

Article

Radical Empathy in Peer Education: A Case Study on Deconstructing Whiteness

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ABSTRACT

Since 2015, I have provided a workshop on deconstructing whiteness through community narratives. Although the exercises, readings, and content changed to meet the needs of each host institution, all iterations of the workshop have aimed to build radical empathy through a combination of relational dialogue and storytelling. In this essay, I will recount the events and people who shaped this workshop over time, reflect on my experiences as an instructor and facilitator, and discuss various shortcomings of my approach.

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INTRODUCTION

In fall of 2015, I began developing a workshop entitled “Deconstructing Whiteness in Archives” for the 2016 Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists (SAA). Since its debut in August 2016, I have presented the workshop for three regional archives conferences, one state archives association, two university libraries, and a conference on innovative library pedagogy. I have also consulted with instructors at several academic institutions across the country to develop similar programming.¹ Although the exercises, readings, and content changed to meet the needs of each host institution, all iterations of the workshop aimed to build radical empathy through a combination of relational dialogue and storytelling.

In this essay, I will recount the events and people who shaped this workshop over time, reflect on my experiences as a facilitator, and discuss various shortcomings of my approach. The evolution of this workshop parallels the archival profession’s turn towards a framework of cultural competency, documented most comprehensively in Ellen Engseth’s 2018 article for *The American Archivist*.² I developed my workshop around the affective process of problematizing “whiteness” to reflect a specific moment in archival discourse. However, I believe this relational model could be adapted to address other avenues of systemic oppression.

As a white woman employed in an academic setting, my insights are limited by the pervasive ideologies of normative whiteness.³ Where I managed to break free from these perversities, I must credit the many brilliant colleagues who have inspired, critiqued, encouraged, and confronted me over the years through their scholarship and

¹ In August 2016, I led a 75-minute pilot for over 100 participants at the Society of American Archivists. I have also given the workshop for the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference in April 2017 (90 minutes, about 30 participants), The Innovative Library Classroom conference in May 2017 (60 minutes, about 50 participants), the Society of Southwest Archivists Conference in May 2018 (four hours, 13 participants), and the New England Archival Conference in August 2018 (four hours, 17 participants). I conducted a full-day version for the Society of Indiana Archivists in October 2018 (six hours, 24 participants). In late 2018, I worked with the Society of American Archivist’s Committee on Education to adapt my workshop for their programming. After several months, we mutually decided not to move forward with the workshop. In May 2019, I delivered this workshop for the library staff and faculty of Northwestern University and the University of Virginia.

² Ellen Engseth, “Cultural Competency: A Framework for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the Archival Profession in the United States,” *The American Archivist* 81, no. 2 (2018): 468-475.

³ This concept comes from April Hathcock, “Whiteness and ‘Oppressive Normativity,’” *At The Intersection* (blog), April 21, 2016, <https://aprilhathcock.wordpress.com/2016/04/21/whiteness-and-oppressive-normativity>.

lived examples. This acknowledgement is core to my own practice of care ethics, which is bound up in a community working together towards liberation.

This group includes but is not limited to Fobazi Ettarh, Cecily Walker, April Hathcock, Holly Smith, Tamar Evangelestia-Dougherty, Shaneé Yvette Murrain, Dominique Luster, Nicole C. Cooke, Stacie Williams, Aisha Haykal, Rebecca Hankins, Nina de Jesus, Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, T-Kay Sangwand, Itza Carbajal, Isabel Espinal, Melissa Gonzalez, Helen Wong Smith, Annie Pho, Rose Chou, Steven Booth, Bergis Jules, Jarrett M. Drake, Anthony W. Dunbar, Mark Matienzo, Ricardo Punzalan, Mario H. Ramirez, Harrison W. Inefuku, Emily Drabinski, Chris Bourg, Natalie Baur, Kimberly Christen, Jennifer Vinopal, Angela Galvan, Michelle Caswell, Craig Arthur, Verne Harris, and Rand Jimerson. In addition to this roster of memory workers, my work has been shaped by the Black, Indigenous, queer, and trans people of color who established critical race theory, my colleagues in Students Affairs and the Office of Inclusion and Diversity at Virginia Tech, and members of the Jim Crow/White Privilege Issue Group of Montgomery County, Virginia's "Dialogue on Race" Forum.⁴

Rooted in Caswell and Cifor's principles of radical empathy and the concepts of critical whiteness studies, my workshop aimed to train archival workers from dominant groups to interrogate their normative assumptions.⁵ It relied significantly on personal reflection, affective entanglement, and peer modeling. In content and presentation, the workshop changed over time to reflect my own growth as a facilitator, feedback from past participants, and emerging cultural contexts of memory work.

Two similar workshops emerged at the national level in this same period. Helen Wong Smith adapted her 2015 plenary address on "cultural diversity competency" into a continuing education workshop for the Society of American Archivists and Midwest Archives Conference; as of March 2019, it continues to be SAA's only offering on equity,

⁴ Key to my development as a facilitator were Christian Matheis and Masayuki Sugie, under whom I studied the human-relations model of facilitation, and adrienne marie brown, whose work on emergent strategy changed the way I work in community. I was trained in Roadside Theatre's Story Circle methodology by Bob Leonard and Jon Catherwood-Ginn. I will always be indebted to Debbie Sherman-Lee whose leadership of the "Jim Crow/White Privilege" Issue Group gave life to Martin Luther King's vision of beloved community in our small corner of Appalachia. My understanding of "memory workers" comes from "Reflections from the 2016 Mandela Dialogues," Nelson Mandela Foundation, February 27, 2017, <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/reflections-from-the-2016-mandela-dialogues>.

