

**Maggie and Me:  
A Black Professor  
and a White Urban School Teacher  
Connect Autoethnography  
to Critical Race Pedagogy**

**By Sherick A. Hughes**

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**Introduction**

There are at least two current challenges arising for urban schools, teaching, and teacher education. First, many urban public schoolteachers and urban teacher educators with whom I have made acquaintance, colleagues, or friends are challenged to explore further how to “care” for students without crippling them. Second, many of us are challenged each year by racial/ethnic/cultural mismatches, while attempting to remain “intimately cognizant of the necessary intersection of other oppressive constructs such as class, gender and sexual orientation” (Jennings & Lynn, 2005, p. 26). From June, 2003 to June 2007, I worked in the University of Toledo’s urban, Midwestern setting. Like most of its counterparts nationwide, Toledo is replete with waning support for inner-city public schools, resegregation, and a growing tension arising from a teacher-to-student mismatch in relation to “personal biography and group

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or community experiences created by race, class, and gender” (Collins, 1990, pp. 226-227). Many of my graduate students were self-identified White female, graduate-level teachers responsible for educating large numbers of children of color. This graduate student population also represented the working poor, as well as the struggling middle class.

Upon taking a course from me, a Black male, tenure-track Assistant Professor, these students found themselves in the unusual position of being challenged to both teach and learn daily from Blacks. During the day they were teaching predominantly Black urban students, and in the evening they were taking part in a course taught by a Black professor that, in part, centers White privilege. It was seemingly the closest these White teachers had come to experiencing life as a minority, albeit temporal and context-specific. Like other scholars of color (e.g., Cleveland, 2005; Berry, 2006), I sensed the tension of White students seeing me as a Black “other.” However, the unequal power dynamics inherent in the professor/researcher-student relationship were also present in this urban setting (Villenas, 1996). Jennings and Lynn (2005) support this notion of a power differential even in Black professor-White student situations. Although, they contend and I agree that due to the overwhelming nature of White privilege in the U.S., “scholars of color cannot be easily described in terms of being ‘privileged’ in the same way that White scholars define their role as privileged” (Jennings & Lynn, 2005, p. 27).

Some education practitioners and researchers alike continue to narrow the race, class, and gender nexus by focusing upon binary race vs. class, or race vs. gender inquiries (Collins, 1990, p.230). Other educators contend that teachers and learners can overcome oppression at school by centering social justice movements with *race* or *political race* (e.g., Guinier & Torres, 2002). Still, other educators center social class/SES above and beyond “race” to expose barriers to the potentially liberatory forms of schooling (e.g., Darder & Torres, 2004; Van Galen, 2004; Wilson, 1980; Wilson, 1996). Noticeably fewer publications of educational research (Cleveland, 2005; Collins, 1990; Hughes, 2006; Jennings & Lynn; Van Galen, 2006) seem to center either race, class, or gender as interlocking systems of oppression, whereby each system should be “centered, validated and judged by its own measure without de-centering any other forms of oppression” (Collins, 1990, p. 237).

My former College of Education encouraged faculty to implement pedagogy that responded fully to the needs of citizens in diverse situations, including the urban, metropolitan community we served. Such a vision requires, by default, a sincere effort to change or “reform” schools. Research endeavors involving the social and historical contexts of education (e.g., Hughes, 2006a; Milner, 2003; Noblit & Dempsey, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999) suggest that any sincere and sustainable school reform effort must necessarily begin with critical reflexivity and subsequent individual and collective action. Results of this research also suggest that such an effort must involve a transformative caring agent to disrupt oppressive experiences and narratives of race, while remaining “intimately cognizant of the necessary intersection of ...class and gender” (Jennings & Lynn, 2005, p. 26).

This article addresses how autoethnography may contribute to this effort by illustrating a promising connection of autoethnography to *critical race pedagogy (CRP)* (Jennings & Lynn, 2005) in graduate teacher education. The remaining text discusses: (a) the theoretical framework of *critical race pedagogy* and its challenges for traditional caring, (b) autoethnography and its extant connection to pedagogy, and (c) evidence and concluding thoughts regarding how I, one Black male professor from a working poor background, connect autoethnography to *critical race pedagogy* along with a White graduate-level, urban high school English teacher named “Maggie” (pseudonym). The connection of autoethnography to critical race pedagogy is illustrated through interwoven narratives of race-, class-, and gender-related struggles and hopes voiced by Maggie and me.

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### **Critical Race Pedagogy**

Jennings and Lynn (2005) recently presented their revised conceptualization of Critical Race Pedagogy (CRP) as a promising route to confront educators’ taken-for-granted knowledge about living, learning, and teaching race (Hughes, 2005) without further marginalizing other related forms of oppression in schools. In fact, Jennings and Lynn (2005) stand by CRP as a “theoretical construct that addresses the complexity of race and education” (p. 24). Researchers further describe the roots of CRP as growing upon a set of “very broad yet closely interwoven characteristics that form the basis for this continually evolving construct” (p. 25). Additional strengths of Jennings and Lynn’s (2005) CRP are highlighted in the following five tenets:

1. CRP must be intimately cognizant of the necessary intersection of other oppressive constructs such as class, gender and sexual orientation. (p. 26)
2. CRP must recognize and understand the endemic nature of racism. (p. 25)
3. CRP must recognize the importance of understanding the power dynamics inherent in schooling. (p. 26)
4. CRP must emphasize the importance of . . . reflexivity . . . [and how the] exploration of one’s “place” within a stratified society has power to illuminate oppressive structures in society. (p. 27)
5. CRP must encourage the practice of an explicitly liberatory form of both teaching and learning . . . advocating for justice and equity in both schooling and education as a necessity if there is to be justice and equity in the broader society. (pp. 27-28)

