Mapping the Emergent Abolitionist Literacies of White Racial Un/learning

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Abolitionist literacy; White supremacy; Un/learning; Emergent strategy; Qualitative research

ABSTRACT

This article theorizes white racial un/learning as an emergent, abolitionist literacy that engages Angela Y. Davis and colleagues' call for a "both/and" vision of abolitionist transformation: a set of long-term political commitments to shifting social life with the immediate centering of care and harm reduction. Drawing on abolitionist scholarship, I argue that un/learning can function as a literacy technology that disrupts white supremacy. Based on interviews with white community leaders I map six recurrent practices of white racial un/learning: 1) interrogating inherited narratives; 2) interrogating participation in systems and histories; 3) naming accountability in past harm; 4) listening to decenter; 5) interrupting spheres of influence; and 6) witnessing to manage structural change. Analyzing these interviews through adrienne maree brown's emergent strategy framework, a theory of change for social justice futures, this article theorizes that shifting worldviews away from white supremacy can enable white people to develop emergent practices that can potentially transform systems of white supremacy. Rather than positioning un/learning as a moment of moral awakening or a product of corporatized diversity training, I frame it as iterative, coalitional work that gradually reshapes worldviews and their associated practices. Ultimately, my analysis reveals the necessity for composition and rhetoric to continue to grapple more directly with the targets, products, and impacts of the carceral ideologies and practices that white supremacy normalizes.

> To reiterate, rather than try to imagine one single alternative to the existing system of incarceration, we might envision an array of alternatives that will require radical transformations of many aspects of our society. Alternatives that fail to address racism, male dominance, homophobia, class bias, and other structures of domination will not, in the final analysis, lead to decarceration and will not advance the goal of abolition. (108)
> —**Angela Y. Davis,** *Are Prisons Obsolete?*

Introduction

In *Are Prisons Obsolete?,* Angela Y. Davis demarcates the integral relationships between punishment and racial capitalism as tethered, in no uncertain terms, to the historical legacies and enduring targets of white supremacy. From the perspective of the United States (US) and its peers, who hoard generational wealth through late-stage racial capitalism, punishment is a product of racial control, one that dispossess the body, especially racialized bodies, as rhetorical subjects to white supremacist state-sponsored political violence. The prison as an institution is deployed as a state apparatus for political and social control that uses punishment in ways that are so deliberate that the public conceives of them as a natural part of the social order. Davis historicizes how the institution of prison is designed as punishment for the transgression of social norms and mores inherited from the legacies of bondage and dehumanization of chattel slavery in the US as a settler nation-state. Institutions established for punishment, like the prison, stem from Slave Codes or "the laws that deprived enslaved human beings of virtually all rights" (Davis 27). Constructions of punishment played an enduring role in maintaining presumptions of criminality as a rhetorical stand-in for Blackness. In other words, Davis observes that "crime" and "punishment" must be understood not as sibling terms, but as the rhetorical ways white supremacist nation-states maintain themselves economically, socially, and politically. Likewise, Ava DuVernay's documentary *13th* recapitulates the reproduction of enslavement through the prison system over the last two centuries. In it, Jelani Cobb traces how distortions of criminality with Blackness served as a defining feature of the white imagination in the twentieth century. In 1915, the silent film *Birth of a Nation* strategically represented a "romantic, glowing, heroic portrait" (*13th* 06:45) of the domestic terrorist group, the Ku Klux Klan. As Cobb describes, the film is seared with and ultimately sponsors white supremacist ideas about criminality, control, and the dehumanization of Black people by manipulating the narrative structure of white imagination. Underwritten by these histories of white racial control, vis-à-vis metanarratives of criminality, the specters of the white racial imagination presuppose racial control as a naturally occurring phenomenon that must be maintained socially, politically, and economically.

These heinous histories of control and manipulation signal the deep need for abolition and, at the same time, underscore how white supremacist social systems constrain liberatory, abolitionist action and always have. As Davis notes in the framing epigraph, to drive forward the goals of abolition and liberation, it is integral to shift the

broader systems of thought that endorse and maintain institutions of imprisonment, which enduringly impose distorted fantasies of criminality vis-à-vis racial politics. That is, we need radical transformations, which ultimately mean divesting from the white supremacist political imagination. In their book *Abolition. Feminism. Now.,* Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E. Richie expand the abolitionist goal of shifting systems of thought by emphasizing the dual necessity of "[h]olding onto this both/and" (5), balancing immediate needs for safety and care for those affected by violent state systems while simultaneously striving to undo the systems that harm in the first place. Davis and colleagues' contouring of feminist abolition praxis offers instructive politics that engage the multiplicity of "both/and"—as a set of long-term political commitments to shifting organizational and social life toward antiracist, feminist futures and the immediate centering of care and harm reduction.

Driven by my positionality as a white queer man with professional and personal commitments to racial justice and organizing white publics to interrogate and dislodge anti-Blackness, this article attempts to embrace the "both/and" orientation that Davis and colleagues call for. Specifically, I turn my attention to the challenges of abolitionism under the broader systems of white supremacy and whiteness, which serves as both an epistemology and a set of racialized, gendered, classed, sexualized, and ableized literacy practices.[1] I join a line of advocates for abolition who have argued that changing the systems of thought and action underwritten by white supremacy is a critical necessity for engaging more abundant, thriving future worlds (Ritchie; Wynter; Spade). As a white queer scholar-teacher, I have examined how my positionality has informed my practices for social justice through coalitional action (Pouncil and Sanders; Sanders, Pouncil, Aguilar-Smith, Smith, and Pregent), and I maintain that the ultimate goal for white people is to work in coalition with pro-Black organizations to dismantle elements of the white racial frame and to create life-affirming possibilities for racial justice. I build on these commitments to divest whiteness from the organizational and social life through small acts of white racial un/learning. By framing un/learning as a coalitional abolitionist literacy, I engage the work of emergent strategy, a Black feminist organizing framework that centers large structural change through a gradual set of practices that can create sustainable social change and transformation. I bring this energy toward knowledge and behaviors of whiteness and offer emergent strategies to explore how to uproot reproduced white supremacist carceral systems.[2]

In this research article, I theorize un/learning as an abolitionist literacy that can shift carceral and white supremacist ideologies through gradual practices. To do so, I braid together an analysis of interviews with white community leaders with commitments to racial justice, analyzed through adrienne maree brown's emergent strategy framework, an adaptable, interdependent, and iterative way of thinking about large scale social change through small repeated, and intentional action. Through such a braided analysis, I develop an emergent theory of "un/learning" (punctuated with a forward slash to emphasize its dialogic and iterative nature) as a rhetorical and coalitional framework to describe how white people with actionable commitments to racial justice interrogate, deconstruct, and dismantle their socialization into white worldviews, policies, and practices. Serving as a departure from white innocence approaches to corporatized Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Ahmed,

On Being), my analysis highlights the range of literacy practices that animate shifts to disrupt white supremacist and carceral ideologies embedded in social life and emphasizes the "both/and" orientation that Davis and colleagues call for of abolitionist work.

