

KEEP YOUR VOICE TO YOURSELF: THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN OF  
COLOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the participants of this study. Their strength and courage blows me away. Their trust in agreeing to be a part of this project is humbling. They are the future and they are going to make it a bright one.

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## ABSTRACT

This study provides insight into the experiences of women of color in higher education classrooms. Embracing recent literature on the politics of education, the double discrimination experienced by women of color, and the tenets of critical pedagogy, I engaged in qualitative interviews to gain insights into the experiences of women of color in higher education classrooms and reveal suggestions from women of color for improving their classroom experiences. The findings of this study reveal women of color experience appropriation of knowledge and bodies, acceptance of classroom ignorance, and social capital. Further, women of color suggest that if professors/instructors use explicit language, acknowledge diversity, recognize the individual, accept critique, and encourage group discussions it would enhance their classroom experiences. The findings support the literature demonstrating the White/male center of education and the use of critical pedagogical practices to disrupt this center to improve classroom climates for women of color in higher education.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

WOC	Women of Color
POC	People of Color
RQ1	Research Question One
RQ2	Research Question Two

## CHAPTER ONE: WOMEN OF COLOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Women of color face unique challenges within higher education (Crenshaw, 1989; DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2014; hooks, 1989; hooks, 1994; Hsu, 2000; Hwang, 2000; Prividera & Howard, 2006; Zeligman, Prescod, & Greene 2015). Women of color must navigate an intersectional discrimination that simultaneously compounds their marginalized standpoint as raced/gendered. They have an experience that is different from both white women and men of color. Although “white women are subordinate to white men, women of color are subordinate to both men [white/color] and white women” (Prividera & Howard, 2006, p. 32). This intersectional experience is an issue that I explore in this thesis. Education is a political site of meaning and the voices and experiences of women of color are a necessary inclusion for dismantling oppressive educational practices.

I am specifically focused on the classroom experiences of students who are women of color in higher education. My interest on this focus is due to my understanding of standpoint theory. Standpoint theory helped me to recognize the distinct value and necessity of marginalized voices. According to standpoint theory every individual “sees” the world from a particular perspective, and some perspectives that do not align with dominant ways of knowing may be positioned to offer a more nuanced view when negotiating the world (Wood, 2004). For instance, standpoint theory posits that bodies of color when positioned in a world that is primarily comprised of White bodies (with taken-for-granted standpoints from which to see the world) are more likely to recognize flaws

in a system than the White bodies aligned with the dominant perspectives. In other words, people of color, because of their particular standpoints, have to navigate the marginalizing aspects of a given system that dominant bodies do not also have to navigate and may be unaware of existing. Therefore, developing scholarship as a platform for marginalized voices has the potential to offer more critical insight into systems of power; in this case education systems.

Better understanding student experiences, who are women of color, in higher education classrooms is important because it can help illuminate marginalizing practices that White students may not be able to reflect on, nor recognize. Their experiences offer an alternative perspective; an alternative history. To hold “alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things. Transforming our colonized views” (Smith, 1999, p. 45). Dominant perspectives often fail to recognize the perspectives of those who are marginalized; the voices of the dominant serve to maintain the status quo. While this may not be done intentionally, without critical reflection, it still happens. Dominant bodies (people) *and* perspectives (practices) are capable of conducting oppressive acts without doing it maliciously. Meanwhile, the voices of the marginalized can provide useful understandings of dominant systems of meaning not recognized by those in positions of privilege. Listening to views from marginalized perspectives could provide useful insight for systemic change that can promote greater access and equality within a system. As Krollokke and Sorensen (2006) explain:

Marginalized groups are not only forced to develop their own standpoints from a less privileged position but are also required to understand the standpoints of the more powerful...the slave must understand the master's standpoint to survive whereas the reverse cannot be said to be true. (p. 32)

Krolokke and Sorensen (2006) call for the recognition that the voices of those marginalized within a social system are likely to see the system more clearly than those in dominant positions within a social system. This is because those in dominant positions do not *need* to understand marginalized perspectives. Those in dominant positions do not experience life from the oppressed position and, therefore, are allowed to be blind to the effects of life lived in an oppressed subject position.

Subject positions refer to how one's body is known in relation to society (Hall, 2014). Dominant discourses often lead to the development of subject positions. We do not openly evaluate these discourses, because we have come to know ourselves deeply through them, and the meanings they provide.

Dominant discourses can be difficult to resist as it can feel like resisting oneself. As Hall (2014) explains, "we must locate...ourselves in the position from which the discourse makes most sense, and thus become its 'subjects' by 'subjecting' ourselves to its meanings, power and regulations. All discourses, then, construct subject-positions" (p. 80), and if bodies of color come to know themselves through dominant discourses they will be encouraged to remain in the marginalized subject position and encouraged to view themselves from this discursive lens.

As such for this study, I aim to gain insights into the marginalizing aspects/discourses of higher education classrooms by looking to students who are women

of color to voice their experiences in higher education classrooms. Ultimately, my hope is that this research may be of use to professors/instructors who wish to create a more inclusive classroom climate. Classroom climate can be defined as the “quality of the perceived classroom environment and can either help the students learn in a higher level or become a barrier, preventing their learning process” (Cengel & Turkoglu, 2016, p. 1894). I believe that an inclusive classroom lends itself to a quality classroom climate, whereby, all students perceive that they belong and have a voice.

Women of color inhabit marginalized standpoints in both race and gender. They face a double discrimination in terms of “the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). To illustrate this, Crenshaw (1989) explains that Black women “experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women” (p. 149). Consequently, my attempts to gain insights into systems of domination requires an awareness of intersectional standpoints of gender and race. Wood (2004) explains that “societies define distinct groups not only as different but as differentially worthy, valuable, or capable. Thus, arbitrarily created social groups are granted dissimilar rights, roles, and opportunities” (p. 213). As such, I am interested in exploring to what extent students, who are women of color, are treated as differentially worthy within their classrooms. I am particularly interested in educational classrooms because dominant and hegemonic ideologies are often reproduced in classrooms (hooks, 1994). Recognizing education systems, specifically classrooms, as political sites of meaning that (re)produce dominant ideologies means recognizing that minority student knowledges and voices that critique the system, are often dismissed by the system (White, 2011). This dismissal often

leads to the silencing of minority voices within the classroom. This silencing results in classrooms becoming political sites for the training and disciplining of bodies. These bodies come to know themselves within hierarchical subject positions leading to the perpetual marginalization of those bodies deemed *less than* or *other* (Foucault, 1975). Within this hierarchy, whiteness and maleness is the center from which all other bodies are considered *other* (Crenshaw, 1989; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Privera & Howard, 2006). In this way, students who are women of color face an educational/political discourse that acts upon their bodies in ways to doubly marginalize and oppress as they are excluded not just on race, nor gender, but sometimes on both simultaneously.

The aim of this research study is to explore the student experiences of women of color in the classroom to better understand practices that perpetuate oppression at the university. While I intend to bring insights into systematic oppressions by better understanding the student experiences of women of color through this thesis project, I also aim to explore ways these practices can be transformed. Specifically, embracing principles of critical pedagogy. I intend to use the findings of this study to recommend practical opportunities to renegotiate relations of power in the classroom. According to Sarroub and Quadros (2015) “all classroom discourse is inherently political, and at the heart of critical pedagogy is an implicit understanding that power is negotiated daily by teachers and students” (p. 252). By recognizing the inherent politics of higher education classrooms, pedagogy can become a means of critical discovery in which women of color, as well as, their oppressors are recognized as “manifestations of dehumanization” (Freire, 1970, p. 81). In describing classrooms as political, this means they are sites where human practices work upon bodies to make those bodies “known” in certain ways.

Bodies can come to be known equally and unequally. With critical pedagogy, and research on critical pedagogy, the intent is to illuminate politics in the classroom that make bodies known in ways that privilege some and marginalize others; unequal classroom politics. The practice of critical pedagogy should then seek to elevate the voices of those who are oppressed within education systems. In doing so, the scholarship can reveal specific oppressive practices within a given education system. Therefore, speaking to these unequal power relations and holding alternative histories and perspectives as valuable allows for transformation of knowledge, being, and ways of doing that cultivate freedom for those within marginalized subject positions. The bonus is that greater freedom for the most oppressed in a society, also leads to greater freedom for those in dominant subject positions (Freire, 1970). In other words, elevating the marginalized in a system equals freedom for all, not just a few.

This study exploring the student experiences of women of color in higher education classrooms aims to reveal how these women are positioned in their roles by the inherent politics of classroom discourses, as well as, offers insight into the ways they have been silenced and erased from discussions of race/gender in the classroom. Gaining insight into the ways women of color face a unique discrimination that is uniquely silenced, means their voices offer a uniquely positioned critique of the classroom; recognizing sites of oppression overlooked by those bodies in more dominant subject positions/standpoints in the university.

With the aim of this thesis project focusing on revealing imbalances of power in order to create a more inclusive classroom community, the findings of this study offer insight into the need for greater diversity of thought, knowledges, and perspectives within



university classrooms. When more people are afforded the opportunity to participate in co-constructing their classroom communities then those communities benefit from a shared pool of knowledge (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999) whereby the collective intelligence of the entire community increases. In order to first overcome a situation of oppression that limits who have access to participation, “people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (Freire, 1970, p. 47). As such it is the aim of this study to offer critical recognition to an underrepresented group within the higher education classroom in order to contribute to transformative ways of knowing, being, and doing within the classroom that can contribute to critical pedagogical knowledge and to education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994).

Critical pedagogy attends to the student experiences of women of color in the classroom, as well as, their suggestions for improving the classroom experience. Embracing this tradition, this study explores both the challenges and successes women of color have encountered in the university classroom. By interviewing students who are women of color about their experiences with university classrooms, this research study calls attention to the aspects of university classrooms that have acted as roadblocks and the aspects that have been invigorating and supportive for students who are women of color. The research addressing the issue of students who are women of color in higher education classrooms is woefully lacking. Issues of non-white women exist outside national consciousness to the point that the issues students who are women of color face in this country are consistently overlooked in research scholarship (Crenshaw et al., 2016; Privera & Howard, 2006).

This study provides insight into the particular challenges student women of color in the university have faced within their classrooms and provides recommendations for improving these experiences in the future. More specifically, the next chapter offers a review of the relevant literature of the politics of education, with a focus on the White/male center of higher education, and the four tenets of critical pedagogy. After providing research questions of my study, in chapter 3 I detail the qualitative methods I used for engaging in this study as well as my methods for analyzing the interview transcripts. Chapter 4 reviews the findings of my analysis. Chapter 5 responds to my research questions and discusses the findings in relation to the literature on the politics of higher education and critical pedagogy. I then conclude the thesis in chapter 6 with a brief discussion of limitations and a call for future research that can make a difference for enabling critical pedagogy and enhancing the classrooms for others in higher education.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION

This study is grounded in the notion that classrooms are not neutral systems of passive information. In other words, classrooms are seen as being part of larger system of education that promotes particular values within the practice of learning. Critical scholars have explored social systems and critiqued them for propagating particular values over others in order to consider the consequences for society and individuals. For instance, Foucault (1975) explored how education systems came to reflect prisons as a new type of educational system whereby, “A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’, was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies...so that they may do what one wishes...that they may operate as one wishes” (p. 138). A political anatomy means a body that is politically constructed. Education works to create bodies that are “known” by the system and “operate” within the system. Bodies that reflect and enact and reproduce the politics of the dominant class (White/male). These systems do not exist outside of human influence; they are social constructions that exist only through human action.

Classroom discourse is inherently political in the sense that they promote particular values while marginalizing others. This study approaches classrooms with “an implicit understanding that power is negotiated daily by teachers and students” (Sarroub & Quadros, 2015, p. 252). The classroom is not a static entity. Rather, it is “a site in which diverse beings come together in order to engage and negotiate knowledge, systems of understanding, and ways of being, seeing, knowing, and doing” (Alexander, Anderson,

& Gallegos, p. 3). This negotiation occurs through social construction as an engaged practice of language in action. When discussing education systems throughout this chapter, I review research from scholars looking at secondary, as well as, post-secondary studies on education to provide critical insights into the broad contexts of U.S. education systems as they occur at different stages. Specifically, this literature reveals three political constructions that occur within the classroom; *hidden power*, *bodies as produced*, and *censorship*.

### **Politics of the White/male Center**

The politics of education (hidden power, bodies that are produced, censorship) work to create an invisible White/male center of power from which all other bodies are gendered and raced (Privera & Howard, 2006). The White/male center is the basis for educational norms and practices. This hegemonic center marginalizes those bodies that are historically and politically positioned outside of center. This is not something that occurs only in specific fields of study. Women of color are underrepresented in most fields of study and they are especially underrepresented in STEM (Mack, Rankins, & Woodson, 2013). Math, physical sciences, and other topics are not exempt from (re)producing the White/male center. The marginalization of some underrepresented students does not cease to exist when race/gender is not the specific topic of study. Rather, the White/male center becomes most powerful, when it becomes difficult to see and point out (Lipsitz, 1998; Mills, 1997; Smith, 1999). As such, this study focuses not on particular classes or fields of study, but explores marginalization across many fields and specific types of courses within the system of higher education.

Students who are women of color exist outside the center on counts of both gender and color. Their bodies are gendered/raced simultaneously. The classroom produces the raced/gendered body as a compound *otherness*. The politics of education and the White/male center doubly oppress women of color (Crenshaw, 1989). Following is a review of the literature on the three politics of education in order to demonstrate how each of these politics works to uphold the White/male center that oppresses women of color in the classroom.

### Power Is Hidden

The political construction of power that is hidden means that classrooms exercise power implicitly versus explicitly. This power operates from a White/male center from which knowledge originates and propagates. When we try to pin it down, “the center always seems to be somewhere else. Yet we know that this phantom center, elusive as it is, exerts a real, undeniable power over...our culture, and over the ways we think about it.” (Ferguson, 1990, p. 19). To think clearly about this imaginary center is to consider not what is seen, but what is not seen. In discussions of U.S. colonization, the words and histories of ‘Manifest Destiny’ are present, yet the histories of Natives, who would see U.S. colonization as genocide, are removed. In this process, education does not explicitly state that white supremacy exists, rather, it gives knowledge of White history and removes knowledge of Indigenous history.

Hidden power creates an imaginary White/male center through, not what is seen/said/done, but through what is *not* seen/said/done. There is a silence in mainstream research on issues of race that highlight “an illusory color blindness that actually entrenches white privilege” (Mills, 1997, p. 77). In other words, while research may not

currently use racist tropes in its intention and scope, the dominant perspectives remain silent on issues of race/gender. And simply not discussing or ignoring race/gender in research and in classrooms contributes to the maintenance of dominant perspectives related to the White/male center. This is because silence on race, ethnicity, gender and other differences means these topics do not emerge as potential social problems. For instance, in discussions of U.S. colonization, the words and histories of ‘Manifest Destiny’ are present, yet the histories of Indigenous Peoples, who know U.S. colonization as mass rape and genocide, are not seen. Those histories are removed. In this way “the fish does not see the water, and whites do not see the racial nature of a white polity because it is natural to them, the element in which they move” (Mills, 1997, p. 76). In this process, the White power of U.S. society does not explicitly state that white supremacy exists, rather, it gives knowledge of White history and removes knowledge of Indigenous history (Lipsitz, 1998).

When young women of color try to assimilate into the political practices of education some may suffer extreme frustrations and psychological distress from trying to emulate the White/male center of “knowledge” while also trying to remain engaged with their personal heritage/culture/experience (Crenshaw et al., 2016; hooks, 1989). This psychological stress is not an experience that can be seen. This stress is real and has real educational consequences, but as it is hidden; it is easily dismissed and overlooked.

In classroom interactions instructors can unknowingly enact the hidden power of the White/male center that devalues the raced/gendered body. Instructors may not set out to treat students differently based on either race, or gender, but teachers’ worldviews are influenced by the dominant culture of the White/male center and politics of domination

are often reproduced in the education setting (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2014; hooks, 1994). When race does makes its way into classroom discourse it is frequently from the Black/male construction. When sexism reaches the classroom discourse it is frequently from the White/female construction. WOC are set up to unknowingly assimilate this “knowledge” and instructors to unknowingly reproduce it.

The hidden power of Whiteness is so pervasive that many educators deny culpability in its reproduction. Hierarchies in higher education place the instructors above the student and if students express concern they are met with disbelief (hooks, 1989). This disbelief is not just in the context of speaking on race/gender topics. This is a disbelief that denies classroom lived experiences. For instance, if a woman of color tries to discuss the perception that her ideas are not being heard or validated in the same ways as her White/male or White/female counterparts, she could be effectively “disbelieved” which can result in her perception being dismissed. This disbelief is rooted in educational systems that support White educators in racist biases. Therefore, bodies close to the White/male center, when confronted with an analysis that challenges the status quo, are privileged with the power to dismiss – as “knowledge” reflects the center of the White/male body and all other analysis/discussions are deviant and outside this center of power (Hao, 2011). The normalized response is that “White students, initially deny any personal prejudice, recognizing the impact of racism on other people’s lives, but failing to acknowledge its impact on their own” (Tatum, 1992, p. 5).

Tokenism and hidden curriculums play a part in maintaining these individual white educator biases. Tokenism means that within classrooms the behavior of one student who is a woman of color is seen as an indication of the way all students who are

women of color will perform academically (hooks, 1989, p. 60; Pane & Rocco, 2014; White, 2011). The hidden curriculum is the “norms, values, and beliefs as a byproduct of education that people often fail to question” (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2014, p. 168). The hidden curriculum fails to question the White/male center and, therefore, works to reproduce it. This normalization means White/male is not socially constructed as a problem within classrooms. The “problem” is in *othered* bodies, not in the *centered* White/male bodies.

### Bodies Are Produced

The political construction of bodies that are produced means that student bodies are socially constructed as ‘political anatomies’ within the classroom (Foucault, 1975). The production of bodies in education refers to how knowledge is used within educational practices to make bodies known in certain ways. When bodies are known in particular ways they become ‘political anatomies’ as the politics/knowledge of the dominant class serves to define underrepresented bodies in terms of the White/male center, oppressing bodies outside of this center. Freire (1970) builds upon this perspective through the position that history does not exist without humankind (or bodies). He notes, “There is only history *of* humanity, made by *people* and in turn making them. It is when the majorities are denied their right to participate in history as Subjects that they become dominated and alienated.” (p. 130). In other words, Freire explains that knowledge is also produced from bodies. It does not exist as an innocent truth outside of human politics. History is written by those bodies in power. In the U.S. White/male bodies are the center of power from which knowledge is produced. Bodies that are not allowed to participate in history (women of color) are made by history in such a way that delegitimizes,



marginalizes, and oppresses. This process is done through the privileging of knowledge that reflects the White/male perspective and erases the perspectives of women of color and their contributions to society from science to math to literature; all fields.