Moreover, CRP provides tools to challenge the dominant, oppressive, and oftentimes inadvertently complicit (Gordon, 2005) ideology of caring (Anders, Bryan, & Noblit, 2005; Delpit, 1988; Delpit, 1995). It seems to be an unfortunate and often shortsighted ideal of caring that lives in today’s K-12 schools. These schools comprise teachers who are “primarily, White, female, married, religious, and on average 43-years-old” (Campos, 2006). Qualitative researchers (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Hughes, 2006; Tozer et. al, 2006) allude to the shared values, attitudes, beliefs

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and habits of thought regarding this limited ideal of caring (Valenzuela, 1999) as including but not limited to:

- (a) Caring as color-race-gender-class blindness above caring as celebrating difference by building upon the funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) each student brings to the classroom.
- (b) Caring as nurturing the cultural rules and norms of Whiteness only and the “myth of merit” (Oakes & Lipton, 2006) above “critical consciousness” (Freire, 1970).
- (c) Caring as modeling “assimilation” only (Valenzuela, 1999) above engaging “transformative resistance” (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001).
- (d) Caring as inculcating complacency regarding systemic race, class, and gender oppression above caring as exposing dominant and oppressive “codes of power” (Delpit, 1995).

Similar to the College of Education’s vision and mission of which I was to adhere from June, 2003 to May 2007, contemporary urban education research describes caring as a search for competent professional educators (e.g., Noblit 1995; Noddings, 1992). In the Noddings (1992) scenario, competence and caring are co-constructed by teachers and students, that is, a student attempts to find “what [the teacher] knows and how she knows it.” Conversely, a teacher is exhibiting his “act of care and respect” by “also discovering what the student knows and how she knows it” (Oakes & Lipton, 2006, p. 267). The five tenets of CRP are seemingly intended to steer teachers, students, and teacher educators toward “caring,” but more of a transformative caring that disrupts narratives of automatic approval or automatic condemnation “for whatever knowledge or interpretation the student” espouses (Oakes & Lipton, pp. 266-267).

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### Autoethnography Research and Pedagogy

Autoethnography is a relatively new research tool in education born in the discipline of anthropology only fifty years ago (Patton, 2002). Raymond Firth introduced the term “auto-ethnography” in 1956 when talking about a 1928 argument between Jomo Kenyatta (first President of the independent Kenya) and Louis Leakey (acclaimed 20<sup>th</sup> century archeologist/ anthropologist) during a public lecture in London (Elder et al., 2007). Both men were said to have claimed “insider” knowledge of Kikuyu customs. Born in Kenya and educated abroad, both Kikuyu tribal men also earned doctoral degrees in anthropology. Elder et al., (2007) aptly describe the center of their argument as “who has the right to represent a society,” Leakey’s traditional hypothesis-driven anthropology, or Kenyatta’s auto-ethnography. Kenyatta’s (1966) *Facing Mt. Kenya* is indeed recognized today as the first published autoethnography (Hayano, 1979) but to date, his work is not without harsh academic criticism.

The work has been critiqued by Louis Leakey and other social scientists who essentially label either Kenyatta’s style, or any style of autoethnography, as too

subjective. Kenyatta's critics seem to be most bothered by his rendition of autoethnography for some reasons that I accept (i.e., limited triangulation of sources, limited disconfirming resources, and mismanagement of the delicate interweaving of a narrative literary style with social science inquiry), and for some reasons that I reject (i.e., use of first person voice, biographical narratives, and native ethnography). Moreover, Kenyatta (1966) and his native Kikuyu people are noted as receiving more praise and admiration than critique in his autoethnographic account (Hayano, 1979).

A quarter of a century ago, Hayano (1979) also spoke to the potentialities of autoethnography, and described its capacity to create an alternative venue for marginalized voices. The research genre appears to be gaining particular credibility and influence in education, communication studies, and qualitative research (e.g., Banks & Banks, 2000; Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Dalton, 2003; Denzin, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Holt, 2003; Laubscher & Powell, 2003; McGuire, 2006; Roth, 2005; Sparks, 2000). Autoethnography includes among its publications the highly acclaimed article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh (1989) that launched an international research movement that continues today.

Reed-Danahay (1997) describes autoethnography as enlisting "a rewriting of the self and the social" (p. 4). It is intended to ask questions like "How might my experiences of "race" and "class" offer insights about my ability to address these issues in any given educational event/situation? Rather than seeking to escape subjectivity, authors considering autoethnographic techniques should do so precisely because of the qualitative genre's capacity to engage first person voice, and to embrace the conflict of writing against oneself as he or she finds himself/herself entrenched in the complications of their positions. With such a focus on exploring and exposing the subjective self, how might one judge the merit of an autoethnography? Richardson (2000) suggests five guidelines to implement "when reviewing personal narrative papers that include analyses of both evaluative and constructive validity techniques" (Holt, 2003, p. 12). Richardson's (2000) guidelines provide a framework for directing investigators and reviewers of autoethnography toward considering:

Substantive contribution. Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life? Aesthetic merit. Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfyingly complex, and not boring? Reflexivity. How did the author come to write this text? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Impactfulness. Does this affect me emotionally and/or intellectually? Does it generate new questions or move me to action? Expresses a reality. Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience? (pp. 15-16)

Similar to Denzin (2003), Richardson (2005) contends autoethnographic manuscripts might include "dramatic recall, unusual phrasing, and strong metaphors to invite the reader to 'relive' events with the author" (p. 12). In his book titled *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*, qualitative researcher Denzin (2003) is credited for actually establishing the initial connection of performance to ethnography, autoethnography, critical pedagogy and critical theory. In the new millennium, scholars in the discipline of Communication Studies

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began to consider the possibilities of autoethnography as pedagogy (e.g., Banks & Banks, 2000), and as a tool for writing essays about critical pedagogy (Dalton, 2003). As mentioned above, critical race pedagogy was recently rearticulated as emphasizing “the importance of ... reflexivity... [and how the] exploration of one’s “place” within a stratified society has power to illuminate oppressive structures in society” (Jennings & Lynn, 2005, p. 27). A synthesis of the research streams from communication studies, qualitative methods, and educational studies points to at least three bridges connecting autoethnography to critical race pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 2000, pp. 235-236):

1. Autoethnography teaches us about self.
2. Autoethnography teaches us to write.
3. Autoethnography teaches us to inculcate & model.

