) novel *The Hand of Fu-Manchu* with a picture of the first Chinese American movie star, Anna May Wong. Rohmer's novel was instrumental in fostering anti-Asian "Yellow Peril" stereotypes which dehumanized Asian men and positioned Asian women as sexually irresistible weaklings who needed White men to save (and love) them or as sexual deviants who weaponized their powers (Tchen & Yeats, 2014). To create this found poem, I used the Procreate artmaking software on my iPad to lay a photograph of Chinese American movie star Anna May Wong (Van Vechten, 1935) over p. 186 from *The Hand of Fu-Manchu* (Rohmer, 1917) which contains a dehumanizing depiction of a Chinese woman. I then erased parts of the photo to allow carefully-selected words to show through. In the resulting poem, entitled "Anna," the found words subvert Rohmer's stereotypes to show Wong's independence, beauty and strength.



Figure 4: “Anna” Found Poem

I found it psychologically harmful to read Rohmer's racist depictions of Asians in the four books of his that I purchased through Goodwill, especially with my knowledge of how these depictions served as propaganda which helped justify violence against Asians (Tchen & Yeats, 2014). I created similar works while examining other racist and anti-Asian documents and found artmaking to be crucial to building my resilience for engaging with such materials (Fidyk, 2019).

After engaging in exploring my archive and making art in the above ways, I felt ready to sum up some of my insights via an autohistoria-teoría.

Autohistoria-Teoría: RQ 1

This autohistoria-teoría is offered in the form of an autobiographical list poem that I significantly revised after rediscovering it in my archival materials. I first began writing this poem with just five items in Diana Khoi Nguyen's class in Spring 2020. It was modeled after the creative, autobiographical work of poet Sun Yung Shin (2016). Diana's class was one of the first where I combined my decolonial feminist lens with creative activities to try to make sense of my how colonialism and imperialism have impacted my mother's life (and thus my own). I drafted a longer version in Iliana Rocha's class in the fall of that same year, incorporating further autobiographical aspects as inspired by poet Carmen Giménez Smith's (2013) "Parts of an Autobiography." This revision expanded my creative inquiry into my own formative influences, and the decolonial feminist theoretical pieces we read in Iliana's class helped me sharpen my use of the lens to inform my work.

I felt drawn to this evolving autobiographical list poem as I went through my archival materials. In reflecting on it, I could see seeds of critical autoethnographic writing being planted and starting to grow. Though I experienced satisfaction in seeing my work (and my

understanding of myself) evolve between the initial two drafts, I felt compelled to continue adding to and shaping the piece to reflect what I've learned since the last draft.

This pull to continually add to and revise this list poem is something I share with Gloria Anzaldúa (Keating, 2015). She worked to improve her own autoethnographic musings numerous times at various points in her life, adding the insights she gleaned over time (Keating, 2015; Keating & González-López, 2011). She was even known to revise after publication, continuing to learn not just from what she added to drafts, but from the new connections that emerged during the revising process, itself (Keating, 2015). I suspect I will continually revise many pieces throughout my life for similar reasons. In future research it may be interesting to compare iterative drafts and contextualize them within my ongoing educative process.

Here, I offer a new version of this list poem that is informed by my archival work and the connections I've made during this study. This list extends to some of the inquiry and reflection I did around RQ1A, but I am placing it here, because it speaks to how historic and sociopolitical factors impacted my racialization as an Asian American in the United States. With autohistoria-teoría adding to my form in this draft, I combine autobiographical and scholarly insights (Anzaldúa, 2015f), making connections between myself and the greater systems that have impacted me (and that I impact). This piece is less reminiscent of an in-depth essay, and more in line with some of the poetic work Anzaldúa offered (such as in Anzaldúa, 1987). I attempt to move from matter of fact, painful realism to a surreal hopescape. This iteration of my evolving list poem is dramatically different from its predecessors. It still does not feel complete, but it is getting closer. I've ended the list at 39, my current age.

Alter/Altar: An Evolving List Poem

1. In the 1400s, Europeans named their homelands the center of the enlightened world.
2. Asia became known as the “East” because of its position relative to Europe.
3. European colonizers racialized Asians as “yellow” to dehumanize them. The “yellow peril” was depicted as Asian drug addicts, thieves, murderers, and whores.
4. Only people of European descent were fully human. All others became Others, which justified violence, theft, and genocide against them for centuries.
5. Even in California, in 1854 Asian immigrants and Asian Americans were forbidden from testifying against White Americans and were thus unable to seek justice when harassed or harmed.
6. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act made Chinese immigration to the U.S.A. illegal.
7. When the French gave the United States the Statue of Liberty in 1884, Chinese immigrants still weren’t allowed into the United States and the French were actively oppressing my ancestors in Vietnam.
8. My mother was born toward the end of French Colonial rule. She was even in a movie about it.
9. In *The Quiet American*, my mom and grandmother were extras, but the lead Vietnamese character was played by a White woman.
10. White actors played the roles of Asian characters because it was against miscegenation laws to feature mixed race couples in love in films.
11. My White father played himself in the American/Vietnam War.
12. My mother fled Vietnam with two suitcases. She would not see her parents again for twenty years.
13. In the United States, she took the role of a White man’s wife, and gave birth to me. She hid me in the name “Elizabeth” and didn’t give me her language.
14. To assimilate is to (dis)integrate.
15. My mother kept an ancestral altar on top of our TV console. She never lit the candles or burned the incense.
16. Who ghosted whom?
17. My childhood years were an erasure poem.
- ~~18. I even censored my own prayers.~~
19. By the time I was 20, I knew the barrel of a gun tasted like a vow of silence.
20. “We need to be aware of the suffering, but retain our clarity, calmness, and strength so we can help transform the situation.” -Thich Nhat Hanh
21. Which comes first, transformation or worship?
22. I can be mindful.
23. I can be mine field.
24. Who does history rearrange as the villain? And how can I help assure White Americans it’s not them?
25. Let’s fall into the usual White American Audience/Vietnamese American Writer dynamic.
26. You be the parasite and I’ll be the Host. Place my life on your tongue and I’ll absolve your sins.
27. Wait-- if this is your communion, why am I the one on my knees?

28. The White gaze put the mute in my transmutation.
29. The shhh in my writing workshops.
30. The war in my memoir.
31. When my love of writing died, the pearly gatekeepers said people like me aren't being admitted into fantasy stories, just realistic fiction.
32. I waited outside the gates until the pages in my heart dried up, yellowed, fluttered.
33. The poets spirited me away in a balloon filled with White men's hot air.
34. They bottled words from K-Ming Chang, and Sun Yung Shin, and Ocean Vuong, and dropped them on my dry tongue.
35. I woke up lying on my mother's altar under a painting of my heart on fire.
36. I plucked the heart from the frame and lit the altar's candles and incense.
37. I burned all the old stories like joss papers.
38. My ancestors appeared and said, "Write a new narrative. Put us in a hopepunk space opera."
39. They are my new critique support group. We workshop on Wednesdays.

Discussion: RQ 1

During the complicated process of gathering and examining my historic and personal archival materials, it occurred to me how the White-dominant history offered in most schools allows White students frequent convenient and supported chances to make sense of their identities. Though this history is grossly incomplete, idealized, and focused on reproducing Eurocentric myths (Swartz, 1992), it at least offers some regular opportunities for White students to see the accomplishments of people from similar backgrounds. Asian and Asian American history, on the other hand, is almost invisible in most general American K-12 social studies courses (An, 2016). Swartz (1992) suggests that historic contextualization is vital for understanding the motivations and actions of minoritized people within their timeframes. Though I grew up understanding my father's life decisions, it was not until I put my mother's personal archival materials in conversation with sociopolitical and historic documents that I began to more fully understand hers.

Further, engaging with historic documents helped me understand Asianization (Iftikar & Museus, 2018), which refers to the ways Asians and Asian Americans are racialized by the

dominant (White) population, especially due to White supremacy and White nativism. I am angry that until I started working on my dissertation I was unaware of how the yellow peril trope originated and was reproduced, serving to dehumanize people of Asian descent (Tchen & Yeats, 2014).

Though I could have engaged in historicizing familial and pop culture artifacts (Capshaw, 2014) through scholarly practice alone, my creative processes made doing so more psychologically manageable (Jordan, 2021). Artmaking also allowed me to stay connected to the emotions I felt during my processing (instead of distancing myself), which helped me to fully explore my relationship with difficult materials and ideas (Jordan, 2021). Without the artistic processes, I likely would have created psychological distance by retreating into the cognitive and would not have been able to so thoroughly process felt tensions (Jordan, 2021).

Summary of Findings: RQ 1

By creating an archive of personal and historic artifacts and putting them together in new ways through artmaking I was able to make sense of and process some of the familial and historic influences that have contributed to my present-day fragmentation.

After examining historic familial and sociopolitical sources of fragmentation, I moved on to trying to discern my lifelong influences as a writer by examining RQ 1A.

Findings: Research Question 1A

A sub-question of RQ1 asked: What formative experiences/processes have shaped me as a writer (creating fragmentation, but also illuminating an alternate, decolonial path)?

Process and Reflection: RQ 1A

To answer this question, I sifted through my archival materials specifically seeking anything that might help me reflect on and understand my formative experiences with writing. Some of the most meaningful artifacts included childhood diaries, writings from high school, newspaper clippings and teachers' notes related to my early and high school achievements, online journal entries from when I was pursuing my MFA, and emails and social media posts in which I wrote about my writing experiences. For the sake of space and time, I will speak to only the most noteworthy connections I made by engaging with these archival materials.

First, I was surprised to see how much I self-censored in my childhood diaries. Throughout my youth, my mother often read my diary, broke any locks I acquired, rifled through my things (even my garbage), and essentially afforded me no sense of privacy. Though I did not know why at the time, my mom's hypervigilance and paranoia were likely long-lasting impacts of her trauma, allowing this trauma to have an intergenerational impact (Maffini & Pham, 2016; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Not understanding this, I felt a constant sense of both surveillance and judgment that resulted in self-censoring. So, between the inability to outwardly express discomfort, sadness, or anger without parental punishment, and the incapacity to express these emotions in my diary, I disconnected from my emotions and body quite often. I found evidence of this in my writings from that time period.

It was particularly interesting to look back at the diary I kept from 1994-1995 when I was approximately 12-13 years old (my daughter's current age). This diary was noteworthy because my mother returned to Vietnam for the first time in 1995, yet I did not mention her trip or visit at all, even though it was an incredibly pivotal event and so much about it is still very vivid in my memories. The trip was extremely stressful for her, and I imagine I did not want to trigger her

further distress by writing about anything I observed in my diary. This said, there were far less important things happening that I only vaguely alluded to out of fear of exposure and consternation. In a few places, I gave people (crushes, especially) code names, and spoke in riddle-like passages about things only I would understand. More disturbing from my present-day vantage, though, is how I sterilized my recordings of my life to only outwardly present manufactured serenity, even in what should have been my own personal processing space.

This self-silencing and self-erasure runs deep because even today I am reluctant to write about many personal experiences, even those I think could be helpful for others to see in print. I am working through this very slowly, as many of my memories are tied to my mother's and I feel ethical tensions about how much of *her* story I can disclose, even when it is intertwined with my own. I take some solace in knowing that other Vietnamese children of refugees also grapple with their complicated feelings about trauma that they did not experience firsthand, but that they still feel difficult emotions about due to their proximity to their parents (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). In the future, I will look to other Vietnamese writers for how to negotiate the tensions surrounding this. For now, though, I am looking back at my past expression (or lack thereof) in the diary that I mentioned (kept from 1994-1995).