In this discursive political construction certain bodies are created as 'human' and other bodies are created as 'other' 'subhuman' (Mills, 1997). Those bodies given Whiteness are also attributed with 'humanness'. Bodies that are not within the White spectrum are denied humanity. Body politics are racial and gender politics. They act in ways that normalize the White/male body while simultaneously demonizing bodies that exist outside of that center. Body politics arise from the racial formations that White settler-colonials used to expropriate property from, deny political rights to, introduce slavery to, and justify the genocide and rape of Indigenous and African bodies upon landing in the space now known as the United States (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Racial formations are the "process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories and by which they are in turn shaped into racial meanings" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 12). These formations create rules from which bodies can be known. It makes certain ways of knowing bodies possible and other ways of knowing bodies impossible. This racial polarization skews raced/gendered bodies as problem bodies; criminal bodies. They are politics of Whiteness acting to maintain the status quo of White bodies elevated above all others.

White body politics work to situate raced bodies as a "problem for whites rather than fellow citizens entitled to justice, and that, unless otherwise specified, "Americans" means 'whites'" (Lipsitz, 1998, p. 1). It operates on the assumption that "racial identity is the cause of racial division, rather than the product of it" (Matsuda, 1996, p. 17). For

example, if a person of color brings up the importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement and is then called divisive and hateful – this is racial identity being seen as the cause of racial division. An example of this would be when a person of color calls out inequality based on systems that historically and contemporarily oppress bodies of color and that person is then called the racist and promotes the notion that “all lives matter.” Such claims position a person of color as being the *cause* of racial division rather than the *product* of racial division written into the laws of this country from Slavery, to Jim Crow, to the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, to Gerrymandering (Thompson, 2010; Wacquant, 2001). These laws do work upon bodies of color and write them into being in a marginalized position. *These* are racial formations and when people of color call it out; call out their color and the marginalization that comes with it, they are branded as divisive. The White bodies that continue to abide by laws written to position their bodies as dominant are not branded as divisive. Therefore, any attempt to draw awareness to the racial formations that oppress raced/gendered bodies and elevate White/male bodies are discursively positioned as divisive and hateful and inappropriate for the classroom context.

Due to this, researchers should view social inequalities as products of discursive White body politics. This calls for examining social bodies as being discursively produced – “not as byproducts but as central facts of the political discourse process” (Prividera & Howard, 2006, p. 64). Racial formations that position bodies outside of the White/male center means that race/gender is seen as existing *only* outside of the center. This socially constructed meaning has real consequences. While genetically there is no such thing as race (Disch, 2009), the meaning that educational politics attributes to

physical characteristics like race/gender is that of the *other/shameful* class (Foucault, 1975).

Bodies of the White/male are neither gendered, nor raced. In the realm of categories, “white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality... - white is no colour” (Dyer, 1988, p. 45). This particularization is not just that race/gender only exists when it is not White/male, but that race/gender means a deviance from the White/male norm. Therefore, the raced/gendered body is a deviant body.

The politic of producing a White/male center of body means that when people see or hear popular portrayals of gender “the unspoken norm is that these are White, middle-class, heterosexual women and men” (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2014, p. 9). The experiences and communication patterns of white “are taken as the norm from which Others are marked” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 293). White is not seen as a label, only non-white bodies receive labels. When classrooms produce White/male bodies as the unlabeled norm, they are tying these bodies closely to power and making that power invisible (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995).

### Censorship

Censorship works to keep the White/male center through constructions of whiteness that “deny the significance of race, downplay or reject the existence of racism, and dismiss any notion of responsibility in connection with any racial issue” (Simpson, 2007, p. 248). Denying the significance of race as a topic means that “race is considered a taboo topic for discussion, especially in racially mixed settings.” (Tatum, 1992, p. 5). By making race taboo, scholarship and histories of race are systematically removed from the canon of “knowledge” in classrooms. The politics of not discussing race help to

normalize whiteness as though it is not a social and historical construction. This norm of not discussing race, means the race of White remains the center axis of cultural meaning, without students ever analyzing how this center came to be.

In censoring racial discussions classrooms naturalize White with a scientific definition and confuse whiteness with nationality (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). When White is constructed as natural, it is denied a political/cultural history. This view of whiteness then escapes the consideration of the power relations embedded within this center of knowing. When Whiteness is conflated with nationality the politics of education deny that not all Americans are White and that not all Whites are American. In censoring discussions of race, Whiteness becomes natural and national versus historical and political. The White/male remains the “natural” center when denied a critical analysis of this social construction. This center subordinates by producing bodies that are constructed outside of the White/male center.

Compoundly, when racism and sexism are discussed, young women of color are still excluded from the discussion (Crenshaw, 1989). This is because “both feminist theory and antiracist politics have been organized, in part, around the equation of racism with what happens to the Black middle-class or to Black men, and the equation of sexism with what happens to white women” (p. 152). Once again, this contributes to the exceptional exclusion of colored/female bodies from normalized educational “knowledge”, as well as, from scholarship resisting the normalized White/male center. Young women of color must either discuss their issues in terms of race or sex/gender, but not their unique compound subject position that is raced/sexed simultaneously.

Three examples of how this exclusion occurs in communication research can be found in Hsu (2000), Jackson and O’Callaghan (2009), and Hendrix and Wilson (2014). Hsu (2000) brings to light many powerful accounts of racism and sexism in the academy. However, in this article minorities, both men and women, are continuously grouped together. Women of color are not always given their own separate analysis. They are lumped in as part of the “minorities” group for the majority of the article. While there is a brief mention that there is a different experience between women of color and men of color – that difference fails to be pointed out in the rest of the article. Rather it is white women and then minorities. This perpetuates the idea that the experience of women of color can fit under the umbrella of race; and worse – that women of color do not belong under the umbrella of woman. This does not allow for an exploration of the very real and specific concerns women of color face in higher education. Not just as women and not just as a people of color, but as women of color. An example of what this discourse looks like in Hsu (2000) is, “It may be more true that more space than ever before has been carved out for women and people of color” (p. 193). This sentence seems innocent and it demonstrates how researchers are attempting to bring issues of diversity to light in their scholarship. Yet, in this sentence women and people of color are presented as two separate entities. Perpetuating the ideology of a woman as a White woman and minorities as men of color. For it is stated that there are ‘women’ and ‘people of color’, but why is a woman is not *also* a person of color?

In Jackson and O’Callaghan (2009), again, the article revolves around looking at women and then people of color. Two separate entities. The research does not address the compound difficulty of women of color as they attempt to surpass the glass ceiling.

Throughout the article it is framed as “successes for women and people of color”; two separate issues. The term “women of color” is not mentioned once in the entire article. The term exists only in the references section as the title of another article.

Hendrix and Wilson (2014) points to the pervasive lack of diversity in the journal *Communication Education*. They noted that, “*Communication Education* publishes a great deal of articles about classroom experience, but very few discuss experiences of teachers/professors/students of color. Scholars of color and their experiences seem to be invisible in higher education” (p. 417). The research is based on an analysis of the journal articles from 2000-2013. However, here too, women of color are erased from their research consideration. Gender and race are talked about separately in this article and the compound issue of the lack of voice for women of color is again lost in the analysis. There is a lack of understanding, or search for understanding, about the issues of compound discrimination or intersectional discrimination. Discrimination that is not just sex, or gender, or class, or race, but it is a compound of two or more of these issues. Issues for women of color are not exclusively race, nor gender, and are often additionally compounded by class.

Outside of the communication field Ong, Wright, Espinosa, and Orfield (2011) report that out of thousands of published works aimed at addressing the underrepresentation of minorities in STEM fields, fewer than 200 pieces of this scholarship specifically sought to provide insight into what factors influence the retention, achievement, and persistence of women of color in those STEM fields. Mack, Rankins, and Woodson (2013) write, “Further, there is comparatively little reported in the literature that either explains the disparate representation of women of color in STEM

fields or elucidates the potential areas for successful intervention” (p. 26). Their assertion is that while, statistically there is data, an exploration into why women of color are excluded from these fields does not make it into the research annals. Zeligman, Prescod, and Greene (2015) discuss that “although it is clear that women of color have different journeys and experiences in higher education, there is limited research on the topic” (p. 66).

The real-world consequence of this censorship is a lack of belief in self and in education. Many educators may be unaware that what they teach is a product of a history of censorship reflected in the textbooks provided. However, whether this censorship is done intentionally, or not, by educators does not lessen the impact of the practice and how it affects bodies outside of the White/male center. There is a scarcity of acknowledgement that experience from the raced/gendered perspective has value. Lacking this value, students who are women of color are at unique risk for dropping out of high school (Crenshaw et al., 2016; Morris, 2016) and of not pursuing higher education (hooks, 1994). For those women of color who remain within the educational system they are likely to internalize and assimilate the assumptions of the White/male center that act to alienate and silence women of color in the classroom (hooks, 1989).

In censoring the histories and discourses that are unique to women of color educational systems construct a culture of absence. Absence of raced/gendered histories and absence of their very bodies. hooks (1994) discusses this through a personal discussion of her experience moving from an all-black school to a desegregated middle-school. Her experience details going from loving education and loving her history to one

of silence, dismay, and doubt. She did not exist within the politics of education that censor the experiences and histories of raced/gendered bodies.

The voices and experiences of women of color in higher education are not given space, nor platform. If scholars are truly interested in creating a University that empowers diversity of thought; then the voices and histories of women of color need to be added to the cannon of the academy. Higher education classrooms are constructed in ways that constrain the voices and histories of women of color and, thereby, their knowledge production/contribution to society. When the voices of students who are women of color are silenced within higher education classrooms, the system loses the benefits and systemic awareness provided by those from a marginalized standpoint.

Critical pedagogy's aim is to create space within higher education classrooms for the bodies, histories, and voices of those from oppressed classes. In the following section I review what critical pedagogy means for educational practices that marginalize and oppress students who are women of color. Then there is a discussion of how critical pedagogy might be used in order to disrupt the traditional politics of education that normalize the White/male center and other young women of color.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy aims to disrupt the hegemonic White/male center within the higher classroom. The commitment of critical pedagogy is to bring the voices, histories, experiences and knowledge of marginalized groups, to the forefront of "knowledge" within higher education classrooms. First, I will review critical pedagogy literature and how the basis of the literature does demonstrate specific ways critical pedagogy can elevate the student voices of women of color within the classroom. A review of the



literature reveals that critical pedagogy calls for a transformation of consciousness, praxis: theory and practice, diversity of intellectual representation, and the formation of classroom communities as co-constructed spaces. This is followed by a brief discussion of how critical pedagogy can benefit from scholarship focused on the experiences of students who are women of color.

### Transform Consciousness

In critical pedagogy, the transformation of consciousness means the critical evaluation of power structures; how they came to be, how they continue, how they can be renegotiated. Critical pedagogy as an approach strives to create awareness of power relationships in society by examining language and meaning. Its goal is to “change an imbalance of power in society by developing students’ and teachers’ critical consciousness of how power benefits some and marginalizes others” (Kahl, 2015, p. 23). It is an instrument of critical discovery, whereby, “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 1970, p. 83). By evaluating how they exist in the world, students are tasked with analyzing the invisible power structures that traditional politics of education keep invisible.

In order to evaluate power, students and teachers must engage in the practice of oppositional world view. And oppositional world view “enables us to see ourselves not through the lens of racism or racist stereotypes but one that would enable us...to look at ourselves, at the world around us, critically – analytically” (hooks, 1989, p. 49). In doing so educators are encouraged to “pay attention to how power operates in knowledge

production as part of the schooling process” (Hao, 2011, p. 281), and examine the use of “language as a tool to read the world and the world for social and political reconstruction” (Pane & Rocco, 2014, p. 312). It is not just *what* is taught, but *how* “knowledge” is taught that matters in critical pedagogy. Both are forms of hidden power meant to be analyzed and made known for students to renegotiate.

Through the critical pedagogy practice of transforming consciousness, the White/male center of “knowledge” is allowed to be challenged and renegotiated. Challenging this center means challenging the normalization of White/male bodies and White/male histories. In (de)normalizing the center, those bodies and histories that have been constructed as “other” through the politics of education become part of a reconstructed normal/center, whereby, diversity and difference is embraced rather than feared. The aim of this practice is meant to encourage and elevate the perspectives from marginalized standpoints; which would benefit women of color, and all of us, in higher education.

### Praxis: Theory & Practice

Another major tenet of critical pedagogy is praxis. Praxis combines theory (ways of knowing) and action. Praxis occurs naturally through human action (Allen, 2011; Freire, 1970). A theory that is not put into action, remains idle chatter. Action without a theory, ends with the seizing of that action. For example, being angry may lead to a verbal action. If the anger is not understood and attached to a theory of thought (realizing why one is angry and why one is justified in that anger), then when that verbal moment stops, the action is done. If anger is tied to a movement (theory), such as the Civil Rights Movement, then that anger is propelled into something that lasts beyond individual

moments of anger made into action; be it marching, striking, or presenting speeches. Those individual actions may seize, but praxis lives on in the movement itself. Freire (1970) writes of praxis as the “human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action” (p. 125). This stresses the importance of humans not just emerging from their objectified subject positions, but intervening in reality once it is discovered and unveiled.

Tatum (1992) argues that engaging in critical pedagogy without an understanding of praxis is unethical. One of the most important reasons for approaching students as agents of change is to alleviate the amount of pushback to the critical pedagogy process. Tatum (1992) notes that:

Heightening students’ awareness of racism without also developing an awareness of the possibility of change is a prescription for despair. I consider it unethical to do one without the other. Exploring strategies to empower students as change agents is thus a necessary part of the process of talking about race and learning about racism. (p. 21)

When students feel like there is a possibility to *do* something with their newly constructed knowledge they are more likely to be open to diverse perspectives in the first place. Without this sense of agency students are more likely to shut down and be unwilling to consider possibilities that would position some students in advantaged positions (inviting guilt and shame) and some students in disadvantaged positions (inviting resentment and shame). Rather, teaching critical pedagogy that reflects the tenet of classrooms as communities of co-construction attempts to “readjust the balance of

power in the classroom through strategies that lessen the degree to which students are force-fed ‘truths universally acknowledged’” (Hwang, 2000, p. 155) and open up the possibility for creating new truths and new ways of knowing that honor diversity.

Exploring strategies to empower students as change agents is thus a necessary part of the process of talking about race/gender and learning about racism and sexism.

Through praxis, education more than any other institution has the potential to level the playing field, to help each student advance in society (Allen, 2011; DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2014; Freire, 1970; Tatum, 1992).

Through the critical pedagogy practice of praxis young women of color are presented with an ideology that encourages action. When the normalized center is revealed, this is combined with the emphasis on personal agency and viewing humans as re-creators of history and the world. In this way, discussions of racism and sexism and othering do not become theory that leads to despair, but rather theory that leads to action; praxis. This allows young women of color to take part in constructing new meanings for themselves and others and the world. They are not positioned “outside” of construction, they are the axis of meaning making itself.

#### Diversity of Intellectual Representation

In order to build a transform consciousness through critical awareness of power critical pedagogy calls for a diversity of intellectual representation. This is an act of dismantling the *hidden curriculums* used to normalize the White/male center within classrooms. This is a form of curricular justice that “reverses the current social practice of organizing knowledge from the point of view of the privileged” (Connell, 1995, p. 239). The practice is not constructed to abandon existing knowledge, but rather to reconfigure

it by opening up the possibilities that current social inequalities conceal (Connell, 1995; Wood, 2004).

Diversifying intellectual representation empowers those within classrooms by examining questions of hegemony and privilege. This helps students and teachers to develop a critical consciousness of how power benefits some and marginalizes others (Connell, 1995; Kahl, 2015; Pane & Rocco, 2014; Wood, 2004). One of the important questions critical pedagogy encourages an examination of is racism. In critical pedagogy an understanding of “racism as a system of advantage presents a serious challenge to the notion of the United States as a just society where rewards are based solely on one’s merit” (Tatum 1992, p. 6). Such a challenge often creates discomfort in students and teachers alike; leading to traditional higher education practices that ignore the racism inherent in their curriculums and pedagogy. However, the aim of critical pedagogy is to disrupt traditional education practices and only through an examination of race/gender is a true diversity of intellectual representation possible.

This disruption of traditional practice in higher education is meant to be as necessary for students as for teachers. Duncan (2002) writes:

To truly teach about race and racism in meaningful, antiracist ways, we as faculty must acknowledge and engage our own social locations. Doing so means being always aware and attempting to understand the complexities of our own power in student-teacher interactions. (p. 47)

In order to truly have diversity of intellectual representation teachers must be willing to challenge their own internal biases and subject positions. Anything less would be an inauthentic approach to critical pedagogy.

Through the critical pedagogy practice of diversity in intellectual representation the *hidden curriculum* of classrooms can be disrupted. With diverse histories and diverse bodies being represented through critical pedagogy young women of color could see themselves within classrooms. Diversity of “knowledge” means young women of color are included in the normalized center of constructed meaning and what is known as knowledge.

### Classrooms as Communities of Co-Construction

Critical pedagogy implements the ideology that it must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (Freire, 1970). This builds a co-intentional education (Freire, 1970) to engage teachers and students in the task of re-creating knowledge; “they discover themselves as permanent re-creators” (p. 69). This is the opposite of the banking system of education. Students are not passive receivers of “knowledge” and teachers are not perceived as having sole property of experience in classroom discussion. In discussing her classroom interactions hooks (1994) writes:

Along with them I grow intellectually...this is one of the primary differences between education as the practice of freedom and the conservative banking system which encourages professors to believe deep down in the core of their being that they have nothing to learn from their students” (p. 152).

Freire (1974) writes:

If an [educator] supposes that [they] are “*the* agent of change,” it is with difficulty that [they] will see the obvious fact that, if the task is to be really educational and liberating, those with whom [they] work cannot be the objects of [their] actions (p. 123).

In critical pedagogy the classroom is a co-constructed community. Meaning is created daily through interaction and discussion. Students are viewed as knowledge producing resources with their own set of expertise gained from lived experience. Students are encouraged to engage in self-generated knowledge (Tatum, 1992), and critical conscientization (Freire 1970; Freire 1974; Pane & Rocco, 2014). Self-generated knowledge is meant to challenge dominant class norms within *hidden curriculums* and critical conscientization is achieved when students and teachers work together to transform their awareness of dominant power paradigms.

Through the critical pedagogy practice of classrooms as communities of co-construction the socially/politically constructed dominant norms of higher classrooms can be disrupted. Students are viewed as having worthwhile and valid experiences that contribute to classroom meaning making and knowledge. Traditional pedagogy in higher education works to normalize dominant ways of “doing” for humans. These dominant ways encourage resistance to challenging the status quo. As the status quo is representative of hegemonic White/male norms being presented as knowledge without allowing for students to take part in renegotiation of this knowledge; traditional pedagogical practices work to diminish and displace women of color. Co-construction in critical pedagogy practice encourages women of color to challenge and recreate with other students, and with teachers, in order to address and transform the hegemonic norms of the White/male center.

### **How Critical Pedagogy Can Benefit from the Voices of Women of Color**

While critical pedagogy aims to elevate marginalized voices within higher classrooms, it still lacks research exploring the unique standpoint of students who are

women of color and their compound marginalization of race/gender. Although it is clear that women of color have unique experiences and journeys in higher education, there is limited research on the topic (Crenshaw et al., 2016; Zeligman et al., 2015). As women of color are “underrepresented in higher education and consider so many factors before entering into higher education, it is important to explore the journeys of these women” (Zeligman et al., 2015, p. 66). Exploring these journeys explicitly can contribute to a better understanding of how to circumvent the current road-blocks for students who are women of color.