To make good on abolitionist futures in and beyond literacy studies, I make the case that literacy scholars must invest in the study and practice of transforming whiteness and dislodging the everyday practices that sustain white supremacist ideologies. I do so through three inter-related aims. First, I situate un/learning as an abolitionist literacy by synthesizing applied theoretical traditions in literacy studies in conversation with social movement writing. I define abolitionist literacies as the practices that challenge carceral ideologies reproduced through everyday social action. Second, I introduce emergent strategy, a social movements framework used frequently in restorative justice and abolitionist organizing work, as a useful analytic tool to understand the gradual and repeated practices that can shape broader change. Third, based on "critical of whiteness" (Matias and Boucher) interviews with white community leaders with commitments to racial justice, [3] I articulate a set of six emergent strategies of white racial un/learning as coalitional, literate action: 1) interrogating inherited narratives (fractals); 2) interrogating participation in systems and histories (intentional adaption); 3) naming accountability in past harm (nonlinear and iterative); 4) listening to decenter (resilience); 5) interrupting spheres of influence (interdependence); and 6) witnessing to manage structural change (creating possibilities). Across these examples, I align social justice movement concepts to emphasize that un/learning—how white people divest from the carcerality of white supremacy—includes a range of stepping stones that interanimate the individual with the structural, as an application of Davis and colleagues' call for "both/and" orientations for abolitionist praxis. Ultimately, I draw attention to the roles of white literacy scholars to responsibly teach toward un/learning in the classroom and call to embrace complexity to disrupt, even smally, carceral white supremacist ideologies.

Approaching Un/learning as an Abolitionist Literacy

I consider abolitionist literacies as discursive and technological networks that tread toward liberation by way of coalition (Chávez), care (Piepzna-Samarasinha), and radical imagination (Kelley). As an abolitionist literacy, un/learning encompasses the "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations" (Gee 6), situated in conceptions of literacy as a social practice (Street), challenging autonomous, missionary, and decontextualized (Kynard, *Vernacular*) constructions of literacy. From this vantage point, abolitionist literacies are both "a politics and a practice" (Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie 25) that ultimately seek to transform white supremacist imaginations through a combination of writing, knowing, and being practices. Such an approach to abolitionist literacy is an explicit engagement with Black feminist theorizations of literacy, especially those that trouble the historical fetishizing of "a paternalistic and autonomous missionary-model for literacy education" (Kynard, *Vernacular* 66). Such autonomous and missionary models of literacy sponsor a white-centered

understanding of literacy that reproduces anti-Black racial hierarchies, maliciously suggesting that approximation to white linguistic codes can liberate anyone under white Christian nationalist regimes. In *We Want To Do More Than Survive,* Bettina L. Love demonstrates how the educational survival complex, where students of color are taught to survive instead of thrive, participates in carceral, white supremacist logic through histories, policies, and technologies that deliberately harm and spirit-murder Black students. Given the undeniable harm caused by white narcissistic imaginations obsessed with control, compliance, and criminality, I advocate for transforming and abolishing the worldview and associative practices of white supremacy through white racial un/learning. However, focusing on white racial un/learning rests on individual experiences of un/learning, perceptions of action, and impact. Therefore, renderings of un/learning are always approximated. I wish to be careful here and not conflate un/learning as a corporatized buzzword in DEI spaces (the slung-together parade of workshops and Zoom sessions focused on multiculturalism and implicit bias)—the same spaces that coincidentally forgot all about those commitments to social justice. Instead, I offer un/learning as a literate technology that can transform violent and unrelenting white supremacist imaginations toward abolitionist and emancipatory futures. In framing un/learning as "insurgent, counter-disciplinary organizing" (Kynard, "Oh No" 326), I conceive of white racial un/learning to intimately explicate how white people with actionable commitments to racial justice interrogate, deconstruct, and dismantle their socialization into white worldviews, policies, and practices. In doing so, I suggest, for abolitionist literacies, a strong focus on the strategies that can shape change. Emergent strategies serve as a foundational framework to help transform dispositions of knowing and doing in decentralized yet deliberate ways.

Black feminist literacy scholars have long critiqued dominant and white notions of literacy, troubling the colonialist and settler origins of dominant literacies as a faux-savior to structurally-targeted communities. Foundationally, Elaine Richardson's work explores how Black women's practices of navigating complex social environments affirm their identities through community-care, protection, and service. Similarly, Jacqueline Jones Royster's historiography *Traces of a Stream* shows the breadth of Black women's writing practices throughout the twentieth century, seeded with activist practices. Eric Darnell Pritchard identifies restorative and normative literacy practices of Black LGBTQ people, showing how literacy can oppress by exploiting carceral capitalism and, at the same time, can liberate and affirm alternative ways of life. Carmen Kynard ("Oh No") recently observed that rhetoric and composition needs Black feminism to reject and transform its links to Enlightenment ideologies that constructed "the human" as the white rational subject. As a rejection of the white imagination, abolitionist literacies can be "about the gradual, constant creation of alternative ways of organizing life and living" (Kynard, "Oh No" 325) that are "not about a final answer, place, or mode, but an ideal of freedom and creative imagination that is always in practice" (320). A Black feminist movement toward alternative life requires an acknowledgment that "what we build is far more important than what we destroy" (Cooper 19). My entry point to transforming the worldviews of white supremacy is the kind of "active theorizing" of a "lived reality" (Kynard, "Oh No" 325), departing from disembodied notions of white knowledge-making routinely critiqued by Black

feminists who've demonstrated how power is never absent from knowledge-making and circulation, especially that of literacy.

As Pritchard demonstrates in *Fashioning Lives*, literacies for Black LGBTQ people can be both normative—tools for reinforcing white supremacist practices—and restorative—tools for self-determination and self-liberation. Their theorization of literacy, drawn from both Sojourner Truth and Paulo Freire, explicates literacy as "a practice of meaning-making that does include print, but also as a way of reading everyday life as significant to literacy practice" (Pritchard 20). Given these dual targets of literacy, I engage abolitionist literacies as those practices that shift carceral thinking and practices, both on the page and off it. Importantly, central to this discussion of the violence of whiteness, especially by a white researcher and faculty member who has and continues to benefit from whiteness as a system, must be the roles of coalition and positionality. I've argued elsewhere (Pouncil and Sanders) that my positionality as a white, queer, middle-class, and now tenure-track faculty member has impacted my commitments to racial justice and transforming inequitable institutions through building coalitions, disrupting whiteness, and creating infrastructures to divest from whiteness as disciplinary and institutional tactics. Harkening back to Davis and colleagues' call to embrace "both/and" in abolitionist work, I view coalition and positionality (Walton, Moore, and Jones) as an engagement of this dual position for shifting systems of thought.