To engage with this diary artifact, I used an empty page in it to write a letter to my personified journal (whom I called "Di" in my childhood writings) and to my younger self. I have not included a picture, here, because I wish to honor my childhood diary as a private, fully honest space for conversation between myself and my younger self. I take great satisfaction in knowing that this space is completely private, now, and I can keep it that way, extending to my young self an assurance that I can now fully express my emotions and also control who has access to my innermost thoughts. Though I may not feel ready to publicly share as much as I

would like, it is safe for me to journal about anything I want and to privately admit to anger, sadness, and other emotions I once felt compelled to hide. Like Bhattacharya's (2015) letter to her six-year-old self, I found this diary writing activity helpful for processing my early formative experiences and for changing the trajectory of my current narrative so that it is not still mired in all of the harmful fears I was stuck in as a young person.

The second artifact that helped me understand my formative experiences is a collection of handwritten questions and memos I made for a family history assignment I completed in 9th grade when I was 14 years old (Figure 5). I was tasked with interviewing my parents about their pasts; however, my mom was particularly vague about hers, and I became uncomfortable asking her questions she clearly did not wish to answer. Because I needed to write something for my assignment, I wrote about the experience of awkwardly trying to ask her questions she didn't want to talk about. I can feel my own self-censoring at work, again, at the end of the page where I crossed out a line pondering why I asked her sensitive questions.

I remember being as curious back then as I am now about my mother's past and feeling like I could not get a full picture of the foundations of my own being without information about her life in Vietnam and our family's history. Back then, I simply knew that my mother's life was difficult and that I seemed to cause her harm if I tried to find out more. I also see the tension that I felt at that time, a tension that I believe contributed to my chronic physical illness with persistent allergies, bronchitis, and teeth grinding throughout those years. Per Nanda et. al. (2016), children who internalize anxiety are more likely to suffer from allergies. Furthermore, according to Harvard Health Publishing chronic stress makes allergy symptoms worse (April 19, 2021, np).

The constant whur of the ceiling fan overhead was the only steady thing in the room. The air was filled with a type of tension that made your stomach rise up to your throat, & your heart pound in all of your limbs.

As she looked up ~~f~~ at me, from her sprawled out position on the couch, her face twitched with the pain and emotion that she was trying so hard to hold back. "I don't want to talk about that," she said ~~quietly~~ in a mumble that I almost didn't hear.

As she looked away, I found myself being drowned in a wave of immeasurable guilt. It was as if a floodgate had broken open, and the guilt-ridden waters had carried me away. Why did I have to ask that question?

Figure 5: Handwritten Notes from High School Family History Assignment

I remember feeling constant tension at that age, and I can see in retrospect that much of this dis-ease was likely impacted by (what I suspect may have been) my mother's unresolved trauma. I wish to speak more to my own experiences than hers, here, so I will just say that I felt a great need to walk lightly around my mother at that age, avoiding or internalizing any questions or frustrations that could compound her trauma and resultant distress. I felt tense all of the time and like my stomach was in knots. I also remember suspecting that my chronic allergies were somehow related to holding all my stress inside of me, though I did not have the language to articulate what was happening at that time. This is in no way to blame my mother, who I know was just trying to survive the lingering effects of her trauma as best she knew how. She also was not the only parent who shaped my well-being.

My father, likewise, expected me to internalize any emotions he perceived as difficult (such as anger or sadness, unless a pet or loved one died). I suspect he may have had some Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or anxiety as a Vietnam War veteran, too, though he was not on the front lines. During my youth, he felt so highly anxious in crowds that he did not attend my school functions, nor was he even able to participate in important family events such as graduations and weddings (though, many years later, he attended my very small wedding). He also tried to maintain a placidness at all times, seeming to incur instant, overwhelming physical reactions to my mother's ever increasing, seemingly-random angry outbursts. I walked on eggshells around both parents, trying to be invisible and hiding most emotions except for happiness and the (feigned) outward appearance of calm. While it's difficult to say with 100% certainty that my parents' emotional repression (which they framed as strength) was at least partly related to their war-related trauma, I do believe, intuitively, that their war-time experiences had lingering negative effects. Both of them had to ignore so much of what they saw, endured,

and (in my father's case) were complicit in, in order to survive. My father was also socialized to display stoicism as a form of masculinity as he reproduced the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2008, 2007). Further, because the Vietnam/American war had colonial and imperial roots, I see this coloniality (which impacted both of my parents in different ways) as the genesis for much of my formative fragmentation.

Overall, my early experiences taught me to present a very carefully-constructed outward image at all times or risk danger. This careful construction of my public self extended beyond my family. Whatever complicated emotions my mother felt about the Vietnam/American War, she only ever outwardly expressed gratitude to the United States for saving her life and giving her opportunities. While my father, a Vietnam War veteran, never really showed much (if any) public identification with other veterans, and rarely engaged in flag waving or other affectionate displays of patriotism, my mother made a point of profusely thanking every Vietnam Veteran she saw. She could identify Vietnam War veterans by war-related artifacts such as hats, t-shirts, and bumper stickers suggesting their veteran status. She sought opportunities to publicly wear red, white, and blue on patriotic holidays, and to dress nicely (and usually with a patriotic lapel pin) any time she voted. If there was a chance to proudly wave an American flag, she did so, or instructed me to do so. She encouraged me to show unabashed public appreciation for our flag and veterans, which culminated in my writing a patriotic speech in her honor for the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) "Voice of Democracy" contest during my junior year of high school. I remember specifically designing the speech to absolve Vietnam Veterans of any dissonance or guilt by showing them how grateful my mother and I were for their sacrifices and by assuring them that our being in the United States, safe and thriving, was evidence that our country (and, by extension, they) did the right thing fighting in Vietnam. I will never be able to ask my mother

about her reasons for this prominent public patriotism. I do believe she is sincere in being grateful for her safe passage to the United States and for the good life she has made, here. That said, I always felt like we had to be extra public about this gratitude in order to be accepted by people in our almost entirely White, southern town who might not treat us as though we belonged, otherwise. I was never explicitly told that these public demonstrations of our loyalty and gratitude were necessary for our safety, but I *felt* like they were from a very young age.

Such displays are common amongst Vietnamese refugees. Nguyen (2017) suggests that there is a politics of rescue that Vietnamese refugees have been socialized to engage in and which relies on their conspicuous public gratitude to appease the American post-war social conscience. Nguyen suggests that it is through this gratitude and highly visible American patriotism that Vietnamese refugees establish their “moral belonging” (p. 5). This positioning also helps appease American guilt by implying that the United States’ willingness to admit Vietnamese refugees after the war was sufficient atonement for any wrongdoing, and was evidence of the country’s righteous anti-communist commitment. Nguyen further suggests that it was important for the first wave of refugees to take part in the politics of rescue to encourage the United States to accept further waves of refugees (often including family and friends). Overall, obvious gratitude and patriotism have been essential to Vietnamese refugees’ survival (Nguyen, 2017). I understand my mother’s actions and her desire to socialize me into reproducing her visible patriotism better after situating her behavior in a sociopolitical context.

An artifact from my archive that helped me see how this formative conspicuous patriotism impacted my writing is a selection of newspaper clippings I found in a scrapbook of my accomplishments (Figures 6, 7, and 8).



Figure 6: A Page from the Author's Childhood Scrapbook

Student's audio essay wins district honors, too

CONTINUED FROM 1

to fight" she says.

I grip my mother's hand tightly, as I look up at the wall, and then at her. She has this weird look on her face, kind of like indigestion, but with a hint of pride, and stifled emotion. Letting go, I move closer to the big black wall, my reflection growing larger and larger as I near. Flags and pictures litter the base of the monument— a silent remembrance.

Elizabeth said that before her parents were introduced by friends in Georgia, Larry Parker served with the U. S. Armed Forces in Vietnam and his future wife, Kim, worked for the American Embassy about two miles away.

Along with local dignitaries and educators, the Parkers and families of the other Voice of Democracy and Youth Essay winners were guests Jan. 10 at an awards luncheon at Rainbow Lakes Community Center.

Jim Dugan, commander of VFW Post 8201, served as Voice of Democracy and Youth Essay Chairman for the five participating posts and auxiliaries; 4864 Citrus Springs, 7991 Dunnellon, 8201 Rainbow Lakes, 8698 Inglis, and 10091 Marion Oaks. These posts and auxiliaries also sponsored the luncheon.

Nicole Reding took second place and Adrian Summers took

third place in the local Voice of Democracy contest. Dugan said that Summers was last year's first place winner in the local contest. He said he thought all the winning essays were "consistently well read, well written."

The theme of the VFW's national Youth Essay competition, open to students in grades 7, 8 and 9, is "What Freedom Means to Me." In the local competition, Chris Bumpus took first place, Jessica Koralewski, second place, and Brian Simpson, third place. All winners received monetary and other prizes.

Elizabeth said she would encourage all students who took part in this year's Youth Essay Contest to enter the Voice of Democracy contest when they become eligible. "Even if you don't win, you still learn a lot about yourself and the things that have happened in this country; how important freedom is," she said.

Ernie Williams, VFW District 7 Voice of Democracy and Youth Essay chairman, presented Elizabeth with a pin, ribbon and cash award for placing second in the district contest. The district is composed of 23 posts in Marion and adjoining counties.

Joseph Crist, District 7 commander, said "Today we have teenagers here who show you what youth is all about. ... some of the credit goes to their families... as long as we have kids like this, we're in good shape."

Figure 7: Another Scrapbook Page



Figure 8: A Third Scrapbook Page

These clippings are from my junior and senior years of high school (1998-2000) and highlight my repeated participation in the VFW's Voices of Democracy contest (Brandes, January 27, 1999; Inglis, Dunnellon VFW, April 28, 2000).

Looking at these articles, I see how my conditioning led me to center the colonialist/imperial gaze in the speeches that I wrote for this contest. I also see how the celebrations of my work served to help justify Western imperialism. My work was even lauded at an event on May 1st that our local VFW called "Loyalty Day," which was described in the local newspaper as a rebuking the "communist" holiday May Day. I know that I did not understand the hegemonic influence of such events at that time, but I do recall feeling, deep down in my bones, that I needed to represent Vietnamese gratitude to these veterans not only for their role in my mother's earlier safety, but also to ensure her current and ongoing safety (and my own). It was constantly vital for us to show (perhaps prove?) that we belonged. Because my father was a Vietnam war veteran, I did feel genuine pride about his participation in the military, as well as a dissonance I continue to feel about veterans having very little power or agency in their individual roles. Our veterans sacrifice greatly and are sometimes pressured to do unconscionable things or are needlessly put in harm's way. When I attended these events, it was with true appreciation for the sacrifices of those who served. I also felt pride in my mother's resilience and genuine gratitude for her safety. Alongside these emotions, though, I felt a keen alertness to how this pride could be powerfully used for protection.

It's noteworthy that the article clippings said my father attended the awards ceremony though he did not. As a White man, he did not likely feel any need to establish his own belonging and safety. My mother and I did not share this same unquestioned belongingness. She

felt an anxiety, urgency, and self-awareness about actively shaping our identities as patriots, and as a result, I did, too.

To process my engagement with these newspaper artifacts artistically, I painted a mask where the outside shows the identity I carefully constructed at that time, and the inside shows the same image painted over genuine thoughts I didn't dare even admit to or acknowledge internally at that age. These early influences certainly impacted my fragmentation by conditioning me to conceal, minimize, and erase my genuine emotions.

I would continue to center the settler colonist and imperial gaze for decades after, often feeling as though I needed to prove my American-ness and guard my safety. If I am being fully forthright, I have to acknowledge that I am still grappling with ways to authentically process and communicate my complicated feelings about our nation's history (particularly the ways it has been both helpful and harmful to minoritized people at home and abroad). I'm not alone. In *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, Cathy Park Hong (2020) writes, that she's been conditioned "to please white people and this desire to please has become ingrained into my consciousness. Even to declare that I'm writing for myself would still mean I'm writing to a part of me that wants to please white people" (pp. 40-41). This is something I will continue to work through in the future. The difference is, though, I am aware of this compulsion, now, and its roots. Though I may still sometimes seek to "please white people" (Hong, 2020) I will strive to no longer center the settler-colonist or imperialist gaze in my work.