⁵ Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 23-43, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13557>.

diversity, and inclusion.⁶ Michelle Caswell developed a workshop on “Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives” for LIS students and archival workers, which premiered at SAA in 2017.⁷ While all three courses explored similar theoretical frameworks and concepts, my workshop was unique in its focus on affective experiences and narrative-based pedagogy.

ANTECEDENTS OF THE PILOT WORKSHOP

The pilot workshop emerged out of a series of formal and informal professional dialogues. In this section, I will highlight the articles, conversations, and movements which most profoundly shaped the course. In his 2006 article, “Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started,” Anthony Dunbar argued for archival theorists to adopt critical race theory (CRT) as a framework for discussing social and cultural dynamics in memory work. Dunbar considered CRT to be particularly useful for challenging “the privileges of dominant culture—particularly whiteness—as the normative benchmark of social acceptability” and for understanding narratives and counternarratives as tools for social justice.⁸ The article concluded with a call for to incorporate CRT into archival education.⁹ Caswell et. al. responded to this call in their 2012 article “Implementing a Social Justice Framework in an Introduction to Archives Course: Lessons from Both Sides of the Classroom.” Caswell et. al. introduced Dunbar’s challenge to a new cohort of archival scholars, and citations increased dramatically in the following years. The highest rate of engagement with Dunbar’s article came in 2016 and 2017, coinciding with a resurgence of scholarly and collegial discussions around critical race theory in the field.¹⁰

⁶ Engseth, 472-474; “Cultural Diversity Competency,” Society of American Archivists, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www2.archivists.org/prof-education/course-catalog/cultural-diversity-competency>.

⁷ Michelle Caswell, “Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives,” *The Library Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (July 2017): 222-235, <https://doi.org/10.1086/692299>. Although Caswell, Wong Smith, and I were working independently, we were generally aware of each other’s progress throughout this time. Caswell and Wong Smith were among the professionals I consulted as I developed my workshop, both as a measure of my respect for them and as an effort to avoid redundant offerings.

⁸ Anthony W. Dunbar, “Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started,” *Archival Science* 6, no. 1 (2006): 113, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-006-9022-6>.

⁹ Dunbar, “Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse,” 127.

¹⁰ In March 2019, a cursory review of Google Scholar statistics revealed three citations of Dunbar’s article in 2008, two in 2009, one each in 2010 and 2011, and three in 2012, including Caswell et al.’s pedagogy article. 2013 marked a significant uptick in citations, with five instances each in 2013 and 2014, eight citations in 2015, 16 in 2016, and eleven in 2017. While

Mario H. Ramirez's 2015 article for *The American Archivist*, *Being Assumed Not to Be*, served as a catalyst for archivists' discussion of CRT and cultural competency. In addition to challenging the profession to engage its own history of white normativity, Ramirez sought to illuminate "a strain of resistance to self-reflexivity within the archives community...emblematic of an inability to think critically about race, whiteness, and sociocultural positionality that is supported by the escalating homogeneity of the profession."¹¹ Similarly, April Hathcock applied "whiteness" as a broad theoretical concept in her October 2015 article, "White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Issues in LIS." Hathcock argued that whiteness can simultaneously acknowledge the societal advantages conferred upon white-skinned people in the field and name the systems by which the normative values and practices of dominant groups are reinforced.¹² In a 2016 blogpost, Hathcock further discussed whiteness as a metonymic representation for "oppressive normativity," which she defined as:

"... the fact that people who are middle-class, male, straight, cisgender, Christian, fully able-bodied, etc. are privileged in their professional and personal lives, while those who do not fit within all of those identities are professionally and personally marginalized, excluded, and erased."¹³

Hathcock's concept of oppressive normativity reflects a long discursive tradition in the fields of sociology, law, and critical race theory. Examples of similar representational concepts include Patricia Hill Collins' "matrix of domination," Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, Raewyn Connell's "hegemonic masculinity," Elisabeth Schüssler

this is by no means an authoritative review, this pattern of engagement reflects what I experienced as a broader engagement of critical race theory in archival discourse between 2015 and 2017. I also argue that 2017 marked an attempt by mainstream archival discourse to co-opt and repurpose the radical demands of liberatory memory workers, which is a discussion for another (or several other) articles.

¹¹ Mario H. Ramirez, "Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative," *The American Archivist* 78, no. 2 (2015): 339, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.78.2.339>.

¹² April Hathcock, "White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (blog), October 07, 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity/>.

¹³ Hathcock, "Whiteness and 'Oppressive Normativity'"; see also Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, "Invisible Defaults and Perceived Limitations: Processing the Juan Gelman Files," *Medium: On Archivy*, October 30, 2016. <https://medium.com/on-archivy/invisible-defaults-and-perceived-limitations-processing-the-juan-gelman-files-4187fdd36759>.

Fiorenza's "kyriarchy," and the work of the Combahee River Collective on the "simultaneity of oppressions."¹⁴

In January and February 2016, Jarrett M. Drake led a Twitter discussion of #ArchivesSoWhite, adapted from April Reign's #OscarsSoWhite movement, to highlight "that the whiteness and white supremacy laced throughout Hollywood is also laced throughout the (US) archival field."¹⁵ The conversation was subsequently covered by the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) Issue and Advocacy Section blog, where Jarrett Drake, Ariel Schudson, and I were invited to contribute to a four part series on white supremacy in archivy.

In my contribution to the blog series, I expressed concern that the predominantly white U.S. profession lacked the cultural competency and experiential empathy to address racial difference in an anti-oppressive way.¹⁶ This is both a consequence of archivy's oppressive origins and an indictment of our educational system, as Fobazi Ettarh explains in her 2013 blog post, "Black OR Queer? Life at the Intersection."¹⁷ As of April 2019, cultural competency is not required by SAA's Archival Continuing Education Guidelines or Guidelines for a Graduate Program in Archival Studies.¹⁸ It is also absent from the Academy of Certified Archivist's key domains, and only marginally addressed in the American Library Association's accreditation standard under a requirement for

¹⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Cambridge, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 221-238; Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299. <http://doi:10.2307/1229039>; R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829-859. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177./0891243205278639>; Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table – Women of Color Press, 1983), 264-274.