Critical pedagogy can also benefit from the reflections of women of color by helping those within the academy who inhabit normalized body/subject positions to “comprehend the depth...the lived reality of [women of color] beyond what has been [solely] theorized and written about” (Hsu, 2000, p. 186). Research exploring how students who are women of color navigate the unique burdens placed on their bodies/subject positions can provide insight into both what *is not* working within critical pedagogical practices and what *is* working within critical pedagogical practices specifically for students who are women of color at the university.

Based on the literature, my project focuses on the classroom experiences of students who are women of color and attending to their recommendations for improving classroom experiences as related to critical pedagogical practices. The following questions guided my study:

- 1) How do women of color describe their classroom experiences at their university?



2) What suggestions do students who are women of color have for improving classroom climates at their university?

The following chapter will review my proposed methods for a qualitative interpretive study and for engaging a critical analysis.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This study aims to reveal insights into the experiences in higher education among students who are women of color and learn how the participants of this study might offer suggestions for improving classroom climates at their university. In this chapter I will review the methodology of my study, introduce the participants for this study, and discuss how I engaged in qualitative interviews. I will also explain how I analyzed the data by coding the interview transcripts using thematic analysis with a critical lens. Overall, these methods provided insights into the experiences of women of color in the classroom and gain a better understanding of the challenges and successes they have encountered, and suggestions they have for improved classroom climates.

### **Methodology**

To engage in this study, I blended interpretive methods of research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) with critical analysis (Alvesson & Deetz, 2001) to gain insights into the experiences of others with hope of improving conditions in higher education. Embracing an interpretive approach, my research reflects certain commitments. Some of those commitments are that social realities emerge in collaborative acts, knowledge of social reality is interdependent between researcher and participant, researchers should attempt to preserve participant perspectives and descriptions, a researcher's knowledge claims will be positioned and partial, and researchers are the research instrument (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Qualitative interpretive researchers believe that rich descriptions of the social world are valuable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). These rich

descriptions are often produced from large amounts of raw data derived from, typically, relatively small sample sizes, such as in-depth interviews (Cassell & Symon, 2004).

A critical approach means participating in the “critique of prevailing social practices that create or uphold disadvantage, inequity, and/or oppression” (Wood, 2004, pg. 259). When looking at critical theory from a communication perspective, then “critical tradition conceptualizes communication as *discursive reflection*” (Craig & Muller, 2007, pg. 425). A discursive reflection is a free flowing discourse that reflects unexamined relations of power. Putting this together, critical theories guide the critique of a society’s current status quo. It is the belief that when examining the discourses of society, the most important aspect of that discourse is in how it positions subjects according to power relations.

While guided by a critical approach and an interest in revealing the White/male power structures, my initial focus was to learn from the experiences of others and present their collective narratives. As such I conducted in-depth interviews to learn from interview participants’ classroom experiences, guided by their perspectives, to provide suggestions for improving classroom experiences in higher education. I then engaged in interpretive analysis of the interviews guided by critical interest in revealing hidden power asymmetries between participants and their instructors and between participants and their peers. In other words, I first coded interpretively allowing for emergent themes from the data, and then applied a critical lens to those emergent themes. In the sections below I introduce my site and participants, explain the why using in-depth interviews was appropriate for this study, review how I conducted the semi-structured interviews following an ‘inter’ and ‘constructionist’ approach and a concern for rapport. I then

discuss my resulting data and how I engaged in a thematic analysis with a critical lens. I begin with a discussion of the site of my study and an introduction to the participants.

### **Site and Participants**

The initial step in conducting this study was to find a site. With an interest in experiences of women of color in the higher education classroom, I needed access to a university setting where I could invite women to conversations about their classroom experiences. As a graduate student at Boise State University (Boise State), I chose this university as the site for my study. This is a good university for this type of study as it was convenient and I already had access. Furthermore, this was a good choice for this study as it has a reputation for a limited, yet growing, amount of diversity among the student population. Boise State is also a predominantly white institution (PWI). As such, I was curious about the extra challenges, if any, this would present for women of color in their classroom interactions. With Boise State as the site of my study, I then sought out participants.

To recruit participants for this study, I used the ‘snowball method’ of recruitment. Current study participants recommended others who might be eligible and interested in the study (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). With an interest in classroom experiences of women of color, eligible participants needed to be women who recently took classes at Boise State. To begin the study, I reached out to a few initial potential participants and, following snowball methods, asked them if they knew others who might be willing to participate. I invited participants to interview in person and via email. Based on this snowball approach, I was able to recruit and interview eleven women of color who were currently enrolled at Boise State, or had been enrolled at Boise State within the last year

of this study being conducted. All interviews were conducted face to face. Interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 85 minutes with an average of 50 minutes per interview. Participants ranged from approximately 20 years of age to mid- 30s and represented five different cultural backgrounds. Though 11 may seem like a small sample, the interviews generated rich data and saturation was reached. After the first eight interviews clear patterns and themes had emerged. These patterns repeated through to the eleventh interview, with no new themes emerging.

### Confidentiality

Protecting the confidentiality of the participants of this study was a paramount concern. This study required participants to be vulnerable and share experiences being in the margins or being marginalized. In an effort to build trust and support with my participants I pledged to do whatever I could to protect their anonymity. This includes not using names but only mentioning participants by a number. Additionally, due to the limited population of women of color at Boise State it was very important to me, and to my participants, that I make sure their identities remained anonymous. Due to this I chose to not provide the specific cultural backgrounds of my participants. I also do not provide the names of the courses my students refer to. The courses are limited and the women of color in each campus department are very few. As such, in an effort to keep confidentiality of the participants of this study, I did not name specific courses or degree tracks, as this might lead to compromising the identity of my participants. The only course I name specifically are upper division Spanish courses as the demographic is shifted from predominantly white to predominantly minority students in those classes.

Additionally, I asked participants if they felt comfortable with me naming Spanish classes and was given permission to do so.

### **Interviews**

To gather data for this study, I engaged in semi-structured in-depth interviews with the eleven participants. In-depth interviews were a good choice for this study because they allow the opportunity to gain insights into the stories of women in their own terms. More specifically, as Lindlof and Taylor (2011) explain:

What distinguishes in-depth interviewing is that the answers given continually inform the evolving conversation. Knowledge thus accumulates with many turns at talk. It collects in stories, asides, hesitations, expressions of feeling, and spontaneous associations...The specific person interviewing, the “I” that I am, personally contributes to the creation of the interview’s content because I follow my own perplexities as they arise in our discourse. (p. 172)

Using in-depth interviews is reflective of the interpretive approach as it embraces self-reflexivity in the data generating process. The specific type of in-depth interview I used was the semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews “are conducted to find out how people express their views, how they construe their actions, how they conceptualize their life world...we want them to disclose their subjective standpoints” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 179). This type of interview was appropriate for addressing my research questions I was interested in participant’s personal perspectives, from their subjective standpoints, in relation to their experiences in the classroom at Boise State. The following are sample questions from the interview process:

- Can you tell me about your classes, and your experiences in the classroom?
- Could you tell me a story about a time when you felt included as a student in the classroom?
- Could you tell me a story about a time when you felt excluded as a student in the classroom?
- What advice might you offer professors/instructors to help you feel more included/valued/supported?
- Understanding that I'm interested in the experiences of women of color in the classroom is there anything else you'd like to share? Is there anything else you think might be useful for me to know?

These questions served as a starting point, but based on how the participants responded and interacted with me, the structure of each interview evolved differently allowing for participant perspectives to be the forefront of this investigation.

In using in-depth interviews, I employed semi-structured or open-ended questions to invite greater complexity and depth of the data, focused on the necessity of building rapport during the interview, embraced the *inter* (constructionist) aspect of the in-depth interview process, and focused on transcription being reflective of the interviewees' perspectives (Atkinson, 1998; Bradburn, 1979; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Kvale, 1996; and Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In the following sections I will review how each of these components are enacted within the interview process.

#### Inter and Constructionist Approach

My approach for these interviews is guided by an inter and constructionist approach. Kvale (1996) and Lindlof and Taylor (2011) use the term *inter-view*. They

explain the *inter-view* as a construction site for knowledge that attempts to understand meaning from the subjects' point of view, while recognizing the researcher's part in the creation of meaning for the participants. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) refer to this concept as *inter-active* to convey the mutually constructed and contextually based aspects of an in-depth interview. Gubrium and Holstein (2002) discuss the impact of construction in their emphasis on conversation within the interview being an important moment that allows meaning making to take center stage. The literature here represents the importance of the *interaction* of the interview process and how that contributes to the meaning making of participants and the context of the data results. This was an appropriate lens to take with the in-depth interviews in order to embrace subjectivity of both the participants and myself as a researcher within the data.

### Rapport

Furthermore, the concept of building rapport, as a necessary component of the in-depth interview process, is strongly apparent throughout the literature grounding my methods. Bradburn (1979) emphasized the importance of rapport in gaining 'further' reporting that reflected depth. Likewise, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note that to achieve understanding of the participant's perspective rapport was necessary. To build rapport one needs to adapt dynamic interaction, active listening, and the use of silence (Atkinson, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002; Kvale, 1996; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

The importance of dynamic interaction is in the use of posture, tone, body movement, and friendliness (warmth of tone, flexibility in time and place of scheduling, smiling) in order to convey interest (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).



Conveying interest allows for a greater flow in response from the participant. A forward posture, an interested tone, and natural body movement can all help to put the participant at ease and affirm that the researcher is interested about the participant's unique perspective.

The importance of active listening is that it encourages complexity in responses. Active listening can be done with nods, pauses, and paying attention to "red lights" such as unusual terms and strong intonations (Kvale, 1996). Being active while listening allows the researcher to connect with what the participant finds meaningful. This is done by noticing the tone and unusual words and then asking more about those moments. This reflects an active participation and interest in the story being conveyed by the participant which is affirming of their subjective experience (Atkinson, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). In this way "active listening can be more important than any specific mastery of question techniques (Kvale, 1996, p.133).

The importance of silence is that it allows the participant time to reflect on their thoughts and then provide more depth in their response (Atkinson, 1998; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Kvale, 1996). These authors all emphasized the need to allow for pauses. They called for the understanding that an effective interviewer will not be intimidated by the silence in a pause, because the potential response on the other side of the pause usually reveals the depth and complexity in a participant's response. An interviewer must be willing to allow for silence so that participants can reflect on what they have said and find the further implications that their responses have for their personal meaning making about the communication phenomenon.

Additionally, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) stress that being silent helps the researcher to remember their role as the listener. The interview conversation is different than a friendship conversation. The interviewer need not fill up silences with their own antidotes, as in a friendship conversation, rather, silence helps the researcher remember the importance of the participant's perspective of the meaning making about the communication phenomenon (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Based on the literature, rapport is a vital part of gaining complexity and depth in participant responses to questions. The use of dynamic interaction, active listening, and silences were useful in helping to build rapport with participants during the research process.

### **Data**

The data I collected for this study included interview transcripts and field notes associated with the interviews. Each interview was audio recorded and transcripts were made from the audio recordings of the interview sessions. After transcribing, I had 115 pages of single spaced transcripts. In addition, I took notes during the interviews and indicated things such as verbal and nonverbal symbols reflecting not only what was spoken, but also *how* it was spoken. For example, the transcripts took into account silences, hesitations, laughter, tone, and other affects. The field notes were my observations of the participants' actions and my interactions with the participants. Field notes also included my immediate reflections, after the interviews, about what I thought was important or meaningful in that particular interview. These notes reflected on the stories when nonverbal expressions seemed to indicate a strong emotional response to that part of the discussion. These notes helped generate greater depth to the data than the audio recordings, alone. This was an inherently subjective process on my part as the

researcher. It involved making decisions about what *seemed* important during the interview and was affected by the subjective understandings I embody as a person. However, the notes combined with the interview transcriptions provided fuller insight into the co-constructive process of in-depth interviews. These immediate reactions and interpretations were taken into consideration during the coding and analysis of the data.

When I completed the transcriptions, I engaged in an interpretive process that occurred in choosing where a sentence ended, where there was a pause and who the pause belonged to; choosing to write words based on how they sounded versus standard English, and choosing to add descriptions (tense silence, awkward laughter) to the transcribed text (Atkinson, 1998; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Kvale, 1996). Overall, I chose to create a text with a flow that resembled and was as reflective of the original interview as possible (Atkinson, 1998). Kvale (1996) describes this as creating harmony between the interview and the transcription. Gubrium and Holstein (2002) write that it is important to try and include the narrative in a way that is as close to how it was originally spoken and that it is important to include description. The best way to ensure an accurate portrayal of the original narrative is through the use of quality equipment, most especially, a digital audio recorder, which I checked out from Boise State's technology centers (Atkinson, 1998; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Overall, the literature speaks of resemblance, harmony, reflection of original text, and description. I chose to make my transcriptions according to this process. Once I had my transcripts from my in-depth interviews and field notes, I engaged thematic analysis with a critical lens to identify emergent themes across data.

### **Thematic Analysis with a Critical Lens**

To analyze the data collected I used thematic analysis to code for emergent data. I then applied a critical lens to the emergent themes. I chose thematic analysis (TA) because:

TA is suited to a wide range of research interests and theoretical perspectives...it works with a wide range of research questions, from those about people's experiences or understandings to those about the representation and construction of particular phenomena in particular contexts. (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 120)

My research question is concerned with participants' experiences within the classroom and their suggestions for improving classroom climates at Boise State. Thematic analysis is suited to both data-driven analysis (participant perspectives). My research focused on data-driven themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews with participants. With recognition of my subject position within the data, the data was coded to reflect, as much as possible, participant perspectives and descriptions. I identified themes within the data with attention to recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness through participant responses and ideas captured in my field notes (Owen, 1984). I also put themes in relation to power structures and engaged in a *critical* assessment of the emergent themes.

Thematic analysis is applied to emergent themes revealed by the data itself (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Boyatzis (1998) calls this "encoding" data, or being sensitive to emergent themes. Boyatzis (1998), Cassell and Symon (2004), Denzin and Lincoln (2000), Gubrium and Holstein (2002), Owen (1984), and Strauss and Corbin (1990)

reveal that the basic process of using thematic analysis to discover emergent themes can be simplified into a three step process: Open coding, axial coding, and selective/focused coding.

### Open Coding

Open coding is the process of examining each line of data in order to build ideas inductively from the participant's point of view (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Boyatzis, 1998). This process of open coding is to make analytic decisions about the data through broad comparison and categories (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Cassell & Symon, 2004). The basic analytic procedures by which this is accomplished are: "the asking of questions about data; and the making of comparisons for similarities and differences between each incident, event, and other instances of phenomena. Similar events and incidents are labeled and grouped to form categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 74). Open coding is the process by which I will start to form my first initial codes in the form of categories. The next step is axial coding.

### Axial Coding

Axial coding is the process of relating categories into larger groupings or concepts (Cassell & Symon, 2004). This allows for greater depth and complexity of the data through these comparisons (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). This is a process of relating subcategories to a category (concept). For instance, in this study, "uncomfortable," "ignore," and "student burden" are all subcategories of the theme *acceptance of classroom ignorance*. These concepts develop in terms of a set of relationships that give rise to causal conditions; something has happened because of this cause or condition (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) additionally

discuss the use of analyzing context and consequence in these comparisons of the subcategories to their concept. Axial coding helped me think systematically about the data and relate the data in complex ways. This was important for my qualitative interpretive approach because I am interested in richness, depth, and complexity in data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The final step in thematic analysis is selective/focused coding.

### Selective/Focused Coding

Selective/focused coding involved making notes of the most frequently recurring initial codes (concepts) to make sense of and synthesize large amounts of data (Cassell & Symon, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). These recurring initial codes become the themes that emerge from the data. Owen (1984) defines a theme as being present when three criteria are met: (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness (strength of tone, use of strong language/vocabulary, forward positioning of the body). I used both the methods of Strauss and Corbin (1990), as well as, Owen (1984) when it came to identifying my main themes. Particularly I was interested in the repetition and forcefulness of Owen (1984). In the transcriptions, I used capitalization, exclamation marks, and italics to illustrate the moments of forceful speech during the interviews. Repetition was necessary to establish the patterns across the majority of my participants versus patterns that may have occurred with only a few of my participants. For this study I only included the themes that represented the majority of participant experience. Themes that reappeared frequently across the participants of my interviews helped me create a connected analysis useful for implications and suggestions for further research.

### Critical Analysis

Typically, critical studies “put a particular object of study in a wider cultural, economic and political context, relating a focused phenomenon to sources of broader asymmetrical relations (power/knowledge relations) in society, for example class, late capitalism, affluent/post scarcity society” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2001, p. 9). This means that when the critical element is applied to thematic analysis, the focus is on the broader context of social relations and how they create imbalanced power relations. The *critical* analysis of the themes arising from the coding of the interviews and field notes aimed to identify particular themes in specific relation to power structures. This analysis was applied after coding for emergent themes, and this analysis is provided in the discussion section, rather than the findings section. The critical analysis I use applies the emergent themes back to the literature and asks of the data if it reflects the power imbalances of the literature used to ground this study. This is appropriate for my study as I am interested in the politics of the White/male center within education systems. I am interested in exploring the perspectives of students who are women of color in order to reveal education practices at Boise State that are potentially oppressive to marginalized bodies. I am also interested in revealing practices at Boise State that are helpful in reducing the marginalization of oppressed bodies in the classroom, specifically bodies that are gendered/raced simultaneously. This form of critical thematic analysis allowed the data to be coded for emergent themes and then later critiqued for what those themes revealed about dominant power-relations at Boise State.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The findings of this study emerged from a critical thematic analysis of the eleven interviews with students who were women of color about their classroom experiences at Boise State University. The first section reviews the findings of RQ1 as it relates to student experiences revealing how the participants discussed their reflections, feelings, and thoughts about their classroom interactions with instructors and peers. Within this section three themes associated with experiences emerged: *appropriation of bodies and knowledge*, *acceptance of classroom ignorance*, and *social capital*. The second section reviews the findings of RQ2 related to suggestions from students regarding how to best address the challenges they faced in the classroom to enhance the experiences of marginalized students in the classroom. The final section of this chapter takes these findings and responds to the two research questions guiding this study. I begin by describing the findings regarding student experiences in the classroom.

### **Student Experiences**

#### Appropriation of Bodies and Knowledges

The most salient theme regarding articulations of participants' experiences in the classroom was the *appropriation of bodies and knowledge*. This theme means that the bodies and knowledges of participants were defined according to White hegemonic views and ideologies. This idea was discussed in two prevalent ways: assimilation and tokenized assumptions. The participants articulated assimilation as occurring when they were required to accept/not question the current White/male status quo. Participants also



reflected on Indigenous knowledges being absorbed (assimilated) into the hands of white scholars. When this happened, White interpretations of non-White knowledges were asserted as Truth over the lived experiences of the participants and at the censorship of scholarly articles from women of color (WOC) and people of color (POC). Additionally, the notion of tokenism emerged in terms of being treated as a generalized representation of a larger social group.