During high school, college, and graduate school, I was socialized through additional colonizing influences. In my personal mementos, I found a handout (Figure 9) from one of my high school teachers listing the books that had appeared most frequently on advanced placement (AP) exams.

WORKS USED ON AP ENGLISH LIT EXAMS (1985-1995)

8 times	Murder in the Cathedral	J.B.
Invisible Man	Obasan	Joseph Andrews
	Oedipus Rex	The Jungle
	Paradise Lost	Long Day's Journey into Night
	A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man	Lord Jim
	The Portrait of a Lady	Love Medicine
	Pride and Prejudice	"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"
	Romeo and Juliet	The Loved One
	The Scarlet Letter	Lysistrata
	A Streetcar Named Desire	M. Butterfly
	To the Lighthouse	Madame Bovary
	The Turn of the Screw	Main Street
	Twelfth Night	Mansfield Park
	Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?	The Mayor of Casterbridge
	Wide Sargasso Sea	The Metamorphosis
	The Winter's Tale	Middlemarch
	Wise Blood	A Midsummer Night's Dream
		The Misanthrope
		Miss Lonelyhearts
		Mrs. Dalloway
		"My Last Duchess"
		No Exit
		No-no Boy
		Notes from the Underground
		The Odyssey
		The Optimist's Daughter
		The Oresteia
		One Hundred Years of Solitude
		Our Mutual Friend
		Our Town
		Pamela
		Persuasion
		Phedre
		The Power and the Glory
		The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie
		Pygmalion
		Redburn
		Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead
		Saint Joan
		Sister Carrie
		Slaughterhouse Five
		Song of Solomon
		Sons and Lovers
		The Sound and the Fury
		The Stranger
		Sula
		A Tale of Two Cities
		Tartuffe
		Tess of the D'Urbervilles
		Things Fall Apart
		Tom Jones
		The Trial
		Tristram Shandy
		Uncle Tom's Cabin
		Washington Square
		The Watch that Ends the Night
		Watch on the Rhine
		Winter in the Blood
		The Woman Warrior
		Zoot Suit

Figure 9: A Handout from the Author's High School English Class

The great majority of these books are by White authors, though there are some by Black and African American authors. Though I may be overlooking something, *The Woman Warrior* is the only book I can identify that is by an Asian American author. Two other books which are about Asian people, *A Passage to India* and *Madame Butterfly* are written by White authors.

Though there are certainly some anti-colonial themes in some of the books on the reading list, most of the books that speak to colonialism are *about* rather than by those directly impacted. Thus, during my formative education about literature, books by White authors' works were largely elevated as gold standards. Their gaze (Morrison, 1992) was positioned as the most important lens through which "good" stories were written. Throughout much of my high school education, these stories were lauded as being of the highest quality. As we studied them for characterization, theme, voice, etc., they served as models teaching me how "good" writing should look and fostering the reproduction of Eurocentric literary ideals.

I do have to thank my AP literature teacher, Ms. Massie, though, for assigning us numerous books by Toni Morrison during my senior year. We read Morrison's *Beloved*, *The People Could Fly: Song of Solomon*, and *Sula* and engaged in conversations and reflections that were wildly progressive during 1999/2000. This experience was fundamentally positive for showing me how a minoritized author might write boldly while centering her own people's gaze. It is an anomaly in my education, but one that's a well of strength even today.

In college, I developed the desire to write for children. I devoted my honors thesis to trying to determine best practices, and all of the handbooks I consulted were by White authors. After graduating, I attended Hollins University where all of my instructors were White (though there were some visiting scholars and writers of color who offered feedback during my time there). Most of my classmates were White, too, and the unintended effect was that I centered the

White gaze in pretty much all of my work because my readers were almost entirely White. This was not something unique to Hollins, and it's an issue that persists to this day in many MFA programs (Salesses, 2021). On the positive side, Hollins was where I learned to use specific critical lenses and frameworks to analyze stories, and it was where I became aware of children's literature's hegemonic influence. I also became part of an incredible community and network of supportive people at Hollins that I'm still in touch with, today.

With this noted, looking back at my journal entries from that time in my life, I can see how much I centered Whiteness along my formative path. Most of the books I enjoyed reading featured White protagonists, largely because characters of color had not traditionally been featured enough in genre fiction (sci-fi, fantasy, etc.) for young readers (C. Myers, 2014; Thomas, 2019). In one private social media post that I made to a curated group of friends, I listed the top ten children's books that I thought had a lasting impact on my own writing. All ten were books by White authors. In a class where I was allowed to pick any "mentor text" (model) of my choosing to use in developing my own writing, I chose a book by Louis Sachar (a White, male author). I was unaware, at that time, of how my reading choices were leading me to reproduce Eurocentrism. While my professors may have assigned some realistic fiction featuring characters of color (I do remember a few titles), these books were more likely to feature the tough, realistic and trauma-focused storylines that I just did not prefer to read. So, I gravitated toward the fun books with mostly-White characters.

I also continued to center White readers' gaze outside of class. My journal entries mention numerous White children's book agents and editors by name, and I spent years trying to figure out what to write that these gatekeepers would want to acquire. I also attended conferences and read market-related materials from the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators

(SCBWI), a professional organization that offers mentoring to emerging writers and supports established writers, too. This group has recently been criticized for their anti-Asian racism and for gaslighting Asian and Asian American members who have called them out (Wenjen, February 27, 2020). In my journal entries about attending SCBWI conferences, I frequently spoke about the White agents, editors, and authors featured at the conferences I attended. Though SCBWI has increased their efforts to be diverse, equitable, inclusive since then, there's still much work to be done (Wenjen, February 27, 2020). My time spent in professional development with them further developed my centering of the White gaze as interactions were primarily focused on White professionals' opinions, preferences, and needs. The manuscript that I took to an SCBWI conference and which garnered the most positive attention was focused on the protagonist's Vietnam War-related death.

Additionally, in several contests, I was recognized and rewarded for writing about minoritized people's trauma. This positive response led to me moving away from the fun, light-hearted books I originally wanted to write (the type I loved and still love to read most), and toward writing what I thought readers wanted and what would sell—books that exposed minoritized people's struggles and fostered White readers' empathy. This work felt socially important and at first I thought it could humanize people like me. I did not realize until later that White readers often want to only read about narrowly-defined trauma (such as reading Vietnam War Stories), ignoring other experiences that would actually have a greater humanizing effect.

Though I ventured outside of the genres I was most passionate about, I tried to still incorporate fantastic elements in most of my stories. Nonetheless, I was no longer having fun writing them. As I grew increasingly disconnected from the genuine heart of my work, I started writing less and less. Eventually, I began writing short stories for educational companies (some

of which do not appear on my curriculum vitae for a variety of reasons). I took on this work because doing so helped me feel like I was using my degree to earn some much-needed money. In this capacity, I received feedback from almost entirely White editors and reviewers, again, reinforcing my centering of White readers' expectations and the White gaze. I became even less engaged with my writing.

One editor (at a company I have not listed on my curriculum vitae) asked me to change a lighthearted autobiographical story about my family to show more fictionalized suffering. They implied the story would feel more realistic with this falsified change. This just about sent me over the edge. Poet Chen Chen suggests that writers from minoritized backgrounds need to have their own reasons for writing about suffering, reasons which are not based on the expectations attached to the White gaze (Chen & Zheng, November 25, 2020). I was being asked to write about trauma for the wrong reasons, and it greatly hurt my satisfaction with my work.

In the wake of Travon Martin's killing, I became even more unsatisfied after receiving feedback from White editors and reviewers at educational companies who asked me to center not only the White gaze, but also White readers' sensitivity about "political" topics (i.e. They asked me to whitewash and tone down Social Studies stories exposing difficult historic and modern political truths about injustice). I stopped writing for educational companies, feeling irreparably demoralized.

After I graduated with my Master of Fine Arts degree from Hollins (a net positive experience, overall), I was offered the chance to teach a creative writing workshop on writing for children. Most of my students were Mexican American or Mexican, and I sought to encourage them to write the types of books they loved. I wanted to prevent them from facing the same burnout and dissatisfaction I felt. Around that time, there was renewed consciousness about the

need for diverse books, too, so we talked about the importance of them adding their stories to what was available for young readers. I was surprised when most of my Mexican and Mexican American students submitted fiction featuring White protagonists. When I pointed out this phenomenon and asked for their thoughts, they generally agreed that they were simply writing about the types of characters they most often saw in the books they liked to read (books like *Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Hunger Games*). When I asked if they had ever seen characters like them in books they read for school, they said that they had, but that they didn't want to write *those* kinds of books. The books they had been assigned in their formative education featuring Mexican and Mexican American protagonists had largely been realistic fiction stories focused on the main characters' hardships and trauma. This experience was part of the impetus for me pursuing doctoral study.

When I started my doctoral program, I wanted to analyze the formative experiences that lead to writers of color being able to grow in their true authenticity. I expected to do purely scholarly work and had no idea that I would also get the opportunity for transformative creative experiences. I never would have dreamed that at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), I'd get to take poetry classes (for my cognate) with three women of color. Beforehand, I had *never* had a creative writing class with a woman of color. At UTK, I studied with Joy Harjo, Diana Khoi Nguyen, and Iliana Rocha. Diana was the first professor I ever had from my same cultural background (Vietnamese American). My experiences learning from each instructor were life-changing.

I signed up for Joy Harjo's course after attending a one-time creative writing workshop elsewhere where a White peer publicly said that my submission was "nice," but "not a poem." Upon hearing this critique, I immediately felt ashamed by my perceived inadequacy. Though the

very public dismissal of my work was hurtful, it did inadvertently lead me to pursue formative educative experiences that were incredibly nurturing.

Under Joy Harjo's instruction, I participated in the first creative writing class in which my classmates and I primarily read books by and about minoritized people. We also were able to interact with some of the authors through online web conferencing, which was a wonderful opportunity for me to find mentorship and role modeling in the lived experiences of non-White writers.

In Diana Khoi Nguyen's class, I learned about culturally-sustaining (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012) groups serving Asian and Asian American writers, such as Kundiman, the Asian American Writer's Workshop (AAWW), and the Diasporic Vietnamese American Network (DVAN). Joining these communities provided a solution to the isolation I felt, prior, and helped me to see that problems which I thought were unique to me were shared by other people working within the Asian diaspora. I was flabbergasted that I had spent nearly 15 years formally studying creative writing before anyone had mentioned these groups' existence to me. It was incredibly helpful to learn with an instructor from a shared background who understood some of our shared needs and who could offer me personalized recommendations and resources. In Diana's class, I also got to explore experimental forms which expanded beyond those reified in the Eurocentric canon. Further, Diana encouraged and modeled embodied and intuitive creative processes, and encouraged us to think of our generative work as "experiments" (Gay & Burges, November 24, 2019). Diana also encouraged our class to use intuitive tools such as tarot and the I Ching. She introduced me to the Asian American Literary Review's *Open in Emergency* mental health book and the amazing set of Tarot cards included with it (Khúc, 2020). I have since used these cards frequently to divine culturally-aligned wisdom and to draw strength

in my decolonial work. They are an invaluable resource that I likely would not have found without Diana's guidance. I have incorporated card readings into my dissertation process when feeling stuck, and there have been numerous times these culturally-aligned cards have helped me move forward.