¹⁵ "#ArchivesSoWhite in the Words of Jarrett Drake," *Issues & Advocacy*, April 19, 2016, <https://issuesandadvocacy.wordpress.com/2016/04/19/archivessowhite-in-the-words-of-jarrett-drake/>.

¹⁶ "#ArchivesSoWhite in the Words of Samantha Winn," *Issues & Advocacy*, April 20, 2016, <https://issuesandadvocacy.wordpress.com/2016/04/20/archivessowhite-in-the-words-of-samantha-winn/>.

¹⁷ Fobazi Ettarh, "Black OR Queer? Life at the Intersection," *Hack Library School*, November 19, 2013, <https://hacklibraryschool.com/2013/11/19/black-or-queer-life-at-the-intersection/>.

¹⁸ "Archival Continuing Education (ACE) Guidelines (2017)," Society of American Archivists, last modified November 2017, <https://www2.archivists.org/prof-education/ace-guidelines-2017>; "Guidelines for a Graduate Program in Archival Studies (2016)," Society of American Archivists, last modified December 07, 2017, <https://www2.archivists.org/prof-education/graduate/gpas>.

curriculum that “responds to the needs of a diverse and global society.”¹⁹ Updated in March 2017, the Association of College & Research Libraries’ *Guidelines: Competencies for Special Collections Professionals* lists “cultural and linguistic competencies appropriate for their collections and user communities” as fundamental to the work of special collections professionals, but the scope of such competency remains undefined.²⁰ In contrast, accreditation standards and curricular guidelines in healthcare professions ask professionals to demonstrate cultural respect, a commitment to accessibility, and an acceptance of personal responsibility for both actions and attitudes.²¹

MY BACKGROUND IN COMMUNITY DIALOGUES

Reflecting on the powerful critiques published by Hathcock and Ramirez in 2015, as well as the #ArchivesSoWhite discussions in early 2016, I began to consider how the archival profession might act upon Dunbar’s 2006 challenge. My work as a community facilitator inspired me to imagine spaces where white archivists could critically and affectively challenge white normativity.²² I first engaged in dialogue-based community facilitation through Montgomery County, Virginia’s “Dialogue on Race” forum. As a member of the Jim Crow/White Privilege Issue Group, I worked with fellow community members to lead

¹⁹ “Role Delineation Statement,” Academy of Certified Archivists, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www.certifiedarchivists.org/get-certified/role-delineation-statement/>; “Standards for Accreditation of Master’s Programs in Library and Information Studies,” American Library Association, last modified February 2, 2015, http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/sites/ala.org.educationcareers/files/content/standards/Standards_2015_adopted_02-02-15.pdf.

²⁰ “Guidelines: Competencies for Special Collections Professionals,” Association of College & Research Libraries, accessed April 30, 2021, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/comp4specollect>.

²¹ “Cultural Competence in Health Care: Is it Important for People with Chronic Conditions?” Georgetown University, Health Policy Institute, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www.aamc.org/what-we-do/mission-areas/diversity-inclusion/tool-for-assessing-cultural-competence-training>; “Cultural Respect,” National Institutes of Health, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www.nih.gov/institutes-nih/nih-office-director/office-communications-public-liaison/clear-communication/cultural-respect>.

²² This model was of its time. I have since become deeply skeptical of white-led anti-racist work, including and especially my own. This shift was inaugurated in part by DiDi Delgado’s 2017 critique of the national organization, *Showing Up for Racial Justice*. Nonetheless, I remain convicted by Kelsey Blackwell’s 2018 essay on her desire for spaces free of whiteness. DiDi Delgado, “Whites Only: SURJ And The Caucasian Invasion of Racial Spaces,” *Huffpost*, April 04, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/whites-only-surj-and-the-caucasian-invasion-of-racial_b_58dd5cf7e4b04ba4a5e25209; Kelsey Blackwell, “Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People,” *The Arrow*, August 9, 2018, <https://arrow-journal.org/why-people-of-color-need-spaces-without-white-people/>.

conversations around manifestations of racism in our region. Our group used Story Circles, a narrative method developed by Roadside Theater and Junebug Productions, to engage community members in restorative justice work and the development of counternarratives.²³ In the same period, I trained as a facilitator of intercommunity dialogue through a series of workshops at Virginia Tech. These experiences gave me a practical model by which to engage archival practitioners in facilitated conversation. The training I received reflected an ethos of radical empathy in its emphasis on interpersonal relationships and communal connections. Operating from this school of thought, my aim as an educator is not to simply impart a concept, but to facilitate critical reflections and transformative dialogues.

To adapt these strategies for an archival session, I began corresponding informally with colleagues, archival scholars, and leaders of various professional affinity groups about developing a workshop for white archivists to critically confront whiteness. The conversations took place from March through June of 2016. Respondents expressed a mixture of fatigue, skepticism, and enthusiasm. Experienced facilitators identified areas of concern, including the potential for such workshops to disproportionately burden people of color, center white affective comfort, allow micro- and macroaggressions to go unchallenged, and frustrate participants with a plurality of experience levels and expectations.²⁴ This feedback helped me to significantly refine the facilitator training, clarify the learning outcomes, more overtly target white archivists for self-reflection, and strengthen the affective core of the workshop.