First, autoethnographic research is connected to critical race pedagogy through its inherent reflexivity and positionality components that can teach us more about our racialized, classed, and gendered selves. It is a research method that challenges our assumptions of normalcy (e.g., what should be considered “right” regarding caring in schools). Researchers may find that instruction via autoethnography can also incite us to revisit our professional and personal participation in the socialization of classrooms and schools. Second, autoethnography can move researchers to practice writing as a cathartic endeavor to improve our craft for its own sake. For this qualitative research genre, sharing emotions with audiences is not only acceptable, but expected. Third, autoethnographic research can provide scholars enough oxygen to live and breathe self-critical attitudes and self-disclosure in teaching and learning. The idea here is to force researchers to criticize themselves first and foremost, and to be at least as critical of themselves as they are of others.

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### **Maggie and Me:**

#### **Evidence of Autoethnography Projects Intertwined**

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##### **Maggie**

Maggie was a middle-class White female teacher of predominantly Black, low-SES urban high school students. Maggie was enrolled in my Intergroup/Intercultural Education course during the Fall of 2004. Maggie was selected from approximately twenty-five other students in her class, because I found her to represent an archetypal case of change in my graduate courses full of students whose voices speak to White middle-class, female teachers finding themselves in the challenging position of both teaching and learning daily as an “other.” Maggie had blonde hair and she stood about 5’3”. Her petite frame and raspy, assertive voice almost seemed counter-intuitive. Maggie seemed to have what Weber (1914) labels “legitimate authority” on “charismatic grounds.” Evidence in support of this claim of legitimacy came during the part of the course where I assign autoethnographic research and the importance of finding a central question.

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First, Maggie told the class that she might go with a question that she had considered prior to taking the course, “with only one negative experience with Black people in my entire life, how do I have the stereotypes in my head that I’m trying to get rid of?” And her classmates listened and acquiesced. Maggie then shared a tale of that “negative Black experience.”

As she recalls, her car was stolen in downtown Toledo. She began searching for her car, because she “was so pissed off.” Within an hour, she found her car, ear-marked by its license plate, and of course, make, model, and color. She found a few middle-to-high school age Black males in her vehicle. When they were at a stopping point, she ran at them screaming, “get the fuck out of my car.” Startled, the boys said, “this ain’t your car,” and Maggie replied, “I know my license plate number and this is my car, get the fuck out of my car.” Unbelievably, the boys complied, and to add insult to injury and immaturity, they asked Maggie to “drop ‘em off somewhere.” She neither dropped them off somewhere, nor did she call the police. And her classmates listened and acquiesced. A class filled with talented, assertive students of color didn’t even challenge Maggie’s story. There was no such challenge partially, I think, because she told it so convincingly, and partially because she seemed sincere about wanting to unlearn racial biases about Blacks and “others.”

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### Me

“You don’t look like a professor,” I am sometimes told. My body does not match the traditional older white-haired male authority figure with verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors that most of my White graduate students have come to expect and to respect. I am a dark brown, 5’10, 248-pound former high school three-sport varsity athlete, and former college Rugby player. I have broad shoulders and a medium build that one might expect of a former athlete who still maintains a brisk walking and weightlifting routine. I have most visible traditional Northwest African facial features, hair color and texture, and skin color. It is not unusual for me to wear a two-piece suit, button-down shirt and tie the first day of class. Sometimes my head is bald, sometimes my hair is an inch thick, or at times, I have a fade (similar to the crew cut, but with a smoother “faded-looking” hair transition from the thicker hair on the top of the head to the thinner hair of the side of the head and side burns.

I am a product of post-*Brown* Southern schooling. I attended three predominantly White institutions in pursuit of the professoriate. Along the way, I taught as a teacher’s aide in urban and rural grade schools. I am not a licensed teacher, however, most White practitioners give me some credence due to the fact that I have successfully taught grade-school students within the last five years and I have a Ph.D. in education from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am a Black man rooted in a working poor class background in Northeast Albemarle, North Carolina, who became more academically, socially, and economically mobile through formal and informal education, when many of my peers did not. I am a

first generation college student who grew up approximately three miles from the Bartlett Plantation where my family was enslaved only four generations ago.

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### **Intergroup/Intercultural Course and Autoethnographic Research Projects**

The Fall 2004 semester of my Intergroup/Intercultural Education course stands as the first time I assigned an autoethnographic research project to any of my students. The course catalog describes it as focusing upon the evolving role of intergroup and intercultural education in the U.S., including the historical and contemporary relationship of schooling and “race” to educational outcomes. In this course, we examine racialized groups of people and the strength of intergroup/intercultural loyalties and divisiveness among and within these groups in the U.S. Thus, to some degree, we are interrogating ourselves. While learning about “others” and how to teach “others,” we also engage self-critique and learn how to be critical of “othering” (Kumashiro, 2001). This course tends to enroll approximately 20-25 graduate students per semester. Most of those graduate students are matriculating at the Master’s degree level.

Maggie and her classmates were expected to expend the bulk of their time and energy in the course on the autoethnography project. In light of this expectation, a comparable portion of my assessment of their progress or growth in the class was based on their autoethnographic research. Consequently, I began my own autoethnographic research to address how this method might be used in teacher education to inculcate a critical mass of resistance to race, class, and gender oppression in the classroom. I offered a few key preliminary activities and assignments to prepare students for the uniqueness of autoethnographic research. I later realized that such preliminary teaching tools were crucial to students’ abilities to grasp autoethnography, because it was a new method for all of them to learn.

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### **Preparation for Autoethnographic Research Projects**

One preparatory activity that helps me get a sense of students’ predispositions and expectations is learning what they already believe about themselves. During this activity everyone in the class is instructed to “name the three most problematic social identities in your life.” The activity is intended to reveal the parts of social identity that individuals rendered most negative in their lives as educators. In the end, this activity works as a promising icebreaker with predominantly White female graduate teacher education students. I quickly recognized a host of privileges and problems inherited by all of us. I recall a few social identity privileges and problems relating to religion, sexuality, and ability were shared, yet the race, class, and gender nexus was particularly poignant in our urban narratives.