The specific focus for my inquiry is the subject position of white people who underwrite and benefit from white supremacist superstructures. As George Lipsitz argues, white people are encouraged to maintain an *investment* in whiteness, a cashing in of holding onto white supremacy as "a matter of direct, referential, and snarling contempt" (vii). Lipsitz's metaphor of investing in whiteness and white supremacy helpfully illustrates the ways in which whiteness is used as a tool for political control and how resources must be hoarded in order to deny communities of color access to power. Individual actions protect the value of whiteness at the deliberate expense of people of color. For example, we can read historical and contemporary fantasies of Black criminality as an ideological investment in white supremacy. By sustaining an index of separation between humanity and inhumanity (Kynard, "Oh No" 324), the white racial imagination has circumvented itself as duly human. The broader project of antiracist and abolitionist organizing must rightfully unseat these enduring constructs about ownership, power, and investment. Lipsitz notes that the possessive investment of whiteness can also possess white people, so that they are unable to engage beyond a late-stage capitalist mental frame "unless they disinvest and divest themselves of their attachment to white supremacy" (viii). Thus, since whiteness is an investment —a purchasing of worldviews, realities, and dispositions of white supremacy—it also can be divested. Specifically, divesting whiteness recognizes that there is no such thing as "good white people" (Sullivan). Instead, divesting whiteness realizes that all white people benefit from and perpetuate legacies of white supremacy. Zeus Leonardo's *Race, Whiteness, and Education* argues for a similar version of divestment from whiteness which he calls "neo-abolitionist whites" (Leonardo), a return to co-conspirators during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries like Viola Liuzzo, James Reeb, Meg Segrest, and Anne Braden, who used their white racial identities to work in coalition for actionable

racial justice (Tatum). Leonardo frames a critical pedagogy for white people as "neither enemy nor ally, but a concrete subject of struggle" whose work is to undo "the self they know and com[e] to terms with a reconstructed identity, even an abolished one" (186). The pedagogy that Leonardo advocates for seeks to dream toward liberatory futures by divesting from the contemporary white common sense, beyond white supremacy, control, and criminality. Thus, an interest in transforming whiteness as a divestment links with the broader project of abolitionist literacies to transform white hearts and minds in order to uproot the broader structure of white supremacy. Notably, the figure that Leonardo invokes above is an uncertain one that reckons with the known self and the establishment of an emergent one. I read this kind of transformation as moving toward alternative forms of life, akin to what Kynard ("Oh No") calls for, by strategically and emphatically deconstructing and reconstructing the meanings and practices of whiteness.

Therefore, white racial un/learning considers how the white imagination can be —though often is not—a productive object of change constrained by centuries of racial framing. By focusing on the conditions of the white imagination as a system and investment in white supremacy, un/learning can serve as a literacy technology disruptive of white supremacist machinations and seeks to move toward alternative forms of life and living. An engagement with how white worldviews shift and change, as I do in what follows, is part of the broader project of abolitionist organizing and literacies that both approaches broader structural transformation and engages individuals who sustain the structural. Interrupting the recreation of white supremacist social order is the fundamental locus of my analysis of white racial un/learning. As I demonstrate below with six emergent strategies of un/learning based on in-depth interviews with six white community leaders with a commitment to racial justice, explicating practices of un/learning helps serve a macro-level of engaging the both/and element that Davis and colleagues have called to model for feminist abolition praxis.

Emergent Strategies of Un/learning

To engage Davis and colleagues' call for a "both/and" approach to abolition in concert with theorizing un/learning as an abolitionist literacy, I engage with emergent strategy as a theory of social change that draws on ecological and Afrofuturist tenets to transform complex social issues through a set of relatively simple patterns. Emergent strategies are social movement frameworks introduced by a Detroit-based community organizing group, the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute, and publicly introduced in adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds.* For brown, emergent strategies are ways "to practice complexity, and grow a compelling future together through relatively simple interactions" (20). Alexis Pauline Gumbs explains how emergent strategy "offers us the opportunity to study and practice the work of shaping change by understanding ourselves as part of the ongoing emergency of nature" (7). According to brown, emergent strategy originated as a way to describe "adaptive and relational" leadership practices, anchored in the work of Octavia Butler, and grew to practices and plans for collective organizing and movement work

focused on creating possibilities through change by leveraging simple patterns, such as "adaptation, interdependence and decentralization" (24).

Elements of emergent strategies are grounded in relationships to nature and its regenerative processes. brown offers six elements of emergent strategy, including fractals, intentional adaptation, interdependent, non-linear, resilience, and creating more possibilities. Together, these practices help to shape change through leveraging simple, repeated habits toward large scale change. As a movement-based framework, emergent strategy has been deployed in abolitionist movement work, as described by Andrea J. Ritchie. With the focus of attention on small patterns of emergence, Ritchie explains that while it may seem counterintuitive to focus on relying on small-scale networks instead of ready-made scripts, "heavily resourced, one-size-fits-all, industrial-scale systems are what got us here [to a police surveillance state]. Our only hope is to try something new" (93). The idea that something can be emergent (flexible and developed in the process) at the same time as strategic (followed by a clear plan), can be understood as an example of this kind of complexity—a holding on to the "both/and" disposition needed for abolitionist praxis.

Below, I share six practices developed through an interview project examining the un/learning of six white community leaders interviewed in 2021. Participants interviewed were selected if they identified as white and had a shift in their understanding of white supremacy. Participants included social justice facilitators, social workers, public servants, and social movement organizers. I developed a "critical of whiteness" (Matias and Broucher) interviewing protocol (Sanders, forthcoming). This three-phased process involved life history and artifact-based interview questions to recover histories of and with white supremacy (phase 1), invited participants to create a multimodal artifact to represent their un/learning (phase 2), and asked them to reflect on their accountability to un/learning and racial justice going forward.[4] In Zoom interviews, I asked participants to select concrete artifacts to tell and analyze stories of their un/learning. Based on thematic analysis of these interviews, a fundamental takeaway is that *when individuals' worldviews change, so too do their practices of knowing, communicating, and navigating the world*.[5] I analyze each practice below through an emergent strategy lens to help demonstrate how each of the practices of un/learning can shape change in white supremacist systems, offering alternatives for life and living. Analyzing un/learning through an emergent strategy lens helps humans understand how simple acts, habits, and dispositions have the potential to scale up and shift broader systems of power. This is especially useful for understanding how small practices of un/learning can create the conditions for the larger goal of transforming the habits of white supremacy and carceral ideologies. Thus, my analysis deploys an emergent strategy approach to un/learning as a productive engagement with Davis and colleagues' call for "both/and" because it draws attention to how individual acts and actions animate the structural. Focusing on emergent strategy is not to say that this work is easy or simple; instead, it asks us to dwell in and engage complexity by focusing on the specific recurrent actions and dispositions that can reshape social practice toward alternative, more liberatory forms of living.