I encountered Caswell and Cifor's 2016 article, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," as I compiled resources for guest facilitators. It offered a pedagogical bridge between the affective entanglement of community narratives, the embodied experience of memory work, and the pursuit of social justice beyond a rights-based framework. Caswell and Cifor's concept of radical empathy, defined as "a way to engage with others' experiences that involves discarding the assumption that we share with them the same modal space of belonging in the world," articulated the importance of engaging difference in a way that does not conflate or erase the lived experiences of others.²⁵

²³ "Story Circle Guidelines," *Roadside Theater*, accessed January 25, 2019, <https://roadside.org/asset/story-circle-guidelines>.

²⁴ I am especially indebted to Katie Seitz, Jasmine Jones, and Anna Clutterbuck-Cook for sharing their time and expertise.

²⁵ Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 31.

LAUNCHING THE PILOT

In light of #ArchivesSoWhite and the profession's response to Ramirez' article, I was curious to see how members of SAA and the Council of State Archivists (CoSA) would respond to a deliberately confrontational workshop proposal from a white woman.²⁶ In April 2016, I proposed the pilot workshop as a pop-up session for the upcoming CoSA/SAA conference in Atlanta, GA. Unlike the standard conference program offerings, SAA's pop-up proposals were voted upon by conference participants. Out of thirty proposals, conference attendees could elect five for the final program. "Deconstructing Whiteness" received enough votes to place it in the final five. As registration for the workshop exceeded 100 interested attendees, I began working with volunteer facilitators and consultants to compile resources and conduct remote training sessions.²⁷ We worked together through a series of emails, Skype calls, and in-person meetings to review facilitation guidelines, adopt shared principles of practice, refine our exercises prompts, and practice the narrative exercises. After the session, I compiled spontaneous participant feedback and met with facilitators to discuss their impressions and suggestions.

Although I had not planned to repeat the workshop, I immediately began receiving invitations to adapt it for other organizations. Preparing this material for several distinct contexts and communities has allowed me to refine both the content and delivery of the workshop in conversation with archival discourse on race, care ethics, and cultural hegemony. New opportunities created new challenges, particularly in mode of delivery.

THE PITFALL OF WHITE PALATABILITY

The popularity of this workshop on the 2016 pop-up session ballot demonstrated a disheartening undercurrent in member attitudes towards discussions of cultural competency. If so many archivists were interested in cultural competency and diversity, why had they not endorsed proposals from Black archivists and non-Black archivists of color who had tangibly moved the organization forward?²⁸ Attendees did not endorse a

²⁶ More directly, I was interested to see whether my proposal would invoke similar ire as conversations started by people of color. It did not. Subsequent workshops by colleagues did, however, attract attention from white supremacist groups.

²⁷ Where the workshop succeeded, all credit goes to volunteer facilitators Stephanie Bennett, Steven Booth, Katherine Crow, Holly Croft, Melissa Gonzales, Lauren Goodley, Jess Farrell, Katharina Hering, Dominique Luster, Holly Smith, and Margarita Vargas-Betancourt. Additionally, feedback from Brad Houston, Michelle Caswell, Anna Clutterbuck-Cook, Mark Greene, Irlanda Jacinto, Jasmine Jones, Lindsey Loeper, Katie Seitz, Alison Stankrauff, Eira Tansey, and Helen Wong were invaluable in the formation of the workshop.

²⁸ This is a rhetorical question, but it continues to rankle me years later. Perhaps the predominantly white membership of SAA and CoSA considered a workshop under my name to

proposal on diversity in the archival profession by Holly Smith, outgoing chair of the SAA Diversity Committee.²⁹ Nor did they select a proposal on cultural competency lead by Aisha Haykal and Harrison W. Inefuku, chairs of the Archives and Archivists of Color Roundtable, and featuring Council member Helen Wong Smith, who had launched a major cultural competency initiative in 2015.³⁰

I had experienced similar reactions in social media engagement and conversations throughout academia. When I made provocative statements about oppressive whiteness in our field, I received significantly less harassment and derision than colleagues who were Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). If I echoed a sentiment shared by a Black woman, for example, her statement would be ignored while mine received acclaim.³¹ I repeatedly saw white womanhood grant me unique authority and access to white platforms, white spaces, and white people at the expense of people of color.

Seeing my colleagues of color overlooked in favor of yet another white woman, I faced one of many ethical dilemmas to come in the implementation of this workshop: should we withdraw in solidarity or make use of the platform we had received? I consulted with several local mentors, archival colleagues, and volunteer facilitators. Because our proposal had been selected by ballot, it was not possible to choose our replacement. Without the option to hold space for one of our sister sessions (described above), we chose to move forward with the session and amplify its focus on anti-racist and anti-oppressive principles.

KEY METHODS AND PRINCIPLES

Building from relational models of facilitation, including Paulo Freire's dialectical methods of instruction and bell hooks' principles of engaged pedagogy, the workshop employed storytelling exercises to reveal, transmit, and deconstruct lived experiences around

be a "safer" choice, hoping my own whiteness would make me less likely to confront or challenge them.

²⁹ "Pop-Up Session Selection - VOTE NOW!," Society of American Archivists, accessed January 28, 2019, <https://www2.archivists.org/am2016/program/pop-up-vote>.

³⁰ Engseth, 472-475.

³¹ As Tasha Nins (@tashacmn) tweeted during Robin DiAngelo's plenary address to the 2019 American Library Association's midwinter meeting, "Robing (sic) DiAngelo Isn't Saying Anything New@ #alamw19. What Is New to Many Is That They Are Hearing It from a White Woman Instead of a POC Who Is Living It. If You Haven't Heard These Points/Thought about Them, You Haven't Been Paying Attention or Care about Who Is Saying It," Tweet, January 27, 2019, <https://twitter.com/TashaCMN/status/1089683374661345280>.

normative whiteness in archives.³² In the future, these methods might be used by archival educators to support the development of radical empathy in small and large discussion groups.