A second preparatory tool was the creation of diverse groups. Throughout the sixteen-week-long course, I try to support diverse group work by creating in-class and out-of-class opportunities to engage the type of race, social class, and gender

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reflexive writing posited by Berry (2005). Moreover, group approaches to “critically engaged dialogue” (Milner 2003, p. 201), “intragroup or same-group dialogue” (Taliaferro-Baszile, 2005), and “intergroup dialogue” (Gurin & Nagda, 2006, p. 22) are also promoted in the course. These approaches work in tandem to involve (a) creating diverse groups based on self-identified experiences of the matrix of race, class, and gender, (b) helping groups identify and define individualized decision-making roles, and (c) finding in-class time and space to balance intragroup and intergroup socialization (Tatum, 1997).

The final preparatory tools are given to students in the outline form illustrated below. An in-depth class lecture accompanies this introductory guide to “empathic validation, commitment, and confidentiality” (Hughes, 2007). Follow-up lectures are applied as needed on this topic to guide class discussions and activities.

1. *Empathic Validation*

- A. To Listen to acknowledge and understand first and foremost
- B. To think and feel and thus to act (verbally and nonverbally) toward reasonableness
- C. To enlist reasonableness requires at least:
  - 1. Openness to counter-evidence/disconfirming evidence/counter narratives/competing ideologies
  - 2. Openness to new syntheses of ideas and “New-self” experiences

2. *Commitment*

- A. To taking a “no fault” approach to conflict resolution with an Anti-Oppressive Response
- B. To making a space “safe” for “productive conflict management or “uncomfortable-comfortableness”
- C. To learning with and toward transformative resistance
- D. To Unlearning Malignant/Anti-Transformative Resistance
- E. To Collaborating for compatibility, at worst, and for consensus, at best

3. *Confidentiality*

- A. To maintaining the anonymity of names of places and people in narratives
- B. To breaching confidentiality only when:
  - 1. Permission is granted preferably in writing by Informant(s) or Pertinent Legitimate Authorities
  - 2. Required by school law
  - 3. Confident (unequivocally) that shared information will lead to less oppression in the end for *All Parties Involved*—Triangulate and consider disconfirming evidence before proceeding

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**Autoethnographic Research Project Assignment**

There were five essential components of the autoethnographic research project. First, students were assigned to draft personal biographies that spoke to the intersection of race (without excluding accompanying experiences of class and gender) and education sometime during their K-12 or collegiate years. Their personal biographies had to offer positive or negative narrative “pictures” that waxed

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and waned in their memories from the initial moment of the experience. Second, students were assigned to locate a central question and guided to personalize the question (i.e., focus upon first person narration). As the central question was located, students were assigned during the same day to begin a review of research, where race intersected autoethnography, class/SES, gender and education. There were several “givens” for this review that students received from me including Laubscher and Powell (2003), McIntosh (1989), Collins, (1990), and Jennings and Lynn (2005). These articles essentially constructed a foundation upon which student pieces of autoethnographic research could grow.

Third, one class period was spent in their groups as a sort of autoethnographic writing workshop. Students were expected to share the parts they were willing to share as I walked around to each group. I tried to be consistent in my responses to each concern of the five groups. It was my sincere hope that such a workshop could yield questions and guide groups closer toward meeting and exceeding personal narrative writing style expectations (Richardson, 2000). Fourth, students were pushed to triangulate narratives or to locate narratives of their raced- classed- or gendered-counterparts in order to address and interweave disconfirming evidence in their accounts. The idea here was not to hide subjectivity, but to name it, check it, and critique it with other voices on the subject in one’s life. Finally, students were assigned to share portions of their autoethnographic research that they were willing to share in a public forum. Downtown Latte provided such a forum. Owned and operated by two dedicated women who model social justice activism, “the Latte” as it is sometimes called affectionately, was a near perfect stage for this assignment.

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### Maggie, Me, and Autoethnographic Research Evidence

Narratives below represent topics discussed in manuscripts, in class, and during final presentations week, where students speak in front of both peers and strangers. Ultimately, all of the narratives became part of the autoethnographic research of Maggie and Me. These narratives are intended to demonstrate the potential of autoethnography as *critical race pedagogy* for reflexive thinking in a manner that doesn’t position race vs. class vs. gender. Although race is central in the descriptions and narratives of Maggie and me, class and gender issues emerged unequivocally and therefore necessitated the centering of race without de-centering class and gender (Collins, 1990).

*Me:* Maggie says she had Black friends and even dated a Black guy in high school, but those statements don’t make her an expert on Black people and besides, she admittedly spends no time with non-White friends now. Because I notice her charismatic authority in the class, I try to immediately disrupt her “more diverse than thou” narrative by responding to her in the classroom forum, “I feel like Whites and people of color are—to borrow from the Indigo Girls—‘intimate strangers.’” I relayed a poignant story from my new arrival to Toledo from the South, “a White woman who had been a physical therapist of elderly Blacks for years, looked at

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my finger when I took off my class ring and replied sincerely, 'I didn't know Black people tanned!'" I then relayed another story of White families who adopt Black males, but don't want them to attend HBCUs, claiming "they don't prepare kids for a diverse world," as if the predominantly White universities attended by their biological White children were known for their diversity programming. Maggie was relatively quiet during this part of my lecture, but she gave me a look that suggests to me that she was experiencing some cognitive dissonance.