In what follows, I detail the six emergent strategies of unlearning, including reflective action (fractals), interrogating inherited narratives (intentional adaptation),

naming accountability in past harm (non-linear and iterative), listening to decenter (resilience), interrupting spheres of influence (interdependence and decentralization), and witnessing to manage structural change (creating possibilities). In offering the following renderings of individual white community leaders who have engaged un/learning and shifted their dispositions through abolitionist literacies and emergent strategy, I in no way wish to frame them as static, altruistic, positive change agents or ideals for racial justice or abolition. All white people participate in perpetuating racial harm, and by no means are my participants fictive "good whites." Instead, I focused on their un/learning journey to better understand how and why white people might engage in stepping stones toward challenging white supremacy in their everyday actions. These reflections, taken together and analyzed through an emergent strategy framework, engage the different habits that can work toward the "both/and" goals of Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie that must be fundamental for abolitionist literacies through the specific target of un/learning.

Reflective Action // Fractal

> "*Small is good, small is all*" (brown 41).

Fractals, according to brown, are "never-ending pattern[s]. Fractals are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales. They are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop" (51). As a part of emergent strategy, fractals help humans understand that the micro maintains the macro; they are "patterns that cycle upwards" (brown 59) that invite growth, change, and transformation at the level of habit. brown looks to examples of fractals in nature, like geologic ripples, cells dividing, and so on; the core work of a fractal is to practice the small toward a more liberating future.

Thinking like and with fractals means understanding that change and transformation are constants and that micro-action created, repeated, and sustained creates large systems (galaxies, even). My interviews with six white community leaders revealed that reflective action served as one of key routine patterns. While rhetoric and composition has a persistent interest in reflection as a tool for writing development, reflective action here is more urgent and more life-affirming. I use it here to refer to the ways in which white community leaders reflected on and acted in relation to their past and future understandings of themselves as a consistent, recurrent rhetorical action. Notably, many of the participants balanced their "past selves" as a figurative measuring stick of how their beliefs and actions have shifted over time, especially in terms of reckoning with anti-Blackness. However, because un/learning is ongoing and infinite, reflections on partners' past histories, ideologies, and practices guide goal setting for future action.

The white community leaders whom I interviewed frequently used reflection to map how their enduring understandings of the world have shifted, and, at the same time, they used these levels to shape their everyday actions. Chris, a retiring faculty member and director of a social justice office, offered a reflection about her un/learning in the next phase of her life. She told me that her next steps require her to intentionally

cultivate communities that challenge "white flight," where retired people move to all-white spaces. Because Chris was moving, she felt the need to bring her community work and her teaching work together. "There is such an incredible dearth of white antiracism there," Chris told me. "I could see myself teaching, just in other ways—whether it's offering workshops, teaching a non-credit course, or establishing a reading group." She also explained that she'd like her un/learning to be a "more spiritual, holistic approach to white antiracism."

Jane, an antiracist curriculum developer for a non-profit health organization, described her goals—to center slowness and center the experiences of Black voices in how she seeks to embody her work—as a result of her reflection. She said: "I want to embody the things that I'm learning and stay malleable to what I'm doing now. I want to evolve from here, learning a new language, adopting new ways of understanding race dynamics." Jane's commitments demonstrate how her recurrent reflections of who she is and how she shows up for racial justice, in relation both to who she was and who she wants to be, make way for future habits. For Jane, destabilizing her perceived stability defines her orientation to pluralism and that such an orientation can never be fixed or "natural"—the practices she notes are a combination of listening practice; interrogation of inherited narratives; and reflective, coalitional action.

From an emergent strategy perspective, these habits have the potential to scale, and shift and change broader systems. The snapshots from Chris and Jane illustrate the ways in which the fractal of reflective action—not just reflecting on what they've learned about racial politics and whiteness, but the specific mobilizing of those dispositions into lived practice—serves as a foundational, routine habit for un/learning. Notably, reflections often move from simple, such as racial epiphany, to more complex, like the thinking-doing combinations that both Chris and Jane describe. Importantly, the worldviews of these reflections represent the slow disruption of carceral thinking. The fractal of reflection, then, requires a reckoning with carceral and white supremacist worldviews that must be named and disrupted as a core component of abolitionist literacy through un/learning. Put differently, as a fractal, reflection builds the bridge between the small and the large; the belief drives the practice. Centering reflection as a habit of systems, structures, and values helps participate in the "both/and" of un/learning, as stepping stones to deeper commitments, translating experience from knowledge to action.

Interrogating Narratives // Intentional Adaptation

> "*Change is constant. (Be like water)*" (brown 41).

While change is a constant, brown warns that change for change's sake is dangerous and a product of capitalist superstructures. Emergent strategy's approach to adaptation includes a clear focus on purposefulness, "wherein the orientation and movement towards life, towards longing, is made graceful in the act of adaptation. This is the process of changing while staying in touch with our deeper purpose and longing" (brown 70). Intentional adaptation, then, can be thought of as a practice of moving toward life, of setting "strategic intentions" that guide how and why our actions do

what they do. In the context of abolition, interrogating inherited narratives engages this strategic intention in balanced ways by naming how narratives and cultural fictions are operating in the dispositions of white people.

Through interviews, participants interrogated their own socialization specific to white dispositions of knowing and being, as a way to challenge and disrupt their racial habitus. Notably, this practice of looking to individuals' life histories to examine how they were socialized through racialized and carceral sets of knowing and doing practices is consistent with antiracist practices around "self-work" (Diab, Ferrel, Godbee, and Simpkins), "racial storytelling" (Johnson), or "archaeology of the self" (Sealey-Ruiz). From an emergent strategy perspective, intentional adaptation helps humans understand that the practice of interrogating inherited narratives is an intentional and purposeful activity to deepen their awareness of systems and histories of power in order to ultimately shape change in the future. Chris, for example, reflecting on her primary education in a newly integrated Georgia primary school, explained how early moments of racial difference—and the impact of racial difference—served as an opening for the interrogation of her identity and her early awareness of her whiteness. Indeed, Diab and colleagues warn that "confessional narratives" are not productive avenues for the development of antiracist consciousness, because they end at the confession. Instead, those confessional narratives must be challenged by placing those individual instances in the context of broader machinations of power.