In Iliana Rocha's class, I was explicitly encouraged for the first time to be overtly political in challenging Eurocentrism with my creative writing. This paired well with my scholarly doctoral coursework where I was developing my understanding of critical frameworks and discovering my alignment with decolonial feminism. Further, Iliana's class was one of the only two in my academic history where I got to discuss an essay by Gloria Anzaldúa with my classmates. Her class showed me how to approach creative writing, and not just scholarly writing, through a decolonial feminist lens. This experience brought my creative work more fully under the umbrella of my epistemological stance, which is something that was missing for me, beforehand. I realized that some of my prior dissatisfaction with my creative writing came from that writing's misalignment with my personal values. Identifying this disconnect was instrumental in helping me determine a direction for repairing my fragmentation. Further, our workshop format was focused on helping each writer to understand how others were experiencing their offerings and less about trying to impose stylistic preferences. I felt free to develop my voice without being pushed toward Eurocentric ideals.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, one small benefit was that suddenly there were many more opportunities to meet with and learn from people with similar affinities and backgrounds, online. I attended numerous Kundiman, AAWW, and DVAN workshops and presentations. Through these organizations I heard from and met other first generation Vietnamese Americans, and other mixed race (half-Vietnamese) people who have grappled (and

are still grappling) with the same tensions I often feel. Until this happened, I don't know that I fully realized how isolated I felt or how much I saw communal problems as personal, placing blame and guilt on myself for issues that are fairly normal amongst people with my same background. Having this understanding community afforded me powerful affirmation and also helped me have a new audience's gaze to center in my writing.

I likewise attended several online qualitative research workshops and presentations with decolonial methodologist Kakali Bhattacharya. Through these offerings, I found a scholarly community with a similar decolonial alignment. This community similarly affirmed my struggles as not being unique to me, and thus provided me support, solidarity, and role models for growth. I cannot adequately explain the power of taking part in these communities and how they enabled me to turn away from the White, colonial gaze, and toward the gaze of a decolonial in-group with which I feel much more aligned.

With all of the above experiences in mind, I knew that my autohistoria-teoría for RQ 1A would have to be about identity formation and gaze. Interestingly, I had already written some initial thoughts about these aspects of my life in professor Iliana Rocha's class in the Fall of 2020. I revised the essay I wrote for her class for publication as part of a chapter that will hopefully appear in a handbook on race and refusal in higher education (Garcia, In Progress). The chapter focuses primarily on my formative experiences in creative writing classes and in dealings with the publishing industry, but it does not explore much of the greater contextualized influences that I've uncovered in this study. Following Anzaldúa's practice of continually revising pieces over time to add layers of meaning and nuance (Keating, 2015), I offer this theorizing personal essay, here, a third time, expanded with the familial, communal, and sociopolitical insights that my dissertation process has provided.

How to Be (In)Visible

Growing Up While Keeping My Head Down

As a kid, when some baseball-cleated boy would call me a “Chink” or exaggeratedly slant his eyes at me, it would often take a few hard seconds to realize he was making fun of *me*. The “Chinese” identity my classmates knew came mostly from racist caricatures in Dr. Seuss books and movies like *Sixteen Candles*. They knew nothing of my Vietnamese mother’s perfect chả giò, the cool feeling of her jade against my skin, or the vibrant green thumb she used to grow all of the herbs from her home country that she couldn’t find in local stores. They certainly didn’t know anything about me, except maybe that they had seen me walking to or from school under my mom’s umbrella (which she held over me to block the Florida sun). We looked “Chinese,” and this was plenty fodder for “Ching Chong Ding Dong” taunts and more.

I didn’t respond to the bullies, nor did I ever tell my parents about them.

Reading and Writing Through the Lens of White Out

Throughout my education, almost every piece of writing that I touched at school centered Whiteness. I read countless novels featuring White main characters and hardly ever saw myself in the stories I loved. I wrote speeches centering the colonial and imperial gaze. I wrote stories for White classmates, teachers, agents, editors, and critique group members, but not for myself.

In college, I participated in workshops where I was forced to be silent while White peers told me what they thought was wrong with my writing. Later, White agents, editors, and other professionals also expected me not to respond to their criticism, even when it directed me to further fragment myself and hide, silence, and erase the Vietnamese parts of my identity. The old

practice of keeping my head down stayed with me for some time, until I realized that I was being complicit in making myself invisible.

In order to heal, I am practicing talking back (hooks, 1989) and speaking up for my past self, even if that can only be done through belated written responses, for now.

False Borders and Boundaries: An Unsilenced Response to Common Criticisms

In creative workshops, writers typically aren't supposed to reply to critiques except to say, "Thank You." Here, I will respond to the three recurring criticisms of my work that have caused me the most disintegration. I write in different genres, so I will speak back to criticisms of my poetry, children's nonfiction, and fiction.

Poetry Criticism: "This is Not a Poem."

Inexplicably, several of my white classmates have offered these words when critiquing my poems in workshops. When I write in free verse, collage, use abstract language, offer overtly political pieces, and otherwise move away from what is collectively accepted as canonical and traditional, this is the feedback I receive. It sometimes feels like I am being pressured to speak in only one way, a way that filters my ancestors' (and my) trauma through White history's sieve.

My Response

It took me a long time to realize you can only see my Asian American poet voice if it looks like a small, thin, brown body growing smaller.

You can only stand to smell and taste my Asian American poet voice if it's covered in soy sauce or plum sauce or duck sauce or dick sauce or what the f*ck sauce, and only if there are no neck bones or chickens' feet or inky eyeballs to slurp and gnaw. To you, those things are *not* food the same way my poetry is *not* something consumable or palatable or nourishing. When you take my poetry into your body, it does *not* satiate. Your body is my-poetry-intolerant.

You can only hear my Asian American poet voice when it sounds like a violin or when I'm singing a patriotic anthem and the refrain is in the key of "*Thank you, thank you, thank you.*"

You can only stand to touch my Asian American poet voice if doing so makes you feel big. Sometimes, this has meant you poking my poetry in the chest and spitting out what it's

Most.

Definitely.

Not.

In your eyes,

I am (in)visible.

I am (il)legible.

And I'll concede:

This is not a "poem."

And it's not for you.

Children's Nonfiction: "This is Too Political."

This is a comment I've gotten on numerous nonfiction pieces exposing difficult histories for children and young adults. The adults who've said this about my writing are white, comfortable and complacent. They have the privilege to shelter their children from witnessing racism and violence unless they are the ones inflicting it. My writing asks them not to let their children look away.

My Response

For a long time, my voice repeated the lie: The bad things happened only in distant places and times. My voice was a high-flying flag. My voice was a grace note in the middle of "Taps." My voice was evidence "our boys" have always done the right thing.

Only the safest of my thoughts became words other people could read. I thought integrating myself into “society” meant segregating parts of me, but an externally segregated self isn’t internally integrated, and that’s what counts, most. If all of you can’t be at peace inside your body and mind, there’s nowhere you can belong. So.

From now on, I’m bringing my entire self everywhere.

My full voice will not go back to where my ancestors came from. “I am here because you were there.” And while I’m here... My full voice will rearrange the letters on marquees outside churches to announce its own holiness. It will pilot a bright purple airplane, skywrite love letters to brown and black babies and sisters and stepdads and great-great-aunts and neighbors people call “uncle,” swoop puffy hearts in cursive loop de loop de loops above city hall. And when my full voice tires, it will gather toddling children to its bedside, let them lick the dangerous, delicious blades of unfamiliar words, and teach them to draw their own pens like swords.

Fiction: “Write Something Readers Will Resonate with More.”

The implication, here, is to write something *White* readers will find moving. What’s odd is that white readers connect best with my fiction when it’s full of the stereotypical cultural signifiers I identify with least.

My Response

I get the most compliments when I write about the Vietnamese stock characters editors are most familiar with, and that usually means writing about war-related trauma. You can probably imagine what the “Vietnamese refugee story” looks like. It’s sepia and dirty and sounds like a baby that won’t stop crying until it dies. And then the silence is so painful and overwhelming, the adults cry to stop it. Next comes gunshots and bombs, fire and smoke, and water that doesn’t cleanse, but drowns. There are helicopters. Flies. Conical hats. Then there is

leaving. A rocking seasick blur. Sunstroke. Daze. Finally, rescue. Broken English. A hard place to sleep. Then a softer one that's overcrowded and shared. Then, maybe, there's a Baptist church, maybe kindness, maybe a saved soul. Maybe AMERICA. That's it. Roll the credits. Assume all brown-person-war-torn trauma is healed by democracy, meritocracy, White-God-Generosity. Dumb luck.

More often than not, only the Vietnamese American origin myth counts, and never the full details of too far before or after the war. You've heard some version of this story, before. I constantly resist the urge to cast my family in retelling it, performing solely the tear-jerking roles of refugee struggle and gratitude and/or differentiating our story with just a dash more trauma than readers have ever seen.

Why are these the only images of Vietnamese (and Vietnamese American) people that most White editors believe are real? They can only recognize us in our pain. They seek to humanize us through our suffering.

We are more than that.

Sure, maybe some Vietnamese characters appear in the background of other stories, painting a white romantic lead's toenails or serving a bowl of phở. I sobbed through *Always Be My Maybe* because I'd never before seen contemporary Vietnamese American people cast as the main characters in a romcom.

I no longer care if White editors only resonate with Vietnamese pain. I'm grasping for something blunt and heavy to smash through the master's windows.

I want to write 300 pages of Vietnamese American people doing the everyday, the boring, the banal. I want to show my elderly mother waking up, scratching her butt, paying the water bill, changing the toilet paper roll, soaping and rinsing her hands, wetting and patting her

face dry, putting in her false teeth, feeling around for her glasses, pulling on her thick white socks, tugging up green pants, slipping on yellow blouse, turning on the coffee pot, peeling a banana, reading the newspaper, clipping coupons, laughing at *Peanuts* or *Cathy*, checking her lottery numbers, watching a YouTube about street food in Saigon, trying to chop and simmer her own version with generic American store brands, calling her bestie to chat about it and make plans to hit up yard sales Friday morning, feeding hummingbirds, watering the mint, harvesting the ginger, hanging laundry out to dry (I imagine detergent-commercial-worthy whites), petting the stray tabby that's winding between her legs, turning her face to the sun.

That's it. That's the whole story. It's nothing for most readers to cry about. But it would bring me to tears.

Disrupting the Politics of Rescue

Nguyen (2017) suggested that Vietnamese refugees often engage in the “politics of rescue,” by which they continually reassure White Americans that the United States’ role in the Vietnam War was morally right and that it resulted in primarily positive life changes for the Vietnamese people who were impacted by American involvement. As the daughter of a White Vietnam War veteran, I sympathize with the desire for this mythologizing. As the daughter of a Vietnamese refugee, however, I cannot continue to primarily reproduce this fan fiction, anymore. It is an erasure that renders nuance in experiences and identities invisible. I need to be able to delve into the intricacies of Vietnamese refugee and Vietnamese American experiences without feeling like doing so could cause harm to veterans I greatly admire. Two things can be true: I can appreciate these veterans’ sacrifices and I can also acknowledge the complicated ways the Vietnam/American war impacted both them and the Vietnamese diaspora, too. Feeling anger or grief alongside my appreciation doesn’t mean I don’t value our military or government; it means

I seek to understand these important institutions in their full complexity. This also doesn't mean I don't stand for American ideals. Instead, I want to help to move us toward the honest expression of those ideals in all contexts and for *all* Americans.

Additionally, and more importantly, I want to write about topics beyond the war! I want to imagine new hopescapes and funny, fun, and fantastic possibilities. Vietnamese Americans deserve to be the heroes of our own stories just as much as anyone else. In order to disrupt the politics of rescue, I now believe my best bet is to write and workshop my stories with other decolonial feminist writers. My time spent with such writers has shown me a different politics of rescue: A new narrative we are writing together in which we save ourselves.

Discussion: RQ 1A

Though my initial drafts of this essay centered on talking back (hooks, 1989) by responding to common misaligned criticisms of my creative work, my dissertation study helped me to observe and integrate the greater contextual influences at work throughout my entire life. I would not have understood these other influences without engaging in this critical autoethnographic work. Thus, I would not have been able to adequately talk back to such a wide range of fragmenting experiences prior to this study.