*Me:* Maggie is obviously challenged by me and challenging to me as we engage autoethnographic research and writing in her class. If I can just work with her and her classmates through the personal biography, I think it will be okay. How might I be part of the problem? I have to remember to introduce them to Freire (1970) so they understand that this process involves struggle and caring and that the relationship is reciprocal and not static. I need to tell the class to focus on their K-12 or college experiences at the intersection of race and education. I anticipate that there will be immediate questions about how one can do that without discussing simultaneous gender and social class experiences. I'll have to direct the class back to Hill Collins (1990), Cleveland (2005), and my notes on CRP (Jennings & Lynn, 2005) I should say something like "the idea is to center race for this course without de-centering class and gender just like we talked about when we discussed Dr. Hill Collins (1990) and others."

*Maggie: Elementary Years: "niggers," "spicks," or "gooks."* My parents had just divorced, and Mom and I lived in the epitome of middle class. I was an only child, so I played with kids in the neighborhood... My mom was a Godly woman that did not talk negatively about other races. My dad was a different story. I was only with him during the summer for a couple of weeks or at Christmas for a week. He was full of racism, with negative things to say about anyone other than White, rich people... We moved... Mom got remarried... I was eight. Again, we lived in a middle class neighborhood... I was friends with everyone and did not think of what he had told me about "niggers," "spicks," or "gooks."

*Maggie: High School Years: "Nigger Lover."* The friends in my clique were all from middle class neighborhoods... Senior year I took typing class and became attracted to a black sophomore also in the class. We started talking and eventually were a couple... Our group of white girls continued to hang out with the black girls and guys we had befriended years earlier, but now we were even more "in" [with Blacks than were other middle class Whites]. We went to parties in an all black neighborhood outside our town... One of the only times I felt the heat of dating out of my ethnicity was when one of my best friends (a raging alcoholic that is no longer my friend) called me a "nigger lover" just to hurt me. I have never forgotten the point of those words.

*Maggie: College Years: "Poor Little Rich Girl" White Pre-service Teacher.* [The Midwestern university I attended] has an awful reputation for being a school for rich, White kids; it was no different when I attended in 1993 through 1997... One of my first horrible experiences with someone from another ethnicity took place during methods. I was assigned to an inner-city school. The teacher asked me one day if I was a P.L.R.G. She went on to inform me that the abbreviation meant Poor Little Rich Girl. I was hurt and embarrassed because I was enjoying my experience

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prior to that...She was a nasty lady I have never forgotten. That experience stuck with me because she was prejudice to me, but I was not to her...

*Me: "It's not that hard."* Today in class, Maggie's like "I get the personal biography part, but I can't figure out my [central] question." "How's this going to be research," she said. Other students began to chime in and it seemed to me that Maggie's question began a big snowball of questions that were worse than they would've been had she not been the one to ask it first, I thought. "It's not that hard, you're making it harder than it actually is," I said to myself. But, my frustration with Maggie aside, there appears to be a difficult challenge in locating a central thesis throughout the class, but this challenge is not so unusual for graduate students. After meeting with her group for in-class discussion and after talking with me after class, Maggie ultimately decided to focus upon the central question, "Where does prejudice originate in my life?" Once the question is found, students need to move to further reviews of autoethnographic literature. Maggie seems to have limited experience searching for peer-reviewed sources, however, her reading comprehension skills and writing skills evident in the personal biography portion of the autoethnography project were what one would expect of an advanced Master's student.

*Maggie: Finding the Central Question and Pre- Literature Review.* I've sat in class week after week pondering about the beginnings of racism. How did it seep into my psyche if I have been friends with (and surrounded by) non-whites all my life? It became apparent that I need to learn more when I did self-reflection to write my autobiography [personal biography component of the autoethnography assignment]...I knew the racism comments my father made were wrong and ridiculous, so when and more importantly how, did my prejudices solidly form and become readily accessible in my everyday life? I was anxious and curious to read scholarly journals and get an answer to my plaguing question...I'm not sure if the prejudices I hold about Whites are as harmful as the ones [some] children had about their own race. Growing up in [the South] I was exposed to the prejudices of people called "white trash." This prejudice about what is presumably a poor White person stuck with me because I still hold those opinions. Jeff Foxworthy has made a living doing standup about this very group of people....

*Me: 10/9/05, the day Maggie and I took the oxygen out of the classroom.* I entered class feeling somewhat physically ill. I gathered my notes and myself and began the lecture portion of the course that day by saying "Alright, let's try to get through this." Maggie replied abruptly, relatively loudly, and with a half-smile, "What's the matter, you aren't prepared?" I immediately responded, "That's an interesting question, which leads me to ask 'Why do so many White people suggest that I'm not prepared for my job?'" "I'm certainly prepared for today," I maintained, "We're discussing chapters from the book that I wrote!" Students self-identifying as "White" and "of color" in her assigned diverse discussion group raised their hands, as did others throughout the class. Their answer unequivocally: "Because you're a Black man." Maggie's face turned red and she refused to talk to me for the rest of class that evening. I learned from a trusted member of her class group, "She said, he better not come and try to talk to me today about anything else, I am so mad at him." Maggie, who from my purview had been rude to me that day and a few days of class before then in September, was now livid and no longer eager

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to discuss the tough issues, but now she was “dreading class,” partially due to my previous response, partially due to the Toledo Race Riot. It is paradoxical that only 1-2 weeks before today’s class, we experienced the Toledo Race Riot, which was international news, and we delved deeply into a course discussion of response bias through Swim & Stangor’s (1998) description of Hits (e.g., I respond as if I was discriminated against and I was), Misses (e.g., I respond as if I wasn’t discriminated against, but I was), False Alarms (e.g., I respond as if I was discriminated against, but I wasn’t) and Correct Rejections (I respond as if I wasn’t discriminated against, and I wasn’t). A week later Maggie reflected upon the incident on her after class comment (ACC) sheet with the following remarks:

*Maggie: Regarding the bad oxygen day in class on 10/09/05.* I was dreading class today...after the riots, I was dreading class...You really embarrassed me today when you basically accused me of a prejudice statement. The reason I asked if you weren’t prepared was b/c of what you said *prior* to that “something to the effect of: “just trying to get through this.” I think what you felt I was accusing you of was a *total miss!* [actually it would have been a false alarm] I guess the reason I was so embarrassed is b/c I’m taking this class very seriously. I talk about it constantly to my friends a+ students-Black + White. I am trying so hard to unlearn those stupid prejudices... I appreciate why you thought I was saying that b/c you’ve had lots of Whites say that but you were absolutely wrong. It was what you said before that- + I only asked you what was bothering you b/c/ you looked upset. That was a Shitty Miss Dr. Hughes.