Entitled “Deconstructing Whiteness in Archives,” the workshop generally consisted of three sections. In the first section, I reviewed key concepts from critical race theory and whiteness studies, then led participants in storytelling exercises to surface counternarratives and affective experiences around whiteness. The second section comprised a facilitated discussion of assigned pre-readings. In the final section, participants proposed and discussed practical applications of the knowledge they gained in the first two sections. I designed the workshop to explicitly challenge whiteness, particularly white womanhood, as normative or neutral. This framing was an explicit response to Dunbar’s challenge.³³

Pre-Workshop Consultations

I worked with each host institution to customize the workshop towards the needs, expectations, and limitations of each institution. In addition to clarifying the purpose of my workshop and facilitate logistical details, these interviews help me anticipate potential flashpoints, expand or abbreviate my introductory lecture, and establish appropriate levels of confrontation. In some cases, the consultation phase helped me see that my workshop was not a good fit for an institution, which gave me space to recommend more suitable instructors.

One specific case merits discussion. In summer 2018, a member of SAA’s Chicago-based staff asked me to present this workshop as part of the organization’s formal education program. I was contacted upon recommendation by a member of SAA’s Committee on Education, a group of appointed volunteers who work closely with the organization to shape professional development offerings.

During our initial phone consultation, I described the narrow focus of this workshop and emphasized that it should not be considered a substitute for foundational EID instruction. I reiterated that I only felt qualified to teach this specific course but would be happy to provide them with recommendations for instructors, including several brilliant Black, Indigenous, and non-Black women of color. Having acknowledged these caveats, SAA staff wanted to continue. I signed an instructor agreement, which specified

³² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000); Augusto Boal and Charles A McBride, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

³³ Dunbar, 113-114.

that the course was my own content and not a work for hire. SAA found a host institution in the Chicago area and posted the course on its official continuing education site.

Being unfamiliar with SAA's typical workflow for course approval, I had assumed that Committee members were familiar with my stated limitations and had expressed interest in my specific workshop prior to contracts being signed. However, I now believe this was not the case. Shortly after course registration opened, I learned that the Committee on Education wanted to develop a new course from scratch. I recommended that SAA end our contract and hire someone more qualified. The Committee on Education came to the same conclusion and the contract was dissolved.³⁴ As of this article's publication, Helen Wong Smith's "Cultural Diversity Competency" remains the only offering in the SAA continuing education catalog to explicitly address equity, inclusion, and diversity. In September 2019, SAA announced that it had negotiated a discounted rate for DeEtta Jones' "The Inclusive Manager's Toolkit" course.³⁵

Introductions and Expectations

After several discussions with key stakeholders, I traveled to the host institution to deliver the workshop in person. I began each session with an acknowledgement of my teachers (see Figure 1), a review of the day's agenda, a review of expectations for community engagement (see Figure 2), and an activity or series of activities to build connections among participants. These activities are designed to accomplish three key outcomes: first, for each participant to locate themselves in the broader context of liberatory memory work; second, to disrupt traditional expectations of epistemological authority by introducing a framework for critical engagement; and finally, to establish a communal care ethic in which each participant commits to pursue self-awareness and radical empathy.

³⁴ I remain deeply grateful to members of the Committee on Education for holding the organization of SAA accountable for its hiring decisions.

³⁵ Society of American Archivists (@archivists_org), "Tomorrow "The Inclusive Manager's Toolkit" course begins! SAA members receive a 15% discount. The course on org. leadership applies an equity lens across programs so that diversity and inclusion are seamlessly connected w/ other managerial practices: <http://ow.ly/XMj130pw790>," Twitter, September 22, 2019, 7:05 pm, https://twitter.com/archivists_org/status/1175923999580270592.

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Building on the work of Jennifer Vinopal and Cecily Walker, this list reflects some of the folks who have inspired and shaped my thinking on this topic.

Figure 1: I have used this practice to introduce workshops and conference presentations since April 2017. This practice came to me from Cecily Walker by way of Jennifer Vinopal.

Ground Rules

Recognize your communication style (verbal/nonverbal).

Expect to learn something about yourself and others.

Speak from your own experience instead of generalizing.

Participate honestly, openly, and to the fullest of your ability.

Engage in the process by actively listening as well as speaking.

Confidentiality, Curiosity & Charity.

Take responsibility for yourself and what you say.

Figure 2: I learned the RESPECT ground rules through the VTInterCom curriculum, developed by Christian Matheis and Masayuki Sugie for the Virginia Tech Division of Student Affairs' Intercultural Engagement Center.

While I presented the same set of ground-rules for each workshop (see Figure 2), I used many different approaches to introduce participants to each other. In the earliest iterations, participants were simply asked to share their first name and explain what brought them to the workshop. This took place either in the full group or in small group discussions, depending on time constraints. For later versions, I used an artistic narrative exercise called “River of Life” which comes from 350, an international network dedicated to climate justice.³⁶ In this activity, participants illustrate a metaphorical river of their personal journey with the workshop topic. The outcome is either shared with a small group or with the entire workshop, as time allows. I have also employed brief exercises to prime affective empathy, asking participants to articulate their affective state and inviting other participants to raise their hand if they shared that feeling or experience. This is followed by a “think-pair-share” exercise, in which participants have more time to reflect upon and vocalize their expectations for the workshop. These activities are designed to foster self-awareness and demonstrate the wealth of knowledge and lived experiences which the community brings to the workshop. This practice is rooted in the dialectic principles of Freire and hooks, whose methods creatively undermine hierarchical models of education.³⁷

Participants come to the workshop with a plurality of curricular, practical, and lived experiences. I used pre-workshop surveys and kinetic exercises (see Figure 3) to gauge participants’ familiarity and comfort with the concepts we will discuss. As an example, I might ask participants to physically respond to a series of provocative prompts by arranging themselves in a physical spectrum or raising a number of fingers to quantify their position.³⁸ Alternatively, I might include a web-based survey which creates an immediate visualization of our group. The exact method depended on the number of participants, any mobility issues of which I was aware, and the general accessibility of the space. I used the resulting data to supplement any information I had gathered in consultation with the host institution.