To be able to fully talk back, it's helpful to first understand the colonizer's discourse and make it visible (Smith, 2012). My critical autoethnographic archival work helped me to see a broad scope of the hegemonic influences at play which had been invisible to me, before, or were otherwise presumed neutral or innocent and did not stand out as noteworthy in my underexamined memories. This has shown me why researching back (Smith, 2012) is important work to do alongside talking back. Researching back means extending one's agency as a researcher to center the decolonial gaze and to use practices that reveal and subvert colonial

hegemony (Smith, 2012). This can be particularly useful in self-study (Smith, 2012), as I've shown by applying a decolonial feminist lens while examining my formative experiences. Further, it can be powerful to research back and talk back within the same process (Agboka, 2014). This allows the scholar to both deconstruct colonialism (through researching back) and reconstruct paradigms, practices, and identities through a decolonial framework (through talking back) (Agboka, 2014). I hope to continue refining how I might pair "researching back" (Smith, 2012) and "talking back" (hooks, 1989) in further autoethnographic work.

While I had originally believed that talking back (hooks, 1989) was an essential part of healing, I now believe it is also an essential part of identity formation (not that the two are mutually exclusive).

Further, I've observed how extraneous healing processes can be used to support deeper, more difficult dives into identity formation. I will discuss this in my answer for RQ 2.

Summary of Findings: RQ 1A

By critically examining an archive of artifacts from various time points throughout my formative journey as a writer, I was able to understand how colonizing influences have potentially impacted my fragmentation, especially by conditioning me to center the White and colonial/imperial gaze. Taking classes with female writers of color, and spending time within culturally-sustaining communities helped me learn to center my and my aligned communities' gaze. Talking back (hooks, 1989) to Eurocentric, hegemonic influences further solidified my ability to examine and reject the White gaze. While pursuing this reparative work, I engaged in self-care activities which made this tough personal exploration and growth possible. I will now outline the most helpful practices in my findings for RQ2.

Findings: Research Question 2

This research question asked: How can a decolonial feminist lens be combined with creative practices to heal a minoritized writer's potentially colonially-influenced fragmentation?

Process and Reflection: RQ 2

Prior to engaging in this study, I assumed writing was my best tool for healing. I thought that if I simply engaged in creative writing (and artmaking) through a critical, decolonial lens, I'd be able to repair my fragmentation. This assumption was too narrow. I now understand that additional restorative practices must support creative acts (Chen & Zheng, November 25, 2020, n.p.). Adsit (2017) notes that when we use creative writing for therapeutic purposes, it is important to "be inclusive of the whole self. A holistic approach to creative writing accounts for the body, for spirituality, for emotion because all of these parts of the human condition are at stake in an oppressive system" (p. 42). Below, I will outline processes that supported my ability to engage and heal my body, emotions, and spirituality in tandem with my archive building/analysis, creative writing, and artmaking.

Accounting for my body. Anzaldúa suggested that we must take extra good care of our bodies while doing trauma-focused work, because as we process trauma through our work, this processing tends to manifest in physical ailments (Anzaldúa, 2015e). Very early on in my reflexivity journal, I noted concerns about my physical health. I have not taken good care of my body for several years (especially during my doctoral coursework) and have been experiencing symptoms that my doctor has said could lead to an impending health crisis without intervention.

So, one of my first steps was to prioritize my physical well-being. I started by attempting to be more mindful about my eating, following the practices prescribed by Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and Dr. Lilian Cheung (2015).

Over the course of six months, I lost 15lbs just by primarily being more mindful while eating. Notably, I did not experience the sense of deprivation or stress that I had felt when dieting in the past. This was not a diet; it was just a way to slow down and eat more purposefully with appreciative awareness of my food and with self-compassion. This was an especially therapeutic practice for me because, growing up, my mother tended to overfeed me, almost always forcing me to eat more after I was full. Because her family struggled with food insecurity, she often had a near-frantic anxiety about whether I was eating enough. Through her constant insistence that I eat more, I came to override my own sense of fullness, carrying this insensitivity to signals into adulthood. Mindfulness practices helped bring back my awareness of satiety and helped me to listen to and feel secure in my body's messages that its needs have been met.

Most remarkably, mindful eating practices also kept me from self-medicating with unhealthy foods and allowed me to take a soothing pleasure in being fully aware of healthful choices. I paid closer attention to senses beyond taste—examining and appreciating the visual, physical, olfactory, and other aspects of food. As I developed a greater awareness of what I was eating, I found myself drawn more and more to fresh fruits and vegetables, which I found most pleasing. I came to derive as much or more pleasure from slowly eating and engaging with, say, a ripe strawberry or tomato than from the processed foods I was scarfing down, prior. I still ate some of the processed stuff, but I did not find most of it as satisfying with slow, mindful engagement, as I had, before. I also took time to be aware of the energy I was putting into my cooking, infusing the food I prepared for my family with love (as directed by Joy Harjo, personal communication, Fall 2018). This led me to be more strategic in choosing foods that I thought would be helpful to my loved ones' bodies (and my own). I avoided self-criticism or judgment

when I did not follow these practices, which also kept me from turning so much to food for self-comfort (something I have long done).

In addition to developing mindfulness when eating and cooking, I also fostered compassionate awareness of my body using Hanh & Cheung's (2015) methods and Menakem's (2017) grounding exercises. With these readings guiding me, I developed several of my own practices for grounding and for staying attuned to my body. I should note that I developed these practices over time, and through trial and error, finding what was helpful as I progressed through building and analyzing my archive, and in the creative activities that sprang from that work. Ultimately, I identified a few practices that consistently worked well, which I will outline, here.

I began most workdays by taking a moment to turn on the electric incense on my ancestral altar and spending a few moments sending compassion to my ancestors and asking those that loved me to help me (per advice from J. Harjo, Personal Communication, Fall 2018). I regularly engaged in bodily check-ins by monitoring and acknowledging how my body felt when working with various archival materials and when moving through psychological tensions (Menakem, 2017). I used deep breathing, and Menakem's (2017) grounding exercises whenever I felt the need to center myself. I also engaged in my own version of Hanh's (1992) walking meditation. Hanh (1992) asks readers to walk as though their feet are kissing the earth, and to transmit love to the earth through every touch. He also suggests slowing down one's breathing and movement and remaining grounded in each individual moment instead of worrying about the future or fretting over the past. I started taking regular outdoor walks, focusing on breathing and staying in the moment, and tried to connect with nature in each step per Hanh's directions. I stopped to connect with trees, animals, and other life forms I encountered along my walks, sending love to them, slowly engaging, and developing the feeling of my own connection to

other living things. These walking meditations had a lasting effect on my centeredness that persisted long after my walks were finished. The practice of staying present with my body through grounding exercises, food mindfulness, and walking meditation, helped me to see how often I used to ignore my body or disassociate from it, particularly when dealing with tough emotions. This led me to analyze how I was taught to disassociate and to develop ways to sit with, process, and honor my feelings.

Accounting for my emotions. I mentioned earlier (in my findings for RQ 1A) that I was conditioned to self-censor in the diary entries I wrote as a child. My self-censoring also extended to suppressing emotions in face-to-face interactions. My parents expected me to display calm strength in almost every difficult circumstance. I was only allowed to cry if an animal or person that I was close to passed away. I had to otherwise remain stoic when physically or emotionally hurt and I endured swift, severe punishment for crying. “Stop crying or I’ll give you something to cry about” was a common refrain, if there was even any warning. I was also punished for anger, and even fear was not tolerated well. The parental expectation of my stoicism led to me tamping down many emotions and psychologically distancing myself from my body’s natural manifestations of sadness, anger, and fear. While I have many memories that can demonstrate how this practice led to my disassociation from my body and led to an internalization (or complete blocking) of my emotions, one memory perhaps illustrates this best. When I was 13, my 8th degree blackbelt Karate instructor (a former police officer and a man much larger than I was), demonstrated a police procedure on me which resulted in him breaking my collar bone. I saw stars and could not move my arm, yet I did not display any distress outwardly. I calmly told my parents my symptoms, but it was too late in the day to visit my primary care physician. My parents did not take me to the hospital. Instead, they took me home, where my adrenaline wore

away to great pain. I was not allowed to take a pain killer because of my parents' fears of substance abuse (impacted by family history on both sides). I did not fully express my discomfort. In the morning, my mother's priority was for me to go to school and maintain my perfect attendance record before being withdrawn early to seek medical care. I accepted all of this placidly and hid my immense physical pain and psychological distress.

Looking back, I cannot imagine expecting the same fortitude from my daughter under such circumstances. Yet, my own mother provided an even greater example of stoicism and disembodiment when she took me with her for her root canal when I was seven or eight years old so that I could watch her endure the procedure without any anesthetic (not even local!). She told me at that time that she was skilled at enduring pain because she had done so many times in her life in Vietnam, and she seemed to take this as a point of pride.

While trying to process memories like these, I read *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* by bell hooks (2015). Though I am not Black, and my familial trauma is at least partly rooted in colonialism and colonial and imperial violence/war instead of slavery, I was really taken by Ch. 9, "Living to Love." hooks wrote, "[enslaved] black people's survival was often determined by their capacity to repress feelings." She suggested that this repression continued to be (and continues to be) a "survival strategy" (hooks, 2015, p. 100). The ability to repress feelings is associated with strength. She noted that in many southern Black homes, children who cried were punished physically and if they cried during this punishment, they were hurt even more.

Though my family's historic trauma was not related to slavery, I can relate to this—I was spanked for crying and was not allowed to show many emotions. My mother seemed to sometimes try to provoke me by doing things that I found disturbing (such as selling my beloved

dog while my father was away on a fishing trip). If I reacted, she would scold or dismiss me, saying, “Life is hard.” I always had the sense she was trying to toughen me up for a cruel world in order to somehow protect me, but we did not face the same dangers that she faced during her childhood and this survival strategy did not feel urgently necessary to me, though it may have to her. My father, likewise, expected me to show strength during difficult times, and I think this may be attributed at least in part to the conditioning he received at a young age in the military.

To develop the capacity to fully feel my emotions and to sit with them, I engaged with expressive arts therapist Amy Maricle’s (2020) “slow drawing” practices (see Figures 10, 11, and 12 for examples of my work, though I often used painting and cutting instead of “drawing”). Much like Hanh’s (1992) and Menakem’s (2017) mindfulness exercises, Maricle’s slow artmaking procedures foster mindful engagement and staying in the moment.

Maricle (2020) invites people to draw, paint, or otherwise create very, very slowly, while following their intuition. I used her meditative art making methods to stay with difficult emotions while grounding myself in the embodied, sensory process of slowly drawing repeated patterns. I added a step to her procedures by simply identifying the emotions I was feeling as they happened and acknowledging them without judgment (e.g. “I am feeling sadness, right now”). I picked colors that reflected my emotions, and freely followed designs that felt expressive of my feelings. As I drew, painted, and cut, I often found myself eventually coming back to circular shapes. Even if I began with more jagged lines, I would, at some point, move toward arcs and circles as I began to accept each emotion without judging it. Though I did not force myself into a state of calm, I found that the more I acknowledged my emotions and sat with them (while artmaking), the more I naturally returned to a true sense of calm and centeredness.



Figure 10: Slow Drawing Example 1



Figure 11: Slow Drawing Example 2



Figure 12: Slow Drawing Example 3

The sense of calm I developed from this practice felt very different from, and much better than the feigned outward calm I presented as a child. I revisited Molly Bang's (2016) *Picture This: How Pictures Work* and was reminded that curved shapes create a sense of security. I certainly felt that sense emerging through the rounded shapes I drew. I tried not to lead myself toward those shapes, but rather to slowly draw until I found them naturally emerging from my meditative artmaking practice. Once these shapes emerged and aligned with a genuine sense of calm, I knew I could end my meditation and move on to additional work (or anything else).