*Me: Thoughts immediately following Maggie’s “Shitty Miss” Commentary.* Except for the writing of White undergraduates on the qualitative component of anonymous end-of-course evaluations, I had never experienced any student being so blunt as to curse at or about me this way. The good news was that Maggie does seem to want to get better at teaching her urban Black students by exploring prejudices within herself. And in class, she actually decided to focus her autoethnography upon the more specific and personalized thesis “Where does racial prejudice originate in my life and how might it influence my treatment of my urban, Black high school English students?” I should reply not only to her, but to the entire class via email as I attempt to model how to confront rather than ignore race/class/gender conflict productively.

*Me: Attempting to practice what I preach on the night of 10/9/05—Email to Class.* My brain worked in a way tonight that triggered [what I thought would be] a teachable moment. It was more of an implicit association/critical pedagogical trigger. It wasn’t a false alarm, hit, or miss, because Maggie’s comment triggered another general overall question in my head, not about her motives, but about student motives and particularly white student motives outside of her who have asked me the same question. It didn’t trigger me to even consider whether Maggie’s response was a hit, miss, or false alarm. Oftentimes, my students’ comments trigger other thoughts and general questions in my head that I feel may be worthwhile teachable moments to pursue for all of us. Please know that I am not feeling your comments are signs of racial prejudice in those times where your words enlist responses from me that link to another experience of mine. I think your thoughts and my triggers might actually enhance our educational setting at that moment...at least most of

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the time. Tonight, I think it let some of the oxygen out of the room. Let's continue to work together and teach while we learn and learn while we teach. I apologize to Maggie and all of you for not clarifying the issue earlier [in class].

*Maggie: Post-Riot, Post-10/9/05, "White Trash and the Songbird of Privilege."* If teachers are supposed to change the lives of the students they encounter, they need to be prepared for racial issues of every kind. I certainly was not prepared for this at [the university I attended]. I am personally trying to discover my White privilege, not enable it since learning of it in this class. My White privilege is a topic I have thought about every day since reading McIntosh's [1989] piece. It is a songbird atop my shoulders singing a nasty tune that reminds me I have no idea what it is like to be a person of color...Gordon [2005] goes on to tell how she tries to teach racial diversity more each semester she instructs at George Mason University. How lucky are those students!

*Me: Pedagogy is a Two-Way Street.* This decision to email the entire class regarding my confrontation with Maggie proved to be one of the defining moments of the course, as it seemed to set the stage for meeting the other challenges of autoethnographic research. Maggie was rude and I expected her to respect me more than to curse at me. Her knee-jerk responses had been unprofessional and she knew it, yet my knee-jerk "trigger" in class was by my own standards, shortsighted and we both knew that as well. So, we nonverbally seemed to call a truce. Maggie seemed to appreciate my mass email, which was evident in her immediate return to class participation, after initially giving me and her group members "the silent treatment." Her participation, now, however seemed more productive and insightful, and I think my participation was too. It's as if we challenged the very tenets of the course and its methodology and found that in the end, it works, but not in some formulaic way, but in the tugging, trials, and triumphs of everyday life in any classroom. What a painful reminder that pedagogy is a two-way street?

*Maggie: "Autoethnography Lends itself to Wondrous Self-Reflection."* My methods for this autoethnography have been pure and simple...Needless to say, this type of research has been useful because I have got to read scholarly opinions about the beginnings of prejudice, while brooding over my own beliefs and from where they stem...The autoethnography lends itself to wondrous self-reflection, while doing research at the same time. I can not say I have not been prejudiced towards children. I have thought many times in my head horrid generalizations about certain students based on their skin color or socioeconomic status. ... Since day one of this experience [autoethnography], I have spoken to my students about what I am learning. I have shared with several students many of our discussions... I could not help but talk about it with "D." D is a Black emotionally disturbed junior in my homeroom and English class. I spoke with him about the way Whites rudely (usually unknowingly) word their questions to Blacks about silly things like hair, tanning, etc... Most importantly, I have admitted outright my White privilege and how I am humbled. Our relationship has developed wonderfully, I speculate partly because I give him hope [she shows she cares] about ethnic differences. He was one of the only people who asked how my speech [autoethnography presentation] went! Awesome!

*Me: Maggie Changes with "D."* By the end of the semester it was clear to Maggie

and me that autoethnography had transformed her relationship not only with me, but with “D.” Apparently feeling more validation than before from Maggie, “D” willingly discussed an article describing historical atrocities faced by the first Black male collegiate athletes. I remember the day she handed the same article to me and explained how well her conversation about it had gone with “D.” I did my own thesis on this topic, and yet, I still learned a tremendous amount of more specific details present in the article. I was taken aback by how Maggie now seemed to have a better understanding of how white privilege works alongside penalty, and the inequity of the unearned physical birthrights that exist alongside misguided feelings of entitlement.

*Maggie: “Keep My White Middle Class Privilege In Check” at the Potluck.* Prior to this class I had no friends of color. Just Whites. This course has offered many blessings, including [Joe]. I told him just last week [at the potluck] I am not losing him as a friend when we are finished. He has to keep my White privilege in check! ... I am closest to the people I work with...and they are as White as snow. There are a few Black teachers in our district and they certainly mingle with Whites—they don’t have a choice! Of course there are tons of different ethnicities in our district... Where I teach has racial issues that plague the school... It is certainly visible to me that there is not much Black and White racial mixing, which is a shame...one would think there would be more racial segregation and issues [where I grew up] because its is considered part of “The South.” I live in [a place] comprised mostly of White middle class people.