Robert, who works in local government, similarly analyzed the inherited narrative surrounding his body as a cis, white man, especially as it relates to the prison-industrial complex. He told me about a writing assignment for his undergraduate degree in public policy. He was given a writing assignment paired with the book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* by Annette Lareau. Robert was instructed to analyze his childhood through the lenses of class and race. Reflecting on this research assignment, Robert had recalled a pivotal moment when he was 14 years old. He was a freshman in high school. "Me and my buddy, I don't know what it was," Robert told me, "I think we just wanted to see if we can get away with shoplifting or prove that we are smarter than [other] people." He was placed in a "scared straight" program at the local police office. As a result, Robert thought he turned his life around. After all, he finished high school, attended a well-respected research university, and earned a good job. "I was very much the hero of my own story," Robert said.

Through writing the research assignment, Robert realized the invisible forces at play that disentangled his sole-actor hero story, and the ways in which those white heroism narratives were developed in concert with carceral entities, especially the prison-industrial complex. As Robert said, "I was a 14-year-old white kid from an upper-middle-class family and the well-to-do suburbs with plenty of youth resources" and "these opportunities were put in front of me to make sure that didn't happen again." Notably, Robert's reflection was not fashioned from the life event itself, instead his un/learning occurred through a practice of critical interrogation. Placing his experiences in concert with racial and class frameworks enabled Robert to more clearly name and interrogate his systematic participation. At another level, it demonstrates the ways in which his white racial privilege humanizes his interactions with law enforcement and carcerality. He is aware that, under white supremacy, he is not

rhetorically constructed as a "criminal," echoing Davis's point that frames this article. Robert's troubling of his self-authored hero story demonstrates how the maintenance of white worldviews creates challenges for abolitionist work. Robert's analysis helps reveal how ideological residues operate as part of the natural order when, in fact, they couldn't be further from it.

Robert's story here illustrates the ways in which adaptation operates in the practice of interrogating taken-for-granted narratives. It is not the practice of change for change's sake, as brown warns against. Instead, Robert's story showcases how interrogating and reframing the stories that white people tell and are told can reveal how carceral systems of power influence those stories in the first place. The act of re-narrating his hero story allows Robert to takes residual white racial ideas to task. As for emergent strategy, the purposefulness of the narrative interrogation extends to other elements of emergent strategy as well. Un/learning, in Robert's case, reflects a making and remaking of a stable, inherited narrative grounded in exceptionalism and meritocracy. The underlying stories about who we are—and can be—fundamentally serve a white supremacist function, locating indices between human and non-human —who can be the hero in the story, after all? The act of remaking, especially in Robert's case, signals how an engagement with pasts, however ugly and uncomfortable, is part of un/learning as an abolitionist literacy, as part of a complex shift from naming and critiquing carceral ideologies to shifting the rhetorical narratives that sustain them. In other words, this emergent literacy practice attempts to dislodge the cultural fiction of white supremacy that operates in everyday ways.

Naming Accountability in Past Harm // Non-linear and Iterative

"*There is always enough time for the right work*" (brown 41).

Large-scale transformation does not happen overnight, and certainly not in an easy-to-predict line. In *Emergent Strategy,* brown draws on social movement work, like Occupy and Black Lives Matter, as examples of non-linear organizing of mass movements. "In a non-linear process," writes brown, "everything is part of the learning, every step. That includes constructive criticism, it is part of the feedback loop—experiment, gather feedback, experiment again. This is how we learn" (106). Framing un/learning as non-linear helps push against perfectionism and precision in everyday abolitionist literacy practice, showing instead the complex and time-dependent ways in which humans organize toward purposeful action. At the same time, it's critical to remember that learning is never neutral or innocent; instead, learning, especially about the margins of power, inextricably impacts communities of color, often placing an uncompensated burden on people of color. For un/learning, naming accountability does not solely rest on the act of narrativizing harm, such as non-confessionals (e.g., Diab, Ferrel, Godbee, and Simpkins) or as empty apologies (Ahmed, *Complaint*). The naming of past harm can shift the practices that are associated with the original harm, and the carceral logic embedded in that harm. Since the broader project of abolition must rest on transforming everyday habits, iterative emergent strategies help emphasize how things can change.

For un/learning, non-linearity plays out through an understanding of disrupting forces of socialization and naming accountability in past racial harm. My interviews with research participants often returned to moments where their whiteness adversely affected people of color in their lives. Each partner could recall a series of instances where their ways of being caused harm, which served as a springboard to changing the behavior and seeking out different perspectives to challenge the practice that incurred harm in the first place. Bianca, a graduate student who focuses on social work and community engagement, recounted an experience in college where she enacted anti-Blackness by telling her Black friend, Morgan, that she could not be alone with her. Bianca's disposition of distrust of Blackness inherited from her parents showcases how she internalized and perpetuated anti-Blackness. Naturally, her relationship with her friend faded, and she felt shame and guilt about how her white worldview enacted violence on her classmate. To establish an analogue to abolitionist literacies, these kinds of racialized thinking-and-being combinations reproduce the naturalization of institutions that capitalize off carcerality. Even years later, Bianca is aware of how her white ways of knowing fundamentally harmed Morgan, and she seeks to be accountable for her past practices without demanding labor or acceptance from Morgan. She told me:

> I want to be accountable. I want to atone and to learn from this. I wanted to do better. At the time, I did not know how, and now, I guess I still don't fully know how without recentering myself. I want to ask her, 'What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to do it?' But that would put the burden on her, and it belongs to me.

Bianca's reflection about the roles of accountability and reconciling past harm motivates her un/learning practice of seeking out and compensating Black creators' content regarding anti-Blackness. However, we should read Bianca's reflection as an enactment of a stable DEI approach to justice that focuses on rules of engagement. It seems that Bianca's reflection is a performance of scripts she needs to say. However, if we read her reflection as a representation of an iterative type of un/learning, it represents an early stepping stone to, perhaps and potentially, a political or professional commitment. What is interesting in Bianca's reflection here, though, is how she imperfectly and even performatively must labor with and dwell in her past harm for emergent and transformative praxis. In her reflection about accountability, her explanation that the burden of accountability belongs to her represents a clear moment of insight; she knows, at this moment, that her responsibility to reconcile her past harm is not labor to be put on Morgan or other people of color. By dwelling in this space of accountability, it becomes clear that Bianca's orientation to herself has changed. She realizes that the labor of un/learning is hers to do and does not call on others to educate her on her behalf.

Bianca's story of dwelling in past harm and seeking to refashion how she sees and moves through the world reflects the non-linearity of un/learning, and at the same time reinforces how carcerality must be critiqued in early stages of the non-linearity of un/learning. While perhaps a less advanced stage on the spectrum of un/learning, Bianca's reflection here is significant to name early and rudimentary steps toward developing

more deep and advanced engagements with un/learning, while also understanding the ways that these early observations of accountability might reinscribe carcerality. It's apparent in the ways in which she names the racial harm she has committed and, at the same time, works to shift them, always imperfectly, in the future. This set of emergent strategies helps showcase the non-linearity of Bianca's un/learning—it requires placing the past in concert with the present and disrupting the lived-in habits that proxy as white supremacist violence. I take up Davis and colleagues' call for a "both/and" approach to abolitionist praxis as a white person to complicate and deepen these reflections that Bianca narrates.