### Assimilation

The idea of assimilation was the most prevalent idea that emerged across the interviews when expressing the ways they experienced the classroom. For this study, assimilation was described as blending in with White bodies and White norms so as to avoid becoming the center of attention in a way that was viewed negatively by instructors or peers. Many participants reflected on how they assimilated Whiteness as a survival tactic in order to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom; at the least to not be ostracized. In some cases, the assimilation was a conscious tactic. In other cases, the assimilation was talked about as a blindness that participants themselves had in relation to oppressive practices/ideologies. This personal blindness participants held was discussed as either being illuminated during their time at Boise State or during the interview process as they reminisced about their time in classrooms. The third way that assimilation was discussed was in the act of Indigenous knowledges being co-opted into the system of Whiteness.

The most prevalent way in which assimilation was expressed by participants was as a survival tactic. I believe it is important to not delegitimize the impact of assimilation and recognize that participants of this study were indeed describing acts of survival. For

those not in the marginalized position of gender/race, this may seem like an overstatement. I do not believe that it is. This is not about participants wanting to be popular and comfortable at all times, it is about the effort to not face dehumanization and verbal assault. Verbal aggression is still aggression. The term “microaggressions” has been used to discuss the very real impacts on health, psychology, and sense of safety (Crenshaw et al., 2016; Matsuda, 1996; Morris, 2016) resulting from the ways people talk and interact. Survival tactics are used in cases of feeling unsafe when microaggressions take place and thus I refer to statements by participants that helped them feel safe in terms of survival tactics. Assimilation for these participants became something participants needed to do in order to survive the classroom, in terms of feeling safe and supported. For instance, assimilation as survival tactic was expressed by Participant 1 saying, “There are moments where I have been...where I have done my best to forget about how I am...there are days were I assimilate because it is hard to be proud all of the time.” Likewise, Participant 10 discussed having to assimilate to preserve her class grade, “I had to agree with his interpretation of the Constitution and write from that lens to get a good grade in class. I had to compromise my liberal interpretation to get a good grade in class.” Participant 10 also used assimilation in order to feel safe in the classroom:

Yeah if not just for the physical it’s for the preservation of social capital that I have because if you have friends that say something stupid or just wrong sometimes you feel like to not be a loner you have to not say anything or play the race card when you’re just trying to re-educate people. I don’t have anyone else. My family are all back home.

Participant 11 also reflected very consciously of how her assimilation has helped her navigate her classrooms:

Yeah that's true I'm involved in a lot of things but it helps that I'm more Americanized. Several of my friends never get involved because it's not as easy for them to navigate that world. It's harder. I feel lucky. Yeah...I can work it. You have to work yourself into the system if you do not have that Americanized sense.

For this participant, assimilation was a tactic used to be able to participate and she assimilated to be successful. While it took work, she was also proud of her efforts.

Other participants discussed assimilation in terms of being a "blindness" to the actual social realities in which they are surrounded. These examples of blindness include stories shared by participants as they perceived themselves to be blind to their own actions of assimilation. These stories include ways in which their assimilation created a blindness, or a lack of awareness, about the racial issues surrounding them. And then how they come to recognize that blindness, in themselves, in various ways. These particular stories are not about others (instructors/peers) being blind, but of participants themselves feeling like they were blind at different stages and then coming to recognize this blindness in their classroom experiences. For Participant 3 it was reflecting on how coming to a place like Boise State, a predominantly white institution, required an assimilated blindness:

I think sometimes coming to a place like this causes myself and other people in my similar situation like this to have a blindness. I don't even realize I'm not as

privileged until something specific comes up and then I'm put back in my place. It's almost caused me a blindness to reality.

The notion of assimilating as blindness to other aspects of one's identity was further described by Participant 5 when she shared that being at Boise State meant that her assimilated blanket was removed and removal of assimilation could not be undone:

I didn't realize how little of diversity we had in Boise and not just race but LGBTQ and other identities. Now that I know, I can't unsee it. I can't unknow it. It is kind of nice when you have that blanket of like, 'This is amazing! Black people get treated great because we stopped slavery!' but it's just not real.

Participant 5 describes assimilation as a type of comfortable blanket that hides the realities of the University and provides comfort, yet when removed cannot be put back on. In short, ignorance is bliss. Assimilation helped Participant 5 ignore racist realities in her high school experience. This blanket, however, was removed when she attended her classes at Boise State. From there the challenges of having a lack of diversity in her University environment become present and pervasive in her conscious thoughts while in the classroom, as well as, when outside of it.

When talking about her classroom experiences, Participant 2 discussed the notion of blindness in terms of being "whitewashed". She would tell classmates and instructors that she was whitewashed in order to defend against generalizations based on her skin color. Yet, during the interview process she spoke about starting to realize that having to use this term was a problem she had not recognized (been blind to) previously.

Specifically, she said:

It's weird that I'm used to it. I've thought about it a lot when I talk about white washing – like why do I have to preface it with that? It almost feels like I have to justify where I'm at right now. Like I'm studying in college because I'm so white washed because I have that white part of me almost like I have to prove my privilege.

This was her story illuminating how she realized that the very common use of describing herself as white-washed was actually problematic. And once realizing that, it was harder to offer the description without also thinking about the systemic problems predicating her need to do so.

The third way assimilation was discussed was as a loss of knowledge into instructor and peer hands. This way of describing assimilation was in terms of one's unique experiences and ways of knowing being replaced or overcome by expertise and knowledge; often presented by academics who have either White or male background experiences and knowledge. For instance, assimilation as loss of knowledge was expressed by Participant 8 when she stated,

I just don't like the rhetoric the professor brings to the classroom. She's studied in Mexico and taken ownership over things. Knowledges and practices...she talks about how she's lived in so and so and so she knows how it is to be a Mexican there. I'm like, well regardless of however long you lived there you're still a white woman so your experience is gonna be different to an Indigenous person.

In a similar way Participant 5 discussed this loss of individual ways of knowing when telling her story of a classroom activity where students were required to come up with racial stereotypes, minus any stereotypes about Whiteness as a race. In this activity a

particular White student spoke in front of the class about her perceived stereotypes of Chinese people. Participant 5 recalls this student saying, “They speak their ching chong, always take off their shoes, eat food that smells bad, they work at nail salons, and they kinda suck.” During this monologue the instructor nodded along and then moved on to the next person without disputing this White student’s stereotypes. Participant 5 expressed that this encouraged Whiteness based negative stereotypes about POC. This was a case of loss of knowledge because the academic knowledge of Chinese customs was replaced with this student’s opinion based monologue.

For Participant 10 loss of knowledge happened when learning about intersectionality in one her classes taught by a white female instructor. In discussing this class and what she learned about intersectionality she asked me (the interviewer), “It’s [intersectionality] a term coined by a woman of color, right?” I (interviewer) replied, “Yes, Kimberlé Crenshaw.” In response to this she said, “Well I’ve never heard her name.” She elucidated that in their readings it was, “White men and white women. Maybe it’s just what their circle provides [white instructors]? But that I know of. I don’t know of any women of color that they’ve drawn from to explain this phenomenon.” In this way, a term developed by a WOC to help illuminate the double discrimination WOC face was taken from WOC and POC scholars and placed into White scholars’ hands.

Participant 10 discussed her frustration with this, asserting the necessity to, “Bring their own findings [WOC/POC]. I don’t know if they’re discounted because they [instructors] think the work is biased if it’s people of color writing about race, but that doesn’t make any sense. Aren’t they the only qualified people?” This instance

demonstrates how knowledge from WOC can be co-opted into the system of White knowledge which erases the origin from awareness.

For Participant 11 the loss of knowledge was in the silencing of diverse perspectives. She emphasized that while there seems to be an initiative to bring more POC to campus that this is not what makes a campus diverse:

Even if you have more color here it's about how integrated I think it is. So even if you have different looks and colors that doesn't make it a diverse group. I think it makes it diverse when you have them interacting with one another so...and I don't think that's the thing here that we have.

This is a loss of knowledge because the belief that there is a requirement for diverse bodies to assimilate to White ways of knowing, means that diverse perspectives would not be given a platform, and diverse bodies would not be able to share their individual knowledge. Rather, that individual knowledge is perceived to be replaced by dominant knowledge practices. These statements describe assimilation in terms of not allowing different ways of knowing to be expressed in the classroom by students, instructors, and the authors of the readings.

Overall, the participants' discussion of the experiences of assimilation in terms of a survival tactic, as blindness, and as loss of knowledge creates an atmosphere of isolation and silence about different perspectives. Americanized, White perspectives of others, especially people of color, are expressed as those being most dominant in the classroom. And assimilation becomes a way to survive the classroom, as a way to not see the real issues of a lack of diversity, and as ultimately a loss of the ability to express their own knowledge and experiences. The participants who discussed assimilation expressed

a feeling of being invalidated and a desire to express their voice. As Participant 4 articulated, “Education can’t teach you that voice. Living through it is a completely different thing. That material is more valid than my experience? and I’m not validated because of a scholarly article?” The meaning being that White perspectives are used to invalidate knowledge from a WOC, regardless of the lived, and therefore known validity, of the perspective being expressed. Another way in which participants discussed their classroom experiences that related to the theme of *appropriation of bodies and knowledge* was in terms of tokenism.

#### Tokenized Assumptions

The second way in which participants frequently discussed their experiences of appropriation of bodies and knowledges was the frequent exposure to tokenized assumptions of bodies. Participants talked about tokenized assumptions first as being exposed to generalized claims about their background or identity based on perceived difference due to race/gender. Being exposed to tokenized assumptions occurred due to skin color or assumed racial or cultural backgrounds. The second form of tokenized assumption came from classroom discussions that made generalized claims about minority groups as part of the classroom culture.

Many participants expressed how generalized claims about participants’ identities often occurred when an instructor or peer made an assumption of difference based on skin color. Participant 1 spoke of an experience receiving a paper back in class and having her instructor say out loud for the class to hear, “Oh this is really good work for someone whose, where English is your second language.” Participant 1 did not feel like she could say anything out loud but internally thought, “Oh okay that’s really strange.



I've been speaking English my whole life...I'm *bilingual*." This instructor assumption is indicative of the belief that non-white bodies on campus speak English only as a second language. Another assumption was that of the generalized sameness of experience for participants in relation to all POC. Participant 2 gave an example saying:

The professor would ask a question that I felt was directed to me as the only minority in the class, but obviously I can't like speak for everyone, for all Hispanics, I can't even speak for my family. I can only speak for myself...other white students and the professor look at me like – 'Is that right?' I DON'T KNOW! I'm not the holy mighty person that has all this knowledge.

Participant 4 expressed similar experiences of generalized assumptions in the classroom, "They [instructors] always turn back to the brown students and say did I miss something? Do your job. How DARE you categorize me? I'm not getting paid to teach the class, you are." Additionally, Participant 5 spoke of this form of tokenization saying, "But anytime anybody in the class would bring up 'Well why do black people feel this way?' Everyone in the class would be like, 'You three!' Even though you're not black." Participant 5 identified as brown and noticed that in her class she and another two brown students were called on to speak on behalf of issues pertaining to black people as though they, as brown students, should be experts. For Participant 6 it was instructors and peers assuming that her name and skin color marked her as a culture she was not a part of. She stated that in class, "They're always saying something about Hispanic and I'll say I'm not Hispanic, but my kids are and this is wrong. I feel inclined to self-correct before anyone makes an assumption." These are all examples of participants' experiences with tokenization in the form of generalized claims about participants' identities due

participants having non-white bodies. These generalizations occurred with instructors and peers.

An example of the second form of tokenized assumption, generalized claims of minority groups as class culture, occurred when a professor believed in the legitimacy of referring to the Indigenous People of Ancient Mexico as Indians. This instance was discussed with Participant 8. She said, “Another girl in the course asked why not refer to them as Indigenous or Mayans or Aztecs?” She said, “The professor responded, ‘Well it’s more general and easier and covers more ground (to call them Indians).’” This assumes that an entire group of people, who are definitively NOT Indians, are academically able to be named as such; simply because White scholars and a White professor decided to make this a truth.

Overall, participants discussed tokenized assumptions as generalized claims that were placed upon their own bodies and as generalized claims made about minority groups of people during classroom discussions. Assumptions about race/gender were made from the political standpoint of a White subject position. There was an assumed sameness of experience for participant bodies and for external groups marked as non-white. White bodies were assumed to have individual experience and were not asked to speak on behalf of all White culture/knowledge/politics. Non-white bodies were assumed to have the same culture/knowledge/politics of other non-white bodies.

In summary, participants expressed the notion that experiences in the classroom resulted in an appropriation of bodies and knowledge. Assimilation meant adhering to a White status quo and witnessing personal culture being transformed in White hands. Participants expressed the idea of appropriation in terms of feeling the need to assimilate

as a way to survive, as a way to cope, and as a way to succeed. Additionally, the participants' accounts of tokenization revealed how instructors and peers assumed participant experience based on participant bodies. Being exposed to these assumptions resulted in women of color in this study expressing a feeling of appropriation. Overall, talk of assimilation and of tokenism simultaneously resulted in a sense of loss of the value of a students' difference. The participants also discussed experiences in the classroom in terms of accepting the ignorance of others.

#### Acceptance of Classroom Ignorance

The next theme that emerged regarding participant experiences is *acceptance of classroom ignorance*. In these findings ignorance was discussed as comments, beliefs, or opinions that were not supported by facts related to the topic of race/gender. Participant stories reflected that the acceptance of ignorant comments or beliefs occurred due to *uncomfortableness* that led to *ignoring* and finally to *student burden*.

Uncomfortableness related to participants' stories of professors/instructors and peers being uncomfortable with the topics of race/gender. In these stories professors/instructors were unsure of how to handle the topic of race/gender when the topic was brought up, either because of the curriculum, or because of participant comments. When this uncomfortableness emerged, ignoring followed. The topic was ignored and the participants, who tried to bring the topic up, were ignored. It is in this way that the voices (in terms of topics/issue) *and* bodies (of participants and minority groups) were alternatively ignored in this context. This led to the final element in the acceptance of classroom ignorance; participants feeling like it was the minority student's burden to educate professors/instructors and peers about ignorant racial comments.

### Uncomfortableness

One way in which participants described their experiences with uncomfortableness in the classroom was in terms of instructors feeling uncomfortable about the topic of race/gender. Sometimes the uncomfortableness was perceived to stem from a general unsureness about the topic. Another way it was perceived by the participants was as a distaste for the topic rather than simply being unsure of how to address it. While other participants talked about their experience with uncomfortableness in terms of their perception that instructors needed to embrace uncomfortableness in order to move through it.

To illuminate how classroom ignorance can manifest from unsureness, Participant 5 discusses her perception of an instructor who seemed afraid/unsure of teaching the topic of race/gender:

Are you lifting up voices from those communities? I feel like if you're teaching and have a mentality of I'm more afraid of being called racist – you're not going to teach about that culture.

This alludes to part of the *ignored* equation in that, when instructors of the participants seemed to be in doubt, they chose to ignore the issue/topic altogether. Another instance of uncomfortableness due to unsureness was shared by Participant 6:

It looks like unsure and they don't know what to do...they don't know when to enforce or say something. They want open discussion and people involved in the lecture. On the other hand, they don't know how far to let it go.

What this meant for Participant 6 was that instructors tended to not be in control of discussions that were potentially harmful to minority students in the classroom, “Do I

feel they're willing to pull a student and say, 'Do you realize what you're saying is offensive?' No. I don't think so." In not being able to demonstrate their ability to draw a line when it came to ignorant and hurtful comments, instructors seemed unsure and hesitant.

Another way participants talked about experiencing uncomfortableness from instructors was through perceived instructor denial or distaste for the topic of race/gender. Participant 4 discusses the stress of navigating an instructor's uncomfortableness due to denial:

They – you are encouraged to talk yet if you go too far and make the wrong people feel uncomfortable you gotta take it back. You've gotta be woke, but not woke enough. Can't be too much. You'll be a radical communist or assigned to anarchy.

Participant 4 is describing the sense that her instructors would encourage her to speak on certain topics, but that if her response was 'too woke' this would make the instructor uncomfortable. If the instructor was uncomfortable this was perceived as leading to push-back from instructors and that instructor push-back encouraged peers to follow suit. This demonstrates the fear of perceived retribution from instructors and students if the participant tried to bring up something uncomfortable relating to race/gender. Participant 8 discusses instructor uncomfortableness that seems to come from a place of denial:

I don't know that the perspectives are not welcome, it's more that of denial. 'Why are we assigning more language inclusivity when we already have a way of doing things for years and it's working 'fine'' even though it's really not.

In response to this denial by instructors Participant 8 states, “Choose the correct road. It isn’t always the most complicated but it might be. Choose the respectful road.... why are we not teaching the most accurate version of that story?” This statement offers the reflection that being uncomfortable with the topic of race/gender could potentially lead to inaccurate teaching practices. When topics of race and gender or race/gender are taught inaccurately, due to the denial of the most recent and most accurate academic versions of a given culture, this had a negative impact for the participants of this study.

Another way denial arose was in terms of whether or not an instructor was perceived to be open minded to learning about cultures outside of White culture. Participant 10 discussed this lack of instructor knowledge of race/gender, “Seems like instructors have not professed open mindedness. Instructors themselves have a lack of understanding of culture and intersectional bias and that leads to problems of not calling out students and establishing rules.” These stories explicate that, in the classroom, participants encountered instructors who they perceived as choosing denial of diverse perspectives in favor of teaching ways of knowing thought to be rooted in knowledge that delegitimized truth of representation for participant bodies.

The final way participants talked about uncomfortableness was in the need for instructors to embrace their sense of being uncomfortable in order to create a more inclusive classroom. Participant 1 discussed why instructors need to be okay with their uncomfortableness, “Sometimes I laugh because 5 minutes of uncomfortability...is my life. Right? So take those 5 minutes that make you feel uncomfortable? Take that into perspective. That’s my life.” Participant 2 echoes these ideas in saying, “I think the MOST change and the most influential moments are out of that uncomfortableness. Like

how people talk about how conflict is good, I think that uncomfortableness is good.”

Additionally, Participant 5 states, “If you’re so worried about being a racist you shouldn’t be teaching it.” In these last stories participants encourage the need for instructors to both be mindful of how they are uncomfortable and demonstrate a willingness to work through it. If the fear of being uncomfortable is more important than creating a classroom that is inclusive for minority students – then that classroom will not be taught inclusively, nor will the knowledge presented reflect intersectional perspectives.

The element of uncomfortableness was discussed in terms of instructors being unsure, instructors ascribing to denial, and in the necessity for instructors to become comfortable with being uncomfortable. When uncomfortableness did arise for instructors, this often led to the topic and/or participants being ignored in the classroom. Ignore is the next element leading to the acceptance of classroom ignorance.

### Ignored

Another way in which participants expressed the experience of having to accept classroom ignorance was by being ignored. This occurred in instances of both students being ignored, as well as, the topic of race being ignored. One element of being ignored was expressed by Participant 1 when she explained that her anti-racist comments were ignored along with classmates who professed openly racist perspectives. She discussed her feelings when an instructor ignored her anti-racist comment:

How DARE you put me on the same level. How dare you ignore me and not choose to acknowledge what this person’s said. Not take it down as an educator? And then to put me on the same level. You’re putting me on the same level as a racist.