*Me: Potluck at Maggie’s Place.* My wife and I attended the end-of-the-course final presentation/potluck dinner party created and hosted by Maggie. Maggie proposed the idea during the last week or two of class to have a potluck to celebrate the diversity of our raced, classed, and gendered course makeup. I was skeptical at first, when she posited what could have been a stereotypic theme of “authentic ethnic foods.” Of course White students claimed there were no White ethnic foods, White was simply, “American.” Laughter, acquiescence, and discussions followed my response, “aren’t rice crispy treats a White ethnic food?” Somehow, by including White as an ethnic group and not as “just American” for this potluck transcended the colorblind talk of the White students and motivated the class to really seek an “authentic” ethnic family recipe to bring to the dinner. The potluck was a success in that it fused the autoethnographic presentations of struggle and caring with a concrete artifact—food, a family artifact that was replete with its own raced, classed, and gendered narratives.

*Maggie: Post-Potluck “Validation, Commitment, and Confidentiality.”* I have made a vow after this paper, the speech, countless hours of pondering my place in the world, and reading for the Literature Review that I will not ever be colorblind. I want to celebrate our differences in the classroom. I want my students to be comfortable with who they are. I do not hush their innocently rude comments about other ethnicities. I stop my teaching and discuss it with them, and usually we come to the conclusion that their thought was a silly prejudice... I am also excited to share that I have used the three-step process we learned in September to validate, commitment, and confidentiality. I simply listen to their story about how they feel they have been discriminated against, validate what they shared, and end

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with the commitment to never do that to them. I am devoted to my unlearning of prejudice and racism, for their sake and my own... I am taking my brain places it has not been in thirty years. Now my thinking is unlearning too. And that is what change [and caring] is all about.

When our narratives are considered in tandem, Maggie and I provide substantial evidence of how autoethnography can work as critical race pedagogy. It forced us to face internal and external conflicts linked to the oppression we perceived in our lives. It moved us to consider how the matrix of race, class, and gender domination works to bind and blind our pedagogy. It shaped our determination and willingness to participate in the struggle for an ethic of care. Her work became a template for how autoethnography can actually work. I am proud of us for engaging and sustaining autoethnography in this way to begin the difficult and vulnerable journey of personal-historical self-criticism, naming current positionality, and engaging reflexivity.

Indeed, our narratives relate a story of attempts by Maggie and me to translate and transfer what we learned about ourselves via autoethnography en route to unveiling more opportunities for “an ethic of care” (Noddings, 1992). Our progress seemingly hinges on our ability to adhere to critical race pedagogy. Our narratives also speak to the internal and external pursuit of specific pedagogical help for overcoming the educational impediments of race, class, and gender oppression. After Maggie’s “paper, the speech, countless hours of pondering [her] place in the world, and reading for the Literature Review paper” (personal communication, December, 2005), I was convinced that autoethnography as a critical race pedagogy might be initiated and sustained. Two years later, I see or receive messages from 5-10 students per semester from the course, including Maggie, who still speak of their transformation as educators confronting race, class, and gender in the classroom and at home. Several of them, including Maggie, even mention the sustained inter-ethnic friendships they gained through the method and the course. I can’t take credit for all of these occurrences. Clearly, students like Maggie taught me important lessons about transformative resistance and pedagogical change by helping me find the light at the intersection of autoethnography, and critical race pedagogy. One latent example of how she influenced my work came after she accepted my request to review the first draft of the manuscript that preceded this article.

In an effort to seek disconfirming evidence, I gave a draft of this manuscript to Maggie, but I had no reply from her for a couple of months. She offered a powerful and invaluable critique of the original manuscript. She felt that my argument initially polarized me vs. White female graduate student-practitioners, which was certainly not my intention. Maggie actually exclaimed, “I just think it’s like Dr. Hughes vs. the White girl.” She also noted two spaces where I had mistakenly left her real name in the original manuscript. Her constructive criticism forced me into several drafts that revisited and edited my underlying assumptions and dichotomies. As I had hoped, at the dawn of Fall of 2004, Maggie and I were beginning to find additional promising evidence of the utility of autoethnography in the social battle of grade-school disproportionality. By re-searching our fallible, but educable “selves,” both

of us began to acquiesce to the ever-humbling, yet exciting and hopeful episodes of *students becoming the teachers*.

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**Conclusion:**

**Toward Addressing Critics and Potential Threats When Connecting of Autoethnography to Critical Race Pedagogy**

Critics at the American Educational Studies Association and American Educational Research Association have asked me quite frankly, “Why waste your time thinking about how your White graduate student-practitioners think, feel, and act when so many, more deserving graduate students of color need you at the same time?” For the first part of my response to this criticism, I draw again upon Jennings and Lynn’s (2005) critical race pedagogy, “For scholars of color...enormous power and privilege is embedded within our position as researchers and faculty members” (p. 27). The second portion of my response says “Since White teachers are teaching kids of color in the traditional public schools (still serving approximately 90% of the nation’s youth) more than people of color are, shouldn’t I be concerned about not only their knowledge and skills acquisition, but also their predispositions and expectations for kids of color?” The third part of my response echoes the scholarly sentiments of Tillman (2002) who welcomes White students committed to social justice education and willing to engage multiple non-White experiences, affording them the social currency to completely interpret and validate an “other.”

Delgado (1995) offers a chilling description of the nature of change/reform processes that tend to hinder such commitments and efforts toward validation in our society:

We postpone confronting novelty and change until they acquire enough momentum that we are swept forward. We take seriously new social thought only after hearing it so often that its tenants and themes begin to seem familiar, inevitable, and true. We then adopt the new paradigm, and the process repeats itself. We escape from one mental and intellectual prison only into a larger, slightly more expansive one. Each jail break is seen as illegitimate. We reject new thought until, eventually, its hard edges soften, its suggestions seem tame and manageable, and its proponents are “elder states-persons,” to be feared no longer. By then, of course, the new thought has lost its radically transformative character. We reject the medicine that could save us until, essentially, it is too late.