At the start of my study, I thought that making art showcasing my fragmentation would be the most powerful way to use visual art to heal. I was surprised that the act of meditation and fully experiencing feelings through abstract art was also a powerful regular exercise. This meditative artmaking made it possible for me to engage in more psychologically dangerous processing, especially when I could not easily identify some other way to use artmaking as a buffer (such as creating found poetry from racist artifacts). Further, this meditative abstract artmaking became a way to cope with and transition myself out of work that left me still feeling stressed out or unsettled. Diana Khoi Nguyen (personal communication, July 27, 2021) had advised me to create rituals for transitioning out of work, and I found this one particularly helpful.

In reflecting (in my reflexivity journal) on this nonsensical, abstract artmaking and its value, I started realizing how much negative self-talk I attributed to how I used time. I seemed to want to put every moment of time to good use, and I was often very self-critical if I thought my time had been "wasted." Yet, I also found myself becoming burnt out unless I made time for recreation. I delved into the socialization surrounding this self-judgment, and, again, returned to hooks' (2015) book on self-recovery.

In this book, hooks talked about how, in many families, parents saw their ability to provide safety, food, shelter, and other aspects of material security as their way of demonstrating love (pp. 101-102). Recreation and play were under-valued or deemed as poor uses of time and energy. I was startled when hooks pointed out examples of how this mindset has prevented some parents from playing with their children (pp. 101-102). Growing up, my parents didn't really play with me the way other kids' parents did. Neither had childhoods, for different reasons.

My dad started hunting to feed his family at age 6. His father had been drafted into the military to serve the United States' colonial/imperial agenda in the Philippines during World War I. Though I cannot 100% attach this military experience to my paternal grandfather's alcoholism, I do believe it had a traumatic effect on him and likely did influence his later addiction. My paternal grandfather was so consumed by alcoholism that he neglected his family. My father, as the eldest child, began taking on adult responsibilities from a very young age. He worked odd jobs and picked cotton throughout much of his childhood. He joined the military while he was still a teen. Immediately, he was sent to the Pacific, stopping in Hawaii along the way where the buildings on base were still scarred and damaged from the Pearl Harbor bombings. He was still pretty much a child when he, himself, became part of the USA's imperial war machine, witnessing atomic bomb tests in the Bikini islands. Like his own father, he struggled with alcoholism (later going through recovery before I was born) after two tours in Vietnam.

My mother's youth was negatively impacted by French Colonialism and the conflicts associated with driving the French out of Vietnam. Her family faced early violence and poverty as a result of foreign interference, and she also had to take on adult responsibilities at a very early age, with play being a luxury she was not afforded.

Consequently, neither of my parents seemed to know how to relax. If they “played” with me, it was for a practical purpose. My dad taught me to play poker very early on because he wanted me to be able to read other people, act with confidence under pressure, and bluff. He would also take me fishing, and we often ate the fish. My mom would take me bike riding or swimming—this was the closest we ever really got to “play.” Otherwise, her free time was spent sewing or gardening, always engaged in activities with a practical outcome. Outside of watching TV/movies and reading books, recreation couldn’t be engaged in for the sake of enjoyment alone; it needed to provide some other useful outcome.

I feel the compulsion to stop, here, and note that my parents nurtured my interests in wonderful ways throughout my childhood and young adulthood, too. Both of them made tremendous sacrifices to pay for my MFA degree at Hollins, for example, and they were delighted by my writing even though it may not have seemed like a “practical” thing to pursue. Additionally, both always made sure I had ample access to stories, and both were quite loving in in so many ways, often through kind acts of service. Both parents also devoted much of their spare time to helping other people in our communities, which is a tradition I still value, today.

Children’s books were always a place they provided me where I could escape into a feeling of play that was often absent from my homelife, otherwise. I think this is why I have long loved humorous books and fantasy over gritty realism. And this is perhaps part of why I find others pushing me toward realism/trauma (in creative writing courses and in the publishing industry) so demoralizing.

By analyzing my childhood familial norms, I realized that I, even as an adult, do not really know how to incorporate regular carefree recreation into my everyday life. I tend to fill up my free time with work or tasks I deem productive. When I taught courses during a nine-month

academic year, I would often spend my summers writing drafts of novels or short stories. While engaged in my doctoral program, I would also fill my free time with creative exercises, some aimed at emotional processing and healing. Through the journaling I did while engaged in this study, I realized that I have long expected the work of creative writing to be where I do my healing and recreating, and that is an unhealthy expectation.

Poet Chen Chen said, “Poems can be healing, but they can’t be the only form of healing I rely on. If I overrely on poems for my mental health and well-being, poetry becomes a toxic force” (Chen & Zheng, November 25, 2020, n.p.). Chen compares this to being co-dependent in a relationship where a person relies on their partner for their total well-being. He says that he makes a point to foster his well-being outside of writing. He also writes slowly, especially when working on trauma-based material. My takeaway is that while creative writing is an important emotional outlet for me, it’s unhealthy to solely rely on it for my healing. I need other outlets both to deal with my overall issues, and to help me cope with the difficulties my writing exposes.

I also am learning to see rest as a requirement for the work I want to do. In an interview with PEN America, poet Danez Smith once said, “Sometimes ‘the work’ is rest. It’s all about learning to pay attention to yourself, your own wants and needs, your own definitions of discipline and exploration” (Philpott, January 23, 2020, n.p.). I seek to be better about giving myself permission to rest and relax in order to prevent burnout and physical illness. One of my favorite pastimes is to go to estate sales and look for bargains. Because of the pandemic, much of my shopping has moved to online estate auctions, but I have tried to make some time for this recreational activity to let off steam. My husband and I picked up a delightful vintage Hitachi TV that he rigged to stream “LoFi Girl” (Dimitri & Machado, 2021) videos for me while I work. “Lofi Girl” is an animated loop of a girl in a mindful flow while writing/studying/relaxing. The

animation is played over soothing music. It is wonderful to have this cute and playful imagery (Figure 13) streaming across from me while I work, and so calming.

While I am still learning to incorporate more recreation and play into my life, I have at least turned to my mindfulness and meditative practices to aid my healing instead of expecting writing to be the primary site of such activity. I am also trying not to be so hard on myself in other ways.

While examining my reflexivity journal, I became alarmed by my patterns of self-judgment and crippling perfectionism. As a result of my parents' criticism of my difficult emotions and our under-developed sense of play, I think I developed a harsh sense of self-criticism and intolerance for my own perceived weaknesses.

Upon mentioning the perfectionism to decolonial qualitative scholar Kakali Bhattacharya, she told me, "Perfectionism is a trauma response" (personal communication, January 03, 2022). She asked me to consider the events that taught me to fear a negative reaction if not "perfect" (Kakali Bhattacharya, personal communication, January 03, 2022). While I do not wish to dwell on the events that taught me this reaction, I do think the "model minority" pressure many Asian Americans face played a big role, as did other pressures common to first generation Asian Americans who wish to succeed in order to validate their parents' sacrifices (Hong, 2020). Other factors related to racialization may have been at work, too. "Racial self-hatred is seeing yourself the way the whites see you... your only defense is to be hard on yourself, which becomes compulsive, and therefore a comfort, to peck yourself to death" (Hong, 2020, pp. 9-10). Regardless, my analysis of my reflexivity journal, and the shocking number of times I harshly judged myself brought me to the realization that I needed to develop a practice of self-compassion.



Figure 13: “LoFi Girl” Streaming to Fun Red Vintage TV

Again, I returned to Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's guidance, this time, incorporating his "Five Earth Touchings" (November 20, 2015) into my meditative practices. In Hanh's practice, he asks people to kneel, and then bow flat on the ground as they connect with the earth and meditate on accepting and sending love out to various groups of people and beings (including those who have caused them harm). By doing this, one realizes their connection with all others, and the compassion they extend to other people ultimately is integral to their own well-being, too. Hanh's practice incorporates compassion for both biological and spiritual ancestors. This led me to my next form of accountability, accounting for my spirituality.

Accounting for my spirituality. One of the first things that I did when I began this study was to create an ancestral altar (Peché, 2003; Van, 2020). My mother had a traditional Vietnamese altar in our home when I was a child, but she never talked about it, nor did she ever light the altar's candles or incense. She occasionally would place fruit and other items on the altar, presumably as offerings, but avoided conversation about it and never answered any of my questions. I did not press her as I did not want to distress her, knowing that she had a difficult past. Yet, my disconnection from my maternal ancestors has always bothered me. Creating my own altar was my way of spiritually re-connecting to traditions that felt out of my reach due to diasporic distance (Peché, 2003).

At first, I felt awkward, but I kept engaging with the altar and, through it, extending compassion to my ancestors. For the first few months, I kept fresh flowers on the altar both as an offering and as an expression of my thereto unacknowledged grief over losing things I never really had (such as the grief of losing my mother's language, per Yuen, September 24, 2021). In time, I became quite comforted by the practice of extending compassion to my ancestors (on

both sides) and asking the ancestors that love me for help. These are practices that I will continue.

I have chosen to offer my own version of Hanh's (November 20, 2015) "Five Earth Touchings" as my autohistoria-teoría for RQ 2.

Autohistoria-Teoría: RQ 2

I offer this autohistoria-teoría in the form of my own version of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's (November 20, 2015) "Five Earth Touchings." This meditative piece may be followed by people wishing to make peace with and recognize their blood and spiritual ancestors while also setting the intention to positively impact the present and future (Hanh, November 20, 2015). A prayer-like script is read as the meditator "touches the earth" (gently moves from a kneeling position to bowing flat against the ground) five times, once for each of the five groups acknowledged. This is a deliberately slow and mindful process, designed to create a sense of groundedness, peace, and healing (Hanh, November 20, 2015). "When we touch the Earth, we breathe in all the strength and stability of the Earth, and breathe out our suffering – our feelings of anger, hatred, fear, inadequacy and grief" (Hanh, November 20, 2015, n.p.). Hanh leads the meditator in touching the earth to honor blood ancestors, spiritual ancestors, and the land (and those who've taken care of it). Then he asks meditators to transmit good energy to those they love and to those who have made them suffer.

Using Hanh's (November 20, 2015) "Five Earth Touchings" as a model, here are my own. Instead of moving from a bowing position to pressing my body against the earth, I instead like to do this exercise while lying flat on my back, feeling the earth lift up and support my full body. I take some time to feel each part of my body being held up by the earth as I breathe in peace and breathe out anxiety (or stress) before I begin. This meditative practice is written

specifically for my own needs, but it might serve as a model for others wishing to transform Hanh's (November 20, 2015) script into something more personalized. I've found it helpful to record myself reciting these meditations and play them as I meditate.

Liz Garcia's Five Earth Touchings

After Thich Nhat Hanh

[Lay flat against the floor or ground. Develop awareness of the earth holding up the weight of your body. Release your tension as you take deep breaths in, and out. Process through this meditation, taking time to breathe and feel the earth supporting you as you go.]

I. In gratitude, I send love and compassion to my blood ancestors.

I accept that my parents did the best they could and I cover them in compassion for the intergenerational wounds that caused our family ongoing pain. I have inherited this pain and the sorrows of my ancestors on both sides, sorrows from victims of colonialism and imperialism and sorrows from those who inflicted colonialism and imperialism on others. I transform these sorrows through compassion, transmuting pain with love in hopes that my child and those who come after will not inherit a legacy of suffering.

I marvel at the generations of love that led to my existence. This is the inheritance that I will keep and pass on. I ask the ancestors who surround me with their love and who want the best for me and my child to strengthen us with the slow, deep wisdom of the infinite when we rush into judgment or fear. Help us to practice relentless compassion so that we may offer it to others.

Help make our legacy love.

At the same time, I acknowledge my ancestors' and my own humanity. With compassion, I hold space for all human emotions without judgment. I offer forgiveness to my ancestors for the

times they reacted to their difficult emotions and unmet needs in destructive ways. In my compassion, I hope that they find abundance. I ask those who love me and wish to help me to meet me with the spirit of abundance when I, too, react to perceived lacking by seeking to erase, silence, harm, or destroy. I seek to practice finding this spirit of abundance when it is needed, drawing compassion from its infinite wellspring, even when doing so initially feels difficult. I also seek to release the need for control where it is harmful, knowing that there are many loving ancestors lifting any perceived burdens alongside me.