³⁶ “River of Life,” 350.org, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://trainings.350.org/resource/river-of-life/>.

³⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.

³⁸ Please note that the use of kinetic exercises can alienate participants with mobility issues and other accessibility concerns. I recommend having many tools available in case you need to change techniques.

Narrative Exercise: Naming Our Experiences

- How often do you talk about race in your courses, workplace, or professional community?
- How comfortable do you feel talking about race/racism in a professional context?
- What holds you back?

Figure 3: Sample Discussion Prompt

Naming Whiteness

With communal norms and relationships established, I then asked workshop participants to define concepts in community. In this section, I presented a term with minimal context and asked participants to share what the term means to them. Through facilitated dialogue, the group worked to articulate a common understand of each term. After the group became comfortable with a term, I asked them to consider various scholarly definitions and choose what aspects to incorporate into our communal understanding. By the end of this discussion, we had established a common definition to guide further discussions.

I began with a broad discussion of “whiteness,” creating space for participants of color to guide the community’s work and speak about their lived experiences with oppressive white normativity.³⁹ Initial use of the term “whiteness” often provoked noticeable discomfort among white workshop participants, including avoidance of eye contact, eye rolling, affected coughing, deep sighs, and shuffling of supplies. When I asked

³⁹ In addition to the conviction instilled in me through my exposure to critical race theory and community dialogues around white privilege, my decision to explicitly confront the ideology of whiteness was solidified by a series of conversations I had with Mark Greene via email in 2016. His questions and critiques helped me to sharpen my rhetorical approach and anticipate common points of resistance from white participants.

participants to name the source of their discomfort, some expressed concern that the workshop would alienate or blame individuals with light skin or specific ethnic backgrounds. In contrast, April Hathcock's framing of "oppressive normativity" invites participants to consider white normativity—or whiteness as the invisible default—as an ideology and a system of oppression in relationship with a broad network of oppressions.⁴⁰ With this definition in place, I could then lead participants through a discussion of white supremacy and white privilege.

In addition to conveying information for participants to integrate into or reject from our communal definitions, I used moderately confrontational media clips to create affective tension for white participants.⁴¹ For the discussion of white supremacy, I shared a selection from James Baldwin's appearance on the Dick Cavett Show as featured in the PBS documentary, *American Masters: Maya Angelou*. To introduce the concept of white privilege, I played part of a presentation by anti-racist educator Jane Elliott. I then asked white participants to communicate their degree of discomfort. A majority of white participants signaled that they feel moderately or very uncomfortable at this point across all workshops.

In this moment of self-reflection, I introduced the concept of "white fragility," which Robin DiAngelo describes as "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering...the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation."⁴² I asked white participants to reflect upon their emotional state in the moment and how it might reflect this definition from DiAngelo. In later workshops, I also discussed the "discomfort zone" concept presented by Training for Change (see Figure 4).

By shifting the affective burden of discomfort to white participants, I aimed to disrupt the "white racial equilibrium" described by DiAngelo. Through this discussion, in combination with a review of our ground rules and voluntary feedback from participants of color, we could agree as a group that white participants would proactively monitor and manage their affective responses without harming other participants or distracting from the work of the group.⁴³ Finally, we refined our understanding of systemic oppression by reviewing "oppressive normativity" in relation to various concepts established by Black

⁴⁰ Hathcock, "Whiteness and 'Oppressive Normativity.'"

⁴¹ By "confrontational," I mean intentionally direct and personal in their manner of speaking.

⁴² Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (May 16, 2011): sec. abstract, <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/view/249>.

⁴³ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, abstract. Over the years, some BIPOC participants felt I focused too narrowly on the behavior of white participants.

and Indigenous women of color since the 1970s.⁴⁴ This discussion also aimed to preempt misappropriations of “intersectionality” as a descriptive identifier.⁴⁵

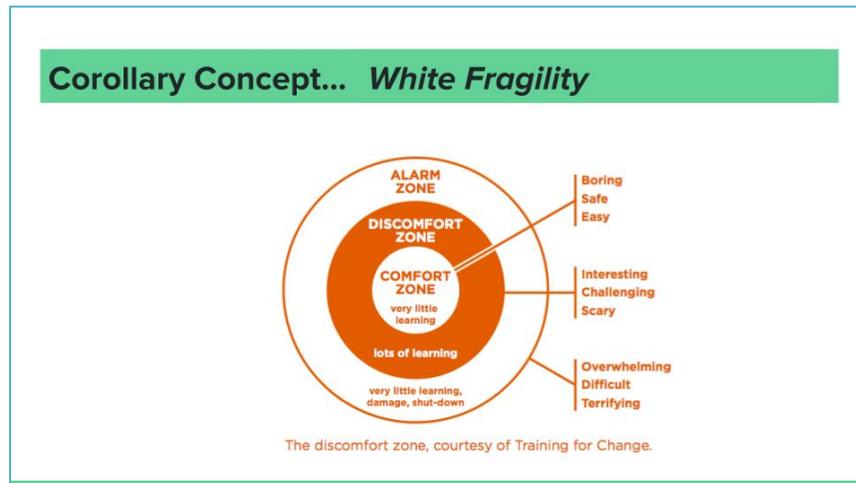


Figure 4: This diagram is included to help white participants establish appropriate expectations for their own affective experience in the workshop.