This statement demonstrates the consequences of ignoring perspectives on race simply because an instructor appears to not know what to say. In saying nothing, something very harmful is being said. It says that a WOC expressing her legitimacy as a knowledgeable human being is regarded as having the same merit of someone expressing that a WOC does not, in fact, have equal worth to that of a White person.

Participant 5 further discussed another time when a professor gave space for both racist and anti-racist perspectives in the classroom, “I felt the professor never wanted to say no to any opinion. All opinions were valid. I was like, ‘All opinions are valid to that individual person. Are all opinions valid to society? To people who live those identities? NO.’” This statement reflects a potential consequence of the culture of free speech and allowing racism to be active in the classroom even at the very expense of bodies marked as non-white. Participant 10 also reflects on the culture of free speech in the classroom:

Um so I think the professors usually...don't know if they're trained to remain neutral. But if a student is just spewing opinions even if it's just BS they can't do anything about it. They can't do anything about it. That's where I'm a little frustrated.

Allowing all opinions seemed to lead to the empowerment of racist voices in the classroom and the silencing of voices of color in the classroom. Boise State is a predominantly white institution; if both perspectives are ‘allowed’ and yet a woman of color is one of the 2 or 3 students of color in the entire classroom, then an anti-racist perspective was given less perceived weight as that of a racist one. As Participant 10 also said, “We were just supposed to draw from the abstract. Notes. Readings [from white scholars]. Use that for the context of an answer. My culture was never considered a valid



thing to justify my answer. I know it is now.” This shows that while White culture was seen as valid for a contextual response to a given question in the classroom, the diverse cultures of WOC were not seen as valid. Their culture was not given the same weight and validity as that of White culture.

While there is no danger to a White body when racism is not allowed in the classroom, there is psychological trauma to WOC when racist rhetoric is allowed (Pennington & Heim, 2016). Participant 8 speaks about the perceived devaluation of her voice when all opinions were both allowed and ignored:

To put it bluntly yeah. Not heard [participant’s voice], not valued as much as others. Yeah. I haven’t seen anything. Anything explicitly shut down. Nothing super terrible but many, a lot, of microaggressions. I remember my notebook and like in my notes pages of me writing the word, ‘Yikes’ over and over and over.

Rather than being engaged in the classroom discussion and the topic of the day, she was writing in her notebook responding to the emotional jab of the comments she faced in her classroom. These ignorant comments happened enough each day and throughout the semester that her notebook was full of her comments. This shows that not actively silencing “microaggressions”/ignorant comments; just ignoring them, does not alleviate the harm upon minority students’ bodies/minds. In fact, it can work to elevate racist comments and devalue anti-racist comments.

For Participant 3 ignoring the topic of race/gender meant ignoring the very existence of certain bodies on campus:

I think it kinda goes to show how the culture here is thought. It’s not very prevalent. There’s a lot of white privilege and a lot of people naïve to that factor.

Because there are so few African American people on campus to represent that difference. Because so few people notice when there are. We just went under the radar.

This demonstrates the potential of acknowledging, versus ignoring, diverse perspectives to potentially help participants feel legitimized and seen in their classroom experiences.

Overall, when instructors were perceived to be uncomfortable with the topic of race/gender this led them to seemingly ignore both racist and anti-racist comments in the classroom. Participants discussed how ignoring both sets of comments gave power to racist perspectives while taking power away from anti-racist perspectives. When this happened, it led to the final element in the acceptance of classroom ignorance; student burden.

#### Student Burden

Another way in which students experienced an acceptance of ignorance in the classroom was in terms of accepting the burden as a student to counteract this ignorance in the classroom. In particular, the uncomfortableness that instructors had, led to ignoring or mishandling the topics of race/gender in the classroom and placing the burden of correction on the minority students in the classroom. The two main ways participants talked about this burden was in being required to give instructors the benefit of the doubt for their perceived ignorant comments, and in being required to take the initiative of holding instructors and peers accountable for these comments.

The burden of giving instructors the benefit of the doubt came up for Participant 1 in light of being tokenized and having to weigh the consequence of making the instructor uncomfortable. Choosing to try and believe the best of her instructors even when the

comments were ignorant. In the interview she expressed wondering when she as a student was expected to shoulder the burden of saying 'enough', "A lot of times I find myself saying they don't know better, or she didn't mean that, but I don't know at what point I'm supposed to be like, 'No that's not right.'" Participant 2 found herself in similar situations of trying to assume the best light of her instructors in the wake of perceived ignorant comments, "Oh they weren't meaning to attack minorities or women, and they wouldn't clarify that's not what they meant, but like, I'm sure that's not what they meant, giving them the benefit of the doubt." Likewise, Participant 4 further discussed the need to dismiss, or excuse, instructor ignorance:

I have to dismiss a lot of comments and behaviors including the teacher's. Back to Indigenous as Indians for contextual purposes. Things like that I have to forgive – oh they may not know- you have a Ph.D, I shouldn't have to make excuses for you anymore.

This indicates the burden placed on students to excuse the behavior or instructors in order to believe that their instructors are not being openly hostile. Instead of instructors making it known that the classroom will be a place where racism and sexism are not allowed, participants had to ignore the comments that indicated otherwise, in order to create the idea of an inclusive classroom in order to better deal with the class on a psychological level.

The second way participants discussed student burden was through being required to take the initiative to hold instructors and peers accountable for ignorant and/or incorrect comments. This arose for Participant 2 when she was singled out to answer as a

minority for all minorities. She took the initiative to make it clear that her experience could not be generalized:

And a lot of times even when it wasn't specifically stated by a professor in my upper division courses, sometimes I would say I'm not speaking for everyone, I'm just speaking for myself. I had to be the one to specifically say it so that I don't have to worry about not hurting people who are hurting me. I change it from the beginning.

This demonstrates the participant being required to carry the burden of both pointing out the error of generalizing minority experiences, as well as, finding a way to do it that does not make the professor uncomfortable.

Participant 6 also talked about being the one responsible for explicitly shutting down fellow students making racist/sexist comments, "One friend sits next to me. And we let him get away with a few things and then when it comes up I'm like okay I have to bring the hammer because I'm done hearing this." When asked if her instructors ever ran these interventions the answer was, "No. Ya. I think it's a lot of the students [minority]." Here Participant 6 notes that if someone was going to be held accountable for inappropriate comments in class that accountability was going to come from students, rather than instructors.

Another example of required student initiative was shared by Participant 8. She discussed a class focused on social justice issues and how she felt empowered to speak, but it came through the realization that she was more knowledgeable than the professor:

And I felt like in that particular setting I was the most knowledgeable person in that classroom...so I felt I was listened to a lot and able to assert my views and

values and be heard and listened to by most of the class and the professor, because I think most of the time she didn't know what to say.

Here, the burden falls on a minority student in an upper division course on social justice to hold the classroom discussion accountable because her professor *didn't seem to know what to say*.

Participant 10 discusses the frustration of the race/gender knowledge being placed on students versus the instructors leading the class:

I want to help people understand but I don't feel I owe them. They can pick up a book. If you're really curious, don't go to me. Something I've had to learn to deal with. Never had to deal with it before.

When asked to clarify if instructors or minority students were being asked to make these interventions, she said, "Yeah [minority students] and before I didn't think I wanted to. It shouldn't be me as a student, but lately I just feel like I need to." This demonstrates the full weight of this category. A participant feeling compelled, almost against her will, to take up the mantle of educating her classmates, due to the lack of instructor accountability in addressing racist/gendered ignorance in the classroom.

In summary, the participants of this study talked in ways that had them accepting the ignorance they would face in the classroom. Some participants spoke of how often instructors seemed unsure or uncomfortable talking about race or gender. Due to this, instructors would often not bring these topics into the classroom discussion. When they did, their uncomfortableness either led to the appropriation of knowledge, or tokenization of bodies of color. Additionally, when participants did try to speak with the intent to inform and educate in the face of an ignorant, or incorrect racist perspective, the

instructor's uncomfortableness with the topic led to the participant being ignored. The perspective, the comment, the discussion, and the participant were ignored. When participants were ignored this then led to uncomfortableness being transferred from the instructor to the participant. In varying cases, the participant either felt like this meant they needed to be silent, or that they needed to bear the onus of speaking up more to make up for the lack of the instructor's accountability to speak knowledgeably about race/gender. The final way in which participants expressed their experiences in the classroom was through discussing it in terms of social capital.

### Social Capital

*Social capital* was discussed by every single participant of this study. Social capital refers to a sense of value gained when belonging to a group that understands and empathizes with the participants' experiences as WOC at Boise State. It is capital in such that it can accumulate and be exchanged similar to currency, and it is social in that this currency accumulates and is traded through social networks (Arriaza, 2003). The notion of social capital emerged in the interviews as either something participants had, or did not have. For those who did have social capital on campus, this made being in the classroom as a WOC an easier experience. Participants stated that social capital helped with resiliency against isolation and feeling silenced. Resiliency can be defined as "the ability to cope with adversity and overcome the most challenging circumstances" (Hassinger & Plourde, 2005, p. 319). For those who did not have as much, or almost no social capital, the classroom experience became more hostile; requiring more careful, and sometimes silent, navigation. In the findings, social capital is mainly rooted outside of the classroom

for participants. However, having this network outside of the classroom seemed to lend to a more positive (resilient) experience while in the classroom.

### Having Social Capital

For those participants who had social capital there was a sense of shared experience with others at the end of the day. For Participant 7 it was living with others interested in similar activities, “I’m really liking it, living in the bronco fit LLC. We do activities together. I joined a ping pong club. I’m pretty good.” For Participant 5 it was having a Facebook group page from a class where the instructor fostered a sense of community amongst the students. This Facebook page continued to be useful for her and other students in the class after the class had concluded:

A lot of us are still on that page. People can still reach out to each other through that page. If they’re struggling or need help with something and others will still respond and say, ‘What do you need? How can I help?’

For Participant 3 social capital was having her athlete cohort to vent to about experiences they would also understand:

Being in an athlete cohort helped. I think going on campus if I didn’t have that automatic cohort it definitely would have been more strained and different...I wouldn’t have had people to relate to and share and have similar experiences with. I would have felt more isolated.

The above examples illustrate that having social capital helped with classroom experiences in the effect of not being isolated and alone in what they were going through. Even if the social capital was located outside of the classroom, students were still able to bring their sense of shared experience into the classroom with them.

For Participant 6 her social capital was not located on campus at all. As a non-traditional student she felt she had her family and her social capital from life previous to campus and did not need to look to classmates for acceptance or approval:

I think from the traditional student standpoint it's different. Certainly no fucks given when you're older. I don't care if 'Joe' hates me. I don't have to see him and be in the dorms and deal with the same struggles younger students go through.

Again, this shows how much of a difference it can make in the classroom when students have social capital outside of the classroom. Participant 6 did not feel the need to impress anyone and therefore was completely free to speak her mind and share her truth in the classroom.

Participant 10 experienced both the effect of not having social capital and then later the difference it made when she gained social capital. For her 'have' experience she discussed joining a sorority comprised of other minority women, "We are very tight nit. We needed each other as that support system to blow off steam and connect and form relationships. I was not used to having that, or used to being the minority. The support really helps." Participant 10 came to Boise State from a high school where she was not the only minority student. She shared that the shock of coming to a PWI hit her hard the first semester. After joining her sorority and establishing social capital, she started to feel a sense of belonging that helped with the frustration of her classroom experiences.

Social capital helped these participants feel that they were not alone, even at a PWI, and to feel more empowered in the classroom setting. The empowerment came from knowing that isolation in the classroom would not lead to complete personal



isolation. There would still be people to turn to for understanding at the end of the day. However, not all participants discussed having a sense of social capital during their time at Boise State.

#### Not Having Social Capital

For participants who did not have social capital the classroom experience became more precarious. Requiring participants to censor their thoughts and be more aware of the professor/student uncomfortableness as discussed earlier. This is shown in the contrast of Participant 10's freshman year experience before joining her sorority:

Freshman year was really interesting. I didn't find my niche. Living in the LLC I thought would make it easier. Thought I would make friends. I did make some lasting friendships but I felt tokenized at some points. I had to play up my culture more than how I usually express it. 'Oh you must know this or this.' I had to play up my Mexican-ness for them to want to be with me.

She talked about how she felt this pressure in her living community and how it transferred to the classroom and not speaking up against, "Something stupid or just wrong." This was because there was no one to turn to who would understand her truth. She was surrounded by people who did not want to understand her experiences. In order to not completely alienate her ability to make connections and have friends on campus, she felt pressured to not speak out when peers, classmates, and instructors spoke incorrectly about race.

Participant 11 personally had a strong sense of social capital during her time at Boise State but she reflected on noticing the difficulty faced by her fellow friends who were WOC, "Several of my friends never got involved because it's not as easy to

navigate that world. It's harder." She noticed that her friends demonstrated a lack of involvement in classroom discussions as well as campus activities. For participants 1 and 2 they discussed having a sense of social capital but with limits. They both expressed having a strong friend group, but that their friend groups were white women and men who at the end of the day did not/could not understand their personal trials in the classroom as women of color. Participant 1 said, "Because I find sisters around me. I'm oh she gets it, we get each other. However, when you look around and you're the only brown person it's different because no one gets it. No one gets you." She talked about how that sense led to feeling like she did not belong because there was no one to seek out about her classroom experiences who would really understand how it felt. Likewise, Participant 2 said, "I have a couple of people that I talk to about those things. But I'm somewhat still reserved because the majority of my friends are White so I just don't expect them to understand everything I talk about." These stories illustrate the void that's left when there is a lack of social capital. It reduces a sense of belonging and necessitates being more cautious when speaking, lest White friends become alienated from comments that push back against White systems. Lack of social capital, of people who can understand and support and validate the unique experience of WOC in the classroom, led to the need to navigate the classroom more carefully and to speak less honestly.

The theme of *social capital* was supported by the categories of *having social capital* and *not having social capital*. Those participants who had social capital had more resiliency when encountering hostile classroom discussions. Those participants who did not have as much social capital had less resilience against hostile classroom conversations.

### Summary of Classroom Experiences

Interviewees expressed their experiences in the classroom at Boise State in several different ways. The three main themes that emerged across the interviews was the appropriation of knowledge and bodies, the acceptance of classroom ignorance, and social capital. The appropriation of knowledge and bodies occurred through assimilation and tokenized assumptions. Assimilation meant that participants felt compelled to act in ways indicative of White culture, as well as, the co-opting of non-White knowledge into White knowledge systems. Tokenized assumptions meant that participants and minority groups were treated as if they had the same lived experience as others within their perceived cultural groups. The acceptance of classroom ignorance had the three elements of uncomfortableness, ignore, and student burden. Uncomfortableness meant that instructors and classmates were either unsure or hostile to the topic of race/gender. Uncomfortableness led to the element of ignore; whereby participants and topics were ignored in order to alleviate instructor levels of uncomfortableness. Lastly, this led to students being burdened with taking the initiative to hold instructors and peers accountable for ignorant comments in their classrooms. Social capital was the sense of participants expressing that they belonged to a group with shared understanding of experience with race/gender. Social capital was something participants either had social capital, or did not have it. For participants who did have social capital they experienced a greater sense of resiliency with negative classroom experiences. For participants who did not have social capital, they discussed needing to be more careful and less honest in their classroom experiences. In addition to discussing their experiences in the classroom, participants also shared their suggestions for improving classroom climates.

### **Suggestions for Improving Classroom Experiences**

Throughout the interviews, participants shared what they thought could be done to improve classroom climates for WOC and other minority students. There were five main suggestions that occurred across the interviews; *use explicit communication, acknowledge diversity, recognize the individual, accept critique, and encourage group work/discussions*. Their suggestions offer powerful methods that I believe professors/instructors could easily implement into their classroom structures. The suggestion to use explicit communication refers to instructors using direct (explicit) communication for two purposes; setting a deliberately respectful/safe class tone and problematizing ignorant comments. To acknowledge diversity means recognizing the value of diverse knowledge and perspectives. Similarly, the suggestion to recognize the individual means letting WOC tell their stories as individuals versus assuming a homogeneity of experience for bodies of color. Accepting critique means accepting that regardless of what a White instructor (male/female) or male instructor of color has read, or experienced, those with the most accurate critique are those bodies within the subject position being discussed. Women of color know what it is to inhabit the position of race/gender due to lived experience; experience that cannot be known solely from books. Therefore, the recommendation is to be open for accepting critique from those bodies within a given subject position. Lastly, participants emphasized that group work and discussions helped to naturally bridge divides of perceived difference based on raced/gendered stereotypes.

### Use Explicit Communication

The first suggestion participants had for improving classroom climate was the use of explicit communication. Explicit communication means overt meaning making; a deliberate attempt to create meaningful awareness within the classroom environment. Participants' suggested that professors/instructors use explicit communication in order to set a deliberately respectful class tone and to deliberately problematize ignorant/racist comments. What was emphasized was the need for ignorant comments to not be ignored and for instructors to be clear at the *beginning* of the semester what would be acceptable comments for discussion, as well as, *how* discussions would be rooted in a sense of respect for fellow classmates. When instructors explicitly set the class tone as one of mutual respect and community, and explicitly used ignorant comments from students as a platform for problematizing and deepening understanding in regards to issues of race/gender early in the semester, the participants felt a sense of safety and noticed that their fellow classmates did not attempt the same level of microaggressions as in other classes.

### Class Tone

The first element of explicit communication is setting a deliberate class tone; one of safety and inclusivity. Participant 2 reflected on the usefulness of her classes "that made it clear that class was a safe space. They [professors/instructors] set ground rules. You felt okay to talk and not feel judged. They set that tone from the beginning and then it got deeper and deeper throughout the semester." Similarly, Participant 3 shared, "She took the time to umm make a point of like if this is, if you're gonna be in the working world you have to be open to people of all race/sexuality/gender whatever, whether you

agree or not.” In the professor making this statement and spending an entire 3-hour class laying the ground rules of this idea and how it would be used through the semester, Participant 3 perceived that it gave the classroom a sense of respect and safety in the discussions held throughout the semester. Likewise, Participant 4 reflected on a professor who began the semester by dismantling some prevalent stereotypes. Her professor made it clear that those generalizations and stereotypes would not be welcome in the class moving forward. Participant 4 shared:

Before he was a professor he studied welfare and government stats and one of the first things he talked about was about how White people complained about minorities getting benefits but White people get the benefits and are getting them the longest and White people being the most on drugs and scholarships and talking about not wanting to hear an excuse and things like that. He was a great role model.

Participant 1 also emphasized the importance of beginning the semester with an explicit message of inclusivity:

The most successful thing I’ve seen so far are professors that create an atmosphere, at the very beginning, of safety. So there’s a syllabus talk that includes inclusive language and that this is a safe space and nothing in here will leave the classroom.

For classrooms that did not have this explicit communication participants shared experiencing either a lack of safety, a lack of allyship, or frustration. Participant 2 shared a story of frustration when an inclusive class tone is not set:

Just literally being explicit saying this is not a generalization would have made a world of difference. Saying it. Writing it on the board or any way of saying we're not asking a person to represent an entire group of people.