As I send compassion to my ancestors, my body changes along with my spirit. I calm the fires of inflammation. I quiet needless cortisol. My body no longer expresses inherited pain through illness. I am free to rest and play knowing that the ancestors who love me watch over me. These ancestors infuse my bones and heart and brain and nerves with their protection and care. I manifest our generational healing in my every breath. I pass this well-being on to my child and to those to come.

II. In gratitude, I send love and compassion to my spiritual ancestors.

I count among my spiritual ancestors the healers and peacemakers whose public displays of loving kindness have fostered in others the practices required to continually choose understanding, love, and peace. Through these ancestors' examples, I am taught a spirit of fierce abundance, forgiveness, and constructiveness in words and deeds. I carry on and grow their legacy of healing energy, asking them to give me the strength to publicly advocate for social justice and asking them to imbue me with a calm strength of purpose that is powerful enough to still and quiet others' anger and fears. I ask that this calmness and strength speak louder in its silence than tyrants can in their shouts. Further, I ask my spiritual ancestors to help me find the

common humanity in all I meet and to reveal this humanity to those who need to see it (even in themselves).

In the face of historic and persistent injustice, I refuse to be corrupted by hatred and bitterness. I seek insights and role modeling from my spiritual ancestors as I strive to hold those who've inflicted pain and suffering on others accountable in ways that align with my ethics of care.

I thank my spiritual ancestors for their persistent practices of peacefulness and I extend compassion to them for the times they faltered as imperfect humans. I ask them to give me perspective on my own missteps so that I stay the course they started and which I continue alongside others who believe we can achieve a common good where every living being's needs for shelter, sustenance, safety, and love are met.

I ask for wisdom as I pursue a career as a teacher and guide. I fill the sinkholes created by my own fears and self-doubts with courage drawn from the infinite well of abundance and peace that we can all access. I make myself a medium for messages of abundance, translating ancient wisdom into modern understanding. I embody the legacies of those who came before me, but stay mindfully connected to each present moment, even as I seek to become a good spiritual ancestor for the next caretakers of our world. I take comfort knowing my spiritual ancestors are always with me in the ever-evolving now.

III. In gratitude, I send love and compassion to the storytellers who have shaped our current reality and to those who imagine the future into existence.

I acknowledge that there are more stories than those that have been written. I acknowledge the power of our ancestors' stories in weaving together the seen and unseen worlds. I send love

and compassion to the ancestral story weavers who wove protection and nourishment into our DNA through the stories that we may no longer remember, but continue to feel.

I acknowledge the destructive ways stories have racialized me and other people, and have been used to support colonialism, imperialism, and other harm. I reject these stories, returning them to their senders and transmuting them with compassion and love.

I send deep wells of self-compassion and self-love to the storytellers whose voices have been erased and silenced through White supremacist systems. I commit to using my own storytelling as part of my activism, and I pledge to teach others to use their creativity for the building of a more equitable world.

We who come from a history of erasure and silencing will give voice to our ancestors' stories, together. We will create new systems that affirm our authentic voices and that nourish others in growing theirs. We will scribble a rough draft of a better future through our incessant lived experiences of service, joy, collectivism, and hope. We will hold space for each others' sadness, grief, resilience, and healing.

We are unabashed in imagining brave possibilities.

We center our descendants' gaze.

IV. In gratitude, I send love and compassion to nature.

I honor the earth, a home I share with every other living organism on this planet. I acknowledge the consciousness and worth of all life. With compassion, I take time to notice, recognize, appreciate, and protect the life around me and the ecological systems sustaining that life. I support the indigenous caretakers of the earth and yield to their wisdom about and agency in its stewardship.

As I rest, supported by the ground, I connect my well-being with the earth's, sending it my gratitude, and cherishing it as a living being worthy of my attention and care. I commit to spending time in nature and to learning about the plants and animals I encounter and showing them my respect. I also seek to foster my simple openness to my natural surroundings without feeling the need to think or act or do anything except exist in the presence of everyday natural wonders. I allow myself unbridled joy and the childlike ability to point out cows and rainbows and shooting stars and stink bugs.

I also acknowledge the parts of nature that I, as a human, find difficult, and I resist judging the natural world through my anthropocentric values.

With knowledge of my inevitable mortality, I accept my role in the circle of life, recognizing that my human form will eventually die and that the energy of that form will return to the earth's energy, where it belongs. While I am living, I resist placing myself above nature or taking from nature more than I will responsibly use. I extend compassion to myself when I falter in this, and I commit to continually improving my mindfulness of how I impact the natural world. I acknowledge that through my participation in various societal systems, I am complicit in harming the earth, and I seek to mitigate this harm through whatever measures I can enact.

With this mindfulness, I also foster a practice of deep curiosity and appreciation, taking time to notice, wonder about, and be thankful for the plants that I eat, the birds that sing outside my window, the flowers that erupt in the Springtime and the bees that kiss them into honey.

I commit to helping others cultivate their compassion for plants and animals.

Through this compassion, I seek to grow in myself and others a loving obligation to care for the soil, water, air, and other aspects of the earth that we are interdependent on. May I fully

realize the impact I can have. And when my human body eventually decomposes, may the earth remember me in wildflowers.

V. In gratitude, I send love and compassion to myself.

I accept my entire past as necessary for bringing me to the current moment. I do not judge my past self from the vantage point of my current awareness. Instead, I extend love and compassion backwards to myself in times when I felt unworthy of either.

I acknowledge how past hurts and bad actors have conditioned me to devalue myself. I disrupt practices that work against my well-being.

I stay aware of my critical self-talk and gently reframe the messages I tell myself, ensuring that they are built on a foundation of self-love. I meet my self-doubt and self-criticism with radical and stubborn self-compassion.

I am worthy of love and compassion just as I am.

[Breathe slowly and deeply. Continue to lie with your full body against the floor or ground.

Notice the earth holding you up. Release your tension, knowing you will be supported. Maintain a twilight state, gently resting until you are at peace and can face the world and yourself with compassion.]

[Stand up (for others if need be)]

Discussion: RQ 2

One of my biggest revelations in conducting this study is that creative activity by itself is not enough to foster healing. This explains to me why I have found past autobiographical work helpful for articulating pain but have not felt psychologically settled by it. I imagine each individual has unique needs for the types of supportive activities they engage in while doing emotionally-difficult writing and artmaking; however, I do think it would be helpful to offer

explicit possibilities to creative writing students as they delve into psychologically tough work. Adsit (2017) suggests that we should help students account for their bodies, emotions, and spirituality and that even if we are not therapists, we can still help students to find practices that are therapeutic (and recommend that they seek professional help if that is needed). Adsit (2022) further indicates that mindfulness practices should be part of the tools that we offer to students. However, she warns that such practices should not be co-opted (the way Yoga has been by many White practitioners, for example). Mindfulness practices also need to be a good cultural fit for each student in order to have the best positive impact (Adsit, 2022).

Summary of Findings: RQ 2

In sum, I developed healing practices to engage in alongside writing which allowed me to 1) Fully feel and sit with my difficult emotions; 2) Reconnect with my body as a site of emotion; 3) Stop judging myself for being “unproductive”; 4) Develop compassion for myself and my ancestors. It is important to heal fragmentation in numerous ways, not just through (or primarily through) creative work.

Now that we’ve discussed the findings for my last research question, let’s look at implications and considerations related to this study as a whole.

CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Implications

As a result of this study, I now better understand how my own fragmentation is tied to forces which have supported and reproduced Eurocentrism in much broader sociopolitical, historic, familial, and systemic contexts. I also understand how Asians and Asians have been racialized and thus dehumanized to preserve Eurocentric dominance. Khúc's (2021) insights mirror my own: "Unwellness must be understood in relation to structures of violence...Asian American suffering is tied to Asian American racialization" (p. 376). Also, "Any project that wants to capture the scope and shape of [Asian American] suffering must investigate the kinds of personhood we are being forced to become" (Khúc, 2021, p. 376). Though I did not try to control the direction of my study, my critical autoethnographic inquiry helped me understand the person I was socialized to become through historic and sociopolitical factors, familial factors, and formative influences in education and publishing industry systems. Regarding the trustworthiness of critical, autoethnographic studies, Pelias (2011) suggested that scholars should recognize and illuminate how people's identities have been "historically, culturally, and individually situated" (p. 667). I was able to identify how hegemonic White and Eurocentric dominance led to my fragmentation in all these categories, and I was able to repair some of the harm done.

According to Anzaldúa (1987), "Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (p. 87). There was so much that I did not recognize about myself, prior to engaging in this work. It would have been irresponsible for me

to attempt to study and impact other writers' fragmentation without first understanding my own (Kakali Bhattacharya, personal communication, February 7, 2021).

As another benchmark of trustworthiness, I have evaluated my work against Adams' & Ellis' (2014) list of seven expectations for high-quality, rigorous autoethnographies. Per p. 269, autoethnographies should:

- (1) Use personal experience;
- (2) Have a familiarity with existing research;
- (3) Describe and/or critique cultural experience;
- (4) Illuminate insider knowledge;
- (5) Break silence and reclaim voice about a topic;
- (6) Maneuver through pain, confusion, anger, and/or uncertainty;
- (7) Be accessible

I believe I have met the first six criteria, and it will be up to the readers of this work whether I have met the 7th. Though a dissertation is usually written for an academic audience, I do hope to create other iterations of some of this work that are written for (and more accessible to) a lay audience, as well. For now, though, I am happy to have made mysteries of my identity accessible to myself at the very least, and to feel stronger in my understanding of my own identity.

Throughout this process, I've engaged with Anzaldua's (2002) imperative to use creative writing, art, embodiment, and intuition to put Coyolxauhqui (my fragmented self) back together, again. Though I've made significant progress in identifying historic and personal sources of fragmentation, and I have begun to call back parts of self and heal, there is much work left to do.

The difference is that now, I better understand where I am situated in a much bigger picture. I also now better understand how to use mindful practices to center and ground myself and nurture my mental, physical, and spiritual well-being as I continue pursuing decolonial work. This “homework before fieldwork” (Kakali Bhattacharya, personal communication, February 7, 2021) has been crucial for setting up a foundation from which to serve others while also taking care of my own well-being. This, too, was part of Anzaldua’s (2002) directive. I now more fully comprehend the scope of what’s required to not only put Coyolxauhqui back together, but to also keep her (myself) whole.

Considerations

I have made the strategic decision to name this section “considerations” instead of “limitations,” per Lahman’s (2021) suggestion that the term “limitations” frequently aligns with a positivist paradigm. Lahman (2021) notes that qualitative scholars often adopt positivistic criteria in “limitations” sections, which are a poor fit for their frameworks and paradigms (for example, attempting to defend a small sample size or “bias” against imagined or anticipated positivist critique). I’ve discussed my rationale for engaging in critical autoethnographic work in Chapter 3, and on this end of my project, I am even more convinced of the immense benefits of conducting autoethnographic “homework before fieldwork” (Kakali Bhattacharya, personal communication, February 7, 2021).

With this understanding in mind, I wish to reflect on aspects of my process that I have not touched on, elsewhere. First, I want to be transparent about some challenges I confronted. The biggest challenge I confronted was the challenge of finding my way through a messy process without relying on “traditional” methods to provide a clear path.

Along these lines, I wish to disclose that my actual process was much more messy and iterative than it may appear from reading Ch. 4. Though I've separated my processes as responses to discrete research questions, in actuality, the acts of identifying and healing my fragmentation were happening simultaneously. There were many setbacks, restarts, and fruitless attempts along the way. Anyone proceeding into similar work should expect it to be complicated. I knew this in advance, though, from reading about Anzaldúa's own winding journey (as described in Keating, 2015). Self-compassion and slowing down through mindfulness to just enjoy each moment for its own unique value helped.