Change by connecting autoethnography to critical race pedagogy is certainly as painstaking as Delgado alludes. It is a change requiring my students and me to face the intersection of privilege and penalty, race, class, and gender long enough to inspire critical pedagogical tools for us to take back into the “real” world—to our work with urban youth suffering from both poverty and racial discrimination. The type of research-driven pedagogical change that emerges from applying autoethnography in this way, necessarily involves (a) continuous development in teacher

(Milner, 2003) and teacher educator reflexivity as well as (b) the development of sound responses to potential threats of connecting autoethnography to CRP.

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### **Potential Threats of Reflexivity**

#### **When Connecting Autoethnography to Critical Race Pedagogy**

Luttrell (2000) conceptualizes reflexive researchers as those seeking to understand and appreciate difference and accept errors often made because of their blind spots and intense involvement (p. 13). She actually coined the phrase “good enough methods” (Luttrell, 2000) to speak to a reflexive positioning that is not intended to celebrate mediocrity, but to acknowledge imperfections that surface despite meticulous procedural implementation. Luttrell (2000) elaborates upon and clarifies “reflexivity” in the following statements from the *Harvard Educational Review*:

Being reflexive is something to be learned in terms of degrees rather than absolutes (a good enough ethnography is more or less reflexive, not either-or in my view). I think of being reflexive as an exercise in sustaining multiple and sometimes opposing emotions, keeping alive contradictory ways of theorizing the world, and seeking compatibility, not necessarily consensus. Being reflexive means expanding rather than narrowing the psychic, social, cultural, and political fields of analysis (p. 13).

From Luttrell’s (2000) arduous goals of reflexivity also arise potential threats when considering the connection of autoethnography to critical race pedagogy. Potential threats include but are not limited to:

- Facing the challenge of qualitative and quantitative scholars who dismiss the potential of autoethnography as critical pedagogy due to the way it merges narrative and social science writing styles.
- Accepting and appropriating subjectivity in one’s own pedagogy rather than feeling compelled to hide it or to quantify it.
- Dealing with the emotional difficulty of writing against the “self.”
- Finding and confronting one’s own *authentic* voice.
- Coping with the vulnerability of revealing your old self and “new-self narratives.” (Anders, Bryan, & Noblit, 2005; Hughes, 2005)

The potential threats of connecting autoethnography to CRP and the narrative evidence presented above reveal the possibilities of this connection to unveil [more] opportunities for hope (Freire, 1996). This connection supports the imminent need for high school teachers and graduate teacher education programs to seek the myriad connections of race, class, and gender to educational reform. Our attempt at autoethnography seemed to move us through the painful and threatening processes of seeking and finding liberation in our democracy as being tied to each other, (i.e., White students tied to non-White classmates tied to me). Evidence also supports the notion that connecting autoethnography to critical race pedagogy can

(a) increase empathic validation, and commitment to socially just change; (b) increase knowledge, reasonableness, and empathy; and (c) increase an overall sense of one's own ability within the scope of teacher leadership to address and begin to ameliorate some of the threats of race, class, and gender-related oppression in the classroom.

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### **Connecting Autoethnography and CRP Toward Transformative Caring**

The connection of autoethnography to critical race pedagogy discussed here wasn't planned by Maggie and me. It happened through the daily necessity and demands of the course, the project, the social context, life outside the course, and the willingness of participants to learn, unlearn, share, care, critique, and be critiqued, which stand in stark contrast to traditional, subtractive ways and means of schooling. In her study, Valenzuela (1999) details how traditional White forms of caring actually render "subtractive schooling" for Mexican American youth. Colorblindness implemented with intentions of masking race tends to coincide with class- and gender-blind approaches that seem to perpetuate subtractive rather than transformative schooling not only for Mexican American, but also for other youth of color (Hughes, 2005). Autoethnography forces me to inquire "How does caring manifest in my classrooms as a one-size-fits-all endeavor?" "Does anyone like me benefit or lose with this form of caring?"

Critical race pedagogy also charges me to consider a different form of caring that affords one the tools to confront questions like: "How might oppressive experiences of race concomitantly reflect negative experiences of class and gender in the classroom?" A connection of autoethnography to critical race pedagogy then, is a promising connection that can move graduate-level teachers and teacher educators toward becoming more transformative caring agents. Through this connection, a more transformative caring agent might promote more promising reflexive inquiries like, "How does caring manifest in my classrooms as a subtractive one-White-size-fits-all form of schooling?" "Does anyone Black like me experience more transformative or more subtractive schooling with the form of caring I espouse?" In the end, autoethnographic research pitfalls and promise of Maggie and me seem to reflect how we literally came to terms with each other, ourselves, and our students throughout the course of one semester. Our autoethnographic outcomes suggest at least three additional possibilities for professors and teachers in graduate teacher education courses attempting to take this route to transformative caring:

- Graduate Teacher Education courses can engage transformative caring by connecting autoethnography to *critical race pedagogy* in ways that promote additional questioning of the curriculum, unit plans, and lesson plans in order to reveal and battle influences of race, sex, class, hidden single perspectives and other forms of response bias (Swim & Stangor, 1998) and favoritism.
- Graduate Teacher Education courses can engage transformative caring by connecting autoethnography to *critical race pedagogy* in ways that advance

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instructional leadership by inciting constructive self-critique in our students, our colleagues, and ourselves.

- Graduate Teacher Education courses can engage transformative caring by connecting autoethnography to *critical race pedagogy* in ways that move beyond critical/analytic interpretation to action. (e.g., Brian Schultz, Project Citizen, 2004, Chicago)

I find the experience with Maggie as challenging my taken-for-granted knowledge about CRP. It worked to teach me about checking my own response biases, professorial privileges and penalties, struggles and cares while remaining cognizant of my students' experiences of oppression—to be at least as critical and caring with regard to my raced, classed, and gendered self as I am of my students. Perhaps autoethnography as illustrated here can be transferable to other teachers and teacher educators on our journey to disrupting assumptions about and responses to oppression in the classroom.

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