Failing to set an inclusive class tone meant leaving the class climate open to generalizations that are harmful to WOC. However, incorporating the use of explicit communication to set a class tone of inclusivity and safety at the beginning of the semester helped participants feel included and valued in the classroom. The next element of explicit communication is directly problematizing ignorant comments from students.

#### Problematizing Ignorant Comments

Participants suggested that having instructors problematize ignorant comments could help improve classroom climate. This means directly addressing students who make racist or incorrect comments about the topic of gender/race and letting those students know that those comments are not factual, historically accurate, nor academically accurate. When instructors of participants problematized ignorant comments, this alleviated the student burden as discussed earlier. Without an explicit discussion of the ignorant comment, participants were then tasked with the choice of pushing back and risking isolation, or staying silent and enduring the ignorant comments continuing throughout the semester.

While participants expressed the desire for instructors to be allies against ignorant comments, few participants actually had any instructors who did so. Participant 5 was one of the participants who did have an instructor who was comfortable problematizing ignorant class comments. Participant 5 described this instructor's process:

Yeah, there was a lot of like we're gonna be talking about this from a different perspective. When people would disagree she was like okay. Tell me more. Use actual intelligence. She's like, 'I don't want to hear your opinion. What historical evidence do you have? What science?' I was like, 'Nailed it!'

Participant 1 also described her experience with an instructor problematizing a painful conversation, "My teacher stopped the conversation and said, 'That's not okay to say. You don't get to choose that.' Uh and that made me feel really empowered."

For Participant 9 problematizing was pushed further into directly stopping a student from continuing his discussion. While the student was directly shut down, the instructor did make clear to the class the reason for this, thereby, still bringing the issue to light rather than ignoring it completely. "She said, 'You're no longer gonna speak.' She completely shut it down. He wasn't allowed to speak and wasn't allowed to say any of our statements that we wrote down." In all of these scenarios, when instructors directly addressed students who made hostile comments, participants shared how empowered that made them feel in the classroom from then on.

Participants 6 and 10 did not have an experience with an instructor problematizing comments. However, they both expressed the need for instructors to use explicit communication to do so. Participant 6 shared:

I feel professors need to do a better job if someone makes an inappropriate comment to say, 'Come on did you really have to say that?' Call it out! But a lot of it too is just like professors being engaged in the conversation and knowing when to say, 'Alex shut up that's not an appropriate comment and here's why and if you want to talk about it later we can talk later.'



Participant 10 pointed out that just because an instructor may not hold racist views, or may be aware of racial oppression, that did not transfer to an anti-racist class, “Unless you actively call it out and establish these views, it doesn’t mean - your classroom could still be run on racist ideals and norms if you don’t intervene. Definitely.” This demonstrates that participants recognized when explicit communication was not used to problematize ignorant comments. Participants discussed that they believed this lack needed to be rectified in order to create a classroom environment where they could feel more valued and supported.

In summary, participants expressed a desire for professors/instructors to use explicit communication to create a safe class tone and to problematize ignorant classroom comments. When instructors used explicit communication to state what inclusivity and safety would look like at the beginning of the course, participants felt empowered and noticed less ignorant peer comments overall. When instructors used explicit communication to problematize the issue for students who did make ignorant comments, participants, likewise, felt empowered to be able to speak up and share their perspectives more freely in the classroom.

Problematizing ignorant comments set the precedent that the classroom is a place for academic rigor and that if an opinion cannot be supported by statistically, historically, and academically accurate evidence then it would not be included in the canon of discussion. In this way it is an opportunity to call out prejudice as it is happening rather than ignoring the problem and ignoring the issues that reside in ignorant comments. This goes back to participants asking instructors not to ignore anti-racist comments and ignore racist comments. It puts the two ideologies on the same level. Rather than ignoring an

ignorant comment, problematizing an ignorant comment, allowed both the student stating the comment and the rest of the class to be part of a discussion that points out the fallacy of raced/gendered stereotypes. The next suggestion from participants was the need to acknowledge diversity in the classroom.

### Acknowledge Diversity

Participants suggested the need for instructors to acknowledge diversity in the classroom in order to improve classroom climates for minority students. Acknowledging diversity means instructors actively being aware that the world and the classroom itself is not the same for White students as it is for students of color. There were two elements to this theme. Participants shared the need for instructors to acknowledge that lack of diversity is an issue and for instructors to incorporate diversity of intellectual representation into the classroom.

To acknowledge that lack of diversity is an issue means embracing the voice and knowledge and perspectives of minority students in the classroom. It also means not ignoring the topic of race, nor discussions of race when they come up in the classroom. This means not ignoring students of color when they voice their perspectives and not ignoring students who make racially, or culturally ignorant comments. Incorporating diversity of intellectual representation means recognizing that the majority of classroom curriculums at Boise State may include almost all White scholars and almost no scholarship from WOC and POC; and for instructors to actively work to rectify the lack of equity by incorporating scholarly articles from WOC and POC.

Participant 1 shared what it would mean to her for instructors to acknowledge that lack of diversity is an issue in the classroom:

Acknowledging. That's all I need. You don't even have to agree, just acknowledging the fact and not letting the conversation be cut off because it makes people uncomfortable...you have to acknowledge, you have to acknowledge the racist comment and you have to break it down...to me that just means the world.

Participant 1 explains just how powerful it is for her when an instructor simply acknowledges diversity and acknowledges the comments that disrupt diversity in the classroom. For Participant 4 this study was a space acknowledging that lack of diversity is an issue:

Not only has this helped you this has helped me express how I feel and contextualize it and just feel validated about it all. So thank you for giving people those spaces that we need. Because little spaces like this show us that we actually do belong here.

I include this quote not to tout this study, but to emphasize the need for professors and instructors and researchers to *acknowledge*. To recognize there is an imbalance of power between White knowledge and knowledge from POC/WOC on campus. A professor/instructor does not need to have the answers to create a difference, it only takes listening, recognizing, acknowledging. This single step *can* make a difference for women of color who are students in the classroom.

Another step in acknowledging diversity is incorporating diversity of intellectual representation. Participant 6 discussed that this is possible regardless of your field of study:

Always talk about diversity. So much research could be done that addresses those things...whether you're in a social science class and talking about how this impacts POC or a poli sci class and talking about how voter ID laws suppress POC, make sure you're addressing there's a difference in how people are treated in the field that you study.

Likewise, Participant 10 discussed what it would mean to have instructors include works from scholars like her, "If women of color were provided and research, now I think I can do something like that now. I think for the future they should really look into doing that." This is about acknowledging the work of scholars outside of the White perspective. Doing so means that students of color can see themselves represented in academia. This is why upper division Spanish classes were an incredibly transformative experience for Participant 10:

Having her as a professor is really empowering. Bringing Chicana artists and writers and all that stuff. I don't get to see that every day. There I can draw from, there's more of us out there and we're renowned and that's huge to think about. People buy our art and read our books...made me feel empowered.

These stories show that diversity of intellectual representation is important for minority students to be able to see themselves represented in academia and therefore feel that they belong in academia.

Overall, participants suggest that instructors should acknowledge diversity in order to improve classroom climates. This acknowledgement means recognizing that lack of diversity is an issue and the need to incorporate scholarly works from WOC and POC. When lack of diversity is acknowledged minority students are able to talk about their

diverse experiences without being shamed, or ignored. When diversity of intellectual representation is part of the curriculum minority students are able to see themselves in the scholarship they are reading from.

The next suggestion from participants was for professors/instructors to recognize the individual versus making assumptions about students who are WOC or other minorities.

### Recognize the Individual

Recognizing the individual was suggested for improving classroom climates. It is important to emphasize that to acknowledge diversity, as discussed in the previous section, is not the same as generalizing and making assumptions about individuals. Recognizing imbalances of power does not mean assuming knowledge of an individual based on skin color, gender, sexuality, religion, etc. Recognizing the individual means that when a student *chooses* to share a difference that is when it is important to acknowledge diversity versus ignore the topic. It is important to *never* make that choice/assumption for any student. WOC in the classroom are individuals exactly the same as any White student in the classroom. It is suggested to not assume skin color means a certain language, or a certain culture; to not assume it means any difference at all. It is the professor/instructor's place to recognize the individual.

For Participant 2 recognizing the individual is, "When your experience is only your experience. That is the biggest thing that has helped me or made me feel more comfortable in the classroom setting." This means that it is important to never ask students to speak for entire cultures, groups, etc. Treat WOC in the classroom the same as you would a White student. If you would not ask the question to a White student; better

yet, if it would sound ridiculous to ask the question to a White student, then recognize it is just as ridiculous to ask that question to a student of color.

Participant 5 also shared why professors/instructors should recognize the individual in the classroom:

My only one other comment is like I feel like sometimes professors think that you're gonna be different because of your difference. Don't always assume that. Don't assume English is not my first language. Don't assume that. How many POC on campus have lived in Boise their whole lives?

Again, Participant 9 emphasized, "Talk to me not just as a student but as a person."

Finally, Participant 11 talked about a particularly powerful classroom experience:

It wouldn't be 'tell me about your black experience.' It would be tell him about your human experience...and that's where we become blind. Tell me your blackness or your country, no just tell me your experience, the whole, 'Who are you?'

Participant 11's interview concluded with her again emphasizing the need to recognize the individual:

Just think of us as human. That's just the main thing. It does start with you and that mindset. And you know less assumptions. Cuz that is one of the worst things you can do for yourself. Bad for you and them...talk to me like I'm a human.

From these findings, participants are saying that, in part, making assumptions about their lives based on their bodies takes away from their sense of feeling human in the classroom. It means *not* talking to them as a human. Therefore, participants are asking professors/instructors to simply let them tell their own stories, assume nothing. In doing

so, the classroom climate improves through allowing *all* students to hold space as individuals – not just the White students. The next participant suggestion for improving classroom climate was accepting critique.

### Accept Critique

Accepting critiques is another suggestion that many of the participants articulated as a way to improve the classroom climate. In particular, participants expressed this as an important way for alleviating the appropriation of knowledge. Accepting critique means recognizing privilege will lead to blindness. It is okay and necessary to have that blindness pointed out by those who live outside of privileged spaces in society. The participants had more respect and admiration for their instructors who were willing to accept critique and admit when they were wrong, or when they had messed up and said something insensitive. Accepting critique meant the perspectives of the participants were recognized as a powerful and informed source of knowledge within classroom discussions and academic understanding.

Participant 2 discussed what accepting critique looked like with one of her professors. She explained that the professor was, “Welcoming and from the get go also the professor wasn’t afraid to be wrong, which was a big thing. If they were wrong about an experience they weren’t afraid of being corrected.” This means being comfortable with being wrong looked like courage. To not be afraid of something is to have courage. Therefore, instructors who allow themselves to be wrong and recognize their privilege were viewed as courageous and more powerful.

In relation to having courage, Participant 5 urged instructors to not be paralyzed when their privilege was called out, “Recognize where your privilege lies. You will mess

up. Recognize your privilege even in that moment. That's all you need to do." This means that being wrong is not the problem according to participants. The problem arises when an instructor cannot be corrected when they are wrong.

For Participant 8 being open to critique about language/terminology use in the classroom was especially important, "I think being open to critique of language use. Definitely important. If I had a bunch of Latin students saying, 'Hey that's not right, don't say that, say this,' I would say, 'Oh, okay.' Self-critique kind of thing." This means recognizing that students who are women of color are going to have unique experiences that may refute White knowledges. When this happens, the recommendation is to not use White knowledge to dismiss the lived experiences of women of color. Rather, accept that White knowledge is going to lack perspective and accept the critique.

Participant 8 shared what it felt like when one of her instructors was open to critique in the classroom:

Awesome. Always very open to critique and receiving other opinions from someone who is in a position she is not in. She would not speak for a person of color just generally. I had a couple of classes with her and she was always very supportive and open and created a safe space and safe environment for women, POC, and WOC.

This shows that being open to critique can help to create a safe classroom climate for minority students who may be afraid to speak their opinions otherwise.

In relation to being afraid to speak an opinion, Participant 10 talked about her frustration of having her voice silenced in discussions about intersectionality because of books about intersectionality that were written by White scholars:



Intersectionality from books versus from someone who lives it? A white woman tries to tell me they know everything because they read. That does not mean you know more than I do...you read books so you know everything? Not open to listening. Just listen for a minute. Let me talk about what I've experienced.

Again, this emphasizes the importance of accepting critique. It means if you are a professor/instructor with either white privilege or male privilege, then no matter how much you have read, you will not know what it means for any one individual to live as a woman of color in the world and in the classroom. Therefore, when a student who is a woman of color offers a critique of the literature relating to her lived experience, the recommendation is to accept the critique. Accept that intersectionality is complex and nuanced and will look different for different women of color. Since, there is no one way for a thing to be defined, instructors can accept the knowledge and accept the critique. When critique is accepted students who are women of color are more able to share their diverse perspectives and the entire classroom can benefit from this knowledge. This can help create a classroom climate that follows and emphasizes diversity, versus being afraid of and silencing it.

Participants expressed that accepting critique means accepting that White instructors will never be *the* experts of non-White experiences and male instructors will never be *the* experts of gendered experiences, regardless of the amount of study. Participants are asking for the recognition that it is not okay to require students to speak on race/gender issues, but it is okay and necessary to sit back, listen, and accept critique when students who are WOC or POC do offer their knowledge/lived truths about the topic of race/gender. The final suggestion from the participants of this study were for

professors/instructors to incorporate more group work and group discussions into the class structure.

#### Encourage Group Work/Discussion

Many of the participants also emphasized how group work helped to break down assumptions between classmates and thus make recommendations for positive group work experiences. Group work and group discussions led to classmates seeing each other as individuals versus as stereotypes based on perceived differences. When instructors valued group work, empathy, and diversity of thought, this led to peer connections that helped bridge racial and gender divides. Group work helped to facilitate a community working together and knowing each other, versus separate unconnected individuals.

For instance, Participant 1 discussed the impact of group work for her:

This idea that we did a lot of group work and always having the preface of the more different your minds are the better your work will be because you challenge each other in different ways. That small tidbit of information? If you don't put it in the context of race? Still implements this idea in people's minds that difference is good.

Similarly, Participant 4 shared what classes she felt most safe in. For her, it was classes with "critical thinking and critical discussions. Open ended questions and group discussions." Participant 5 shared that for one of her upper division classes she was not sharing at the start because of past experiences but in this class, "We are in different groups every day. We have to get to know each other. That's what she wants. Everyone to be friends. A collective versus individual approach." Due to this, "We got at common

themes and then I was feeling the same as what other WOC were saying. It was nice to know you're not alone." Participant 7 shared about a class she felt inspired to go to:

Yeah in my class...we're all getting to know each other through our [projects] and I know their hobbies and they know my hobbies too. It was collaborative with everyone...I really liked it. Another way to know everybody else. They know stuff I wouldn't have told them personally, but I realized others have experienced the same differences growing up.

This shows how in having students interact and share with each other, they are able to bridge the gap from difference to shared experience. They are able to go from separate to a collective that supports and respects one another. Participant 9 also shared a class she enjoyed going to:

In this one class you're thinking outside of the box, listening to others, and collaborating. The professor really loves group projects. He's hopping around to each group...he includes himself with the whole class. It's amazing. Empathy experiments, observation hours, bringing in our own insights.

Participant 11 likened her love of her field of study to basketball:

You go on a basketball court and...you can have difference on the outside but get on the basketball court and all playing and those differences go away because you have a sport in common that gets to the heart and to some people their soul.

She shared this as an example of what happens when students in classes find a common goal and interest that matters more than race, gender, language, religion, sexuality, or any other difference. That it was in pursuing goals as a group that lent itself to physical differences not mattering and not being able to hold the same weight.

Overall, participants recommended that working in groups helped to overcome barriers between classmates based on perceived differences. Group work allowed classmates to get to know each other as individuals while working toward common goals. Group work fostered a sense of classroom community that valued diversity of thought and perspectives. This can lead to an improved classroom climate by fostering peer connections that allow all students, including minorities, to feel as though they belong and are an integral part of their classrooms.

### **Responding to My Research Questions**

This research study was guided by two questions aimed at learning about the experiences of women of color in the classroom and gaining insights from women of color for improving their classroom experiences. The findings of this study help provide useful responses to these questions from the perspective of women of color. The first question guiding this research was “How do women of color describe their classroom experiences at their university?” Based on the findings of this study, when the interview participants shared their classroom experiences they described a sense of appropriation of knowledge and bodies, an acceptance of classroom ignorance, and the value of social capital. Participants explained a sense of appropriation of knowledge and bodies happening through assimilation and tokenized assumptions. Assimilation was talked about in terms of being encouraged to assimilate to White cultural norms in order to feel safe in the classroom, while Indigenous knowledge was co-opted into White knowledge systems. Furthermore, participants described experiencing tokenized assumptions in which they experienced the assumption of sharing the same of lived experience as other people of color. Participants also described feeling the need to accept a certain amount of

ignorance in the classroom leading to a sense of uncomfortableness and being ignored which resulted in a type of student burden to counter this ignorance. Finally, the participants described experiences about social capital revealing that social capital offered resiliency for participants who encountered hostile classroom environments, and created extra classroom challenges for participants who did not have social capital. Overall, in response to my initial research question, women of color experienced a collective sense of feeling silenced and ignored in the classroom combined by a desire to overcome the challenges they faced.

The second question guiding this study was “What suggestions do students who are women of color have for improving classroom climates at their university?” When the interviews participants offered suggestions for how professors/instructors might improve classroom experiences at Boise State several useful proposals for improvement emerged: use explicit language, acknowledge diversity, recognize the individual, accept critique, and encourage group work/discussions. Based on the interviews, participants expressed that instructors could do more to use explicit language to deliberately set a class tone at the beginning of the semester that promoted the value of diverse perspectives and also directly shut down ignorant comments that did not value diverse knowledge. Participants also recommended instructors do more to acknowledge diversity by more openly recognizing that lack of diversity was an issue that existed in classrooms at Boise State. It also meant choosing to incorporate diversity of intellectual representation by including scholarship from WOC and POC. Those participating in this study also suggested that instructors focus on recognizing the individual by not assuming difference of experience based on gender or skin color, but rather letting all students

share their individual stories, not just White students. Furthermore, participants expressed the need for instructors to work on accepting critique by recognizing that if you are a professor/instructor who is White and/or male, it is important to listen to students who are living within marginalized subject positions based on race, gender, or race/gender simultaneously, and be open to their critiques of White/male literature as valid and important. Finally, participants felt classroom experiences could be improved if classroom structures were built around encouraging group work/discussions in ways that provide students with the opportunity to get to know each other as individuals in order to help break down stereotypes and promote a classroom community where all bodies/voices/knowledges were valued and respected. Overall, the response to the second question reveal powerful suggestions, from the position of women of color in the classroom, that if implemented could do much to enhance the experiences of women of color in the classroom.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how these findings relate and contribute to the literature on higher education and critical pedagogy. Specifically, the experiences of participants will be compared to the literature on the White/male center of education systems and the participants' suggestions will be reviewed in relation to the literature on critical pedagogy.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this chapter I will discuss how the findings of this study contribute to the literature on the politics of education and critical pedagogy. The literature on the politics of education illuminated how women of color (WOC) face a double discrimination within a U.S. education system that is built on the White/male center. The literature on critical pedagogy promotes four tenets of teaching that are positioned to help disrupt the imbalanced power dynamics in the classroom. These four tenets are transform consciousness, praxis: theory and practice, diversity of intellectual representation, and classrooms as communities of co-construction (Freire, 1970; Freire, 1974; hooks, 1994; Sarroub & Quadros, 2015; Smith, 1999). The findings of this study supported that participants who were women of color had a majority of classroom experiences that reflected the White/male center politics of education. The findings also support that the four tenets of critical pedagogy were reflected in the participants' suggestions for how instructors could promote a more positive classroom climate. What emerged are experiences in the classroom that might be addressed if we listen to the voices of women of color and consider implementing their suggestions. I began this project with standpoint theory in mind. That those bodies positioned further away from the White/male center may be more likely to see systems more clearly as they have to navigate systems that marginalize their experience. Women of color are positioned away from the White/male center on the count of race and gender. By listening to the voices of women of color educators have the opportunity to learn about the system from a perspective they might

not have; especially if the educator is White and/or male. This section will discuss these connections, as well as, how the findings of this study contribute new elements to the literature on the White/male center and critical pedagogy that are grounded in the voices of the women participating in this study.