Seeing Whiteness at Work

A short break allowed participants to manage their affective state and reflect on their intentions for the rest of the session. Upon return, I sorted participants into small dialogue groups. For workshops under 15 participants or in situations where I could arrange guest

⁴⁴ I highlighted Cherrie Moraga’s concept of “interlocking oppressions” from “La Güera,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (London, UK: Persephone Press, 1981), 27-34; Collins’ “matrix of domination” from *Black Feminist Thought*; Kimberle Crenshaw’s definition of “intersectionality,” from “Mapping the Margins”; Moya Bailey and Trudy’s concept of “misogynoir,” “On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 762-768, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395?journalCode=rfms20>.

⁴⁵ In her 2017 interview with Columbia Law School, Dr. Crenshaw describes some of the most pernicious misuses of the term she coined. “Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later,” Columbia Law School, June 8, 2017, <https://www.law.columbia.edu/pt-br/news/2017/06/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality>.

facilitators ahead of time, I used Roadside Theatre's Story Circle methodology to guide participants through the development and sharing of personal stories which counter white hegemony in memory work.⁴⁶ In larger groups or where time is very restricted, I employed less-scripted small group discussions. After these discussions, we returned to the full group and briefly shared out or recorded common themes of discussion. This presented an opportunity for us to reflect upon the community definitions established earlier in the day.

Participants then moved from personal narratives to collective narratives, engaging with excerpts from the workshop's assigned pre-readings. Pre-workshop readings included Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez' "Invisible Defaults and Perceived Limitations: Processing the Juan Gelman Files," Bergis Jules' "Confronting Our Failure of Care Around the Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives," Mario Ramirez' "Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative," and Anna Robinson-Sweet's "Truth and Reconciliation: Archivists as Reparations Activists."⁴⁷ I divided participants into small groups to rotate through discussion stations. Each station featured a key excerpt, which allowed participants who have not completed the readings to engage constructively in the discussion (see Figure 5). After everyone visited each station, we returned to the large group and revisited each prompt as a collective. Here again, participants had an opportunity to share, challenge, and refine their understanding of various concepts through dialogue.

⁴⁶ For a comprehensive discussion of this methodology, see "Story Circle Guidelines."

⁴⁷ Ramirez, "Being Assumed Not to Be"; Anna Robinson-Sweet, "Truth and Reconciliation: Archivists as Reparations Activists," *The American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (2018): 23-37, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-81.1.23>; Arroyo-Ramirez, "Invisible Defaults,"; Bergis Jules, "Confronting Our Failure of Care Around the Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives," *Medium: On Archivy*, November 11, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/confronting-our-failure-of-care-around-the-legacies-of-marginalized-people-in-the-archives-dc4180397280>.

Station 8: Robinson-Sweet, “Truth and Reconciliation”

Tonia Sutherland scathingly indicted archives' continued failure to collect materials documenting violence against black Americans, a failure she says amounts to "archival amnesty." Sutherland said that despite the large quantity of images showing "Black death" at the hands of whites, archives have declined to collect these materials. Here "Black death" refers to the lynchings and riots of the twentieth century as well as to police killings like those on the Danziger Bridge. By not bringing these materials into their collections, archives are obstructing the ability to hold perpetrators and the system of racist violence accountable: "American archives, through appraisal and other practices, continue to extend the amnesty that was granted to Confederate slavers by inadequately collecting and maintaining the records that would make transitional and restorative justice possible in the U.S."

- How do your accession policies inform which stories are represented in the archives? What unspoken assumptions determine what gets collected? Do you see similar gaps in your own materials?

Figure 5: Sample excerpt at a discussion station. Station prompts are designed to facilitate narrative sharing and help participants tie their personal experiences into ongoing literature and work.

Looking Forward

Rather than ask participants to produce complete strategies and workflows, I guided participants in a deeper discussion of their relationship with the systemic forces we had discussed. I aimed to engage participants in a targeted analysis of their own power to effect change, both as individuals and in community. Through a series of writing prompts and dialogues I challenged participants to articulate areas where they felt especially curious or frustrated (Figure 6). From this place, participants began identifying strategies and practices which could be applied to each situation, with and without consideration of practical constraints. Peer feedback was a key element of this exercise, allowing participants to refine and iterate their ideas.

Part Three: Challenging Oppressive Normativity

- *15% Solutions:* In response to the Wicked Question you identified last round, “Where do you have discretion and freedom to act? What can you do without more resources or authority?”
 - 2 min to generate your own list
 - 8 min for everyone in the group to share their list
 - 10 min to ask clarifying questions and share advice within the group

Figure 6: The 15% Solutions and Wicked Question exercises come from Liberating Structures.

Debriefing as a Group

Regardless of the exercises employed or the time available, each iteration of the workshop concludes with a full group debrief. I used many different mechanisms to elicit feedback, including having Story Circle facilitators synthesize the thematic discussions of their group, asking participants to provide a brief affective response to the workshop (echoing their affective check-in at the beginning), asking participants to share something they learned and something they hoped to try when they leave, inviting participants to record their thoughts on a poster as they leave, and distributing post-workshop surveys.

FACILITATOR’S REFLECTIONS

Participant feedback and conversations with peer facilitators have helped me to identify recurring concerns and critiques. I hope this brief review will be useful to anyone who seeks to emulate or improve upon this course. Although I will share my own strategies for responding to or mitigating these issues, these reflect my own limitations as a facilitator and are by no means intended as recommendations.

The Unbearable Whiteness of (My) Being

When I enter a room, whiteness enters with me. This reality has many implications for my role as an instructor. Every time I accept a workshop invitation for a topic on race or

intercultural conversations, I must understand that I am taking work and recognition away from instructors who are Black, Indigenous, and POC. When I do accept an invitation, I donate honorariums and stipends to Black women and QTPOC through mutual aid funds and scholarship programs. This is an imperfect strategy, as I cannot donate the name recognition, academic esteem, and professional opportunities which emerge from my participation.