Listening to Decenter // Resilience

> "*Never a failure, always a lesson*" (brown 41).

For brown, resilience is how individuals, systems, and nature recover and "[transform] the conditions that make injustice possible" (125). They explain how resilience is about changing conditions, especially after traumatic and harmful events. The natural world is full of examples of "adaptive survival brilliance" (brown 125), such as the ocean's ability to create life through the coral reef (brown 24) and how mushrooms transform toxins into nourishment (brown 124). brown notes that this resilience is the work of "healing and transformation, moving towards a world beyond enemies, [and] is work that has to be done for our survival" (133). As a component of un/learning, resilience, then, places the burden of healing and changing conditions for injustice onto rebuilding, re-articulating, and transforming through destructive systems and environments, such as white supremacy or white Christian nationalism.

For my research participants, resilience serves as a process of shifting inherited white supremacist and carceral logics that lead to oppressive conditions in the first place. As Frankie Condon reminds us in *I Hope I Join the Band*, "[T]he aim . . . is not cross-cultural communication, but the deconstruction of the logics of racism . . ." (88). In other words, changing the logics of racism through an emergent practice of resilience , at its best, destabilizes regimes of narrative and knowledge that produce harm. One of the foundational ways I observed this occurrence was a shift in white community leaders' listening practice.[6] Jane explained how listening, particularly to Black folks, must be thought of as a sacred covenant. As an antiracist learning specialist, she is aware of the ways in which white people's un/learning is often unfairly predicated on the emotional labor performed by Black people, a labor that is never owed and never compensated. She noted the violence implicated in demanding such emotional labor from Black people to justify their humanity to whiteness. The labor of Black people explaining sacred cultural knowledge, often anchored in their survival and humanity, to white people can be costly and dangerous, if not engaged with responsibility and accountability. Jane described her relationships with Black people as something that must be sacred because of the inherited histories of her body as a white woman:

> You can just respect the experiences of Black people as precious and sacred. Part of the doubt, the downfall, the con of whiteness, is that nothing is really held as sacred in the culture because we have fought and

> spent generations and decades and everything else forcing our cultural norms onto other people. And so, when you come across knowledge or art, these are ways of survival. It feels like white people should not even be aware of these things. When Black people are sharing with me the experience of Blackness, and living in a white supremacy culture, I hold that as really sacred. I just want to honor those experiences and never question them.

Jane's description of the sacred bonds of being in community with Black people illustrates resilient practices like decentering white normative subject positions through listening practices. One key concept Jane described is that Black people don't owe white people anything, including cultural knowledge. One of Jane's interview artifacts was the album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, as Lauryn Hill had been rumored to express hope that white people not purchase it. Jane had to pause here to consider that not everything is for white people's consumption, gaze, and entertainment.

Jane's reflection about the labor of Black folks illustrates how she seeks to engage: with both accountability and responsibility. In this way, listening becomes an integral component of engaging un/learning in concrete ways. Particularly, listening implicates different ways of sensing, interpreting, and engaging the world, and thus serves as an emergent literacy practice for un/learning. By using listening as a tool for decentering, partners enact a shifting worldview that is race-conscious and intentionally seek out counternarratives to disrupt singular, self-affirming white worldviews. This kind of shift, in both practice and the pro-Black philosophy that undergirds the practice, reflects how resilience, the shaping of conditions that move toward life, operates at a macro-level.

Interrupting Spheres of Influence // Interdependence

> "*There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it*" (brown 41).

brown explains how interdependence is when "we can meet each other's needs in a variety of ways . . . we can truly lean on others and they can lean on us. It means we have to decentralize our idea of where solutions and decisions happen, where ideas come from" (87). brown critiques late-stage capitalism as maintaining a competition culture; instead, an emergent strategy approach means that humans' needs are met from community and coalition. They argue that humans must engage in complexity as a part of interdependence—a way we all work toward more distributed decision-making, shared leadership, and care. They write: "[E]veryone I am in relationship with, creat[es] an abundance of connections, desires, interactions, and reactions" (brown 88). This kind of decentralized and interdependent thinking is reflected in the ways in which the white community leaders I interviewed understood themselves to be working toward change. In particular, I read their practices of decentralization as an opportunity to move toward life, particularly through interrupting their sphere of influence.

Chris further explains how a kairotic moment at her current university interrupted its structure toward justice. Chris told me a story about her search for a job to lead a

social justice institute at another university. She explained that she did not want to leave but could not do the work she wanted to at her current university. Chris told me that her friend, Anne Braden, suddenly passed away. As she told me:

> I didn't really want to leave, but it was a better job offer. And right in the middle of that decision, Anne Braden died very unexpectedly. I just countered the Dean. I told him, 'I don't really want to leave; why don't you set up a center like that here? Why don't we do that?' And he was like, 'Let's do that.'

Chris's story about building a social justice campus unit reflects the ways in which she worked intentionally to disrupt the machinations of her university further toward justice. This creation was modeled after her relationships with the community, the campus, and her work with social movements. This example showcases how Chris's positionality and a kairotic moment afforded her such a place to interrupt for good.

Chris spotlights how she's interacted with their spheres of influence in rhetorical and distributed ways, demonstrating that transforming conditions happens through more dialogic and distributed ways of knowing and being. This engagement of un/learning as a practice of embracing complexity complicates the black-and-white thinking characteristic of carceral white supremacist imaginations. These reflections operationalize Chris's awareness of who she is, the influence that she has, and the choices that they can make toward a more life-affirming choice. While Chris's case does focus on an institution of higher education, it's important to note that her practice of advocating, in this case for herself, can be understood as embracing complexity and working toward justice in an intentional way—a broader institutional shift toward healing and community-engaged social movement work. When read as distributed and decentralized literate acts, Chris's reflection reveals how un/learning can contribute to critical counter-institutional organizing strategies, both small and large, that move toward more robust forms of life and living, especially within a cold and relentless political system.

Witnessing to Manage and Advocate Change // Creating Possibilities

> "*What you pay attention to grows*" (brown 41).

brown explains that environments are complex and chaotic, and that singular treatments or strategies to engage them are broadly insufficient. As she writes:

> [T]here is evidence that many possibilities exist for how we manifest inside our potential. Then there are wavicles—entities that are simultaneously waves and particles. Then there is quantum mechanics, which examines the smallest units of our universe and shows that everything we think of as solid and singular is actually fluid and multitudes. (brown 156)

Across former examples, I showcased how emergent literate acts surfaced as a way to move toward affirming life and living in more holistic and compassionate ways.

For research participants, creating possibilities to move toward life happens through advocating change and witnessing. By this I mean the ways that humans move beyond interruptions and practice advocacy to shift and change policies toward transformation.