### **Politics of Education**

The findings of this study reveal the politics of education in the stories shared by participants about their classroom experiences at Boise State. As a reminder, politics, in the context of classrooms, means they are sites where human practices work upon bodies to make those bodies “known” in certain ways. Bodies can come to be known equally and unequally. The politics of education that work to make bodies known unequally are *power is hidden, bodies are produced* and *censorship*. In this section I will discuss how the findings of this study connect to each politic of education. This section will then conclude with a discussion about the findings of social capital and social capital and resiliency and how this adds to the literature on the politics of education.

#### Power is Hidden

Literature on issues of power often discuss how power is hidden. This means that power resides in implicit practices versus explicit practices (Lipsitz 1998; Mills, 1997; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). An example is hidden curriculums that only provide literature from White knowledge perspectives and erases literature from Indigenous knowledge perspectives. Two themes from the experiences findings of this study support the notion of hidden power; the *appropriation of bodies and knowledge* and *acceptance of classroom ignorance*. These two findings support that in their Boise State classrooms power remained hidden, diverse conversations were not maintained, and alternative ways



of understanding remained invisible. Their stories were examples of how the White/male center of power can be (re)produced when instructors and students continue, or are forced, to accept a White/male knowledge center. For instance, when participants discussed their experiences with the *appropriation of bodies and knowledge* it revealed how power was maintained because alternative ways of being and knowing were not permitted. This finding exposes the ways participants shared being required by instructors and peers to provide an explanation for their perceived difference due to color attributed to their bodies. Transversely, participants shared stories of how they attempted to alleviate their perceived difference so as to not have to answer generalized questions, or to not be marked as *other* in the classroom. Further, within this theme participants discussed various ways that they played up their Whiteness in order to feel that they could belong in the classroom. This performance resulted in maintaining dominant Whiteness and demonstrated a hidden power tactic as no one overtly told participants to be, or think, or act White. Rather, when participants acted within the system of Whiteness they did not experience pushback and hostility and thus maintained this as the “best” or “dominant” way of being. Then, when participants spoke against the system of Whiteness they received pushback, were ignored, or experienced open hostility resulting in pressure to assimilate.

Similarly, participants shared stories of having to *accept classroom ignorance* from instructors who were uncomfortable with conversations about race/gender. When participants expressed that they encountered instructors who were ill prepared to handle challenging conversations it helped maintain power dynamics in their classroom. White and/or male instructors of participants were able to ignore the topic of race/gender

altogether, or place the onus on minority students to explain how the White/male center oppresses bodies outside of that center. It forces the marginalized to explain their oppression to their oppressors. In this case the oppressors were instructors who were unwilling to deconstruct the White/male center. Thereby, allowing the White/male center to continue to hold implicit power by never calling out that Whiteness is a construct that acts in very specific ways that marginalize and oppress. When this center is not called to attention it is normalized as the status quo, versus a political construction that acts upon minority bodies in harmful ways.

Instructors may not be aware that their inability to engage in discussions of difference could result in assimilation and contribute to this invisible power. The lack of awareness/education removed opportunities for conversations and led to participants feeling invisible in the classroom, keeping the power dynamics of race/gender hidden from view. In this way, those bodies in the classroom who were privileged by either Whiteness or maleness were able to deflect any responsibility for dismantling the oppression that privileges their bodies at the expense of marginalizing gendered/raced bodies.

The findings also reveal how the experiences of the women of color (WOC) participants were delegitimized in the face of White scholarship. The participants of this study explained how scholarship from WOC and people of color (POC) were overlooked on topics that related to participants' cultures, or systemic oppressions. Rather, White scholars were used to explain phenomena outside of White experience. This is another way in which participants' classrooms, at Boise State, maintained an invisible power dynamic that perpetuated the dominance of the White/male center; elevating White

scholarship and silencing Indigenous scholarship. White scholarship was used in their classrooms to create truths about WOC/POC and, as the participants noticed, those truths were only part of the story. Again, this worked to keep the power dynamics of the White/male center hidden by never questioning the imbalance of this power.

### Bodies Are Produced

Findings from this study also contribute to the notion that bodies are produced. Bodies are produced means that White/male bodies are normalized as human while all other bodies outside of this center are marked as *other* and less human (Benokraitis & Feagan, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2014; Foucault, 1975; Lipsitz, 1998; Mills, 1997; Smith, 1999). This politic of education was supported by the data from *appropriation of bodies and knowledge*. Here, participants shared the generalizations instructors and peers placed upon their bodies. Participants were marked as *other* in small ways that added up over their time at Boise State. Being asked to speak for entire groups of minority populations, having peers look to them when discussing issues of race/gender in the classroom, assuming spoken language based on skin, assuming culture/heritage based on skin. The constant assumptions of their bodies that participants endured produced their bodies as *other*. This production means that participants were not treated as individuals with individual experiences and perspectives as their White counterparts were. Individuality was given to White students and generalized sameness was placed upon the participants' bodies. Due to this, participants expressed the need to call themselves out, to mark themselves before classmates or an instructor did so. This points to the desire to be able to define themselves rather than have their identities assumed and defined for them by the White majority in their classrooms.

## Censorship

The findings of this study also support the notion of censorship. Censorship denies the significance of race as a topic (Lipsitz, 1998; Mills, 1997; Smith, 1999; Swann, 2003; Tatum, 1992). The two themes from the findings that supported this final educational politic were *appropriation of bodies and knowledge* and *acceptance of classroom ignorance*.

Censorship showed strongly in the data from *appropriation of bodies and knowledge*. Here participants shared that their bodies and knowledge were co-opted into a system of Whiteness that worked to erase acts of white supremacy. Participants expressed the need to act White, or think White in order to survive their education system. Participants also explained the many times that their knowledge was discredited in their classrooms due to White instructor pushback. This pushback usually came from citing other White scholarship. Even when in classes focused on the topics of race/gender participants shared that they were not given scholarship from WOC/POC in order to engage these discussions. This was open censorship of knowledge and bodies that exist outside of the White/male center.

Censorship also showed in the data on acceptance of classroom ignorance. When professors/instructors ignored the voices and perspectives of the participants when they spoke to correct ignorant statements, those ignorant statements were allowed to remain elevated within the classroom. For instance, in the promotion of all opinions being allowed to be voiced (racially ignorant with racially aware) white supremacist comments were actually allowed to grow in power while anti-racist perspectives were centered. Placing anti-racist and racist perspectives on the same level actually worked to censor the

marginalized perspective as there was so little support from peers for this perspective. With instructors who chose not to take the side of anti-racism, the topic became silenced. Participants did not feel they could speak up as the hostile climate would be unsafe without strong instructor support. This allowed for the censorship of voices and perspectives that could actively work to point out the systemic oppression of white supremacy.

In summary the three educational politics of the White/male center, power is hidden, bodies are produced, and censorship were supported by the findings from the experiences data. As such, this study contributes to the literature that education systems work to maintain a White/male center. The participants of this study confirmed that hidden power, bodies are produced, and censorship occurred in their classroom experiences at Boise State. However, some experiences discussed by participants demonstrate an attempt to resist and make changes in the classroom. For instance, the theme of accepting the burden to educate others in the classroom revealed that the participants were aware of some of the hidden power dimensions and are working to enable change (no matter how small). Furthermore, the suggestions offered to enhance the classroom experiences reveal a sense of awareness of these issues among the participants. Their awareness led to insightful suggestions for instructors to enhance the experiences of women of color in the classroom. However, most of these suggestions still reveal that those “in power” are still needed to enable change.

#### Additions to the Literature

The findings of this study regarding social capital contribute new ideas to the literature on the challenges for women of color in higher education. In particular, the

findings revealed *social capital* and *social capital and resiliency* was not reflected in the literature leading to this study. Participants who shared stories of not having social capital, described feeling an extra pressure to conform. Participants who shared stories where they did have social capital also coupled their stories with descriptions of resiliency in the classroom. The ways the women of color in this study talked about their experiences shows social capital and its connection to resiliency is another way to view how politics of education can oppress, as well as, a way to alleviate the oppression.

### Social Capital

Participants who shared not having social capital shared their perception of needing to conform. As the participants were studying at a predominantly white institution (PWI) they discussed the pressure they felt to conform in the classroom so as to not be isolated by their predominantly White peers. This shows another way that silence from WOC/POC is encouraged within academic systems. As noted in the literature, education systems were built for White/male bodies and each body that is *allowed* entrance that exists further from that center is marked more and more harshly. This has led to a majority of White bodies being allowed access to higher education while raced/gendered bodies have less representation on post-secondary campuses. The very presence of numbers of White bodies compared to the lack of raced/gendered bodies seemed to have an important effect for the participants. The need to develop social capital meant keeping their dissenting perspectives silent in order to maintain their White relationships with both instructors and peers.

### Social Capital and Resiliency

Social capital can also be used for resiliency. For those participants who did have access to social capital on campus, they shared stories that reflected being emboldened to speak their perspectives within the classroom. This was evident for those participants who were part of an athlete cohort, or part of a minority sorority, or who were part of a group that had been taught to recognize and support each other through oppressive situations.

This connects with other research done on resiliency. In Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, & Vela (2010) their qualitative study of 11 Latina/o college students demonstrated that academic resiliency was fostered by positive family and educator relationships. This supports the idea of social capital being an integral part of academic success for students of color. Likewise, Reynoso (2008) conducted a study that revealed seven resiliency factors of 1) faculty support, 2) tutoring support, 3) counseling support, 4) peer support, 5) family support, 6) self-motivation, and 7) bi-cultural identity development. Five of these seven factors relate to social capital. Arriaza (2003) and McKenzie (2009) both conducted studies that revealed the decrease in social capital afforded to students of color and how this led to a decrease in positive (resilient) academic outcomes. I think the connection between social capital and resiliency is a necessary addition to the literature on the White/male center of education systems.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

The findings of this study offering suggestions for enhancing the climate of the classroom contribute to the literature on critical pedagogy. In particular, the participants' suggestions aligns with the four tenets of critical pedagogy; transform consciousness,

praxis: theory and practice, diversity of intellectual representation, and classrooms as communities of co-construction. The findings help support the need for more instructors to embrace a critical pedagogical practice regardless of their academic field of study. I also believe the findings of this study help to provide examples of what the different tenets can look like in the classroom. I believe that personalized suggestions from those who are marginalized by education systems is important to help professors/instructors, who may be in privileged positions, to understand and recognize what critical pedagogy can look like for them and their classrooms.

### Transform Consciousness

The suggestions offered by participants of this study support the notion that teaching should transform consciousness. Specifically, the suggestions to *recognize the individual* and *explicit communication* show how education can transform consciousness. Recognizing the participants as individuals meant that professors/instructors and peers were tasked with dropping their preconceived assumptions, assumptions borne out of a White/male center, and to treat participants, and all WOC as individuals with individual stories. On the instructor's end, this means not expecting minority students to speak on behalf of entire groups of people. It also means holding classmates to the same standard. This requires a very powerful transformation of consciousness. It is an act of subverting the invisible White/male center that requires *other* bodies to be marked. By refusing to mark bodies and requiring all students to also not take part in marking bodies, this requires a shift in consciousness for all bodies in the classroom.

Explicit communication also requires a shift in consciousness. It advocates bringing the implicit power of the White/male center and making it visible. Explicit



communication means drawing attention to the politics of education and thinking critically on those politics. It means professors/instructors taking the mantle to be a part of the solution instead of remaining ensconced in the current status quo of U.S. education systems. It explicitly draws attention to the topics of gender/race regardless of the field of study. Actively requiring students to think about privilege means bringing white supremacy to the forefront of discussion. This goes directly against the three politics of education and can promote new ways of thinking and understanding race/gender.

#### Praxis: Theory and Practice

The findings from this study also relate to the tenet of critical pedagogy referred to as praxis. The tenet of praxis means combining theory with practice. This idea directly ties into the ways the participants ask for professors/instructors to acknowledge them in the classroom. *Acknowledge* means recognizing that students who are WOC or POC may have diverse perspectives that White scholarship and experience will not be able to reflect. Critical pedagogy is about recognizing that the classroom is a site of political power and that everything done in the classroom is a political act. Therefore, for those instructors who want to change those power dynamics, it means practicing what the theory of critical pedagogy preaches; recognize your power as an instructor (if you are White) is compounded not just by your expertise but by the privilege of an education system built on White privilege. With that being the case, it is necessary to recognize that a White instructor's expertise cannot replace the lived experience of students who are WOC and POC. Acknowledging does not mean calling out students and assuming difference. It does mean listening when a WOC or POC chooses to share a story or a perspective that pushes back against White ways of knowing. Acknowledging WOC and

POC as important knowledge producing resources is putting the theory of critical pedagogy into practice by allowing power in the classroom to be shared and created together.

### Diversity of Intellectual Representation

The findings of this study also relate to the idea of diversity of intellectual representation. This tenet of critical pedagogy is supported by the findings related to *acknowledge* and *recognize the individual*. Diversity of intellectual representation means promoting scholarship, knowledge, ideas, and perspectives outside of just the White/male center. In *acknowledge* participants asked for their perspectives and for scholarship from WOC and POC to be acknowledged in the classroom. They expressed the impact this would make. To just be seen and heard. Participants did not ask to be agreed with, but they did ask for representation. To have a space to speak and be heard, rather than ignored, and for scholarship from people who look like them be integrated into the classroom. I think this is one of the most glaring omission from professors/instructors within education systems. It is easy to keep regurgitating scholarship from the White status quo. Yet, there is a plethora of powerful, meaningful, astute, and academically rigorous scholarship, in all fields, from WOC and POC. It only requires a little extra work to read this scholarship and integrate it into the classroom curriculum.

The suggestion of *recognize the individual* also represents the tenet of diversity of intellectual representation. As discussed in the previous section, it requires dropping assumptions. It also means recognizing the value of all individuals within the classroom, not just the White majority. In recognizing the individual when the individual is a WOC that is allowing for a perspective outside of the White/male center to have space within

the classroom. This space can lead to a greater depth of classroom knowledge as all bodies come from a unique experience that can contribute to greater collective knowledge and depth of understanding of all topics and issues, including issues that elevate White bodies at the cost of oppressing marginalized bodies.

### Classrooms as Communities of Co-Construction

Finally, the suggestions from the participants of this study also support the tenet of critical pedagogy about classrooms being communities of co-construction. Specifically when participants discussed the need to *accept critique* and *group work/discussion*. Classrooms as communities of co-construction is about viewing students as knowledge experts in their own rights. Instructors may have a set of expertise from their field of study, but this does not need to replace or invalidate lived experience. This aligns with hooks (1994) discussion of experiential versus analytical knowledge. Experiential knowledge is gained through life experience and analytical knowledge gained through more traditional academic means. Both knowledges are important and worthwhile contributions to the classroom. Accepting only one (analytical) is a disservice to both students and instructors in terms of knowledge gain. In *accepting critique* participants call on professors/instructors to recognize that regardless of how much they study, or read, if they are White or male then there will be aspects of being a WOC that simply cannot be understood in the same way as someone who lives the subject position daily. To accept critique is to recognize privilege and to be okay with being wrong. In doing so, professors/instructors allow students to become agents of change, meaning makers. If we want a different system of education that does not actively rest upon tactics of white supremacy it is important to empower a generation of students who believe they are

capable of creating new meaning, new ways of knowing that do not need to reproduce the White/male center.

The suggestion of *group work/discussion* made by participants highlights the power of the collective over the individual. In all cases that participants talked about a classroom experience that empowered them to feel validated and seen, it was a class that involved group work and discussion. Group work requires students to know each other as individuals and yet work together as a collective to accomplish a goal. In working towards a goal, many stereotypes, assumptions, and biases naturally and organically are deconstructed. It is a subtle way to address bias without students, who may be against it, realizing they are developing a new sense of understanding about race/gender stereotypes just by valuing a teammate/group collaborator. By turning the classroom into a community it makes it harder to dismiss a fellow classmate based on internal bias. When classmates are encouraged to know each other and value and respect each other, then that attitude changes the classroom discussions and dynamics. When the person sitting next to a student is someone they value and not just a body they would place assumptions upon, they are more likely to hear that person and a perspective that may challenge their own.

#### Additions to the Literature

Explicit communication adds to the literature on critical pedagogy. Specifically this adds to the two tenets of *transform consciousness* and *classrooms as communities of co-construction*. Implicitly, these two tenets require adept communication skills from educators facilitating their classrooms. However, instructors may not know how to engage in explicit communication practices that would help them implement these two tenets of critical pedagogy. Therefore, critical pedagogy could benefit from incorporating

literature on explicit communication so that instructors from all fields may be able to better incorporate all four tenets of critical pedagogy.

#### Explicit Communication

This suggestion from the participants can contribute to all four tenets of critical pedagogy. However, it is not currently very well represented in the literature on critical pedagogy. Rather, explicit communication more often exists in literature relating to interpersonal communication and conflict management. From the findings, participants note that the skills of explicit communication are necessary for instructors regardless of field of expertise. Specifically, participants talked about an instructors' ability to engage in difficult conversations. Conversations about race/gender are not easy and, therefore, require communication skills that participants noted most instructors lacked. Lacking these skills led to instructors feeling uncomfortable and then ignoring the topics of race/gender and the bodies of the participants. Overall, this particularly stunts the critical pedagogy tenants of *transform consciousness* and *classrooms as communities of co-construction*. Consciousness cannot be transformed without engaging opposing and challenging worldviews and classrooms cannot be places of co-construction when instructors do not know how to honor the knowledges of marginalized bodies.

The findings lend to the connection between explicit communication and classroom climate in that when instructors were able to engage in explicit communication it led to a perceived positive classroom climate for the participants. Therefore, the literature on critical pedagogy may benefit from drawing similar research connections and using research about the connection between an inclusive classroom and a positive classroom climate, as well as, research on how to engage in explicit

communication. Doing so could provide a more nuanced foundation from which educators can better implement critical pedagogy practices.