Another challenge I faced was trying to do work that should happen at an organic pace (Keating, 2015) under the imposed schedule a dissertation timeline demands. These time pressures particularly impacted my goal to take radical care of my physical and mental health throughout this process. While I did well with both for several months, the nearer I drew to my first dissertation draft deadline, the harder it became to maintain my most healthy habits (regular exercise, good eating, adequate rest) and a healthful productive pace. Based on conversations with peers, I believe it's common to forego the best practices of self-care when trying to wrap up a dissertation under a tight deadline. I am trying to extend the compassion I feel for my peers toward myself, too.

This said, I feel some dissonance about mostly slipping back into the norms of a colonial system which values productivity over well-being (Smith & Ulus, 2020). I have an incredibly supportive committee, and I know this pressure comes from a larger system that needs to be overhauled to protect academics' mental and physical health (Smith & Ulus, 2020). Khúc (2021) said, "The time for scholarly work—the time in which it happens, the time in which it is later read and consumed by others—is not usually a time of intimacy or care" (p. 370). This needs to

change. Anzaldúa (2015e) warned about the need to take continual good care of one's body, but this was also something she also struggled to do. It's not helpful to be hard on myself, here. I believe self-compassion and compassion for others is the best way forward. With self-compassion in mind, I can see that though I did not maintain my wellness throughout the entire process, I did learn many new protective and nourishing practices that made the overall journey more healthful than it would've been without my devoted attention to selfcare. Though the last few weeks came with a small setback, overall, I've moved myself quite a bit forward compared with where I was when I started. I need only to keep going.

In the future, I would like to undergo cognitive behavioral therapy alongside my autoethnographic work. In this study, I became aware of some habits I have that may be trauma responses, such as feeling reluctant to ask others for help. I'd like to work through such trauma-rooted responses with a professional who can help me identify maladaptive behaviors and shape my healing activities. Cognitive behavioral therapy would also be helpful because someone with greater insights about trauma and healing might be able to point out issues and possible paths that I cannot see from my limited vantage point. I still feel most comfortable having privacy in dealing with many of my wounds, but a therapist could provide both help and discretion.

One additional struggle I faced in doing this work was my concern that others may not understand why I, as a Vietnamese American scholar, drew so heavily from Anzaldúa's theorizing. Though anyone who's read Anzaldúa's work will know that she resisted labels, I worried those who were unfamiliar might think I co-opted a Latinx scholar's ideas. I felt concerned that my 17 years spent living in the Borderlands, and my identity as a mixed-race person might not be enough to justify using Anzaldúa's Borderlands theorizing in some critics' minds. I meditated on this, and dug deep down, listening to the stillness to determine if I, myself,

believed this criticism to be valid. I did not. In all my time spent reading Anzaldúa's works, I understood her to reject such limiting, exclusionary ideas in favor of building bridges between aligned communities and people, instead (Anzaldúa 2015a; 2015c). Further, according to Keating & González-López (2011), before Anzaldúa died, she was working to refine her early idea of *El Mundo Zurdo*, through which she suggested we should identify with one another based on our affinities rather than our backgrounds. "Unlike identity-based alliances— which often rely on externally imposed social identity labels and thus seem to be shaped by fate, not personal agency— affinity is more open-ended and volitional; it implies choice, desire, and movement" (Keating & González-López, 2011, pp. 15-16). Though we may not share racial identities (beyond an important, shared *mestiza*/mixed-race consciousness), Anzaldúa and I certainly share affinities and a kindred purpose in decolonizing and healing through creativity. I've also felt aligned with Anzaldúa's desire to help others follow a decolonial path to wholeness and wellness.

It's with this goal in mind that I grappled with another point of dissonance: My new role as a public scholar. It was difficult not to be self-conscious while writing knowing that this dissertation will be made publicly available. This was partly because of my conditioning to keep my negative feelings hidden, but it was also partly because of my lack of confidence in my identity as a scholar. I was relieved to see another Anzaldúan scholar's disclosure about feeling the same way. Brochin (2020), stated that she "fear[s] ownership of making claims" (p. 366). I, too, have long avoided submitting my scholarly work for publication out of a sense of feeling unsure about the merit of my ideas. I, too, have increasingly questioned whether this failure to speak out ultimately harms those I care about, work alongside, and serve. I thought I was unusual or somewhat alone in these tensions, but reading Brochin's (2020) musings provided me

a sense of solidarity as I understood that another minoritized writer shares my same worries. Her words have inspired me to be braver in putting my own words forward so that others may find the same solace in them that I've found in hers. As she suggests, this is the power of autohistoria-teoría. When minoritized and marginalized people write openly and in ways that align with their (and their participants') values and worldviews, this provides permission for others to do the same. I now more fully understand what Anzaldúa (2015f) meant by "inner works, public acts" and her urgent call for writers and artists to transform their painful experiences into something valuable that can empower other people. I am working to show up both in my fullness and my vulnerability (K. Bhattacharya, personal communication, July 24, 2020). Keating & González-López (2011) state that "radical transformation begins with the personal but must move outward, linking self-change with social change" (p. 2). I hope to keep this in mind as I try to publicly share my work more, moving ahead. There is much left to heal.

At the same time, however, I am also grappling with decisions about how much personal information (especially concerning loved ones) to share. It is difficult to do autoethnographic work without including memories tied (even indirectly) to other people. I did self-censor quite a few memories in my public, written analysis that I explored privately while conducting this study. Poet Danez Smith once said, "Not everything I write is meant for the public and if I'm ever the smallest bit hesitant about a poem, I'd rather sit on it until I'm sure it's an utterance I want to vibrate in the world than regret it later for the sake of a line on the CV" (Philpott, January 23, 2020, n.p.). So, while I hope to be more transparent and open, overall, I also want to retain some amount of caution when discerning whether something publicly shared might harm someone I care about. This tension is tricky to navigate and I presume it will take some time for me to develop the self-awareness necessary to know if I'm keeping something private out of my

own fears of being vulnerable, or if I'm keeping something private out of an ethics of care regarding potential impact on those closest to me.

Despite my challenges, there were some unexpected, pleasant surprises along the way. The most significant is a renewed sense of internal priority when considering what children's stories to write and how to write them. I'm no longer as self-conscious about trying to meet the poor-fit expectations and demands that I became overly aware of in workshops and in interactions with publishing industry professionals (e.g. centering Vietnamese/Vietnamese American trauma stories, centering the White and/or settler colonist gaze, adhering to Eurocentric conventions, etc.). Now that I have been reminded of how it feels to write from my own values and wells of wisdom and joy, I will continually seek to re-center and ground myself whenever I find my attention and concerns moving outward, again. I am looking forward to, but also a bit nervous about, trying to reclaim my joy in writing for children. I know I need to return to my passions. I predict nurturing a sense of play that expands beyond writing will be crucial to re-developing my sense of play within the storied worlds I create.

This is not to say that I will write only for myself, creatively or academically. Another unexpected surprise of my work has been how positively others have responded to it. I went into this study expecting an autoethnographic dissertation to be primarily received as self-indulgent work that is not as rigorous as studies employing other methods. I proceeded, anyway, because this is the path I needed to take to move toward becoming my most authentic self. This is also the path that I felt could widen the trail Anzaldúa blazed for me and others who are similarly situated and who need ways to heal. I stepped forward in a direction I was warned against (by a professor who is not on my committee). I stepped forward with faith in my intuition to guide me and with the courage that comes from following the foremothers who've shown me the way. I can

unequivocally say I made the right choice. I have been stunned by comments from others (particularly other women) implying they deeply value what I'm trying to do and expressing their desire to do similar work. There seems to be a great hunger for healing both amongst minoritized scholars and White colleagues who are also fragmented by colonizing systems. I feel a strong calling and sense of purpose in growing this work. I hope to help others pursue healing through critical, arts-based, reflexive practices as I continue pursuing my greater research agenda. I outline the next steps in this agenda, below.

Future Research

According to Zavala (2016), decolonial work involves counter-storytelling (naming and remembering), healing, and reclaiming. While this study has been my foray into counter-storytelling and healing, those components of my inquiry do not end here. Continually invoking the Coyolxauhqui Imperative and repairing ongoing fragmentation through mindful habits of creativity and self-care will be crucial to my enduring well-being as I continue to build on my knowledge and seek *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2015f, p. 133). In particular, more work will be needed as I attempt to write for children, again, while maintaining my centeredness and prioritizing my own and my aligned communities' gaze. I will continue to reflect on my processes as I move into this work with hopes that my self-analysis will be helpful to others. There will be more to face and heal as my career continues to evolve.

The path is not linear from counter-storytelling to healing to reclaiming. It is recursive, and winding (Anzaldúa, 2015f). This said, I chose autoethnography as a first step along this path because I knew I needed to do "homework before fieldwork" (Kakali Bhattacharya, personal communication, February 7, 2021). Now that I have examined my own formative fragmentation

and have begun to call back parts of self, I feel confident to begin looking at and trying to influence the practices of others. This is crucial to my long-term goals for reclamation.

Per Zavala (2016), through decolonial research and practice, we can reclaim three things: identities, practices, and spaces. My future research will seek reclamation in these three areas as I continue to attempt to decolonize creative writing pedagogy (Chavez, 2020) and impact the educational and publishing systems to foster greater cultural pluralism.

Directly following this study, I would like to explore how other minoritized writers are identifying and healing their fragmentation both alone and in culturally-responsive writing communities (such as Kundiman, Canto Mundo, Macondo Writers, Cave Canem, etc.). I want to find out how others who have experienced fragmentation are reclaiming their whole identities, and how they are caring for themselves mentally, physically, psychologically, and spiritually, while doing so. Through this inquiry and my own continued reflection on my restorative processes, I hope to determine how to mentor other writers and academics onto their own healing paths. Scholars such as Sotomayor (2020) and Bhattacharya (2021, 2016, 2015) are working to develop practices and curricula that can help students from underrepresented populations reconnect with their heritages in an academic setting while also fostering their wholeness and overall well-being. I wish to add to this work, specifically focusing on practices that can help repair fragmentation for individuals who write for children and young adults. After examining how to reclaim identities, I want to look at reclaiming practices more broadly.

Along these lines, I also seek to examine best practices from professors seeking to “decolonize” creative writing classrooms and programs (such as Adsit, 2017; Chavez, 2020; Salesses, 2021) as well as study challenges related to this work. Further, I wish to explore practices that are fragmenting or nurturing for minoritized writers and others working within the

publishing industry. By making these practices visible and advocating for more nurturing practices (and fewer fragmenting ones), I hope to ultimately help reclaim spaces for minoritized writers to show up in their fullness in academia, in the publishing industry, in alternate systems, and, most importantly, in the stories they are enabled to write and publish for young readers.

Implications And Considerations Summary

Overall, there was great benefit in conducting an autoethnography and identifying and addressing my own fragmentation before attempting to work with other people. This process was messier and more complicated than it may seem in my write-up, and I will continue to need to engage in iterative rounds of counter-storytelling (naming and remembering), healing, and reclaiming as I zig-zag forward. I feel fortified by the mindfulness practices I gained, which will serve as a protective buffer as I pursue additional decolonial inquiry. I hope to gradually expand my work to examining and attempting to influence others' processes as my career progresses, with the end goal being to positively impact the educational and publishing systems in order to de-center the White gaze and the dominance of Eurocentric values, making room for greater cultural pluralism.

Conclusion

In *Borderlands*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) wrote, "I am playing with my Self, I am playing with the world's soul, I am the dialogue between my Self and *el Espiritu del mundo*. I change myself, I change the world" (p. 71). This study has been the first step on my path to changing myself and the world. There are many more steps, ahead, but I won't take them alone.

I hope to continue to build community along the way with others doing similar work. It is through a growing collective of minoritized writers and our White allies that I think we will eventually be able to develop more culturally pluralistic spaces where writers from all cultural

backgrounds can show up, grow, write, and publish in their fullness. If you are reading this, I hope you'll take part.

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VITA

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