The most apparent way that witnessing and advocacy played a key role in creating possibilities was through Nicole and Robert's use of their office and official positions to advocate for change in local policies. Nicole, the director of the Office for Financial Empowerment, a municipal office in the Midwest US, and Robert, her colleague, described the ways that they intentionally resisted inequitable policies. As Robert explained, "Policies have been weaponized in the past against marginalized communities, and policies can be used to have positive impacts." Across both stories, they explained how their office received a grant to support the reissuance of suspended driver's licenses for minor infractions, like parking tickets. Their analysis revealed that these policies most directly impacted Black men. Such an analysis represents a shift in macro-level policies in an attempt to slowly dislodge carceral practices that maintain prison pipelines.

The office received grant monies to research how to mitigate the harm of this fee-driven practice. As Nicole told me:

> My constant learning is that we do this thing as city governments that even the most progressive units of city government, where we're studying the problem, we will rope these people in and give them a $50 gift card to spill their whole sob story. And then we will move on with our lives as though nothing happened. We don't change. There has to be "what's next?" Because if there isn't, we used those people for no reason. And so yeah, we paid them to tell us their story. But now we have to do something with the story, or we're causing harm.

Nicole told me that, after a few attempts to do focus groups, she and Robert decided they would use the grant monies to pay the fees to get suspended drivers' licenses reinstated. Nicole explained that she had to answer to the funder, who didn't love the idea, because they wanted the funds to be used for research. "But I was like, 'Look.' I was like, 'At the end of the day, you must answer to your funder.'" Nicole also talked about her administrative knowledge around budgets: "If you don't spend it, and it's a grant, they have to leave the grant account open because it's not legal to push that into general funds of the city. So we just quietly bank these little piles of money for good." This example showcases how Nicole and Robert use their positionality to "resistantly read" grant requirements toward specific, justice-centered ends. Through this kind of individual attention, individuals harmed by such a policy were able to have their fees paid. Beyond the individual interventions or "band-aids," as Nicole calls them, she worked with Robert to advocate for a change in the policy that produces suspended licenses based on nuisance fees, like parking tickets.

As a practice of creating possibilities, Nicole and Robert managed inequity through witnessing and advocating for change in their spheres of influence. From an abolitionist literacy perspective, literacy practices are an attempt to weaken state structures that fetishize "criminality" under carceral systems in local state governments. As they both admit, they struggle to identify the specific balance between pushing

and not pushing enough, realizing that pushing too hard might not engage productive change. As Robert said, "I also have days where it's just too slow. We got to do more, we got to be bigger and faster. It'll take forever if that's, if our approach is one person at a time, when we need massive policy change at the city level." Robert's reflection illuminates the double binds and paradoxes involved when moving from individual change to structural change. Perhaps most notably, Nicole and Robert's reflections demonstrate "both/and"—how scaling up to create new possibilities can be developed from their un/learning in order to disrupt carceral systems in their spheres of influence. The act of creating new possibilities based on un/learning is an attempt, even momentarily, to shift a system and policy.

Emergent Un/learning, Race Treason, and the Charge of Literacy Studies

Ruth Wilson Gilmore's presidential address at the American Studies Association observed that abolitionism offers pathways out of a web of political, economic, racial, and cultural crises: "[W]e must direct our energy and resources . . . toward the goal of freedom, which I'm going to call . . . radical abolition" (41). Radical abolition, guided by engaging with the Black Radical Imagination, seeks to hold a both/and complexity approach to moving toward life and living. As Davis and colleagues note in *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, holding onto complexities of contradictions is fundamental to the contours of abolitionist feminism. They beautifully address the different practices that sustain a feminist-abolition movement toward life and living, which is worth quoting at length.

> [A] politically informed practice . . . demands intentional movement and insightful responses to the violence of systemic oppression. Building on these foundational approaches, this theory of change proclaims that we can and must do multiple things at the same time. We work locally and internationally. We hold people accountable and believe that people can change. We believe in being radical and active. We reflect, learn, and adjust our practices. We react to injustice. We build different ways of living. We are clear that organizing to end gender violence must include work against the prison industrial complex—against border patrols, against the incarceration of disability, against the criminalization of radical democratic protest—and as centrally, for mutual aid, cop-free schools, reproductive justice, and dignity for trans lives. All this is possible because the 'we' is not a set of individuals but rather a collective that grounds and defines its members and the projects, goals, and campaigns that are connected to the everyday, thus encompassing joy and struggle. Inextricably. (Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie 4)

In this article, I've attempted to embrace this both/and approach to un/learning as an emergent abolitionist literacy to map developmental patterns that hopefully develop more politically- and abolitionist-engaged work. My analysis highlights how whiteness

has supported the carceral literacy practices that got us here in the first place. As many, many other scholars of race, power, and education have argued, the fundamental goal to move toward socially-just, decarcerated futures means directly working to uproot the carcerality of white supremacist ideologies that manifest in everyday ways. After all, white supremacy, which does its damnedest to reproduce the same systems and ideologies that gave way to the rise and maintenance of chattel slavery, is why the most obscene violations of living occur. Scholars of literacy, then, will do well to remember that violations of humanity are maintained in the very structures of our knowledge, teaching, and theory. Lamar L. Johnson, in this vein, has reminded us that the spirit-murder experienced by Black people in the classroom is no different from the acts of racial violence experienced on the streets. The conditions for these experiences have been fashioned through the carceral systems of knowing that, whether we are aware or not, we reproduce.

My analysis of six emergent literacy practices offer ways of thinking about un/learning as part of the broader strategy of abolitionist literacies, transforming the systems and practices of carceral white supremacy. As literacy scholars have long known, ways of knowing impact ways of moving through the world, both on and off the page. My focus is on how white community leaders came to understand and interrogate their socialization through white supremacy. In particular, I draw on six elements of emergent strategy as a movement-based framework that engages Black, queer, feminist practices for organizing life toward liberation. The practices I map above all work to shift a carceral worldview and its associated practices. I wish to be clear here that these are my ways of understanding, confined always by my own whiteness. My analysis of un/learning as an abolitionist literacy, and also a set of emergent strategies, pays homage to foundational movement work and engages the Black feminist visions of future-making that our discipline so desperately needs. At the same time, I acknowledge that more practices exist than the ones I've identified here. I posit that more work could uncover how these practices might converge, and even complicate, the emergent strategy framework I've drawn on in this article.