### Classroom Climate

Classroom climate can be defined as “the quality of the perceived classroom environment and can either help students learn in a higher level or become a barrier, preventing their learning process” (Cengel & Turkoglu, 2016, p. 1894). A class climate that helps students learn at a higher level can be referred to as a positive classroom climate and one that hinders students can be referred to as a negative classroom climate. In the findings participants shared stories of how explicit communication led to a more inclusive classroom climate and that they also equaled a more positive classroom climate. In Cengel and Turkoglu (2016) their qualitative study revealed that one of the most prevalent differences was that “noise” was more prevalent in positive classroom climates than in negative classroom climates. “Noise” meant that the classroom was full of conversation. Student felt free to share and challenge and be a part of classroom discussion and educators were able to encourage and facilitate those discussions in a way that felt safe for students. This supports the connection between explicit communication and positive classroom climate.

In Burciage and Kohli (2018) they reveal how the teachers of color in their study were more prone to explicit communication in their pedagogical practice than their White colleagues. The classrooms with the greater amount of explicit communication were shown to have much higher positive classroom climate ratings by students and were also more likely to be discouraged by Whitemstream measures (encouraging order through student silence and obedience). This adds a layer to why a PWI campus such as Boise

State may be more prone to classrooms lacking explicit communication. Whitestream measures of teaching are rooted in discouraging critical pedagogy as it would lead to a disruption of the White/male center status quo.

Therefore, it is another piece of evidence that links the participants of this study to participants of other studies in recognizing that explicit communication is a key element in critical pedagogy and the field of critical pedagogy would benefit from making this connection clearer. The current literature does posit for the need of reduce the distance in power between educator and student in order to engage in critical consciousness and education as the practice of freedom (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). However, I think the participants of this study have pointed out a missing link in that journey; how do instructors reduce that power imbalance? How do instructors encourage these conversations? The participants kept coming back to educators needing to engage in overt meaning making, explicit communication practices. Yet, very few educators, outside of the communication field, are trained in how to engage these communication practices. Therefore, the connection between explicit communication and positive classroom climate in the field of critical pedagogy could also potentially benefit from communication literature that helps educators begin the practice of explicit communication.

#### Implementing Positive Classroom Climates

Critical pedagogy aimed at positive classroom climates could benefit by connecting to literature that explains how educators might practice explicit communication in the classroom. This was an important finding from the study. Participants noted that very few of their professors/instructors were able to engage in

explicit communication and this led to the perception of student burden, whereby, participants had to be more knowledgeable and more explicit than their instructors, or else, remain silent on issues that mattered to them and affected their well-being. Participants also noted that the few instructors they had who did engage in explicit communication practice were able to foster a positive classroom climate where the participants felt safe in sharing their experiences and being a part of the classroom community. Due to this, critical pedagogy could potentially benefit by incorporating literature that helps educators understand how to implement explicit communication for a positive classroom climate.

For instance, Goodman (1995) provides a concise and straight to the point guide for difficult dialogues in the classroom; specifically aimed at promoting inclusiveness. Fifteen key steps are provided. The only step I believe should be dropped is number five which encourages the sharing of personal stories and feelings about experiencing discrimination. I believe the findings of this paper caution against this. Do not expect students to bear the burden of sharing their personal stories. It is not their job to dismantle racism in the classroom, it is the job of an instructor to facilitate this. Participants specifically asked for instructors to *not* expect them to share their stories and thereby assume and point out their “difference” to their peers.

Based on the findings of this study, the two most important steps from Goodman (1995) are 1) develop own sensitivity and knowledge and 2) have discussion guidelines and enforce them. These first two steps are echoed by participant responses in the findings section. If unsure of what discussion guidelines should look like a succinct four suggested Goodman (1995), as well as, Tatum (1992) are 1) confidentiality, 2) talking



from one's own experience (I statements vs. generalizations, 3) listening without interrupting and with respect, and 4) avoiding put-downs. Connecting to literature like this can provide useful 'how to' information for instructors. However, as per this paper, I think one of the most integral components of implementing explicit classroom communication for increased inclusiveness and a positive classroom climate is to incorporate methods and research from the perspectives of women of color and people of color.

As the findings of this study reveal, as critical pedagogy posits with the tenet of *diversity of intellectual representation*, literature on implementing explicit communication in the classroom could benefit from the minority perspective, especially the perspective of women of color. The work by Kohli (2012), Turner (2002), Vaccaro (2017), and Michie (2007) all provide evidence that women of color and people of color educators and researchers, more so than their White counterparts, tend to implement critical pedagogy and explicit communication in their classrooms in ways that are meaningful and inclusive for their minority students and that their dominant students can also benefit from. Their collective work also shows that White educators tend to resist the work and advice from colleagues of color. Therefore, I think it bears suggesting that scholars and educators who wish to incorporate critical pedagogy in their classroom, and who are looking to connect critical pedagogy with explicit communication, should do so with the inclusion of research and advice from women of color and people of color who are educators/scholars.

### Listening to Women of Color

In summary, the findings from this study closely corroborated the literature on the White/male center politics of education and added a link to social capital and resiliency as an additional element of the White/male center. The themes of *appropriation of bodies and knowledges* and *acceptance of classroom ignorance* support the educational politic of *power is hidden*. The theme *acceptance of classroom ignorance* supports the educational politic of *censorship*. The theme of *appropriation of bodies and knowledges* support the educational politic of *bodies are produced*. Finally, *social capital* and *social capital and resiliency* add to the literature on educational politics by calling to attention another dimension of the White/male center and how it works to isolate women of color in the classroom, as well as, how social capital outside of the classroom can operate as a resiliency factor protecting women of color from the politics of education.

The data also reflected the literature on the four tenets of critical pedagogy. The findings theme of *recognize the individual* supports the tenet of *transform consciousness*. The themes of *acknowledge diversity* and *explicit communication* support the tenet of *praxis*. The themes of *acknowledge diversity* and *recognize the individual* support the tenet of *diversity of intellectual representation*. The themes of *accept critique* and *encourage group work/discussion* support the tenet of *classrooms as communities of co-construction*.

Lastly, the theme of *explicit communication* adds to the literature on critical pedagogy. In the findings explicit communication was linked with an increase in perceived positive classroom climate. Therefore, explicit communication could further help with the two tenets of transform consciousness and classrooms as communities of

co-construction. However, the findings also revealed that participants perceived the majority of their instructors as being unable to engage in explicit communication practices. This was seen in the theme of student burden whereby instructors' feeling uncomfortable with discussion and topics led to ignoring topics and students; placing the burden on students to engage in explicit communication or remain silent. This means that inclusion of literature on *how* to implement explicit communication in the classroom could be of potential benefit to the critical pedagogy canon.

These findings showed that participants of the study who are WOC at Boise State are experiencing educational practices that are marginalizing their unique perspectives/bodies/knowledges from the classroom. This is important to recognize. It matters that WOC are experiencing this in the classroom. It matters that they are providing powerful and insightful suggestions for how educators can use to improve classroom climates. If we do not take WOC's voices, perspectives, and suggestions into account in our studies on educational practices then we take the risk of continuing to engage in educational practices that marginalize and oppress women of color. The intersectional perspective of women of color is necessary for decentering the White/male politics of education. Women of color deserve for us (researchers/educators) to consider the foundations we are standing on. They deserve for us to recognize that those foundations are the brick and mortar of white supremacy. They deserve to have us call this out and to make efforts to transform the power structures of educational politics that privilege White/male bodies while ensuring the oppression/marginalization of each *other* body as it exists further and further from that White/male center. Most importantly, the

voices of women of color must be taken into account when considering solutions to a problem that affects their bodies/knowledges while completing their higher education.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

In this chapter I conclude this study by reviewing some implications of this study, discussing some limitations, and making a call for further research related to enhancing the experiences of students who are women of color in university classrooms. I will first review the rationale for this study and consider the potential implications of learning from women of color's experiences in the classroom. I will then discuss some of the limitations of this study and follow with some suggested areas for additional study. I conclude with an overall summary of this research study.

### **Implications of this Study**

I initiated this study for several important reasons. The first purpose of this study was to try to better understand what systemic oppression looks like specifically in the university classroom. While the study is looking at 11 participants in particular, all from one institution, these findings can still be used for educators to compare with their own experiences in their respective classrooms. Educators can review the findings and ask themselves if they are engaging any of the marginalizing practices outlined by the students participating in this study.

It is important to note that it does not matter an educators' field of study. The eleven participants of this study were involved in a wide array of academic disciplines and their suggestions shared the same patterns across these disciplines. Regardless of what is being taught, all educators could potentially benefit from incorporating the

suggestions from the participants of this study. As noted in the discussion section, positive class climates promote higher learning, regardless of field.

If educators find that their classroom structures do imitate the practices revealed by participants of this study as marginalizing, then there is probable justification to believe those practices are also marginalizing for students who are women of color in their respective classrooms. Even though the results of this study cannot be generalized to all institutions, nor all classrooms at those institutions, due to the sample size and interpretive methodology, the insights from the participants of this study still offer educators a chance to reflect on their own practices and to decide if they believe their practices have the potential to marginalize.

The second purpose of this study was to explore ways that classroom practices of marginalization could be transformed. Educators who read the findings of this study and compare their classrooms to those discussed by participants in this study and find similarities in their structure, can also use this study as a guide for how to transform their classrooms. Furthermore, the suggestion offered by women of color gives space and platform for participants to discuss what changes they would like to see in the classroom and how those changes would empower them to feel safe. I encourage educators to consider implementing the use of explicit communication, acknowledging diversity, accepting critique, recognizing the individual, and encourage group work/discussion in order to promote a more inclusive classroom climate. Encouraging instructors to take these types of suggestions into consideration in the classroom could help make steps toward more inclusive classrooms and enhance the experiences of women of color in the classroom.

Based on this study, there is a need for more research learning from the experiences of women of color about their learning environments and university experiences. Future researchers might want to explore institutions of higher education and ask similar questions of their students who are women of color. It could be particularly beneficial to conduct this research within the primary and secondary educational context to discover if/how the White/male center affects women of color and their academic success long before reaching the academy. If similar themes emerge from institutions across the United States this will help further build the case that U.S. education systems are built on the White/male center. Furthermore, seeking guidance and suggestions from people of color for enhancing their experiences might also continue to advance the changing university. Also, exploring the experiences of other students who are somehow different from the dominant norms of society can help provide further insights to the experiences of those not speaking from the dominant voice. Additionally, scholars might want to consider the perspectives of professors and instructors faced with teaching a more diverse student population. Overall, engaging in more studies that explore the challenges of teaching with a focus on diverse perspectives and encouraging conversations that are difficult can help to encourage more diversity in the classroom and make some headway in disrupting the politics of the White/male center by making it explicit versus remaining hidden from view and, therefore, maintaining its power.

### **Potential Limitations of this Study**

There were several potential limitations to this study. First, this study was limited to only one institution. This study would have benefitted from recruiting participants from different institutions to gain insights into experiences across different universities.

This could have helped to see if the themes in this study (re)produce across various institutions. There is also a limit in the number of participants involved in this study. Eleven women were interviewed. More participants could have potentially offered more varied or robust insights into the experiences and suggestions. Furthermore, a limitation of this study was my body. As a White woman completing this research there may have been insights not gained due to my inexperience, inability to understand, or if there was some distrust or uncertainty based on my positionality. This is an example of my personal lack of experiential knowledge of the subject (hooks, 1994). Potential participants may have encountered White instructors (many female) who co-opted or ignored/erased/dismissed their perspectives (as seen in this study). There may have been some hesitation to be a part of this study and feel safe and open to sharing experiences or suggestions with me. The number of participants may seem like a small sample, however, the purpose of the study was to gain depth of understanding for individual perspectives to gain a collective understanding of the experiences of women in the classroom. The in-depth interviews allowed for this in-depth analysis. Additionally, across the eleven participants, the themes discussed in this study were those that emerged across the majority of the participants. Thereby demonstrating that there were deep commonalities that repeated for all eleven participants indicating issues that could imply a collective experience other WOC may be encountering in their respective classrooms. While there are some limitations to this study, the findings reveal areas for further research.

### **Perceived Lack of Intersectionality in the Findings**

It is interesting to note that at first glance the data does not seem to reflect the compound effect of race/gender for the participants. In the findings I provided a platform



for what participants explicitly shared of their experiences and offered for suggestions. However, implicitly is the knowledge that the majority of instructors that the participants referred to were White women. Therefore, race does become the center-focus of analysis, because it is assumed that gender cannot be the issue, so then race is the primary issue. While race, then, is the primary focus of discussion, this does not mean intersectionality was not at play. When Participant 1 said, “Because I find sisters around me. I’m like oh she gets it we get each other. However, when you look around and you’re the only brown person it’s different because no one gets it. No one gets you,” this is an example of an intersectional experience. It’s pointing out that since gender cannot be the problem, race is. That is the lived experience of being a women of color; if it is not gender it is race and sometimes it is both (Crenshaw, 1989). Additionally, when participants did refer to White male instructors, race still seemed to take precedence in the discussion. Participant 2 shared a possible reason for this, “Talk about racial fatigue. Thinking about – not thinking about both at the same time. You’re already so fatigued on one part it’s hard to look at the depth of the sexism in those situations too.” This was a statement unique to Participant 2, however, it does provide possible insight into why race was discussed more predominantly than race/gender, or gender.

An additional insight into why race may have been more prevalent in the findings, is the relatively small amount of interaction most participants shared about having with men of color on campus. Participant 4 and Participant 8 were the only two participants to share stories about their interactions with male instructors of color and peers who were men of color. Participant 4 shared, “100% I definitely focus on race more than sex but focus on sexist when it comes to men of color that’s when I see it... It shows me

patriarchy is a thing regardless of race – shows me that men of color that they think they are higher social wise because I’m a woman. Shows me their proximity to whiteness.”

This story reflects that in interactions with men of color, the issue of gender became more prominent, because it is assumed that the unequal treatment most likely does not stem from race. This is the flipside of participants’ interactions with white women on campus; whereby, the assumption is that the unequal treatment most likely does not stem from gender. Participant 4 states this as a proximity to Whiteness for men of color. I think this offers a connection to how closely Whiteness is tied to *White/male*.

Participant 8 shared her experience with a peer male of color and how she perceived that in the eyes of her instructors, her voice would not hold the same weight as her male peer. She discussed how this MOC peer often made sexist remarks in group projects. When asked if she felt should could remark upon his behavior she said, “I think I would be infantilized. I would feel tattling. Especially this particular student is very looked highly upon. Umm.” I asked, “So some student voices matter more?” She replied, “Yes, yes.” I asked, “And your perception is your voice matters less?” She shared:

Umm I guess to put bluntly YA. Not heard not valued as much as others. Umm sorry I’m like always have it on the tip of my tongue. Umm \*sigh\* I mean it’s kinda like tattling on the star student. Do you wanna be that person? So and so is kinda sexist he kinda sucks. I guess he’s here for people of color but not for women of color or women in general.

The stories from Participant 1, 2, 4 and 8 indicate that intersectionality may have been at play in a more nuanced way. That, as the majority of instructors were women of color, the racism was part of intersectionality. That, though participants were women,

they were not part of the White woman circle. Likewise, in interactions with males of color, sexism was part of intersectionality as they were not part of the patriarchy circle. As noted, however, few participants shared of having interactions with men of color on campus. The issue of intersectionality particularly stood out for Participants 4 and 8 in those moments. It may be that as Boise State is a PWI with few male of color instructors and peers – that participants then shared stories more focused on the racial aspect of their experiences at Boise State. This does not, however, necessarily mean that intersectionality was not reflected in the findings – only that it may be more implicit.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, eleven participants who were women of color at Boise State shared their experiences in the classroom, as well as, suggestions for how their experiences could be transformed. The three main findings of their experiences were the appropriation of bodies and knowledges, the acceptance of classroom ignorance, and social capital. Participant experiences aligned with the three White/male politics of education discussed in the literature; power is hidden, censorship, and bodies are produced. The main findings of their suggestions were that classroom climates can be improved with more explicit communication, acknowledge diversity, recognize the individual, accept critique, and group work/discussion. Participant experiences aligned with the four tenets of critical pedagogy; transform consciousness, praxis: theory and practice, diversity of intellectual representation, and classrooms as communities of co-construction. The findings of this study support the assertion that classroom experiences at Boise State (re)produce the politics of the White/male center. The findings also support the notion that the four tenets of critical pedagogy can be used to transform and disrupt

those White hegemonic practices that marginalize and oppress women of color in higher education. Listening to the classroom experiences of women of color is key to understanding how classroom politics are working upon their bodies. Listening to their suggestions for improving classroom climates can be useful for addressing the problems of the politics of education. If we do not listen to the experiences and advice from women of color we stand to perpetuate classroom climates that (re)produce the White/male center and continue to marginalize bodies that exist outside of that center. Continued research is needed to continue to reveal the consequences of dominant ways of teaching and to reveal alternative ways in which all voices can be heard and appreciated in the classroom.

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APPENDIX A

**Recruitment Email Script**

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Shanna Hagenah. I am conducting a study exploring the experiences of women of color in higher education classrooms for my MA Thesis project. I am writing to ask you if you identify as a woman of color and, if so, would you like to participate in a short interview to talk about your experiences at Boise State? If so, I will be following ethical protocol and will keep your participation private and will do everything possible to protect your identity.

If you are interested, I would you be happy to schedule a time to meet at a place on campus that you feel comfortable. We could meet at a coffee shop, private conference room, your office, or anywhere else that you have in mind. I really hope that you would like to participate. My study will benefit from your participation.

If you are not interested would you know anyone else who might be interested in participating? Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Shanna Hagenah

### **Recruitment In-Person Script**

Hi my name is Shanna Hagenah and I am a graduate student in the communication department working on my thesis project. My aim is to better understand experiences of women of color in higher education. I am wondering if you would be willing to participate in an interview for my research. It would essentially involve a short interview where I would ask you about your own experiences at Boise State University. I would do everything possible to keep your information anonymous and confidential. If you would like to participate let's schedule a time that would work for you. I am happy to meet you anywhere on campus that is comfortable for you. We could meet at a coffee shop, private conference room, your office, or anywhere else that you have in mind. If you're not interested do you know of anyone else who might be?

### **Interview Script**

- How did you come to be at Boise State? Why did you want to study at Boise State?
- Overall, have you enjoyed your time here at Boise State?
- Can you tell me about your classes, and your experiences in the classroom?
- Could you tell me **a story** about a time when you felt **included** as a student in the classroom?
  - What about the experience made it feel so inclusive?
- Could you tell me **a story** about a time when you felt **excluded** as a student in the classroom?
  - What about the experience made you feel excluded?
- Could you tell me **a story** about a time when you felt **valued** as a student in the classroom?
  - What about the experience made you feel valued?
- Could you tell me **a story** about a time when you felt **devalued** as a student in the classroom?

- What about the experience made you feel devalued?
- Could you tell me **a story** about a time when you felt **supported** as a student in the classroom?
  - What about the experience made you feel supported?
- Could you tell me **a story** about a time when you felt **unsupported** as a student in the classroom?
  - What about the experience made you feel unsupported?
- What advice might you offer professors/instructors to help you feel more included/valued/supported?
- Understanding that I'm interested in the experiences of women of color in the classroom is there anything else you'd like to share? Is there anything else you think might be useful for me to know?