My white skin gives me access to spaces that are overtly or implicitly hostile to instructors of color. However, my white presence also allows an organization to avoid paying people of color for the same work. I cannot justify this displacement by merely hoping that my presence will pave the way for future POC instructors. Although I have frequently recommended POC colleagues who provide more comprehensive or practical instruction than I can offer, I have not seen this bear fruit.

While I make efforts to mitigate the harm of my presence, the continuing demand for my work (not the work in general, but my work specifically) is a stark indictment of the profession's implicit preference for white voices and white bodies. Most content in my workshop is derived from the foundational work of marginalized scholars, particularly queer and trans people of color (QTPOC), but these communities are rarely invited to conduct paid workshops on whiteness for predominantly white institutions. I strive to acknowledge this by centering QTPOC voices and scrupulously attributing the quotations, exercises, and principles by which I facilitate. I aim to center the expertise of Black women and QTPOC in the readings I select and hold space for POC attendees to speak on their own lived experiences with white normativity. Nonetheless, my work will have been destructive if it is not sufficiently radical to bring about my own obsolescence.⁴⁸

Any workshop I give must necessarily start with whiteness, because I am white and operate out of whiteness (even as I seek to resist and undermine it). This framing emerges from my belief that white people have an obligation to organize and educate other white people, especially when their whiteness gives them unique access to spaces and platforms, and even more so when such work positions them to absorb some of the violence which would otherwise be directed at POC.

Another common critique is that "diversity and inclusion" workshops tend to center white emotions or prioritize the comfort of white participants. I aim to combat this explicitly elevating POC voices and designing affective exercises which disrupt the "white racial equilibrium" identified by DiAngelo. Problematizing whiteness gives me a platform

⁴⁸ When a peer reviewer asked why I continued to offer this workshop despite my many moral misgivings, several justifications came to mind. I hoped that my workshop would serve as a kind of gateway to more rigorous discussions. I believed that I could act as a kind of Trojan horse, deconstructing white normativity from within its own walls. I found it frightening and uncomfortable as a junior scholar to turn down any opportunities to speak or teach. However, I try to frame the class, I remain deeply conflicted about its legacy. To the extent that it helped any white people avoid discomfort, I have failed.

from which to challenge white archival workers whose complacency perpetuates systems of domination and marginalization.

My lived experience as a white woman inevitably limits the depth of my expertise. I repeatedly acknowledge my own complicity in whiteness and frame this as a narrow scope from which I can operate. I can speak about what it's like to attempt to divest from whiteness, I can deliver messages from Black women and QTPOC who advanced the theory and praxis of racial justice, and I can make other white people uncomfortable with less risk of violence against my person. However, my work is necessarily reactive and reductive.

Learning at the Expense of Doing

A handful of participants have expressed frustration with this workshop's affective focus. Some of these concerns come from participants who have considerable prior experience with critical race theory, while other participants are simply impatient to begin "doing the right thing." Continuing education workshops in the archival field commonly provide participants with a specific skill or product which can be immediately deployed in their home institution. In contrast, this workshop promotes self-reflection and affective entanglement through narrative exchange.

This approach is both a reflection of my training and an acknowledgment of my limitations. How can any white instructor claim to systematically "fix" whiteness? Any such pretense should be understood as an attempt to maintain white racial equilibrium. White normativity cannot create radical imaginaries of Black, Indigenous, and QTPOC archival futures. Checklists, standards, and best practices established by white institutions will continue to perpetuate white normativity because white normativity is the foundation upon which these institutions exist; these are the tools by which the master's house rebuilds itself.⁴⁹

White normativity will continue to prevail so long as whiteness dominates our profession's ways of knowing. This is why I focus on problematizing whiteness and fostering affective resonance or entanglement around experiences with white normativity and its systems of oppression. My facilitation practice reflects both my training and a conviction that the white archival field is collectively deficient in affective and cognitive empathy for most of the communities whose heritage we claim as our purview. I suspect that many white people entering racial justice work are either ashamed or in denial of this deficit, which leads them to believe they can make a clean leap from "complicit in white supremacy" to "paragon of racial justice." By avoiding the affective

⁴⁹ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 110-113.

discomfort and peer critique of the learning process, white archival workers merely learn to practice oppression under a veneer of diversity buzzwords.

Conclusion

My original intention with this workshop was to create a space for meaningful and lasting dialogues among white archivists on a topic that we have previously sought (as a group) to ignore. Within each iteration of my workshop, I witnessed high rates of participant engagement and received cumulatively positive feedback. However, participants tended to self-select. The audience of my workshops generally comprised individuals with at least a prior curiosity about the topic. As I have not implemented any kind of continuing assessment to identify long-term participant outcomes, I cannot measure the effect of this workshop on the broader profession.

Since the first pilot workshop in 2016, several participants have asked for additional resources and help with planning similar workshops for their own institution. This gives me an indication that the workshop has at least sparked lingering curiosity in the topic, and perhaps even broadened the spectrum of facilitation techniques familiar to archival workers who teach continuing education courses.

For more sustainable transformation to take place in our field, I believe we must expose the invisible defaults of our profession and incorporate cultural competency into the core of our curricular and professional standards.⁵⁰ Anna Robinson-Sweet and Lae'l Hughes-Watkins have made significant strides in articulating reparative frameworks. Caswell and Cifor's model of radical empathy provides a foundation of "mutual affective responsibility" from which archival workers can respond to critical dialogues around race. This lens would also bring us into closer alignment with the applications of cultural competency in healthcare. Without radical empathy at the core of our training, white archival workers cannot contribute to the liberation imagined by memory workers who have been marginalized by whiteness.

⁵⁰ Anna Robinson-Sweet, "Truth and Reconciliation: Archivists as Reparations Activists," *The American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (2018): 23-37; Lae'l Hughes-Watkins, "Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 5, Article 6 (2018), <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol5/iss1/6>.

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