My interviews with these community leaders demonstrate how *when worldviews change, practices change*, though often slowly and smally. Notably, many of the participants I interviewed were at different stages of their own un/learning, but the index of emergent literacy practice I offer here shows the different ways in which they revise their knowing and doing combinations (Gee). While we may want large-systems-level change here and now, emergent strategy teaches us that change is purposeful. Kynard reminds us of this lesson: "Black feminism is about the gradual, constant creation of alternative ways of organizing life and living and alternative ways of communicating in and about those lives far beyond our current alienating regimes" ("Oh No" 325). So, to echo the fractal principle of emergent strategy, "Small is good, small is all" (brown 41). As I have demonstrated, un/learning is a spectrum of development with early stepping stones to deeper and larger commitments for engaging coalitional action that divests from the carceral histories and structures of white supremacy. I do, however, want to caution that the over-reliance of the individual can often obfuscate the power and sway of a system, even as the system, as an abstraction, is represented in and by individual actors. Anchored by Black feminist critiques of

literacy, my analysis here offers a way to think about the constant, gradual changes needed for abolition through un/learning. In no way do I hope that these portraits reify the fictive "good white person" mythology that rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies often obsess over.

Yet, at the same time, my inquiry offers pathways to consider how white scholars can engage, research, and teach toward un/learning. Especially in a cultural moment defined by a rise in conservatism and bolstered by white nationalism, my call to the field here is to focus on white racial un/learning, as a part of abolitionist literacies, as one of the foundational and engaging commitments of the social and professional work of the field. In a "nice" field (Ladson-Billings) like ours that is demographically and ideologically white, white teachers and researchers hold the responsibility to foster un/learning as a set of ongoing dispositions. As other antiracist scholars have argued, this begins with interrogating narratives, values, and identities to locate the specific targets of whiteness on communities of color. Given the current issue's focus on abolition, and how taken-for-granted white racial dispositions function as part of the same imaginary that produces and reproduces anti-Blackness in constructions of crime, punishment, and justice, my analysis of my participants' un/learning offers a set of takeaways, especially for white literacy professionals. While I offer additional considerations below, I urge readers to consider and complicate these takeaways.

The first is to call into question inherited and taken-for-granted simple ideas, especially those that are unquestioned in our professional practice, and embrace complex thinking about ourselves and our practices, locating how unchecked practices and ideologies are extensions (or even enactments) of carceral ideologies. Perhaps one of the more challenging aspects of this work is to complicate our relationships to expertise, stability, and other taken-for-granted dicta. For instance, the strategies I analyzed above call into question stories of who knows, who is an expert, and what expertise looks like. These portraits show that stable expertise in who we are and what we know must be unraveled. For example, take Robert's reckoning of his hero story; how do literacy professionals make space for the reckoning of undoing a stable self? I might invite engagements with this question in our local curriculum, our professional development, and our community work. I'm curious what it looks like to decenter ourselves as white people as the subject that can know. Relatedly, it's critical to remember that the ethos of a knowing subject replicates Enlightenment thinking that has persisted, creating indices of who is human and who is not—the very same carceral logics at work in the prison-industrial complex (Kynard, "Oh No"). By dislodging stable and taken-for-granted schemata, embracing complexity leads us to embrace tension and paradox in useful ways. On the ground, this might look like shifting how and why we value certain types of inquiry and text-production—calling into question what might be "clear," and to whom? Additionally, my analysis here also reveals the necessity for the field to continue to grapple with the targets, products, and impacts of whiteness, calling for deeper engagement—especially of and by white people—toward naming, interrogating, and shifting the carceral practices of whiteness. While there are excellent white scholars who write about and teach against white supremacy, the field needs to continue to cultivate critical whiteness scholars and teachers who are especially equipped to support

other white people, white institutions, and white students to reckon with their own whiteness.

The charge to literacy studies, then, is at once simple and complex—another lesson from emergent strategy. Given the ways in which literacy has functioned as both liberatory and emancipatory, and/or oppressive and carceral, it's integral for literacy scholars and teachers to divest from those white supremacist worldviews and practices that produce the practices that constitute carcerality and criminality. While literacy work may feel far from the target of corporatized anti-Blackness, Love's work has demonstrated that literacy has always been at the seat of underwriting the carceral surveillance function of education, directly contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline. If abolition requires an embracing of complexity, literacy scholars must be aware of how literacy can serve white supremacist aims. At the same time, the challenge must be for white scholars to engage, research, and teach toward un/learning. This move toward reconstructing the white worldview away from white supremacy must take up what Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey call being a race traitor: "The abolitionists are traitors to the white race; by acting boldly they jeopardize their membership in the white club . . ." (36). In a time when we see the gleeful rolling back of equity-minded initiatives and a giddy rise of white Christian nationalist authoritarianism, it's an understatement to say that our collective responsibility is to tread toward life and abolish whiteness as a social category and carceral ideology that creates the conditions for lifelessness in the first place, especially for those of us who are white.

Notes

[1] Charles Bazerman's theory of literate action demonstrates how social order is reproduced through acts of writing, literacy, and rhetoric.

[2] While some scholars distinguish white supremacy—the global political system of "formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth . . ." (Mills 3)—from whiteness—the everyday practices associated with white people as naturalized racial ontologies and ideologies (Leonardo)—it's key to note, following Marxist critiques of social order, that the political and ideological structures of white supremacy (as ideology) are dynamically reinforced by whiteness (as material practice). As Asao B. Inoue points out, drawing on Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "The maintenance of whiteness and white supremacy . . . is vital to maintaining the status quo of society's social, economic, and racial hierarchies, the structuring structures the (re)produce a white racial habitus" (50). Inoue's concept of white racial habitus demonstrates the interplay between localized everyday practices, such as language, worldviews, and politics, that reinscribe the targets of white supremacy and white nationalism.

[3] This article reports on IRB-approved data with an exempt determination from Michigan State University (STUDY ID 00006285).

[4] I have discussed this methodology in more historical, theoretical, and pragmatic senses in a forthcoming piece (Sanders). The three-phased interview protocol I developed focused on critically interrogating whiteness and invited participants to bring three concrete objects to tell stories of their un/learning, create a multimodal artifact, and pose future-facing accountability plans.

[5] In an earlier version of this research (Sanders), I represent this phenomenon through a three-phase cycle of coalition, adapted from Pouncil and Sanders, demonstrating the cyclical work of un/learning across internal, external, and systems levels. In this iteration, I share a similar set of rhetorical and literate actions mapped to elements of emergent strategy. I do this to demonstrate that routine practices can shape change and therefore can serve as foundational elements of un/learning as an abolitionist literacy practice.

[6] Readers familiar with feminist rhetorical traditions might make a natural connection to Krista Ratcliffe's theory of rhetorical listening, a rhetorical strategy for listening across cultural logics. This is a slight departure from rhetorical listening, as I am engaging Condon's description of white antiracist practices. While there may be some connections between these two concepts, listening to decenter is a deliberate attempt to remove oneself as the knower. Listening to decenter departs from rhetorical listening because, in this tradition, listening is about understanding alternative cultural logos, not a practice based in the destruction of racialized habits, and thus a less stable subjective position than rhetorical listening posits.

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